



Searching for the Prince (Fang and Fae #2)

Author: *Rebecca Cohen*

Category: LGBT+

Description: When a fae prince goes missing, Gwil and Hyax are called in to help.

Nothing is easy when youre a vampire dating fae royalty, but with his sire demanding his help, and his boyfriends parents trying to split them up, finding a fae prince who has vanished into thin air is one of the least complicated parts of Gwils afterlife.

Total Pages (Source): 34

CHAPTER ONE

G wil had long since given up on being welcomed into the elite circles of vampire society. He was allowed on the periphery, where he could be useful, like investigating mundane issues for the Vampire Council, but nothing he'd consider important, so he still couldn't quite believe he was part of the congregation for the marriage of the Dark Viscount of MacLove and Robin Flint, the future Dark Viscount Whetford. He didn't think either of them knew he existed or was present at their nuptials.

Hyax stood next to him, looking amazing in full fae prince regalia. Another thing he'd been unprepared for was to actually get to have Hyax as a lover rather than just a friend and business partner. Not behind closed doors either, kept as a dirty secret, but out and proud, even if Hyax's parents weren't one hundred percent on board.

"I don't think I've been to a legitimate vampire castle before," Hyax said. "It's really rocking the gothic vibe."

"I've not been to this one, I don't think many have as the Dark Earl of MacLove isn't known for being big on visitors. And I'm only here because I'm your plus-one." He didn't want to sound bitter, but it summed up his standing in the paranormal community that he'd got an invite because of Hyax. "I'm still not sure how you managed to swing an invite either, let alone bring me along."

"I told you, I'm representing my parents as the leaders of one of the six other tribes, all of which were invited, so it was considered something of an olive branch."

He knew the MacLoves were big shots in the vampire community, but Hyax had

confirmed the rumours he'd heard about the Dark Earl being royalty in the fae realm, so could be considered more important there. Their tribe, the Calanti, weren't what he'd call flavour of the month with the other fae—not having had official open channels to the others for more than a thousand years was a bit of a giveaway. “Since when have you lot accepted olive branches?”

“When I started shagging a vampire.” Hyax rolled his eyes and jostled him with his elbow. “Get with the picture, Gwil, a vampire and fae wedding, we could hardly not go as a couple.”

They'd been dating a few months now, although Hyax's parents thought they'd been together longer. Hyax bending the truth when he'd needed a boyfriend to stop his parents from marrying him off and Gwil was the first person he'd thought of to play his Romeo.

“I bet your mum loved that. I can't say I've noticed a warming towards me on your mother's part.”

Queen Talia had made her opinion of him pretty clear—she thought Gwil was an acceptable plaything for Hyax, but he wasn't worthy enough to marry him. Hyax believed she'd mellow eventually and while Gwil was immortal, and had the time to wait her out, he wasn't convinced he would win the long game.

“I might have insisted I attend, and with you.” Hyax squeezed his hand. “Not just because I think we should find a way to improve relations with the Calanti tribes, but it helps socialise the concept of a vampire marrying a fae with my people.”

Hyax had proposed, not with the grandeur Gwil might have expected from a prince but he'd learnt in his long un-life not to miss out on something by being a churlish twat, and Gwil had accepted despite Hyax's parents not being too keen on the idea. “Oh, well when you put it that way I can see your reasoning.”

Hyax leant closer and dropped his voice lower. “It does mean I get to see you in a suit. You know how much I love peeling you out of one.”

Gwil was partial to Hyax stripping him naked. “We do have a lovely room. Would be a shame not to make proper use of it. Four-poster beds have great potential for all sorts of fun.”

Hyax’s eyes glowed gold for a second and Gwil suspected he might end up at the mercy of his clever magic, pinned to the bed for both their pleasures. If Hyax had planned to reply, he was cut off by the sound of bagpipes. Not the usual caterwauling he associated with the Scottish windbags of doom, but more melodious and less eardrum-splitting. He might go as far as to say he didn’t hate the noise.

“Oh, I don’t think I’ve heard the fae pipes played in years,” Hyax said, sounding as if he were fond of them.

“They’re tolerable I suppose.”

“I take it you’d not be keen on having them at our wedding?”

“I’d rather record Midnight retching up a furball.” Midnight was his cat, and apart from the odd heaving action, she was a good girl, and he’d fight anyone who disagreed.

“I’ll put that down as a maybe then.”

The doors of the great hall swung open, and Gwil craned his neck to get a decent view. The Dark Earl of MacLove was a secretive bastard, and his mixed fae heritage wasn’t openly discussed, but Gwil knew even less about his son Prince Simon. Gwil wasn’t high enough on the social ladder to be party to the good secrets, but he presumed there must be more behind this wedding than members of different vampire

Houses wanting to play nice.

Robin Flint followed minutes later. He was an attractive bloke, not on Hyax's level because Gwil was nothing if not biased, but Robin had an aura about him that corroborated his reputation of being able to get whatever he wanted. Gwil had seen him about. He'd only ever been on the periphery as he didn't get to visit the places Robin Flint inhabited unless he was working, so he wasn't surprised to see him scrub up well for his wedding. Prince Simon though, was hidden under a cloak and Gwil was as intrigued as everyone else when he stood opposite Robin and the hood was pulled back to reveal a pretty bloke with long black hair who screamed fae as much as vampire. He was the perfect blend of his parents.

Hyax leant closer. "I can taste his magic from here."

"That strong?"

"More that it's a different flavour. Let's just say, I would say the fairy prince is probably an expert sucker and I don't just mean of Robin Flint's cock."

He had to bite his lip to hold back the snort. The ceremony itself was interesting enough—a blend of vampire and fae traditions—and not like any he'd attended before. His sister was a dark countess and they'd not been on speaking terms when she'd married. From what he'd heard, hers wasn't as grand an affair as this, but then she was her husband's third wife and Penelope wasn't a princess, no matter how important she considered herself.

Hyax watched with a dopey smile. Gwil wasn't sure what it was he hoped for his own wedding, but he'd pretty much do anything Hyax wanted, be that eloping to a human registry office or a five-day immersive ceremony in a woodland glade.

They filed out into the reception hall, following the other guests, all of whom were

more important than him, so Gwil decided he would stick next to Hyax to avoid being asked who he was and prevent himself from being thrown out for being a pleb. He would be a pretty poor detective if he didn't know who most of the people in the room were on the vampire side. There were representatives from every House and various societies, and no one would have turned down an invite without a good reason. Gwil nursed a glass of blood, the vintage of which was so rare it probably cost more than everything he was wearing, including his favourite pocket watch. Which made him think of someone else. He glanced around. There were famous vamps and beautiful people, but no sign of his old friend, well, ex-boyfriend, but it seemed the society wedding of the year couldn't tempt Oliver Hoffman away from his research.

“Who you looking for?”

“Hoffman.” He had mentioned to Hyax before they arrived that he might be here given his status, and he wanted to warn Hyax because he could be a bit of a jealous arse for no reason at times. Although Hoffman, who he had dated for over twenty years, didn't seem to trigger Hyax as much as another individual from his past.

Hyax also glancing around, checking out the other guests. “I didn't think this would be his sort of event.”

“Stranger things have happened, and with his connections and wealth, I'm sure he'd have been invited.

“It's amazing how profitable blood can be,” Hyax mused then grimaced.

To be fair to Hoffman, he had revolutionised the whole feeding process for vampires by creating a process to bottle blood and stop it from coagulating. “Yeah, people will pay a lot of money for convenience.”

Small talk wasn't his forte unless it was for a case and he suspected he came across as not the sharpest tool in the box. Hyax was led away by Queen Hylei to speak to her son, and Penelope had swept in making a big show of kissing her brother on the cheek before sodding off. He somehow ended up trying to make conversation with Elaine Vine from the House of Devereaux, who wasn't a future Council member but important enough to get to use the family name.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch who you were," Elaine asked. She was the sort of woman who, in normal circumstances, wouldn't have given Gwil the time of day unless he was carrying her bags and wanted to check he hadn't stolen something.

"Gwilym Hilt, I'm Prince Hyax's partner."

"Oh. And you're a vampire?"

To be fair it wasn't an unusual response, most people were surprised he'd bagged Hyax. "Yeah."

"Which House?"

"I'm not a member of one of the Houses." He saw her eyebrows rise but he did have a way to salvage this. "My sire is Solivatus."

Her demeanour changed in a second. "I see. Now he is a remarkable gentleman. Pity I've not seen him here. No doubt you'd have liked to have caught up."

When he'd been turned, his blood lust had outweighed his need to be fucked, but not by much, and once he'd been sated with blood, he'd spent three days being drilled into a mattress by his sire. They'd repeated the activity twice, on the tenth anniversary of his turning, and once after he'd parted company with Hoffman. He'd been surprised when Solivatus had turned up after hearing they'd split as it hadn't

been a bad break-up.

“I’m always honoured when my sire wishes to spend time in my presence. But I don’t think weddings are his thing.”

Elaine chuckled. “You’re right there. Tell me, are the stories true?”

Vampires weren’t known for their subtlety, but neither did they tend to give straight answers. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“When someone is turned by Solivatus, the normal lust is almost as bad as the need for blood.”

Gwil cleared his throat. “Let’s just say his reputation is well-deserved and leave it at that.”

Hyax appeared at his side. “Whose reputation?”

“Good evening, Your Highness. We were talking about Solivatus,” Elaine said. “I’m not sure how well-versed you are about vampire society.”

Hyax slid his arm around Gwil’s waist. He wasn’t used to Hyax displaying his possessive side, and he saw a dangerous edge to Hyax’s expression. “I’m aware of the individual. Gwil’s past liaisons aren’t something he’ll be drawn on.” The if he knows what’s good for him was left unsaid.

Elaine appeared flustered, as important as she thought herself to be, she would know better than to rile a royal fae. “Of course, and I do believe congratulations are in order.”

“Indeed.” Hyax turned to Gwil. “If you’re finished here, I want to discuss something

in private.”

Gwil wondered if Hyax was this jealous over nothing or if it were a plausible reason to get away. “Yeah, whenever you’re ready.”

Hyax didn’t exactly excuse them; more manoeuvred Gwil away with a curt nod in Elaine’s direction. “We’ve not discussed your sire in detail, and we will, especially if I have to continue to overhear inappropriate conversations of what you two got up to.”

He didn’t think Hyax was being fair, but they were already halfway back to their room, Hyax marching him away from the wedding as if he were in trouble. “There was nothing inappropriate, I have a history. So do you, and you’ve no reason to get annoyed with me.”

Behind their closed door, Hyax stood with his hands on his hips. “I don’t want to get into the whole Solivatus thing now, I’ve bigger things to worry about.”

“Hyax, there’s nothing to be jealous over. You know there’s a bond between a vampire and their sire, but I haven’t seen him in decades, and besides all that I love you.”

He saw Hyax’s posture soften. “I’m sorry. You know I’m dealing with a lot, and I’m waiting to be summoned home at any moment, but it was the conversation I had with Prince Simon that’s going to have a potential long-lasting impact.”

Gwil sank onto the end of the bed, Hyax could be a grandiose prat some days, but he didn’t tend to be this dramatic. “In what way?”

“He suggested that a future where the Calanti are no longer outsiders is a possibility that’s closer than ever before. While I had a similar hope, I thought it would take

more persuasion.”

He could understand why Hyax thought it a big deal, the Calanti tribe had been ostracised for over a millennium and if Prince Simon was opening up a path to bring them back into the fold, then surely the other tribes would welcome them. It was also a great distraction, and he could shelve any conversation about Solivatus for a later date. “I imagine after his honeymoon it might be something you’ll want to follow up on.”

“I’ll need to talk to my mother first, and she’ll decide the direction, but I’m going to offer to be the go-between to see if the other tribes might be as keen.”

“Is this coming from Prince Simon or his father? You might want to hold off saying anything until you know if this is a next-generation idea, and he’s approached you because you’re his peer in that sense.”

Hyax pouted. “You might have a point.”

Gwil grinned. “I’m not just a pretty fang.”

CHAPTER TWO

As weddings went, Prince Simon's was pretty classy, and Hyax had enjoyed the mix of vampire and fae traditions, several of which he thought might be applicable to his own future nuptials. He couldn't help but fantasise about marrying Gwil. While there wouldn't be a brooding Scottish castle on the banks of a loch, he was sure they'd find another stunning venue. Although he was probably getting a bit ahead of himself because while Gwil might have accepted his proposal, they were nowhere near setting a date and they'd only been shagging a few months.

His mother had informed him he was required to return home, and he assumed that was because he needed to report back on the wedding, and any important intel he'd picked up about the Calanti tribe. He arrived at the palace and made his way to her office.

"Ah, Hyax," she said as he entered. "I appreciate you coming directly. We've important matters to discuss."

"I would have thought you'd have wanted a written report on the wedding rather than a verbal debrief."

She flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder and then banished the document that had been in front of her on the desk.

"Obviously a full account will be required, but this is not about that. Well, not in the way you're thinking." She seemed agitated.

He took a seat opposite her. “I assumed by the summons that it was important, but if it’s not the wedding I can’t think of anything else that would warrant me racing home.”

“It’s not Prince Simon’s wedding that’s the pressing matter, but yours.”

He bristled at her interference. He’d kept her out of his love life for centuries and, if he could, he’d keep her out for several more. “Gwil and I haven’t set a date yet. As interested as I’m sure you are, we’ll inform you in due course when we’re ready. We don’t want to rush matters for something important that takes careful planning.”

“You and Gwil won’t be setting a date. I’ve given you enough warning, Hyax.” Her eyes blazed gold for a second, a sign of annoyance, and a trait he’d inherited. “I am talking about you marrying one of the approved suitors, and since you have been so bloody-minded and refused to name one, I will be doing so myself.”

The suitors’ lists had been an ongoing battle. He’d played along, pretended to meet and greet the eligible bachelors his parents had deemed acceptable, like a good little prince, but she was aware of his stance. Even if he didn’t have Gwil, none of the fuckers on the approved list would have been suitable for him. Picking a husband from a collection of creeps, mummy’s boys and political climbers was the last thing he wanted.

“No.” Hyax stared in disbelief at his mother. “I’m engaged to be married to Gwil, we have a love match. You know that.”

“And you know we have not sanctioned your engagement, nor have I made a public statement consenting to the union.”

His parents might not have made an announcement, but he’d made sure the news had got out and gossip about the calibre of a vamp of Gwil’s stature bagging a fae prince

had spread like wildfire. “But you should. I want to marry for love, not because you’ve dragged out an archaic rite to fit your own narrative because you don’t like Gwil.”

“It’s not a matter of liking Gwil.” She raised her chin, defiant, eyes back to their normal colour. “You cannot be naïve enough to think you can ignore the politics at play. Given the current situation with the Calanti, and you attending the wedding of their prince, some of the other tribes are seeking reassurance that we’re not going to also break the wider alliance.”

His mother’s diatribe made him think he’d been prudent to heed Gwil’s advice to hold off saying anything about the future reconciliation of the Calanti until he’d been able to ascertain which direction it was coming from. His mother didn’t appear keen to rekindle relations, but he wouldn’t put it past her using this as an excuse to pressure him into dumping Gwil. Ultimately, she would always do what was best for their people.

“I attended on your behalf,” he said through gritted teeth. “With your blessing, I might add. I would also note that I wasn’t the only senior fae representative from the tribes there either, so if there’s chatter about my pro-vampire sentiment then it’s ridiculous and hypocritical.”

She clicked her tongue, one of her more annoying verbal tics. “It is a matter of perception, Hyax. You took Gwil as your guest, a clear message of your attachment to a vampire and therefore your sympathies towards the Calanti.”

His mother was grasping at straws and there were other political sentiments to be balanced, and she bloody well knew it.

“Prince Simon’s marriage unites two of the Vampire Houses, how would it have looked if I’d turned up without Gwil? I’m publicly dating a vampire. If I’d left him at

home, it would have been seen as a snub to them.”

Talia’s wings vibrated. “As a prince of the Tasharick tribe, you should be aligned with the fae, not the vampires. You need to make a public declaration of your allegiance to your people.”

They could argue in circles forever, but it wouldn’t address the actual problem. “That does not mean I have to marry a fae to prove my loyalty. By marrying Gwil, I’ll show that we fae are not insular and are able to widen our horizons.”

“That is not how politics work and you know it.”

He wasn’t a naïve fledgeling, and as this was her second dig at his maturity Hyax didn’t think he could win by continuing this line of defence. “Mother, this is ridiculous. You can’t possibly marry me off when I have a love match. Are you so willing to see me miserable and ignore the precedent set through the generations to appease a few muttering harpies? We abandoned arranged marriages centuries ago if one of those involved had a partner.”

“Precedent has never included a prince marrying a common vampire, or any sort of vampire for that matter.” She took a deep breath. “Hyax, I am not here to destroy your happiness, far from it. You know there are examples of fae being cast out when their loyalty was questioned. I will not see that happen to you if I can prevent it by relatively simple means.”

He’d never thought anyone would denounce him as a traitor, nor would he describe a forced arranged marriage as a simple solution. “I am loyal, but I can be loyal to my people and the man I love.”

“With your marriage to the right fae, you would have a way to show outwardly that you are committed to your realm. I’m not a monster, Hyax, I truly believe who we

have chosen for you will be suitable and a good match for political stability.”

“Mother—”

“It’s not like you have to give up Gwil. While he cannot be your husband, he can be a favourite lover, one who you bestow your affection on and that would be accepted without too much issue.”

Gwil wouldn’t stand for that, and he shouldn’t have to. Hyax would need to find a way out of this. “I don’t wish to marry someone who isn’t Gwil. It’s not enough for him to be a side piece when he’s my everything.”

“It is a matter of obligation, Hyax, and you’ve never been one to shirk your duty. Our joining with the Elementa tribe through your marriage will be a perfect message.”

The Elementa tribe could mean only one person, Metra—an old boyfriend his parents hadn’t known about. The truce between their two tribes was too recent to risk on an affair that had been over fifteen years ago, and he hadn’t intended on admitting anything to his mother unless he had to. But that would be a last resort, and given the way Talia was talking, it wouldn’t help, and might make her think they were more suitable for each other and could work past their differences. Fucking ridiculous as Metra was a cheating asshole, but Hyax’s sensibilities wouldn’t be taken into account.

“You would send me off to be miserable for a message? How could you do that to me?” he asked, hoping it would be the guilt-ridden dagger to the heart he aimed for.

“I am not saying you need to be miserable. Metra will have to accept your right to keep Gwil, you have to accept that you cannot have Gwil in the way you want. Most royalty do not have the option of a love match. Me and your father grew to love each other in our own way.”

Both his parents had a harem, but that didn't mean he wanted one, even if it was a harem made up solely of Gwil.

"I do not want Metra as a husband."

Her expression was stony. "Arrangements of this type are not based on want but need, the need for duty and sacrifice to benefit the realm. Gwil will understand, and if he truly loves you as you say, he will support you in what you must do to protect your tribe."

"You would ask him to stand by and witness me take another as a husband, while he knows full well that I do not wish to?"

"If your love is as strong as you claim, he will not desert you."

He couldn't believe she was asking this of him, or Gwil. "I won't do it. I refuse."

"You have to. Queen Vaness has made it clear that for the peace we brokered previously to stand, we have to demonstrate that the Tasharick are committed to our relations with the Elementa. It is at her insistence that you marry her son."

The last thing he had heard from Metra's mother, she was far from convinced Hyax was a suitable husband for her precious baby boy because of his connection to Gwil. "She wasn't so insistent last time we talked. She called into question whether I would be fit to marry him."

"We have had several conversations about your suitability, and she is now convinced you and her son would be a good political match. Metra believes it could be more in time, but I think that is unlikely."

He snorted. "No fucking way."

She scowled at his language but didn't reprimand him. "Hyax, the reality is we cannot afford to be at odds with the Elementa, we do not want another war, or the destruction that comes with it."

Hyax wasn't going to buy into her dramatics. "Come off it, me not marrying their smarmy prince wouldn't result in us going to war."

"They have also found out about the Stone of Ljin."

The stone was one of seven on the Coronet of Asphodel, a powerful artefact the Tasharick tribe were entrusted with keeping. The jewel had been stolen by a group of rogue elves who used its power of transmutation for illegal drug manufacture. Now it was back where it was supposed to be. Hyax thought he would need to investigate how the Elementa had found out as they had gone to great pains so the other tribes wouldn't uncover the issue, especially as the matter had been resolved. If the stone were still missing or had been destroyed, he might understand the implication and why his mother might bow to the Elementa's request.

"I didn't think that was common knowledge."

"We all have our ways of determining information. They aren't aware of all the details but know enough."

"What if they do?" He wasn't going to accept this at face value. "There's no longer a concern on that front. And Gwil was one of the people we have to thank for ensuring its safe return—that should count for something."

"I do not contest Gwil's involvement and have thanked him for his part. But you must realise the position we are in. We need to make a statement of our intent. Your hand in marriage will demonstrate that you are not allied to the vampires even if you keep Gwil as a close companion. Also, it shows we are not shirking our commitments

when it comes to the future safety of the coronet or the peace agreement between the tribes.”

If this had been her just being dramatic, she would have changed tack again, but his mother wasn't one to make something out of nothing when there could be serious implications for her people. He'd always thought that while she hadn't been keen on his and Gwil's relationship, she'd have come around eventually, but now this outside pressure meant he had to reconsider that option. The reality was he might not have a choice and neither did she.

“Please, Mother... there must be another way. I love Gwil, and while I'm positive he'd stand by me, the hurt this would cause is so unnecessary.”

She stood and came around the side of the desk and placed her hand on his cheek. For the first time, he saw her regret. “I wish there was. I know I am asking more than any mother should ask of her son. I am not saying you have to give up Gwil but be realistic about what he can be to you. A prince and a mediocre vampire. If he'd been a Dark Earl or Dark Duke, or member of one of the influential societies, we might have been able to do something, but as it stands, he is nothing special to his people, and you need to do your duty.”

He couldn't argue about Gwil's importance to other people, but he wasn't nothing to him. Hyax loved him and the least he could do was to let him choose if he wanted to take a way out. “I will need to speak to Gwil. Give him the chance to make an informed decision.”

His heart hurt, he didn't want to lose Gwil, but the politics were not something he could ignore. He could cope with being cast out, but not if his people suffered from his actions, and the risk of fallout with the Elementa was considerable if it were real.

“Hyax, we have time. The negotiations will make sure you get to keep Gwil without

argument. From initial discussions with Queen Vaness, there has been no stipulation either way about a harem, as it is part of our tradition, there should be no objection. Even if it is a harem of one or a named favourite.”

If he was going to have to adhere to this bollocks, then he would insist on the most important title he could find for Gwil, to make it clear he wasn’t some fucktoy but the one he cared about. “I want Gwil to have the title of Prince’s Beloved.”

“That carries specific implications, but since you claim Gwil is your love match, it would not be unsurprising for you to ask.”

He’d expected at least a bit of a fight. Although she’d said she wasn’t opposed to Hyax keeping Gwil in some capacity, he’d been dubious about how much she’d meant it. “Metra should make plans for a harem of his own, because I will not be sharing a marital bed with him.”

She winced. “There will be a matter of the consummation.”

As far as Hyax was aware that did not have to happen after the ceremony and a kernel of an idea and hope grew inside of him. He’d keep his previous involvement with Metra quiet for now and ensure the wording of any contract would allow the interpretation of the consummation would work for him and Gwil, and keep Metra at arm’s length.

“I will not discuss that now,” he said, not wanting to risk his plan until he had the details clearer in his mind and had checked he was correct in his assumptions.

“I am sorry, darling. Once you have spoken to Gwil, we can make an official statement about your engagement.”

He would try and put this off for as long as he could, but he knew that wouldn’t be

long. “I need to go. Please let me have a few days.”

“As long as we continue discussion with the Elementa, we can negotiate a time to make a public announcement.”

“I suppose I should be grateful for this small mercy. I’ll be in touch.”

His mother did look remorseful, but she had got what she wanted and Hyax felt nauseous as he opened a portal and stepped into the hallway of their shared home in Spitalfields. The house was nowhere near as grand as the palace and his rooms in the fae realm but here felt more like home than anywhere he’d ever lived, and he did not want to lose the sense of belonging.

“Gwil?” Part of him hoped Gwil was out, and he could put off talking to him, but a shout from upstairs told him he would have to tackle this head-on. He didn’t have forever, and he couldn’t keep this a secret.

He found Gwil in the living room petting his cat, Midnight, who was enjoying a belly rub. “You all right? How were things at home?” Gwil asked.

“I’ve had better visits.” Understatement of the year.

“Did something about the Flint wedding piss off your mum?”

“It didn’t come up.”

Gwil frowned. “I thought that was why you were going back.”

Hyax sat next to Gwil and took hold of his hand. “My mother had another topic to discuss and there’s no good way to say this but directly. She’s no longer giving me an option when it comes to my marriage.”

“Fuck.” Gwil squeezed his hand. “She’s going to force you to marry someone else, isn’t she?”

Hyax wanted to cry or scream, or both. “There’s a huge political pressure due to the Elementa finding out about the stone, and questions of my loyalty to the tribe because I’ve chosen a vampire and attended a vampire wedding.”

Gwil’s expression was a picture of pain and Hyax wanted to hold him and make everything better, but that wasn’t part of the script.

“Who is it?”

“Metra.”

“How long do we have?” Gwil’s voice croaked and he sounded as miserable as Hyax felt.

“No date’s been set. I said I wouldn’t agree to anything until I’d spoken to you.” He pulled Gwil close, pressing their foreheads together. “I don’t want to marry him, but I don’t have a choice.”

Gwil cupped his jaw. “I love you. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I love you too. Gwil. If I could prevent this, I would. I’d renounce my title and give up the fae realm for you, but that would leave my people at risk of war with the Elementa.”

“How? Because you refused a forced marriage?” Gwil seemed horrified.

“No, it’s more than the arrangement, they’ve somehow been made aware of the disappearance of the Stone of Ljin, and my perceived allegiance to the vampires

rather than the fae. The marriage will be a sign of solidarity.”

Gwil let out a choked sob. “What will happen to us? I know I’m not considered important by your parents, but will they make you give me up?”

Hyax had thought Gwil might be incensed and angry, and he’d not expected this reaction. “You know the fae customs allow me to have others beside a spouse. They know how important you are to me. I will insist you’re given the title of Prince’s Beloved, so this isn’t whether I give you up, but whether you can stand to stay with me.”

“What? You think I want to leave you? Hyax, I love you, and I’d do anything to be with you. I know you don’t want to marry Metra, and I won’t let you face this alone.”

Hyax crashed their lips together. He loved this man, no one had ever come close to Gwil, and that he was thinking of Hyax rather than himself made his affection even stronger. Whatever happened he would find a way to keep Gwil at his side, and no one would mistake him for anything other than the most important person in Hyax’s world.

CHAPTER THREE

G wil lay awake, his head pillowed on Hyax's chest. The beating of Hyax's heart comforting as he tried not to think about the bombshell his boyfriend had dropped. For all Hyax's talk of his parents eventually accepting their relationship, he'd always doubted he would get to marry Hyax, and now his self-fulfilling prophecy was coming true. As it stood, they were in limbo, no date had been set and no contract terms for Hyax's marriage to Metra agreed but given everything Hyax had explained about the politics involved it wouldn't be long before the pieces were put into place. Lying here, curled up with Hyax, he let himself forget about everything else.

His mobile began to vibrate on the nightstand, he ignored it. If whatever the caller wanted was important, they'd leave a message or try later. He wasn't in the mood to talk to clients about attics haunted by spectral squirrels, or poltergeists sabotaging gender reveal parties, both open cases he had no headspace for right now.

Hyax stirred as Gwil's mobile began to vibrate for a second time. Gwil grabbed it to see who was calling and whether it could be ignored. He sat bolt upright as he saw the caller-ID, somehow his phone recognising the number when Gwil was sure he'd never received a call from them before on these contact details.

He accepted the call. "Solivatus?"

"Gwil, long time no hear."

Hyax stared at him and Gwil shook his head—he was none the wiser than Hyax at this point. He'd not heard directly from his sire in years, and that had corresponded

with another situation with his love life. He wasn't sure how to answer, he'd always had a deference to Solivatus, which was pretty common for vampires and their sires, and had no clue why he would be contacting him now.

"Is there something wrong?"

"A car is on its way. I'm at Flume's, bring your fairy prince with you—I've a job for you both."

The call disconnected before Gwil could answer and he stared at the screen of his mobile as if hoping it would reveal more secrets.

"What's going on?" Hyax demanded.

"All I know is he's sending a car to take us to Flume's. He's asked me to bring you, but if you'd rather not you can stay here, and I'll handle it."

Hyax threw back the duvet. "Like fuck would I let you go on your own. You're in a vulnerable state at the moment, there's no telling what Solivatus might demand of you."

They'd only had the briefest of conversations about Gwil and his sire, the sexual thrill he'd experienced after being turned and the times they'd met since. Their encounters hadn't been meaningless to Gwil, but they weren't some great love affair. He wasn't pining after Solivatus or feeling he'd been abandoned like some Austen-esque maiden.

"I'm not going to let him fuck me," Gwil said as calmly as he could manage.

Hyax bristled. "From the little that you've told me, every time you've seen him, he's had you on your back."

Gwil bit down hard on his tongue and managed to stop the reply about him not being the one who was going to marry his ex. “I don’t appreciate what you’re insinuating. I’m with you, I’m not going to shag someone else.”

“You might not have that intent, but he might, and he could use his thrall.”

Hyax was being a twat, but he didn’t have time for his bullshit. “If fucking me was his end goal, I doubt he would have asked you to join us.”

Solivatus might have thought he stood a chance of a threesome with a pretty fae prince. He had a reputation for doing far more adventurous things than playing with more than one person at a time, but Gwil thought if Solivatus wanted to hook up he wouldn’t be shipping them out to Flume’s house for the pleasure.

Hyax huffed. “I’m sorry. I’m being an asshole. Just everything with Metra, and now Solivatus turning up, all has me unsettled.”

“I get it, but we’re stronger together, and throwing shit around won’t help.” Gwil would do a lot of things for Hyax, but he had to have some boundaries, he was too old to let himself get pushed about by a jealous boyfriend. “He might try and wind you up, he’s a master at finding someone’s weakness and exploiting it—don’t let him get to you.”

By the time they’d finished dressing and emerged outside, there was a car waiting. London’s evening traffic was as bad as ever, and Gwil thought it would have been a lot quicker if they’d taken the Tube. Flume’s residence was in Camden—they’d visited before as part of the case they’d worked to find the Stone of Ljin. Hyax was clearly agitated, and their conversation had dwindled to nothing, Gwil coaxing out the odd monosyllabic grunt but he thought it best not to poke the dragon too much. They arrived at Flume’s house, his goblin secretary there to meet them.

“Your Highness, Mr Hilt, if you would follow me. Mr Flume and his guest are waiting for you.”

Flume’s house was more modern than expected given his age and position in vampire society. Gwil’s guard was up, even as a returning visitor—senior vampires didn’t tend to be good hosts to those they considered little better than dinner if they didn’t want something.

They were shown into a parlour. “I’ll inform Mr Flume you’re here.”

Gwil swallowed as Solivatus entered. From the first moment Gwil had met him in a laudanum den in the 1840s, Solivatus had given off a raw sexual energy that had resulted in Gwil making a reckless decision that had changed him forever. The term silver fox didn’t do Solivatus justice. As long as Gwil had known him, he’d had grey hair worn tied back in a low ponytail, but now he had a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. He looked as if he had a new collection of tattoos too as Gwil didn’t recognise the ones poking out from under his cuffs and open collar.

For most vampires there was a connection between them and their sire that was unbreakable, it wasn’t always sexual, but in his case, it was alongside a huge dose of reverence.

He got to his feet. “Solivatus,” he said with a nod.

“Gwil, modern clothing suits you—you are looking very well, indeed. Please sit.” Solivatus turned to Hyax, his smile no longer reaching his eyes. “Your Highness, thank you for coming. I hear congratulations are in order.”

Gwil sat and Hyax tensed beside him, and he wondered if Hyax was thinking the same and somehow Solivatus had heard word of Metra. “If I thought you were offering them sincerely, I would accept,” Hyax said, not giving anything away.

Solivatus smirked. “I am nothing if not concerned for Gwil’s happiness. I just hope that you are one of the rare faes who can fight the habit of a lifetime and not be a complete prick towards your vampiric intended.”

So for now the cat was still in the bag, but Gwil was relieved by the diversion and slightly taken aback by the sniping between his sire and his boyfriend. Solivatus didn’t give a flying fuck about anyone, and Hyax usually wasn’t a posturing asshole, so it was strange for them to be bitching at each other over him.

Flume arrived, perfect timing for a much-needed diversion.

“Ah, gentleman. Thank you for coming.” Flume poured three glasses of blood. “Don’t worry, Your Highness, I’ve ambrosia in the other decanter.”

“I don’t know, a bit of blood might put some colour in his cheeks,” Solivatus drawled. “Mind you, Gwil’s a fine lad, I’m sure he can pep you up.”

Flume cleared his throat and handed out the drinks. “Thank you both for coming so swiftly. I have a delicate matter to discuss and I’m sure Solivatus will behave himself, at least for a little while.”

Gwil thought Hyax was one comment away from walking out, and he wouldn’t give a fuck about something the vampires might think delicate, although he might like to wipe the smirk off Solivatus’s face.

“To be frank, Mr Flume, unless there is some great political catastrophe about to explode then I don’t see why I’d care,” Hyax said.

“Funny you should describe the situation in such a manner. This isn’t solely vampire business, and I’m approaching you on behalf of King James, or as we call him the Dark Earl of MacLove.”

“Are you telling me this is related to the Calanti?” Hyax asked, his disbelief evident.

“And the Houses of Hewel and Cartwright. You attended the wedding of Prince Simon and Robin Flint. I know Prince Simon approached you about restoring civilities between your tribes, so I hope you will hear us out.”

Solivatus leant forward. “I apologise for my previous uncouth remarks, now is neither the place nor the time for posturing. I asked you here because I thought you and Gwil might be in the position to help where others wouldn’t.”

This must be serious as Gwil had never heard of Solivatus apologising before.

“Help with what?” Hyax appeared to be willing to listen, but Gwil could tell by his expression he would be ready to fire a bolt of pointy magic at Solivatus for the merest infraction.

“Prince Simon has been kidnapped,” Flume said. “There’s seemingly no trace of him, and we were hoping you’d be able to help find him.”

Gwil watched Hyax for his reaction. The kidnapping of a man of Prince Simon’s standing would be big news, and he’d not even heard a whisper about it. Vampires could close ranks like no other, but this was also fae business and they were gossipy bastards at the best of times, but throw in the Calanti and tongues would wag so hard they’d fall out.

Hyax scowled. “How would we be able to locate him since I assume you’ve not been able to and we’d be several options down the list?”

Flume kept his composure, Gwil was impressed. “His parents seem to think you might have a way due to your vampire boyfriend, and that you’d be more willing to help than some fae.”

“Right, so you’re saying King James and Queen Hylei asked for me?” Hyax sounded incredulous.

“Yes, and I have something called a spark that Queen Hylei said to give to you if you were to entertain the notion.” Flume was as diplomatic as they came, or he was a great actor—Gwil couldn’t call it. “But I can share some details up front.”

“She gave you a spark?” Hyax said.

Gwil was pretty sure that was the fae equivalent of a voice message and seemed like a big deal to Hyax that she’d send one to him.

“Yes. This is a terrible situation. She has no idea where her only child has gone—taken the night after his wedding by unknown assailants who are thought to be elves.”

Gwil cleared his throat. “If you’ve no trace, I assume you don’t know who has him. So where do the elves come into this?”

“They are suspected to be a group known as the Red Stars, elite mercenaries for hire,” Flume explained. “We were able to ascertain their species by their magic signature and the rest by their *modus operandi*.”

Gwil didn’t know enough about the elves to recognise the group in question, as far as he was concerned, all elves were evil shitbags.

“They would have delivered him to order,” Hyax said with a sneer. “But to who?”

“We don’t know,” Solivatus said. “Look, Prince Simon and his husband have a special bond, not some lovey-dovey made-up shit, but an honest-to-goodness magical bond that for some reason his parents can’t track. They thought you might be able to

do so because you're not related to Prince Simon, so you'd not be blocked, and as you are a fae could sense the magic."

Gwil thought there had to be more to this, if it were just a fae link, they could have asked someone from the Calanti tribe and not one of their rivals but, as this was fae business, he would follow Hyax's lead.

"I'm not convinced I could do something Queen Hylei couldn't, but I would be willing to liaise with her to hear her reasoning for why I might be able to help."

"It all goes back to the bond between Robin and Prince Simon, and I was allowed to share with you that Prince Simon was meant to have fed from Robin to fully embrace his vampire side, but he hasn't yet had the opportunity to do so."

Gwil gnawed his bottom lip, in these matters, the most obvious answer was usually the correct one. "Does that mean Prince Simon is a vampire-fae?"

"Well deducted, Gwil. Yes, Prince Simon is, or he will be. He hadn't fed before he was abducted, so he's trapped at a crucial point in his metamorphosis," Flume said, his smile fake.

Gwil guessed there was a lot of pressure to bring Prince Simon home.

"Why can't Hylei or James trace the bond?" Hyax asked.

"All I know is they can't." Solivatus scowled. Hyax and Solivatus had as much patience as the other. "Look, we don't know any more than we've said, but as you can imagine, it would mean a great deal to both the Calanti tribe and the Vampire Council if you were to help."

Gwil didn't think Hyax would care but he did. This was a huge deal, and if he were to

say no, then he might as well forget about being able to work again. He'd be blacklisted in minutes, decades of dedication gone. He turned to Hyax, hoping he understood. "I think it would be only right for us to help."

"While you're not the star attraction, Gwil," Solivatus said, "I've heard excellent feedback about your detective skills and that you've a network to call on that we'd also like to explore."

Gwil assumed Solivatus meant the sewer dwellers who he had a special deal with, mostly because his contact, Copperpipe, liked him and the ample quantities of sugar-based confectionery he sent him. "I'd be happy to assist in any way."

"And you?" Solivatus said to Hyax.

"I said I would liaise with Hylei, and I will," Hyax snapped. "I can't promise something until I get the full picture."

"Thank you." Flume handed over a glowing orb. "The spark is password-protected."

Hyax took it. "So, what's the password?"

"Your birthday, which we don't know."

Hyax pocketed the spark. "I will open this when I'm home, she didn't intend you to hear it, so I won't do so in your presence."

Solivatus stood, grinned and then sat in the space next to Gwil on the sofa. His hand landed on Gwil's thigh. "How's things, Gwil? It's been a while since we've caught up."

He felt the ripple of Hyax's magic, his displeasure unmistakable.

“Doing well,” Gwil croaked and took hold of Hyax’s hand. “We’re doing well.”

Solivatus slapped his thigh. “That’s what I like to hear, and I hope it remains that way. I’d hate for you to get hurt.”

“I don’t like your tone,” Hyax snarled.

“You don’t have to like it.” Solivatus smiled, it was a bit disconcerting as he leant around Gwil. “But you have to do right by one of mine. I hope I’ve made myself clear.”

Gwil had never thought he’d hear his sire give his boyfriend the equivalent of the shovel talk—no one had ever done that for him. “Perhaps we should go.”

Hyax was on his feet in an instant, for a moment Gwil thought he would open a portal and leave him behind, but instead he grabbed Gwil’s arm and marched him out, Flume on their heels. “Please take my car. And accept my apologies for Solivatus, Your Highness. Us vampires can be a little protective of our own.”

“I don’t like being threatened or the status of my relationship being called into question. Gwil and I are happy and do not appreciate your interference.”

Gwil wouldn’t mind a bit of interference if he thought it might help with their Metra problem, but for now, he’d get out of here with Hyax before he set fire to something with a well-placed fireball.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hyax had enough self-awareness to know he didn't like to share, and could be prone to the odd jealous twinge, but this reaction to the way Solivatus treated Gwil was beyond anything he'd experienced and had caused a fiery bolt of pure possessiveness to scream through him. He'd barely been able to contain his anger and had at least stopped himself from throwing Gwil over his shoulder as he stormed out. He'd even thought to open a portal and drag Gwil with him but that would have been disastrous, knowing how Gwil's anatomy did not fare well in the fae portals. Reducing his boyfriend to a crispy fried vampire due to a hissy fit would not be the best way of endearing himself to Gwil.

He had seethed all the way home, knowing it wasn't prudent to vocalise anything negative while in a car owned by Flume. When the front door shut behind them, he turned on Gwil. "Solivatus is a giant fucking creep."

Gwil schooled his expression. "I'm not arguing, but he's my sire, Hyax. He's not what I'd call a constant in my life... er... afterlife, but I wouldn't be here if he hadn't turned me."

"That doesn't give him the right to put his hands on you now."

"There are some schools of thought that would disagree," Gwil said. "But he's not one of them. He did it to get a response, and you gave him one."

Hyax sneered. "What was I supposed to do, sit back and let him paw at you? You're my betrothed."

“Am I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

“Well, according to your parents, your betrothed is Metra and I’m your side fuck.”

Hyax wasn’t going to stand for that. “Solivatus doesn’t know what’s going on with me and Metra. As far as your little vampire friends are concerned, we’re planning to marry and he put his hands on you.”

“That’s what you’re pissed off at? That a man I’ve known for over one-hundred and fifty years put his hand on my knee? He didn’t even ask to see my ankles.”

“Gwil, don’t take the fucking piss.”

“You’re getting angry at me because someone touched my knee... or is it because they told you not to fuck me over?”

“What?”

Gwil snorted and stomped up the stairs. “Ah, it was that. This isn’t you thinking someone might crack on to me, but that they’ve had the audacity to tell you not to treat me like shit. Well, laugh’s on them, eh, Hyax? I’m about to be booted to the kerb.”

For a moment he was stymied. This wasn’t about his feelings for Gwil but that his sire was overstepping. He charged up the stairs. Gwil wasn’t in the front room, but in true British form, the bastard was in the kitchen filling the kettle.

“You’re making tea?”

“Yes, do you want one?” Gwil asked, keeping his back to him.

“Gwil, don’t be fucking ridiculous. You’ve just accused me of not caring—of course I don’t want bloody tea.”

He saw Gwil’s shoulders sag, but he didn’t turn. “I didn’t think you’d want me to tear your throat out, so the next best thing to calm me down is tea.”

“Arsehole.”

“Prick.” Gwil slammed a mug on the counter and threw a teabag into it. “You’re the one who’s out of line, not me.”

Hyax wanted to argue but the fight drained out of him as reality hit. “I’m sorry. I didn’t expect to have such a reaction to Solivatus.”

Gwil turned and leant against the counter. “You’ve always been a bit funny about him, but I didn’t expect you to be so rattled.”

“It was the way he said it’s been a while since you’d caught up in a suggestive way, and then he put his hands on you.”

“He’s my sire, and for many vampires that has a sexual element, but it doesn’t mean I am interested in shagging him again. I told you this before we went.”

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to fuck you.”

“You know, if I took issue with every man wanted to bend you over, I’d be fighting half the people I meet. But I trust you, so you need to trust me. I admit there is a level of deference I have for him, but that wouldn’t mean I would take up any offer and risk what we have.”

He did trust Gwil. Gwil wasn't the sort to cheat, no matter what his link to his sire. "I'm sorry if this is coming across as if I don't trust you, I'm more shaken than I thought I would be, and then the fucker told me not to upset you... and that's inevitable."

If his unease was just about Solivatus then Hyax would've told himself he was being a twat and that would have been the end of it, but the issue was bigger than Gwil's past and while it wasn't Hyax's fault over Metra, he still carried the guilt.

Gwil took a step closer. "To be fair to you, you're not doing anything to upset me, you can't help the position you've been put in and I'll have to find a way of dealing with it because I'm not walking away. So I would appreciate it if you could try and do the same over Solivatus."

Hyax pulled him into his arms, the depth of his feelings for this ridiculous man was like nothing he'd been prepared for. He'd thought he'd been in love with Gwil before they got together but now it was ten times anything he'd experienced. Even with all the chaos dating someone of his status would load onto Gwil's shoulders he was still there for him.

"I will, I promise. It's just I want the old goat to know you're mine. And if he's like this now, how's he going to be when everything comes out about Metra?"

Gwil stroked his hair. "We'll deal with him. I ain't gonna let Solivatus console me or anything like that."

Hyax stepped away. "He'd do that?"

"He did after I ended things with Hoffman, but we ain't splitting up."

Gwil hadn't said much about him or the fallout, just that their split had been

amicable. They were still in touch, now and again, and Hyax hadn't given it much consideration.

"Do I want to know the sort of support he might offer?" He knew it was the wrong thing to say but he couldn't stop the words escaping.

"Hyax, you're being a knob. You don't need me to tell you what happened. I've told you before, and I'm telling you again—it was nothing more than a brief physical release, so unless you're planning to ditch me, it's not an issue."

"If anyone would be ending things, it'd be you. And I wouldn't blame you with all the shit that's flying around."

Gwil scowled. "Do I need to say it in another language? Or sing it in falsetto? I've told you I'm not going anywhere. You need to park that idea before you make me think you want me to leave."

Hyax was fucking everything up, he didn't want to lose Gwil, and he was out of order. "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying sorry and act like my partner instead. We've got a lot of stuff we're going to have to deal with and we can do so together, but not if you're all words and no action. Because if you're going to act like I'm not worth the hassle, then we'll go back to being business partners."

He hadn't fallen for Gwil because he was a pushover, but because their strong personalities had matched. Neither of them would do well with a meek partner and it was possible that seeing how Gwil was with his sire had triggered his reaction. "Understood, I'm not going to act like a bag of pus on a goblin's ball sac and we're going to get through this."

Gwil laughed. “I don’t think I’d have ever thought of you in such a light, but I guess the analogy holds up. Actually, I was thinking can we use the Prince Simon stuff to our advantage.”

He couldn’t see how. “Really? I guess it’ll be good for our business, although I’m not sure it’s something we’d be able to share with many people.”

“The Vampire Council will know and that’ll give us brownie points from them, but I was more thinking of it as a way of putting off your parents from announcing your betrothal to Metra.”

Hyax would need to contact his mother about the request to help King James, and it was a perfect delaying tactic when it came to their other problem. “You might be onto something. There’s going to be a certain sensitivity regarding my involvement, but we couldn’t turn the request down as we can come at that from the Vampire Council angle.”

“I’m not just a pretty fang.”

“No, and I find your intelligence as fucking sexy as the fact you don’t need to breathe when you’re sucking my cock.”

“Blond twat.”

“Blood-sucking wanker.”

“I wank a lot less now we live together.”

If Gwil had been a fae there’d have been so many things he’d have done as part of their customs, and it struck him that Gwil being a vampire didn’t mean he couldn’t do those things. “Are you free for the rest of the evening?”

“Yeah, I’ve always stuff to do but nothing that can’t wait.”

“Give me half an hour, there’s somewhere I want to take you, but I need to arrange a couple of things.”

Gwil seemed bemused. “What are you playing at?”

“I assure you I’m not playing. Take a shower, put on something nice, I’m going to show you off at home, but I need to call in a couple of favours.”

“Hyax?”

He opened a portal. “Make yourself pretty, I’m going to show the fae world that you’re my beloved. I might have to call Metra my husband, but there’ll be no doubt where my real affections lie.”

Gwil bit his lip. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Yes, I do.”

He stepped through the portal into a reception area for La Pian. The fae behind the desk squeaked as she recognised him. “Your Highness! How can I be of assistance?”

He felt sorry for her, she was young, and while La Pian catered for the elite of fae society, she wouldn’t have expected him to arrive unannounced.

“I want a table on the mound, first press ambrosia and a viewing suite for two.”

“Of course, Prince Hyax. When would you like it?”

“Now.”

He saw her wings vibrate and he guessed his request wouldn't be easy. "We are fully booked at the moment."

"Right. How soon?"

She frantically checked the list in front of her, and while Hyax didn't like to throw his rank around, he wasn't above doing so today.

"If you could give me an hour, I can make it happen."

He smiled. "Thank you, I'll be very appreciative."

Hyax stepped through a portal into his rooms at the palace. He sent Gwil a text that he'd collect him in an hour and set about getting ready. Removing his jacket, he remembered the spark from Queen Hylei.

He laid the small glowing ball in the palm of his hand and spoke his birth date. Often, these were tuned to the recipient's magic, but they had only met once, at the wedding, and she wouldn't have been able to lock onto him.

"Prince Hyax," the message began, "you will have been contacted via your partner's sire. I apologise for using that channel but official communication opportunities between our tribes are limited, and I am beyond desperate. I hope you can help me. My son was kidnapped, we can't trace him, and we have used every avenue we can think of apart from one... you have a vampire lover, and I believe there is an alternative branch of magic you can access, or you may already have. This spark is encoded with a signature that will allow us to correspond with each other, if you are willing to help, please contact me. I will be forever grateful."

Hyax would have thought that with James being a vampire-fae he'd have been able to utilise the magic Hylei had mentioned, but it sounded as if that wasn't the case. He

sent back a spark message of his own, confirming he would be happy to help but would need more details.

For now, he would need to wait for her reply, and he had a date with his favourite sexy vampire.

CHAPTER FIVE

Over the last few months, Hyax had taken Gwil to several swanky places in London, but they'd not visited the fae realm apart from a soiree at the palace where Queen Talia had thanked him for helping with the recovery of the stone. Gwil hadn't expected to be invited for a regular family dinner, but it would have been nice for his future in-laws to have shown a little interest in him. Although that wasn't fair, they were interested in him, they just didn't want him marrying their son, and he wasn't convinced they were that happy about him being Hyax's walking sex toy either, which meant calling them his future in-laws was technically incorrect.

Hyax had told him to make himself pretty, but that was a daunting task given the default setting for fae was drop-dead gorgeous, and no matter how much he tried he wouldn't be able to pass muster with creatures who had iridescent wings and were set to auto-sparkle. He'd showered and selected jeans and a designer shirt, both of which were Hyax-approved, plus a leather jacket. He hesitated, wondering if he should suit up, but his best one was at the dry cleaners and Hyax wouldn't be impressed by the off-the-peg offerings he could wrangle up instead.

A portal opened and Hyax stepped through, stunning as ever in fae clothing he wouldn't describe as formal but made Gwil look like he'd be there to open doors and not get in the way.

"Oh, you know I love that shirt," Hyax said, claiming a kiss.

He didn't give Gwil time to answer and pulled him through the portal. For some reason, travelling direct to the fae realm didn't cause the issues as moving between

two points in his own world. Hyax had said he thought it something to do with the way magic drained in a particular direction, but he hadn't been able to figure it out completely, which he was still pissed off about.

Fae sunlight wasn't a problem, but Gwil thought it would have been worth a few crispy patches for the view. They'd emerged onto a terrace overlooking the fae meadowland, long grass swaying and a blanket of tiny lights stretching out miles in front of them. The sky was a mix of blue with heavy clouds tinged with pink and purple.

"This is... wow," Gwil said, lost in the beauty of it all.

Hyax kissed him, nothing more than a quick peck. He heard a trilling noise behind them. A female fae stood waiting, and he thought she might explode with excitement. "Your Highness, Mr Hilt, welcome to La Pian. Your viewing suite is being prepared but your table is ready in the bar. Unless you would like a private room."

"The bar is perfect," Hyax said.

Gwil suspected he was about to be put on display, Hyax had said he wanted the world to see that it was Gwil who was important to him. Hyax placed a hand on his lower back, a possessive gesture as they followed the host into a busy bar where they were directed to a table. Fae weren't subtle and many of the people there were staring outright. Hyax smirked.

Drinks were served and Gwil found himself pressed up against Hyax on a small sofa. "You're being a bit smug."

"I've the prettiest vamp as my guest, I deserve to be smug." Hyax leant in and kissed his neck. "I want it obvious, no matter what happens, that you are my choice, and while I'll do my duty, I won't give you up. You'll be the Prince's Beloved, and

everyone will know.”

He didn’t want to be known as Hyax’s fucktoy, but then he could be called a lot worse. “I can’t say I expected you to parade me around like you won a medal.”

“We fae do exchange collars, you said you’d do that when I proposed, but if you’re the medal I’ve won, perhaps I should tie a ribbon around you.”

He tried not to let the sabotaging thought invade his mind, but it was too hard. “That was when we would be getting married. I get you and Metra will be doing the exchange of collars now.”

Hyax winced and cupped his cheek. “No, I’ll make it a stipulation of the contract. I won’t be marked as his, and nor him as mine.”

“But—”

“I mean it.” He traced Gwil’s collarbone with a finger. “I might have to go through this fucking sham of a wedding, but I’ll be giving you my collar.”

“You have one already?”

“It’s one of the traditional gifts when a fae comes of age. Most don’t use that one, but for you I would, it’ll make the point even clearer.”

Gwil wasn’t sure if this was Hyax being romantic or a stubborn arse, but he couldn’t bring himself to mind. “I don’t have a collar to give you. What will you wear?”

“Whatever you want me to.” Hyax leant back and collected their glasses, handing one to Gwil. “A toast, to us.”

Gwil had only had the odd glass of ambrosia. He could eat and drink, but his main sustenance came from blood. The sweetness and depth of the liquid in his glass told him this was the cream of the crop, the finest first press, and would have cost the same amount as he earnt in a week. “It’s almost as sweet as you.”

A soft cough disturbed them, the host was back. “Your viewing suite is ready. The shooting star display will be starting shortly.”

He found himself once again with Hyax up close, a possessive arm around his waist. Gwil thought he could get used to being treated like a posh side piece if this was the calibre of evening he’d get. The London scene was pretty cool but the viewing suite they were escorted to was like nothing he’d experienced in his own world. It wasn’t the pod itself—although sitting in what was tantamount to a more structurally stable bubble was amazing—but the show that came with it. They were on a large elevated mound and could see further across the meadow, with the night closing in, the creeping blanket of light looked even better, as if glowing seeds had been sown across the land. Then the stars moved and Gwil’s jaw dropped. “Fuck me!”

Hyax had a hand high up Gwil’s thigh, he squeezed. “I will later, never fear.”

He’d seen shooting stars before, or rather bits of meteors burning up. He knew the science, but this was different, the constellations were moving, Orion, the hunter, fired arrows while Capricorn and Aries gambolled out of the way. The Plough chased Aquarius and Libra spun its scales like nunchucks.

“How is this happening?”

Hyax chuckled. “Magic. We’re not shifting solar systems about—it’s an illusion.”

He should have realised. “Oh, yeah. It still looks amazing.”

“That’s the thing about the fae, we like to make everything look perfect, everything has a shiny hue, but that’s not real. Real is the sniping and political double play, real is the way we punish our criminals with iron or banishment for centuries. People think we’re nice because we’re pretty, but we’re not. We’re arseholes with wings.”

“So, I’m right when I call you a sparkly arsehole, then?”

“Yeah, like when I call you a throat-biting twat.”

He pulled Hyax in for a deep kiss, and ran a hand down the edge of his wing, knowing only special people got to touch a fae’s wings.

“If you keep playing with my wings, I’m in danger of fucking you right here,” Hyax growled. “While I want everyone to know you’re mine, they don’t need a front row seat.”

Gwil smirked. “I expect you to put me on my back later and fuck me so hard I forget my name.”

Hyax made a keening noise. “Deal. But I want us to be seen here for a bit longer. I’m trying to make a point.”

“Everyone is just seeing the truth. I can’t keep my hands off you, and you’re as equally smitten with your favourite fang.” Gwil nuzzled Hyax. “Since you want to show me off, how about I go inside and strut about? Is there something I can order from the bar that sends a message? I get we’re drinking the best ambrosia but is there something else?”

“Order a Love Drop to share. It’s a cute cocktail, but it’s often drunk at special events like wedding receptions. Just asking for it will show you’ve a decent insight into fae culture.”

Gwil sauntered into the bar. He wasn't keen on being the centre of attention, but he did like what Hyax was trying to do. The area was busy, and he gathered it was the sort of place you only got in to by knowing the right people. He waited at the counter to be served, the server run off their feet and the clientele, like rich snobby bastards everywhere, were rude and condescending.

A frazzled bartender took his order and asked where he was sitting and told him the drink would be delivered to his table. He was about to leave when a male fae with copper-blond hair spotted him. "You're here with Prince Hyax."

"Correct."

"Give me a moment of your time."

"Why should I?" He was sure he didn't know this guy and didn't like his impertinence.

"My name's Sitial. I'm a friend of Metra's. I assume Prince Hyax has brought you here to make a point and I can guarantee Metra will be made aware if you give me a chance to talk to you."

Gwil was more intrigued about what this bloke wanted if he was willing to run off and play messenger. "Go on then."

Sitial muttered something. "That's a privacy spell. I don't like people knowing my business."

"Yet you want to tell it to a complete stranger. A little contradictory don't you think?"

"Possibly. But since I doubt I'll get the opportunity again, I'll park that to one side."

Most fae were grandiose prats and Sital didn't appear to want to break the mould. "Get on with it as I want to go back and canoodle with my partner."

"I know Hyax isn't happy with the situation with Metra, and Metra isn't happy that he's been put in the position he has. He didn't request they marry but hasn't a choice either."

"I'm sure he can tell Hyax that himself."

"He won't listen to him. Hyax still believes Metra cheated on him."

As far as Gwil was aware, Hyax and Metra's previous involvement wasn't public knowledge. "How do you know about that?"

"Because I'm the one he thinks Metra cheated with. And we didn't. It was a shirtless hug, which should have been for the benefit of Metra's parents as they were expected, and we were to be caught together in a clinch. Hyax turned up and misinterpreted what happened."

"How fucking convenient. I don't believe you either and you can fuck right off."

"They were getting sloppy and Metra's parents were asking questions. We weren't seeing each other then, nor have we ever. Metra's a friend nothing more."

"You know how ridiculous that sounds?"

"Yes. But it's true. I'm married to a woman. Men, even princes, aren't my thing."

Gwil snorted, the fucker might be telling the truth, Gwil wasn't convinced. There had to be more behind Sital approaching him and he didn't think it was because Metra wanted to play the good guy. "So what? Does he think that Hyax will suddenly take

your word, or his, after all this time? Expecting him to settle down and be a good little husband?”

“The marriage will go ahead. They will at least need to be civil and if they can clear the air, it will be better. I saw the way Hyax looked at you, heard it was you he wanted to marry, and there’s not a word of a lie. But to make your lives easier, Hyax should listen to Metra and put the past behind them.”

Gwil saw a waiter carrying a glass to their viewing suite filled with a frothing red liquid. “Nice story, needs work, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ve had enough of listening to fairy tales.”

He left Sitial scowling and returned to Hyax, who was on his phone. “I’ve just got a message from Hylei. I need to open it through an encrypted channel, so I’ll wait until we’re home.”

“I thought she’d sent a message already.”

“I listened to the spark when I was getting dressed and sent her word that I would be happy to help if I could.”

“Then we should probably leave soon.” Gwil was a bit disappointed, but the case took precedence.

Hyax pointed to the glass that had been delivered, close up he could see the deep red liquid had golden particles and two straws. “No rush. Let’s enjoy this.”

Hyax leaned in and took a sip and Gwil copied. It tasted like the deepest, best vintage blood. “What the fuck?”

“If you drink it with someone you love, it tastes like your favourite thing. So blood

for you I take it?”

“Yes. Champagne-topped ambrosia for you then.”

Hyax smiled, he was so beautiful. “Correct. Did you enjoy your swanning about?”

Gwil didn’t want to spoil the mood, but it was best he told Hyax straight. “Up to a point. I got a few interested looks and then some guy called Sitial had a word with me as I was waiting at the bar.”

“Sitial? What the fuck did he want?”

“He wanted me to pass on the message that Metra didn’t ask for the marriage any more than you did, and tried to convince me he wasn’t cheating with Metra. I told him to fuck off.”

“He had no right.”

Gwil squeezed his hand. “He did make one good point, you’re going to have to get through this, and if you can be civil with Metra, it’ll be easier.”

“I don’t want to be civil.”

“Look, the best way to get back at someone who hurt you, is to show that they aren’t important any longer. You gifting him your anger could be construed that you still care.”

“I do care, but not about him. I don’t like being lied to.”

“If you accept he is telling the truth, both on the cheating and the not pushing for the wedding, you get through this without fighting every second—that can only make

things easier for us.” Gwil wasn’t sure if Metra wasn’t a lying piece of shit, his dealings with him hadn’t been great but then Gwil was the man Hyax was dating.

“We’ll talk about how to handle Metra another time. This is about us, and your importance to me.” Hyax’s tone put an end to that particular conversation.

“Maybe you should kiss me again,” Gwil said. “We don’t want people to think we’re arguing.”

“Drink up. I’m taking you home to more than kiss you.”

He chuckled and they finished the Love Bomb. He was more than happy to go home, and Hyax escorting him through the bar hand-in-hand was a nice touch before he opened a portal into their bedroom.

Before they’d got together, Gwil had what he’d described as a dry spell when it came to his love life. He’d been pining so badly for Hyax that no one held much interest and he’d never been one for random shagging, another way he was different to his peers. Hyax had unlocked a part of him he’d almost forgotten he had and there were days he was desperate for Hyax to fuck him. He’d discovered his desire for his partner to take control when he’d been turned and he was more than happy to let Hyax lead.

Usually, he managed to take his own clothes off, but Hyax didn’t want to wait and they were naked with a wave of his hand. Hyax was more than capable of taking things slow, worshipping him until was a whimpering mess, but that didn’t appear to be on the agenda. Hyax pounced, knocking them both onto the bed.

His kisses were borderline brutal, possessive and demanding, and Gwil knew he would be left with no doubt who he belonged to. Hyax muttered another spell and he felt his arse tingle as Hyax’s magic breached him, he fucking loved being fingered by

Hyax's magic, working him open while Hyax's hands were free to stroke the rest of him. He keened as tingling from the lube spell added a dash of spice unique to Hyax, something Gwil had never experienced before.

The mix of dazzling kisses and the magic things happening to his arse meant Gwil was on the verge of seeing stars and when Hyax entered him in one long, deliberate thrust, he cried out in delight. He loved to be fucked, loved to be the one Hyax wanted to own and dominate. He hung on as Hyax rode him, bringing him closer to the edge with every jerk of his hips.

"You're mine," Hyax growled.

Gwil couldn't hold back any longer. His orgasm rampaged through him and he came, ribbons of pearly cum shooting across his belly. Hyax fucked him harder, using him, taking what he needed as he shouted out when he reached his peak. He collapsed forward pressing kisses to Gwil's face, muttering soft words in a language Gwil didn't recognise but understood their sentiment.

Several minutes later, Hyax rolled off and lay on his back.

Gwil snuggled closer and was surprised when Hyax summoned his phone and elbowed him in the ribs. "Oi, a bit of pillow talk would be nice."

"I want to read Hylei's message. Come on, you've gotta be intrigued too."

Gwil tutted but couldn't argue he was interested. "I suppose."

Hyax clicked on the screen of his phone and instead of showing Gwil the screen he projected a document he'd opened. "This is from Hylei."

Prince Hyax,

Thank you, sincerely, for being open to help. We are beside ourselves with worry about the disappearance of Simon and we are willing to use any avenue we can to bring him home.

While James and I are proficient magic users there is a branch of magic we can't access but are aware you are one of the few we know of who could. While this magic is similar to that which vampire-fae could use, it has some nuances, and think our connection to our son is part of the issue of us being unable to reach him. We believe he's alive, or at least being kept alive.

Given the little we do know, our thoughts are his link to Robin could be the key to the way to reach him, although the bond is being limited and if we can trace it, maybe we can locate him. And that is where you come in. There are spells and rituals that a fae working through a vampire can utilise and James has been informed that you have access to several old volumes from Tobias Flume that may yield an answer, along with others in our own library.

I know you cannot promise any form of resolution at this point, but please can I ask you to do a little research? Please do not hesitate to contact me, and James would be happy to talk to you directly at your abode in the human realm to explain whatever you need.

Again, I thank you for your willingness to listen to my request.

Blessings be.

Hylei

Somehow Gwil hadn't expected Queen Hylei to be so forthcoming, she must have been in fear for her son's safety. They'd been called in to help, but vampires were known to overreact and Gwil hadn't fully appreciated the gravity of the situation.

Hyax was getting out of bed. He knew there'd be no point trying to call him back.

"Enjoy your reading," he called after him.

Hyax grinned. "Come on, you know I can't resist that type of teaser."

Gwil laughed. "I'd be more surprised if you did."

CHAPTER SIX

Hyax sucked on a lavender bonbon. Gwil had been buying him them for years, but had just recently realised they were little love tokens and he thought there must be something he could do for Gwil. The last few days he'd been conversing with Hylei via the encrypted channel but there was only so much she could share and Hyax was second-guessing a few things, which had made his progress slower than he'd have liked.

Also, he was trying to be extra nice to Gwil. He'd been a prize shit over Solivatus, and the Metra thing hadn't helped, so he needed to make sure Gwil knew how much he meant to him. The trip to La Pina had been a good start but he could have done without Sital turning up and trying to convince Gwil that Metra wasn't a lying sack of shit.

He flicked through a couple of case files Gwil had asked him to look over while Gwil had gone to visit a client. Nothing challenging—the one with the poltergeist ferret haunting a gnome burrow might need a special potion, which helped keep his mind occupied while they waited to hear about the MacLove case.

A portal began to open, he didn't recognise the signature from its silver-blue tinge, but it was fae by the feel of it. He got to his feet and his jaw dropped as King James of the Calanti tribe stepped through. "I do hope I'm not disturbing you, Prince Hyax. But we need to talk."

Hyax managed to get over his surprise to bow, as a rival tribe or not James was still a king. "Your Majesty, I wasn't expecting you."

“Why would you? You’ve been talking with my wife, not me, and she explained she’d been in touch over our situation. I thought it would be better if I gave you my insight and maybe some information best not written down.”

James threw himself into a chair, he was weary, the worry over his son hung around him with no relief in sight.

“I understand that there are things you’d rather not divulge.”

“No shit, but we’re beyond that now. Listen.” James spoke with a soft Scottish accent, which seemed to amplify his weariness. “What I am about to disclose is not common knowledge, and I am relying on your honour and discretion. Understood?”

Hyax suspected he might end up as a drained husk if he fucked James over. His royal status wouldn’t save him. “I’d be willing to be put under a magical oath if that would make it better.”

“Not really, but I’m grateful you’re willing to talk to me. Solivatus said he mentioned that Simon has a bond with his husband. I doubt he’d have explained it well, but ultimately it is through that bond he will be able to access his vampire side. After intimacy with his bonded, his fangs will come through, but he will need to feed from Robin to complete his metamorphosis. As it stands, Simon is in a state of flux, his magic will be erratic and it is our belief that he has been taken because of it, in crude terms, he’s a battery that could be constantly drained.”

He’d wondered about vampire-fae, some thought they were a myth but as he now had one sitting on his sofa, it was safe to say Hyax thought them real. This bond was the key to turning Simon from a fae prince to a scary motherfucker who, the rumours said, were some of the most powerful creatures to inhabit either realm.

“But who would know to take him? How would they know what you’ve just told

me?”

“There’s a thought that it could be a lich, an ancient creature who might have been waiting. We don’t know how it found out about Simon, but I think it’s probably the most likely culprit.”

Hyax only knew the basics about liches—they were remnants of powerful sorcerers who had managed to achieve immortality, and almost as rare as vampire-fae because they could hide in plain sight and use centuries of knowledge to avoid detection.

“Knowing what is behind the abduction is a start, but Queen Hylei said she thought I could help, although I wasn’t sure what I could do that she or you couldn’t.”

“I was sceptical at first but then I realised it’s not you, or rather not you on your own.” James reached out and held Hyax’s wrist then he let go almost immediately and smiled. “You can help.”

“What do you mean?” James was powerful, even without contact Hyax could tell and James must’ve noticed something when he’d grabbed his arm.

“I’m a vampire-fae, Hyax, there are things I can do because of the combination of my genetics, but I’m sure Hylei told you, we think you’d be able to access a part of the same branch of magic because of your connection to Gwilym Hilt.”

He’d sort of understood, but it wasn’t as straightforward as Hylei had made it sound. “I’ve been studying texts that Tobias Flume and the Vampire Council have given me access to. I’m not sure what I’m looking for, but I have a potential option.”

“It’s not easy magic, and it’s gone unused for centuries as there aren’t many vampire/fae pairings that are compatible enough to utilise it. You have been given a rare gift. Not one you should advertise too widely, and keep the knowhow close to

your chest.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because most won’t understand, will think it’s akin to necromancy as Gwil is undead.” His warning sounded like something Hyax’s mother might say. “I’ll deflect if asked, it’s up to you who you tell your secrets to.”

“I’ve only done it once, but it was special. It allowed me to use my magic in a way I’ve never been able to before.” Hyax could still recall how different it felt, darker, rich and tantalising, he’d channelled a spell through Gwil, and he’d be lying if he didn’t want to do so again.

“Do you have the book here?” James asked.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s see it.”

Hyax scrambled to his feet, far from his usual graceful self, and raced to the bedroom where a copy of *Magical Concepts Not for the Faint-Hearted* sat on his nightstand. He returned and flipped open the book at the spell he’d found and handed it to James.

“Ah, you don’t see many of these. I have a copy and a few others that I don’t think Flume has that might be of interest in the future. If everything works out.”

Hyax would be glad of the chance, but he sensed he would have to prove himself to James before any library privileges were granted. He tapped a passage. “This was what I thought might be useful. It’s a weaversnipe. It should knit strands together in the bond and then we can trace it back.”

James wrinkled his nose as he read. “I tried something similar and it didn’t do the trick. Robin’s not a magical creature so there’s no energy source at his end to pull on.”

“I didn’t think of that,” he said, annoyed at himself.

“You’ve no reason to.” James flicked through the pages and handed the book back. “There are a couple of potentials. This is one of the ones I had in mind. It’s called a mirroricom.”

Hyax had spotted the spell but had dismissed it. “Surely it’s just a mirror spell, I don’t see how it’ll work.”

“The sigils are the key, you paint them on Gwil and Robin and push your magic through them. If it works, the spell should carry through the bond to Simon, who’ll see Robin in a reflection, or a dream, depending on whether he’s awake or not.”

Hyax read the spell again, taking more care. “I suppose if there is something left of the bond tethered in both of them it’ll work.”

“You’ll need to probe Robin for that. I’m sure there’s something but I couldn’t trace it. My conjecture is our familial link is interfering and my magical signature is too similar so I can’t distinguish between myself and Simon in this situation. I hope you’ll be different.”

“And if it’s there then I...” he read the additional instructions and grimaced... “need to paint sigils with harpy blood on their skin.”

“Not the nicest stuff but then you’re not exactly using the light side for this spell.”

James pointed out a couple of other potential options that used different techniques.

One included something similar to the blowjob method he'd used before, so he'd have no issue to get Gwil's buy-in, but he didn't think it would be as useful in this situation. "Depending on what you get out of the bond when you read Robin, these might also be a possibility. But they all rely on Gwil's undeadness in one way or another. For the mirroricom the harpy blood is just a carrier, the others have similar preparations you'll use that are a sliding scale of grim."

"But you're a vampire, why can't you use your own undeadness?" He had several questions, and he wasn't sure how much James would tell him.

"I was born a vampire, I'm not dead as such. And Hylei is a fae and so I can't access this spell in the way you can through your undead partner."

He could understand now why James had requested his help. James seemed to be one of the rare royal faes who was committed to his spouse and didn't have a collection of lovers. Since he didn't have a vampire bit on the side and couldn't do this with his wife, he wasn't in position to help himself. But there weren't many people who had known about what he'd done before with Gwil. "How did you know I could work through Gwil? Did Flume tell you?"

"He didn't tell me as such. I figured it out after a couple of comments he made, and then remembered the stories I heard about how Prince Hyax was dating a vampire—I wasn't about to forget those given what I am. Let's just say, Flume wasn't so forthcoming to start with but after I threatened to pull out his fangs he saw my point of view."

"I'd have thought he'd have wanted to help."

James smirked. "He did, but he wanted to make sure it was seen as a debt, and I'm in no mood to play. All of a sudden, he's spouting about vampire camaraderie and that bullshit. He's not my House, or Robin's, so his allegiance isn't a given and I'm not

about to take risks.”

Hyax hadn't even scratched the surface of vampire politics, Gwil had explained some of it, but he wasn't a high-ranking member of their society so wouldn't know the nuances like James. “Sounds like vampires don't like each other any more than other people like them.”

“Very true.” James smiled. “Talking of not liking vampires, I've heard that your parents aren't keen on you keeping your pet fang. The whispers are they want to marry you off to another tribe.”

“How did you know that?” The Calanti tribe were supposed to be ostracised by the rest of the fae realm, and he wouldn't have thought the details like his parents' view of his marriage would be readily available to James.

James laughed. “I make it my business to know things. I might be a fae king, but I have connections with the vampires, meaning I heard about your betrothal to Gwil. Why do you think he was your plus-one for the wedding? Gwil's sister is a dark countess and she's ever so proud of her big brother banging you.”

Gwil hadn't mentioned Penelope was in favour of their relationship. He thought she was more likely to hit him over the head with a shovel and bury the body if he were to hurt Gwil.

“That doesn't explain how you know my parents aren't happy.”

“I have people throughout the fae realm who keep their pointy ears open, for the right compensation. And even if I didn't, there's no way Queen Talia would be willing to marry off one of her bairns to a nobody. You'll be important for political liaisons, which Gwil is not.”

He shouldn't have been surprised about James's connections or his astuteness, and there was no point denying the truth. "She would prefer me to marry Metra from the Elementa tribe. I don't want to, but I'm not going to have much choice in the matter."

"You can marry anyone, it doesn't matter as it's just a bit of paper and some words," James said wryly. "But you can't bond to someone unless there is a true connection, remember that... I don't think this is a conversation your mother would be happy to know we've had."

"I'm not going to tell her." James was right, his mother wouldn't be happy on many levels, but there was more behind James's words. "Are you suggesting I marry Metra but bond to Gwil?"

"I'm not here to give you relationship advice or put ideas in your head, I'm here about my son," James said, but his eyes danced with humour.

Hyax sensed that he wouldn't get more out of James on this topic, and he didn't need to. James's suggestion was clear and Hyax was a bit annoyed he hadn't thought of it himself. "So what do we do next? Should I practise the spell with Gwil beforehand? Maybe painting the sigils?"

"I wouldn't recommend using harpy blood, it's foul stuff and repeated applications aren't a good idea. When you do the spell, your magic will siphon through Gwil into Robin in a way that prevents the nasty properties from damaging anyone."

Hyax hadn't thought of that, but it made sense, although he was a bit concerned about going in blind. "I could at least practise drawing the sigils with something else."

"Aye, you could. Chocolate body paints are good for that sort of thing, but I don't particularly want a peek behind your bedroom door."

He laughed as James waggled his eyebrows. “I was thinking more sketching them out on paper.”

James shrugged. “Each to their own I suppose.”

He still had another problem with doing this, and it wasn’t just the mechanics of the spell. “If I were to help, I’m not sure how I would explain my involvement to my parents.” He had to be realistic that if he could be seen as being disloyal due to his relationship with Gwil, then speaking to the king of an exiled faction would be much worse.

“If you think it will help, I’ll write to Queen Talia, appeal to her as a mother, one who loves her son very much.”

Hyax snorted. “Maybe my brothers.”

James scoffed. “You might think she’s trying to ruin your life, but this shite with Metra is there to protect you, dating Gwil isn’t the smartest political move you could’ve made.”

“I didn’t get with him for political gain. I’m not going to stop seeing him.”

James stood. “And so you shouldn’t. But a word to the wise, I would strongly recommend trying to avoid consummating your marriage with Metra if you don’t want to fuck up your bond with Gwil. Your magic won’t like it now it’s had a taste of what it can do with Gwil.”

“That’s a whole different problem.”

“But one you’ll need to solve. I’m telling you, what you have with Gwil is special. Not in the cute hearts-in-your-eyes bullshit way, which I’m sure is lovely, but yours

is a once in a half millennia opportunity to play with that branch of magic. Don't fuck it up."

"I don't intend to."

James opened a portal. "I'll have you called to Crofton Hall. The Dark Earl of Crofton is supporting Robin, I'm sure you'll know what to do. Hyax, I won't forget this, I am truly grateful for any help you can give."

The portal closed, leaving Hyax intrigued and confused. James knew about the magic he'd used with Gwil, and James had got the details out of Tobias Flume, not caring how he confirmed the information. He didn't think Flume could be intimidated but James was something different. His vampire connections were one thing but combined with his fae side, he was a scary mother-fucker and Hyax hadn't even seen him angry.

He wasn't sure how he would explain it to his mother. James writing to her would help, but it wouldn't be an easy conversation, although he knew she wouldn't stop Hyax. His involvement would potentially be a useful political means to an end. However, if he had gauged this wrong, it could backfire.

Another thing—James had said he could appeal to Talia as a mother to help. For all her bullshit over Metra, Hyax did think she loved him and she wouldn't wish to see another parent suffer if she could do something to prevent it. Hyax was sure he could use this to his and Gwil's benefit, delaying having to announce his marriage, and anything that gave him extra time would be most welcome.

He sat cross-legged on the sofa and settled down to read. It was going to take some time to get his head around the spell and learn the sigils, but his magic hummed, happy at the prospect of getting to play with Gwil again. Something he could definitely get behind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gwil had been expecting the summons to help Robin Flint. Solivatus had said it would only be a matter of days and Hyax had told him about James's unexpected arrival—if he'd known they were going to have a fae king in the living room he might've run a vacuum around. Still, despite knowing they would be expected, it didn't make sitting in a parlour at Crofton Hall any less intimidating. Hyax looked indifferent, although Gwil noticed he'd worn his new Gucci shirt and a pair of jeans that made Gwil whimper when he bent over, plus a selection of fae jewellery that would rival anything in the human world. Whether that was to remind him of how sexy his boyfriend was in front of his sire or to advertise he was as rich and as important as the owners of the house was debatable.

“For fuck's sake, Gwil, stop pacing,” Hyax snapped. “You weren't like this at the wedding, why are you acting like a nervous schoolboy on his first date?”

He'd been unable to sit and wait, he wasn't used to the kind of scrutiny they would get from the attention of such senior vampires. Hyax had never had to worry about his social status, never had to navigate the risk of saying the wrong thing and being ostracized with no chance of escaping mediocrity. Gwil wasn't quite the bottom rung of vampire society, but he didn't like the idea of being put under the spotlight of those who could make his existence miserable if he fucked up.

“I need to make a good impression. I'm not exactly important to this lot.”

“You were invited alongside me, so that makes you as important as I am.” Hyax rolled his eyes. “Remember they are asking for our help—not the other way around.

And I couldn't perform any of the spells James has suggested if it wasn't for you."

He'd helped other members of the Vampire Council before, and he couldn't say they'd been particularly grateful, and had taken ages to pay his bill. "I don't suppose anyone mentioned paying us for this, did they?"

"King James asked for my help, he said he was grateful, that means more than monetary payment."

Times like this he really missed breathing so he could let loose a massive sigh. "Not sure I can use a fairy king's thanks to pay the electricity bill." His water use had gone through the roof as well when Hyax had moved in—the man could shower for hours.

"Are you short of money?"

They'd not discussed financials, he didn't have a mortgage on the property, but there'd been moving costs and business expenses that had depleted his savings, not to mention paranormal clients weren't known for their propensity to pay on time. He'd never had a head for money like many of his peers and Gwil didn't have the spare cash to invest in the sort of projects and products that had made some millionaires. "Not short exactly."

"We'll talk when we get home. I have plenty of money. You should have said."

He wasn't broke and he didn't want Hyax thinking he needed bailing out, but there was nothing wrong with having a budget. "I'm not with you for your money."

"I know that, and you're not a gold-digger by asking me to pay for the utilities we both use."

Yet another conversation to be had—they seemed to be stacking up big topics for

discussion. Gwil wasn't exactly avoiding them however, what he wanted was to find a few quiet days to crawl under a duvet and have Hyax fuck his brains out so he wouldn't need to think. The situation with Metra and now being called into this shit with Robin Flint had left him wanting to retreat and hide, or at least get a bit of reassurance from his boyfriend while he had his meltdown.

A cloud of black smoke appeared in front of them and a man dressed in a three-piece tweed suit materialised, complete with a pair of curly, highly polished horns. "Gentleman, my apologies for not greeting you earlier but I was dealing with our other guests. I am Karl Vinter, Lord Crofton's valet."

"You're a demon," Hyax said, recoiling.

"Correct, Your Highness. Level three, pushing for four hopefully in a few years."

Gwil didn't know a lot about demons, they were not high on the trustworthy scale but then neither did they usually go into service. He seemed to recall Lord Crofton having an elf as a secretary. He'd given his blood for a potion Hyax had made that Gwil had drunk and he remembered a throwaway comment about a demon valet. Hyax had called bullshit, but it seemed Flume had been telling the truth. Flume not lying might be the greatest revelation today.

Hyax had been researching the spells James had suggested but hadn't yet narrowed down their options and said he'd explain everything once he knew what he needed to do. He got the distinct impression he didn't want Gwil changing his mind and had said one of them might have blowjobs involved, which was a huge positive in Gwil's opinion.

"Now, if you wouldn't mind following me, Mr Flint is waiting."

"We're going to see Robin Flint?" Gwil said, having not been sure if he'd get an

introduction, as it was Hyax who they wanted to perform magic and Gwil could be described as equipment if someone was being uncharitable.

“Yes, Mr Hilt,” Karl said

He’d survived Robin Flint’s wedding by sticking close to Hyax and being ignored by important people and he’d not spoken to Robin Flint or anyone else from the House of Hewel. Somehow, he hadn’t factored in having to deal with a man who was responsible for most of the biggest names in Hollywood and was the future Dark Viscount Whetford.

Hyax grabbed Gwil’s hand. “Lead the way, Mr Vinter. Gwil will get his shit together as we walk.”

“Just so you’re fully informed, as well as Mr Flint, there’s a gentleman called Solivatus with him.”

Hyax squeezed his hand and Gwil yelped at the pain. “Ow!”

“Sorry, your sire brings out the worst in me.”

“You know how I feel. There’s no need to overreact.”

“I do. And I feel the same.” Hyax’s smile was soft and if they weren’t about to speak to two of the most important vampires in the country, if not the world, he’d have snogged Hyax silly. “I’ll do better. Promise.”

They followed Karl down the hallway. Crofton Hall was a lovely place. Gwil hadn’t expected anything less, since he understood the manor had been Sebastian Hewel’s home at one point, and when it came to important fangs, he beat even Robin Flint and Solivatus. They were shown into a reception room where Robin and Solivatus were

waiting. He'd seen Robin at the wedding, but only from afar. He was an attractive bloke, the sort who could have whoever they wanted, and his reputation was that he wasn't short of company. Gwil had been surprised he'd got married to begin with. Vampire marriages between the Houses weren't done for love and most people would predict Robin would be back to his normal ways before long. Gwil might be a little sensitive because Hyax had said that Robin and Simon had some special bond, but he didn't think he was mistaken in the way Robin was more than just appreciative of Hyax as he looked him up and down. Hyax was fucking gorgeous, and it was no surprise he got the attention he received. When Robin saw him there was the ever-present expression of disbelief Gwil had become accustomed to seeing since publicly dating Hyax. He wasn't exactly prince consort material.

"Prince Hyax and Mr Gwilym Hilt," Karl announced.

"Please call me Hyax," Hyax said, holding out his hand to shake, which Robin did.

Gwil wasn't cowed per se, more a bit starstruck by Robin being who he was. He also knew his place in vampire society, and he would act accordingly. "Mr Flint," he said while bowing his head. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd prefer to be called Gwil."

Robin shook his hand. "There's no need for the formality, Gwil. You may both call me Robin. I can only thank you for your willingness to help bring Simon home."

Hyax sat and Gwil waited for his cue from Solivatus when he took the place next to Hyax. He saw Solivatus nod, acknowledging Gwil's deference to his sire in front of Robin. Hyax would just have to deal with it, and to Gwil's surprise Hyax managed to keep his expression neutral, which was a definite improvement.

"Solivatus has explained to me about the bond you have with Simon," Hyax said, without a hint of a barb. "I have also had some written discussions with Her Majesty Queen Hylei, so I can comprehend how special your connection is."

Hyax had told him he wasn't going to mention King James's visit. He hadn't wanted his mother getting wind of their interaction and he also didn't think it was something the vampires needed to have the details about.

"I must admit I still don't see how you can help but Simon's parents can't," Robin said, echoing his and Hyax's original thoughts.

"Because while Queen Hylei is pure fae, King James is not pure vampire and, as such, he can't use a branch of magic that I can with my betrothed," Hyax smiled fondly at Gwil. "It is an additional benefit Gwil and I have recently discovered."

Hyax had been interested in using their connection again, helping Robin was a nice excuse to do so, although the technicalities were lost on Gwil as his eye's tended to glaze over when Hyax started on magic theory. He was happy to sit back and let Hyax suck his cock in the pursuit of magical science.

Robin wrinkled his nose. "How did you come across this knowledge?"

Robin hadn't achieved his success by rushing in without testing the waters. He didn't know them, they might have come recommended by other important people but trust between vampires was relative. Gwil suspected he wasn't used to going cold into a situation and anything he could glean would help.

"Gwil and I were investigating the theft of an important fae artefact and Tobias Flume, a well-connected individual in his own right, showed me a way to help. It came from a volume in his personal library, and he shared several others."

"That seems a bit too altruistic for the Tobias Flume I know," Robin drawled.

He should have known Robin would have been aware of Flume, and he had a fair point since Flume had helped only because it had suited him, which was pretty much

standard for most vamps.

“I’ve taken a number of cases for him over the years,” Gwil said. “The fae object had been stolen by a group of rogue elves and they were up to no good, so he was keen to support.”

“I appear to have an elf problem too.”

For all the talk of a bond, Gwil hadn’t been sure what Robin’s feelings for Simon were, but he did appear shaken at the thought of his husband being in the hands of the elves. They were horrible bastards and even if it were an arranged marriage, no one deserved that fate.

Hyax shook his head. “If the elves had Simon, then you’d have found him by now. I believe Lord Crofton’s secretary is an elf—they have a way of tracking each other. A bit like the fae. None of it technically legal, but that wouldn’t stop him if he’d been able.”

Robin appeared sceptical. “But you think you can?”

“I don’t know. At a minimum, I should be able to use the bond from your end to try and tether you back together, even for a few minutes. If we’re lucky then I might be able to follow the bond to where he is, but I’m not sure that will work.”

Robin leant forwards, his eyes shining with a sense of hope Gwil hadn’t seen until now. “If I can speak to him, then he can tell me where he is.”

“Maybe. But that will depend on where and how he is being held. First things first is to confirm he’s alive, as we’re making the assumption that he’s being kept for his magic.”

Hyax's consultations with Simon's mother had led him to the conclusion that, because Simon hadn't fed from Robin and transitioned into his full vampire state, he could be being used like a battery, his magic syphoned off to be used by someone else.

Hyax hadn't wanted to give false hope but would do all he could to help, and Gwil knew he'd try his best and would be disappointed if he couldn't.

"When can we try?" Robin asked.

"I can cast now and see the state of the bond, but then I'll need to determine the next steps, whether it would need a tailored spell or potion, so that will depend on what I find."

Solivatus stood. "Why don't me and Gwil leave you to do this bit?"

Hyax's eyes flashed gold. Gwil didn't want to leave with Solivatus, but he was being put in an awkward position between his lover and his sire. He didn't think Solivatus would want to do anything more than talk, but Hyax's insecurities were at a peak at the moment.

"You can go, Solivatus," Hyax said, his tone even. He really was trying. "But I'd rather Gwil remain, because of his involvement in the procedure.."

"It might be better if Gwil stays, he can give me some insights on the vampire side that Hyax can't," Robin said.

Robin was an astute man, he'd picked up on the tension in the room and come to Hyax's assistance—wise, given it was him who would be able to help Robin now, not Solivatus.

Solivatus chuckled. “All right then. Gwil can catch me up later. I’m sure he’ll be willing to make some time for his sire.”

Gwil inched closer to Hyax, aiming to reassure him without being too obvious. Solivatus was deliberately trying to rattle Hyax and he wasn’t sure why. He usually didn’t give a shit what Gwil did.

“Have you two known each other long?” Robin asked once Solivatus had gone.

Hyax smiled, and Gwil melted a little inside. “More than fifteen years. First as business partners, and then recently we both realised we wanted more and were parallel-pining like idiots.”

Robin laughed. Gwil didn’t think many people got to see this softer side of Robin Flint.

“I understand your marriage was arranged but the bond has probably added an extra element, and we can use that,” Hyax said.

“It was arranged,” Robin said. “But I feel more for him than I can express. Losing Simon, not being able to reach out and hold him, makes me feel like I’m being pulled apart. I need to get him home.”

There weren’t many times when Gwil would admit to being genuinely surprised. He considered himself far too old and sceptical, but hearing Robin speak about his husband was one of them. He’d assumed the bond might draw Robin and Simon together, most likely in the shagging-like-rabbits way, but as an arranged marriage, it would be more akin to a business deal than a love match, and once the lust passed, they’d skip off into different sunsets. Magic could do strange things to people, though Gwil wouldn’t put it past the bond to be making Robin feel so devoted. If that were the case, he’d have thought them being apart would have made the attraction wane

and that didn't seem to be the case. Hyax would be able to tell and Gwil was becoming more intrigued by the minute. Maybe Robin really was in love with Simon, and Gwil needed to stop being a cynical old bum boil.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hyax had been itching to get his hands on Robin—not in a sexual way because he already had his own sexy vampire. Robin might be a big fang, but he wasn't a patch on Gwil as far as Hyax was concerned, just another of the overprivileged arseholes ubiquitous in the places he tended to go. What had intrigued Hyax was the bond, which were common for magical creatures, but Robin wasn't magical and that made Hyax want to know more. From what he'd been told about Robin and Prince Simon, the timing of Simon's birth, there was at least the potential Robin had been turned into a vampire in order to be still around by the time Simon would be old enough to drink his blood and transition into a vampire-fae. That wasn't a trifling matter, and it made Hyax's magic dance with curiosity.

Hyax moved and knelt at Robin's side. Robin was known in the paranormal world, and he'd married a fae, so he should be used to the concept of being probed by magic. "Can I see what I can get from the bond?"

"Yes, do whatever you need to."

Hyax took Robin's hand. He started with a gentle wave of magic, allowing it to meander through Robin. He could sense a sharpness at his core, and he chased the unnatural tang setting his teeth on edge. There was a glowing strand writhing in the centre of Robin's chest, it felt as if it were incomplete and that it should have been one of several strands woven together, but the good news was it wasn't fully severed. There was a chance he could follow it back to Simon, not guaranteed but far better odds than if it had been cut. He coated the strand with his magic, it tasted salty, grumpy even. It was not happy, and it didn't want to play with him. He tried to push

and follow where it was anchored. He'd never felt magic like this before, it was crying out to be reattached properly, but he was the wrong fae. A jolt of negative energy surged at him.

Hyax gasped, let go of Robin's hand and toppled backwards. Gwil raced to his side, helping Hyax sit up.

"What's wrong?" Robin asked. "Are you all right?"

He understood now why Simon's parents had asked for help. Robin and Simon's marriage might have started as an arrangement and they'd been forced together for political reasons, but the bond had taken root and they were now entwined, they were meant to be a devoted couple. "I found your bond. I've never come across anything like it before. You two were destined to be together. That's not a statement I make lightly."

Robin nodded and Hyax wondered how Robin had been told, or if he'd found out somehow they were more than just bond-mates-with-benefits. "Apparently, Simon's parents were waiting for me to be born, and I was watched all through my life and even turned into a vampire so I would be able to be with him."

"Fucking hell," Gwil said. "That's more than playing the long game."

Hyax had already expected that Robin wasn't just in the right place at the right time, and Simon's parents had ensured their son would have whoever he needed to fulfil his potential.

"I didn't know how to take it at first, but I realise I was given a gift. To be with Simon is a true blessing. We complete each other."

"I doubt who has him knows that," Hyax said. He'd felt the anger of the bond as if it

believed he'd been disrespectful messing with Robin and its strength—something like that would not be easy to cleave. “They won't expect the level of connection you have, and we can use that to our advantage.”

The bond would be how they got Simon back. Hyax was sure of it and now he was convinced which of the spells to use.

“So you definitely think he's still alive. Do you think I can contact him?”

“Oh, he's alive and your bond is very annoyed, desperate that it's been limited.” If Simon had been dead, the link would have been severed and he didn't know how that would have affected Robin, he didn't think it would have been good. “There's still a tether but there's something stopping Simon connecting back. I definitely think we can crack it open... maybe not for long, but it might be enough.”

The mirroricom ritual James had pointed to in the book should work, James had been keen to recommend it and Hyax should have realised that James would not have suggested something without good reason.

“Does this call for more magical blowjobs?” Gwil asked, perking up.

Hyax didn't blame him, it had been made clear their relationship was key to helping and one of the other spells had called for the drinking of a vital essence. But Gwil wasn't lucky today.

“I'm afraid this time what I've in mind will be more a cuddle and feed my magic through you.”

Gwil schooled his disappointment, Hyax would make sure he got his blowjob later.

“Do I want to know?” Robin asked, laughing.

“We’ve been experimenting with a number of spells but the last time we needed to track something I made a special potion and Gwil drank it and acted as a filter.”

“Right, so the blowjob was the flowthrough?”

“Pretty much.” Hyax smirked, not too surprised Robin was bright and had been around enough magic users to put two and two together. “But this time it’s not an object but a person and I can work through him directly if it goes how I expect. He’ll need to basically sit in my lap.”

“When do you think you can try?” Robin was eager. Hyax had expected him to be. If he hadn’t then Hyax would have had to reevaluate his and Simon’s connection. “Do you need me to do anything?”

He’d prepared for this eventuality, but until he’d investigated the bond he’d needed to wait before deciding which spell to use, but now Hyax was positive the mirroricom ritual would work. “I need to collect a couple of things, but that’ll take minutes. If we could have somewhere comfortable and private... and a mirror. Ah, that might be a problem.”

Vampires weren’t known for their reflective capabilities, he hadn’t thought that part through and he suspected neither had James or he would have already had a solution for it. The mirroricom spell, from the nature of its name, had a reflection element and he wasn’t sure how he’d get around Robin not having one.

“Ben’s got a mirror that Alex spelled so he could use it,” Robin said.

“Really? I never thought of doing that.” Hyax turned to Gwil. “I’ll speak to Alex and see if he can show me the spell.”

“I’ll get it moved to a guest room,” Robin said. “I’m sure Solivatus will help us set

up.”

“No.” Hyax much as he would pull back on his animosity, he wouldn’t work with Solivatus unless he had to and there were plenty of staff on hand. “He’s not to be involved.”

“Hyax—” Gwil said. Hyax knew that Gwil was in the middle, but someone had to protect him from the lecherous old goat.

“No, I mean it. He’s a predator and while I get he’s your sire, you’re mine now. I know you said he’s trying to rile me as a test, but fuck it.”

“Let me ask Karl. He can set up a room,” Robin said.

Hyax was relieved Robin was on the ball about his discomfort. He would play nice when he had to, but now wasn’t one of those times. “I’ll portal to pick up a few things and be straight back.”

He left Gwil with Robin as he shouldn’t be long. Most of what he needed was already at home, he’d put together bags for each eventuality. Midnight glowered at him when he woke her up and shooed her off the small sack she’d decided was the best place to sleep, almost as if she knew it would be the one he’d want. The only other thing was the book with the spell, which he retrieved from his bedside table, and then opened a portal back to Crofton Hall.

“Are you ready to give this a go?” Hyax said, holding up the sack as he stepped through. “I need to paint a few symbols on you both in harpy blood, but apart from that it should be straightforward.”

He’d half expected Gwil to have retreated in deference, but they looked to have been engaged in friendly conversation. It would be good for Gwil to not be so reticent, he

needed to have more self-belief.

“Harpy blood?” Gwil said, gagging. “Hyax, that stuff is nasty.”

Gwil wasn’t wrong but the blood was unnegotiable, the spell used it as a carrier. “I’ll make it up to you later.”

Robin chuckled, and Hyax wondered what they’d been talking about while he was gone. Gwil seemed far more relaxed than before he’d left—maybe he’d told him about the magical blowjob. Robin summoned Karl and gave him instructions regarding the mirror and how the room needed to be set up, and less than half an hour later, the three of them were in a bedroom, the majority of the furniture cleared away apart from a dressing table and a mirror positioned in front of a large mattress on the floor.

“This is perfect,” Hyax said, removing several glass bottles from the sack and a couple of makeup brushes. He’d practised the sigils several times and could probably recite the spell in his sleep, but he wouldn’t truly get a measure of how it would work until he started. “If you could both strip down to your underwear, we can get this started.”

“My underwear?” Robin asked, his eyebrows raised.

“I can’t draw on your skin through your clothes, can I?” Hyax didn’t think it needed an explanation, and it wasn’t as if he were inviting Robin for a threesome. “I thought you were meant to be one of the clever ones.”

“I see you’re not stripping,” Robin said as Gwil began to undress.

“I don’t need to. And I don’t think your husband would appreciate you being sandwiched between me and Gwil if we were both undressed.”

“Sandwiched ?” Robin choked.

“Actually, you’ll one of the bits of bread and Gwil’s the filling.” Hyax wrinkled his nose, he would make sure there were no fuzzy lines here. “I meant that metaphorically as no one’s filling Gwil but me.”

“I’m sure he’s a wonderful lover, but my interests are solely for Simon.”

If Hyax had thought otherwise he’d have opened a portal and shoved Robin through it, not caring if his constitution could stand the effects or not.

Gwil tutted and now dressed in just his underpants, sank to sit cross-legged on the mattress. “Let’s get this over with before I stake myself to avoid the embarrassment.”

Hyax could see Gwil was already uncomfortable at being so exposed, and if he still had a working circulatory system, he’d be a delightful shade of pink, instead he was his usual lovely pale self and had nothing to be ashamed about. Hyax stroked the curls at the back of Gwil’s neck in silent apology.

“I’m going to paint matching sigils on your chests and a different pair on Gwil’s back. I’ll link through those into Robin and hook onto the bond.” He didn’t know if either of them had understood a word he’d said but he wasn’t about to start a lecture series on magical theorem and the undead.

Robin sat next to Gwil. “I have to ask, but if Gwil’s role in this is because he’s a vampire, isn’t it a bit redundant as I’m one too?”

“He’s a vampire I’m intimate with but it’s beyond a sexual connection, it will only work if there’s a true attachment and trust.”

“Do your parents know how this works?” Robin asked.

Hyax selected a bottle of harpy blood and knelt in front of Gwil and Robin, the book open at a page from where he could copy the sigils. “My mother would claim blissful ignorance because if she were to admit it, then she’d also have to admit that Gwil is perfect for me.”

Gwil was perfect for him, but if his mother agreed, she wouldn’t be insisting he marry Metra. She didn’t seem about to go back on her decision though, not with the additional rumblings at play.

Hyax had often thought of himself as a frustrated artist, but if he’d had a canvas like Gwil’s skin to work on, he might have been more dedicated to learning the skills. He carefully copied the intricate designs from the book onto Gwil’s back, grateful he’d spent the time to practise. Taking special care with the series of interconnected circles and overlapping swirls so as not to smudge the deep blue and sticky harpy blood, he tried to be as quick as he dared. As the blood began to dry the terrible smell became more evident. At least it looked pretty, it reminded him of an unfortunate situation years back with a fae who had a coke habit so bad it made the guy’s cum taste weird.

“That stuff’s revolting,” Gwil said.

“Don’t moan, it’s not like you’ve got to drink it. This time.”

Gwil shuddered. “I used to go to a bar in the East End of London that catered for those that liked exotic blood types... harpy was the one all the young idiots would drink as shots. Fucking muppets.”

“I’d have thought it poisonous,” Hyax said, moving behind Gwil and running a finger over his shoulder blade before painting an additional sigil on his back.

“The aftermath wasn’t pleasant from what I saw, but I didn’t touch it myself,” Gwil said with a grimace.

“Does it give a high?” Robin asked, who Hyax suspected was no stranger to the Hollywood drug scene.

“No high is worth projectile vomit that can strip the dye out of a carpet,” Gwil replied.

Hyax tutted. “And on that lovely note, I’m done.”

He stood and moved the mirror to the end of the mattress. “I know this looks like a kinky game for three, but I would appreciate it if we all keep our minds focused on the endpoint. Robin, you need to face the mirror, once he’s in place you need to kneel up behind Gwil and place a hand on each of the symbols on his back. Gwil will be sitting astride me and I will have one hand on his chest, and I’ll reach around him and place my other hand over your heart.”

Gwil grumbled about Hyax’s exhibitionist streak as he sat astride his lap. There were definite perks to this sort of magic and his cock was hard, Gwil gave him a withering stare, which just made him harder.

Robin followed Hyax’s instructions and knelt up behind Gwil. “Thank you both for this.”

Once Hyax had heard what was going on there wasn’t a question in his mind of not helping. “It wouldn’t be right if we didn’t help when we could. I know mine and Simon’s tribe are not considered friendly, but this could be the start to changing that.”

Robin placed his hand on Gwil’s back and Hyax reached around him to place his hand over Robin’s heart. “I’m going to cast. The spell itself is wordless, and you need to stare into the mirror if all goes to plan you should be able to speak to Simon. If he’s somewhere near a reflection you should appear in it and he can see you.”

“What if he’s not conscious, or not on his own?” Robin asked. “We’ve been working on the assumption that someone had been stopping him from escaping or contacting home.”

From what he’d read, while this was called a mirroricom spell, the reflection could be symbolic if there was a shiny surface to hand. “He should only hear you in his head. If he’s asleep then most likely you’ll be a very vivid dream. But it is a risk, but it’s the best way I can think of finding him. He’s been well-hidden, without somewhere to start looking we don’t have another option.”

Robin straightened his shoulders. “I’m ready.”

Hyax started chanting in his head—the words were a strange combination of ancient fae and Latin, and he had to concentrate on the patterns, or he’d mess it up. The spell manifested as a fizzing sensation, radiating from his fingers into Gwil. The magic developed a different feel as it filtered through Gwil and back into him before he directed the stream into Robin. The taste was part Gwil—delicious and dark—and he would need to be careful he didn’t come to crave the thrill that came with this sort of magic.

A tendril wormed through Robin, it was searching out the root of his and Simon’s bond. As it attached, his magic began knitting the strands together, nowhere near as thick as it should be but it showed Hyax the bond hadn’t been fully severed and should give them a way to allow Robin and Simon to talk. He needed to concentrate on the magic, but he could see what Robin could. The face of a man with long red hair and pale blue eyes swam into view, it was Prince Simon, but his hair should have been black. He seemed confused, didn’t know his own name or who Robin was.

Hyax tried to get a look at the surroundings, there was a lake, and he thought Simon, who referred to himself as Nomis, was on a jetty, but he couldn’t tell where.

He could sense Robin's initial high of pleasure as they talked but then came ebbs of sadness. Robin's emotions were all over the place, but Hyax couldn't afford to get distracted. He caught snippets of the conversation, enough to get an appreciation of Robin's relief they'd found his husband. The spell was taking a lot of his energy, and although he received support through Gwil, there would be a limit to how long he could continue. Then the spell was broken, the connection closed, but the thread was still attached. Hyax removed his hand and Gwil pulled him close.

Hyax caught his breath as Robin and Gwil got dressed. He wanted to know what Robin had experienced, he had part of the story. "Tell me what happened."

"He was on his own, somewhere by water, so I guess we were lucky. He didn't recognise me, and he didn't know his own name. But I think I was able to convince him that I wasn't a danger, and that we were searching for him to bring him home."

"I saw snippets, but I needed to concentrate on the magic," Hyax said, wanting to know more.

"He said he was an inpatient at a hospital, and that he had a doctor called Ralph who had claimed to be his husband, although he wasn't convinced." Robin buttoned his shirt, agitated. "What did you get?"

"It was pretty clear he didn't know who you were, but he didn't run off so that suggests that the bond is still in there."

He could feel the bond from Robin's side, but he couldn't confirm from this remote access how well anchored it was in Simon. If Simon hadn't felt some compulsion to stay, he would have probably bolted.

"He doesn't know where he is and I didn't see anything apart from he looked to be sitting on a jetty, so perhaps where he is has a small lake. Somewhere like Crofton

Hall?”

Gwil finished getting dressed. “Quite a lot of the big fancy houses have those, it wouldn’t narrow it down that much. You said he described the place like a hospital and that he was being treated by someone called Ralph.”

“Yes,”

Hyax cocked his head to one side, there was another reason why Gwil was involved, his resources weren’t magic but as efficient at times. “Are you going to ask your dirt devils?”

“No, I’m going to ask Copperpipe.” Gwil tutted and turned to Robin. “I have an interesting informant. I’m not completely sure what he is but he’s a sewer dweller who is surprisingly good at finding information.”

“Simon had also had his memory altered,” Robin said. “And continued to be repressed as he didn’t know his own name.”

“To be honest, I expected there had to be something to stop him returning beyond a physical imprisonment.” Hyax tapped a finger against his lips. “Did I see him wearing gold cuffs?”

“Yes, he had them on both arms. He didn’t have them when he was taken.”

Hyax suspected they were important and might be the way he was being controlled, otherwise why bother putting them on him? “I will need to research those, but I think they might be the items limiting his magic, they could also be siphoning it away because bottling up the magic of a fae of Simon’s power would manifest with obvious side effects.”

“So, what do we do now?” Robin asked.

Hyax thought they might have been able to find out more through the spell, but he was surprised at how successful they had been, and they did have other options.

“Gwil will talk to the sewer potatoes, and I’m sure Solivatus will want you to fill him in. I’ll be honest, it’s not a huge amount to go on.”

“Can’t we try the mirror spell again?” Robin asked, but he was grasping at straws.

“Maybe.” Hyax didn’t want to get Robin’s hopes up. “I’m not sure it will work a second time, but we could be lucky, and the bond is tethered a bit firmer than it was. We’d probably be better trying to narrow down the location and get in and extract him. By force if needs be.”

“I’ve no concerns over collateral damage,” Robin said. “As far as I’m concerned, anyone standing in my way has put themselves in the line of fire, and I’m in no mood to play nice.”

“But if we do find them, we need to be careful. This is not a fly-by-night operation, and it takes a strong and devious mind to execute this, they will have a backup plan.” Hyax pursed his lips. People who were capable of this level of operation were dangerous and not to be underestimated, and while they might not know exactly what they’d done with the mirroricom spell, they might have an inkling. “The level of power and magic needed brings me to agree with the hypothesis that we’re dealing with a lich.”

“How do we kill an immortal remnant?”

“There must be something. I’ll work with the fae and the warlocks to see what we can come up with.”

“I want it to suffer,” Robin said, his voice a low growl.

“I can understand that, but we should first concentrate on getting Simon back and restoring his magic.” Robin wanted vengeance but he would need to wait.

“We should talk to Solivatus,” Robin said. “Hopefully he can help. While I’m grateful we were able to connect with Simon, I don’t think we’ve got much further.”

Hyax bristled but Robin summoned Karl with a click of his fingers, who then disappeared again with his orders. A few minutes later Solivatus strolled in. Gwil, who had only just finished getting dressed, seemed flustered again, and came to stand next to Hyax.

Solivatus listened as Robin explained what they’d learnt. “I know you think it’s not a lot, Robin. But we’ve some good intel. I’m sure Gwil will be back with more before you know it.”

Hyax slipped his hand into Gwil’s. “We should get going. We’ll be in touch.”

They left, heading downstairs, anywhere away from Solivatus was acceptable to Hyax. Gwil squeezed Hyax’s hand and he received a small smile for his trouble. “What do we do now?”

“I was expecting a car to take us back to London so you can go and chase a potato around the sewers. I’m not sure what our further involvement after that will be.”

Karl materialized at the foot of the main staircase. Standing next to him was an elf in Armani. “Gentlemen, I was hoping before you left, myself and Alex could have a word,” Karl said gesturing to the elf. “After which I’ll have a car called to take you home.”

Hyax had been fascinated by Alex, elves weren't known for being subservient to anyone, so for him to be Lord Crofton's secretary was a real enigma. He wasn't used to being made demands of by servants, but he was far too intrigued to say no. "Very well."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Alex said. "Please follow me."

They were shown into a pleasant reception room. Gwil seemed more bemused than anything and Hyax got the sense that Gwil wasn't the one they wanted to talk to.

"Go on then, what do you want?"

Alex cleared his throat. "This is a sensitive matter and one I hope addressing you directly with will help. There is some thought that once Prince Simon is located, it will be a simple matter of extracting him."

Hyax could see Alex wasn't comfortable with this topic, in theory he was talking behind his master's back, but he must be concerned if he felt the need to do so. "That would be a somewhat naïve assumption given the amount of effort that has been put into keeping Simon in the first place."

"Quite." Alex's gaze darted to Gwil. "I would say it was less naivety and more bravado, the senior vampires involved are not what you'd call humble regarding their capabilities."

Gwil snorted. "No shit. Look, they're going to think that once they have an address, they'll be able to rush the place and the jobs done. But that's a fantasy."

Alex looked relieved at Gwil's agreement. "So, to that end, I think this will need to be a highly coordinated magical operation. And I was hoping we could call on Your Highness and Mr Hilt to support."

“Gwil’s not magical.” Hyax didn’t want Gwil more involved than he had to be, he was happy to help in whatever fashion, but Gwil was a different story.

“I realise that, but I think we may need to find a way to infiltrate the facility when we find it, and your magical signature would be nigh on impossible to mask, but your magic would be incredibly useful to have a different flavour in any spell work.”

“It would make more sense for me to go in,” Gwil said. “I’ve done undercover work before.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Hyax said.

Gwil rolled his eyes. “It might not come to anything, but if needed I’m willing. I suspect if this is going to be magic-led, you’ll need to square things with the Warlock Ruling Committee as well.”

Hyax was aware of them, they tended to leave the fae alone when it came to matters in their own realm but were sticklers for all magical creatures adhering to the rules here. “Yes, if you don’t involve them, they’ll be super pissed off and annoying.”

“Lord Crofton’s partner is a member of the WRC. He’s already aware, and he suggested we all talk to you. His Lordship can be... a little led by his peers, so to speak.”

Hyax laughed. “Right, I understand. The vampires are cocky bastards and we’re going to need to give them a dose of reality without sounding like we are.”

Alex grinned. “I am so glad we are aligned.”

“I’m willing to do whatever is needed to bring Simon home, I have my own reasons for doing so, but you can count on my support.” He glanced at Gwil who was staring

at him defiantly. “And of course Gwil’s.”

They would have to discuss some boundaries, but he knew there was no way Gwil wouldn’t help if the senior blood suckers asked. But if anything happened to him, he would make the pointy-toothed fuckers pay in the worse possible way.

CHAPTER NINE

G wil waded through the sewers, not his favourite London location, but it was a means to an end, and he needed to find Copperpipe in a hurry. Hunting a sewer dweller wasn't easy and it would be typical that the little bastard would hide when he needed him the most.

"Copperpipe!" he called, his voice echoing off the walls. He'd been down here longer than he'd wanted and so far, no sign of him. "I have pear drops."

Still no answer.

He was about to give up and head back to the surface when he heard the scrape of metal. Hyax wasn't wrong that Copperpipe looked like a potato on legs, and as he landed in front of Gwil there was even a clod of soil on the side of his bulbous head.

"Gwil, my favourite dead man. What you want?"

"I am in need of your special skills. There's a missing persons case, a very important individual, and the people involved would be grateful for your help."

He sniffed. "Important to you, is not necessarily important to me."

"What if I were to say you'd be helping a fae Prince and a future Dark Earl?"

Copperpipe's eyes bulged, which was saying something as they were prominent to begin with. "You are referring to the Viscount of MacLove?"

“Yes.”

“He was only married not long back. To the young Flint boy...” Copperpipe licked his teeth. “He is missing? And if I help, I will be assisting those people?”

Copperpipe usually came with an attitude of not giving a fuck, that he’d get around to helping if he wished as long as he got what he wanted in return. Often it was food-related, he didn’t seem to want for much, but this opportunity was too big for him to miss.

“Yep, and the quicker you help, the happier they’ll be.”

He hopped from one foot to the other. “Tell me and I will see.”

“Hyax did a spell, but we weren’t able to fix an exact point to where we know Prince Simon is being held, but it’s a medical facility, most likely in a stately home with a lake. I’m guessing there’ll be some sort of warding around the place as the thought is the scheme has been masterminded by a lich.”

Copperpipe hissed. “A nasty creature.”

“Yeah, and I guess it’s a big ask, but what do you reckon?”

Copperpipe bobbed his head from side to side, Gwil thinking he might be having an internal conversation. “I have many hands at my disposal. There is some goblin magic I can use and having people everywhere is useful.”

Gwil had suspected Copperpipe was part goblin, but the other bits weren’t obvious. “How long?”

“I can probably track down the who within twelve hours or so, the exact where within

forty-eight... for the right price.”

He knew Copperpipe had an incredible network, but this was beyond what he was expecting. “What do you want?”

He grinned and danced on the spot. “You might not be able to pay this price.”

“I might not, but the people I’m working with will.”

He dug around in the sack that he wore as a tunic and pulled out a crumpled photograph of a famous female singer. “Tickets for her.”

Gwil wasn’t sure how a load of potato people turning up at the hottest gig in town would go down, and he wasn’t in the position to make this happen, but he’d bet Solivatus or Robin could. “Deal. I’ll even see if I can get a phone call.”

“Oh, if I get to talk to her then I’ll get everything in twenty-four hours. Guaranteed.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

He left Copperpipe and headed back to the surface. As soon as he had enough reception on his phone he called his sire.

Solivatus answered. “Gwil?”

“This is going to sound bonkers. I can get you the whereabouts of our missing prince, but you might have to call in a few favours...”

Gwil walked home, he didn’t want to draw attention to himself by subjecting the Tube to the pong, but hopefully Hyax would be home and could do a quick sluicing spell to take the edge off until he’d had a shower.

He was debating getting a kebab when he was grabbed and pulled into an alleyway. Usually, he could handle a mugger with his above-average strength, but his attacker was strong.

“For fuck’s sake, Gwil. It’s me.”

He stared at the pretty copper-haired fae and realised she was Cikla, Hyax’s best fae friend—they’d known each other since childhood.

“Cikla? What are you playing at?”

“I needed to speak to you.” Her nose wrinkled and she gagged. “What the fuck is that smell?”

“I’ve been in the sewers, it’s literally shit.”

She mumbled something and a wave of magic raced across him, and he thought he now knew what a frying pan felt like when subjected to a scouring pad, still, he had to admit, he smelt a lot better.

“Right, now you don’t stink like an asshole, I can talk to you about Sitial.”

“Sitial, Metra’s friend?”

“Yes, which is why I need to talk to you when Hyax’s not around.”

“You do realise I’m going to tell him I saw you. I don’t believe in lying to my partner, it just leads to a load of mistrust and angst, and I’m not into that sort of pain.”

She snorted. “I expect you to tell him, what I don’t want is this getting back to our people that it’s me who’s been talking about this. As far as Hyax’s parents are

concerned, his marriage to Metra is the best thing to happen in a long time and no one will be allowed to prevent it.”

While not being able to prevent the wedding was true, Gwil didn’t think it was going ahead because it was the best for all involved. “So, what’s this got to do with Sitial? He was trying to convince Hyax that Metra wasn’t unfaithful.”

“Exactly, to make Hyax less resistant to the wedding. If he stops fighting, then it will be seen that he’s being a good fae.”

This wasn’t adding up. “But Hyax’s parents don’t know about his relationship with Metra.”

“I think we can safely say Metra’s parents now know. They are pushing for this wedding too, and I think they’ve asked Sitial to lie about what happened to try and make nice.”

“Metra and Sitial were fucking?”

“Still are if my source is correct.” She sneered. “But Sitial is a great actor.”

“I have to admit I wasn’t sure. He came across as being sincere.”

“He’s sincere that he doesn’t want to lose the position of Metra’s favourite—that gives him an edge he won’t get elsewhere.”

“But Hyax won’t care, he’s been saying I’m his favourite.”

“Come on, Gwil, use your brain. He won’t want to accept that the fae who his ex cheated with will be in his husband’s harem.”

“Sital said he was married to a woman and didn’t have any interest in men.”

She scoffed. “You believed him? I went digging. He’s definitely more than friends with Metra.”

“But he has a wife.” His wife was the reason he’d given as to why he was just friends with Metra.

“What of it? Hyax will have a husband, but he’ll still have you. Fae marriages are pretty open, there’s no real lockdown, and it’s not like him and his wife are bonded.”

He’d heard this expression before and knew there was a distinction, not just in the case of the missing prince. “What’s the significance of being bonded? Extra big cake at the wedding?”

She gave him a look that was hard to interpret. He guessed her initial thought was he was an idiot, but then it changed to understanding. “It’s not something vampires have. Usually, it’s a magical bond, and so at least one side of the couple has to have a bit of sparkly oomph about them. Imagine a deeper connection, beyond love and devotion, like you’d die if you never saw them again.”

“Since vampires are technically dead, I’m not sure that analogy works.”

“You get the drift.”

He did, the idea was nice, and he wondered if this was a predetermined fixture. Vampires did have the concept of finding their Eternal. The one person they’d want to spend forever with, might not be a magical link, but it was close enough. “So, are you predestined, born to be bonded to someone?”

“Oh no, I mean it does happen, but that’s extremely rare. A bond can form between a

couple at any time. My parents have one, they'd been married sixty years when it manifested and since then, there's not been anyone else for them."

"What? They just sort of grew into monogamy?"

"Not quite. And it doesn't always happen that way." She seemed annoyed. "I'm getting side-tracked. I came here to warn you about Sitial, not talk about mating ceremonies."

"I..."

"Just don't go falling for the lies of pretty men. Metra isn't next in line for his mother's throne, so he needs her blessing to have any political clout, sending Sitial smacks of an attempt to try and manipulate Hyax. Keep your eyes open and look after him."

She opened a portal and was gone.

"Fucking fae," he muttered and began the trudge back home.

CHAPTER TEN

Hyax had hoped to be at home to hear what Copperpipe had to say but his mother had turned up in person and had threatened to drag him through a portal by his hair if he didn't come with her directly. Which was why he was now sitting opposite Metra and Queen Vaness rather than curled around Gwil in post-orgasmic bliss.

Despite wanting to pitch an absolute toddler tantrum, he knew better than not to be on his best behaviour and not let Metra rile him. Otherwise, his mother would take over all negotiations and cite his childish actions as just reason.

To be fair, Metra was being civil and respectful, which annoyed him even more. He'd always been attractive, with black hair and a square jaw, and eyes that did legitimately sparkle like sapphires at times. "I do understand that an arranged marriage wasn't your preferred choice, Hyax," Metra said. "But I'm hoping we can find some common ground."

Talia nodded. "On paper, you are both well-suited. Similar backgrounds and pedigrees, interests and social circles—with some exceptions. I see no reason why you shouldn't grow to be fond of each other."

Hyax counted to ten before he answered. "If I wasn't already in love with someone, then I might have agreed. The situation is more delicate than two single princes being wed at the behest of their families."

"You are insisting on keeping your vampire... friend?" Vaness asked, looking as if someone had waved golem shit under her nose. She was a beautiful woman, Metra

having inherited her features, but her scrunched face made her look harsh and sour.

“Yes. If this marriage is going forward, I have some specific stipulations relating to him and under fae law, I have every right to insist.” Political marriages had rules and customs passed down the ages, he would be relying on them. “I will want Gwilym Hilt registered as the Prince’s Beloved.”

“That is a grand title,” Vaness said.

Hyax was about to launch into a prepared speech when his mother beat him to it. “Hyax is well within his rights to assign the title as he desires. Gwil might not be suitable as a husband, but I have no concern with Hyax’s judgement regarding Gwil as a special partner.”

Hyax was lost for words. Of all the ways he could see this conversation going, none of his scenarios had his mother defending Gwil.

“He’s a vampire, and not an important one either. If he had been someone of note I could understand the fascination, but surely this is a fad that will pass,” Vaness said, she wasn’t sneering or being demonstrative and sounded as if she was just stating facts.

“I will not be drawn on this topic,” Talia said. “Suffice to say, Hyax is exerting his right for a harem, the same right Metra would be allowed.”

Vaness glanced at her son. “I think Metra was hoping to explore an option of a more than cordial relationship with Hyax. Perhaps, Hyax would consider a temporary separation from his Gwil fellow to get to know Metra better.”

“No.” Hyax wasn’t going to agree to anything that meant giving up Gwil.

“You could consider the proposal,” Vaness pressed.

“I will do my duty, marry a man I have no care for, but I will not give up my beloved.”

They had no way to force the issue. He’d play by the rules, malicious compliance would become his favourite sport if needed.

Talia cleared her throat. “As I have previously communicated, Prince Hyax is willing to wed Prince Metra, but this is not a love match, and my son has told us all plainly that he has someone he will not be parted from. That is the starting point, so let us begin by setting a date.”

His mother was not used to being argued with and for once Hyax was glad of her tenacity.

“The sooner the better,” Metra said. “We need to allow time for preparation but with our combined effort we’d need only weeks, days even, if planned correctly.”

Hyax didn’t know why Metra would push for a quick resolution, apart from him being a controlling prick, and he wasn’t going to be bullied.

“I need more time. I have agreed to assist the Vampire Council with a missing persons case. Solivatus, Gwil’s sire, requested our help. Once we are done, then we can set a date.”

Vaness scoffed. “You helping a non-fae means nothing, I see no reason to delay.”

“It pertains to the son of the Dark Duke of MacLove.”

“King James of the Calanti?” Vaness asked.

“I cannot give details, but I am doing nothing that would not be beneficial to my tribe, or indeed the Elementa. If I were to back out now there would be serious repercussions on several fronts.”

He’d already helped, but he wanted to do more, and having spoken to Karl and Alex, he thought his involvement would make a huge difference.

“Or you could be painted as a traitor,” snapped Vaness. “What have you done?”

“I have agreed to help King James, the rest of the information is confidential, and I am unable to say more. But I give you my word, there is nothing nefarious.”

“That remains to be seen.”

He shrugged. “The truth is, I cannot, and will not, step back at this time. It’ll be a few weeks at most—and I don’t see a need to rush into this marriage.”

“I would say that now, even more than ever, you need to prove your loyalty,” Vaness said. “Supporting the vampires and a rival faction is not princely behaviour.”

“Well, I’m a prince, and I’m behaving in this way, so I would say by the very definition it’s princely behaviour.” He would not back down on this. “Let me finish and I will be cooperative on the wedding planning and even comply with an expedited timeline for the ceremony. If not, I will fight you on every single point, from the time of the service to the colour of the ribbons on the gifting tray. I could drag things out for years if I wanted to.”

His mother’s look told him he would be receiving a stern talking-to, but her reaction could have been a lot worse. “You can play petty well.”

“I learnt from the best.” He smiled nastily. “I do not want this marriage. I will go

through with the motions because I have been told it is my duty to do so, but I make this clear, I will not have a relationship or a romantic involvement with Metra. I will tolerate him and that is the best I will offer.”

“How dare you,” Vaness snarled. “You are not so important.”

“Then if I am not suitable for your son, I would understand if you wished to call off the marriage. You can blame it all on my loose morals and misguided ways.”

Talia had claimed there was a risk of war, but that didn’t appear to be the case. Vaness wanted to push for a marriage to his tribe, and she had no intention of backing out.

Hyax couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was more going on here, and he noticed his mother stiffening slightly, which made him think she had also come to a similar conclusion.

“Our tribes will be joined, Prince Hyax, your theatrics will not stop that, and we will ensure a peaceful environment for both our people,” Vaness said, but Hyax thought she’d have liked to have used a few more choice words.

“I think this is enough for today. No doubt Metra and Hyax will want to arrange a time to meet separately to foster a civil situation, but for now we have other business to conduct,” Talia said, her tone even more clipped than before. “I propose we reconvene officially in three weeks, to allow Hyax to finish his business with the Vampire Council, and we can work on the wording of the official announcement in the interim.”

Hyax was pleased with the turn of events, they’d not gone as expected but he considered the outcome the best available given the situation, and he’d also come out with some additional time and his mother’s support.

Vaness stood, Metra doing the same. She was not happy but not in any position to argue. “Very well. If his business is concluded sooner we should meet earlier, and in the interim I will send draft wording for your consideration.”

Vaness opened a portal, and they were gone.

He huffed. “Mother, what just happened there? From what you told me, they were the ones threatening war and knew about the coronet.”

“I don’t know. I was expecting the same sort of bravado as the last time I spoke to her, but the narrative has shifted. The change can only lead me to believe they have reasons for wanting this marriage they haven’t revealed yet.”

“I picked up an undercurrent. I think we should investigate further,” he insisted.

“Agreed.” She walked over to a cabinet, and from a locked drawer removed a golden box. “In there’s a tenement stone, it’s not traceable or trackable and I suggest in all your dealings with Metra and his mother, you keep it on you.”

Tenement stones were used to gather evidence for some of the more salacious trials. They could record vital signs, or the use of magic, alongside words and actions and were generally only ever used under royal decree. His mother’s blessing to do so set his teeth on edge. “If you are so worried, why are you allowing this marriage to go ahead?”

“Because you can look after yourself, Hyax, and you have a vampire boyfriend who can help as well, since he is far better connected than I realised. Originally, I had thought it a good match to join the tribes of Elementa and Tasharick together, now I may ask you to go through with it in order to prove or find evidence as to why we should never join forces with the Elementa. We were at war for a long time and then we made peace, that does not mean we need to be close allies.”

He decided now might be a good time to mention the potential warming of the relationship with the Calanti tribe. “You do realise that my support of the Vampire Council and the Dark Earl of MacLove, could help us to mend fences with the Calanti?”

“Is that your intent?”

“Gwil was asked by his sire to help, but if there is a possibility that further good can come of it then I think it is something that we should consider, or at least not dismiss out of hand.”

“I am far from convinced closer ties with the Calanti would be the right approach for now. But I will not stop you from helping.”

He knew she would take some time to convince, but he also had the chance to speak about Gwil and the way she had defended him in her own way, “I will keep you informed on any interactions I have with King James; he said he might write to you. But I feel I must also mention, I was surprised by your support of Gwil.”

“I told you I do not have an issue with him being your partner, and I would not ask you to give him up, but I cannot be as supportive of your involvement in public. Marriage is different.”

Hyax wouldn't push, this was already better than he had been envisaging, and with time he thought he could get more acceptance. Even with the suspicions over the Elementa's reaction, the marriage would go ahead, maybe, depending on what more he learnt he might confide to his mother about his past relationship with Metra, but for now he would keep that powder dry in case he needed to use it.

He returned home to find Gwil back, his eyes wide, staring in disbelief at several pieces of crumpled paper.

“Oh, you’re home, where’d you go?” Gwil asked, getting to his feet and giving Hyax a quick kiss.

“Summoned home, wedding planning. I have managed to use the MacLove case to buy some time, but I think there’s something going on with the Elementa.” He tapped the pages Gwil was holding. “What are they?”

“First reports from Copperpipe, but back up, these can wait. What do you mean something’s going on, because your mate Cikla jumped me in an alley?”

“What?” He had no idea why Cikla would have accosted Gwil.

“You first. I don’t believe in coincidences, and I reckon what Cikla told me and whatever’s ruffled your wings are connected.”

Now was not the time to get annoyed at Gwil’s wing reference, Cikla was a close friend and he’d spoken to her about his mother’s insistence he marry. “Remember I said my mother was concerned that the Elementa might threaten war and expose my tribe over the Stone of Ljin? Well, they don’t seem to be sticking to that script. I said if they were so upset about me keeping my fang fucktoy around then they could pull out of the marriage, and Queen Vaness was quick to dismiss the idea and not risk a threat to peace.”

Gwil was thrown. “I don’t get it.”

“My tribe had made no threats about war if I don’t get married, but that’s not how they answered.”

“Could it have been your mum making up an excuse to insist on the marriage?”

The thought had crossed his mind, but his mother’s reaction and her giving him a

tenement stone made him believe she was as thrown as he was. “No, I saw her surprise.” He removed the stone from his pocket and handed it to Gwil. “Don’t open it, as it’ll start recording, but in there is a state-of-the-magic-art surveillance device. She gave it to me to use whenever I talk to Metra and his mother in the future.”

“Safe to say there’s something suss going on.” Gwil, ever the master of the understatement.

“Now, what’s this about Cikla?” Hyax asked.

“She pulled me into an alley, and didn’t do any terrible things to my person.” Gwil grinned and Hyax rolled his eyes. “She wanted to warn you about Metra trying to play nice by sending Sitial to persuade you nothing happened between them.”

“She’s too late for that, he already did.”

Gwil shook his head. “No, she knew that, but she thinks Metra’s parents were in on it too. And that they already know you were an item once.”

Hyax didn’t know what to make of that. “I would’ve thought they’d been none too happy to find out their son had been cavorting with an enemy at the time. Vaness is the sort to have a long memory and not be able to look past that to push Metra into marrying me.”

“I don’t know, but it ties into what happened when you went home.” Gwil took his hand. “There’s something else, Cikla said she’s done some digging, and not only were they together, they still are.”

He’d always known Metra was a lying, cheating piece of shit. “He lied to me then, and he’s lying now, no surprise really.”

“I’m not sure what’s going on. But I think we need to play him at his own game, pretend you believe Sitial and act cordial with Metra. There’s an old saying, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“Flies like shit, Gwil.”

Gwil pulled him closer. “It’s all right to be upset over this, you’re allowed to be angry. All I’m suggesting is you channel that anger into uncovering what Metra and his family are up to.”

“I am angry, but it’s now how much he thinks he can play me for a fool. I’d never want him back.” He knew Gwil had a point about playing along and it was a good idea. “I’ll have to think about whether I can be nice to him, I’m not that good an actor.”

“You are a stubborn sod who likes to get his own back, and you could use that energy in better ways.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t want to deal with it at the moment and Gwil wouldn’t push, at least for the time being. “How about you tell me how things went with Mr Potato?”

Gwil’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t rise to the bait. “Copperpipe has been diligent to the point of astonishing.”

“He’s good but not sure I’d call him astonishing unless it was something relating to what he keeps under his sacking.”

Gwil handed him the papers. “He has a named suspect, and potential lead on the general area. I’ve already left Solivatus a message... I’m expecting a call to Crofton Hall at any moment.”

Hyax scanned the notes Gwil had made, Copperpipe had gone above and beyond the usual effort. He had a name, a background search on them for the last twenty years, and a potential location, which he was in the process of narrowing down. He really should start giving the little dumpling more credit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gwil waited for the reaction. He'd finished relaying everything he had so far. His contacts had done an amazing job, and he'd explained all the information as calmly as he could. He hadn't expected the audience, Robin was here with Solivatus. He'd been prepared for them but not for Sebastian Hewel. This was only his third time in Sebastian's presence, and this occasion was worse than the other two as previously Sebastian had not acknowledged his existence. Sebastian was the Head of the House of Hewel and as such he was one of the most important vampires in the world. He looked as if he were in his twenties despite being over eight hundred years old, and dressed like a goth kid, not someone who could kill you in a heartbeat. Gwil was beginning to wish Hyax was here but he'd not been home when the car had arrived and Solivatus had told him not to fuck about. He'd deal with Hyax later. He was going to be pissed off for leaving without him, but he couldn't tell Solivatus he couldn't come out and play because his boyfriend wasn't home, and Hyax had promised to rein in his jealousy.

Robin stared at Gwil. "Your potato people told you all that?"

"His name is Copperpipe. And given it's his information, I think it would be nice not to refer to him as a tuber." He panicked internally for a moment, realising who he was talking to, his defence of Copperpipe automatic and not considering who he was chastising. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Apologies, you are of course correct," Robin said, sounding sincere and Gwil's fear receded. "But I must admit I am rather surprised at the amount and quality of his information. Especially as it's been less than twenty-four hours since we last talked."

He used to underestimate Copperpipe but over the years he'd delivered time and time again, although this was stellar even for him and he would be forever grateful, as getting this sort of kudos from the likes of Robin Flint was priceless. "It's amazing what he can do for the right incentive and, at the moment, he's a big fan of a certain female pop star and Solivatus was able to arrange a call which, let's just say, oiled wheels like I've never seen before."

Robin was scrolling through the information Gwil had sent over. "So, we're pretty certain a lich is masquerading as a Dr Ralph Mettle, and for the last twenty years he's been travelling the world as a faith healer?"

He'd been able to corroborate Copperpipe's information through other means. Mettle seemed to be a smooth bastard who'd managed to stay under the radar and still do what the fuck he wanted and had an almost undercover cult following trying to seek his help. "For the last five years or so he's been settled in the UK, the exact location is difficult because he's been able to make himself untrackable and untraceable. But from the intel, he conducts healing clinics and then invites those he thinks need more help to his residential property. We think it's there he's been holding Prince Simon."

Robin looked ready to kill. "Then we go get him."

Gwil glanced over to Solivatus and Sebastian, he knew how vampire society worked. Nothing would happen without Sebastian's say-so in the House of Hewel, and he hadn't told Robin anything yet but Sebastian had been given a download of the information in advance by Solivatus.

"I don't think it'll be that simple," Gwil continued. "The spell work and magical wards are like nothing we've seen. We've narrowed down the location to three potentials and we've people scouting but with that level of security we aren't going to be able to waltz in there. It's not going to be a matter of storming the fortress but infiltrating and worming our way in."

Liches were known for their power and ability to work with complex magic, Mettle fitted the pattern, and Simon would be a perfect target for him. His fellow vampires weren't known for their patience so Gwil would need help to prevent them from doing something rash and stupid.

"We don't have the time for that," Robin snapped.

Gwil understood his concern for Simon but he wasn't seeing the bigger picture. He could see why Karl and Alex had approached Hyax at the end of their last visit.

"Robin." Sebastian sat forward in his chair. "This is bigger than Simon, and while I understand you don't give a flying fuck about anyone else, if we don't do this in the right way, then this Ralph fucker can disappear and take Simon with him."

"Can I ask what you consider the right way to be?" Even Robin wouldn't risk arguing with Sebastian.

"Once the reconnaissance has concluded, we will find a way to get two or three people into the facility. Two as patients and the third on the staff if we can."

"I want to do it," Robin said, a demand that wasn't unexpected but probably not the most sensible, and Gwil didn't think he'd be talked out of changing his mind.

"I thought you might," Sebastian said with a smirk. "Which is why we are researching a safe way to alter someone's appearance without obvious flaws or them looking like they've been generated by AI on a detox setting. Having talked to Solivatus, and knowing what you would demand, we thought you, Gwil and Jack Webb would be the best candidates."

He hadn't been asked exactly been asked, more voluntold. Solivatus had informed him the research had been ongoing for a while since they'd thought it unlikely

wherever Simon was would be an easy target. The truth of the matter was he couldn't refuse, given who had been making the demands, no matter how the request was couched. It didn't mean he wasn't scared shitless at what might happen and although Hyax would be involved, it would also include magic from other spell chuckers who he didn't know or trust.

"Thank you for understanding," Robin said.

"I would do the same for Anthony," Sebastian admitted and since Anthony was Sebastian's Eternal, lord help anyone stupid enough to hurt him, as Sebastian Hewel would see them pay for it. "I just ask you for some patience, Robin. Alex and Ashley are close to a resolution, and they are running some ideas past Hyax."

"Not James and Hylei?" Robin seemed surprised.

"They are as distraught as you are, and James might go in waving a broadsword, so I can't risk him ruining the plan. You keep this to a strictly need-to-know basis. Is that clear?"

Hyax hadn't mentioned being contacted, but Gwil guessed that might be happening as they spoke. Apart from his initial visit, James hadn't been mentioned again and it was Queen Hylei who'd been in touch. She had been distraught at the thought of what might be happening to her only child. Given how unstable fae could be at the best of times, Gwil thought Sebastian was wise to keep her away from the fight. In her current mood it could save half a village from being wiped off the map.

Robin squared his shoulders, looking resolute. "As I've said, I'll do whatever it takes."

"From what I've heard about spells and potions that change someone's appearance, they're not too pleasant, but physiologies such as those of vampires and certain

creatures fare better. Hence, why you and Gwil were chosen.”

“And Jack Webb?” Robin seemed surprised at the choice.

“You need a magic user with you, and he’s one of the best the Invigilators have,” Sebastian said. “And elements of his genetics mean he’s no stranger to odd things sprouting.”

“He’s part siren, isn’t he?” Robin said.

Gwil hadn’t met Jack Webb He’d heard of him as a legal whizz, although nothing about him being on the scaley side. He knew to keep his mouth shut, even if he had. If Jack had been recommended by the Invigilators, he’d be one of the best, as the Invigilators were there to ensure fair play in the Vampire Council and had to be able to deal with pretty much anything.

“Not my place to confirm or deny. Ben is in his potion shack brewing a few important bits and bobs, so all being well, we should be able to finalise the plans within the next day or so.”

Gwil hadn’t expected the Dark Earl of Crofton to do the brewing, but he was fast realising there was nothing about the assignment he should take for granted. They must be more advanced with the plan than he thought. He got the feeling Hyax was about to be dropped into the middle and he wouldn’t be happy but would mask his annoyance outwardly until he got the chance to blast the shit out of something to vent his anger.

A scuffling noise came from the fireplace and Copperpipe, wearing a new flour sack judging by the minimal stains, scrambled out and grinned. Gwil hadn’t told him where he was, but Copperpipe knew things Gwil had no idea how he found out, and if he were honest didn’t want to know. “What is the collective noun for Fang Faces? A

phlebotomy?”

“You must excuse Copperpipe,” Gwil said quickly. “He doesn’t understand the concept of deference.”

Copperpipe snorted. “Senior vamps never have a sense of humour.”

It was obvious Robin didn’t know what to make of Copperpipe. “There’s not a lot at the moment for me to laugh at.”

Copperpipe’s expression changed to sad, and he rubbed his nose. “Yes, you are missing your pretty princeling, Mr Flint. But I bring you good news.”

“You do?”

From out of his sacking, he removed a crumpled piece of paper and waved it for Robin to take. “There is no way to speak or write the name of the exact place—there is powerful forgetmist over the area—but I’ve drawn you a map. It sits in the middle.”

Robin took the piece of paper between his thumb and forefinger, no doubt wondering where it might have been secreted. He held the page up for them all to see. Gwil wouldn’t call it a map as such, but there was an X in the middle of three place names Weobley, Ledgemoor and King’s Pyon, like a rubbish treasure map.

Solivatus took the piece of paper from Robin, looking equally concerned about its origin. “Herefordshire. I believe.”

Copperpipe nodded. “My associate may have accidentally eaten a couple of cows. Tasty.”

Sebastian peered at the map. “The X is in marshland... ancient common land and the sort of place witches were thought to hang out. But it’s a bit too cold and damp for the fun stuff.”

“Surely someone would notice a manor house in the middle of a marsh.” Robin turned back to Copperpipe. “Are you sure it’s here?”

“Yes. The place reeks of badness... no mistake.”

“I suppose if a sewer dweller says it smells bad then there must be something about it,” Robin said, and Gwil thought he had a point. He’d never known Copperpipe to offer judgment on his intel, making him think they should be extra cautious.

“Weobley is one of those old places, there’d be powerful ley lines under the marshland.” Sebastian seemed to be recalling a memory. “Used to have a castle... lots of dark places and willing bodies that bleed. I do miss the 1400s... death was simpler then.”

“Thanks, Copperpipe,” Gwil said, shoos him back to the fireplace, keen that he didn’t say something that might get them both into trouble. “I’ll have the eclairs shipped straightaway.”

“The good ones, with extra salted caramel.” The way Copperpipe smacked his lips made Robin shudder and several others in the room grimace.

“Absolutely. A dozen a day for the next month.”

He went the way he came, and Robin turned to Gwil. “Eclairs?”

“He’s got no need for money, and our dealings are transactional dependent on what he wants at the time.”

“If he’s found me Simon, I’ll give him anything he wants in the world.”

“That’s the thing, what he wants at the moment is salted caramel eclairs.” Gwil smiled, he wished some of his clients were even as half as straightforward. “It’ll be different again next time, but he does like a pear drop and I have a bag of those delivered once a month whether I need him or not.”

Sebastian opened a laptop and pulled up an ordnance survey map of the area. He had a way of hyper-focusing that was unnerving and Gwil never wanted to be the object of his scrutiny. “Now we have our location let’s get our three witches together and see what they’ve come up with.”

Gwil winced at the term, as one of those had to be Hyax.

“But there’s so much we don’t know,” Robin said.

“We couldn’t wait for everything to be confirmed, I’ve been making plans and drawing up scenarios based on what we did know and a risk-based hypothesis. We need to be ready to act.”

Solivatus’s mobile pinged. He read the message. “Seems Dr Mettle is holding a new meeting in two days... Time for you to be saved, Robin, maybe taken into residential care.”

Gwil knew he wasn’t the only one with contacts, and Solivatus would have people all over waiting to act once he had something to go on, Copperpipe’s early insights would have allowed Solivatus to send out his dogs.

“How are we going to make him do that?” Robin asked.

“Then we’ve luck on our side,” Sebastian said. “I’ve been thinking about this. While

I accept they do cure people of their ailments, I can't believe a lich would do anything for purely altruistic reasons."

Gwil didn't know much about liches but what he did know wasn't good and he didn't think they'd do anything for nothing.

"He must want something in return," Robin said.

"Oh yes. My theory is he's invited individuals from the meetings who can be of use to him, a vampire's blood is worth a lot on the black market, as are the bark scrapings of naiads."

Robin's top lip curled into a sneer. "I suppose there's use for anyone, darker potion ingredients or spell work often have a sacrificial or biological aspect."

"Exactly. I've a business generating an income based on those principles, but I don't go around kidnapping innocent people. I pay for donations—and I pay bloody well—but I'd bet one of my houses Mettle is harvesting from his patients without their consent. To be honest, I wouldn't give a flying fuck, but he crossed the line when he took Simon, and he will have to pay."

"I'm not sure how we're going to make him pick me and Gwil," Robin said. Gwil didn't think he'd be of interest, they might want his blood, but they probably wouldn't need both him and Robin.

"We need to make you look like a decent prospect... or if he doesn't pick you, replace you with ones he does."

"How are we going to do that?" Robin was holding back his frustration, but Gwil saw it was a lot of effort.

“Some sort of rare condition might be a good start. We need to think about this, if it were a sexually communicable disorder then both you and Gwil could have it... set you up as lovers who need to get rid of the vampire pox.”

He'd agreed to go undercover but not this, and he could see Hyax losing his shit. “I don't think Hyax would be in favour of that idea.”

Solivatus grunted. “You'd just be acting, and it wouldn't even look like the real you. He'll be fine... or I will speak to him about his trust issues.”

“I can speak to Prince Hyax,” Robin said. “He is already aware of the bond I share with Simon and would know I would have no interest in Gwil.”

If he were being honest, Gwil didn't think Robin would have fucked him even if he'd been single. He wasn't sure that would make Hyax any happier though.

“The Invigilators should be able to build a trail if they check backgrounds... a police report about the spell use, medical records showing they hadn't been cured, with some flavour to make you even more interesting,” Sebastian said. “They'll want to be seen to help with the return of Simon.”

“This all does depend on whether the magic is possible,” Robin said.

“I have every faith, Robin. You'll see. Ashley, Alex and Hyax all bring distinct flavours to the mix and the lich won't realise what's going on until it's too late.”

Gwil hoped Hyax wouldn't take affront at all the assumptions being made, Gwil had no clue about the level of power or what type of magic was needed and, if this hadn't involved another fae, he could've seen Hyax flouncing off, spraying holy water as he went.

Robin still didn't seem fully convinced. "Are we certain there's no way to do an extraction? Go in get Simon and get out?"

"I've already explained once, Robin, I'm not one for repeating myself. Now, if you're not keen on helping us get your Eternal home, I'm sure I can find someone else to help and it would be a shame if your lack of engagement were to get back to Simon and his family."

Gwil held his breath, then remembered he didn't breathe. Sebastian was a scary bastard and Robin tensed at the rebuke. The threat was clear, and Robin wasn't stupid.

"I'm completely committed to bringing Simon home, and to Simon."

"Correct answer, Robin." Sebastian's smile had no warmth to it. "Now you should go rest. Leave the planning to me and Solivatus."

"I am grateful for your guidance." Robin turned to Gwil. "Come on, Gwil, let's go and inform your fiancé of the plan and start to work on our backstory."

Robin took Gwil firmly by the arm and they left. Gwil was not looking forward to having to explain to Hyax that he wasn't going to pretend to have caught something due to getting down and dirty from sex magic with Robin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hyax stood with arms crossed over his chest in a reception room at Crofton Hall. He'd returned from visiting the fae realm to find Karl waiting for him with a message that Gwil had been collected and would he be so kind as to join them at his earliest convenience. Meaning immediately.

He'd arrived through a portal into what he'd describe as an ambush as Alex was waiting for him, alongside a warlock of exceptional calibre. He could taste his magic, and a good measure of his capability even though he'd never met him before. Not to mention he wasn't bad-looking, with black hair and bright eyes behind wire-framed glasses.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"Prince Hyax, I'm Senior Warlock Ashley Niven." He held his hand out to shake, which Hyax did, Ashley's magic making his own prickle. Ashley's eyes widened and he cleared his throat. "Well, that explains why you were asked."

"I haven't been asked anything yet. I said I would help where I could with Prince Simon, but up until now there's not been much said other than the vampires were likely to rush in like a bunch of idiots."

Alex spluttered. "I don't think we put it quite in those terms."

Ashley laughed. "Although accurate. I'm Lord Crofton's partner, I'm more than aware of how idiotic a vampire can be, but thankfully this isn't Ben's mess. The

supreme pointy tooth, Sebastian Hewel, has made demands, and since most of us don't want to suffer horribly at the hands of a creative amateur torturer, we're pulling together."

He'd met Sebastian at the wedding, nothing more than a courtesy greeting but Hyax knew enough not to want to get on his bad side, a few discreet enquiries had told him all he'd needed to know. "I guess I'm here to add a bit of fae magic into the proceedings. I've never tried to blend fae, elf and warlock energies—it might not be the outcome you were looking for."

"Actually, I think it'll be perfect. Our signatures will effectively block each other out and the potion will work better for the additional flavours."

Hyax thought he was still missing the basics. "A potion for what?"

"Sebastian is convinced that there's no way we can get into a facility guarded by a lich and extract Simon from the outside. He thinks we will need to infiltrate and that will require who we're sending to have a little facial reconstruction so as not to be recognised."

The plan was more sensible than he'd expected, liches lived long lives by being able to avoid being found in places they didn't want to be. "Most transfiguration potions are short-lived. By adding our magic to the mix it would prolong the effects as well as mask them."

"Exactly. And the familial connection won't hurt either."

Hyax didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Ben's brewing the potion and Robin is one of his closest friends and House member. Jack, who will be going undercover as a porter, is my ex, and you're

banging Gwil.”

“Gwil? He’s not going anywhere near a lich deranged enough to think kidnapping a fae prince who’s also a dark viscount is a good idea.”

The door swung open, and Robin arrived, Gwil with him. “Ah, excellent, His Highness is here.”

“I’m about to leave and take my fiancé with me.” Hyax scowled. “I’ve just heard of a ridiculous scheme where you think Gwil is going to take an untested potion and swan into a lich’s lair.”

Gwil hurried over. “I’m more than happy to be part of this, Hyax. You said yourself we should help if we can.”

“I did not mean putting you in danger. How on earth do you think you’ll even get in?”

Robin stepped forward. “We’re in the process of concocting a backstory. The lich goes by the name of Dr Ralph Mettle. We believe he accepts patients on the basis of them having something useful, so in our case, we’re working on us being a couple, with some sort of sexually transmitted disease.”

Ashley bounced on his toes. “Oh, I’ve a good one for that. A nasty dose of a spectral infection contracted through a spell while shagging. There’s a version of the Nosferatu virus that’d be perfect.”

Hyax blinked several times as he processed the information. “Robin is going to give my boyfriend the ghost pox? You have to be shitting me? Absolutely not!”

“Of course I’m not going to give Gwil anything, I have a husband, and you know

yourself about our bond.” Robin looked as angry as Hyax felt. “This will be part of the cover.”

Hyax bristled, he didn’t have an issue with Gwil pretending to be Robin’s boyfriend—it was the danger they were willing to put Gwil into without due consideration for Gwil’s safety. “It should have been pre-discussed.”

“Surely it’s Gwil’s decision if he wants to be involved,” Robin insisted.

“Don’t give me that,” Hyax snarled. “He’s a vampire, he can’t say no to his sire or family members of the Houses.”

Gwil placed a hand on his arm. “I’m grateful you care, and you’re right. So, I have to do it.”

Gwil’s expression asked him not to push this further so Hyax would drop his argument for now, then once they were alone, he’d be having words. “Then it’s a good job I’ll be involved so I can make sure my magic can protect you.”

He knew part of his reaction was not about the way the vampires treated each other, but the guilt he was carrying over Metra. He’d thought his parents would back off eventually, but they hadn’t and now there were more potential issues, and he had a duty to undertake, much like how Gwil must be perceiving his situation in recovering Simon.

“The potion is in preparation,” Alex said. “Lord Crofton is the principal brewer, and Ashley and myself are assisting.”

“When will it be ready?” Hyax asked.

“Tomorrow. Which means we’ve that long to perfect the magical blend and be ready

to cast.”

They had barely any time. “That’s an aggressive timeline.”

Ashley huffed. “Tell me about it. We don’t have longer, I’ve just received word the meeting Gwil and Robin need to be at is in two days.”

“I’m not sure it can be done.”

“We’ve no choice. Sebastian is not someone you disappoint. Add in Liam Cartwright and you’ve the perfect storm on a homicidal power trip.”

He’d not had much to do with Liam, but he was James’s sire and while in theory it was the fae angle through James that had meant Hyax was helping, by the sound of it, Liam was another vampire he didn’t want to upset.

“Then the sooner we start the better,” Hyax said, admitting defeat.

“I’ve had a room made up for yourself and Mr Hilt,” Karl said. “I can collect any items from your abode if you should wish so.”

No way he was letting a demon rifle through his things. “I’ll go myself, a little later, there may be some other items that only I’ll be able to access depending on the discussions.”

“I’ve set up a workroom, I would suggest a light meal and then we get down to business,” Alex said.

“Gwil and I would like to freshen up, we can eat together and then I’ll join you.” He wanted some time alone with Gwil before the chaos started.

“Perfect,” Ashley said. “I’m going to discuss a few things with Jack and start the wheels rolling on a backstory, the sooner we have that, the sooner Gwil and Robin can make sure they know who they’re supposed to be.”

Robin excused himself. Hyax could see how losing Simon was affecting him. Most vampires were pale and drawn, but there was a bone-deep weariness about Robin that wasn’t due to being physically tired.

Karl escorted them to a lovely room overlooking the lawn, and he realised the sun was up. “Are the windows treated?” he asked Karl.

“Yes, the household is in the main nocturnal, but Lord Crofton has been known to keep odd hours when he’s experimenting.”

Karl disappeared in a cloud of black smoke and Hyax took the opportunity to pull Gwil into his arms. “I don’t want you getting hurt,” he said, brushing his cheek against Gwil’s hair.

“I’ll do my best not to. I know you worry, but I can make my own decisions.”

Karl reappeared and they stepped apart as he laid out a table. “I’ll leave you to it, if you need anything click your fingers and say my name and I’ll be here directly.”

Gwil picked up the bottle he’d been left and let loose a low whistle. “Danish, 27. Not had one of those before.”

“Does the age and country make that big a difference?” Hyax said, sitting at the table and spotting a selection of delightful-looking breads and a bottle of ambrosia.

“Massive variety. Oliver realised that he could blend the poor quality ones for a mass-produced product but then make a fortune on single vintages, and he mapped

out the geographies and age profiles—he loved that side of it.”

Oliver Hoffman was Gwil’s ex-boyfriend and, although Hyax had never met him, he didn’t like him on principle. “And the Danish is good?”

“Supposed to be. Can’t imagine the Dark Earl of Crofton settling for shit blood.”

“You tend to get packs, not bottles.”

Gwil poured himself a glass. “Those are the blends. You might have missed the memo, but I’m not one of those posh types. I keep the nice blood for special occasions. Besides, I thought you’d be more grossed out by the idea, so I don’t exactly put them on display.”

“You have to eat, Gwil. I’ve always known you were a vampire. You don’t need to worry about the money, I can cover our expenditure.”

Gwil shrugged. “I could switch over. I don’t pay a mortgage any more since Flume signed over our place, but I spent so long being frugal that it’s a hard habit to break.”

He would need to spend some effort adapting Gwil to the finer side of life. As the Prince’s Beloved he should expect to receive the best, and Hyax would make sure of it. “Once we’re done finding the fairy prince, we’ll put some things in place.”

“I’m not going to stop working,” Gwil said, defiant. “I’m not with you to be a kept fucktoy.”

The conversation was not going in a direction he’d expected. “I don’t see you like that, and I enjoy working cases with you. That’ll never change.”

“You’re also not my keeper, and you overstepped earlier trying to stop me from

going undercover. I don't need you to fight my battles. Especially when it's related to the vampire side of things."

"I don't want you hurt."

"I won't be. But it's not just that, you're still hung up over Solivatus, and I appreciate you're trying not to overreact, and you know he's my sire, I can't change it." He knocked back his blood. "Just like I have to accept you're going to marry Metra."

Hyax picked apart a bread roll filled with dried fruits and chewed slowly on small chunks, the silence sitting between them. He didn't know what to say that would make things better. "I love you. I'm sorry for the Metra shit."

"I love you, too. We'll deal with it, but we need to work together. I'm not important to the likes of Robin Flint, but I can be useful and if we can get the support of those sorts of people it'll help my reputation. Then maybe your mum might stop thinking I'm something she'd want to scrape off her shoe."

"She isn't that bad, and if she really wanted rid of you, you'd have disappeared into a fae portal, your vampire friends be damned." He'd not told Gwil how she'd defended him.

"I don't think that's as reassuring as you think it should be."

Hyax laughed. "Seriously, Gwil. She's accepted you as the Prince's Beloved, there's never been a non-fae with the title before, and she even told Vaness you were here to stay and our involvement was non-negotiable. Now with all the suspicions relating to Elementa, I think we can capitalise on the situation."

"If I were to be the one to find key evidence, that might help."

Hyax had been thinking the same thing. “Half the rhetoric around you not being the right person for me is that I could be seen as being disloyal to my people, but helping uncover the ill intent of another tribe, that has to help them see you as a suitable partner.”

“I get your mum would know, but I doubt it’d ever be allowed to be public knowledge.”

“We’ll take what we can get.”

Gwil yawned, his nocturnal algorithm would be kicking in, whereas Hyax’s fae metabolism meant his need to sleep could be curtailed for much longer. “Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll go and start working on whatever they’re cooking, and I’ll pop home and bring us back some things.”

“All right, there’s not much I can do to help with the hocus pocus unless there’s more of the dark stuff, especially if there’s blowjobs on offer.”

Hyax laughed. “I doubt it, balancing normal fae magic will be a challenge enough, adding in a vampire would release the chaos monkeys.”

“Heaven forbid.” Gwil stretched. Hyax loved the way Gwil’s body moved, but he wasn’t in the position to let his libido take charge. “I’m gonna have a shower and crash, wake me when you get back. I’m sure you’ll have a load of magic-fuelled sexual tension to work out if your reaction to Ashley was anything to go by.”

Hyax choked on the mouthful of ambrosia he chose that moment to drink. “What do you mean by that?”

“I could tell by the way you interacted that you were drawn to him. I don’t mind, I trust you not to act on any nice tingles, and I’m more than happy to pick up the

strain.”

“It doesn’t work that way. I appreciate his magical prowess, nothing more.” Gwil was smirking, he didn’t understand. “I mean it. Don’t go confusing mutual respect for me wanting to jump someone’s bones.”

Gwil raised an eyebrow and Hyax got the distinct feeling he’d walked into a trap. “Same for my sire. I get we have a history, but my past is very much my past, and you’re my future.”

After a kiss to remind him he was Gwil’s and no one else’s, Hyax left him to get some rest and made his way downstairs to what he hoped wouldn’t be a day of magical mayhem. Given it would include an elf and a warlock, he could only hope it didn’t devolve into the punchline for a bad joke.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hyax wrinkled his nose at the odour of the pervading dampness in the cellar. “Why are we down here?”

Ashley was reading from a book that must’ve been as old as the house. “The cellars are specifically warded for a high level of magical activity. There are dampening fields which are some of the strongest in the country, and given what we’re trying to achieve, we don’t want any rogue spells causing issues.”

“We could do this as safely outside, where there wasn’t a house that could fall on our head.”

“From a security stance, it’s far better to keep this inside,” Alex said. “The magic will transmit a unique signature and I don’t want to risk the work we’re doing being detected.”

This was going to be hard enough, but Hyax wasn’t used to being trapped underground without natural light. “While I agree for the initial work, we should move eventually to where the spells will be cast, as the environment can have an impact.”

“That’ll be in the brewing outhouses,” Ashley explained. “Partly because we will need to act quickly once the potion is ready, but also because they are heavily warded as well.”

“They’ll need tuning to Prince Hyax,” Alex said. “And Mr Webb.”

“I should probably explain that Jack is also a warlock, and we’ll need to adapt the spell to take his magic into account.”

Hyax was getting a headache, everything seemed to have an extra complication. “Is there anything simple about this?”

“No,” Ashley said with a grin. “To be honest, it’s partly why I agreed to help. I love a challenge.”

He handed Hyax the book he was holding. “We’ve not worked together before, so I don’t have a measure of your magic apart from when I shook your hand. The first step is for me, you and Alex to have a threesome, although not in the sexual sense,” he added quickly.

“A mapping of our energy cores is the most expeditious approach. Despite how we’d deny it, elf and fae magic aren’t so different.” He glanced at Alex to see if he’d argue but he was nodding. “It’d be your warlock elements that’ll stand out as different.”

The core mapping was also the least intimate of ways to get to know a fellow magic practitioner. Sex was an excellent shortcut as people tended to let their guard down, but that wasn’t an option.

Alex produced a glowing cube with a wave of his hand. “We elves have this device. It’s a projection unit, prevents unnecessary... touching.”

Hyax snorted. “From what I know of elves, you’re not averse to touching things, especially things that don’t belong to you.”

“But this is different. Knowing the essence of someone’s magic gives them the upper hand and no one needs to know everything, the cube will filter only the required information.”

Elves were secretive bastards, so he shouldn't have been surprised. "I'm okay to use your toy if you wish. We are all working towards the same goal here."

Alex placed a cube on the floor between them. "It'll take a moment to warm up, but then the scan will take a few seconds."

He'd never encountered this technology before, and he was wary of anything elvish. "I would want assurance that there is no recording of the data collected."

"I swear on my holar that I will keep no record, we will all experience each other's magic, nothing more."

The holar was a sacred oath for elves and Hyax would need to decide whether he trusted Alex or not.

Ashley looked more curious than concerned. "Should we wait for Jack to do this? I was going to summon him once we were a bit further advanced with the plan."

"He is being cast against, not the one doing the magic, I would suggest we get on with it and create what we need for Gwil and Robin first and then retune for Jack," Alex said. "We don't need him yet."

Hyax didn't like the elf taking the lead. He would put his own measures in place. "Let's get on with it, I would prefer to set up a monitoring sequence to make sure nothing unexpected happens."

"Agreed," Ashley said. "We want you to be comfortable with helping, Hyax. Alex has my full trust, but you don't know him, and so until you do, it is only fair to put in place mechanisms to make you confident you've made the right decision."

Ashley would make a great politician, Hyax thought. There was no option to back out

though, as he wouldn't abandon Gwil to this lot. "Then all should be fine. But I will still put my own precautions in place."

Alex's smile was tight-lipped. "All we need to do is fire a basic spell at the cube. Doesn't matter what, as it's all about the underlying energy pattern."

Hyax muttered a spell under his breath that would track ill-intent, and on Alex's cue fired a charm designed to remove dirt and odour, which was relatively simple compared to what he was capable of. The other two did the same. The cube glowed green and levitated off the floor and three beams of yellow light shot out. Hyax flinched on impact, but more out of surprise as there was no associated pain. A wave of bubbles raced across his tongue. His brain felt as if it had lurched ten degrees to the right, and he had an absolute awareness of the flavour of Alex and Ashley's magic, he knew how to work with them, how to adapt his own magic but not cause malice. The cube gave him the information he needed to work, and he could see from Alex's expression he'd had the same experience. Ashley didn't seem to be affected but Hyax wondered if he'd experienced this sort of thing before with the Warlock Ruling Committee.

The cube shut off.

"Well, I'd say that was successful." Alex grinned, the tips of his pointy ears were red.

Hyax realised he too had a pooling warmth around his ears and neck and moved his hair in the hope of covering any spreading patches.

"Yes," Ashley agreed. "I'm far more certain now that we can do this. I'd been worried about the fae magic being counterproductive, but now I see a way to use it as an amplifier. Gentlemen, it's time for us to get to work."

Some of the areas of magical theorems were new to him, and Hyax loved that he was

learning new things. They tried combinations of spells, practising on watermelons, and a pile of split and mangled fruit began to amass. Once they had managed to develop a spell that worked without covering them with juice, they moved on to chickens. Thankfully the bantam hen morphed into a mallard without coming to any harm.

“We should probably try it on Gwil to confirm,” Ashley said as they took a break and reread his notes.

“No fucking way,” Hyax said, he was tired, and needed some downtime, but there was no way Gwil would be subjected to this until they were ready. “He’s not a guinea pig, I won’t have anything but the final spell near him.”

Alex wrinkled his nose. “I think Mr Hewel would be similarly minded about Mr Flint. But we should try it on a vampire.”

“Then we’ll go get one that no one cares about,” Ashley said. “There’ll be plenty in the clubs, hanging around hoping to work their way into the favour of a House.”

Hyax didn’t care who they used, as long as it wasn’t Gwil. “How do we get one?”

“I imagine if a beautiful blond fae walked up to one and offered a night they’d never forget, we’d have a willing helper,” Ashley said, waggling his eyebrows.

“Oh, yes,” Alex agreed. He checked his watch. “It’s a bit early. But you could portal to a club closer to sunset and pick someone who’s not managed to get paired up and knock ’em out. I’ll have a car ready to bring them here. Once they wake up your magic will have worn off and I’ll explain they’ve been specially selected to help the House of Hewel.”

“No. Send someone else.” He yawned. “I’m going to get some rest, then shag my

partner. You can kidnap your own vampire.”

He stalked out, the nerve of some people. Hyax was a prince, not some common oik who could be ordered about. Alex was an elf and Ashley was a warlock, and neither were known for being submissive creatures, so they should have known the fae were the kings of being uppity bastards and he was going to play stuck-up prince for as long as he could. For now, he would hope Gwil was still in bed or could at least be persuaded to return.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gwil stretched out. He'd slept like the dead, which was an analogy he wouldn't use in front of some members of the paranormal communities due to their sensibility and general lack of a sense of humour. His groggy mind acknowledged the presence of someone sitting on the edge of the bed and it took several moments to realise it wasn't Hyax, but Solivatus.

"Wake up, sleepy head. We've some things to discuss."

He struggled to sit, the thought of the reaction Hyax might have if he were to find Solivatus in his current position, was not a pleasant one. Hyax might be trying to be reasonable, but this would set off the fireworks.

"Give me a minute and I'll get dressed."

Solivatus smirked. "You're fine as you are. It's not like I've not seen it all before."

"Doesn't mean you get to see it now."

He chuckled and stood. "Fair enough. Get dressed and I'll wait in your sitting room."

Before dating Hyax, Gwil would never have had the balls to push back against Solivatus, so it was kind of liberating to do so now. The expectations of his status were so engrained in him he would've never thought to have challenged them.

He dressed quickly and joined Solivatus. It was one thing to brush him off, another to

keep him waiting. “So, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong per se. We’ve set up your background for the infiltration, and I wanted to check in on how you’re feeling about the whole situation.”

Gwil sat in a separate chair rather than next to him on the sofa. “It’s fine. A little apprehensive about the speed at which everything’s progressing, and that they’re going to make me look like someone else, but I’ve done undercover work before. To be honest, given no one knows who I am, I wonder why they’re bothering to change my appearance.”

“I wouldn’t say no one knows who you are. Dating a royal fae, against their parents’ wishes no less, is going to give you an element of notoriety.”

He hadn’t considered it from that angle. “I suppose any link back is dangerous.”

“Pretty much, with both Sebastian and Liam heavily invested in this, you can be pretty safe in saying it’s not allowed to go wrong.”

There were times when he had wished to be better situated in terms of being recognised in vampire society, now faced with what might go down if they failed, Gwil thought he might want to go back to them not knowing he existed. He could find a nice cave in Wales, live off sheep and not come back to civilisation for a few hundred years.

“Do I have a complete backstory? The sooner I can learn who I’m playing the less likely I am to fuck up.”

“You don’t do yourself justice, Gwil. You’re good at what you do.” Solivatus winked. “You’ll ace this and imagine the favours you’ll be able to call in.”

Gwil wasn't about to risk reminding the likes of Sebastian and Liam that they owed him. "We'll see."

Solivatus spent a moment doing something on his phone. "I've sent you the details of your new identity and questionable life choices. Robin is the one who has a dick for a boyfriend. Sebastian rather liked the idea of having him behave as less like his real self as possible."

"Surely that's just asking for trouble."

"Robin's a brilliant actor, he should've been on the stage, not making stars. He'll be able to pull off the lovestruck dweeb who'd be willing to look past his boyfriend cheating on him and infecting him with something nasty during a bit of dark hocus pocus shagging."

Gwil groaned. "Couldn't you have come up with something more believable?"

"I've heard far worse bullshit spouted and asshole behaviour forgiven in the name of love. Honestly, you giving him a mutated version of the Nosferatu virus is one of the tamest things we came up with. Consider yourself lucky."

He didn't feel lucky. "Right, and if I'm a complete bastard, why am I putting up with a wimpy streak of piss?"

"Money, why else?"

Gwil had once been driven by money, not so much after he'd been turned, but the 1920s had been a glut of overindulgence and decadence and he'd been frustrated by his inability to accrue the wealth it had been hinted he'd be able to amass. It had led to some bad decisions, which was why he thought his alter ego could be considered as willing to put up with a subpar partner for the right financial persuasion.

“Is Robin’s character as rich as the real Robin?”

“No, we need a little verisimilitude.” Solivatus grinned. “Robin is beyond wealthy, and him no longer shagging about has caused some serious grumblings already from folks who thought they’d have had a chance at him, and it’s only been a few weeks.”

Gwil had heard the stories about Robin. “I wouldn’t have believed he was so devoted to Prince Simon if I hadn’t seen it for myself. Anyone can feign a wedding and lovey-dovey nonsense for a few hours, but not the concerted effort being this upset over Simon would take.”

“The fact he’s willing to change his face and pretend he’s the put-upon boyfriend of a fuckboi talks volumes. That level of devotion is rare.”

Hyax had said they had a bond and had explained as best as he could to Gwil, but it went well beyond his understanding. Unfortunately, Hyax hadn’t been the most patient of late so Gwil decided he could cope with knowing the basics.

“Then he’ll be playing a rich kid with a hankering for a bad boy? I’ve seen that plenty of times.”

“Yeah, half the wannabe vamps want to be turned because of that premise.”

It wasn’t just humans with a craving for immortality. Too often, there was something about having rich parents and no sense of the value of money that turned people into gullible idiots. “It’s not exactly my usual *modus operandi*.”

“But you’re good at what you do, Gwil. You’ll cope. Read through the briefing docs, get a measure of who William Carpenter is meant to be.”

At least he could go by Will, which was close enough to his real name that he

shouldn't get caught out. "I daresay I'll cope, Hyax won't be too happy with the scenario, though."

"I have factored that in, a bit. You're cheating on Robin still, with a bloke called Mal and he just happens to have the same contact details as a certain blond bombshell, so you being in touch with him while you're away should unwrinkle his wings."

Gwil hadn't seen that coming and he was surprised at Solivatus's insight. "I'm sure that'll go a long way. I'll still need to discuss it all with him and make sure he doesn't worry over nothing."

Solivatus tutted. "I did want to talk to you about your pretty fairy. He seems to have a bug up his arse, and I want to check what was going on."

Hyax was a bit touchy about Solivatus. The conversation they'd had about Gwil and his sire had cleared the air to some degree, but the Metra problem just compounded the issue and Hyax was trying to deal with the situation as best he could. Then there was the whole matter of it not being announced yet.

"He is a royal fae, the bug up the arse could be considered the default setting. Although, he did have a couple of moments recently. Daft to think he'd feel insecure over me."

"He obviously loves you, and you him. Must be nice. Can't say I've ever had the pleasure, or that I'd want it, but you do."

"I've liked him for a while. Now I don't want to think about not being at his side." It was strange to make that admission to Solivatus, a man who, for the majority of their interactions, had been high on the carnal spectrum.

"He's been calling you the Prince's Beloved, so it begs the question why the fuck

he's marrying someone else."

He hadn't expected Solivatus to know. He would need to play this down. "Since when did that become common knowledge?"

"It isn't, but I keep an ear out for my favourites, and if I hear a whisper, then I'll follow it through and find out as much as I can."

Gwil wouldn't have thought himself a favourite. He didn't want to talk about their Metra problem, but he also knew Solivatus wouldn't let it lie. "He doesn't have a choice, and it's not like I'm a dark earl and it would be some major slight that would put the fae at odds with the Vampire Council."

Solivatus sneered. "You're one of mine, and your sister is the Dark Duchess of Linden."

The issue was he had great connections, but he wasn't from the top drawer himself. "You're great, and so's Penelope, but I'm a hanger-on."

"I get what you mean, but leave it with me, I'm sure I can exert some influence. Might not be enough to stop a wedding, but I daresay you being the right sort in the future might help facilitate a divorce."

He didn't know what Solivatus had in mind, but he wasn't about to say no, as he had limited options to improve his own social standing in the vampire world. "We both hope Hyax's association with the Elementa will be temporary, I think there's something fucking dodgy going on."

"Your instincts are top-notch, Gwil. Trust them, and I'll do a bit of discreet digging myself."

Another offer of help he wouldn't refuse, but he didn't think he'd be revealing that titbit to Hyax just yet. Solivatus was helping Gwil, not the fae, and depending on what he discovered, Gwil would need to coach the narrative so Hyax didn't cause his balls to tingle in an unpleasant way, as vampire interference in fae business would be a problem, even if it hadn't been Solivatus.

"It might be nothing. Fae politics are worse than vampires'." He didn't believe it, he was pretty convinced Metra was a skeevy bastard up to no good, but he decided not to reveal Hyax's past with Metra or the games being played by Sital—that fucker was on his hit list too.

"Leave it with me." He patted Gwil's thigh and stood. "I like Hyax, he's good for you, but he needs to respect that we'll always have our own connection. Not that we'll act on anything, he needs to show you he trusts you. Just like how you've done over this Metra bollocks."

"I've no reason not to trust him."

"Metra is a beautiful man. Are you telling me Hyax isn't tempted to have his consummation cake and eat it?"

Solivatus didn't give Gwil a chance to rebuff him, he was already heading out. If there hadn't been a past between Hyax and Metra he'd have been more worried, but that was more about his own feelings of inferiority than anything Hyax had done. Hyax had countless offers and never acted on them, and Gwil had begun to embrace the smugness that came with being the chosen partner of a man like Hyax. He had a fucking proper love match, no political machination or magic bond had got them together, and he wasn't going to bollocks it up because he could be a mopey twat.

The subject of his thoughts arrived, and he couldn't remember a time when Hyax had looked so tired and rumpled. Gwil raced towards him. "Are you all right, you look

like you've been hit by a bus."

"Is that some quaint sort of human idiom as I wouldn't be standing if twenty tons of automotive metal had taken a swipe."

Hyax was fluent in British slang, so this was him being a grumpy arse. "How about being dragged through a hedge backwards instead?"

"Probably more fitting." He yawned and stretched. "I'm tired and being a shit. Sorry."

Gwil pulled him close and held him tight. "You need a cuddle."

Hyax nuzzled his hair. "When you're right, you're right."

"Have you made progress or is this a pit stop?"

"We're at a natural break, I'm going to grab some sleep. Once we have the test subject, we can make a few tweaks and we're done."

Gwil pulled back—Hyax must've been sent to collect him for the final push. "Where do you need me to go? Still in the cellars?"

Hyax snorted. "There was no fucking way I was going to let you be used as a plaything. Gwil, I wouldn't allow that."

"But you need a vampire."

"Yes, and we can get some insignificant bloodsucker out of a nightclub. They can pull someone off the street for all I care, but it's not going to be you."

Gwil got the sense he'd been the guinea pig in the original plan and Gwil was glad Hyax had stood up for him. "Thank you. And I suppose if it does something to me and I can't go undercover then that sets back the rescue in another way."

"I hadn't thought of it in those terms, I just put my foot down." He shrugged, and Gwil loved that Hyax was only thinking about him and not the case they were working. "You have the plan for the mission?"

"Yeah, Solivatus sent me more details, and I'll share those with you. Me and Robin are going in as boyfriends. Robin's a rich kid who's forgiven his cheating partner—me—for infecting him with a mutated Nosferatu virus."

"You'll have to act as if you're together."

"Nothing overt. I'm playing an arse stringing him along for his money and he's being oblivious. Pretty much as far from the real Robin as you can get. I'm also cheating on him with a guy called Mal, which is you, so because of that we'll be able to stay in touch."

Hyax knew he wouldn't be able to stop Gwil from doing this, but Gwil hoped the basis of the sting and being in contact meant he'd deal better with it. "I'll read the info. I know Robin won't overstep, but I do want to ensure you know how important you are to me." Hyax crowded up to him. "You're mine, Gwil."

He had to admit he loved this side of Hyax's possessiveness. "Then perhaps you'd better make sure that I have no delusions otherwise. Hyax's eyes flashed gold, his desire one of several things that could trigger the reaction.

He didn't think they were going to make it back to the bedroom and while Gwil had no issue of fucking over the back of a sofa or across a table, he knew Hyax was tired. He would need to recharge and Gwil thought that apart from a bit of magical

lubrication, he'd be happy to take the lead. With a gentle shove, he pushed Hyax and he landed on his back on the sofa. Gwil pulled his T-shirt off and stripped away his jeans, boxers and socks, leaving him naked, his cock standing proud.

“You riding?” Hyax asked with a grin, his voice breathy and his expression eager.

“You fae are lazy fuckers—someone has to take the lead. Wanna get me some lube? Gonna work myself open on my fingers, let you watch and then sink down on your cock.”

Hyax had various involuntary noises that drove Gwil wild, but the low growl accompanying him being turned on without being able to think straight was one of his favourites. A pot of the lube they used when Hyax didn't use magic to prep him would do. Today Gwil wanted things the old-fashioned way and Hyax wasn't one to argue as long as he got laid.

The lube was a special edition from the fae realm, it had a secret ingredient that added an extra level of zing and was slipperier than any he'd used before meeting Hyax. He was hard and desperate, needing to move this on. He straddled Hyax's legs, facing away from him so he would have the best view. For years most of his sexual relief had come from his own hand or toys, he'd not had a regular partner between Hyax and Oliver so Gwil knew how to please himself. This was about getting ready for Hyax, he wouldn't bring himself off, he would get his pleasure with Hyax buried deep inside.

Gwil coated a couple of fingers and began to work them into him, the burn minimal and the sensation heightened by the noises Hyax made as he watched. The stretch was good. He'd never considered himself to be on the exhibitionist side, but with Hyax as an audience, Gwil performed as well as the folks working the podiums at the Kitty-Fang-Club in Soho.

Gwil didn't need more, what he needed now was Hyax. He wasn't the most graceful of men but he managed to turn without falling off the sofa and scooted up so he was in the perfect position to ride Hyax.

"You're fucking glorious," Hyax panted as Gwil lowered himself onto his cock.

He took a moment to adjust once Hyax was fully inside. He loved the feeling of being filled, loved that it was him who was making Hyax feel so good. Hyax placed his hands on his hips and Gwil began to move up and down. The position was perfect as Hyax wrapped his hand around his cock, he knew he wouldn't last much longer. He sped up his movements, Hyax's cock angled just right, making him see stars as he nailed his prostate. Gwil cried out as Hyax milked him through his orgasm before coming inside him with a shout.

He collapsed forward, Hyax pulling him in for a deep and messy kiss. The next few days would be filled with uncertainty—he might not be able to speak to Hyax often and they would both be worried about the other. But at least for now he was safe, wrapped in Hyax's arms, and there was nowhere he would rather be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hyax had never understood vampires, Gwil was an anomaly and he was glad of it because he couldn't understand why a man who appeared to be intelligent and attractive on the surface would be happy to take part in their request after he'd been roofied and kidnapped.

"It's an honour to be able to help the Houses of Hewel and Cartwright." The vamp was almost panting with excitement. His grey eyes were shining and he sat upright in a chair, eager to help.

Ashley didn't seem surprised, but his father was head of the Invigilators and he was banging the Dark Earl of Crofton so he had insights Hyax would never have nor want. "Thank you, Daniel. Your support will, of course, be seen in a beneficial light and Mr Reynolds," Ashley pointed to Alex, "will ensure after we are done, that suitable remuneration will be arranged."

Hyax doubted Daniel would want money—he was dressed in designer clothes and his watch was easily a high five-figure model.

Alex stepped forwards. "As explained to you by our agent, we're conducting some valuable research, I assure you that the initial rounds have been completed successfully and we wanted a final run-through."

"I've no issue. Magical transformation I believe was the phrase used. I have a high pain threshold."

Hyax thought that it was a good job he could tolerate pain as the spell wasn't a glamour. It would physically change the shape and appearance of the subject, and Hyax would warn Gwil about the potential pain level he'd need to endure once he'd seen it in action on a vampire.

"Excellent. You've also consented to keeping everything confidential," Alex said. He had a device in his hand that could have been a normal tablet but it was giving off elf vibes so it must have been adapted in some way, which made Alex even more impressive, as tinkering with electronics wasn't easy.

"Yes, I know how to keep my mouth shut. I would not dishonour my sire."

"For my records, who is your sire?" Alex asked.

"Maurice Osbourne."

"One of the Duke of Pembroke's named successors?" Alex confirmed.

"Correct, I would be grateful if he could be informed of my service, even though I appreciate the details couldn't be shared."

Vampires were always looking for a way to curry favour and in this case, Hyax thought Daniel deserved it.

"The House of Langley is known for its Chiropteran tendencies, did you receive those when you were turned?" Alex asked.

"Yes, hence the high pain threshold. And why I'm not concerned about you lot testing a morphism spell on me."

Gwil couldn't turn into a bat, he'd mentioned it was because he'd not received that

gift from his sire, but Hyax hadn't realised it was a specific attribute associated with one House.

Ashley rubbed his chin. "Do we think Daniel's fledermaus ability an issue?"

Hyax didn't think so. "No, it would have been an issue if the other final recipient was so blessed and we hadn't tested, to me this is a worse-case position. A piece of luck Daniel was selected."

"Agreed," Alex said. He turned the device around to show a photo of someone Hyax didn't recognise. Fluffy blond hair, squared-jawed, with a wide forehead. "Gentleman, I generated this image, as you can see Daniel is very different. His face is long, with high cheekbones, and he has straight black hair, therefore a true test of our skill."

Daniel rocked the quintessential vampire vibe, pale and brooding, and clever enough to spot an opportunity when it presented itself, even if it were in an unorthodox manner.

"Let's get on with it." Ashley walked up to Daniel and handed him a strip of leather. "Bite down on that. I know you have a high pain tolerance but you're the first vampire we're testing so I'd not want to risk you biting through your tongue. Do you want the straps?"

Hyax hadn't noticed but the chair Daniel was in had restraints for both the arms and legs.

Daniel took the piece of leather. "No, if it's super bad I'll probably turn into a bat so no point tying me down as I'll fly out."

Alex conjured three hip flasks and handed one each to Ashley and Hyax. "This is a

carrier potion. I collected a sample of Daniel's blood to key it to him."

Hyax unscrewed the lid, it had a sweet aroma and he didn't linger on the ingredients, just knocked back the potion, gagging at the unexpected sourness. Hyax knew Alex would have liked to have dabbled with it further and had another two slightly different versions brewing but it should be sufficient for their needs now.

Alex gave instructions for where he wanted Ashley and Hyax to stand. Working with Alex and Ashley had been far easier than he'd expected, and it was a different type of experience from casting on his own. The spell combined their energy and the output was unique and gave him a deep satisfaction that would be difficult to explain to a non-magic user. His magic danced in a choreography he hadn't tried before, the technical pursuit as pleasing as the result.

Daniel writhed in his chair. The spell was working and the bones moving under his skin to reshape his face, shortening his hair and turning it blond. He keened loudly, and Hyax was impressed by how well he was tolerating the pain and the spell. It was working. Moments later Alex gave the order to stop. There sat Daniel, not that anyone would recognise him. He spat out the piece of leather and waggled his jaw from side to side.

"I guess it worked," Daniel said, stroking his chin. "Pity I can't use a mirror to see."

Alex snapped a picture with his device and showed Daniel. "You're a new man."

Daniel sniffed. "I preferred the old me. I assume you can turn me back?"

"Simple reversal. We'd like to monitor you for at least twenty-four hours to confirm the stability of the spell, then we'd return you to your original state."

Daniel nodded. "Fine by me."

They didn't have twenty-four hours to wait to try this on Gwil and Robin, but Hyax still wanted to double-check a couple of things before Daniel was dismissed. "I'd like to use a surface probe, nothing terrible."

"You can do whatever you like to me, Your Highness," Daniel said with a smirk.

Daniel had mentioned he was connected to the House of Langley so he wasn't a bottom feeder, Hyax should have realised he'd have recognised him. It was a vampire's second nature to flirt, Hyax wouldn't rise to it, as Daniel had taken Gwil's place, albeit unknowingly, and that would save him for now.

He placed his fingers on the side of Daniel's head, he could feel the interwoven layers, they weren't going away without intervention. He could also gauge whether the measures to hide their signatures had worked, and if he hadn't known what he was looking for, he wouldn't have spotted anything.

"Well?" Ashley asked as Hyax stepped back.

"Good, I think we're there."

Alex snapped his fingers and Karl appeared. "Mr Daniel Morten will require a room and monitoring as previously discussed. He's been very helpful so I'm sure we'll want to show him our best hospitality."

"I have everything ready," Karl said. He bowed to Daniel. "If you'd follow me, I'll show you to your suite."

Daniel was grinning as he was led away—he had good reason to as he would be well-rewarded.

"What's the next step?" Hyax asked. "Are you going to tinker with the potion?"

“A little, I’m going to add clementine and asphodel to the base. I think Daniel’s bat form helped but Robin and Gwil won’t have that. I would have liked more time to experiment and the chance to monitor Daniel and turn him back, but we don’t have that luxury. I’m pretty confident nothing will pop up afterwards but we’ll have the data for when Robin and Gwil return.”

Hyax was hit by a tang of salt as someone stepped out of the shadows. He had long black hair, not unattractive, but ordinary-looking, the sort of person he’d not have given a second glance to, but then there was a wash of magic and Hyax knew he was special.

“Jack!” Ashley called. “How long have you been watching? Sneaky bastard.”

This must be Jack Webb, he’d heard him mentioned several times, he was some legal whiz but there was a lot more to him than statutes and torts. Jack gave Ashley a brief hug—there was a definite history between them. “Not long. I think that spell will work on me, with a little tweak on the third-level resonance, but the potion will need a bit more.”

Alex stiffened, his expertise being challenged. “I would have thought the base would be fine.”

“Base, yes, but you’ll need more than my blood to key to me.” From his top pocket, he handed Alex what resembled a large green fish scale. “Add that, while hitting the side of the cauldron with a tuning fork. You’ll need the sonic frequency.”

For a second Hyax was confused but then he realised—Jack was part-siren, how much he wasn’t sure, but it wasn’t something he’d mentioned freely, his kind were treated pretty poorly by most other creatures. To have risen to his rank he must’ve been a gifted warlock, but also have high-level backers who could bury uncomfortable information.

Jack extended his hand in Hyax's direction. "Prince Hyax, I'm Jack Webb. A pleasure to meet you."

They shook hands. Jack's magic tasted like salted caramel and roast acorns with an underlying slate that was unique. Hyax would not underestimate this man, and he was happy he would be part of the infiltration. "I've heard a lot about you. I must say, now I've met you I'm more comfortable about Gwil going undercover."

"My intent is to bring Prince Simon home, but I won't lose sight of those helping me to do so. I'll look after the Prince's Beloved for you."

Alex clapped his hands together. "I suggest we get some rest for an hour or so. I'll monitor our new guest and, unless anything changes, we should be ready to put the plan in motion."

While part of Hyax was delighted they'd been able to make the spell work, it meant he'd now have to let Gwil go out into the world with a strange face and Robin Flint as a boyfriend. He trusted Gwil, and to some extent Robin. It wasn't that side of things that worried him but the fact they were going to be under the scrutiny of a suspected lich powerful enough to kidnap a fae prince from under the nose of his vampire husband and hide him from the world. If Gwil didn't come back alive his vengeance would know no bounds and everyone who'd been part of the plan would pay.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Just because he was dead didn't mean Gwil didn't need sleep, but the last few days had been gruelling mentally, and he knew it was far from over. Hyax was happy with the plan and the preparations, or as happy as he could be given Gwil going undercover, especially since they had no idea of how long he would be away.

They were all gathered in one of the outhouses at Crofton Hall waiting for Ashley to add the final ingredient to a potion he, Alex and Hyax would drink so they could combine their magic and cast a spell in order to change Gwil and Robin's appearance, before adapting the spell for Jack, who needed a tweaked version to account for his magic.

"Nearly there," Ashley said throwing a sprig of something woody into the cauldron.

Alex peered at the liquid. "Looks good, nice shimmer."

Hyax nodded, his boyfriend loved a good potion, pity he'd yet to persuade Hyax to turn his brewing skills to cooking him dinner. Three glasses had been placed onto a lab bench and Ashley decanted a measure into each and handed one to Alex and Hyax and kept the third for himself.

"Down in one and then we'll turn Gwil into a pox-infested vamp fuckboi and Robin into his cock slut," Ashley said, grinning.

"I'm pretty sure that wasn't the exact backstory," Gwil said.

Ashley snorted. “Gwil, I’m sure you can tell them what we’ve prepared, but you’re going to have to accept that your alter-ego is going to be thought of like that. It’s not real.”

Hyax rolled his eyes. “Let’s get on with this,” Hyax said. “Once we’ve cast it, Robin and Gwil need to get on their way. Then we can do Jack, and I’ll go with him to abduct the staff member he’ll replace who is meant to be starting a new job.”

Gwil hadn’t spoken much to Jack, but Hyax had spent a brief time with him earlier and he didn’t have an issue about of becoming a porter in the facility. He’d done all sorts of jobs for the Warlock Ruling Committee and the Vampire Council over the four-hundred-odd years he’d been alive.

“Things have moved on a great deal since I was party to a metamorphosis casting,” Jack said.

Gwil hadn’t a clue what he meant by that but he decided he didn’t need to as he had enough to be worrying about. Alex was first to knock back the potion. He didn’t appear to be overly bothered by the taste but both Ashley and Hyax gagged.

“Time to get this going.” Hyax stroked Gwil’s cheek. “I know you won’t be talked out of this, but you have to promise me you’ll be careful. I won’t be held responsible for my actions if anything happens to you.”

Gwil smiled. He was hopelessly smitten with Hyax, any fool could see it. “I’ll be fine, don’t worry. We just need to get selected and then find Simon. Easy-peasy.”

Although Hyax mentioned not being talked out of taking part, Solivatus had been pretty clear with his and Sebastian’s expectations, and though it might put him at odds with Hyax, Gwil would have never said no, even if he’d wanted to, the hierarchy of vampire society was too rigid for him to have done otherwise.

“I don’t think I’ve thanked you for agreeing to help,” Robin said. “I have considerable influence, and you should never worry about asking me to exert it in your favour.”

Gwil hadn’t expected Robin to have said anything in front of anyone else. “I’m happy to help.”

Alex patted one of a pair of chairs. “Time to take your seats. The potion’s done its job. Let’s get our Cinderellas ready for the ball.”

“I’ll go first—you’ll be unsurprised to hear this isn’t my first multi-person session,” Robin said, smirking. “Do I need a safe word?”

“Ha, ha.” Ashley snarked. “You’ll be safe from me doing anything to you other than throwing magic at you.”

Gwil watched with interest. Hyax had warned him the procedure wouldn’t be pain-free, and he’d been in two minds about whether he wanted to go first and not know what might hit him or get a clue and follow Robin. Like many things in his life, the decision was made for him.

Ashley, Alex and Hyax stood in a triangle around them. “This might tickle at first,” Alex warned. “Then it’s going to hurt like a bastard.”

“What?” Robin said.

“We’re reshaping your anatomy, Robin. It’s not a glamour, the wards would strip that away before you got a few feet, this is the only way.”

Gwil guessed Robin hadn’t made the connection. Ashley held out a strip of leather. “You might want to bite down on that. We added some numbing elements, but we

can't do too much as it'd be counterproductive."

"Is it likely to be on the level of when I was turned?" Robin asked.

"On a par but condensed into a shortened timespan," Alex explained. "We'll be done in minutes not days... this isn't permanent, and you'll have a similar reaction when it's reversed."

Robin bit down on the strip of leather. Initially, he seemed to be coping well. It was strange to watch how his features shifted under the influence of the spell. Then the mood changed and Robin keened in pain, rocking backwards and forwards, his jaw was clamped shut with the leather strip taking the brunt.

"Nearly there," Hyax called.

Robin slumped in the chair as the spell came to an end.

"I think the ginger hair is a nice touch," Ashley said. He grabbed Robin's chin and inspected their work.

Alex conjured a hand held mirror and handed it to Robin. "Spelled for vampire use."

Robin's face was now much squarer and his nose flat and broad. Gwil didn't think him bad-looking but not as attractive as his normal self. "I wouldn't recognise me, so it worked."

Then it was Gwil's turn. The casting started with a gentle tickle, three waves of magic circled his body, dancing across him almost playfully. He was used to Hyax's magic but the other two were different, and when all three waves combined, they were no longer gentle but like thousands of pinpricks and getting deeper and fiercer with every second. His pain threshold must've been lower than Robin's because he

couldn't hold in the howl as his bones and ligaments shifted and his skin stretched. It might have been seconds but it felt like an eternity, and as the magic dissipated, the relief flooded him and swept away the nausea from the pain with it.

They moved on to Jack, but Gwil was still too frazzled to pay much attention and a few minutes later a blond with a round face had replaced the black-haired man with a square jaw. Jack hadn't appeared to have suffered in the same way and Gwil wondered if it was his magic that had cushioned him from the pain.

Alex handed out new clothing. After changing into jeans, a T-shirt and a sweater that were certainly not the designer clothing Robin preferred, Ashley handed them their mobile phones which he had taken earlier. "These are now adapted to your new identity—your old information is still in there but hidden, but you can access it through the calculator app."

Gwil slipped his into a pocket. "Do you think they'll work in the facility?"

"I've developed a spell, I hope it will work, but it might not and I would limit the use of phones as much as possible—best kept for emergencies."

Gwil followed Robin and Alex outside where a sleek, black Mercedes was waiting. Hyax pulled Gwil to the side as Robin got into the car.

Hyax cupped his face. "You don't look right. I already miss your curls."

His face was sharper, his hair straight and lighter. "I'll be in touch when I can."

"I meant it when I said to be careful. There's not a force in this realm that will hold me back if something happens to you, understand?"

"I love you too."

Hyax kissed him, and Gwil clung to him for a moment, but he had to leave. He stepped away. Gwil didn't want to go, but he had to and he'd be counting the hours before he was back with Hyax. He would need to be careful, this wasn't a simple mission, and he could get in real trouble if he lost his concentration. With a final kiss, he got into the car.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They both knew their back story and were running through it a final time when they reached the rental place where they were going to pick up their car. The conversation had been all right, after an initial probing about Hyax's views on what was going on. Gwil hadn't wanted to be pressed more on the situation with Hyax, not knowing how much Robin knew about Metra, as Solivatus might have shared.

Robin had declared he wanted to drive the hire car, but once he'd seen it was a Fiat 500, he changed his mind. Gwil suspected he hadn't been in a car this small. According to the satnav, they were about twenty minutes away from where Dr Mettle would be holding his meeting. The journey took them down country lanes, which Gwil hated driving on, only his reflexes kicking in to save them from coming a cropper as the locals thought nothing of doing sixty miles an hour around a blind bend.

They pulled into the carpark of a village hall, the sort of place where a vicar with squeaky shoes would do Sunday school and a slimming club would weigh in on a Thursday.

"You ready to be William Carpenter?" Robin asked.

Gwil nodded, the first name was close enough to his own he shouldn't have an issue answering to it. "As I will be. So, how's it feel to be Robert Black?"

"Itchy. Due to the pox you gave me."

“I told you, I didn’t mean to... how was I to know that doing the nasty in a bath with spelled water would do that.” Gwil grinned. He liked Robin, he was less of a self-absorbed asshole than he’d expected. “I’m sorry, babe.”

Robin laughed. “It’s fine, sweetheart, we’ll get through this.”

Gwil was expecting there’d be a fair amount of interest, but he was surprised to see at least a hundred people waiting as they joined the back of the queue. While the spell holding their changed features in place would also mimic the infection, they would also need to come across as genuine.

Robin took hold of Gwil’s hand. “Don’t look so worried. I’m sure Dr Mettle will be able to help.”

Robin nodded in the direction of a man carrying a clipboard, he had a crop of curly black hair and eyes that shone in a shade that wasn’t human. The streetlights didn’t help but Gwil suspected there was a bit of wolf about him. He held a lump of quartz, the stone glowing with different intensity and colour as he walked past different people in the queue.

The quartz flashed red three times when next to them, and he stopped. “Gentlemen, can I ask you to answer a few questions? To see if you will benefit from being here?”

“Yeah, sure,” Gwil said, taking the lead, as Robin was to be his submissive and somewhat put-upon partner.

“Please follow me.”

They walked hand-in-hand around the side of the village hall. Gwil clocked the raised stage as they entered, and there were a hundred or so chairs with less than a dozen already filled. The young man directed them to sit at one of three school desks at the

back of the hall.

“My name is Nurse Helm, I’m one of Dr Mettle’s assistants this evening. Just to explain, the quartz is an early warning system, while we understand that everyone who comes is looking for help, not everyone will be able to be treated, or even if they are, it might not be treated during a single session.”

“Are you saying we won’t be treated?” Gwil asked, a fake concern as he was sure the quartz had outed them as potential marks.

“Not at all. I need some details and to discuss your options before any decisions are made. Can you give me some details, names, addresses, species, and conditions you’re here for? I assume you’re both here for treatment.”

“Yeah, both of us have an infection we’ve not been able to shift, spectral in nature that’s caused a different variant of Nosferatu disease,” Gwil said, sticking to the script. “I’m William Carpenter and this is my partner, Robert Black. We’re vampires, obviously, or we wouldn’t have what we have, and we live at 12a Aldershot Avenue, Clapham.”

“Have you already sought out medical assistance?”

“We’ve both seen doctors but there’s not much they can suggest, apart from signing up for an experimental treatment and we’ve not been selected.”

Nurse Helm’s eyes glowed orange—definitely wolf. “Did you get a reason why?”

“The doctor wasn’t convinced it was worth his while, and that the chances of success were too low, so he wanted to prioritise someone more likely to be cured.”

The backstory of their medical side had been crafted to pass muster with even a

specialist in the disease area but with extra tasty Easter eggs for a lich.

“Understandable, resources are limited these days,” Nurse Helm said.

“But he did say it might clear up on its own, but wasn’t sure as it’s a level four spectral infection... which I don’t really know what that means,” Robin said, sounding meek, nothing like the real Robin.

“Level four?”

“Yes.” Level four was a rare virus mutation producing specific proteins that would make a lich super happy.

“And you’re both infected?”

Gwil huffed, aiming for dismissive cheating asshole. “Yeah, look, I know what I’ve done, and Rob is willing to look past it and we are working through that, all right? He’s sticking by me, I don’t deserve it, but I’m going to do anything I can to win his trust back fully.”

Nurse Helm scribbled several notes on his clipboard. “I do think Dr Mettle will be able to help, but what you have is a persistent and difficult-to-treat infection. Let’s see, are you in the position to locate to a secure facility after the meeting if needs be?”

“We’ve a few things in an overnight bag, but we weren’t planning to be away for long,” Gwil said.

“Everything will be provided for you, and if you need a medical certificate for an employer Dr Mettle can arrange that.”

Robin shook his head. “We don’t have employment in that sense, I have a trust fund and support us both.”

Gwil was playing a real shitbag who lived with his rich boyfriend despite giving him a nasty pox, making Robert Black a prime candidate to be manipulated, and that trust fund would be an extra draw.

“Perfect. Take a seat, and the meeting will begin shortly.”

Gwil stood first and grabbed Robin by his upper arm—in their real life he’d have never dared manhandle Robin. “Come on.”

They took seats and waited. The hall filled quickly, several people being turned away before the doors were closed. The intel they had was minimal, and Gwil was on the fence regarding the way the crowd would react, although the sedate English countryside would unlikely bear witness to a US-style rally.

A side door opened. Dr Ralph Mettle took the stage with no pomp or ceremony. Gwil tried to be impartial in his assessment. He was reasonably attractive, with brown hair and a close-cut beard, but nothing that would make him stand out, which Gwil thought was the point.

“Friends, welcome, I am humbled that you have come to see me. My credentials speak for themselves, I don’t have to sell my wares like a street hawker. Now, knowing all our time is short and everyone knows why they are here, we don’t need a song or dance. So I will begin without further ado. I will walk amongst you, I will lay my hands on your head as I pass so you will feel my presence. I will heal you if I can.”

Gwil offered up a polite round of applause. Robin mimicked some of the audience members by sitting forwards, pretending to be eager, while Gwil slouched in his seat.

He noticed many of the other attendees were indifferent, as if they didn't care if they were there or not. Maybe they'd been brought in to fill seats to stop others taking them. Mettle would only have so much power, and a room of a hundred people would suck him dry.

Nurse Helm stood behind Mettle, along with two others who took the details of each person after Mettle had laid his hands upon them. Nothing appeared to happen to the first four, then Mettle's hand had barely rested on the next woman's head. She sprang up from her seat, threw her hands into the air, then stood stock still, before collapsing back into her chair. "I'm free. The spirit—it's gone," she cried.

Gwil would bet a lot of money she hadn't been exorcised. From his experience, malevolent spirits were difficult to evict and that seemed far too easy. She burst into tears and was helped out of the hall.

"It appears we have had our first real success, my friends," Mettle said, smiling.

Mettle moved. The next guy was one of the pre-screened attendees like they had been. Mettle's hand lingered on his patient's head before closing his eyes. "I can help you, but not here. Please go with my colleague, and we will see what we can do."

Nurse Helm led him away without questioning. The next few were once again uneventful, the crushing disappointment on the attendee's face too real to be an act.

Mettle worked his way around the room, a mix of nothing and then jubilation, the crowd excitable and Gwil thought Mettle an excellent showman.

Then it was their turn.

Nurse Helm whispered something in Mettle's ear before Mettle addressed them. "I think it best I do you two together."

The plan had been for them to be treated as a couple, and Gwil was relieved the ruse appeared to be working. Gwil braced himself as Mettle's hand descended on his head. A gentle trickle of exploratory magic weaved through him and then it was gone. Mettle looked perturbed, almost stricken, but there was a light in his eyes that made Gwil think they'd caught themselves a fishy.

"Oh my, gentlemen there is something greatly disturbing. I cannot fix it now, in fact, it may take some time, but I do believe that I can help you. If you want me to."

Gwil nodded. "We knew it wouldn't be easy, but it's why we're here."

"Then if you can put your trust in me, I will do everything in my power to ensure the best outcome. Go with Nurse Helm, he will give you instructions on what to do next."

Robin took hold of Gwil's hand. They followed Nurse Helm out of the main village hall and into one of the side storage rooms.

"We have accommodation for this evening and can transfer you to the residential facility in the morning," Nurse Helm explained. "The vehicles will be prepared with UV blockers, so completely safe for you to travel during the day, and when we reach the facility, you will be delivered directly into the building so you won't have to go outside."

"Looks like you've thought of everything," Gwil said, this was a slick operation where nothing would be left to chance. "We need to return our hire car."

"Get what you need out of the vehicle, and give me the keys, I'll arrange for its safe return first thing."

"Won't we get in trouble?" Robin asked. "With the rental company?"

“Do not worry, I will take care of it all. There is a minibus in the carpark, those who Dr Mettle thinks he can help at the facility will be transported to a nearby hotel for the night.”

“We’ll get our stuff,” Gwil said.

“Perfect. And I’ll call ahead to the hotel and make sure you have a double.”

They went back to the car. “You’d better let your dad know what happened,” Gwil said.

Robin sent a message to a contact called Dad , who was really Sebastian, and he showed Gwil what he had written. The reply was instantaneous.

Rob: We saw the doc, but he needs us to stay at his facility. Not so surprising. Will be in touch soon.

Dad: Little steps, son. I’m sure you’ll get everything you need at the doc’s place .

Their phones were programmed with their backstories and an electronic failsafe, ensuring nothing would trip them up, everything else hidden. Gwil had another fake contact called Mal who was Hyax, and he would contact him once they were at the hotel.

“You ready?” Robin asked him as they grabbed their bags.

“Yeah. This needs doing... there are some things that can’t be allowed to linger.”

They would spend the night at the hotel, then tomorrow they’d be at the facility, and they would need to locate Simon as soon as possible. Somehow Robin would have to convince him of who he really was and send word to Sebastian to get them out. Gwil

couldn't wait to get home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hyax tapped the surface of a scrying mirror to see where the mark was—they had been lucky that a new member of staff was due to start. Solivatus had the reach to identify them and where they lived. Jack, already wearing the other guy's face, crowded behind him, and stared over his shoulder.

“He's about to leave, we'd better go. Your portal or mine?”

Hyax laughed. “That sounds like a dodgy pick-up line, but let's use mine, you be ready to stun our friend.”

“Did I read correctly that he's part dryad?” Hyax asked.

“Yeah, no magic, but aware of the paranormal world. Sounds like he got a bit of a rubbish deal out of life.”

He opened a portal into the living room of the unsuspecting John Collins. The poor bloke shrieked, not prepared to be accosted by someone wearing his own face, and Jack silenced him before he had the chance to kick up a ruckus and alert the neighbours. “Are you going to contact Ashley?” Hyax asked.

“Yeah, Ashley will collect our friend, and leave him in stasis until I'm done borrowing his persona. The Warlock Ruling Committee will look after him and he'll think he'll have been in a coma, then we'll arrange for him to come into some sort of unexpected windfall.”

Hyax hadn't expected the guy to be compensated. "Very generous of you."

"We're not vampires, and the kidnap and sedation of an innocent man isn't something we'd usually condone, but there's too much at stake."

Jack levitated the sleeping form onto a sofa, in the corner of a small, not very nice flat. It was a bit odd to see the two of them together, knowing they weren't twins. Hyax thought this John bloke had got lucky—a long sleep and a lottery win and he'd be able to escape his mediocre existence without ever knowing why.

There was a plastic document wallet on the table and on closer inspection, Hyax saw it was the papers John would need for his first day all completed. "He's even done the forms for you."

Jack gave them a cursory check. "Looky here, there's a space for a preferred name. John's gonna be a Jack from now on, which will make things easier."

"Best get going," Hyax said.

Jack was going to use John's car to travel to the facility as John was a local living in the nearest town about five miles away. Hyax would catch a ride to the perimeter to avoid using his magic and see what he could glean from the outside. He wasn't expecting much, but he was doing that more to find alternative escape routes for Gwil than for rescuing Simon. John's car was parked in a designated bay at the back of the block of flats, and it was a box on wheels with an unhealthy amount of rust. It started first time, which was something, and Jack didn't seem bothered about driving it.

"Have you heard from Gwil?" Jack asked as they drove along.

"Not yet." Alex had sent word that Sebastian had got a text from Robin saying they'd been chosen. "We agreed he'd only contact me once he was somewhere safe. Since

Sebastian has let us know they've been selected, I guess I'll just have to be patient."

"I'm guessing they won't take them to the facility until the morning, it'll make it more disorientating to have them stay a night somewhere else then drive them around a bit first."

It made sense to Hyax. "Good job you're starting on the night shift then."

"Yeah, I'd have preferred the morning, I'm not nocturnal. I'll need to keep my wits about me, although I rarely sleep more than five hours in a go."

Hyax wondered if that was the influence of his siren side, but he wasn't rude enough to ask. "I suppose in your line of work you have to adapt to whatever's going on."

"You're the one with a vampire boyfriend, hasn't that meant you change things up?"

Hyax shrugged. "A little but the fae don't need the sleep humans do, even after they've been turned into bloodsuckers."

"Aww... cute pet name." Jack sniggered. Hyax liked him, he wasn't as serious as Ashley but he was as powerful.

They left the town and headed into the country where the roads were narrower and dark due to no streetlights. "Did Robin mention to you about how he saw Simon wearing a set of golden cuffs?" Hyax asked.

"Yeah, I haven't had much time to look into them, but I suspect they're what's containing Simon's magic."

"Agreed, they could be fae or elvish, the examples I know of are used to bind criminals during trials and then punishment."

“Trouble?” Jack asked.

“Pretty much. If they are something similar to the ones I’ve seen, you won’t be able to get them off easily without damaging Simon, and I imagine they are keyed to the wards or the lich, so you’ll need to factor that in.”

“I need to find a way to drop the wards so you and Ashley can portal in and contain the lich, but those cuffs might make things tricky.”

Hyax had been thinking the same. “I’ll keep researching from my side, but once you get the chance to check them over, let me know if you can, it might help me find a way to get them off or block them long enough that we can work.”

“Between you and me, I think we’re being a bit optimistic on how this might turn out,” Jack admitted.

“You don’t think the plan will work?”

“It’ll work up to a point. The vampires aren’t known for their patience and this has all been done in a rush. While I think the magic you’ve used for the transfiguration is sound, the rest of the plan is a bit less thought-out.”

“I didn’t want Gwil involved, but he was adamant he’d help,” Hyax said. “Do you think Gwil’s in danger?”

Jack sniffed. “I heard he’s been undercover before. I’m less concerned about him and more about Robin not being able to control himself when he sees Simon and giving the game away before we can act and the lich disappears with Simon.”

Hyax grimaced at the thought. “I wouldn’t like to be the one to tell Sebastian.”

“No, if things go south, take Gwil to the fae realm and stay there a while. Sebastian can be a bit indiscriminate in his handing out of punishments and while I don’t think he’d do anything to a fae prince, your Gwil is a vampire and fair game.”

“I’d remove Hewel’s head before he could lay a finger on Gwil.” His protective instincts were already heightened, even Sebastian Hewel would pay if Gwil was hurt.

“As much as I’d love to see you try, I’m not sure how successful you’d be so let’s not let it get to that.” Jack glanced over. “I’ll do my best to keep Gwil safe, of all the people dragged into this, he’s been the one with the least choice. He’s a good bloke and the way vampires work means he’s collateral to the likes of Sebastian, but I’m one to root for the underdog.”

“Thank you. I will be grateful.”

“I’m not looking to be in your debt, just making sure that if there’s any kickback over this, then it’s not the one who deserves it the least.”

The fae had dealings with the warlocks—fellow magic-users tended to stick together—but he’d not heard a warlock be as forthright as Jack. He was powerful enough not to be cowed and several hundred years old so had seen more things than most, and that gave Jack a different perspective. Hyax decided he would be someone to keep closer ties with in the future.

Jack pulled the car up in a layby, this was as close as Hyax would get. “Good luck,” he said, getting out of the car.

“You too. I’ll be in touch.”

The car pulled away and Hyax found himself alone in the middle of nowhere with only the moon for illumination. His night vision wasn’t great, nothing like Gwil’s but

he conjured a light orb and masked the signature as best he could. He squeezed through a gap in a gate and into a field, his magic tingling, ready to react. Copperpipe had spoken of a forgetmist and he was on the edge of a strong incantation. He would need to be careful so as not to get disorientated and end up sleeping in a ditch.

The land underfoot was uneven so he chose to manifest his wings despite them not usually being visible in this realm and a drain on his magic he hadn't accounted for. From what he could tell, there were no buildings in range, there was a copse of trees and rolling fields but no large manor house, the spellcraft to create an illusion on that level was superb. Hyax knew within half an hour of trying to track a perimeter that he couldn't pin down he was on a hiding to nothing without exposing himself by casting invasive spells, which would defeat the purpose.

He flew back towards the road, keeping behind the hedgerow as he put more distance between himself and where the edges of the forgetmist started, and when he was satisfied he was far enough away, he landed, hid his wings and opened a portal.

Stepping back into the living room of his and Gwil's house made him feel empty on two counts. First, his little adventure into the English countryside had been for nought, and second, the lack of Gwil's presence hit him like a brick. Knowing Gwil wouldn't be back here tonight, or for several days, sent a pang deep into Hyax's core.

He checked his phone—nothing so far—and made himself some green tea and raided the biscuit tin. If his fae friends were to see him now, sitting alone on a sofa in a nice but hardly palatial house, they'd have questioned his sanity. He could be surrounded by servants being waited on hand and foot, lavish food and the finest wines, but he was content to be sipping tea and mainlining custard creams. Gwil had fucking ruined him in all the best ways.

Determined not to brood, he worked his way through some case files.—Gwil made meticulous notes—and he set out his to-do list for the next few days to avoid himself

going crazy worrying about Gwil wearing someone else's face. His phone pinged and he saw the message.

Will: Am at a hotel with R. Let me know when good to talk, he's having a bath.

He would have trouble reconciling Gwil with his persona of cheating fuckboi, but it was better than him playing himself and having to drape across Robin Flint. He replied with his fake credentials.

Mal: Ready when you are. I've eaten all the good biscuits.

He answered as soon as it rang.

"You better have left me the Jaffa Cakes."

Hyax laughed. "Where are you hiding them? They weren't in the tin."

"I'm not telling you, you can go through a whole packet in minutes."

"What can I say? If humans do one thing right, it's the baked goods."

Gwil snorted. "It's good to hear your voice. How did seeing Jack off go?"

"Pretty uneventful." He decided not to tell Gwil about Jack's comments about how things could go wrong. "Once he'd dropped me off, I had a stomp around, but I couldn't get anything. How's the hotel?"

"Well, there's only one bed. So obviously me and Robin are going to succumb to our base desires."

Hyax laughed. "Are you now?"

“Yeah, so since we’re British, I’ve made us both a cup of tea. He’s having his in the bath.”

“You fucker. I miss you already.”

“I’m sure Midnight will keep you company. Robin says he doesn’t snore so he’s got one up on you.”

“Hard to snore when you don’t breathe. And I’ll have you know, your jiggly leg thing is far more annoying than my snoring.” He’d give anything to portal to Gwil and kiss him but they’d be discovered and ruin their chance of finding Simon. “Best not kick the big fang in your sleep.”

“Twat.” Gwil sounded so fond. “I’ll text when I can. We’ll be at the facility tomorrow, and we’ll see if my phone works.”

“Be careful, if you do something stupid, I’ll find a way to kill you again.”

“Love you too.” There was a muffled conversation, he couldn’t catch. “Sorry, Robin’s out of the bath. I better go.”

“Love you.”

The call dropped and Hyax felt bereft. He spotted Midnight asleep on the chair and without a second thought, scooped her up and plonked her on his lap. He didn’t expect her to stay but maybe she was missing Gwil too and settled down. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure he comes home.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gwil had managed to grab a few hours of sleep at the hotel, his nocturnal habits didn't help and sharing a bed with Robin had been uneventful. No random cuddling and Robin had insisted Gwil would not have to sleep on the floor. They boarded a minibus to be transported to the facility, Robin making it clear he had no intention of participating in small talk, and Gwil thought he probably never travelled on mass transit. Some of the other patients tried to speak to them, but Robin was not engaging. Gwil picked up the strain of making small talk with strangers where no one really wanted to know each other's business while Robin fell back into his persona of a submissive and somewhat meek partner as an excuse to ignore them.

Robin's mobile buzzed, he showed Gwil he had a text from Dad, not expected as they were meant to be low contact apart from emergencies.

Dad: Hope the treatment goes well. Maybe when you get back, we can get you a new cat, I know you were upset when the other one disappeared.

"I guess we should be searching for a new moggie," Robin said.

Gwil hummed, he hadn't a clue what Sebastian meant, and Robin didn't seem any more the wiser. "I guess so. Not sure we're best suited for pets."

"Let's see what happens, eh? We might find that a few days at the facility gives a new perspective on things."

He hated wasting time, and the minibus ride had taken a couple of hours, which was

longer than he'd expected. Copperpipe's intel suggested the facility should have been closer, so Gwil suspected Mettle had taken precautions to help hide its location by sending them on a circuitous route. Many of the roads were too narrow for two cars to pass, or little more than bridleways in some places, but somehow they didn't meet any oncoming traffic, which only made him more suspicious.

A high, solid brick wall came into view, as if rising out of nowhere and he couldn't see over it nor were there any gaps. They followed the perimeter wall until they reached two large black gates, and the minibus slowed but didn't halt completely. The gates opened to reveal a manor house built in the late Georgian style, but it appeared new, no weathering, its marble frontage almost gleaming.

The minibus didn't take the main approach but instead they were driven around the side to where there was a modern-looking extension that would've made a conservation officer weep in despair. They entered a garage where a team of people wearing white uniforms waited.

As the minibus came to a halt, Nurse Helm stood. "Please make your way off the bus, your luggage will be delivered to your rooms, and you will be reunited once the admission process is complete. If Rob and Will could disembark last, you'll be with me."

Gwil thought it would only be a matter of time before they were separated.

"I was worried we might be outside for a bit, we're not good in daylight," Robin said, another lie as Robin had told him he was not as susceptible to daylight as the average vampire.

"Your best interests are at the heart of everything we do here, Rob," Nurse Helm said. Gwil somehow managed to contain his snort of disbelief.

Gwil took hold of Robin's hand as they were led inside into the main house. He'd expected the white walls and grey floors, given this was supposed to be a hospital, and they entered a small reception room where another nurse waited. Her electric-blue eyes were off-putting along with her sharp features, and jet-black hair and eyes. "This is Nurse Teller, one of the senior staff, she's going to look after Rob, and I'll take care of Gwil."

"You're splitting us up?" Gwil asked, sounding surprised and a little aggrieved, play-acting for the benefit of the nurses.

"You are individuals, and medical care has to consider the individual not the couple. We don't have couples' quarters here, but you'll not be permanently separated."

Robin bit his bottom lip, looking coy and nothing like the real vampire who would happily rip out the throat of someone who crossed him. "I'd rather do this together."

"After the initial consultation, you'll be reunited."

"Fine," Gwil snapped. "Make sure you don't forget to tell them all the important stuff."

Gwil was escorted down the corridor leaving Robin with Nurse Teller. He was shown into a little room, with a chair and a desk but not much else, it didn't even have a window. Nurse Helm handed him a clipboard with a stack of papers. "Please fill these out. Dr Mettle will be with you as soon as he can, but he will see the patients in order of priority."

It was clear to Gwil that he wasn't near the top of the list, and he might be waiting a while. "I thought I'd already filled in the forms."

"I'm afraid they're endless when it comes to healthcare. I'll get you a coffee while

you wait.”

Three coffees and many forms later and Gwil was ready to start a commotion—he was supposed to be an asshole so he could be excused. He’d had blood taken and pissed into a paper cup, had his cheek swabbed, and now he wanted a kip. He was about to leave the room and shout down the corridor when Dr Mettle entered. “Apologies for the delay, Mr Carpenter.”

They shook hands and Mettle sat down, he looked a little rough around the edges. “No worries and call me Will. Is Rob all right?”

“Mr Black has been triaged and should be in his room.”

“Right.”

“I’ve got the results of some bloodwork.” Mettle consulted a clipboard. “And they confirm you have a mutated version of Nosferatu virus, where the virus particles have become spectrally enhanced.”

“We knew that already.”

Mettle nodded. “I have also spoken to Mr Black about how that happened, but I’d like to get your version of the events.”

There was nothing accusatory in his tone, but he would bet Robin had been treated more as a victim and less matter-of-factly.

“I picked up the virus from another partner. I know that puts me in a bad light, but I’m working through my issues, and Rob has chosen to forgive me.”

Mettle flicked through the pages. “You were taking cocaine at the time? Are you still

using?”

“I used to dabble occasionally, but it turned me into a wanker, so I’ve stopped.”

“Good, and you infected Mr Black?”

“Yeah, a friend of mine told me about a spell that makes sex even better, so I asked Rob to try, and I reckon he picked it up then. We’re usually pretty careful.”

Robin’s story was he been had pressurised into trying dark sex magic by his manipulative boyfriend, but Gwil was to be more blasé, and Mettle didn’t seem to be bothered by his patient being a prize shit.

“I’m not one to judge what goes on between consenting adults. You didn’t deliberately infect your partner, and his variant of the virus is a little different to yours.”

“Do you think you can help me? I mean us.” Another deliberate slip.

“Yes, I think so. The differences mean treating you independently.”

“But we were infected by the same spell at the same time, doesn’t that alter how you would treat us?”

“Your clinical experience is different, so there is no one-stop-shop and it will have an iterative process.”

Gwil hated medical jargon. Mettle would think him too stupid to understand and that would work to their benefit. “I suppose that makes sense. I gathered from the paperwork, we wouldn’t be housed together. Rob might not like that much.” Robin would pretend he wanted them to be together, but it didn’t matter either way.

“We don’t have facilities for couples, there is nothing to stop you from visiting each other but you must sleep apart.”

“Fair enough. To be honest, Rob can get a bit clingy. We could probably do with the space.”

Mettle nodded. “I don’t think it would hurt. This is a safe facility, Will. Take the time you need to recover. We’ll start your treatment plan once the rest of your tests are complete, and I’ll call Nurse Helm to escort you to your room.”

Gwil thought it would be in Mettle’s interests to split them up, Robin’s persona was a rich, easy-to-manipulate individual, whose disease and money would be useful to a lich. If they were able to move around separately then they could cover more ground and the sooner they found Simon the better.

He was shown to a room that was nothing special. He’d bet every room was decked out the same, designed to maintain anonymity and prevent the patients from getting over-excited. After a little persuasion, he’d been able to get directions to Robin’s room, and he checked he had no restrictions in where he could go in the facility apart from staff-only areas.

Once the nurse had finished going through his check-in, he changed into the head-to-toe grey items of clothing that had been left for him and set off to find his pretend boyfriend. The corridors of the main house were as sterile as the wing he’d first experienced, not gelling with his idea of what the vibe of a Georgian manor should be. There were several other patients in the corridors, as well as staff members. He made his way to Robin’s room, the layout of the house uniform and easy to follow—another reason he doubted the house was really of the period.

He knocked on the door, waiting for Robin to answer, having assumed Robin would be there given how long it had taken for him to be triaged and admitted. The door

cracked open, and recognising Gwil, Robin beckoned him in.

“Hello, sweetheart, how you feeling?” Gwil said with a smirk.

“Emotionally fragile, darling, but Dr Mettle has vowed to do his best to make everything better. It took every fibre of my self-control not to punch the bastard.”

“He was pretty much matter-of-fact and professional with me, but I’m not a walking bank vault.” He sat on a chair while Robin took the bed. “He also took ages to get to me, I’m way down his interest list, meaning I guess I can wander around and do what the fuck I want.”

“He’s a clever bastard, clearly out to divide and conquer and he’s managed to get away with not being discovered for a long time.”

If Mettle hadn’t taken Simon, Gwil thought he could have kept his operation going under the radar for years, but the chance of getting his hands on a vampire-fae must have been too great an opportunity to pass up. “Have you been able to confirm if Simon is here?”

“Yes.” Robin smiled, it was the first genuine one Gwil had seen. “He’s here and I managed to talk to him. Not for long, but we’re meeting tomorrow, ostensibly for him to show me the grounds.”

“Least you know he’s here, safe for now, and we haven’t infiltrated the place for no reason.”

“Simon is not the only one here, do you remember Sebastian mentioned a cat in his text message?”

He did, he’d thought it a reference to something Robin had knowledge of but hadn’t

probed as he wasn't going to be told everything. "Yeah."

"Catlin Redbourn is the cat. She's Ben's sired sister, and has been missing for several months after an incident at Crofton Hall."

He'd heard something along those lines. "I guess we'll be bringing her home too. I doubt Sebastian would take too kindly to leaving one of his House behind."

"Ben would never forgive me either," Robin said. "We've no idea how she ended up here, but we can worry about that once she's home."

Gwil was all for helping Catlin—another positive mark for him in Sebastian's book wouldn't hurt in the slightest. "Looks like we've got a buy one, get one free. Makes having the wrong face even more worthwhile."

Robin laughed. "I won't miss these teeth, but I'll sleep well tonight. I couldn't bring myself to believe Simon was here until I saw him. Now we'll need to ensure we know the grounds and house well enough to move as soon as we have the opportunity."

Gwil already had a plan. "We've a couple of hours of daylight left, I intend to get a couple of hours sleep and then have nose around the ground once it gets dark. My tolerance for daylight isn't great, and being nocturnal means there should be no reason for them to stop me."

"Do the house as well. You're meant to be a cocky fucker. I'm sure wandering out-of-bounds is the sort of thing Will Carpenter would do."

"Absolutely."

He left Robin. He needed some sleep then he'd crawl over this place as much as he

could get away with—the faster he did so the sooner he could go home. At least they now knew Simon was here, next steps were to make sure they could get him home in one piece.

CHAPTER TWENTY

G wil tapped out a text to Hyax. Hyax had mentioned going to see his mother, and Gwil knew that he would have to face the music once the case was over.

Will: How was your day? How was your mum?

He waited for a reply, and it seemed forever before his phone buzzed.

Mal: Her usual self. When you finally dump R you'll have to meet her. I'm sure she'll have a lot to say.

He groaned, he didn't want to be talked at by Queen Talia but he doubted he'd be able to escape. The new twist with her suspicions of the Elementa meant he might have other ways of ingratiating himself, and maybe that was what she wanted.

The door opened and Jack let himself into Gwil's room, carrying a stack of towels. "How's your day been?"

He'd managed to do a fair bit of reconnaissance. As suspected, the staff didn't seem too bothered about him. "I scoped out some of the grounds, nothing obvious, and none of the patients gave me any reason to think they weren't here for anything other than to be treated. I checked those places you thought might work to open a portal but those were on the grounds, I'm not sure about the ones in the house yet. I'm intending to get to those tonight, but I've a good grasp of the layout of the house in general."

"The more info we can collect the better, the smallest detail might be key."

Gwil pointed to the bundle Jack was carrying. “You just here to drop off my towels?”

Jack laughed. “I thought Robin would be here looking for you. I wanted to get the lowdown on what he found out after his stroll with Simon.”

As if Jack’s words had summoned him, Robin arrived.

“The wanderer returns,” Jack drawled. “I take it you’ve managed to speak to Simon.”

Robin looked stricken, his agitation beyond anything Gwil had seen up until now. “Yes, we always planned to get him out of here as soon as possible but Mettle is working on a new treatment, and Simon thinks he’s planning to wipe his memory... no doubt irrevocably. For now, he starting to recall things, but until we get those cuffs off, we’re going to have issues.”

“No surprise there, we’re going to probably have to extract Simon and keep him in some sort of protective shield until we can remove them,” Jack said.

Hyax had explained that they thought the golden cuffs were key to how they were keeping him prisoner and, if Hyax’s suspicions were confirmed, they would either have to find a way to remove them before they left or they needed to make sure they couldn’t be used to get him back.

“We have a couple of potential locations where we can set up the portal,” Gwil said. “But we’ll have minutes before we’re caught, Jack might not even have time to cast the protection charms.”

Gwil knew he didn’t sound keen about travelling by portal and Robin must’ve picked up on his unease, despite some of the precautions they would take, Jack had a theory that his magic being different to the fae’s might make things easier.

“You said they could cause issues, what we looking at?” Robin asked.

Gwil thought Robin should be made aware of what he could be facing, as his vampire physiology would not make portal transport easy. “I felt like I was being boiled alive when I used a fae portal, but Jack thinks his magic might not be as brutal.”

“I’ve been travelling by portal under the casting James and Simon did, so I might have some residual protection,” Robin said, unfazed.

Gwil wished he had Robin’s confidence.

Jack nodded. “Possibly, but Gwil and Catlin won’t have that. We’ll have healers and blood stocks on hand based on how Gwil was affected previously. The trouble is, we will just have to take the opportunity as soon as we can, once the portal is open, they’ll know and we will have to leave.”

“Is there an option that Gwil leaves with Catlin using an alternative exit strategy?” Robin asked. “I don’t think Mettle cares about her in the same way.”

“I don’t know, it depends on the cuff she’s wearing,” Jack said. “If I can get a closer look and determine if it’s the same as Simon’s, then we can make a better evaluation. Potentially we could magic bomb the ward long enough for them to step through the barrier if her cuff won’t cause an issue.”

Gwil shook his head. They would need to be sensible. “It’s not worth the risk, the portal will get us away from the facility. Us stepping outside of the wards means we have to find a way back by road.”

He didn’t see a way of doing that without being caught unless there was a car left in a designated place, but they’d have to get to it and hope it hadn’t been nicked in the interim. It wasn’t viable as far as he was concerned.

“True.” Jack huffed. “Portals it is. I’m going to do a scout of a different area after the second dinner service when I have my break.”

Gwil had known it was a possibility they would have to do an emergency portal extraction. He had hoped it wouldn’t come to it, but at least if he did end up toasted he’d then be in the hands of several healers and have access to the best blood stocks, rather than the generic packs he used while waiting out the cycles of extreme sweats and chills to abate when at home.

“Picking up any sense people are getting suspicious?” Robin asked.

Jack shook his head. “No, I gathered they get through lots of orderlies so as long as I don’t do anything too odd, I’m pretty much background furniture, talking to the other staff members, the hours are long and the pay’s shit. I imagine part of the leaving package is a bit of memory manipulation.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Robin asked.

“I’ve found a couple of areas that would be possible locations, if you can, I suggest getting a look at them properly. We shouldn’t waste any time in being able to get there so you knowing the access would be beneficial.”

Jack sketched out the back of the house on a piece of paper towel. “Memorise this and then flush it down the toilet. No one can accidentally find it then.”

“We can’t risk being found skulking about,” Gwil said, feeling he had to get this through to Robin, who could break rank and do something stupid. It was one thing to strut about in the areas they were allowed, being out of bounds too obviously would put them under the scrutiny they didn’t want. “Not sure how we’d justify us being caught mooching around down there.”

“You two are meant to be boyfriends, you’re being kept apart. Me finding Robin in here with you is perfect as I can be seen escorting him away, so now you have an excuse if caught.”

“It’ll make me feel like I’m useful,” Robin said, Gwil sensing he was feeling a bit of a spare part at the moment. “I spoke to Simon and he’s insisting we bring Catlin with us, so she needs to be informed of the plan.”

“She’s aware,” Jack said, he must have had the chance to talk to Catlin. Him being brought in as a member of staff had been an excellent piece of strategy. “The hardest part will be the coordination. I have access to the appointment register with the doctors. If we can be ready the day after tomorrow, Dr Mettle has a clinic and I can see if Simon is one of the four down for a slot.”

“We want to act before then, if he’s been successful in his research then he could be aiming to administer it to Simon,” Robin insisted.

Jack scowled. “I had thought we’d plan for leaving after his appointment. As far as I can tell he’s not scheduled for anything earlier.”

“I don’t think we can wait.”

“Fine. Give me until you wake up tomorrow. I’ll have a plan and a timeline... I’ll contact the relevant people and see if it’s possible.”

“It has to be.”

Jack squeezed his shoulder. “I can’t pretend I know what you’re going through, I’ve never had anyone mean as much to me as he does to you, but if we go too quickly, we could ruin everything. Bringing Simon home is one side of the story, we also need to put a stop to what the lich is doing. None of his dealings have been sanctioned. He’s

effectively been taking people prisoner and experimenting on them for who knows how long. We have to stop it.”

“If you say so. Do you know how to kill a lich?”

“The plan is when we go through the portal Hyax and Ashley will come the other way, bind him and bring him to Crofton Hall. He should have his phylactery on him, and we need to destroy it. Then we can kill him.”

“His what?” Robin asked, and Gwil was also in the dark.

“It’s a protective amulet that links him back to this realm. We can in theory kill him, but if we don’t destroy the amulet that encases his anchoring spells, then he can come back, and start again and we won’t know where.”

Gwil knew they would have to prevent that at all costs. If the lich were to return, it wouldn’t just be Simon in danger, and Gwil didn’t think the Vampire Council would be happy with that outcome.

“Do we know what it looks like?” Robin asked.

Jack shook his head. “Not exactly, it’s likely to be some sort of jewellery that he can keep on him at all times. I haven’t seen anything obvious, so I suspect it’s on a chain under his clothes.”

“Should I tell Simon? I haven’t said anything about Mettle being a lich, just that he’s the one who is behind him being here.”

“I don’t think it would help. Simon’s memory is already fragmented, it might be better to explain it as an after-effect rather than give him something else he’s supposed to be keeping secret,” Jack said.

“But he might have seen the amulet,” Gwil said, he thought it likely if it had been used on him, but he might not have to clear a memory. “If we know where it is, surely that’s an advantage?”

“He would have used the amulet for certain spells, so Simon might have seen it, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“I don’t think I should ask him. Let’s assume Mettle has it on him.”

“Agreed.” Jack headed to the door. “Now, get out of here. And I’ll try and find a way for us to talk tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hyax should have expected the invite, but he was still surprised by the gall of Metra to ask for a meeting to speak and move things forward as adults. The insinuation that Hyax might act up for no reason was unspoken but clear, and he would not let Metra get the upper hand. He couldn't refuse, as that would prove Metra right, however, he would pick the time and place and ensure this was as swift and non-combative as he could make it.

He wouldn't trouble Gwil over this—he was deep undercover and the last thing Hyax wanted was to make him lose concentration. He could deal with Metra, especially with a tenement stone sitting in the inside pocket of his jacket ready for use. Which was why he'd chosen an Indian restaurant in human Old Street, London—somewhere Metra wouldn't want to linger, and where no one would believe two fae princes would meet to talk. He was sipping on a mango lassi when Metra arrived. He'd been here early, booking the table and telling Metra a later time so he could sit where he wanted, order and show Metra he was in charge.

“Charming place,” Metra said, without a hint of a sneer. “I love Indian food.”

“I've ordered a selection. You've the time I take to eat my fill to talk, I suggest you use it wisely.”

“You've great taste, I'm sure you've selected the best they have to offer, and I'm willing to try anything once.”

A plate of appetisers was delivered alongside several main dishes and rice.

Hyax speared a chicken pakora. “You contacted me, Metra. What is it you want?”

“We’re going to be married, I know you don’t want to, and I thought if we could spend some time together it would make things easier. I didn’t push for this either, but my parents were adamant, and I am in no position to refuse.”

Metra wouldn’t go against his parents—that much was true. “So, we have a couple of nice chats, I forget what you’re really like and we skip hand-in-hand to the celebrant and proclaim our unending devotion?”

“I was hoping you could at least move to indifference from outright contempt.”

“I’m here, I’ve not thrown my drink in your face, and I’m willing to listen, I think you’re getting more than you deserve. You know I have Gwil, you knew I wanted to marry him, and yet here we are about to be declared betrothed.”

Metra was arrogant, self-serving and in reality, if he hadn’t been so good in bed, they wouldn’t have lasted past the first assignation.

“It is our duty, I am doing so because my parents insisted, they have made it clear that our tribe’s future is brighter if we make stronger links, and fully leave behind the shadows of the past. We should do the same.”

“We have not been at war for over a decade, we are at peace, so I don’t see the need to suddenly cement a deeper relationship.”

Metra pulled apart an onion bhaji and Hyax helped himself to portions of lamb balti, aloo chat and rice. “My family are looking to the future, we want to ensure there is no chance of another war and a marriage between our peoples is an age-old way of doing so. We aren’t a love match, and I know our past situation means this is difficult for you, but it isn’t coming from a place of retribution or hate.”

“But why the Tasharick tribe? You can make alliances with the other tribes.”

“We have those already—it is only your tribe we have yet to forge a partnership with. And I am the only unmarried child of my parents.”

“You do not have to marry me, though.”

Metra sighed. “Don’t be so naïve, you know why your mother agreed to offer your hand in marriage. No matter how much you love him, Gwil is not husband material for a prince in the eyes of most people.”

“I don’t give a fuck, I will not give him up.” He would stop this before Metra tried to suggest otherwise.

“He is the Prince’s Beloved, I accept that, and so do our parents. All I ask of you is extend me some common courtesy in public, and we can put on a good show.”

“I will be doing what I have to. That does not include being nice to you. I merely have to tolerate you, and nothing more.”

Metra stiffened. “Have you forgotten the wedding night?”

“No, I haven’t.” Something else he wouldn’t discuss. “Have you forgotten your inability not to be an asshole?”

Metra, for his credit, didn’t react, which was a pity because Hyax was looking for a reason to punch him. “Hyax, what do I need to do to move us past this place of animosity so we can make our arrangement work?”

Hyax wiped his mouth on the napkin and threw it onto the table. If Metra truly wanted to set things straight, then there was something he could do. “You can start

with coming clean. Stop pretending Sitial was just a friend, and that he's still just a friend. We were never going to be more to each other than we were, and I got caught up in the idea of a love match that wasn't real. Now I have Gwil, I understand what love is. If you can do that, perhaps, we can get to a point where I can be cordial, but it'll never be more."

If Metra could stop lying, and admit what he did was wrong, then Hyax could see himself not loathing the fucker, but he would never trust him. It was unlikely, and even if he did admit wrongdoing, it didn't help explain the reasons the Elementa had pushed for the marriage.

Metra pushed back his chair and stood. "I need to go."

"I'm sure I'll be hearing from you soon. Remember, Metra, if you want me to trust you, then you have to give me a reason to."

Metra left, and Hyax congratulated himself on getting through the meal without lobbing anything at Metra's head. He wasn't sure if Metra would come clean, but if he did, Hyax could pretend to be magnanimous and call a truce, and a more civil relationship might have Metra letting his guard down.

He looked around for a waiter in order to settle his bill, but before he got the chance, someone dropped into the chair opposite. There were many people Hyax didn't want to talk to and Solivatus was pretty close to the top of the list.

"I thought it was you, but then I said to myself, why is Hyax having dinner with another man when his own Prince's Beloved is off putting his neck on the line to help mutual friends."

Gwil had told him Solivatus had talked to him while he'd been playing in the cellar. "I believe you already know."

“I do indeed, and I must say I ain’t particularly happy.”

“You and me both.” He wouldn’t be bullied by Solivatus. “I don’t have any choice.”

“But Gwil does, and I’m still on the fence on whether I should exert my influence in order for him to extract himself out of this mess.”

This had to be some sort of test and Hyax wasn’t about to give Solivatus the satisfaction of failing it. “Don’t you think I already offered him an out? I love him, I don’t want to see him hurt. But Gwil’s a stubborn bastard and he loves me, he refused to abandon me, and I’m more grateful than I can articulate with words.”

“He’s loyal, I’ll give him that. Despite my reservations, he seems to be thriving, which must be in part due to whatever you kids do for fun.”

“Are you giving us your blessing?” Hyax couldn’t help but be incredulous. “Not that I care either way.”

“You’ve been acting like a dick over me, so I think it would be best if we buried the hatchet. I have no intention of fucking Gwil unless you dump him, and then I’ll console him in my usual way.”

“Gwil isn’t interested in having you fuck him either. Just so we’re clear, I’ve no intention of dumping him.”

Solivatus smirked. “Good, but your connection is far better than you’ll get out of the pretty-boy fae. I bet you’ve enjoyed the taste of the dark side.”

He knew Solivatus was referring to the ways he could use his magic through Gwil, but others would say him dating Gwil was stepping into the shadows. “I enjoy everything I do with Gwil. Which is why there is no reason for you to be concerned

about Metra.”

“You will have a wedding night, even arranged marriages need to be consummated.”

“At least in these modern times, no one will insist on watching.”

He saw a flash of fang as Solivatus sneered. “I’m the type who is happy to share my lovers, Gwil isn’t, and we’re heading back to where I came in and being concerned for his happiness.”

He wondered how far Solivatus would take this, he couldn’t do anything at the moment. Hyax still had a role to play in the extraction of Prince Simon, but afterwards was a different matter. “And I told you there is no need to be. I will not need to consummate my relationship with Metra.”

Solivatus gave him a considered look. “Now that is a specific way to put it. Hypothetically speaking, because two good little princes whose families were at war would never do such a thing, but say they had a fling when they were young and were thrown together again, would the pre-marital shagging count?”

“I would imagine so, but then I wouldn’t be able to comment.”

Solivatus laughed. “I do like you, Hyax. It explains a few things I’ve been hearing.”

“Meaning?”

“Don’t be pissed off at Gwil, but I did offer to have a little mooch about.”

Gwil wouldn’t have been able to tell Solivatus no, but he should have mentioned his conversation with his sire. “Do I want to know in what direction your mooching took you?”

“I’m still digging, but you might be surprised to hear that the royal treasury of the Elementa tribe had been running rather low.”

He’d never considered something as base as mere money being behind the move to marry him to Metra. There’d been no talk of either side providing a dowry. “How low are we talking?”

“It’s not the level that’s concerning but rather that there’s no longer a problem. Which suggests to me that whatever deal they struck has now paid out.”

“A deal such as getting one of their princes married off?”

Solivatus shrugged. “If I was a betting man, I would put a large stake on there being an even bigger payment planned for when the nuptials are completed.”

“But why would they be accepting money for Metra to marry me, and who would be able to do so?”

“Your mum’s not exactly a fan of your dating habits, perhaps she set it up?” Solivatus was taking the piss and Hyax knew it. “But that doesn’t fit her style. Besides, it wouldn’t explain why they had no money to start with.”

“It must be recent because it wasn’t that long ago when Queen Vaness was touting the line that I wouldn’t be suitable for her son, given my associations.” If Hyax was to go poking around it might cause more troubles, but the vampires would have a cause to on paper. Hyax was about to upset one of their own by marrying Metra. “If you wouldn’t be averse to the idea, perhaps you could continue to keep an eye open for reasons why.”

“I could do that. For Gwil. As a not-a-wedding present.”

“I guess it’s difficult to get a card that says ‘sorry the man you love is marrying someone else’.”

“Do you think there’s a market? I could start a range.” Solivatus stood, grabbing a leftover poppadom as he did. “Joking aside. I get the political pressure you’re under, but if you hurt Gwil, I will pull off your wings and drain you dry.”

Solivatus left and Hyax was in no doubt that his words weren’t a threat but a promise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gwil didn't like waiting. He had plenty of work to be getting on with once he was home, and he was missing Hyax something fierce. No amount of suggestive text messages and flirty calls could fill the void left by not being able to hold him in his arms and he knew Hyax would feel the same.

He threw the newspaper he was reading to one side and took out his phone to reply to Hyax's last text, which had been a veiled reference to what he'd like to do with his tongue. His phone beeped with an incoming message:

Jack: Another orderly has been called to collect Simon. We need to act. Robin's getting Catlin. Make your way to the lower ground floor outside the linen supply room. Let your friend know. We need to get Simon out now.

Gwil had suspected it would only be a matter of time before Mettle made a move to ensure Simon didn't leave. He was a rechargeable magical battery and there was no way a lich would want to lose him. Robin would be going spare, he wasn't the most level-headed when it came to Simon. If Simon had been taken to the lower floor, there were a series of treatment rooms there and they had a small advantage as Gwil had been able to get a recce when he'd accidentally followed a nurse into the area before being chased out.

Gwil: Will do. Coming.

He was prepared for this to be an extraction and he hadn't brought anything with him to the facility that couldn't be replaced if they had to leave in a hurry, but they hadn't

yet mapped out all their potential exits so he would need to think on his feet. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to act on a half-arsed plan, but at least this time he wasn't on his own and Jack was someone he'd want on his side.

He tapped out a message to Hyax.

Gwil: Could be home sooner than we thought. Might need to be ready to leave Rob on short notice. Can you get me some things together?

The text needed to be vague enough in case they were caught and needed to remain, but also provide the information to give Hyax time to react and have the blood stocks he'd need. He didn't have much mobile phone coverage, it was spotty inside and he was grateful he'd been able to be in contact with Hyax at all. But it also meant he wouldn't know whether it had got through and they might be on their own.

Gwil left his room—he needed not to look obvious and was lucky the corridors were quiet. Since it was late and most of the residents weren't nocturnal it was less of a risk but he still needed to be careful. Robin was collecting Catlin and she was down a different corridor. He'd not spoken to her much. Robin was a link to her sired brother but Gwil didn't have a way to earn her trust so had left it to Robin, given he wouldn't be shepherding her out on his own. He took the stairs down to the ground level and peered around the door to one of the main hallways. He would need to cross this intersection and then head to the back of the house. There were cameras, but from what they'd been able to ascertain not all were monitored to the same extent though being the sole one out and about could lead to him attracting attention.

Jack, Robin and Catlin were waiting by the storage closet as he arrived. They were in front of a set of doors with keypad access, and Gwil assumed that was where Simon was and it was the place he'd been able to get a glimpse into.

“We ready?” Gwil asked.

“Not really,” Catlin said, for some reason, she was brandishing a knitting needle like a weapon. “All seems like a shot in the dark.”

“I can tell you that through the door is a lobby, with several other smaller rooms, I followed a nurse in and was chased off, but it was enough,” Gwil explained.

“Right, I’ll pick the lock,” Jack said. “We get in fast and check the rooms. Grab Simon and get out, I’ll try to provide cover, but I need to manage the portal so your best bet is not to get hit.”

“Were you able to get word to Hyax?” Gwil asked, his fear the portal would be their option was fast becoming the reality and fae portals were not good for him, hopefully Jack’s warlock ones weren’t so bad. “To have supplies on hand?”

“Aren’t they meant to be coming through to capture Mettle?” Robin said. “Otherwise, we could be back to square one.”

The retrieval plan they’d devised wasn’t meant to have been done on the fly. Hyax, Alex and Ashley were meant to come through to grab Mettle to stop him from escaping. An emergency portal would mean they were on their own and would have to make the best of it even if it meant the vampires getting a little crispy around the edges.

“I couldn’t get enough signal to call,” Jack said. “I’ve sent a message but the reception’s patchy. But we don’t have time to argue about this. We’ll figure something out.”

“What did you mean by supplies?” Catlin sounded worried

“The fae portals can be a bit rough on vampires. I’ve assumed a similar issue for those created by warlocks,” Gwil explained, there was no point in sugar-coating

things. “The blood supplies help with the immediate aftermath.”

“I take it there’s not an alternative?” she asked.

“You could stay here,” Robin snapped. “Look, we need to move, if nothing else we don’t want to get caught in this corridor.”

Jack raced over to the door and his fingers danced over the keypad, a slight purple haze the visible sign of his magic. “Nearly there. Triple layer encryption is impressive, but people are always complacent over the matrixing.”

Gwil was impressed, those locks were not easy to break and he’d seen Hyax have trouble with something similar. Jack was a remarkable warlock and was probably brought in to assist on all sorts of matters. A useful man to know and Gwil wouldn’t think twice about contacting him in the future.

A soft click announced the door release being activated. Robin, ever the reckless fucker was first through the door. He knew Robin was desperate to get to Simon, but if he was extinguished or injured then Gwil was sure the House of Hewel would find a way to hold Gwil responsible. They followed Robin, the lobby was empty and there were five doors, only one closed and the other treatment rooms were deserted.

“Stand back, I’ll blast the door open,” Jack instructed. “Grab Simon and I’ll open the portal for Catlin and Gwil. I might need another one for us.”

Gwil was happy enough to get out of there and he’d take Catlin with him. Jack hit the door with a discharge of magic and cast out a sea of mist, then with his other hand opened a purple portal. Gwil grabbed Catlin’s hand and dragged her through the portal and to safety.

They collapsed onto the floor, some sort of flowery carpet that, alongside the burning

sensation in his veins, made him want to throw up. So much for hoping the warlock portals wouldn't be as bad as the fae's. He was vaguely aware of a series of shouts. Someone picked up Catlin and he was rolled onto his back, a blood pack forced to his lips.

He guzzled down the blood, and he was already beginning to feel a bit less shit. His world righted just enough for him to realise Hyax was kneeling at his side. "I've got you."

Hyax administered another pack of blood, even in his current state he could tell it was better than his usual supplies. There was a commotion to his right, Robin arrived with Simon, they were safe. A wave of nausea hit him, and his nerves felt as if they were on fire.

Hyax brushed his fingers across his temples. "Sleep."

And Gwil slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The last time Gwil had gone through an emergency portal he'd been unconscious for days. At least at Crofton Hall he was receiving the best care vampire medical science and warlock healers could provide him, with the purest blood stocks on hand to aid his recovery. Hyax sat next to him on his bed, waiting for the chills he seemed to be suffering from to abate. Gwil muttered something in his sleep, it was an improvement from last time, but Hyax was still worried sick.

Gwil had been back a couple of days, he was no longer as frazzled as when he had come through but still had a way to go before he was fully recovered. To avoid going out of his mind, Hyax had been to the facility with Ashley to see if they could track the lich who had escapes and the Warlock Ruling Committee were treating the residents who remained, there was nothing he could do.

He'd promised Robin, who was conscious but not in a great state, that he'd visit Simon, and given Gwil was deep in a healing sleep now was as good a time as any.

He headed to the room where Simon was housed. As he approached, he could feel the wards he'd created with Ashley and Alex. It had been exhausting and he'd slept a day straight after, but he was smug beyond belief they were still standing and giving Simon the protection he needed.

Simon was of average build but nestled amongst the pillow and blankets he appeared small and fragile, his fae qualities still overriding any from his vampire side. His red hair was shocking against the white of the bedlinens. At Sebastian's request, Hyax had checked Simon's condition once he had been settled and had been able to provide

a base level from which to work, assuming a certain amount of similarity to his own physiology. His assessment was the same as that of the healers they'd brought in, but Sebastian liked to be sure and Hyax was a known entity.

Hyax ran his fingers over the cuff on Simon's left arm. No change. His magic was sitting behind a magical barrier, the spell housed in the cuffs was stubborn, meaning there wasn't the option to wait for the enchantment to fade. They'd confirmed the cuffs were elvish and those bastards were the epitome of cantankerous fuckwits. He had to admit that it was a brilliant piece of magic that not only contained Simon's powers but siphoned them away without danger. Removing them without the right materials would be fatal, Alex was working on a potion which should work, but until that was ready, they would need to be careful. They hadn't gone to all the trouble of extracting him for Simon to cark it here.

From what he'd heard, Robin hadn't been as badly affected as Gwil, and Hyax had surmised the protection James had cast had helped Robin when he was in the portals. Once Simon was recovered, Hyax would be asking him how he'd made it possible for Robin to use fae portals without turning into beef jerky.

Simon made a series of whining noises and to Hyax's surprise, sat up. Simon stared around the room, bemused and a bit lost, which was another shock because Hyax was sure he'd be yelling and screaming if their positions had been reversed.

"Ah, you're awake," Hyax said, wanting to keep Simon as calm as possible.

Simon frowned. "Who are you?"

They had hoped Simon would have begun to remember now he was no longer under the lich's influence, but then he had only met him once so it might not be an indication he still had a Swiss cheese brain. "Prince Hyax of the Tasharick tribe."

Simon cocked his head to one side and gave him a considered look. “I... you were a guest at my wedding.”

Hyax cheered inwardly, this was an excellent sign and suggested Simon’s memory wasn’t permanently damaged. “Correct, and that answers one of my questions, you know who you are. Don’t you?”

“Prince Simon, heir to the throne of the Calanti, and Viscount of MacLove,” he said as if it were obvious. “Where am I and where’s Robin?”

Hyax felt a prickling of energy from around Simon’s cuffs and he thought Simon was trying to use his magic. Simon held up his arms. “What the fuck are these?”

“This is not going to be an easy conversation,” Hyax said, but he didn’t think it would help fobbing Simon off. “You’re at Crofton Hall, you’re safe but only because myself and Ashley have warded this room with a mix of spells so complex I don’t think I could repeat it under pain of having my wings pulled off.”

The spells had been hard work, and he’d impressed himself with what they had created but he didn’t want to repeat them.

“Crofton Hall? As in Ben Redbourn, and Ashley’s his boyfriend and Senior Warlock?”

Simon was more with it than they’d dared hoped, him being able to recall the information was a great relief. “Yes, we weren’t sure which memories you would have retained. But I get the feeling you’re probably missing some... what’s the last thing you remember before you woke up?”

Simon took a moment, no doubt having trouble collating his thoughts. “I’d woken up after my wedding night.” His smug expression suggested he’d had a great time at

Robin's hands. "I'd got dressed to go somewhere, but... I... must have gone back to bed. Then I woke up here."

Simon stopped talking and grabbed a handful of his hair. "Why the fuck is my hair red?"

Hyax sat on the edge of the bed, he hadn't expected to be the one dealing with Simon waking up or being the one to answer his questions. "This is going to take some explaining but since you know who you are, it's a good sign and I think you can cope with knowing."

"Knowing what? And why shouldn't I?"

Best to get this out of the way and be as straightforward as possible, Simon was a fellow fae and Hyax thought he could handle this. "Your marriage was several weeks ago, not yesterday. You went to a house viewing and you were kidnapped, we're still piecing together all the details, but Robin and a few others got you back and you're being kept in this room to stop who took you from trying to take you again."

Simon was quiet for a while before he asked, "Who took me?"

Simon was an intelligent man and Hyax wouldn't insult him by trying to fob him off. "The kidnappers we think were elves, but under contract and we've someone working on that angle, but you were found at a facility run by a Dr Ralph Mettle, who claimed to have helped you escape from a place where you were being ill-treated. You had no memory of who you were, and Mettle put the cuffs in place to limit you using your magic."

"Why would he do that? And where's Robin?"

Simon was more matter-of-fact than Hyax had expected. He'd been exposed to his

peers and fae princes weren't the sort to deal well with situations outside their control.

"Robin's resting. We had to remove you via an emergency portal, and it messed with his vampire physiology, I will go get him as he'll want to see you now you're awake. But the person who took you was a lich."

Simon shuddered, and Hyax thought the reality was beginning to bite. "He must've wanted my magic to use for himself."

"That's the hypothesis. A fae healer has done an examination, and found no evidence of physical or sexual assault, and that the only residual issue is your memory, which now seems limited to the period you were away."

"Do you think I'll regain my memories?"

The process might take some time, but since Simon had already remembered so much Hyax thought it wasn't unlikely, but there were barriers, and the cuffs might be holding back more than just his magic.

"Possibly." Hyax tapped one of the cuffs. "We need to get these off first and see. Releasing your magic might be the answer."

Simon took a moment to examine the cuffs. "I think they're elf. I've read about how they can enhance metals to hold a certain magic."

Alex had confirmed their origin. "Yes, we came to the same conclusion and think we might have a way to remove them, but it involves a complicated potion that is currently under preparation and takes some time and constant supervision. The final ingredient would be elf blood and your blood."

“Elf blood? What will I need to promise to get that?”

“That’s not the issue, Alex is Ben’s secretary and an elf, he’s also one of the brewers. He’s ready to add his blood when needed.”

Simon grimaced. “One small mercy. Do I drink it?”

“No, submersion. You’ll bathe in it, might need a prolonged exposure but we’ll have to see. It might not be the most pleasant of experiences.” Hyax wouldn’t fancy sitting in the concoction, but needs must and they didn’t have an alternative.

“No shit, it’s got elf blood in it.”

“Ashley said he can prepare a lotion to use afterwards... and Robin volunteered to apply it.”

Simon laughed. “I don’t know if he’s a cheeky bastard, or I’d be annoyed if he didn’t.”

Robin hadn’t wanted anyone else’s hands on Simon, and no one had opposed him. They’d also kept Simon’s parents informed, and King James had sent some insights.

“There is one more thing, your father thinks the cuffs are also impeding your fangs from coming through.”

“That makes sense, as without them I can’t transition to my vampire-fae form, and so my magic is in perpetual flux, which would make it easier to siphon. Somehow, the lich must’ve known.”

Simon would have a lot to digest and would need time to do so. Hyax stood. “I’ll let Robin know you’re awake. Are you hungry? You’ve been out a few days.”

Simon's stomach growled, answering for him. "I guess that's a yes."

"I'll visit again, we can talk some more." He had other things he wanted to ask Simon, but those could wait until Simon was fully recovered. "I was hoping you'd be able to show me how to adapt the portals to use with Gwil. Robin said he can use yours."

"I'm part vampire, so that might make a difference, but you can use a biphasic transference spell, and it stops the molecule superheating. You'll need to tune it to Gwil."

He might need to cast through Gwil for that to work, but now they had done similar magic together he was no longer concerned he'd be doing more harm than good. "I'll give him some time to recover from his last trip and try it, I think I've the idea now."

"My father figured it out, I've just built on his ideas."

"I'll leave you to rest for now. If you need anything, don't hesitate to contact me."

"That goes the same for me. Thank you, Hyax. I won't forget this."

Hyax left. Alex would be in touch if he needed anything, and he was more interested in Gwil. He wouldn't let the vampires forget how pivotal Gwil had been to the success of returning Simon, and he wouldn't be subtle about it either.

It was to his great surprise he found Gwil sitting up and a healer on their way out. "You're awake."

"Yes, I see your observational skills are improving. The new healer tried a different idea, a magically infused blood which can expedite healing from the inside."

Hyax would have to follow up on that, he would love to know what they'd used. "Did they give you more details?"

"None I understood. Something about magic antibodies that would be tackling the inflammation and some other stuff that was to speed up the repair of my tissues. Seems to be doing the job."

"I should say so, when I left you were recovering but still out of it." Hyax took Gwil's hand and he could feel the treatment working. Gwil's body was repairing, and unlike the last time, Hyax thought he might be up and about soon. Hours even. "The effect is quite something. How are you feeling?"

"Bit dopey, hungry for food, not blood. I'd love a ham and cheese toastie."

Hyax was amazed, and beyond relieved. "I'll get Karl to bring you something."

"I feel so well that I should make sure all of me is in working order."

Hyax knew they'd been apart but Gwil had to have a screw loose if he thought that was going to happen.

"No, you need your rest. Once you're home and confirmed out of danger, then I'll fuck your brains out, but not before."

"Please," Gwil whined, but Hyax would not be coerced.

"I've said no once, don't make me put my foot down."

Gwil grumbled and Hyax made peace by sliding into bed for a cuddle. Curled up here he could forget what was waiting for them once they left Crofton Hall. Robin and Simon might have got their happy ending but for Hyax he was facing the start of

having to publicly deal with Metra. He held Gwil tighter, trying not to think about what would happen, he wasn't going to give up Gwil without a fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hyax had been astonished by Gwil's improvement and although he was now keen to get him home, they had a few loose ends to tie up before heading back to London. He'd return if needed, but he'd be much happier when Gwil was away from his manipulative pointy-toothed brethren. He left Gwil packing and went to join Ashley to give an update to Robin, Sebastian and Solivatus about what they'd managed to find out about Dr Ralph Mettle and how they were going to have to adapt their approach to contain the bastard.

Ashley was an impressive warlock, his magic highly organised and precise which, coupled with the magnitude he'd experienced when working with him, explained why he had a seat on the Warlock Ruling Committee.

"Because we had to do an emergency extraction, we weren't able to implement the original plan of myself and Hyax going in and containing the lich," Ashley said, for Sebastian and Solivatus's benefit. "That resulted in Mettle leaving the facility. When he did so he decommissioned several wards, most likely due to the energy expense they took to maintain, and so a number of other members from the Warlock Ruling Council and me were able to access the property. He was gone, so now we're trying to pick up various traces using tracking spells which will take time."

Hyax noted Ashley hadn't mentioned who had gone to the facility and had omitted Hyax's presence. The warlocks were as bad as vampires when it came to sharing as little information as possible, although he would admit the fae weren't much better.

Sebastian clicked his tongue. "So, we have no idea where he is at the moment?"

“Correct, but that should change once we get Simon’s cuffs off. Alex believes he’ll be able to use some of the residual magic in the cuff to pinpoint Mettle’s location.”

“Then it is just a matter of time.” Sebastian seemed happier there appeared to be a resolution on the cards. “I believe death by fire is the traditional execution for a lich.”

“It’s not the killing that’s the issue but their ability to regenerate,” Hyax said. He needed to be sure Sebastian understood the implication they needed a way to ensure the lich did not evade capture again. “I’m studying a number of ancient texts that I’ve recently got access to, and if I’m not mistaken, then the power Simon will wield once he transitions would be sufficient to destroy a lich’s phylactery.”

Robin sat up, agitated. He seemed recovered from the portals, or at least no longer all charred and Hyax wondered if he’d been given the same treatment as Gwil. “I don’t want him put at risk.”

Not an unexpected reaction, Robin wouldn’t be able to dictate what Simon would do any more than he could Gwil and Hyax didn’t think Simon would agree to be left on the sidelines, plus there were other considerations Robin couldn’t appreciate. “I think it would be beneficial for him to have an opportunity to offload a significant amount of power. He’ll transform and initially he’ll be erratic, and this would level him off.”

Robin still didn’t look convinced. “It’s dangerous.”

“With the greatest of respect, so is your husband.” Hyax stared at him. Robin could do with a dose of reality. Simon wasn’t a lost kitten but a fucking magical killing machine and they were very lucky he was as well-balanced as he was and didn’t just smite everyone in his path. “This also gives him the chance for vengeance, which is a major driving force for most fae.”

Sebastian chuckled. “It’s not exactly unheard of for vampires either.”

“He’s not fully recovered,” Robin insisted.

“He’s physically fine,” Ashley said. “Personally, I don’t think it’s your decision to make. You might be his husband but he outranks you in both realms, so we should ask him what he wants to do.”

Hyax didn’t think Robin would appreciate being reminded of his social standing compared to Simon’s, but he agreed with Ashley that Simon should be the one to make his own decisions. Pity Hyax didn’t have that sort of freedom in his own life. Although Simon had an arranged marriage, his had turned out to be a fairy tale, not the horror he expected he’d have with Metra.

“I will talk to him, but if he agrees to this, I will not allow him to go alone,” Robin conceded but Hyax could tell he wasn’t completely happy.

“No chance there,” Sebastian said. “The House of Hewel will hunt together, it is not just Simon but retribution for Catlin.”

“Simon is a Calanti, his people will want retribution too,” Hyax said. He couldn’t imagine the fae sitting back from this. “This needs to be a magic-led operation. Or we will be in danger of losing him again.”

Solivatus turned to Ashley. “What about the Warlock Ruling Committee, would they oversee? Jack and yourself have already been involved.”

Ashley nodded. “The WRC have already met—we will provide all necessary support. There were more than fifty residents at the facility, and also past residents who were treated with unsanctioned magic. This falls under our jurisdiction.”

“I have no desire to mop up this bollocks,” Sebastian said. “I just want to make sure the bastard pays for his crimes.”

“How is Catlin?” Robin asked.

Hyax had helped with her treatment since he’d known what she’d be going through, thanks to Gwil. She was another pretty vampire, but less arrogant than most he’d dealt with.

“Ben’s been talking to her, while she’s near enough her old self, her memories haven’t returned, and Jack has a theory about that,” Sebastian said. “He thinks that even though he was able to remove her cuff without the complications we have for Simon, there may be a residual link to the lich. The expectation is once Mettle is eradicated, she’ll be her old self and we can get to the bottom of how she got there in the first place.”

Alex materialised. “Apologies, sirs. But I was informed you’d wish to know when the potion was ready. I’m about to set up the bath.” He checked his watch. “I’ll need to add Simon’s blood directly, but all should be in place in about twenty minutes.”

“Excellent,” cried Sebastian.

“I’ll let Simon know.” Robin stood.

“Since the bath is being set up in his warded rooms, he is already aware.” Alex smiled, looking pleased with himself. “I understand you’d liked to keep him company while he bathes. And I’ve also left ample supply of the cream to apply once the potion is washed off.”

“I’ll be there directly,” Robin said.

“I’ll be checking in regularly to check his progress and contain the cuffs once the release mechanism works.” Alex dematerialised with a polite nod.

“Off you go,” Sebastian said. “Speaking to James, he believes that once the cuffs are off, Simon’s fangs will come in and he can feed.”

“I thought he’d be here?”

“He has a kingdom to run, and knows Simon is in the best hands. But he has been receiving constant updates and has suggested that Simon transitions back in the fae realm so James can be available for support, given Simon’s recent memory loss.”

“I’ll need to make sure I don’t turn into vampire beef jerky again when we travel through the portal,” Robin said.

“Simon can do that once his magic returns,” Hyax said, it was only natural Robin might be a bit put off from using the portals. “He explained how I can protect Gwil in the future.”

Sebastian cocked his head to one side. “You are actually taken with him. I thought it might be an act of rebellion against your mother.”

Hyax bristled. Sebastian’s opinion was not his concern but he didn’t like the inference. “We are betrothed, that’s not something I would have entered into for the sake of pettiness.”

Sebastian snorted. “I can tell you some marriages are built on foundations much shakier than that.”

Robin excused himself. “I best go to Simon.”

Sebastian waved Robin away with an instruction to enjoy applying the after-bath cream and to be diligent, which Hyax thought was a little creepy. “I have heard, Your Highness, that Gwil might not be your betrothed for much longer.”

He should have known Solivatus wouldn't have been able to keep his mouth shut. "It is a political matter. I remain no less dedicated to Gwil."

"I did wonder, but if you're as smitten with him as you appear, I'm sure you'll be able to overcome the situation one way or another." Sebastian glanced at Solivatus. "Given the help Gwil has provided, and the sacrifices he made to do so, I wouldn't like to see him too upset."

"Neither do I."

"Good, I think I've made myself clear. Please don't let me detain you."

Hyax didn't think Sebastian gave a shit about Gwil but didn't want the fae pissing on vampires in general terms. "I'll keep in touch with Simon, he can contact me if he needs anything."

He'd already been dismissed and didn't wait to be told twice. Gwil was ready to go when he returned to their room. "Karl says there's a car on standby whenever we're ready."

"The sooner we leave the better."

"Did you manage to speak to Simon about the portals?"

Gwil's miraculous recovery had distracted him. "Yes, I have an idea. We'll try in a few days, I'm sure you're sick of them for now."

"I was hoping that we could have some us time when we get back. I suspect your mum will know what went down already and that Simon's home."

Hyax nodded. "I imagine the royal proclamation will have already been drafted, and

it'll only be a matter of hours before I get called back.”

“Do you need to make a statement in person?”

Hyax shook his head. “No, but there’ll be a gathering, and I’ll need to show my face. I don’t think you’ll be allowed to attend that one, but I’ll try and ensure you’re always invited to any official engagement I’m being rolled out for.”

“Won’t your husband object?”

“He can throw a fucking tantrum for all I care, as far as I’m concerned you are the Prince’s Beloved and I will have you at my side at any chance I can. I can’t call you my husband, but I won’t let anyone think you’re not my choice.”

The title wasn’t used often, but its existence couldn’t be overlooked. He wanted to spend as much time as he could curled up with Gwil until the inevitable happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gwil had known the announcement was coming, but it didn't make it any easier to deal with. Hyax had returned to the fae realm and within the hour Gwil had received over twenty messages from his friends asking if he was all right. Cikla had sent him the wording, it spoke of the union of the two tribes, and other bullshit around harmony and cementing the special relationship. He'd been mentioned, his title of Prince Hyax's Beloved didn't have the same ring to it as husband, but what had been the absolute kicker was there was a date for the ceremony. In less than a week, Hyax would be married to Metra, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He couldn't stay in the house, everywhere he looked something reminded him of Hyax. He'd tried working, but it was the same issue, most, if not all of his current cases had been touched by Hyax in some way, even if it had just been a discussion on a path forward. He fed Midnight, grabbed his keys and headed out into the London night, to Lambeth where there was a bar he could drink himself stupid in and people would keep their distance. The owner would pour him into a cab and tomorrow Gwil could nurse his hangover and pretend nothing had happened.

He'd first discovered Gilmont's in the 1940s. It had started after the owner of the original bar had returned from the Second World War longer in the fangs than he'd left. He'd found a niche amongst a subset of London vampires who weren't well connected enough to grace the glitzy lounges or stately homes where warm bodies were available on a whim but weren't so low down they were picking off the booming homeless population.

At street level, Gilmont's gave the impression it was a boarded-up hardware shop,

posters and graffiti had added to the décor, and it meant that ninety-nine percent of the people who walked passed ignored it. The actual entrance was partway down the alley at the side and as he descended underground Gwil forced all thoughts of what Hyax would be up into a part of his brain labelled do not poke until morning .

In absolute terms, Gilmont's hadn't changed much over the years—a low-ceilinged main bar with booths around the edges and other smaller areas where a patron could be seen as much or as little as they wanted. He intended to sit in a corner, drown his sorrows in a bottle of whisky and leave, doing so in public would mean he wouldn't go too far, and he could probably find someone to talk to as a distraction.

Stu, the eponymous Gilmont, clocked him the minute he entered. "Gwil, my friend. It's been a while."

Stu also hadn't changed, the style of his suits had been updated, though he still had the same slicked-back hair and waxed moustache Gwil remembered from the early days. "I needed a place to not think, or maybe overthink, but where no one will give a fuck."

He took a stool at the bar and Stu collected a bottle of Macallan's. He put it down in front of Gwil along with a glass. "Let's start you on the decent stuff. Once you're shitfaced I'll move you onto Bell's. Will you be wanting something more robust?"

Another thing about Gilmont's was it had never moved over to bottled blood, and catered for those wanting to live feed. Gwil hesitated, but in his current mood, the temptation was too great to turn down. "Yeah. Probably."

"I'll let you know what I've got available, I had to switch out earlier."

He knocked back two large measures of whisky in quick succession. Alcohol still worked, although it took more and longer to do the trick. His old drug habits had

some effect but generally white powders left him listless after a short high these days and he'd steered clear as the benefits didn't add up.

It was still early, but there were a few others in. This wasn't the sort of place he'd take Hyax, hell, this wasn't somewhere he'd go with anyone else.

"You been busy?" Stu asked. "Must have been the best part of two years since you've been in."

"Work mainly, and I don't feed as often as I used to."

"I guess dating a prince means you get to have your pick of the good stuff."

He'd not transitioned over to the single vintage bloods. Hyax had made a comment about it and, while he'd like to know what it was he was drinking, he'd not had the chance to bring it up in conversation again. "You'd be surprised, I don't get the perks you'd expect I would."

"I would think, now especially, you could demand whatever the fuck you wanted. Surely the Prince's Beloved should want for nothing." Stu refilled his glass. "You're too nice, Gwil. You should put your foot down and get what you deserve."

"Does everyone know I've been booted down the pecking order to walking sex toy?" He knew that wasn't his actual position but to the outside world, he wasn't going to be as perceived as important to Hyax in the same way.

"Come on, Gwil. It's fresh juice, give it a few days and no one will care. It's debatable anyone cares now."

He sipped his whisky this time. "I don't know if that's worse."

“I have to ask, did you really expect to marry him?”

Someone like Gwil marrying Hyax must seem far-fetched to most, but he’d believed Hyax had been sincere in his proposal, even though the way he’d asked hadn’t been romantic. “I had hoped, and hope springs eternal, it’s not like I have a timeline to beat.”

Stu handed him a sheet of paper and moved to serve other customers. It was the menu, and it only had limited hand-written options: two males (Scottish), two local females, Liverpudlian NB. All aged between 20 and 40, with consent paperwork and certification.

He guessed Hyax would probably want him to choose the woman, although he’d explained he wasn’t the type, unlike some of his peers, to shag his food, there was always a thrill associated with feeding. While he had dated women in the past, he was deep in cock territory now so feeding from a bloke might be a touchy subject. He and Hyax had enough to contend with without a bout of irrational jealousy. Then again, this wasn’t Hyax’s call, and Gwil preferred the taste of men’s blood over women’s. Hyax was the one off becoming Metra’s future husband so why should he allow Hyax’s feelings to dictate his dinner?

“What you having?” Stu asked.

“The Scot and another whisky.” He handed over his credit card. “I should start a tab.”

“I take it you’d prefer a booth. Never known you to feed in the open.”

He’d pay extra for privacy. “Yeah.”

“Follow me. Blond or ginger?”

“Ginger.”

He grabbed the whisky bottle and followed Stu to one of the booths at the side where there was a two-seater sofa and a low table. This was not a swanky corner to wine and dine a date, but more a comfortable nook which was heavy on the sandalwood air freshener to cover lingering wafts of stale blood.

“House rules as usual. No tolerance for draining, maximum two taps.”

Gwil took a swig from the bottle, removing all pretence of caring what anyone else thought. Stu reappeared several minutes later with a docile man in his late twenties. The herd were generally subdued, kept about for a few months and then released with a large amount of money they often didn't remember earning, and a case of anaemia.

Gwil wasn't given a name, and he didn't ask. He was cute, with ginger curls and vacant blue eyes. Built on the wiry side, he wasn't someone who Gwil would describe as being his type, but this wasn't a date.

Ginger sat and cocked his head to one side to give Gwil access to his throat. There was a school of thought that this wasn't how things should be done. Vampires were meant to be dangerous and wild, but this was evolution in his view. Why waste time and energy when there were those willing to be fed from?

He stroked a finger down the column of his neck feeling the glorious pulse of Ginger's heartbeat under his fingertips, his fangs extended and he began to salivate. For all his words about how bottled blood was good enough, there was nothing like drinking straight from the source. A chemical replaced the need to use his thrall, Ginger was compliant and Gwil shifted closer. He sank his fangs into the willing flesh and drank down the red nectar. He didn't rush, and eased off a little when Ginger whimpered. He had no desire to cause him pain, not when he was proving such a heady repast.

The hit of the blood was better than any chemical high and he withdrew and sank back into to a cushion. Ginger's eyes were heavy-lidded and he panted slightly. He was aroused but no doubt he'd find someone later to help him out. Gwil didn't pay much notice as Ginger was guided away and he sat in his own bubble of happy chemicals as the blood worked its way through his system.

"What the fuck are you doing, Gwil?"

He recognised the voice, but he had to be wrong. He peered up to see Penelope standing over him. She looked as if she'd come straight from a business meeting, her hair in a bun, and wearing a trouser suit. This was not the place she would ever come to. "Are you lost?"

"I have people looking out for you, when I heard about Hyax and then you turning up here, I thought I would need to stage an intervention."

The blood and whisky combined to make him wonderfully light-headed. "S'fine. I was having a nibble, that's all."

"If you wanted to live feed, you could have come to me, and I'd have ensured you had something of a better calibre."

Penelope was such a snob. "No need. I'm good, promise."

"Somehow I don't believe you. You're coming with me."

He opened his mouth to protest but two of Penelope's security guards pulled him to his feet.

"Since when have you cared what I did?" He snatched his arm away as he stood. "You don't need to be here."

“I know we haven’t always been close, Gwil, but you are my brother, and I don’t want you doing something stupid. You’re in the good graces of two of the Heads of House, you will not squander the opportunity you can get because you’ve had your heart broken by a sparkly twat.”

Penelope would also be able to capitalise on Gwil’s new fortune, and he didn’t like the way she was referring to Hyax. “I’ve not had my heart broken.”

“That’s why you’re in a dive bar getting shit-faced on cheap blood and whisky.”

“Hardly cheap.”

“Not the point. You’re coming with me.”

“No.”

He was grabbed and he knew he wouldn’t be able to fight these two goons off. “Honestly, I’m okay. I was blowing off steam that’s all. I’ll be back to normal tomorrow.”

“So Hyax won’t be marrying another fae prince?” She raised an eyebrow and he wanted to pluck the fucking thing off her face.

“It’s not like I didn’t know.”

She turned on her heel and clicked her fingers. Gwil was lifted off his feet and carried out of Gilmont’s between two burly vampires. He was pretty sure this wasn’t an unknown event given some of the clientele, but it was a first for Gwil. Moments later he was bundled into the back of a car, and next to Penelope.

“Gwil, I know you think I’ve overreacted but you put yourself in a dangerous

position. High on blood lust and whisky, you could have been taken advantage of or done something more stupid than being seen live feeding in a dive bar.”

There were a lot worse places than Gilmont’s, some where he wouldn’t dare show his face thanks to some of the cases he’d taken over the years. “I’ve been going to Gilmont’s since it opened and never had an issue. You’re being a snob.”

She scowled. “You’re associated with a fae prince, your sister is a Dark Duchess, you are the one not understanding the levels of social hierarchy and the place you inhabit within it.”

He didn’t think dealing with the vampire elite would ever be his problem on a day-to-day basis—as he had said to Solivatus, he knew important people, but he wasn’t important. “My position in society puts me at the bar in Gilmont’s. As you pointed out, it’s my partner who’s the prince, not me. And as he’s currently off out at his engagement party I can’t exactly get into places I’d go when I’m his plus one.”

“But you also have me.” She laid a hand on his arm which made him immediately suspicious. “I accept we’ve had our differences, I could have helped you more, and now I want to ensure that even if things go south with Hyax, you don’t lose the progress you’ve made.”

Gwil guessed he must’ve started getting traction if Penelope was interested in being seen with him. Part of him wanted to tell her to sod off but he wasn’t the sort to cut off his nose to spite his own face.

“I’m not expecting anything to change between me and Hyax. I know he’s being made to marry someone else but it’s not like he’s going off to make a life with him. Yeah, it sucks that I don’t get to get to have the ceremony and whatever, but I still get him and that’s what I want.”

The car drew up outside Penelope's townhouse in Pimlico. "Come in, I think we've things to discuss and it's best they're not done in the open."

He bit back the comment that the car wasn't in the open either, but Penelope was likely to have a decent selection of blood on hand and he wouldn't admit it, but Ginger had left a bit of an aftertaste.

Gwil had only been here twice. The property belonged to Penelope's husband's family, and since he was Penelope's brother from before she was turned, he wasn't considered part of her sired family and he'd been made to use the side entrance.

A butler opened the door, and Penelope gave instructions for them to be served in the parlour and to have a room made up for her guest. He didn't argue but he didn't intend to stay. Hyax would be home at some point, and he would want to see him. When exactly he'd be back, Gwil didn't know but he could do a good line in pining boyfriend while he waited.

The parlour—he wasn't even aware townhouses still had parlours—was a reception room set up to show off the wealth of the inhabitants. Penelope had always wanted the best in life, and fair play to her, she'd got it by marrying Philip. If he wasn't mistaken, there was a fucking Fabergé egg on the mantelpiece, along with several more ornaments that wouldn't have looked out of place in the British Museum.

She ushered him into an armchair and the butler arrived with a carafe of blood and two glasses, which he served and promptly sodded off.

"You're taking all this far more calmly than I would."

"Didn't you lob a bloke's head off with a broadsword because he got blood on your dress once? I mean, we've always had a different approach to dealing with drama in our after-lives."

“But this is different. You’ve been dumped?—”

“No, I’ve been demoted and only on paper,” he said. He might have trouble believing it, but he wasn’t going to have other people question what was going on. “Hyax has a role to play, he’s assured me that there’s been no change to his feelings towards me, and to be honest, I’m surprised his mum’s allowing him to still keep me around, never mind letting him give me a fancy title.”

“Prince’s Beloved does make you sound like he’s keeping you as a pet while he goes off and plays nice with another prince.”

He wasn’t going to dignify the pet dig with a response.

“There’s more to this than just royal families wanting to join forces. Solivatus told Hyax he’d uncovered financial irregularities.”

She pursed her lips. “What sort of financial irregularities?”

“The Elementa were running low on funds at one point, but now they’re not and he wasn’t sure what caused the uptick in how they managed it.”

“It is more common than you’d think for old families, royal ones included, to run out of money. It’s not generally something they come back from.”

“Yeah, Solivatus didn’t seem to think them having run out of money was the issue, more the fact they now aren’t. Especially as he seemed to think it was recent.”

He drank his blood, it was good, really good, and poured himself a second glass, Ginger’s taste was now history.

“That suggests they were paid money to marry Metra off to Hyax. I know Hyax’s

mum isn't a big fan of yours, but I can't see her forking out that sort of money to get rid of you when an assassin would be much cheaper."

He hadn't thought about it in those terms, but she was right. "We don't think it's his mum. But it might also be completely unrelated."

"Since when did you believe in coincidences?"

He didn't. He was convinced someone wanted Hyax married to Metra but who and why, he didn't know. "I don't. But buggered if I know. I don't even know off the top of my head who'd have the funds to prop up a royal family."

"There are several vampire families, and then there's the dragons with their hordes. Other fae and elves, but it's not really their thing."

"I can't see vampires and dragons meddling in fae politics in this way. Most of the vampire connections have been vocally supportive of me bagging a fairy prince."

She snorted. "True, it's been a salacious piece of gossip. Philip said the Council were very happy."

Philip was her husband. "Was he the one who told you to be nice to me?"

"I've been nice to you before. But he did say it wouldn't hurt for us to be on even better terms. And we like each other, most of the time."

"I daresay I could get used to drinking blood of this calibre, if I had to."

"Joking aside, Gwil, why wouldn't you be doing that already?"

They didn't discuss his finances—she'd flaunted her own enough but never in the

sense that he didn't have money, just not as much. "Blends are cheaper. I'm planning to talk to Hyax about the money side of things, but it's not something on his radar. Paying for things kinda happens."

"Blends aren't... great. You used to live with Hoffman, you can't tell me you weren't living like a king."

"I didn't want for anything in the sense of things that could be bought. I helped with the tasting of some of his early prototypes, but that was years ago, so I adapted."

She gave him the most curious look. "How did things end with Oliver? We weren't speaking at the time, and it wasn't a topic I could drag up with no reason."

"I was bored, he wasn't what you'd call an overly affectionate bloke. I wanted to do more and work on my detective business, he wanted a trophy husband. And let's face it, I ain't that."

"You're reasonably attractive, Gwil, we share the same gene pool." She smirked. "But I understand the boredom. Philip doesn't try and curtail my activities, and I don't interfere with his. How did Oliver take it?"

He wasn't sure why she wanted to know, apart from her being nosey. "He was a bit pissed off at first, then he begged a bit but not a lot and, in the end, it was pretty amicable. I left the States and returned to London and that was it. I get the occasional email, but I've not heard from him in years."

"If you're looking for someone with enough money to bankroll a royal family, then Oliver Hoffman could. He'd probably not even notice a drop in his funds. I hate to think how much he's worth these days."

Most people, after he admitted he used to date the bloke who invented the process to

successfully bottle blood, either didn't believe him or thought he was a prize muppet for leaving. Hoffman was rich when they'd broke up, but these days he'd be far more affluent. "Are you suggesting Oliver Hoffman paid the Elementa to get Metra to marry Hyax? Why the fuck would he?"

"You. He's the sort who could play the long game. You don't get married to Hyax, and yes you're his Beloved or whatever, but Hoffman would be banking on that turning sour. Then he could sweep in when after a couple of years of you not being the centre of Hyax's attention and lure you away."

"You're off your fucking head."

She seemed quite pleased with herself. "It's a better working hypothesis than anything you've come up with."

"That's because I've not got a hypothesis, so saying aliens did it is as likely as Hoffman paying off a fae prince so he can get back his ex-boyfriend."

"Maybe he doesn't want you back but doesn't want you to be happy with someone who isn't him."

Hoffman wasn't a malignant ball sac, nor was he a mopey heartbroken fool. "He was dating a Paris fashion model a few years ago. He ain't giving me a second thought."

"I think we should investigate this further. Make some discreet enquiries into what Hoffman's been doing for the last year or so. He's not exactly reclusive but he's not been so public of late."

Hoffman had never been one for noisy and boisterous settings He'd go to the odd party but he preferred long expensive dinners, buying fine art on a whim, and tinkering with engineering projects, not caring how much it cost him. "He's probably

holed up in a cave creating a robot servant. You're barking up the wrong tree."

If he let himself believe this for a moment, which he wouldn't because it was crackpot nonsense, Hoffman was a genius and wouldn't be stupid enough to leave a trail. Hyax would laugh his arse off when he told him. Penelope was a force of nature, so he would ignore her particular dose of crazy and she'd soon get bored. His afterlife was weird enough, he didn't need his deranged sister making it worse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Hyax stood next to Metra. He felt a bit like a creature on display, dressed in his finest. This should have been one of his most fondest moments, where he stood up and declared himself ready to take a husband. Instead, he seethed inwardly and tried to keep his disdain and anger from becoming visible. This would go down as one of the worst days of his life—no one would die, the world would not end, but he could not manage an iota of good grace or happiness and would have to fake it. The declaration had been read, he was now enduring the hell of small talk and pretence.

“You make a striking couple. Hyax’s fair hair and Metra’s black mane are simply stunning,” Council Treyma remarked. She was one of Queen Vaness’s senior appointees and Hyax thought she must be aware of the situation. “There will be many broken hearts in both tribes now you are both no longer available for matrimony.”

“There would be no reason to be upset over our marriage, my heart belongs to my Beloved and has done so way before tonight.” He’d decided since Gwil had been part of the declaration that he’d be well within his rights to bring him up at every eventuality. If he’d had his way, Gwil would have been here.

Treyma choked on the drink she was sipping and Hyax took it as a sign to move along. He grabbed a glass of ambrosia, if he had to do this, he was not going to do it sober.

“You know you are allowed to have a conversation without mentioning another man,” Metra said. “I get you’re not happy to be here, and I’m not thrilled either, but if we could get through this with a fraction of civility, I’d appreciate it.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you appreciate.” Hyax saw Sital with his wife across the room. “Especially as you have your special person here, one I know you lied about and continue to do so.”

“Can we not do this now? What will it take?”

“I’ve already told you what I would consider a good starting point.”

Metra clenched his jaw. He glanced around. It wouldn’t be long before someone else came along wanting to give them their best wishes. “Fine. I’m a lying, cheating piece of shit. Happy?”

He’d not expected Metra to confess, and his admitting he was a fucker did nothing to make it better. “No. You’re still a cunt. And I hope he gives you wing droop.”

“Hyax.”

“What? Metra, back off. I will do my best to tolerate you, but you can’t seriously believe I would want to be friends?”

“There’s more to this?—”

A cry went up as a toast was proposed and they got swept into a series of congratulations Hyax wasn’t able to deflect.

He hated the pretence and there was only so much more he would be able to put up with. His patience was wearing thin and Metra’s admission of guilt hadn’t brought him the closure he thought it would. If anything, because Metra had sent his little friend along to try to convince him he’d been mistaken, he was more annoyed. They must think he was stupid or easy to manipulate.

Metra was called over to speak to his parents. There were a few people Hyax had yet to talk to, but once they were done, he should be able to escape. His mother glided up to him, she'd been playing the role of delighted mother-of-the-groom.

"You've tolerated this evening much better than I thought you would. I do appreciate your actions."

"I won't be here much longer."

She laughed. "You've done your duty. No need to extend your frustration any longer. I've a couple of my council members probing a few things, so we may have more news soon."

"I think Metra wanted to tell me something, but he was interrupted before he could." Hyax suspected the speed at which things had moved had taken Metra by surprise, and while he was happy to do as his parents asked, he didn't think he'd expected to have to marry so soon.

"Are you sure he wasn't looking for another way to manipulate the narrative?"

His mother was probably right, if he tried to reach out to Metra before the ceremony, that would only give the wrong idea he was interested in being more civil. "The ceremony is only a week away, if he tries to contact me, then I'll see what he has to say."

He'd accepted the wedding would go ahead, and the timeline was being driven by the Elementa. Somehow, he didn't think he'd hear from Metra and he had other things to deal with before then. Like Gwil.

With Metra still talking to his parents, Hyax slipped back to his rooms through a portal. He was dressed in his finery, although his wedding garb would be even more

splendid, and he didn't want to upset Gwil anymore than he had to, so he decided he would change. He'd find a way to make this up to Gwil. Gwil hadn't chosen to leave him, but Hyax hadn't asked if he would attend the ceremony, perhaps that would be a step too far, but he really needed him there.

He changed back into jeans and a shirt and was about to leave when the surface of his cheval mirror flickered. He blinked, wondering if he was seeing things, but then the face of Prince Simon materialised.

"Hyax, I do hope I'm not intruding, and this is a convenient time to talk."

"I'm in the fae realm. How are you in my mirror?" He flicked a spell in the direction of the door, locking it and casting a silencing charm.

"It's a variant of the mirroricom you used to help find me."

Hyax didn't know how that was possible. "You can't just turn up in my mirror, the spell doesn't work that way."

"True I'm not reaching out to you due to a specific bond, but the mirror and reflection are the same." He opened his mouth, his fangs descending before he retracted them and grinned. "My magic is a bit different nowadays. I think you'd understand a flavour of it because of working through Gwil but it's not normal fae magic anymore."

He would love to learn more about Simon's vampire-fae magic. Technically they were peers from rival tribes so he should be keeping Simon at arm's length, but there was no way he'd do that.

"I admit I am fascinated by what you can do."

“Me too. I have so much to learn, but then I have the time to do so.”

“So, what brings you to my mirror?” Hyax asked with a smirk.

“I thought I owed you an update on what happened with the lich. I wanted to give you my assurance that he has been dealt with.”

He hadn’t expected anything less, Simon was never going to let the lich escape justice. “I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“I am not being completely altruistic, I am probably as intrigued with your connection with Gwil as you are about my new skills.”

Such direct speaking wasn’t a typical fae trait, and Hyax sensed King James’s influence at play. “Nevertheless, I am happy to hear about how you dealt with Mettle.”

“I was able to track him, a spell I would not have been able to do before I transitioned. So, with a few members of my House and the House of Hewel, plus our two favourite warlocks, I paid him a visit. Once I’d destroyed his phylactery, I handed over the pleasure of terminating his mortal existence to Sebastian. He’s gone and he will not be able to return.”

Hyax knew that lichs had the capability to regenerate as long as their soul fragment in their phylactery was maintained, and he knew Simon wouldn’t take any chances. “We are all safer for that. I’m curious to know how he knew what you were. Your tribe is not one to advertise themselves or you and your father’s ways.”

“That is something of a sore point. He had been playing a long game, as he heard about my father’s nature centuries before and had made it his business to listen out for him to have a child. Somehow, he heard not just about my birth but also the

contract to Robin and surmised correctly what I was, and had even managed to get himself installed as my tutor at one time.”

“Fuck.” He’d had tutors, they were as close to him as some of his friends, and the thought of such a betrayal made him feel upset on Simon’s behalf.

“Yes, it is a pity I couldn’t kill him twice without risking his escape. But I would have hated even more not knowing how he was able to find me. My marriage to Robin was the trigger for him to act, as he had been able to deduce there would be a time then when I would be vulnerable. I will never be vulnerable again.”

Hyax didn’t doubt it. Simon was a powerful magic practitioner before his vampire side had come in, now he would be sublime. “You know if there is ever anything I can support you with, I am more than happy to do so.”

“Actually, given all your help, I think that is something I should be saying to you. You did not have to help me as you did, we are from different tribes, and even with your vampire boyfriend, your actions could’ve caused you real trouble. I cannot thank you enough.”

The request had come from the vampires, and while he could have refused, he knew Gwil would have been punished, albeit subtly. He had wanted to help, and if he had heard about it from other sources, would have offered anyway as he believed the fae would only be stronger with the Calanti back in the fold.

“I accept your thanks, but you do not need to repay me.”

Simon wrinkled his nose—it was a rather cute gesture for someone who could disintegrate him with a flick of his finger. “I have heard commiserations are in order, due to your upcoming nuptials.”

“Yes, well, there is nothing to be done on that front. It is a political match and not a love one, I will not be giving up Gwil.”

“I would think a lot less of you if you did. What you have with him is quite lovely. I have been blessed with my feelings for Robin, I see you are as attached to Gwil.”

Hyax had wondered if the bond would fade once Simon had fully turned, or if it would have changed the affection between him and Robin, but it didn't appear to be the case. Simon loved Robin, and he had witnessed Robin's devotion to Simon. Destiny, for once, hadn't been a cruel and heartless bitch.

“We are in a difficult situation, but we will weather it together.”

“I was wondering if I would receive an invite to the wedding,” Simon said, and there was something about his tone Hyax couldn't place.

“Each tribe will be invited to send a representative, I didn't think the Calanti would attend.”

“Then how about I represent my tribe, I was thinking Gwil could be my plus-one.”

Hyax would have thought if Simon were to attend he would prefer to bring Robin. “Wouldn't your husband have an objection?”

“Somehow, I think I would be doing him a favour by not asking him to come. Besides, for the next couple of weeks, he needs to be in LA, there's several events that I might have gone to if I didn't have an alternative.”

He wasn't sure if that were true or not, but he'd welcome Simon supporting Gwil. Having Simon, important in both the fae and vampire societies, with Gwil would be an excellent message. “I think it a marvellous idea. I'll need to speak to Gwil, we've

not spoken yet about the ceremony itself. We used the investigation into your kidnapping to defer the announcement, but I didn't realise the payoff would be the ceremony would happen so fast."

"If you could let me know in the next day or so and I'll make sure I'm available."

"What's the best way to contact you?"

"This way. Place your fingers on the glass of the mirror—you'll see how to do it yourself, and you can then use any reflective surface to contact me. Or leave a message—I don't intend to be available on demand."

Hyax laughed and pressed his fingertips to the mirror. He could taste the way the spell worked, see in his mind how to recreate it, and sensed also a slight shift in the flavour of his own magic, a tinge darker and he wondered if that was Gwil's influence. "Got it. I'll be in touch."

"Thanks again, Hyax. Don't be a stranger." The surface of the mirror flickered, and Simon disappeared.

Hyax needed to talk to Gwil—they had so much to discuss and so little time to do so. He opened a portal and stepped into the lounge of his home. It was dark and there was no sign of Gwil.

The doorbell rang and he hurried downstairs, not sure what to expect and was greeted by a man dressed all in black, wearing sunglasses who wouldn't have looked out of place minding the door at an exclusive nightclub. Without saying a word, he thrust a shoebox into Hyax's hand and stomped away.

On the box were the words: Fairy Tales, an alternative ending for those who upset people's big brothers. Px

He was in two minds about whether to chuck the box without opening it as the P had to be Penelope and the big brother, Gwil. He closed the front door and pulled off the lid. Lying on a bed of scrunched-up tissue paper was a doll, the sort human kids played dress-up with but this one had no face and two sparkly wings balanced on top as if they'd been removed. Hyax knew he would now have to tread carefully, some threats were literal, and Penelope had never been the type to mince her words. She couldn't have been clearer, upset my brother and I'll pull off your wings.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Gwil had succumbed to Penelope's fine whisky collection and more of the amazing blood so had decided to spend the day. They'd talked, rambling conversations that were long overdue, some from before they were turned, others from during the time they were estranged. He'd been honest about how he'd pretty much put up with a whole raft of interfering parents if he got to keep Hyax. He'd woken up to a dead phone with a cracked screen that he couldn't charge, and the need to do something useful, so he'd called in on a client on the way back to Spitalfields.

One pineapple-loving poltergeist ferret dealt with, he headed home, wondering if Hyax was back or if he was still playing wedding prep back in the fae realm. Somehow, he didn't think he was going to see much of him for the next week or two.

He was surprised to see Hyax in the living room. Gwil was in no mood to fight. He just wanted to spend the time they had together and he thought it best to try to show an interest without being an asshole. Hyax didn't want any of this shit either. "How are plans coming along?"

Hyax shot to his feet as Gwil threw his door keys on the table. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick."

"I didn't think you'd be back yet, not with all the preparations," he admitted.

Hyax looked pained. "You could have told me where you were. I left the reception as early as I could. You weren't here and not answering your phone."

Gwil held up his phone. He needed to assure Hyax he hadn't ignored him deliberately but tell where he'd ended up. "It's bugged. Look, I needed to take my mind off a few things. Went out to a place to live feed and Penelope turned up and dragged me back to hers. I spent the day there and then went and cleared out the poltergeist ferret, did you know they liked pineapple?"

"No." Hyax frowned, he probably wasn't expecting the change of topic or that Gwil was being so reasonable. "Did you lace it with an exorcism potion?"

"Yeah, worked a treat." He shrugged off his jacket, the conversation more polite than normal and he hated it. "I didn't mean to worry you, I just needed a bit of headspace. Penelope was surprisingly understanding and even said that she'd like us to spend more time together. I'm worthy enough these days."

"I'm sure she didn't put it quite like that."

"Near enough." Her tone had changed a little over the evening, and by the end, he'd felt he'd been able to really talk to her. "But there's not many people who can understand our situation, so it was nice to have a friendly ear."

Hyax stepped closer, he was nervous and Gwil hated that Hyax would feel that way. "You know you can talk to me. I won't keep anything from you I'll tell you every last detail if that's what you want."

"Not sure I do," Gwil said, sometimes it was better not to know everything, especially when once he was supposed to be the one who would be marrying Hyax. "It's kinda hard to think about you preparing for a ceremony that I had hoped would be ours and not just yours."

"There's not going to be too many of the traditions, things are moving too fast and I won't do things that are meant to have symbolic meaning with someone I don't love."

He stepped closer and took Gwil's hand. "We've yet to finalise the wording for the vows, but there'll be no mention of love or devotion, or even a long-term commitment."

They hadn't had a chance to discuss what the ceremony would entail, but when Hyax had described the fae customs they might use the options had seemed limitless, and he supposed there would be something that would cover every reason for a couple getting married.

"Even if there were I know you wouldn't mean them, though I won't pretend it won't be hard to hear them." Watching Hyax say the vows to Metra might be the hardest thing he would ever have to do.

"I would understand if you'd rather not attend."

He'd rather be anywhere else. He knew Hyax was trying to give him an out, but it would feel far too much like he was abandoning Hyax when he needed him most.

"I'll be there. I won't leave you to face this on your own, and as you've said, I'm the Prince's Beloved, so being there is a statement in itself."

Hyax kissed him and all Gwil wanted was to lose himself in his arms but they had too much to discuss before that could happen.

"I fucking love you, Gwil. I'll make this up to you, I promise."

"You have nothing to make up for—none of this is of your doing. Someone is manipulating the situation to get you and Metra together."

Hyax pulled back. "Gwil... what have you heard?"

“Penelope has a theory, I think she’s crazy but I’m going to ask Copperpipe to have a root around.” He could hardly believe he was going to say this. “She thinks Hoffman is bankrolling the Elementa, and his price to do so is to get you married and out of the way.”

“Hoffman, as in your ex?”

He knew it sounded stupid, but it was a line of enquiry, and he would follow it through. “There aren’t too many people with the sort of money who could prop up a royal family, but he’s one.”

“But why?”

“This is why it’s a stupid premise. Because if you’re with Metra, then you’re not with me. I mean, there has to be another reason, or another explanation because, y’know, it can’t be because of me.”

Hyax shook his head. “You always underestimate your worth, Gwil. I’d tear the heavens apart for you.”

His relationship with Oliver was nothing like what he had with Hyax. “Hoffman and I parted ways years ago, he’s never hinted he regretted it and he dates models and actors. If he’s behind this, which I’m not convinced, then there’s more to it than him wanting to stop us being together.” He wouldn’t believe it until he got proof and even then he’d want it triple-verified. “But for now, we just need to get through the next week.”

Hyax stroked his cheek. “I spoke to Simon, he offered to be your plus-one for the wedding.”

Gwil didn’t know how Hyax would have got the chance. “Prince Simon? When did

you speak to him?”

“He dialled into my mirror. Don’t ask me to explain how, just he’s got new gifts and he used them to let me know what happened with the lich and to offer his support.”

He liked the idea of having someone with him who was on his side. Not that he knew Simon, he was the Viscount of MacLove and therefore Gwil was nowhere near his equal. “He’d do that for me?”

“Yes. For both of us. We’re part of the reason he’s home, and he won’t forget that. Having him there will make waves, even without him being with you, because of his tribe, but adding you into the equation will cause an even bigger stir.”

Gwil laughed, realising the game Hyax was playing. “You want me and Simon to upstage your wedding.”

“Why not? It’s not like I care. I haven’t mentioned Simon’s attendance to my parents yet as all the tribes would have been sent an invite out of respect. They won’t be expecting the Calanti to accept but they can’t rescind his invitation. I just need to let them know he’ll be sitting with you.”

“Perhaps, since you’re embracing a new wave of honesty, you might want to tell her about you and Metra dating way back. Given all the other shit flying around, it’s barely worth a second whisper.”

Hyax nodded. “I had wanted to find a different way to sidestep the consummation, and if I’d had more time, I’m sure I would have found something, but I can’t see another option.”

“What do think your mum will say?”

“I’m not sure. The sneaking around and with an enemy of the tribe is far more akin to treason than anything I’ve done with you.”

Gwil had put Hyax and Metra’s fling in a category alongside Romeo and Juliet, but with less poison and daggers, but in reality, it would have caused a far bigger fallout at the time.

“Even with us marrying, I’m not sure it wouldn’t be an issue if it became public knowledge now.” He bit his lip. “I did think I could leverage it as a way to get out of the wedding but the clusterfuck it’d cause would be too dramatic.”

“What? Too dramatic even for you?”

Hyax shoved him and laughed. “Cheeky shit.”

He lunged forward and kissed Hyax, pouring his love and desire into his kiss. “Let’s go to bed. We can figure everything else out later.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Hyax reread the vows for a third time, making sure there was nothing hidden in the language that might be construed as romantic or a declaration of love. The words about loyalty weren't directed to each other, but to their tribes, and the continued building of a relationship was about their people, not what they would experience.

"Hyax, if you keep reading that you'll burn a hole through the page." He was in his mother's private office, going over several items and ensuring he was happy. She handed him another piece of paper. "Finalised guest list. When were you going to tell me?"

He looked down the list of names and saw Prince Simon with a note about Gwil and seating arrangements. "It's only natural, given the service I performed, that Simon would wish to attend as a show of thanks and solidarity."

"Right, and that he will be seated with the Prince's Beloved?" She raised an eyebrow. "He is recently married himself. I would have thought he'd have brought his husband."

"Robin's a busy man. And Simon's representing a fae tribe, not the vampires, which could be perceived to be Robin's position."

"If he is sitting with Gwil, then Prince Simon is broadcasting his allegiance loud and clear."

Hyax smirked. "I suppose he is."

“I see as well that you’ve vetoed having a collar bearer. That’s usually a specific role.”

“I’ve already stipulated I won’t exchange collars. We can do the ribbons and a bangle, and that’s coming off the minute the reception is over. I will not be marked as his or have him marked as mine.”

“Hyax,” Talia said, his voice softer than he’d expected. “You do need to make some compromises.”

“I’ve compromised enough by marrying Metra. I’ll be there in my finery, say the words and attend the reception, but that’s all I’m willing to do.”

“I know we are concerned about the origins of the request for this marriage, but Metra seems a reasonable young man. You might grow fond of him over time.” She sat and placed her hand on his arm. “We also need to discuss your wedding night. I know it is an uncomfortable topic, and I’m sure you’ve spoken to Gwil, but there is a consummation element.”

He had intended to tell her and now was as good a time as any. “I’m not going to fuck Metra and before you say anything, he’s not going to fuck me.”

“Hyax—”

“No, Mother, there’s something I need to admit to, and I don’t think you’ll be too happy about it. But it’s why I know I’ll never grow fond of Metra, I doubt we’ll ever even be friends.”

“I...”

“Just listen, because it is already mortifying to have to discuss my sex life with my

mother.” He squeezed her hand. “It’s more than fifteen years ago now, and we were still technically at war with the Elementa, but Metra and I were seeing each other.”

“What?”

“It was a secret, creeping about trying not to get caught was part of the thrill. I thought I loved him, but in retrospect, I loved the excitement, and so I don’t need to consummate our relationship, as it’s already been done. I’ve checked every bylaw, caveat and covenant, and there is no stipulation that the consummation has to come after the wedding in fae law.”

She stared at him, and he had no idea which way this would go. He decided to stay quiet and let her process. “Before I say something I might regret, if you were so... cordial... with him before, why all the animosity now? And you having Gwil doesn’t explain it, because you could have been nice to Metra and shown empathy for your shared situation.”

His mother wasn’t stupid, and he thought she might have already guessed. “I caught him with someone else. Metra claimed it was him trying to cover our tracks, and only admitted he’d been unfaithful a few days ago. He even sent his little friend to talk to Gwil to have Gwil convince me I’d been wrong about him.”

“You thought you were in a committed and closed relationship?”

His parents had lovers, they cared for each other but there was no intent for them to be monogamous. “Yes. At the time I thought that once the tribes reconciled we could be together. I was in love, or thought myself to be, and it hurt a great deal.”

“I see. Obviously, this is a breach of protocol and not a matter for public consumption. Although, fortuitously, you could be considered to have no need for a wedding night with Metra.”

She was taking this far better than he'd hoped. "And you can understand, even if it wasn't for Gwil, I wouldn't want to partake in many of the traditional customs."

"Of course. I liked your father a great deal, we love each other in our own particular way, but you would never have that with a man who betrayed you. It is one thing to make a mistake and be remorseful, another to lie for years and try and convince someone they were wrong." She took back the sheet with names. "I think I will ask to ensure our special guests are a little closer to the front."

She couldn't be outwardly negative about his and Metra's marriage but there were little ways she could show her support of her son.

"I'd like that."

"I'm sorry we can't stop this, and we will present ourselves as we must, but the more I think about it the more I am convinced we will find a way to get you an ex-husband soon enough."

"Have you any more insights into why the Elementa were so insistent?"

"The concerns about going to war were false, there have been no escalations of ill will between the tribes, there have been some skirmishes on the borders, but they were staged, and then there appeared to be a huge deficit in their budget that has since miraculously gone."

Gwil had said the vampires had discovered something similar. He'd agreed with Gwil that Hoffman being a candidate was unlikely, but someone had to be behind it. "Do we know what caused the deficit?"

"That appears to be post-war bad financial planning and poor return on investments. There had been a series of magic blights which led to more importation, and also

over-borrowing. Governmental debt is not uncommon, getting rid of it so quickly is what's suspicious."

"I guess there's only certain contenders for the role of good Samaritan."

She pursed her lips. "Indeed. Your pointy-toothed friends are one of them, but I don't believe it's the vampires, they're far too happy about you and Gwil."

He held his tongue to say there were certain vampires who didn't need the Vampire Council's blessing. "So who else?"

"It could be the other tribes propping them up, but I don't think they'd have made your hand in marriage to the Elementa part of the deal. The dragons came to mind, but again I'm having trouble finding a reason why."

"Do the Elementa have any commodities so valuable they could have sold?"

She shook her head. "Not really. However, we are looking into a new mining facility they've opened. We're not sure what it's for as the areas are not known for ore deposits."

The more Hyax thought about the situation the more he thought they were missing something, and this was the sort of thing Copperpipe could help with. "I'm going to head back. I'm having dinner with Gwil tonight. But I'll be here first thing."

This time tomorrow he would be exchanging vows with Metra, he'd deal with it, but at least he had his mother on his side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hyax had left a few hours earlier, close to tears and unhappy. Gwil had pottered around the house, filling his time with small jobs and paperwork that occupied him but didn't need him to expend too much brain power. Part of him wished he'd taken up the offer of not attending, but if he was feeling this way, he could only imagine how shit Hyax felt. Someone would be coming to collect him for the ceremony, he wasn't sure who, but he knew he needed to be ready and Prince Simon would be waiting.

He showered and had just put on his boxers and socks when a portal opened and Hyax's mum stepped through. He squeaked and managed to grab the duvet to cover himself. "Ah, Gwil, I didn't mean to catch you unawares."

Talia laid a suit bag and a box on the bed. "Hyax was worried you wouldn't have something suitable to wear so I've brought you this. Get changed and make sure it fits in all the right places."

"Er..."

She laughed and gestured to the door. "I'll wait through there."

She was dressed in a gold flowing robe and shimmered as she left, which made him think she was ready for the wedding, which then begged the question of why the fuck had she turned up in their bedroom. Gwil stood motionless for a moment, not sure what the fuck was going on. Surely Queen Talia, Mother of the Groom, hadn't come to collect him.

Gwil opened the suit bag, its contents were no human three-piece but a fae robe made of cloth that made him think of the midnight sky, with silver embroidery in exquisite detail. He'd seen some of Hyax's fanciest clobber, and this was just as nice. The suit he'd intended to wear was long forgotten as he slipped the robe on over his head, the feel of the silk next to his skin was delicious, although the length and the wide sleeves might take a bit of getting used to. He didn't think his usual shoes even his best ones, were going to cut it, although that had been thought of as there was also a pair of black boots in the box.

Gwil stood in front of the mirror. He looked fucking amazing. He'd always liked clothes and had mourned the passing of Victorian fashions, but if being the Prince's Beloved meant he got to parade around like this, he would be demanding to be taken out at every opportunity. The high collar was a little tight but he could cope.

Talia was waiting in the lounge, petting Midnight. "She is a lovely creature."

"Yes, and she knows it."

She smiled. Talia was a beautiful woman and it was clear who Hyax had inherited his looks from. "Don't we look the very picture of a partner to a prince?"

"I'm pretty sure you weren't that keen on me taking up such a mantle."

She tapped a finger to his high collar and muttered something and the material shifted, more fitted in some areas and his neck was now freer. "I have lived a long time, Gwil. And I intend to live a lot longer, if I hadn't learnt to accept that I am capable of being wrong, then it would have been a poor existence."

"So, you'd be fine with me marrying Hyax?"

"Eventually, your social position is on the rise. You've a little way to go yet, and

we'll need to remove Metra first, but I don't see him hanging around for too long."

This was as close as he'd ever got to a welcome-to-the-family speech. "I won't order the matching towels yet."

She laughed. "You are a funny one, Gwil."

A scrambling noise came from the blocked fireplace and it was followed by frantic banging. "Fang Face, let me in!"

"That's Copperpipe. He's an associate of mine."

"What's he doing in the chimney?" she said while clicking her finger and thumb and opening the hearth.

Copperpipe tumbled out in a flurry of arms, legs, and swear words. Talia took a step back and from her expression, she didn't know what to make of him, which was a pretty standard response.

"Copperpipe, what are you doing here?"

Copperpipe dusted himself down, although it was more like adding new smears to his sacking. "I have information about your pretty prince's future in-laws and an old flame of yours."

Copperpipe stared him up and down and then realised Talia was there and let loose a long whistle. "Ooooh, you are dressed up nicely. And this must be your not-mum-in-law. Hello, Queenie."

"The correct address is Your Majesty," Gwil said. He turned to Talia. "He's not one for formal niceties."

“You don’t need to be nice when you have information.”

Copperpipe wasn’t wrong, but he’d never thought he’d have to deal with him in front of a Fairy Queen. “Go on. Tell me what you’ve got and your price.”

“I’ve discovered there’s something called chocolate-covered custard creams. A biscuit. I want many packets and good tea.”

Gwil was pretty sure he could find them easily enough on the internet. “Deal. Now spill and hurry up as I’ve somewhere I need to be.”

“Your ex-boyfriend has been acting odd, even by his weirdy-nerdy standards.” Copperpipe sniffed. “Giving fae lots of money in exchange for bags of shiny chalk.”

“Chalk? Is that a euphemism for something?” Gwil asked. White powders in various guises were a well-known commodity, although Oliver had never been the type to partake as he said it ruined his thought process. Also, he didn’t need the money and Gwil couldn’t imagine him lowering himself to be a dealer.

Copperpipe gave Talia a side-eye. “No, white rock out of the ground in the fae realm. Dunno what it is though.”

“Oh, we had heard that the Elementa had new mining complexes.” She pursed her lips. “Thank you, strange potato person. I am grateful for your information.”

“I am not a potato!”

Gwil hurriedly shooed him back into the fireplace. “I’ll get those biscuits to you asap, and I’ll see what others you might like.”

Copperpipe poked him in the chest. “You need to start hanging about with better

people. People who don't call others tubers!"

He was gone, more scrabbling and a definite bollocks later, Gwil turned to Talia. "Sorry about him. He's too useful to annoy."

"Right. Come on. Time to get you on the arm of a different fae prince for the evening." She smirked. "Oh, maybe you'll be thought of as the Prince's Beloved of Simon as well. That would be smashing."

Gwil did not want to encourage people associating him with Simon in such a way as he was sure Robin would come and pull out his fangs, shove them up his arse and remove his head.

"Let's not overcomplicate matters."

"True, and Hyax does have a possessive side."

Apart from Solivatus, Gwil wouldn't have said that Hyax was the jealous type but he'd not given him any reason to be and he wouldn't want to risk it with Hyax's current mood. Talia opened a portal and he followed her into a small sitting room where Simon was sitting drinking a glass of champagne.

"Gwil, good to see you. I apologise I didn't have the chance to thank you myself before you left Crofton Hall, but I hope my being here today is a small indication of my gratitude."

"I am going to see how Hyax is holding up," Talia said. "A servant will be here in a moment to escort you to your seats."

Gwil, left alone with Prince Simon, felt a bit awkward. "You didn't have to do this, Your Highness."

“Please call me, Simon. You of all people have earned that right. And I am happy to be here. I would prefer to be watching you marrying Hyax, but I don’t believe this will ultimately prevent that.”

Before Gwil could reply a servant arrived wearing clothes far grander than usual and they followed him out and into the halls. As they emerged into the main part of the castle, he could see the building had been dressed for the occasion. Soft lights guided them to a room he’d never visited before, large and reminding him of a cavern where chairs had been arranged row after row. Most of the seats were taken and he received stares of interest and confusion as they passed by towards the front where two chairs waited for them.

Gwil sat next to Prince Simon as instructed. He wasn’t sure which of them was getting more attention. Gwil, who was one of the groom’s favourite fucktoys who had the balls to show up and watch his boyfriend get married, or the future king of a tribe they weren’t on the best of terms with.

“You’re not used to the spotlight, are you?” Simon said. He was more observant than the average royal.

“I’m able to do my job because most of the time I can hide in plain sight because no one cares I’m there.”

“No chance of that today.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have come.” He knew Hyax had wanted him to make a scene but now he was here he was no longer as convinced.

“Bollocks to that. You being here is a statement, you are supporting Prince Hyax, and you will be at his side no matter what. It is far more powerful than being pretty on his arm in a club.”

“I guess.” He couldn’t argue with the sentiment even if he didn’t like it much.

He glanced down to see a furry creature, akin to an overly large cat, stick his head between his ankles. He hadn’t expected him to be allowed out to roam the castle during such an important occasion.

Simon noticed. “Oh, is that a talkist?”

Gwil leaned down and scratched Meddi between the ears, setting off a loud purring noise. “This is Meddi, he belongs to Hyax.”

Simon laughed as Meddi jumped up and settled into Gwil’s lap and would not be moved despite Gwil trying to push him off. First time he’d met the furry git, he’d got into bed between him and Hyax, expanded in size and held Gwil in a bear hug.

“Another message,” Simon said fondly, tickling Meddi between his long pointed ears. “Those are like witches familiars to the fae, and here is Hyax’s talkist showing everyone who he favours.”

“My cat likes Hyax too.” Gwil thought Simon might be over-egging the proverbial pudding as Meddi was almost a fan of anyone who gave him bacon.

“But they’re traditionally used as collar bearers in a wedding ceremony, but not in this case it seems.”

Hyax had said he wasn’t going to exchange collars. “They’re not doing collars. Hyax said something about a bracelet.”

“Oh, that is interesting. I exchanged wedding rings with Robin, which is a vampire custom because they’re not keen on things getting in the way of a jugular, but it’s rare for fae not to have collars.”

“Hyax was insistent, said he wouldn’t do it. He said he wanted me to have his collar.”

“Best check it’s not silver, that’s the traditional metal,” Simon said, and it struck Gwil he was not keeping his voice down and anyone around would be able to hear. If anything, he was speaking louder than necessary. “But it’s another statement, Gwil. This ceremony is nothing more than a business transaction.”

“I am honoured to know my place in Hyax’s heart.”

Simon smiled, the tips of his newly acquired fangs just visible. “As it should be as the Prince’s Beloved. I do believe it will not be long before I am invited to your nuptials.”

There was a definite twittering from the other guests, Hyax’s plan to set the cat amongst the pigeons had worked. Gwil had been dreading today, and now he was going to sit back and enjoy being the reason behind the chatter.

CHAPTER THIRTY

H yax stared into the mirror, he was dressed to perfection, every inch of what a fae prince should be on his wedding day. There was no point in waiting for someone to race in and stop the proceedings, this marriage would have to go ahead. He'd been able to dictate the direction he'd wanted, with no talk of love or devotion. He had rejected anything that talked to commitment and the mentions of union and collaboration could be referring to their tribes and not him.

"I know this is not how you envisaged your wedding day to be, but at least try and enjoy some of it. Your Gwil is here, he's very dashing in his consort robe."

"Consort robe? You did that?" He turned to face his mother, not believing she'd have gone to the effort to have a robe made for Gwil.

"I did. In black and silver, I thought it would go nicely with your gold and he, well, black for a vampire seemed rather fitting." She tucked one of his braids behind his ear. "I delivered him to where Prince Simon was waiting. They should be in their seats causing a stir."

"You were so adamant that I could not have Gwil, yet here we are, you treating him more like my groom than Metra."

"Metra's a sneaky little mummy's boy. Gwil has stood by you, I admit I didn't expect him to and because of that, I'm willing to admit I was wrong. We would have been in this situation with the Elementa anyways, they have manipulated fae law to get what they want."

“Have you found out something new?” Hyax asked.

“Not me, but a potato on legs.”

There was only one creature he knew of that could be described in such a fashion. “You’ve met Copperpipe? What did he say?”

“Something about Gwil’s ex buying a lot of fae chalk. It has to be related to the mining activity, but we won’t be able to find out more now. Let’s get the wedding done and we can investigate further. Maybe you can speak to Metra?”

“I think he wanted to tell me something at the announcement reception but changed his mind. I can pretend that I could potentially come to tolerate him as a friend, if it meant he’d speak to me.” He shuddered. “But if he puts his hands on me, I might break them. If Gwil doesn’t do it first.”

She helped him place his ear chain correctly. He liked the way the gold traced the shape of the point and down to the lobe.

“You should know that King James wrote to me once Simon accepted to attend in his place,” Talia said with a smile. “He not only vouches for your Gwil, he went so far as to suggest that it would be in no one’s best interest if you and Gwil were kept apart. Do I want to know the details that has caused His Majesty to offer such vociferous support of a lower-level vampire?”

“Gwil did help save his son,” Hyax replied, not meeting Talia’s eye.

“I can understand that but there must be more to it, and I can’t help but think this might be linked to James’s status as a vampire-fae. Hyax, have you been using your magic through Gwil again?”

“How would you like me to answer that? Fully? Or so you can have plausible deniability?”

She raised an eyebrow. “For once, I want an honest answer.”

He been vague when she’d asked before, but now was the opportunity to show his mother the potential he could have if he stayed with Gwil. “Then, yes. As you surmised, it started with the Stone of Ljin, but we used another spell to track Prince Simon. I’ve been given access to ancient volumes belonging to a certain senior vampire’s library and the promise of King James to share others he owns.”

She didn’t look surprised, but he’d long thought she’d have known there would be something along these lines going on.

“A word of warning, Hyax. This should not become common knowledge. You are dabbling in things nobody truly understands, it could be dangerous.”

“From what I’ve seen so far, working with Gwil in this manner will bring us only enhanced capabilities.”

“Capabilities that have not been used for centuries. We do not know the ramifications, both for you and the political climate. I am your mother, I do worry about you.”

Maybe, but he thought the political angle was more her concern, or he wouldn’t be standing here about to get married. “I have been able to handle everything so far, and with Prince Simon and his father as allies, thanks to my recent help, if I have problems I have somewhere to turn.”

He wondered if she’d take more exception with this alliance with Calanti than the darker side of magic he was using.

“I sense you won’t be swayed on this,” she said after a few moments of awkward silence.

“No, if for no other reason than it proves that I have chosen my partner wisely, the magic wouldn’t work if we were incompatible.”

“We will discuss this another time, for now we have a wedding to attend. I’ll portal us to the door of the great hall so you can make your entrance.”

Traditionally, he should have walked the path leading to where the ceremony would take place, and he’d always imagined a glade or in front of a waterfall, but Metra did not deserve to be part of those dreams, and he would retain those for a future ceremony with Gwil.

“You should know I intend to give Gwil my collar. I already said I wouldn’t wear one for Metra and originally I thought for the sake of harmony I wouldn’t have my collar worn publicly by Gwil for a few months but to be honest I’m not sure I give a fuck about that.”

“I’m not surprised on either front there.” She squeezed his arm. “This will not be forever. And your life will barely change apart from the odd official engagement you’ll be expected to attend.”

When she had first announced he would marry Metra, he had feared the worse but now things had changed in so many ways and he could count on his mother’s future support.

They stepped through the portal into a lobby of the great hall. Metra’s family had originally offered their palace, but Hyax wanted the home ground advantage.

Talia kissed his cheek. “I will go and join your father.”

She left and he was alone. On the other side of the door were two guards who would open them on cue, but for now he had a few moments to compose himself before the ceremony. Apart from the grandeur of the setting and the clothing, this would be nothing like the last wedding he'd attended. If the congregation was expecting a fairy-tale event they would be disappointed, although he thought they should have known better. He'd never been romantically linked to Metra in public, and he never would. Today he would play dutiful prince, but that was as far as his compliance went.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Gwil had learnt patience over the years. He'd spent days tailing a client or chasing down a lead, but from the increased chatter from the congregation he gathered it wasn't a fae trait. He'd been stared at and pointed at and Simon had enjoyed waving at anyone who'd been too obvious. The music had been soft and lilting up until now but a fanfare of trumpets indicated things were starting.

He joined the others in standing as two pairs of wooden doors, on opposite sides of the room, opened. Meddi growled in annoyance but instead of dropping to the floor, he curled around Gwil's shoulders like an angry stole.

Hyax entered the room from the right, dressed in a robe of shimmering gold. He was beautiful, his long blond hair had been plaited into a sea of braids woven with jewels, but his expression was blank. Gwil couldn't recall Hyax ever looking so cold.

Across the way Metra had entered, wearing similar clothes and jewellery but Gwil wasn't impartial enough to admit he was as attractive as Hyax, he was a poor second to his stunning boyfriend. Even though Metra was smiling, there was little warmth to his expression.

They walked slowly towards each other and came to a stop in front of a purple-robed celebrant. Hyax had explained what would happen, and how it would differ from normal versions of their ilk. Usually, a choir would have accompanied their walk, and flower petals would have been conjured to rain down upon them but there was nothing save the two of them now standing opposite each other. There should have been songs of celebration and readings from joyous texts—there would be none of

that.

The celebrant stepped forwards. Her rigid stance suggested she was no more comfortable to be here than the grooms. “We are gathered to witness the joining of Prince Hyax with Prince Metra, bringing together the tribes of Tasharick and Elementa. I ask the congregation to remain standing as the proclamations are made.”

The vibration of wings and frantic whispering was on the verge of deafening and it took several moments for the audience to quieten. He glanced at Simon who appeared to be finding the whole thing amusing. Gwil supposed if he were watching someone else, he would have felt the same way, but he couldn’t escape that it was the man he loved in front of him with another.

He flinched as Simon took hold of his hand and squeezed and didn’t let go. “It’s all going to be okay,” he said.

Gwil smiled tightly but it was hard to believe.

Now order had been restored, the celebrant pressed on. Gwil thought she should have introduced herself, but maybe everyone else already knew her and he was the only one in the dark.

“Through the marriage of these princes, their tribes are pledging a union to bring forward a new era of collaboration.”

A cushion levitated from a table and on it were two silver bracelets. “Prince Hyax, please take up your offering and gift it to Prince Metra.”

Hyax picked up one of the bangles and Metra held out his hand as Hyax slid the bracelet onto his wrist.

“With this gift, I honour my tribe’s traditions and join our families. From this day hence, until a time it is decreed otherwise, you are my husband.”

Gwil wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly, if Hyax had said those words to him he would have questioned everything about their relationship, and that was the point. Hyax was not making a love match, and he would not pretend otherwise.

Metra was no longer smiling as he copied Hyax and placed the bracelet on Hyax’s wrist. “I accept your gift of union and present you with my own. We shall be husbands and our tribes will be joined.”

Gwil expected to have endured at least a kiss but that didn’t appear to be on the cards either. He heard someone whisper behind him: “I told you, Prince Hyax is loyal, not just to his tribe but to his Beloved.”

He didn’t see who said it, but he agreed with the sentiment.

The celebrant conjured a golden strand. “Please place your fingers together.”

Hyax and Metra grasped hands and the strand weaved around their wrists, it danced and flickered and Gwil found himself mesmerised by its motion as it finally settled in place.

“With the power invested in me, I pronounce you married. Blessings be.”

Hyax all but snatched his hand away and offered Metra his arm to take, which he did without hesitation. Gwil knew it was another sign, there was no way Hyax would give an indication he was in any way submissive to Metra.

He’d never been to a wedding like it. Even vampire marriages where the couple had no intention to remain monogamous pretended for the duration of the ceremony they

gave a shit about each other. Gwil had thought he'd be an emotional mess after watching Hyax marry someone else, but he'd been more jealous watching Hyax dance in clubs before they'd got together.

Jovial music accompanied the grooms as they walked down the aisle and out of the great hall. Simon let go of his hand and scratched Meddi under the chin. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No, I..."

"Come on, we should go and mill around the reception. Hyax will need to keep his hands off you."

They joined the others shuffling out of the hall but before he could enter the stateroom where the feast would be held, Talia appeared at his side. "Mr Hilt, do excuse the interruption, but could I ask you to come with me? I think Hyax would prefer his audience with you to be a private matter."

Simon sniggered as Gwil let Talia lead him into a portal. He stepped into a bedroom, although that wasn't a grand enough word for it, more like a boudoir, with a giant four-poster bed with rose petals strewn across the surface of the mattress. There was an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne and a platter of delicate canapés and sweet treats. This must be the honeymoon suite.

"Hyax will join you soon." She winked and disappeared through another portal.

Meddi, who had tagged along, jumped down and settled onto the bed. Today had been fucking weird but at least it looked like the night would make up for it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Hyax had zero interest of being in this room, being paraded around by a man who was technically his husband but in reality, was a piece of shit he wouldn't care if he never saw again. If he didn't need to find out more about the reasoning behind their marriage, he'd have fucked off already and would be balls-deep in Gwil, which was his endgame for the evening, the thought of which was helping him survive the small talk.

At least the food was good, and the waiters were bringing platter after platter of the traditional wedding favours, there would be no sit-down banquet. The guests would get plenty, and the quality of the food and drink was unsurpassable, but Hyax had no patience to sit for three hours pretending he was happy to be there. If he'd have had his way, they would have parted company after the ceremony, but that was never going to be accepted and in order for the Elementa not to insist on some of their more convoluted customs, there were others he'd included for appeasement.

Metra had already downed three glasses of ambrosia, but Hyax had been deliberate in his decision not to overindulge, which would be for later, once he was reunited with Gwil. He sipped his drink and offered another mindless thank you for attending to someone he didn't recognise.

King Daha, Metra's father joined them. "Gentleman, it is time for the sipping of the ladle."

He'd promised he'd remain for the traditional elements, but he had limits. He offered Metra his arm, just like he'd done as he'd left the great hall, the message clear he was

the dominant partner, fake relationship or not. Metra tutted but took his arm and fell into step behind Daha who escorted them to a plinth where a silver bowl was waiting, filled with a deep red liquid. This was an Elementa tradition, his own tribe weren't big on this sort of rubbish.

Daha picked up a silver ladle and stirred the liquid twice then held up the full ladle. "Drink deep from the heart and all other matters will follow."

He made sure to take the first sip, not wanting to share any more bodily fluids with Metra than he had in the past. The drink was pleasant, fruity and non-alcoholic, which was a pity as a bottle of vodka would have done it the world of good. Metra took his own sip.

A servant picked up the bowl, the tradition would continue with the other guests being offered a drink from the marriage cup.

"As fun as this has been, I have somewhere else to be," Hyax said.

"You can't leave yet," Metra said, grabbing his arm.

"I think you'll find I can do what the fuck I want. Take your hands off me."

"What will people say if you leave your husband so abruptly?" Metra insisted.

"The truth, that I only married you because of protocol and I would rather be shagging my sexy vampire boyfriend."

Metra's expression changed to contempt. "You're so in love with your fucking vampire, yet it's one of his own that's behind this marriage."

They'd heard rumours but Hyax shouldn't be aware of anything, and maybe Metra

would spill his secrets if he were to pretend to be surprised. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Metra paled. He glanced over his shoulder. “Not here. Give me five minutes of your time in private. I’ll explain what I meant, and I’ll even escort you out so we can look like we left together, and you can go wherever you want.”

Hyax didn’t know what Metra was playing at, but he was far too curious not to listen. He’d also not factored in leaving with Metra, but this way he wouldn’t have to answer questions on the consummation, as it would be assumed. “All right. Five minutes.”

There was a private balcony for the reception room they were using but it was roped off as it was too small to host more than a couple of guests at a time. Hyax unlocked the doors with a flick of his fingers and led Metra outside. Ostensibly, it could’ve appeared as if they were having a moment alone in the romantic sense, not something Hyax would encourage but it couldn’t be helped.

“Start talking, Metra.”

Metra stepped forwards and Hyax put out his hand to stop him. “You don’t need to be any closer than you are, I can hear you fine from here.”

“I’ve done what you asked,” Metra growled. “Last time we spoke, I admitted I didn’t behave as I should’ve but that’s history. We should move past it.”

Metra might have confessed to his poor behaviour, but Hyax didn’t want to rehash the past. “This is not the conversation I asked for, and you know it. As I said I will tolerate you, be less hostile now you have finally admitted you were a piece of shit. But I’ve not forgotten you sent your little whore to try and convince me you two weren’t screwing.”

“That was a mistake. It was part of the plan to have you more accepting of our marriage.”

Metra must think him an idiot. “By compounding a lie I was never going to believe?”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

Hyax wasn’t sure Metra was capable of original thought. “Whose was it?”

Metra kept glancing back inside, he couldn’t be more suspicious if he tried. “My parents. When my mother told me we had a way to deal with our significant financial issues, and that it involved you, I informed her of our past liaison and how we had ended. Once she’d calmed down and stopped accusing me of treason, she said I needed to fix things and suggested I try and convince you I wasn’t an asshole.”

“Too bad I’m not stupid.” He decided not to comment on the financial issues. “Now back to why we are here, what did you mean by the vampires being behind our marriage?”

Metra pouted, looking even more of a twat. “I shouldn’t have said anything, but since I did, I can’t put the genie back in the bottle. I don’t know who, just that some very rich fang was willing to pay a lot of money to have you marry me.”

This information tallied with what Gwil and his mother had told him. “Why would the vampires care who you marry?”

“They don’t care who I marry, just that you were getting married to someone who wasn’t Gwilym Hilt.”

Again, Metra seemed to corroborate Gwil’s intel, this time about an ex who might want to keep Gwil away from Hyax. “If it were a fae-led buyout, it might find it

feasible, but the vampires aren't against my relationship with Gwil. Quite the opposite."

Metra shrugged. "I don't know what else to tell you. My mother said a very rich fang, and I mean staggeringly so, was willing to pay an amount we couldn't refuse. That's a vamp in the singular, not all of them."

"And you don't know who?"

"No. I'm not even sure my mother knows because it was all done through various legal associates that we couldn't trace back."

"Then how do you know it wasn't all just a load of bollocks?"

"They paid ten percent of the total amount upfront to even talk to my mother." Metra winced. "I'm sorry, Hyax. But there was no way we were ever going to say no. We couldn't afford to take the chance on refilling the treasury."

Hyax needed to push, as there was more here than Metra was admitting to. "Come off it, I don't believe my hand in marriage was worth that amount of money."

"It made up a large part of it, but they were keen that it didn't appear obvious, so they've also offered to buy golashe from us, and we agreed to mine a specific quantity and then negotiated a continued supply."

Golashe was like normal chalk but had additional stabilising properties for use in a smattering of potion bases that made it useful but not really a sought-after commodity. "Why did they want golashe?"

"I don't think they wanted the golashe itself but as a cover. It's not like it can be used for anything dangerous, so we saw no reason to query. Not considering the price

agreed.”

Hyax couldn't imagine his mother agreeing to anything with such limited information, but then maybe Queen Vaness knew more but wasn't willing to share the details with Metra, which he could understand.

“Thank you. I appreciate you telling me.”

“Perhaps we could have a drink before you leave.”

Hyax snorted. “I don't think so. Although I expected you to be pushing for a consummation.”

“I know you think I was dropped on my head as a babe, but I did my own research. Our previous relationship counts, and I'm many things, but I'm not a rapist.”

He might not like him, and Metra had hurt him emotionally, but he'd never caused him physical pain or forced himself on him or anyone else as far as he'd heard. “True. Let's leave together, my thanks for your willingness to share the background. Dare I ask where you will spend the night?”

“Do you really want to know?”

He took that to mean Sital, and for the first time, he thought Metra might care for someone other than himself. “No. I can guess. You love him. Don't you?”

“Yes, and much like you and Gwil, I would never be able to call him mine. Worse for me is he is married, his wife knows, and has her own lovers, but our tribe's rules prevent me from giving him a similar role you gave Gwil.”

If he'd cared he should have realised there would be something, otherwise Sital

would have been front and centre of the congregation. Gwil had looked bewitching in his black consort role, and if his mother hadn't spirited Gwil away he'd have had trouble not fucking him over the nearest surface. She would have known it too, and it was for the best that he wasn't hanging off another man at his wedding.

"Talking of Gwil, it is time for me to leave."

"At first I thought you were laying it on thick about him to get back at me. I can see why you'd think him attractive but for some reason, he's become your everything."

Metra didn't deserve an explanation, and he wasn't going to get one. "Yes, he has. Now come on, unless you want to explain to the guests why I am leaving you on your own."

They returned to the reception hall, and after an endless procession of congratulations, escaped into the hallway. Hyax opened a portal, Metra did the same. "I daresay I will see you around, Metra. Hopefully not too soon."

The vision that greeted Hyax as he stepped into the conjugal chamber made him whimper. Gwil was reclining on the bed, still wearing his consort robe. This was probably the best gift he'd ever received.

Gwil grinned and popped a chocolate into his mouth.

"I see you're lounging around like you own the place," Hyax said, coming over to the side of the bed.

"I thought since I was the Prince's Pet, I should enjoy it as much as possible. I could get used to this—they even brought me blood. Good blood."

Hyax sat and laid his hand on Gwil's hip. "And I could get used to seeing you

wrapped in chiffon and silk.”

“I have to admit it feels nice, although it took a while to get used to not wearing trousers.”

Hyax took that as an invitation and slid his hands under the hem and up Gwil’s leg, to mid-thigh. “You do not know how hard I am now, seeing you in your consort’s robe.”

“I had planned to wear a nice suit but seems this is more fitting. You’re all gold and shiny and I’m black and brooding.”

Hyax leant over and rolled Gwil onto his back. “You’re fucking beautiful, and you’re mine.”

“I think you’re going to have to work hard to assure me of that because last time I checked I wasn’t the one you married.” Gwil’s tone was playful, not accusative.

“Do you have suggestions on how I can do that?”

Gwil’s eyes sparkled. “I suppose we have this marvellous bed. I bet you could put it to good use.”

Often he didn’t have the patience to remove Gwil’s clothes and would use a flash of magic to have him naked in a second, but peeling away his consort robes would be a treat he would not squander. He stroked his hand down the front of the robe, a series of buttons materialised and he unfastened them, popping each through its buttonhole and the silk of the robe sliding over Gwil’s body, revealing his moon-pale skin. He did allow himself to remove Gwil’s boxers and socks with magic, but he left the robe in place and he had the delicious idea to keep on his own—at least for the first time.

“I love seeing you naked,” Hyax said, and grasped Gwil’s cock, giving it a couple of

strokes before letting go and revelling in Gwil's cry of excitement.

"Don't tease, Hyax."

"I have no intention of teasing you." He conjured up several purple silk ribbons and a pot of sparkling lube. He held them aloft. "But I am going to put these to good use."

Gwil made a keening noise. "Fuck yes!"

As a young fae, Hyax had become quite proficient at tying knots, and he had enjoyed binding Gwil during their intimate encounters. He muttered a spell under his breath and the purple ribbons wrapped around Gwil's wrists and tied him to the bedframe.

Preparation was another area where he'd used his magic as a sort of assistant, but after a quick cleansing spell, he intended to use his fingers. His own cock was already hard, and he wanted nothing more than to be buried deep inside Gwil.

Gwil was on the submissive side when it came to sex. Hyax had been surprised at first, but then he'd realised Gwil was happy to have someone else take the lead in one part of life. For years, he'd not had a long-term partner, and it thrilled Hyax to know he had been gifted Gwil's trust.

He watched in fascination as he teased Gwil's entrance and let his finger slide in and out. Gwil had a dirty mouth—he babbled out a litany of demands begging to be fucked and only when Hyax was satisfied did he magically open his own robe to waist level and coat his cock with lube.

"You're not getting undressed?" Gwil asked, lifting his head.

"Later... I thought you'd appreciate me fucking you in my wedding garb, knowing that the other groom wouldn't get the chance."

“Fucking hell... do it!”

The feeling of sliding into Gwil was exquisite, his vampire physiology meant he was cooler than other humans or fae and Hyax loved the difference. He lost himself in the rhythm, stroking Gwil’s cock as he writhed against his bonds. Hyax had always loved sex, and with his connection to Gwil, sex was so much more. The heat rose in his belly, his wings vibrating as his orgasm built. There was nothing better.

Gwil cried out, his cum spurting over Hyax’s hand. Hyax picked up the pace, chasing his own climax and he reached his goal, gasping as he came deep inside the man he loved.

Several moments later, he was able to withdraw, but his head was spinning with delight. He banished away the ribbons and a quick cleaning spell removed any lingering residue.

He settled down next to Gwil and they exchanged a long, lingering kiss. “Love you,” Gwil said, his smile dopey.

“Mine.”

Hyax stroked his fingers over Gwil’s collarbone, his pale skin impossible for him to resist. His unadorned neck reminded him of the gift he’d intended to give Gwil, but he deserved to be presented with the collar in a special setting, and not have it feel like an afterthought.

He already had a place in mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Gwil let out his last appointment for the night. He'd spent several hours in his office seeing clients and working through the various open cases and planning their next steps. He had a load of invoices that needed to go out—he was behind and his lack of being on the ball annoyed him as he was usually up to date when it came to asking for payment, even if most of his clients were less diligent about paying him.

Hyax would be home soon. It had been a few weeks since the wedding, and apart from one public appearance with Metra, Hyax had kept his distance from his husband. He'd muttered something about keeping Friday free, which Gwil had noted but hadn't been able to get any reason why he would need to. Given Hyax had been overly attentive of late, Gwil wasn't about to argue, but the blond git was up to something.

He tidied away a stack of papers, locking them in a metal filing cabinet. One day he hoped to go paperless, but with some of his clients being older than the original printing press, they were set in their ways and weren't going to enter the digital age any time soon.

The bell on the door announced a new arrival, and he turned to tell whoever it was to make an appointment and come back another time unless they were about to lose a body part, but the words seemed to get stuck behind his teeth. Standing there was a man, well, a vampire, he hadn't seen in decades. He hadn't changed much, young-looking with a round baby face and owl-like glasses, and his brown hair neat with a centre parting. He was a short, compact man, whose fashion sense was lodged in the 1950s, right down to the brown suit and Windsor knot in his tie. Oliver Hoffman

hadn't changed at all.

"Oliver?"

"I heard on the grapevine you were looking for me."

Not technically correct. Gwil had returned from the fae realm and contacted Solivatus, filling him in on what they had learnt from Metra and Copperpipe. He'd not been sure what to do, if he confronted Oliver it wasn't going to change Hyax's situation. "You've a nerve coming here."

Oliver bounced on the balls of his feet, not appearing the slightest bit admonished. "You're looking well. Having a fae prince as a partner must be good for you."

"Pity you tried to prevent me from having that."

Oliver chuckled and sat uninvited. "I did nothing that ultimately interfered with what you have with Prince Hyax. If anything, you've got the best of both worlds, here you are, Prince's Beloved without any of the tedious wedding crap."

"Some of us wouldn't mind the wedding crap." Part of the reason their relationship had fizzled out was because he and Oliver didn't have the same ideas when it came to making a commitment, he hadn't been unfaithful but hadn't seen the need to make things official, which had led to a kind of stalemate and boredom.

"I'm sure you've other options. Doesn't the title of Prince's Beloved go some way to fulfilling those needs?"

Oliver had never been the romantic sort—it was why Gwil had doubted Oliver was still carrying a torch big enough for Gwil that would cause him to spend more money than hundreds of average men would see in their lifetime. "I still didn't want my

boyfriend to marry someone who wasn't me."

Oliver shrugged. "Honestly, I didn't think it was that big a deal."

The oblivious bastard didn't think of much beyond his fucking lab and experiments. He decided to change tactics. "Do you remember my sister, Penelope?"

Oliver winced, with good reason. "Of course. How is the delightful Dark Duchess of Linden?"

"Fucking pissed off. She thinks her brother's ex bought a royal family in order to try and get him back."

"Really? I never thought you two were that close." Oliver shifted in his seat. Penelope had shared some choice words with Oliver over the years they'd been together. "As far as I was aware, you didn't even go to her wedding."

How did he know that? "Why are you keeping tabs on me?"

"Not tabs as such. We didn't part as enemies, I'd never see you out of sorts."

"But you see no issue marrying off my boyfriend to someone else. Oliver, please tell me Penelope wasn't right, and you don't want me back."

Oliver appeared genuinely surprised by the question. "Why would I? We spent long enough together already. I'm more than happy with the young gentleman I keep around for the odd bit of relief."

"Still dating the model then?" It came out sounding more bitter than he intended.

"I wouldn't call it dating. I wouldn't even say friends with benefits, just when we're

in the same place it makes sense. And only if I'm not busy. Some of my experiments cannot be interrupted."

Gwil had grown tired of coming second to a cauldron, and while Hyax was a keen brewer in his own right, he'd never felt he was less important than freshly diced lizard spleen. "So, you didn't tell Queen Vaness of the Elementa tribe that you didn't care who Hyax married as long as it wasn't me, and so her son would be the perfect option?"

Oliver puffed out his cheeks and screwed up his nose, which was a sure sign he was being asked something he didn't want to answer. "I might have used words in a roundabout fashion, but it was more that I needed to find a way to get to the golashe without them figuring out why. So, for them, the marriage is the real reason and the golashe was sort of thrown in for good measure to cover my tracks."

If the bastard wasn't already dead, Gwil would have killed him. He had a machete in a cupboard, he could lop off his head, but then someone would be bound to come looking for him. "You sold me out for a load of chalk. What the fuck are you playing at?"

"It's not chalk. Its value isn't obvious to a mere layman like yourself."

"Oliver, I'm about to fucking blow my top. As it stands, you've sold my happiness down the river for fae chalk, so you spluttering and being all indignant ain't gonna cut it. I want the truth."

"I don't owe you anything."

"No, but Sebastian Hewel and Liam Cartwright both owe me personal favours and I'm not above calling them in for petty revenge."

He knew they were big names to throw around, but Oliver was too rich and influential to threaten him with someone of less significance.

“How did you get so friendly with two Heads of House?”

At least he'd not dismissed him outright. “I did some work for the Flints, the nature of which is covered by client confidentiality. Now stop being an arsehole and tell me what you did.”

His reputation was growing, and Oliver would know it wasn't beyond Gwil's sphere of influence, especially considering his sister, that he might be able to help Vampire Council members.

“I'd heard that Queen Talia wasn't too keen on you and your precious Hyax's relationship... not surprising really, but I didn't care until I heard Queen Vaness had put her son on the suitor list for Prince Hyax.”

Oliver had the sort of money that he could find out information, and if he was keeping track of Gwil this would be something he'd collect. “What of it?”

“Like I said, I didn't have a horse in the race until I realised I'd cracked a missing piece of my new blood-batching process that will elevate the operation exponentially. Trouble was it was a fae mineral that I didn't have ready access to.”

Oliver's research decades before had led the way for the whole bottled blood industry. He'd tinkered for years before he'd perfected the process, and he wasn't the sort to stop playing. Knowing Oliver, the improvements would create a new stepwise change, and he wasn't going to let something as insignificant as his ex-boyfriend's happiness get in the way. “The golashe?”

“It's an extract from golashe, but yes.”

“And you couldn’t just buy this from the Elementa without involving me and Hyax?”

“I couldn’t let them know the truth, they’d start asking a fortune for the stuff. I found out they were on shaky ground financially but that just meant they’d want as much as they could get, so I came up with the idea that I would give them the money if Hyax married Metra to stop Hyax marrying you, and golashe was the cover.”

The bastard was fucking proud of his thinking. “I can’t believe you’d do that to me! Actually, I can. You don’t care about anything, do you? You’re not capable of it.”

“That’s not fair. You’ve not suffered and give it a little while and Hyax can divorce Metra.”

“But I bet you’re paying the Elementa a monthly fee for them to remain married, and they ship you your rocks as if that’s what you’re paying for.”

“Gwil, you were always cleverer than you looked. It’s why we lasted so long.” Oliver smiled, the fucker thinking he was paying Gwil a compliment.

“You need to stop.”

“No, not yet. I will, but I need a few more months. Then I’ll have found a way to synthesize the extract and I won’t need the raw golashe.” He shrugged. “I have a contract through to the end of the year. It’s magically binding, I couldn’t break it if I wanted to.”

“I’m sure Hyax could help.”

“I’m not sure the two tribes are going to want to admit they were manipulated by an outside influence when all they need to do is wait it out a few months.”

Gwil knew Oliver was a selfish cunt, deep down he'd always been a bit of a shit, and once they'd broken up, Gwil hadn't missed the fucker and had considered himself well out of long-term relationships until Hyax had come along and blindsided him.

“This isn't fair to me or Hyax.”

“You're immortal, what's a few months?” Oliver said, unrepentant. “I can offer you some sort of gift. You probably aren't in need of money but maybe I can be of help in other ways. I've a few friends in need of the services you could offer.”

Gwil realised this was probably the best he was going to get. Men as rich as Oliver moved outside the law and no one was going to charge in and make him do right by Gwil—not when Oliver was right and it would all blow over in a few months. Oliver hadn't offered to help his business previously, it had been a bit of a sore point towards the end of their relationship.

“You were never keen to help me with contacts. In fact, I'm pretty sure you said it wouldn't be ethical—which coming from a vampire was a bit ridiculous.”

Oliver chewed the inside of his cheek, a sure sign he was on the back foot. “Perhaps I haven't been fair to you in this whole fae-golashe-marriage thing.”

This was the closest he'd ever come to an apology or any acceptance that Oliver Hoffman was capable of making a mistake. “So, what, this would be your idea of reparation?”

“Maybe.” That looked like it hurt to say. “I have some very important friends, friends and acquaintances who could use the discreet services of a professional such as yourself. And now you can claim to have come recommended from the senior echelons of vampire society, I would not think it inappropriate to proffer the relevant introductions.”

He wasn't going to get a full apology or anything else in terms of compensation, and he'd bet the sort of cases Oliver's contacts would put his way would be a lot more interesting than poltergeist ferrets.

"Then I look forward to hearing from you in the future."

Oliver smiled and stood. He wasn't unattractive, nowhere near Hyax's league, but he was a self-absorbed twatwaffle who didn't like people much and had more money than he'd ever spend, even being immortal. Gwil struggled to see why he'd spent so long with him.

"Take care of yourself. If you do manage to become Hyax's second husband, I'd love an invite to the wedding."

Gwil walked over and opened the door. "No fucking chance. Have a nice rest of your night."

Oliver left, chuckling. Gwil wondered how he was going to explain it all to Hyax without him going ballistic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Hyax stared across the London skyline, the rooftop bar empty, its usual patrons kept away, as Hyax had plans and enough money to make them happen. London by night had a specific quality that was hard to pin down. Maybe it was because the city was almost as busy at night as in the day, or that the urban sprawl cast a pattern that was almost as bewitching as the night's sky.

“Now this is posh,” Gwil said, sipping a glass of good champagne. “I didn’t think you were a fan of this part of the city. Didn’t you say there were too many arseholes in suits?”

“None of them are here now.” The square mile was loaded with sacks of skin who thought they were important because they wore expensive watches, but by now most had fucked off home to their overly medicated spouses or were snorting coke off a hooker’s arse.

Gwil pouted. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

Hyax ran his finger down the front of Gwil’s waistcoat. “You’re not an arsehole.”

“Can I quote you on that, as I’m sure you’ve called me one several times?”

“How about overbearing twat instead?”

Gwil shrugged. “Been called worse. And that was only yesterday.”

Gwil had sat him down the evening before and calmly explained what his ex-boyfriend had admitted to and Hyax had thought he had done well not to blow the roof off the house with a discharge of anger-induced magic. An hour of raging later, he'd calmed down and realised there was nothing they could do about the situation for the moment, but Hyax would find a way at some point, to make Hoffman pay. He didn't know how yet, but he had the time and the stubbornness to do so.

"I did apologise."

"Calling into doubt my taste in partners doesn't say much about yourself." Gwil smirked. "You made up for it once you'd calmed down. Repeatedly."

"I hope that tonight will also show my appreciation for you, and everything you've done for me." Gwil could have dumped his sorry arse several times over what had happened but instead he was still at his side. "I love you, my pointy-toothed muppet."

"You too, my favourite sparkly douchebag."

Hyax decided now was the perfect time, he reached into his jacket pocket and brought out an oblong jewellery box. He wanted to make this special, and somewhere Gwil would appreciate. This might be a fae tradition but London was Gwil's home, so doing what he planned in the city was perfect. "Usually us fae exchange collars when we marry, but there was never a possibility of me giving this to Metra."

Gwil took the box and opened the lid to reveal the strip of shiny metal. "Silver?"

"It was originally, but I've altered the atoms and it's platinum now." He reached out and gently tugged on Gwil's tie. "Will you wear it?"

Gwil hesitated. "Won't your family be upset? Or your husband?"

"I told my mother of my plan to give you my collar. As for Metra, I don't give a fuck."

I'm pretty sure he gave Sital his, and not recently either."

Gwil stroked his thumb along the strip of platinum. "Do you care?"

It was a loaded question. He'd been so angry at Metra, he'd held onto the rage long after the event, and Gwil had asked at least once why he was so bothered, and why he hadn't let it go if he was truly over Metra and no longer cared. Now Metra was his husband, he guessed it would be even more pertinent.

"I guess I cared that he lied to me, and now he's admitted the truth I can close that chapter. It stopped being about the cheating and more about the lies, and that he thought me stupid enough to believe them. I couldn't give a fuck who wears his collar, only that you would be willing to wear mine."

"Am I supposed to get a fancy ceremony or will being up here looking out across London count?"

"If you'd rather wait?—"

"I didn't say that." Gwil pulled at his tie, sliding it free and shoving it into a pocket, then he popped the top button of his shirt. "I'll wear it, but I don't have one to give to you."

Hyax liked the idea of wearing something of Gwil's. Collars were fae tradition, but he could have one made, or there were rings but maybe they could save those for something else. "It doesn't have to be a collar, choose me something you'd think I'd like."

"Simon told me Meddi was meant to be a collar bearer, maybe I could get Midnight to cough you up a sparkly hairball."

"Fucker." He laughed. "She thinks she owns our house so she probably thinks she

owns me too.”

“She’s a cat. We’re her slaves. Or I am, you’ve just not had all your training yet.”

“I should bring Meddi to meet her.”

“I don’t know, introducing the kids, it’s a big step.”

“I think we’re ready. We’re living together, we’ve a house.” He was playing along but Gwil was his happy ever after. Fae lived a long time, Gwil was, in theory, immortal, and he wanted to spend forever with him.

Gwil smiled. “Now, mark me as the Prince’s Beloved.”

He picked up the collar, discarding the box and fastened it around Gwil’s neck. He’d never been so deeply in love before, everything before Gwil was a pale infatuation in contrast and he never would have thought he’d find his happy ending with a vampire.

Gwil pressed forwards and kissed him, and Hyax had to stop himself from testing his new portal skills and toppling Gwil backwards through one and straight onto their bed.

“Thank you. I’ll take great care of it.”

“It suits you. A beautiful present for a beautiful man.”

Gwil snorted. “You’re the beauty in this relationship, I’m the blood-sucking monster.”

He tapped Gwil on the nose. “My blood-sucking monster. And don’t you forget it.”