



Starfall (Stand Alone Tales #20)

Author: *Viola Grace*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Two women, one destiny. Stars have fallen and become human, but life is complicated, and love is terrifying.

Emery has helped her friend gain her freedom from her family of ogres, but now, she has to figure out what to do once her birth father loses his head. Getting revenge for her mother had consumed her life, but now that it was over, she had to figure out what would happen next.

Rowen manifests autumn and admires Emery from afar in a different form. They have verbally sparred, but he kept her at bay, knowing that his true match had a far different aspect. Imagine his surprise when the woman he wants shifts into the woman he is destined for. Friend and lover in one bundle. He's willing to fight for her, but she beats him to it.

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Emery got dressed and headed back to work. She took her car and parked in her reserved spot in the lot. The diner was bustling with regulars and holiday visitors. Folks who had family renting places in town all sent them to the diner.

She walked in and waved at the ladies, heading for her office. Whether she needed to work or not, she had to get payroll in. Everybody else got paid first and foremost, and then, she would take her hours. She had been getting paid regularly for the last four years. Business was good.

She headed to the till and asked Sue, Are you guys doing okay?

You look like hell, and yeah, we are doing good.

Payroll is in. Payments should be hitting in the next six hours. I do love transfers.

Sue smiled. Me, too. Thanks for making sure we got paid before the holidays.

No problem. It s what I wanted when I started, and it s still what I want now.

Sue looked at her. You need a nap.

I just woke up.

Go back to bed. You look like hell. What happened last night?

A friend had a crisis, and I jumped in with both feet.

As is your way. Sue winked.

Yeah. I think today feels like a PJs and popcorn with bad movies kind of day.

Oh, heavy muscle coming our way. Have you pissed him off lately?

No. She looked toward Rowen making his way to the sidewalk, and a blush formed on her cheeks.

Sue gasped. Oh, wow. You have a thing for him.

Don't say thing in reference to him, Emery muttered.

She swallowed and looked up at him from her daywear shape. So, Row. What do you know?

I know you need to be in bed. Why are you here?

Payroll.

Understanding lit his eyes. Ah. So, are you finished?

I am. Everybody's paid. Did you come over here to get away from the sound of grunting?

We just had a sauna installed, and it isn't open to the public yet. Did you want to loosen up some muscles?

Emery saw Sue staring with fascination as she got her plates. Yes, I do.

He grinned. Would you come with me then? I promise to minimize the grunting for

now.

Um. Okay.

Her staff was staring as she took the hand presented to her, and they walked out together. I am never going to live this down.

He kept her close as they crossed the street. Sure, you are. Everyone is entitled to change their mind.

I am still on the fence about that.

He chuckled. I jump fences.

She sighed. Of course you do.

He opened the door without letting go of her hand, and the clanking of the equipment proved that the muscle nuts like to rise early.

She wiped her shoes on the mat, and he led her to the back and past some construction areas marked with safety tape. She heard some snickering and dug her heels in. She slowly turned and stared at the two men who were looking at her with Rowen. She glanced at her new friend. I am just going to deal with this.

He let go of her hand, and she stalked over to the guys and spoke to them for a moment. They backed away, and then, she took a three-hundred-pound barbell, lifted it, and set it off the pathway. Don't be messy. This is a nice place. Keep it nice.

She turned and walked back to Rowen, taking his hand again. He smiled, and when they were on the other side of the door, he murmured, What did you say to them?

I just mentioned that I had been in a bad fight and showed them some bruises. And that you were being a friend and letting me use the new facilities out of pity.

He tightened his grip on her hand as they walked to the new sauna. There was a towel rack outside. Sorry, but there isn't a change room here that you would want to use. The change room for the sauna isn't finished yet.

She shrugged and removed her clothing right there, wrapping herself in the towel and then folding her clothing neatly.

There is a vestibule inside with a shelf. You could have changed there.

Emery sighed. Of course. Thanks for that.

No problem. He opened the door, and the warmer air helped her relax a little. She put her clothing on the convenient shelf and then moved to the inner chamber.

The heat wrapped around her, and she added some water from next to the heating unit and then clambered up the benches to the highest one.

When Rowen entered wearing a towel that did not cover much, she tried not to stare.

He chuckled. You can look. As we discussed, I worked hard at it.

She sighed and scooted down to the same level, looking him over. Well done. My compliments to the construction crew.

He chuckled and then paused. Emery, I noticed something this morning before you concealed it.

Her hand went to her arms, and she covered the skin on the inside of each forearm.

Oh. That.

Yeah. If you don't want to tell me, that's fine.

Well, I gave you the short notes on my life. She exhaled. I skipped over a bit.

Like?

My parents adopted me before they found out I was an ogre. When they figured it out, they brought me to counselling and tried to get me to stifle myself. That is where this body came from. The other form was shameful. My claws were too sharp and limbs too long. They made me hide, and I did... but the ogre nature came out and wanted to be seen, so she-I started cutting myself with those deadly claws.

Your parents noticed?

They did, and they found me a counsellor. The cutting mostly stopped, but I still hated my other face.

Understanding flickered on his face. The one that scared your family.

That would be the one.

The one that I dream of.

If you say so.

Tonight is Yule. New starts for a new year. Why don't we try and see if we can't bring both of yourselves together.

It's the same personality; it is just the body that is the problem.

The body isn't the problem. Guilt is your problem.

It isn't a problem; it is a condition. I am half ogre, half human. My father took my mother by force. I was the result, and she didn't make it. I have the soul of a star and the body of a halfling. I am complicated, and it is even too difficult for me to grasp sometimes. She chuckled. Oh, and I took my father apart yesterday, so I am really unsure of what to do. I know the council has purged ogre blood before, so I am waiting for that to happen. They were upset to find out about that family living in their midst.

What about Orla?

She's fine. She doesn't have ogre blood. She shrugged. I don't know what will happen if they try to expel me. We are a set of stars, Orla and myself. Can she remain here if I am gone? If I die, does she die? If I am imprisoned, do I have to wait until she's gone? It could take centuries. I don't know, and I can't ask the council. They freak out when I show up.

She looked down where her scars were showing again and blinked. She was letting her defenses down, and the fact that he seemed to want the big, scary her and the little curvy her was probably working on her psyche.

Emery sighed. Right. Sorry. I am going to try and relax now.

He took her hand and pulled her against him. I get it. I am in this shape right now because even though Autumn is fused into me, my mind is fixed on the thought that it could leave anytime, and I would be back in my chair, fighting to stay moving. I am giving myself the best chance if things change.

She was lying against a lot of bare skin. She didn't say anything. She had already done the same thing. She had prepared to have nothing and had squirrelled away as

much as she could.

She breathed slowly, and to her surprise, she felt herself slipping into sleep.

She heard a soft croon and just let herself slide against him. Her aching body considered it the best idea ever.

She woke up sweaty and slippery but still wearing the towel. Rowen nuzzled her temple. Welcome back. Feeling relaxed?

Yeah. My arms are feeling better. It takes more effort than I thought. All that practicing, and I nearly blew it at showtime.

You knew you would be facing an ogre?

Sure. But I didn't want to take him down with light. He didn't deserve my light. He got the blades that a friend made a few years ago.

Those. I cleaned them for you. They are still at my home.

She tried to sit up but was already sitting up and leaning against him. Am I a ventriloquist's dummy?

Well, as enticing as the idea of sliding my hand in to see what sounds you make, I believe that it was just more convenient for me. You were sliding down my chest, and your instinct was to stop yourself with your teeth. He chuckled. She looked over to where she had been leaning, and there was a puncture and drag mark on his right pectoral.

She covered her mouth. I am so sorry.

He chuckled. It was a little surprising, but you didn't fight when I moved you.

Her face was on fire. Oh, I am so sorry. I will look into how to counteract that.

What? Are you venomous?

She scrambled off his lap. No. Not like that, but your love life is about to tank until we get that taken care of. I know someone who has the antivenin.

Wait. You are venomous.

She shrugged and shifted, opening her mouth. These canines are. They are... never mind. This happened once before when they were growing. I bit a friend of mine, so my parents took me to an alchemist. She bit her lip. Let's get dressed.

He chuckled and got to his feet. I don't understand the fuss.

You will.

Sweaty and nervous, she got dressed and sent a frantic text. When she got a response a moment later, she slumped in relief. She has the antivenin. Can you come with me, please?

We could shower.

I don't have a change of clothing, and I just want to get that stuff out of you.

He grunted and got dressed. When they were both decent, he took her hand. I am parked out back. We can go from there.

He seemed to be taking it seriously, so she nodded, and he walked her through the

back of the building, opened the door, and held it for her, boosting her into the vehicle. Where are we going?

Lathom Street. Number twelve.

Nice area. He helped her buckle up even though she didn't need it, and then, he moved around and got behind the wheel. They were driving for a few minutes when he asked, So, what will happen if I don't get treatment?

That is best left for the alchemist to explain. Emery was nervous.

Is it dangerous?

It is embarrassing. There are options for you, and I can't really offer anything to you. You have to be told your treatment options. I am not equipped to notify you of them.

But it was your bite.

To the magical communities at large, ogres are rabid dogs. I am trying to get you taken care of so that they don't come for me.

I am a seasonal avatar. I will be fine.

Weeeelllll, Nori will explain.

He snorted. I am very curious.

Yeah. Well. It goes beyond embarrassing.

Definitely curious.

He drove and parked in the drive of the large home. A cheerful woman opened the door and waved at them, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

Emery got out of the vehicle and dropped to the ground, closing the door and walking toward the alchemist. Rowen walked behind her, and they were welcomed into the room that smelled of baked goods.

Nori, you are looking well.

Nori chuckled and kept walking, opening the pantry door and walking through it. So are you and your friend. I expected he would be pale, shaking, and masturbating.

Uh, he s made of stern stuff.

The hall opened into the lab, and the insulated container was sitting on the wooden table.

Rowen said, Why would I be jerking off?

Nori smiled. Emery s venom is supposed to be used for mating purposes with another ogre. Frankly, she wasn t supposed to be a female. Male ogres choose the sex of their offspring; female ogres choose who will father them. She bites her mate, and when she has sex with him, his sperm is carrying tracer rounds. She marks him as acceptable genetic material.

Emery didn t look at Rowen. I told you it was embarrassing.

Nori smiled. Since Em isn t making the introductions. I am Norianna, but everybody calls me Nori. Em and I were in the same foster home when we were younger, and when she had this issue during puberty, she knew I could lend a hand. You are?

Rowen. Avatar of Autumn.

Nori stared. Well, you both smell sweaty, so I am guessing at what the bite interrupted.

Emery whipped her head up. No. I wouldn't. I was in a sauna, and I dozed off. I must have ogred out in my sleep and bit him in the chest.

Rowen shrugged. She isn't wrong. She relaxed and pitched forward. The puncture occurred a moment later.

Nori nodded. She must not have closed and activated the venom, which means this will make you immune to her bite in the future.

He frowned. I don't want that.

Emery whipped her face toward him. Don't be stupid.

He looked at her in surprise. I have been seeing you since I was a teenager. I am not going to give up on you. Or on us, rather.

She frowned. Now that I have been exposed to the council, I am not going to have long out and about.

Nori paused. You have been seen?

I have been observed. I killed my father, and Orla finished off the other two. She had to live with them; I didn't.

Nori blinked. Right. And since her family were technically in good standing with the council, there had to be witnesses to their end and to the fact that they were illegal

non-humans.

Emery snorted. Like me.

Nori looked at her. You have special circumstances. You are a fucking star, for pity's sake.

Yeah, and the next time I am in a body, I will be known as the ogre-star. Delightful. Shit. Can you check him to see if he has been contaminated?

Nori snorted. I told you not to say it like that. It's a normal response, and the first time, it was defensive.

Emery hugged herself. Check him, please.

Rowen shrugged. I don't feel odd.

Nori sighed and got a magnifying glass. Can you show me the area in question?

He shrugged and pulled his shirt off. Nori's eyes widened. Whoa.

Emery stifled a flick of possessiveness. Nori, the mark?

Right. Nori used the magnifying glass and examined the bite. It's shallow and doesn't look like you activated your marker. Sir, do you want the antivenin as a preventive?

It will keep me from being identifiable to her as a partner?

Nori paused, and understanding dawned. Yes.

Then, no. Leave things as they are.

Emery jerked her head up. She had been staring at her feet. Rowen, take the meds.

He shook his head. No. I have spent my life knowing you were for me, and I am not going to miss my chance with something to block your effect on me.

Don't be stupid.

He laughed. That is possibly the most direct you have ever been.

She scowled. If that stuff activates, you will be miserable. Once it populates through your body, you will be locked.

He smiled. What if that is where I want to be?

Nori paused. I will take some swabs and double-check exposure. Rowen, you will have to keep your shirt off for a while. I will consider it payment for my time.

Emery huffed and flapped her arms in the air. I am going to find the cat.

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Nori sighed as she got the swabs ready. Yeah. She's upset. Really upset. She hasn't accidentally bitten someone for a decade, and that wasn't her fault.

What happened? A boyfriend?

Nori smiled at his jealous tone. Yeah, these two were going to collide and lock eventually. No. Well, it was a high school date-rape attempt. He forced her head down, and her teeth emerged. Guess where he got bit?

And she called for help?

Nori nodded. Of course. I had already been experimenting on her venom, so I was ready to work on things. It wasn't a very large issue if you get what I mean. Even with the swelling.

Was he a warlock?

No. Human. It brought him to the edge of death and of pulling his own dick off. It hit him hard, and she was terrified the same thing would happen to you.

He blinked as she started to clean the already-healing punctures. Why is she so scared?

Her parents adopted her, but when they knew what she was, they made sure she could successfully hide it. It was reinforced that ogres were hated and hunted, and the fear took hold. It must be a strange thing, knowing that your natural body is hated by folk you have never met. She capped the first sample and kept working.

I can't imagine. When did she find out she was a star?

She was little. Very little. I think she said she was able to express it when she was four or so.

Power as a toddler and hated as a teen. No wonder she's nervous.

She is but is also one of the sweetest, most supporting and most generous people I have ever met. She is a target for many but still puts herself between the vulnerable and danger. Every time. That's why you are here. She doesn't want you trapped because the scent of you triggered a mating reflex.

He jolted. Is that what that was?

You missed that part? Her teeth appear for defense or mating, and if she was asleep against you, she wasn't feeling defensive.

Rowen paused as she capped her last swab. I guess that is true.

Also, she flashed hot when you took your shirt off and I commented. So, she is definitely interested in you.

What do you mean flashed hot ?

The eclipse came to her eyes. She smiled. If you have seen her other form, you know about her eyes.

He smiled, and there was slow recognition in his eyes. Yes, I have seen it, and I want to see it again.

Then, go out to my back yard before my cat kills her. She is an aggressive hugger. Nori shooed him away.

Rowen grabbed his shirt, and she called out, Don't bother getting dressed on my account.

He laughed and went out back.

Nori did the test and sighed. No infection. Too bad. A successful bite would have sped things up.

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Emery sat in the back yard on the lush grass. There shouldn't be grass, but Nori's place defied all normal expectations. It was a warm summer afternoon in the middle of winter.

She smiled and stroked the head of the three-tailed cat on her lap.

You look comfortable, Rowen spoke softly.

Emery looked up at him and nodded. I am. It is very comfortable down here, and Archimedes here won't let me up.

Does he have three tails?

He does. He's one of Nori's first experiments and is a sweetie.

He looks sweet. How does she keep him fed?

There are no rodents or stray sheep in the area, and her grocery bill is huge. She chuckled and kept rubbing the head that was as large as her thigh from knee to hip.

He crouched next to her, and his shirt was dangling from his hand. You are upset.

I was. I am getting better. She sighed. I am sorry I was so agitated. I wasn't expecting the last forty-eight hours.

I wasn't either, but I am glad it has happened. This was the shove between us that I think was needed.

Great, so if I behead another ogre, we can have a first date.

He stroked hair from her cheek. Or we could just go to the party tonight and try and dance.

She stared at him. I don't have an invite. I know those things are fairly strict. There isn't a plus-one vibe.

I will ask Hunter for one. He pulled his phone out and sent a message.

It isn't necessary. I don't think I am up for a party.

What aren't you telling me?

I am banned from council events. The human nature and ogre blood make me unwanted.

He paused and then scratched the kitty's head. Please allow me to deal with that.

She snorted. Why would you want to? It is a bit of an old boys club as far as I have been able to ascertain.

Yes, well, there are more ladies nowadays. More women with power are entering the space.

I am firmly in monster class.

Then, they will make room for you, or every grain harvest will fail.

Emery looked at him. Don't be stupid. I have read all the books about ogres rampaging and spoiling the ground they walk on. Eating men and magic in equal

measure.

I will have to brush up on my ogre history. Rowen sighed.

Don't. It's gross. I am very glad that I didn't grow up in it. She played with Archimedes' ear.

Nori came out and said, Rowen is clear. No contamination, no venom, and the bite has already closed.

Emery looked at him. You can put your shirt on.

He smiled. You sure?

Yes. Archimedes, get off.

The cat opened his eyes a slit and settled back.

Baby boy, I have to go.

Rowen said, She needs to leave with me.

Nori shouted, No! as Emery grabbed for the tails as the huge cat tackled Rowen and tried to get him into a position to crush his skull with his enormous fangs.

Rowen was surprisingly calm. He got his hand under Archimedes' jaw and pushed back. Emery watched as he slowly grew his horns, and his neck had thickened to support them.

Rowen got to his feet and looked at Archimedes. Stop. She is not leaving town.

The big cat shuddered and took the shape of an adult. You said she was leaving with you.

She is, but only for today.

I hear the decrees. No ogres in town. She s an ogre.

Decrees can be changed. So, did they know you could shift?

Archimedes snorted. No. Why?

Emery stared at him. Because you are taller than I remember. You can turn your tails off?

Of course.

Why did you let me cuddle you all those times?

He looked at her as if she wasn t bright. Because you smell good.

Rowen went around him and wrapped his arms around Emery. She does, but you can t have her.

Archimedes growled. She s ours.

Rowen was surprised. Ours?

The beasts, the shifters, the changelings. She is ours. She takes care of us, feeds us, shelters us. She guards us, so she is not leaving. We will tear this town to the ground if you try and make her leave. He leaned forward and growled.

Nori blinked. Archimedes?

Please call me Archie.

Can I get you some pants?

Do I need them? Archie frowned. You run around the house naked.

When there are guests, clothing is standard.

I will return to my natural form then. He disappeared into fur and lashing tails.

Emery blinked. Did he just...

Rowen chuckled. He did.

And he s...

He is.

Nori paused, Glad I delayed the neutering.

Archie growled with his tails tucked in.

Rowen reached out, and Archie s muzzle sniffed his fingers. Even if Emery cannot take care of you and yours, I will take it on.

There was a weird sort of shimmer in the air.

Nori whispered, An oath from a season. He s locked in now. As long as you are alive, you are in charge, but as soon as you pass, it will be all him.

Emery asked Archie, You are good with that?

He purred and rubbed up against her.

Rowen pulled her away and went, No more marking her.

Emery was off her feet and dangling. She had shifted to her tall form and was still dangling. You don't know what you are promising.

You will tell me when it is too much, and I will take care of it, he murmured.

She turned her head, and his stag-like face was near hers. Well, at least the rescue, caf, and hostel will be okay if I get booted out of town.

Nori sighed. And your other businesses will simply be sold off.

Rowen smiled. Other businesses?

She shrugged. One or two.

Nori snorted. Six more plus the three she mentioned. She's an owner of small businesses that need help. She gets them up and running and popular again while keeping a certain amount aside to help the magical who are having a rough time. She gives meals, lodging, and medical assistance to a variety of creatures.

He smiled at Emery. You do?

Well, yeah. I know what it's like not to know where your next meal or a safe place to sleep is. My adoptive parents were great, but they wanted me to be a responsible adult the moment I turned eighteen.

Nori snorted. You mean you took off because they were after you to have your soul split.

They wanted what was best for me and thought that if they could get the ogre portion out, I could live a nice, normal life. They tried; it hurt; I left the next day. I don't go home for holidays or anything. Emery sighed. Can you put me down?

I can. Yes. He nuzzled her temple and inhaled. I don't want to.

Why not?

You fit me, body and soul. I want to see your star blaze and your teeth bite. His voice was a rumble of sound that barely formed words. Have you ever ridden a stag through the woods?

Um. No.

Would you like to? I can arrange it. I will kneel down, and you can climb onto me, moving around until you are comfortable. Then hold on, and I start to move.

She blinked slowly. Uh. I have no idea how to respond to that.

You just have to say yes when you are in the mood for it. I will handle the rest.

Emery stared into his eyes and at his horns.

Nori chuckled and cleared her throat. Well, if he isn't infected, can I get fresh venom samples from you for antivenin? Your contribution works on all ogre bites. Takes care of them right away.

Okay, but do you have something for me to rinse out with?

Yeah. This time, I got it ready. So, will you?

Um, yeah, I will be there right away. She cartoonishly pumped her arms and legs.

Rowen snorted and set her down. I get the idea.

She settled, walked back to the lab, and got the extraction kit out. It was like collecting from a snake, but she had to provide the pressure. Her face always ached after extraction.

The other two were just coming into the room when she bit through the cloth and rammed her thumbs against the roof of her mouth as she milked the venom. It smelled like grape soda and acid, and she faced the mirror to see when her fangs were empty.

The steady stream of purply crimson showed no signs of stopping. Her eyes were wide when she held up two fingers for Nori, and another collection vessel was quickly prepared. She got the first one three-quarters full and then stopped pressing for a moment to extract her fangs from one vessel, hand it off to Nori's gloved hands, and then bit into the next vessel and pressed on her glands again until they were empty.

Emery carefully pulled her teeth free and felt them retract into a normal position. She flexed her jaw. So, you should be able to make all you need for a year with that. Fuck, that hurt.

Yeah. That... That's a lot. Can I black-market any of this?

Emery blinked. Half an ounce after you remove all links?

An ounce? You have gotten sixteen here.

Emery massaged her face. Fine. One ounce. Remove the link to me here and now, please.

Of course. Nori drew off the magical venom and carried it carefully to her apparatus at the far end of the lab. She added materials that would sever the tie between Emery and her venom so it could not be used to trace or bespell her. They had learned that lesson early.

Rowen asked, What is she doing?

Oh, she s severing the link between me and the venom, so those who want to use it for spell work can t summon me or use me as a battle drone. She grimaced. Again.

It has happened before?

Twice. After that, we started the protocol. There is a mild curse that only activates on contact with the venom and turns into something more dangerous.

Like what?

Ogre transformation fluid but only if they are using the venom for an attack on another being. If there is ill intent in the spell that uses it... boom. Ogre. She snorted. The antivenin is popular as well. It works on a lot of venomous creature bites. Most of them, actually, once Nori is done with the formula.

Rowen blinked. You sell your venom?

Sure. It has paid for about five of my businesses, and they paid for my next four.

Nori worked and muttered with Archimedes watching over her.

Goodbye, Nori. Thanks for running the scans.

Yup. Anytime. Feel free to bring him by anytime you bite him. Next time, aim lower.

Rowen laughed, and Emery blushed. There isn't going to be a next time.

Oh, Emery, you know that's not true. Rowen chuckled, and they left the alchemist's lab and her pet.

Back in his car, she scrubbed her face and muttered, Fuck.

What's wrong?

I am stuck like this for a few hours. I hate having to work like this.

Perhaps you should take a day off. The diner is operating smoothly.

She wrinkled her nose. Do you skip the gym?

Well, no. But I get to watch you day in and day out, and occasionally, I go over there to get on the case of one of my clients just to watch you flip your shit and put extra cheese on everything.

When did you pull your horns in?

While you were milking your venom.

She wrinkled her nose. Ah.

What does that feel like?

It s part getting your teeth stuck in a toffee apple and a little like having a sour candy causing a drool waterfall while your sinuses drain.

So, not great.

It is unique. Probably similar to the first time you got your horns stuck in a t-shirt.

He laughed. I refuse to confirm that I have tried that, but yeah, it was awkward.

Can you take me back to my place?

Sure. May I take you out for lunch?

She paused. Like a date?

Precisely like a date. I will take a shower and be back in half an hour.

That s fast.

An hour?

Better. She smiled. Do you have a place in mind?

I do. Do you like barbeque?

I do. I really do.

Good. I will be back in an hour. Wear something washable. He grinned. He pulled into her driveway, and she nodded.

One hour.

She nodded and returned to her house, opening her door with a pulse of magic. She slipped into the house, watched through the glass as Rowen drove off, and tried to calm her thudding heart. Emery headed to the shower and scrubbed, trying to blot out the fact that he knew it all, or most of it, and he was still wanting to get closer.

Maybe watching her savage a rack of ribs would cool his interest.

She washed out the conditioner in her hair and sighed. He had found the thought of her biting him during sex to be arousing, so her gnashing teeth probably wouldn't turn him off. Maybe she should eat like she was having afternoon tea. Nah. She couldn't disrespect the lives of the animals she was about to consume. It definitely beat having to chase them down in the woods and kill them herself. Puberty had been rough, but she hadn't killed any humans, so she considered it a win.

She picked out a dark tee with no decoration, dark blue jeans, and dark sneakers. She got carried away with handheld food and wasn't going to hold back.

The jokes about food and sex drive might be accurate, but she didn't care. Rowen had been verbally sparring with her for a few years by this point, and she always stopped the battle by eating something sugary, usually on a stick. He would flush, open and close his mouth, and leave. Now, she knew it wasn't because he was speechless.

She dried her hair and pulled half of it into a high ponytail. It would keep it off her face. She put on a clear lip balm that would defend her from the hot sauces she preferred, and she got her purse. Her phone had messages from Orla, so Emery spent a few minutes answering them. When she looked up, she felt Rowen pulling into the driveway.

His timing was good.

She got up and walked to the door, locking up and using the key for a change. Rowen

stepped around and opened the passenger door. You look lovely and sparkling clean.

That is what happens when you shower.

And yet, sweaty Emery is adorable and is a smell I have committed to memory.

She blinked as she buckled up. That s... I am unsure of how to think about that.

He chuckled and put the car in gear, backing down her driveway. Why do you live out here instead of in a more expensive area?

Well, first, this place is paid for. So, no worries there. Second, I like to put my money back into my businesses and keep expanding my eclectic empire.

You don't stick to one business model?

Oh, hell no. The world is changing, and any business can lose popularity at any moment. So, I keep my focus on the type of shops that can enrich the local population. Small grocery shops that are not distant from bus stops, animal shelters, cafés that sell food at reasonable prices. When folks have full bellies, they are calmer and can make better decisions. When they can go to a free clinic for small issues before they become big ones, they get better faster and can keep their savings. Stuff like that.

He smiled. So, you have humanitarian businesses.

If you say so. I just feel that everyone is happier if the basics can be taken care of. She shrugged. Time in group homes showed me that once the basics are good, other things can be reasoned out. If you are desperate, you panic, and some folks get violent.

He nodded. The fight-or-flight response.

Yes, well, if you are small and shaped like prey when the larger prey is panicking, they will trample or attack the smaller prey to preserve resources.

What you are saying is that one of your guardians attacked you.

They tried. They were human and just thought I had gone crazy . They couldn't believe the changes, so they didn't. But I stayed up and watched over the other kids from that day onward.

So, you don't sleep much.

I do now, mostly. But not during school. That was different, but it helped me burn off some of that initial rage. When I was fostered and got adopted finally, it was great. No more back and forth to the group home when my file was sent to court and the adoption petition was denied. I had to remain there until the court settled on their no, and then, it was months before I was back at my foster home.

Shit.

That sums it up. I learned what was a friend and what wasn't and how strong I could be without changing my face. That was important. Now, I am stuck for a while, and going out into public like this feels strange. She looked down at her arms. Oh fuck. Go back. I have to change my shirt.

Why?

The cut marks. Some people know what they are on sight and make sure to comment on it.

What do you normally do?

Go on a rant about survival and minding their own fucking business. I am alive and have made it to adulthood and into my thirties, but those morons obviously have suffered some kind of brain damage and never had to learn from their mistakes.

So, if it happens, do that.

It won't bother you?

Nope. He chuckled.

Emery rubbed at her arms. I can hide them for a while, but I really like eating, so my glamour slips.

If it bothers you, cover them with barbeque sauce. I will help you lick it off later. Rowen grinned.

Isn't it a little high in carbs for you?

I will work to burn them off later. You could join me? He glanced at her. We have spare workout gear at the gym.

You want me to work out after lunch?

Do you ever get full?

She blinked. Oh, no. Well, you have been quick with your research.

Your friend Orla read it to me over the phone while I showered.

She laughed. That sounds like something she would do. She s doing well?

She is.

Emery relaxed in relief. Good. I wasn t sure.

Don t you wonder about her mother?

No. She s fine. We are connected until she linked to another. It isn t much of a tether.

You can just survive with that?

Sure. It doesn t take much out of me, and what it does is easily replaced.

He pulled into the restaurant parking lot. Will you explain how?

Feed me, and I will tell you anything.

Rowen came around and helped her out of the vehicle. I will bear that in mind.

She smiled and stepped down, ending up against him for a moment before she pulled back. Sorry about that.

He grinned. Don t worry. I have plans to be much closer.

Whoa. First, you have to feed me.

Fair enough. Let s go in.

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The place was crowded for lunch, but the hostess saw Rowen's head above the crowd. Rowen, come on.

Rowen put his arm around her and smiled. Hold tight. This place is popular.

She was held tight to him as they moved through the crowded tables to a booth in the back corner where there was a little more room to breathe.

There you go, Row. Who is this?

This is Emery. She owns the caf across the street from the gym.

Nice to meet you, Emery. Your face is very familiar. The woman whose name tag said Meg grinned.

I just have one of those faces. She looked around and saw a ton of photos around the dining area. Family place? I haven't been here before.

With an appetite like yours? I am surprised. Rowen smiled.

I can't ever get in. Too busy, and they don't take reservations. She looked at the walls and saw a familiar face but much younger and thinner.

She slowly turned toward him. Your family?

He grinned. What gave it away?

You are all over these walls. She smiled, and Meg gasped.

Emery looked at her. Is something wrong?

You are the lady he has been sketching since he was a teen. I just thought it was a weird fantasy, but you actually... wow. Meg grinned. Lemonade?

Um, yes, please.

Rowen was looking innocent and had the menu elevated.

Rowen?

Yes? He didn't look up.

You have sketches of me?

I told you Autumn gave me your image when I was worried about being alone forever. He told me I just had to wait, and when I accepted that, we fused, and I got to walk without pain. He shrugged. With your image in my mind, I started drawing you in art class as a teen and just continued. You are my doodle when my mind thinks of nothing else.

Wow. Well, that s... now you made this weird.

He looked at her, his expression worried.

She snorted and held his hand, squeezing lightly. Like this could get weirder. Okay, what's good here?

He smiled and began to advise her so that when Meg returned, they were ready. She

grinned and asked, Are you sure you want all that?

Yes, I have been working up an appetite.

Meg winked at Rowen and left.

Emery blinked. Oh, I hear how that sounded now. Do you bring dates here often?

No. This is a first, so my family is drawing a bunch of inferences. Don't be surprised if they pop out of the kitchen to bring extra water or napkins one by one.

Your whole family works here?

Yeah. My parents own it, and siblings and cousins work it. Rowen smiled. I used to be the greeter, and we could fit a lot fewer tables in this section when there had to be room for my chair. They currently have some accessible spaces near the front, which is nice. I remember how hard it was to get through when someone pulled their chair out. That was annoying, and I still keep an eye out for pathways to restrooms, just in case.

That is a very endearing hobby.

He shrugged. I remember how hard it was, and if I can ease that even once, I will.

You could just carry them.

They are not infants; they are adults and teens just trying to make their way in the world. He looked at her. Oh, you were joking.

Yes. I was joking. One of my school friends was a chair user, and fighting not to be treated like an infant took up half her time. She smiled. We made her our queen and

commanded our peers to step aside as she was so royal she was not to be parted from her chair of power.

He smiled. How old were you?

Eight. It was a good year, but she went for surgeries in the city the next year, and she didn't return to our school.

He cocked his head. How old are you?

Thirty-two.

He blinked. And she was in a chair... Did it have purple streamers on the handles?

Yeah.

Unicorn sticker on the back of the seat?

Yeah.

Her name was Gabi?

Queen Gabrielle, if you please. You know her?

It was my cousin.

Was? Her eyes went wide.

Is! Is my cousin. She is the head of marketing.

Really? Oh, that's great. How is her back?

Not completely corrected, but she can walk with a cane and likes to use it on her nieces and nephews to pull them in for hugs. He smiled.

Food started arriving, and Rowen handed her some wet wipes out of the pile in a warmed bowl.

The plates kept arriving, and Rowen laughed. Just start somewhere, or we will be swamped.

All right, you asked for it. She licked her lips, picked up a rack of ribs, and tore it into pieces, then started to lift one rib after another to her mouth, stripping the meat from the bone.

Rowen had a forkful of shredded pork to his mouth, and the mouth was open in astonishment. Wow.

She grinned and muttered, Buckle up.

She grabbed food, put bones in a bucket, and then moved on to brisket, chicken, more pork, shredded pork, coleslaw, and some fried potato chips dusted with spices.

She looked around, and he held out a plate with soft white bread. She met his gaze. I know this sounds weird, but I try and minimize gluten. It isn't an allergy, but it isn't friendly.

He laughed. You eating low gluten is one of the best things I have heard today.

She snorted and started to wipe the wreckage of sauces from her hands and face.

Meg came by, and her eyes went wide. Holy... There is nothing left on those bones.

Emery smiled and said, That s the point.

I know Rowen didn t do that. Wow. Mom s gonna love you.

Emery blinked. Mom?

Meg is my youngest sister. She was two when I was selected, and as I got up and running, she grafted herself onto me.

Meg paused, Emery, can you eat more?

Uh, without wanting to draw criticism, yeah. I don t get full.

Cool. I will be right back.

Rowen snorted. She s either going to bring you a huge sundae or banana pudding.

Meg returned a moment later. Here you go. If you can eat this, my parents will be here proposing to you themselves.

Rowen snorted. That isn t an actual family tradition.

No, but I think it would be cool. Meg grinned. It could become a weird myth in the town. So, how do you two know each other?

Emery was looking for the best point of attack. It looked like a banana pudding base with a sundae top. She could do this. He came into the diner to grab one of his clients who was trying to ruin his good work with a tray of cinnamon buns and milkshakes. He called me a carb peddler, and I called him an over-inflated bully.

Rowen smiled. It wasn t true love, but I was intrigued.

She began to attack the dessert, and Meg's eyes widened. Wow.

Emery heard the siblings talking but kept eating. It was good, fluffy and sweet, cool and warm. When it was done, she wiped her mouth and sipped at her lemon water. That was lovely.

Rowen grinned. Do not consider this an insult, but that was a dessert for three people.

I know. The problem with being what I am is that I am hungry most of the time. She shrugged. Nothing really sates it, but I like eating.

Meg blinked. What are you?

A conversation for another day.

Rowen asked Meg, Are you coming tonight?

Of course. Winter's parties are not to be missed. Meg smiled at Emery. You are going to be there?

Probably not. I don't really run in those circles.

Rowen sighed. You should have gotten your invitation already.

Emery carefully reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. The invitation was there in an email from Orla. Huh. There it is. Now I have to get a dress.

Meg chuckled. Don't you have anything?

Not for this height. No. I haven't gone out like this for years. I don't attend many formal events that don't involve a lot of leather.

Rowen grinned. Do tell.

Shut it. I need to go shopping. She went through three wet wipes clearing her hands.

Let s go then.

What?

Meg chuckled. He has four sisters. He s fun to shop with.

Emery paused. Don t you have to go lift something? Or lunge at something?

He chuckled. Like you, I have staff that can manage things.

I don t want you shopping with me.

Tough. One of our cousins works at a dress shop with a specialty in tall ladies, but it s booking only unless you are family. So, I am your key.

Fine, but keep your key out of my lock. I will snap it off.

Meg snorted and started to clear the table. Rowen put some money down, and Meg laughed. Thanks for the tip.

Emery scooted out of the booth and stood up. Rowen got up behind her, wrapped his arm around her, and guided her through the tables and chairs. When someone started pushing their chair into the aisle and glanced at them, they quickly pulled it back in.

Rowen didn t relax his grip on her until they were past the crowd.

Holy smokes. That place is hopping.

Fifteen years and counting. The family all does shifts there. I did mine between fifteen and twenty-five. I got paid minimum plus tips and managed to save enough to start the gym.

He kept his hand on her back as they walked through the parking lot.

So, you have sketches of me?

A few.

Are we from the eighteenth century?

He grinned. I could offer to show you my etchings.

Wow. That s hot.

They giggled together, food drunk and relaxed.

So, where is this mythical shop that caters to tall women?

North end of town, near Hunter s place.

Oh. I never get out there. Well, not until recently.

You walked right through that area last night.

Did I?

Well, you were very tired and bloody.

I thought I burned it all off.

Not all. No.

Sorry. I must have been a mess.

An adorable mess.

Dude, have you been injured at work? Taken a weight to the head? Have the horns grown through your brain? I am never adorable. Statuesque, imposing, striking even, but never adorable.

He grinned and opened her car door. No, I can't say any injury has occurred. When it comes to adorable, look up.

She turned to face him; she was staring at his neck. She tilted her head. Oh. Right. Fine, I will consider the eye of the beholder.

He inclined his head. Thank you.

She reached up and stroked his cheek. You have a bit of sauce right here.

Rowen froze. Thanks.

I am fighting the mom scrub.

He grinned as she pulled her hand back. I wouldn't mind.

Let's save the grooming for another date.

Rowen chuckled. So, I am considering our first date at an end. The shopping is a second date, and this evening is separate as well.

She got into the car and sighed. I fell right into the second date.

He leaned in and kissed her quickly. You did. This is turning into a very fun day.

Right. She buckled up. He closed her door and walked around to the other side.

She tried to pull herself into her normal shape, but it wasn't happening. It was her natural form for the rest of the day. Must be the stupid solstice.

He got in next to her and buckled in before waiting until they were clear and then backed out, and they were on to their next stop.

So, why are you so eager to play chauffeur?

Because I want to spend time with you and don't mind driving.

Oh, I don't mind driving either. She glanced at her arms and realized that if anyone had noticed, they hadn't commented.

Good. I can use portals, but I guess you don't like to.

It is the one thing in the world that can turn my stomach. If I have to portal, I keep myself hungry.

Sensible. Is it the same when others transport you?

I don't know.

Oh. Can we test it?

Not until I digest lunch.

He chuckled. Fair enough. We are going to my cousin Merwin's shop. She's pleasant.

Merwin. Merwin Hyguard?

Yes. Do you know her?

Um, yes. She's Gabi's younger sister, right?

You know it.

Well, she didn't like me and Orla much. She thought we were making fun of Gabi instead of trying to make her laugh.

She has changed. She's a grownup now.

Okay. But don't be weirded out if she tries to put me in pastels or sizes that are too small.

I am sure she will be a consummate shopkeeper. Are folks often hostile to you?

Yes. Now that the ogre is more to the surface, it causes some folks to get nervous.

I can see that. He turned off a main road and into a private lot. We're here.

I keep forgetting that we live in a small town.

He chuckled. Better here than the city. Too many weirdos.

She laughed and unbuckled after he parked.

Emery waited until he opened the door for her before she slid out of her seat. He

smiled brightly, like she had learned a trick. Thank you, Emery.

What?

Letting me open your door. My mom always said the mark of a true gentleman was that he could attract a true lady.

Right. I can be had for a bucket of hot wings.

Oh. I will keep that in mind. He grinned and put his hand on her back, guiding her to the front of the old home that had been upgraded entries, which were accessible to anyone.

Emery kept her expression pleasant as they walked in, and Merwin hung up the phone with a smile. Rowen. I hear you need a dress for your girlfriend.

Emery opened her mouth but felt his fingers flexing against her back.

Yes, Merwin. This is Emery.

Emery looked at Merwin. You are taller than when I saw you last.

Merwin looked at her and blushed. You were Gabi's friend?

Yes. How is she?

There was a soft thump as another woman came out of a back room. I am taller as well, Emery. May I have a hug?

Of course, my queen. Emery bowed low and then walked to Gabi, hugging the smaller woman carefully. You are looking well, Gabi.

I know. Your fashion sense remains the same.

Emery chuckled. Hey, it's easy to find clothes.

Yeah, well, beating up hobos for their wardrobe is a hobby for you, I guess.

I love it when you are vicious.

Gabi laughed and hugged her again. When they parted, she said, What are we dressing you for?

You aren't dressing me. I just need a single dress. For the Yule party at Winter's.

So, you know Winter, and you are hanging around with Rowen. Wow. Are you collecting an entire calendar?

A calendar of warlocks posing around the year? It might sell.

Gabi giggled and straightened, looking Emery up and down. Well, we can discuss you and my cousin while I find something suitable for you. Follow me.

There was nothing else to do. Emery followed.

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Emery looked at the collection of dresses and muttered, I just need one.

You have to try on a minimum of five. A few of these are just for fun, but they should be interesting to see on you. Gabi grinned.

Merwin smiled. She's been hoping that someone who doesn't mind cosplay with their formalwear would show up. And here you are.

Emery eyed them suspiciously. Well, that does sound like me.

Gabi finished loading a rack with options and pulled it slowly to the back. Come on, Emery. Let's get you naked.

Rowen grinned. I'll get you something to drink.

Emery followed Gabi to a changing area with a raised stage and a lot of mirrors. He's very at home.

Gabi chuckled. He brought all his sisters here for their prom dresses, two for their bridesmaid dresses, one of those who picked out a wedding gown that our seamstress designed. We have a lot of family, so we are always busy.

So, it seems.

Gabi ushered her into a changing area and brought a dress in. The fitting had begun.

It took two hours to get into something that Gabi would authorize. Whatever she

stepped out in made Rowen's eyes shine. Merwin came back occasionally to offer a critique, but Emery just had one comment. How do you have so much stuff in my size?

Gabi chuckled. Merwin is magic with textiles. I am better with people.

Rowen came around the corner with a bottle of water, and the sudden geyser that shot upward from his hand indicated that the corseted dress might have been a winner.

Gabi snorted, and Emery grinned. I don't think it will fit you, but if you are enthusiastic about it, you are welcome to put it on.

He whispered, No, I think it looks fine on you.

The bronze corset went over a dress that had wispy panels of fabric that floated as she turned, stepped, or lifted her arms. Keeping the sleeves out of the corset had been the worst part. She wore all the colours of fall, and her hair was in a black, red, and gold curtain to the middle of her back.

She chuckled. Second date, huh?

I aim to please. You look... wow. Rowen was staring.

Gabi chuckled. You have the posture of someone who likes corsets, Emmy, and definitely the figure for it.

She started to fidget. Yeah, well, I saw the tag, and that isn't going to fly. I spend that much on supplies, not on clothes for a body I rarely spend time in.

Gabi looked at her with narrow eyes. It is a gift from the family.

Absolutely not.

Rowen walked up to her and took her hands. Please, please, please.

Gabi sighed. I owe you.

You don't. She turned her head and looked at her friend.

I do. You made my life fun again. I had forgotten what it was like just to have people want to hang around me for my filthy mouth and wicked brain.

Well, you did know all the swear words. Emery wrinkled her nose.

Gabi smiled. Come on. Take the dress. I will consider it advertising for the shop as we are definitely going to get some business off this.

Merwin smiled. I had no idea what that dress would be used for, but it looks so perfect on you.

Right. What about shoes?

Merwin grinned and darted off into the shop. She emerged with two long tubes with deadly heels. You seem like a boot gal.

I am, but... Rowen, I need my hands.

He sighed. I was hoping you wouldn't notice.

Of course. No one would notice someone your size dangling from their hands like a bracelet charm.

He smiled and kissed her knuckles before letting her go.

The boots were rich brown and had four-inch heels. I don't need to be taller.

Gabi chuckled. It might come in handy.

Emery frowned. Why?

Rowen had moved to lean against a wall and pointed at himself.

Oh. Yeah, this would increase elevation. She bent and put the boots on, straightening slowly.

She was close to six and a half feet tall, which still put her at eight inches shorter than Rowen.

Gabi whistled. Yeah, that will do. We just need to get you to the salon while Rowen changes into his eveningwear, and you are ready for the party. It starts before sundown and goes until dawn, so we need to be there by four thirty.

What time is it?

Merwin smiled. Three. I have called the salon, and it is a quick walk next door, so we are going to get you on your way.

Dressed like this?

Gabi smiled. Of course not. Ladies of my court get a cloak.

Rowen asked a good question. Can you move around on those heels?

I can. Not a problem.

She stepped toward him and twirled. See?

He nodded. Trust me, I am watching.

Emery looked to Gabi and Merwin. Thank you for the dress.

Gabi smiled. Our pleasure.

Merwin nodded. Yeah, I owe you for my attitude when you were just trying to be friends with my sister.

I wasn't trying. I succeeded.

Gabi snorted. You did, indeed. So, you mentioned another form?

Yeah. I am all small and normal-sized. Hair is lighter, and everything is curvier. She shrugged.

Gabi squinted and then gasped. The diner! I knew I had seen someone who reminded me of you. We had a different server, but I saw you moving around the other side of the restaurant.

Yeah. That was me.

Merwin blinked. Seriously? Can you shift now?

No. I am stuck right now. I have been trying to shift back all day, but I overexerted myself last night and don't have the necessary juice to cram myself into the smaller form. This is my natural one.

Gabi nodded. It definitely is.

Merwin got a cloak off a rack and touched it, shaping it. Emery understood that she was tailoring it by touch.

Emery crouched so Merwin could put it on her shoulders, and then, she settled it, wrapping it and fastening the closure. She smiled. Thank you again. Now, where am I supposed to go?

Gabi grinned. I will walk you there. It s in this building, but we don t connect.

Which cousin is it this time?

Rowen said, It s my sister s place. Levelle s place.

Oh. I haven t met her.

Yes, this will be interesting. Do you promise to stay at the salon until I pick you up?

She lifted her hand with a pinkie up. Pinkie promise.

He locked fingers with her and kissed her quickly. I will be back as soon as I can.

Emery unlocked her finger. Sneaky. Go get changed into something pretty.

Rowen grinned and nodded, leaving the shop in long strides.

Gabi got her walking stick and didn t stop her grin. Looks like your season is autumn.

Shut up, my queen.

They walked out and around the building to a separate entrance. A woman, who had the tawny skin and dark hair that Emery associated with Rowen, approached them. Okay, Cuz. Who is this?

This is my friend Emery and also Rowen s friend Emery. Gabi chuckled. She needs her face done.

I can do that. Can I see what you are wearing?

Emery blinked and opened the cloak on her right side so the dress was visible.

Cool. Full glam it is.

Levelle walked her to a chair and wrapped a cape over her cloak. Her skin was prepped a few minutes later, and Rowen s sister got to work. So, how do you know Gabi?

Emery said, We went to school together when she was a wheeled warrior.

Gabi smiled. We were friends. She was one of two but definitely the ringleader. It was so nice to have a friend that wasn t family.

You didn t bring her over for anything.

Gabi glanced at Emery. She couldn t go out after school.

Emery said, I was in the foster care system. My social life wasn t under my control.

Levelle paused. Oh. I am sorry. No family?

None that acknowledged me and definitely none that wanted to have me in their

home. My mother passed after she had me, and I was the product of an assault, so her family didn't want anything to do with me.

Levelle paused. You know all that?

Sure. It's in my file, and my mother's parents told me all about it when they met me in court to stop me from being adopted for the fourth time. I believe I was six by then. I had to look into what their words meant and figure things out later. Boy, was my teacher surprised when I wrote the report on what I researched during my vacation. The other kids all had to go into therapy, and the court system sued my mother's family for assaulting a child and threatening to kill me. They put that on their social media. They stated that they wanted me dead and knew where I had been placed. It was enough to keep us from communicating and get them a fine.

Levelle sat back and blinked.

Gabi whispered, I had no idea.

Well, I have never lived with or even really talked to them, so they are just barriers to my happiness. She shrugged. Well, not anymore. I have fun luck.

Gabi sighed. Well, you are here and generally cheerful. Also, Rowen looks at you like he has just woken up in heaven.

Levelle brushed blush on her cheeks. You do seem familiar.

Yeah, that's what he says.

You aren't... oh, wow. He found you. Levelle stared. I thought he was nuts.

He is a bit. He charges into my diner and yells motivational speeches at his clients as

they cheat with cinnamon buns.

The artist paused. Wait. That's your place? He's mentioned a little crabby owner.

That is also me, but I am currently stuck in this shape. She shrugged. I don't have any clothes for this form.

Which is your normal form?

Gabi smiled. This one is. This is the one she had as a child.

What is your other form?

Emery pulled out her phone and brought up a selfie in a mirror. She had done a fit check, and she showed Levelle.

Oh. That must have driven him nuts.

What? In what way?

Oh, he likes curves... a lot. Levelle smiled. But he has never been serious about anyone.

Ah. Right. She tried not to think about it.

How about you? What's your type?

Emery blinked. Oh. Um. Not a clue. Haven't given it much thought.

Gabi frowned. Levelle, don't talk about that. She and Rowen are adorable together. He's constantly taking chances to touch and kiss her, and she lets him wrap his arms

around her. That s huge. She hates being touched.

Emery blinked. She didn t hate being touched. She just didn t trust touching.

So, Emery, how did Rowen find you?

Winter called him. I was walking home after doing... something... and was covered in something, so I turned down his offer to drive me home. We walked and talked.

Why were you hanging with Winter?

I am a friend of his new girlfriend, Orla.

Gabi grinned. Really?

Really. She s doing well.

What s she doing?

Oh, she s working at a custom furniture company as a saleswoman, but I think she is about to get a bump to management.

Gabi looked cheerful. She is going to be at the party?

Yes. She and Hunter are a thing now, and they have a puppy, so I think it is a settled thing.

Gabi grinned. Good. She was always so friendly.

Emery nodded. She still is.

Emery had to remain quiet as the lip stain was applied, and the gloss went on a few minutes later.

Levelle smiled. Lovely. The hair will be simple as you are not trying to show anything off.

No. That isn't really my wheelhouse. I am usually fairly direct no matter which form.

Levelle moved behind her and started brushing her hair. The twists and weaving were quick with a minimum of pins, and a curling iron kept everything else moving together.

Gabi smiled. You look lovely. I will see you later tonight.

You aren't coming now?

No. We need to get dressed and ready, and only the seasons need to be there by sunset. That means you as Rowen's date.

Right. She stood up and glanced toward the door. Will he come here?

Yes, and I have to stay with you until he shows up. Gabi chuckled.

Why?

I believe he thinks you will run.

Well, he is perceptive. She settled in her cloak and fidgeted.

Gabi sighed. He's a really good guy, Emery.

Emery looked at her in surprise. I know that. I just think that we aren't a particularly good match.

Gabi paused and said, Oh. Our family will greet you with open arms, and we are a huge family, so that is a lot of arms.

Emery nodded. Okay.

Emmy, Rowen attracts women easily, but he has been looking for someone like you.

Levelle was tidying her station and sanitizing makeup. He has been looking for her specifically. She's his sketch model.

Gabi blinked. I thought you hadn't met him before.

I hadn't. Not like this. He said he was given the image of me when he was worried he would be alone.

Gabi gasped. Oh. That s...

Levelle snorted. So, he started sketching every part of her that had been shown to him. He saw a lot.

Emery was nervous. Like what?

I don't know, but he has a collection of sketches, so he sees what he's seen.

Gabi glanced out the window. He's here. See you later, Emery. I am so glad he brought you to the shop today. We have to reconnect and go for coffee.

When I can get back into my other self, you can meet me at the diner. I can take as

much time as I like.

Gabi smiled. Throw in unlimited coffee, and I will be there.

Of course. I mainline it most days myself. She smiled. Why is he coming in?

Because our family is old-fashioned, and he is going to escort you to your car. Haven't you ever had an old-fashioned date? Gabi chuckled.

I don't date. It's complicated. She shrugged and looked at the door as Rowen came in with his hair slicked back, his eyes bright, and he found her the moment he scanned the room.

Oh, wow, Emery. Every beautiful feature has been enhanced so it cannot be forgotten.

She blushed.

Levelle, you did a wonderful job. Gabi, you, too. We will see you both later. We have to get there before the Yule log is set ablaze. He held his hand out, and Emery walked over, acting on instinct.

She fidgeted as he kissed her knuckles and then wrapped an arm around her. They left the salon, and he walked her to his car. This is different.

Fancy car for fancy events. I am just going to tuck you in, and we will be on our way.

He followed his word, and she couldn't stop staring at the tux he was wearing. She pulled the cloak around her as he tucked her in, and then, she had to put her arms out of it to buckle herself in. She sat with her hands in her lap as he came around and settled behind the wheel. You look wonderful, but I think you are gorgeous sweaty

and without a shower.

Thank you. The tux looks good on you.

He grinned. Thank you. I have to go to a surprising number of events in a year. It was sensible just to buy one.

She had a thousand thoughts, most of which involved him in that suit and her in very little. Her cheeks were hot as he drove. It would be presumptuous of her to think that it was in her future, but she liked the thought of it.

He drove over the bridge that still showed the mark from where Orla had driven through the guard rail and into the river. He turned right instead of left toward the ogre's house, and she exhaled slowly.

The glowing lights in the trees lit the path to Winter's home. Hunter was outside, supervising the last of the arrangements, and Orla was next to him, wearing a white fur cloak with a snowy puppy in her arms.

That is one large puppy.

Emery chuckled. Yeah, but he showed up when Orla needed him, so I sent him over from the rescue.

You sent him over?

Sure. The pet rescue is one of the businesses I own, and there is a strangely large percentage of magical creatures who arrive at our doors.

They pulled into a marked parking spot, and he turned off the engine. He looked at her. What would you pick for me?

She looked at him. I have a jackalope that requires a specific home.

His grin said it all. Just tell me what he needs, and I will get it together.

Emery nodded. I will make you a list.

He laughed and got out of the car, walking around to help her out. They walked toward Orla, Hunter, and Snowball. They had about an hour before the sun set and the party started. Time to finish getting organized.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am

Emery stroked Snowball, and Orla was still staring. You are staring, Orla.

You look... pretty. Like something has softened.

I am stuck.

What?

I can't get into my other form. I think I am just tired from yesterday. I can't get the old me back.

Yinmar finished arranging flowers on the table and came up to them as Emery was speaking. You embraced your blood yesterday and killed your father. Your ogre is very close to the surface right now.

How do I put her back? she asked Orla's mother.

You don't. If it chooses to retreat, it will, but if not, you are stuck with her. Yinmar stood beside Orla. I am sorry.

Fudge. I have introduced myself as my own cousin Emma a few times. I am my own silent partner.

Orla paused. I think I can find a spell for it. It will make those who knew your other shape accept this one as the new one. It helps that you are the same person and that your personality doesn't change with your shape.

Emery blinked. Thank you. I am going to have to do a lot of shopping. I don't have much beyond jeans, sweat, and t-shirts for this one.

Yinmar smiled. I need to do some shopping of my own. Hunter helped me get back into the rolls of the living today. I should be an actual person again in a few weeks. She paused. I have also contacted my family. They are... shocked that I am back.

Orla snorted. You could say that. When I talked with them, they were still happy with the funds they received when you married into the ogre family.

Yes. I reminded them that those funds were mine, and the moment I could put a suit against them, I would have it if they had to sell the clothing on their backs. I am starting over, and living with my daughter and her fiancé isn't appropriate.

Emery blinked. Fiancé ?

It isn't official, but I can't see life without him. Orla smiled. He s... I dunno. He fits.

Emery nodded. Congratulations.

Orla smiled. Thank you.

Are you expecting a large crowd?

Orla shrugged. Locals and the seasonal avatars, of course. Their families will be here as well. It will be an all-night party until we make sure we have relit the sun.

Emery smiled. Are the other seasons coming?

Spring and Summer are on the way. I think they are curious about me, and that is why they agreed to stay today. Normally, they help start the fire and go.

Two cars pulled in next to Rowen's, and two more men approached.

They were handsome, and Emery began to suspect that the avatars were chosen for that reason. The funny thing was, she knew them. She knew both of them. They were regulars at the diner. Of course, they didn't recognize her in this form, but that was their issue.

Hunter swung by and borrowed Orla, walking with her to greet Spring and Summer.

Emery walked to Rowen as he wrestled more of the great log into position. Would you like a hand, Rowen?

He grinned. Please. Hunter has to be a host.

She lined up and shoved the log into the fireplace. It was sixteen feet long and two feet wide and would be fed into the fire at intervals so that the fire would be the same that was about to be lit.

A bonfire nearby would also be lit so that if anything went out, embers could start things again. It wasn't traditional, but if it was a good party, it might be necessary.

How strong are you? Rowen smiled and came over to brush bits of wood from her cloak.

I don't know. I can always do what I need to. That's all I know.

Have you looked up the characteristics of ogresses?

When I could. My adoptive family didn't encourage it as they thought it would draw my father's attention.

Ah. Well, Winter has a few books. Orla can show you.

Emery snorted. Orla can probably recite them by now. Books are her thing.

What do you mean?

She consumes books. Always had. Now, she can actually use some of the stellar magic that she possesses when she wants to.

Is that the same magic that you have?

No, mine is different. A bit more tangible.

What?

Accumulation is my paternal inheritance, and the magic makes that take a different form than any ogre would recognize. I collect businesses that have social benefits and staff them with people who need the workplace and will thrive there.

He paused. How many businesses do you actually have? Not the dozen or so you mentioned?

She coughed, Forty-five. Three more are in the acquisition phase. Some are in the city and in surrounding townships.

How much do you have in liquid assets?

She met his gaze, looked down, and mumbled, Three million or so.

Where did you learn that?

Uh, I had a mentor. She was great and helped to keep me focused.

She was magical?

Oh, yeah, and excellent at hiding it. She said she was waiting for someone but had to keep busy in the meantime, so we began our financial adventures. She smiled. She backed a lot of my investments at first, and we still get together every now and then for tea at one of her businesses. She tends to own popups. She said she never knew how long she would be here, so she wanted to put any and all funds into a trust to benefit the future.

He looked at her with a dawning bit of understanding. What is her name?

Avaknell.

He snorted. Avaknell Blue was a business consultant who found the building across from yours. She s the reason the gym is there.

Emery smirked. That tracks. She s sneaky and very good at getting the right people into the same place at the right time.

Yeah, she has that aura about her.

Where did you meet her?

A women-in-business conference put on by my college. She shrugged. She picked me out of the crowd, and we went for coffee afterward. I was her manager at her first and then HR and auditor all in a year. After that, we went looking for a business for me, and we found one.

The diner.

Yeah.

He chuckled and hugged her. If she shows up, I will have to thank her.

She s invited?

Certainly. She s heavily involved in the township. This night starts the year anew, so it is ideal for new starts. He hugged her. I have to go get things started with the others.

Okay. Go commit arson.

He smiled and touched her cheek before he walked off to join the other seasons around the Yule log. They didn t hold hands, but they ranged from spring to winter around the edge of the fireplace.

Orla walked back to her and smiled. As soon as the fire is lit, we can take the cloaks off. It s gonna get warm.

The seasons extended their arms, fingers inches apart, and then, as the sun turned red on the horizon, a red flame appeared in front of them. The log and the kindling began to glow, and a burst of flame curled around the first four feet of the two-foot-wide log. The sun had its carrier. Now, they had to keep it alive.

Hunter picked up a torch and lit it from the fire, walking over to the stacked bonfire and throwing the torch into it. The flare of the blaze shot skyward, and the air around the flames got warm.

Emery smiled as the seasons chatted. She had always thought they would be girls.

Orla grinned. And now the party starts. The sun has been continued, and we just have

to make it until dawn. She unclasped her cloak and folded it over her arm. Come on. Let's get something to eat.

There was a bump on Emery's leg. Hey, Snowball.

The puppy was already knee-high and was wagging happily at her side. See? I told you. I wouldn't steer you wrong. Orla is going to be an excellent mommy, and it was my pleasure to be an auntie for a while.

Snowball yipped and leaned against her.

Well, puppy, did you want a snack?

Orla laughed. Can I take your cloak?

Oh, uh, sure. She worked the clasp and slid the fabric off her shoulders.

Orla stared. Damn!

Uh, too much? I can put the cloak on again. She fidgeted as she realized that all of the seasons were taking notice.

No, please. I just haven't seen you like this since we became adults. Orla grinned. And you are extremely adult.

Emery blushed. Thanks for that. You look sexy and elegant as well. I also like the ice silver and gold in your hair.

Yeah, it happened when I let my starlight out. I thought yours would have manifested by now.

I am keeping things locked down, including my starlight. I really don't need to look any more peculiar. She touched her hair. I let autumn come through on my hair a little.

Orla smiled and snickered. You know what that sounds like.

Oh, shut it. Emery blushed.

Spring and Summer approached them. Emery looked to Orla, but she swished away with the cloaks and the puppy. Traitor.

My lady, I know you are not with Winter. There is far too much warmth in you.

She held up a hand and stopped Summer from continuing. Ty, stow it. Robert, don't start.

They froze. Robert asked, Ma'am, do we know you?

She wrinkled her nose. Sort of. Not in this form. You are two eggs over easy, four pieces of bacon extra crispy, and a glass of orange juice. She turned to Ty. Garden salad, six pieces of bacon, two cups of coffee, and a fruit salad.

Robert let out a strangled, Emery?

Just so.

But you look...

Like a dumpster in jeans? I believe that was your least flattering description of me. She smiled and fluttered her lashes at him.

Rowen walked up, and she edged toward him. Is something wrong? His voice washed over her.

Nope. Just two surprised customers and a change of heart.

Rowen smiled. You look lovely.

You have said that already. She felt her lips curve upward in a shy smile.

It bears repeating. Would you like to get something to drink? It is going to be a long night.

Sure. Is that what the pavilion thing is for?

It is. Winter always hires it. He offered her his arm, and she moved close to him, wrapping her hand partially around his forearm.

Entering the pavilion, she murmured, Thanks for the escape.

What was happening there?

Ty and Robert like to analyze women s figures at my diner. I was no exception.

Ah, and they only saw the other you.

Yup. And were exceptionally insulting to every woman more than two percent over the optimum.

Including you.

Yeah. I really wanted to snap them like the twigs they are, but I couldn t let them

know I was listening from seventy-five feet away. She sighed, and they walked toward a table where he got them glasses of mulled cider.

He sighed. Were they really insulting?

Yeah. Really. You were never mean, but they were like teen girls bitching about everyone around them. She smiled. I am guessing that they don't have large families and certainly no sisters.

Rowen frowned. You are right. Robert is an only child, and Ty only has brothers.

Ah. Got it. Men trying to impress other men. Classy. Juvenile as well.

Rowen nodded. Nailed it.

She sipped at the cider and smiled. It looks like Winter likes to have all the seasons represented.

He does. This is going to be quite the party. Will you dance with me later? Rowen smiled hopefully.

Sure. She sipped. Enough of this cider and I will dance with the tent.

He chuckled and looked up. The guests are arriving, and shockingly enough, my family is all on time.

She inclined her head. Have fun greeting them.

Not necessary. They are coming to us.

The people who bore a startling resemblance to Rowen greeted Hunter and Orla

before brushing past and heading for them. Emery stepped toward Rowen. There are a lot of them?

He slid an arm around her waist. Fourteen at a glance. More will come later.

Okay. She breathed slowly.

He chuckled. They aren't going to hurt you.

No, but I might get hugged. There were threats earlier.

Rowen pulled her a little closer. I've got you.

She leaned against him as Gabi managed to lead the pack, cane and all. Gabi was grinning. Emery, you look amazing.

Thank you. Emery saw the hug coming and leaned into it. You clean up well yourself. Does that cane have sparkles? It's very dashing.

It does, and it's a sword cane.

Nice.

Rowen chuckled. Emery, these are my parents, Lenora and Davil. Mom, Dad, this is Emery. We have been friends for a while but have begun a relationship of sorts.

Emery snorted. Of sorts.

Emery started to extend her hand when Lenora hugged her. She smelled sweet and soft and comfortable like a mom should. The ripple of magic across Emery's skin wasn't her doing. She was being analyzed.

Lenora leaned back with her eyes wide. Why do I think there is so much more I can't see?

Because there is. Emery smiled.

Good answer.

The sisters and two brothers swarmed around her, introducing themselves and shaking her hands. They all looked at her face and then over at Rowen, who was talking with his parents.

The cousins came next, and Merwin walked up to her with a smile. Levelle did a good job on your makeup and hair, though I would have gone a bit more elaborate.

Good to know. The whole thing caught me by surprise, and I haven't had to dress this body up before.

Well, you did very well. Your waist is astonishingly tiny for someone your size.

Okay, I am not sure if that is a compliment.

It is. You are striking.

Well, that is normally my move. She smiled shyly and shrugged. Striking, I mean.

Why am I not surprised? Merwin nodded.

More people were arriving, and a few of them looked familiar. Rowen's family loosely formed a pod around Emery and Rowen, and he returned to her side and put his hand back on her waist.

She was tired. It had been a long day with only minimal sleep. A familiar face in the distance made her smile. Nori's here.

Rowen chuckled. Good. She's interesting.

She didn't bring the cat. She smirked.

Probably a good thing. He grinned.

Music started up in a corner, and Emery felt Rowen's fingers grip tighter. She looked up at him. Eager to get the dance off the agenda?

Eager to start. I plan on dancing with you until dawn.

Oh, I am going to fall asleep far before that.

Just nap near me so that I can keep an eye on you. He murmured, Or better yet, let me know, and I will just hold you while you sleep.

That sounds astonishingly intimate.

Rowen pulled her into his arms and put her left hand in his right, swaying with her to the music. You know I am going to court you persistently, right?

Emery looked up at him. I would be disappointed if you didn't at this point. You already know all of my secrets.

He smiled and continued swaying with her as they got closer to Orla and Hunter. Couples were joining them on the dance floor, and Emery felt delightfully lost in the crowd.

Rowen was warm. Everything about him was warm. He moved lightly on his feet and kept a careful hand on the middle of her back. You dance well.

Seven years of ballet.

In which form?

This one. When I needed to take on the other form, I was urged to stop. I do miss it, though, even if I had to solo.

Why?

Because teenage boys are smaller than teenage girls. Making them lift me would just have been mean. She looked up at him.

He grinned. I can say you definitely were out of my height class.

Well, you were sitting down a lot. I am surprised you didn't develop a breast fetish.

He looked down at her cleavage in the corset. Who says I didn't? The angle just changed.

Emery snorted as they continued to sway until the dance changed to something more energetic.

Rowen paused. Are you up for this?

I am not nearly drunk enough.

He laughed, and they left the dance floor, walking out into the strangely warm night. He held her hand as they walked around to watch the log crackle and slowly char.

So, you do this every year? she asked to break the silence.

Yes. The seasons get together to end the year and start it over. We don't know how long it's been going on, but here we are.

What happened to the avatar before you?

Autumn? He needed to pass the season on to someone so that he could die. He had loved, had children, and been loved in return, but they were all gone. He wanted to join his love.

That is so sad and sweet.

I am grateful for it. It let me stand and heal, and if not for it, I wouldn't have met you.

She nodded. True. I would have missed all the growling and bitching.

He chuckled. It was so much fun, and you never backed down or even flinched.

I will defend fried food unto death.

And I look forward to battling you again and again. He paused and said, Emery, may I kiss you?

She paused. Even knowing about the teeth and venom and stuff?

Even knowing that. I am not afraid of ending up bound to you. He turned to face her and took her hands.

It's your funeral... eventually.

He smiled. I will take that as a yes. He leaned in, and his lips were so close she could feel the heat when she heard the word that terrified her.

Ogre!

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Emery jerked away from Rowen and whirled to face the attacker. Three warlocks were facing her, and one had the white eyes of a seer. Nosey fucker.

Rowen asked, What are you doing, Penrose?

That woman is an ogre. I can see it.

His companion stated loudly, Ogres are not allowed in township limits.

Emery was softly growling as they approached.

Rowen eased to the side and put himself in front of her. What do you three think you are doing?

Penrose said, Do you know what the bounty is on her teeth alone?

Oh, shit. They want me for parts.

Hunter sauntered up, and Orla stood next to Emery and took her hand. Gentlemen, what the hell do you think you are doing at this party?

Penrose glanced at him with nervous energy radiating from him. We have found an ogre. We are claiming the bounty on her.

Hunter nodded. I see. Hold on while I make a call.

A shimmering disc appeared in the air, and Kelnen was getting into formalwear in

front of the mirror. Hunter, what do you need?

Three would-be ogre hunters have arrived and are laying claim to Emery. Would you be willing to mediate before you continue to the city party?

I will certainly mediate, but I was coming to your party. Krys looks forward to being out in some fresh air. Maven and her lot are coming as well. Expect us within twenty minutes. Krys has to help me with this damned tie .

Thank you. Hunter inclined his head. We will guard her until your arrival.

Emery muttered, I don t need to be guarded; I just need a challenge space. They can even use projections so no blood is spilled.

Hunter nodded. I will take that under advisement. I will create an arena because we aren t getting out of this without a fight.

Fifty metres away, snow began to roil and expand in a wide column of wind.

Ty and Robert wandered over and asked, What s going on?

Emery stated calmly, They want to chop me up for parts.

Penrose spluttered. We just want to extract her fangs and claws and maybe some hair. She s worth a fortune.

Emery looked at him and knew there was hate in her eyes.

Rowen said softly, You don t want to go down this road, Penrose.

Penrose s white gaze was locked with hers. He took a step back. Look at that. She s a

monster.

Rowen glanced at her and smiled. She s beautiful.

A distance away, two portals appeared, and Kelen and Krys emerged from one and Mavin, Olmin, and Argo were with her. Kelen frowned and stepped forward. Pardon our speed, but we all agreed this was time-sensitive. Hunter, thank you for hosting us.

Hunter nodded. So, how do we settle this?

Kelen shrugged. It has to be trial by combat.

Emery smiled. Good, but can they use projections or simulacrums? I don t want to start the year with a death on my hands. One was enough.

Hunter looked to where the arena was forming. It will be ready in a few minutes.

One of Penrose s companions said, We can do live attacks. I am confident that we can take her.

Kelen lifted his brows. You think you will all be allowed to attack her at once? Really? That isn t happening.

Olmin shook his head. Challenges are one-on-one only.

The three warlocks paused. Penrose asked, What?

Yes. She s in good standing with the community, has not committed any crimes against the citizenry, and has strong ties within our gathering here. There is no reason for her to face three of you at once.

Emery said softly, I don't mind. I just want them using projections. I don't want to create blood vendettas.

Olmin nodded. I agree.

Penrose blinked. But we want to face her directly.

You will, but you will use projections. Emery is a much more effective killer than you are. I have seen her in action. Emery, do you have a second?

Orla shot her hand in the air. Me. Me. Me!

Emery chuckled. Do you have to pee, or do you know the answer?

Orla snorted. Both. Don't start before I finish in the restroom. Back in a minute.

Orla shot across the field toward the trailer with lavatories that had been rented for the event.

Hunter was grinning. This will be interesting.

Rowen looked at her. I can be your second.

Seasons are immune from combat. You know that; I know that. You have to remain avatars, untouched and separate.

I was looking forward to breaking the touching streak.

She grinned. I have been working out logistics. You are very tall.

Well, the fun thing is that if we are lying down, we will line up just fine.

She blinked and fanned her face. The mental images are a little much.

He grinned. Once it becomes a habit, it will be less petrifying.

It isn't that. I have this weird urge to count all your muscles, and I know I am going to lose track and have to start over.

His eyes warmed as he stared at her.

Orla came sprinting back, which was hilarious with her evening gown. Done. Ready.

Emery smiled. Did you wash your hands?

Orla paused, and Emery sent up a flare of ogre fire to wrap around her friend's hands. The puppy stood and yipped, so she did the same for him.

When Orla was clean and Emery had stopped chortling, they hugged and then nodded to the heads of the magical community in the area. Emery nodded. Ready.

Rowen looked at her. You don't have to do this.

I do. This will seal the issue. Once this challenge is done, they can't come back and do it again.

You are sure you will win?

She grinned.

He smiled and kissed her cheek. I am giving you the luck I can.

Thank you, but I've got this. She looked at Orla. Can you make my dress a little less

vulnerable?

I think I can manage something. I will remember this one, though; it s stunning.

Emery held still as Orla focused, and the corset thickened and dress shortened into a saloon-styled affair. It left her legs clothed in leather leggings that covered her legs to her boots.

Orla grinned. I like it. Now mine. She changed into a long tunic in silver with snowflakes all over it.

She was wearing boots and looked like she was looking for a fight.

Orla, you are my second. I don t want you getting that dress messy. Where is your mother?

Over at the buffet by the shrimp.

Think again. Emery smiled and said, Turn around.

Orla, what do you think you are doing?

Orla whirled and faced her recently reappeared mother. I am going to help a friend if she needs it.

Her mother was standing with her eyes narrowed. Good. She suffered at your father s hands just like you did. Well, not the same, but she did go through a very specific torment because of him. You two are bonded, and because of that, go nuts and don t let one of those manifestations stand. Warlocks are morons.

Emery grinned and started to walk to the battlefield. Orla caught up to her and linked

arms. Emery called out, So are we doing this, or are you three the little bitches that I see when I look at you? I own an animal shelter. I know a bitch when I see one.

Orla was laughing, and when they got to the polished round in the snow, they waited.

Hunter and Rowen walked up. Hunter was carrying the puppy.

Orla muttered, I wonder if they heard you.

The three warlocks in question were bristling with indignation as they stood at the other side of the snow arena. Partygoers were wandering over to watch whatever was about to occur. Olmin and Kelen were both there with their arms crossed.

Their wives and Olmin's familiar were standing nearby.

Emery watched as the three on the other side decided who went first. When they had their fight order sorted, Orla chuckled. You aren't going to leave one for me, are you?

Emery laughed. Hopefully not. The chance to beat the hell out of three warlocks as part of a Yule celebration? That comes along once in three lifetimes.

Orla chuckled. Here come the introductions.

Olmin looked at the warlocks. What do you declare in front of these witnesses?

Penrose stated, She is an ogre and useful for the magics that she can provide from her body. She is not allowed here. Her kind has been banned from this area for the last century and a half. It is our right to take her.

Kelen turned to her. Emery, what do you declare in front of these witnesses.

I, Emery, ogre born, was conceived using the magic of a warlock-sanctioned event. He stole away and used the magic of the evening to assault and impregnate my mother, who did not survive the birth. I was raised by mortals and by those who recognized what I was and helped me to manage what roared out of me. The only contact I had with my paternal side was the night they died. But sure. I have ogre power. Now, let's see what I can do.

Orla called out, If I can't fight, I am controlling the soundtrack.

Kelnen laughed. Agreed. Emery, are you ready?

Emery shifted and felt her swords ready themselves. Yup.

She walked onto the field and waited. The three warlocks stepped forward together, and Rowen yelled, Hey!

Emery didn't look away as the three men began to generate their avatars. It's fine, Rowen. Now, we find out which one is the warlock and which two are the familiars.

There was a gasp and an ooooooh from the watchers.

It was easy to bait warlocks under forty. They were all dick and ego. Easy prey.

Penrose sent his spectre outward, charging at her. The music theme of a martial arts video game began to blast, and Emery reached over her shoulders to grab her swords as she calmly moved toward him. An instant before he got to her, she straightened, stopped moving, and lit the swords with ogre fire. She started twirling them, and when he was close enough for contact, she simply cut his spectre's head off.

There was silence under the music, and then, the crowd cheered. She looked at the other two that had just generated avatars while Penrose was passed out on the ground.

She cocked her head. I don't make this offer lightly, but you can both take me on at the same time.

Orla hooted with laughter.

The other two warlocks lasted longer, but that was just because Emery was showing off. Ogre blades were not common, and she wanted to make sure that the warlocks and shifters got a solid look. Her body and movements were why battle-training ogres was forbidden. She jumped, slashed, backflipped, and finally slid between them, cutting the spectres in two. They dissipated, and their warlocks dropped.

She stood up, extinguished the flames, and slid the blades along her back, letting them disappear into the space between magic and skin.

Emery walked back to Rowen's side. Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?

He was blinking. You have ogre fire? His expression was impossible to understand.

Yeah, but you know I am half ogre. Sudden nauseating doubt assailed her. I didn't know it was that big a deal.

She started to back away from him, unable to decipher what was going on in his features. This wasn't an expression she had seen before.

She bumped into Orla standing with a grinning Winter, and she knew her eyes were wild. I don't know what's going on.

Orla tried to grab her, but Emery stepped back. She looked around, and then, her panic and insecurity about the evening snapped, and she ran. When she left the weather-controlled bubble that Winter had crafted, the icy snap surrounded her. She

looked left and right then headed for the nearest cross street. She was going home.

* * * *

Rowen was still locked in place with shock. Ogre fire. That much power with no proper training was so fucking dangerous it wasn't even funny. She had handled it like she had been born to it, which he supposed she had.

When she had bounced up to him with a big smile and flirty look in her eyes, he had been stuck with the ramifications of her fire. She said something, and he mumbled something about her fire. He saw the flickering of pain and confusion in her eyes, and then, she bolted.

Orla looked at him. What did you say?

I said something about her ogre fire. I don't know what. He pressed a fist into his forehead. He looked up and looked around. Where did she go?

Hunter sighed. Where you can't follow until dawn. We are locked in.

Rowen frowned. What?

She's out of the barrier.

Orla frowned. I will go get her.

Hunter looked at her. I don't want you to go.

Gabi walked up with her limp exaggerated on the snow. Where is Emery? I wanted to congratulate her. She was amazing.

Rowen nodded. She was. Did you know she had ogre fire?

Gabi shrugged. No, but I am not surprised.

Orla muttered, What is the big deal of ogre fire?

Hunter touched her arm. It means she is a ruler. It hasn't been seen for fifteen hundred years during the last wave of the ogre attacks.

But there aren't any other ogres in the area.

She won't just rule ogres. Anything she wishes to acquire will fall to her charms.

Orla paused and then looked to Rowen. You asshole!

He blinked. What?

Gabi said, You have been drawing her picture since you were twelve. Do you think the fire arranged that? The fire didn't manifest until you were nineteen if we are using your timeline.

Rowen blinked. Oh. Right.

And you have been verbally sparring with her ever since you opened the gym.

He frowned. Yes, that s... oh fuck, what have I done?

Orla looked behind him and said, Rowen, can you put a hard pulse through your magic right now? Through anything connected to it?

He frowned but nodded. Twenty feet away, a woman screamed and clutched her

head.

Got her. Thanks. Hunter's partner sprinted over to the woman who was blinking and clutching her head. As Rowen watched, Orla blasted the woman with starlight, and he felt clear.

What the actual fuck? Rowen's mind was clear, and he was looking around for Emery.

Hunter scowled. What happened?

No idea.

Gabi grunted. I know what that was. It was a repulsion spell based on one aspect of Emery that made you uneasy. It rippled until there was fear and disgust on your face.

Rowen's eyes burned, and he turned and walked to the woman who Orla had knocked over.

Orla had the woman in glowing cuffs and said, Rowen, this is Amelie Norwalk, one of Emery's bullies. Also, incidentally, her adopted sister via Emery's adoption.

He looked, and memories stirred. Amy. You have a membership at the gym.

She looked at him and tried to look seductive. I am a way better choice than she is.

His mind was completely clear. You are a nasty little worm. I would not choose you if you were the last woman on earth. Your corruption oozes out of your pores. I can smell it.

Amy paused and smirked. Well, she won't have you now. How could she when you

rejected her so publicly?

You did this on purpose?

She doesn't deserve anything good. She's ogre born, and she killed her mother. Amy sniffed as if that made sense.

Orla grimaced. Amy is a bully. She only eased up when Emery learned to mask her appearance. Pretty sure tonight is the first night that Emery has been out as herself since she was fourteen.

He was going to act, but Ty snapped his fingers. A tree trunk began to wrap around Amy, and she started screaming as the bark took her over. Then silence.

That will hold her. How can we get Emery back here? Ty scowled.

Orla looked at Rowen. He stared back. Shit. I can text her.

He picked up his phone and started texting.

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Emery was numb as she walked over the bridge. The ping of her phone made her want to throw it into the river, but instead, she looked at it as she walked along. Orla, Hunter, and the texts from Rowen kept coming in.

She slowed her steps as Rowen apologized, begged her to come back, and then mentioned the one thing that would give her understanding. I have met Amy. Ty has turned her into a tree.

I will be back in twenty minutes.

She turned on her heel and started plodding back over the bridge. She would return, but there was a lot less enthusiasm for the party.

The light of the party glowed in the distance, and she slowed to a stop. It was light, renewal, and hope. She wasn't feeling any of those things now.

A sports car with strange opalescent paint pulled up next to her. It was there silently for a moment, and then, the passenger window slid down. A familiar face caused Emery's heart to stutter.

Come on, Emmy. We want to join that party.

We do? The party doesn't want me.

It does; it is just a little slow. Come on.

Avaknell, I am not sure that this is a good idea.

Get in, Emery. We don't have to get out of the car until you are ready. Avaknell Blue smiled at her.

She nodded and got into the car, closing the door only when her skirt was tucked in safely. Thanks. Do you go to this party every year?

Sure. Every year since I landed. Is Kel there already?

Yeah.

Oh, this is going to be fun. Watch his eyes bug out.

Emery chuckled. Is he your destiny?

No. Don't be silly. You know how I feel about destiny. We are from the same original population group. That's all.

She drove slowly through the quiet streets and toward the party. The parking area was surprisingly well organized, and a young woman in a safety vest directed them into a parking spot.

Original population? He's a dragon.

Yes, dear. I know. She chuckled. Now, remember where I parked. I might need you to take the car after this.

Why?

I plan on getting high. Avaknell looked at her. Now, I know that you took some kind of emotional hit, but I want you to walk back in there with your head high and light out.

What?

This is the night for it.

Will you be yourself as well?

Her mentor chuckled. That is the idea.

You will stay with me?

Until you are ready for me to peel off. We are going to light Orla up as well, so this will be a freeing night for you both.

Why didn't he come after me?

The seasons are locked in to watch the turn of the year. They can't leave until dawn.

Avaknell opened the door. Emery mimicked her. They got out and stood behind the car. Avaknell grinned. I know you don't remember this, but I look like a cheap figurine at a ren faire.

I don't remember.

Her friend took her hand as a subtle shimmer washed over her, leaving Avaknell clad in a backless gown with gorgeous, gleaming, translucent, opal wings coming out of her back. She was taller, and her skin had the milky blue sheen, but the wild riot of long curls in every pastel colour of the rainbow tumbled around her.

The tail was a bit of a surprise.

Avaknell looked skyward at the dance of the stars. They look so different through

these eyes.

The eyes in question were as opal as the rest of her, only darker.

Emery looked at her friend and knew that no one would be looking at her. That was the best place to be.

Emery stood back and lit the dark fire. Black, red, and gold skimmed along her skin. It was a dark light that came from inside her. It felt so good to let it out. It had been the first thing she had to hide.

She stood with her eyes closed, and when she opened them, Avaknell was even prettier. She looked like every graceful movie elf but with wings and a tail.

Ready, Emery?

They held hands and walked to the checkpoint. Avaknell spoke calmly. She is returning. Emery, guest of Rowen and friend to Hunter and Orla.

The young man with the list swallowed. And your name?

Avaknell Blue.

He nodded and checked her off. Thank you and welcome.

Avaknell inclined her head and glided inside with Emery holding her hand. The party was in full swing, but silence fell as they walked through the crowd to where Hunter and Rowen were visible.

Emery saw Kellen's face turn toward them in astonishment, and Avaknell started laughing.

They continued walking to the group at the edge of the party, but it was the silence that followed them which made those in front turn around.

It is fine to stand out, Emery. You have earned it. You save people, you rescue people, and don't think I don't know about the mentorship program you have started at three different junior highs. You lift people up and make them understand their own strengths. That is what your light does. It doesn't illuminate you outside; it illuminates others within.

Emery blinked as the words were spoken and reverberated around the event. Everyone was listening.

Now, your man wishes to apologize for letting himself be bespelled, so accept his remorse and then dance. Avaknell waved her on.

Emery turned to Rowen, but he was already up next to her and hugged her. I am sorry. I didn't know anything was happening until you were gone.

She'd done it before. Anytime anyone was nice to me, she magnified anything negative they saw, and I ended up alone.

You have dark light.

I do. It flares gold or green depending on what I am doing, but this is what it looks like. She let the darkness pulse and shine.

It's lovely. Don't take this the wrong way, but it suits you.

She sighed. I know.

He laughed. Would you like to dance?

Yes. Can we make out when we stop?

His eyes gleamed. Definitely.

Emery felt the warmth of his body against hers as they walked back to the dance floor. He smiled. Take two.

They danced, and the music suddenly swelled to match them. Orla and Hunter joined them, and the rest of the party resumed.

* * * *

A vaknell turned to the looming figure next to her and said, Pleased to meet you formally, Kel. And your host, Nen. And your mate, Krys.

Wife. We call them wives here. Who are you?

She turned to him and smiled. Avaknell Blue of Blue Station. When I assumed my wings for the first time, I blew a hole in space. I fell through it and took two stars with me.

How long did you fall?

A few hundred years, I think. The idiot warlocks here were summoning stars, so we came here. I recovered my body, and they went into their mothers. When they were grown, I helped where I could while we waited for signs of the sky opening.

Kel murmured, You are going to take them?

I will come back for them when they call me. For now, they have hundreds of years ahead of them before they surrender their bodies again. I will open the sky for them

when they want to resume their journey.

He looked at her. You are a female dragon.

Yes. You are a fused one. How is Nen doing?

The eyes shifted. I am fine, mistress. Thank you for inquiring.

She smiled as Kel returned.

Krys asked, So, you are a female dragon?

Yes.

You look so... pretty.

Kel just looks like that because he used to open asteroids with his face. She grinned.

But you could have been his mate. Krys looked a little nervous.

Fuck no. I do not produce the amount or type of energy that he needs. As the big bastards get older, their bodies become fussy about what they can and can't consume. I and the handful of other female dragons are not on the menu.

Handful?

Oh, we are not common. We are rare. Powerful, strong, naive, adorable, and rare. Avaknell grinned.

Kel asked, Where were you?

My sisters and I are at Blue Station. It is where we have been running the station, taking on customer service, and tending to those who just need somewhere to rest. Our ancestor is using the station as a dating platform to draw in male dragons so he can observe and make sure we are solid matches. You know, as a good patriarch should. She grinned.

You seem jovial. You did not have a match?

Oh, I found one. Or he found me, but our first shift is a little... violent, and I had to jettison myself out of an airlock. The dragon emerged and tore the hole in space for me and those two stars. We dropped through the darkness for decades or centuries, I have no clue, until we landed here. Well, I landed, they dispersed.

Kel stared at her and then looked skyward. So, your mate is coming.

It wasn't a question.

She shrugged. The sky has been lively over this last year. If he were going to find a beacon, the two dancing stars would be it.

Avaknell looked at the dance floor where the two stars were dancing with their seasons. She flicked her fingers, and both girls got a power boost. The light and darkness spiralled upward and continued on into the sky.

How long do you think it will take for him to find you? Krys asked softly.

He will be here tonight. That was just landing lights in case he is especially dense.

Krys followed up, Why don't you just fly home?

Kelnen answered, Her dragon is a baby. She has trouble with atmospheric flight.

Avaknell tapped her nose. That s it. I am fine gliding using the starlight for power, but it takes a lot of power to escape from a planet s gravity. Basically, I need a lift.

Krys leaned in. Can his dragon carry yours?

No. Not really. I will ride him or be carried into space and then resume my other form. From there, he will be able to haul me through the nearest portal. My guardian is going to be pissed.

Avaknell looked upward. It will be a matter of finding the right path home.

Kel chuckled. Could he have arrived already?

Maybe, but as you know, dragons live long but have limited patience. She smiled. I also remember what he felt like.

Krys leaned in. What was that?

A whole lot of nothing. Avaknell grinned. He s a null.

Kel blinked. You aren t serious?

Oh, yes. She smiled. He s very pretty, though.

Kel snorted.

Avaknell shrugged. He is.

Olmin was slowly walking around her, staring at her.

Where are your manners, warlock? She jabbed him in the abdomen with her tail.

You brought the prophecy?

She looked at her polished nails. Prophecy?

When the doom was coming, the asteroid was coming. You gave us the information to get the guardian involved.

Oh, that. Yeah. He was busy being a statue, so there wasn't much he was doing at the time. Good call on picking Krys, Nen. She was just what the old bat needed.

Kel growled, and she snickered.

Krys muttered, Are you trying to get on his nerves?

Absolutely. But, to be honest, with him being so old and wise, it is like a toddler pouring juice on his head. It's annoying, but he's amused as hell at the same time.

Kel crossed his arms. She's not wrong. I have never seen a dragon female before. Fuck, they are annoying.

Avaknell beamed. And you are cranky. Comes with age, I guess.

He grinned and shook his head. You are going to be in so much trouble when your mate gets here.

Tell me something I don't know. But he isn't here yet, and I feel like skating. She sent a wave of dissipating heat over the snowy field, and it formed sheets of ice. Her height grew by two inches as she made some skates, and she started a slow pass over the ice to the music.

She was bigger with the wings out, but it was easier to balance. They compensated

for every little wobble, as did her tail.

Ava felt like herself again, with no reason to hide or modify her body. She had understood Emery the moment that she met her. All that power and no way to show it; all that loneliness and no one to hold. Avaknell had tried to adopt Emery, but her grandparents refused it. She missed the window when Emery was available for adoption, but the foster parents had a more urgent claim to her. So, she had waited, and the moment her little dark star was free, she had taken her under her wing and helped her to become a valuable member of the community.

Emery was a glowing soul, but her glow was dark, and that was overlooked. She worked her magic deep in the hearts of those around her when she was able. She smiled at the glow that had flared when Rowen had hugged her little friend. Emery was in good hands. Great once Avaknell left the earth.

She looked around, and other individuals or couples or triads were skating along the ice, and she smiled. She always had been a trendsetter.

Two hours later, she was sitting and having some desserts and a kebab when there was a rumble of shock out on the ice. Avaknell ate her meat stick and then munched on the tarts and other fruity pastry as she walked out of the pavilion and onto the snow.

Kel walked up next to her. Looks like your ride is here.

A dark swirl in the stars got wider, a spinning spiral of darkness that blocked out the stars in its vicinity.

Avaknell frowned. That looks wrong.

Kel paused in his silent amusement. What?

He isn't so absolutely dark. Avaknell stared up and tried to think of what it could be. She didn't like the answer.

She frowned and looked around.

Looking for a place to run? Kel was amused.

Nope. Trying to figure out how large a snowball I can muster.

Why? Isn't that your null?

She hissed, Yes, but it isn't alone. Someone else is with him, and I said that I wasn't going to accept a set.

Oh. There are two of them in there?

Correct.

The dragons formed out of the swirl and descended rapidly.

One was blue-black, and one was absolute black. She had seen them both before.

Avaknell watched them head toward the icy gathering, and they back-winged to settle neatly on their clawed feet.

The party was full of amazed voices.

Kel muttered, They are big.

Avaknell mumbled around the food she was eating. Shut up.

He laughed. Oh, I believe I am understanding. Krys doesn't mind.

She's not facing two of you. She deals with you and Nen. It's different. A lot less tails involved, for one.

He was laughing as Hunter came up next to them, and they walked up with Olmin to greet the dragons, who were swaying their long necks as they looked for her. She went back to the buffet.

Emery met her as she piled her plate high. Those are dragons.

Yes.

And you are a dragon.

Correct.

And they are boys?

Yup.

And you are in here because?

I am peckish. Avaknell looked at her. So, inside my car, there are documents in the glove box, leaving you all my stuff. The car will open and drive for you and only you. It also fixes itself if you get into a fender bender.

What?

Well, one way or another, I am leaving with the gruesome twosome. I am bingeing calories because space is cold, and it will take a long few seconds to get me into my

other form.

Emery cuddled up against her side, her dark light spilling over. I don't want you to go.

I know, huggy bear, but I have to. Keeping myself in has been painful over these few decades. Just having my wings out tonight feels amazing, but it burns a lot of calories. She looked at her friend. You will be fine, and if you need me, Orla can teach you a communication spell. I am going to have to go back into my sector, but you are not alone. If I have to drop back here again, I will.

But it will hurt you.

Those two scaly buggers flew here because I am going into heat soon. Really soon.

Oh. So, babies?

A rich, dark voice said, If we perform all the rituals correctly and frequently, that will be the result.

She looked over him and wrinkled her nose. Why are you here, Void?

His unrelieved dark features moved, forming a startling white slash of a smile. I am here because you flew so far and so fast that Null needed my help to find you.

He reached out and took a treat off her plate. She smacked his hand with her tail, but he just turned his hand, gripped, and stroked down her tail. You know that Blue authorized both of us, right?

She valiantly hid her shudder. Yes, but one of you is a little much. Two of you are obnoxious.

Emery giggled. You didn't end up here by accident.

Void shook his head. She tore a hole in space, grabbed two star souls, and dropped through it, sealing it behind her. Weirdest accident ever.

Avaknell shrugged. Oops. Sorry, Emery. I dragged you two with me.

Why?

Null was approaching.

Avaknell muttered, You two were on the way here. I need a light in the space between, so I grabbed on and used you as a tow vehicle. You dropped through at midnight, and I showed up in the middle of the day. Time is funny in the space between.

Emery laughed. So, we brought you here.

Yup. Dragons are funny. We need beacons to guide us to worlds if they don't have their own dragon population.

Null slid his arm around her waist from behind and kissed her neck. Hello, Ava.

She fought the urge to slam her tail up between his thighs, mostly because Void still had a grip on her tail and was stroking it slowly.

Null.

Emery paused. Wait, Null and Void? Are you serious? She broke off into peals of laughter.

Rowen slid his arm around her waist. Are you good?

I am good. Avaknell is younger than I thought.

Ava stuck her tongue out at Emery. Mean.

Void paused. They aren't our names, but Avaknell Blue likes to categorize things, so they are our manifestations.

Ava started eating again.

Kel came by and shook his head. You should have said.

There was never a good time. How long do we have? She glanced at Void.

We need to leave. The stars are shifting.

She sighed, handed him the plate, and hugged Emery. Be brave, be strong, be bright, and call me if you need me.

Do you have live births or lay eggs? Emery stared at her.

Avaknell sighed. Depends on what form I am wearing when I get pregnant.

Oh, wow.

If it is the scaly one, big eggs. Huge. She grinned and kissed Emery's cheek. Remember, car, glove box. Really big house.

Wait, so you knew this was happening.

Avaknell shrugged. They move through the space between worlds like a semi in need of a tune-up or a cement truck. Either way, they were going to be here tonight, but I needed to make sure you were safe and secure. Now, I have to head back and figure out the rest of my life with these two bozos. Wow, this world is full of fun words.

Emery looked sad, so Avaknell kissed the slight peak in her hair and exhaled power into it. There. I am with you always. I would have adopted you if I could. I did try.

Emery nodded. I read my file. I know. You were the best mentor I could have had, though.

Good. Now, live a life, have a family, and let Rowen s family become yours. They really want to be. They think your natural hair is cool.

Emery laughed, hugged her one more time, and then turned to Rowen. He held her as tightly as she held him.

Avaknell turned to her dragons. Let s go before I start crying.

Null and Void put their hands under her wings and walked out to the open area where they had landed. They explained the procedure, and Void changed first. He opened his mouth, and she walked into it, settling on his tongue.

Darkness surrounded her, and she was still able to breathe, but then, they shot skyward, and she felt the strain in his body as he pushed the air out from under his wings.

She felt the moment that they left the atmosphere, troposphere, and stratosphere. When they were free of gravity, she focused and crouched, and as Void opened his mouth, she shot forward and took on her glowy white wings and scales. They moved next to her, and their wing claw linked with hers. Void opened a rift, and they flew

into it, gliding through space with delightful ease. Well, it was easy for her. Her mates were doing all the work. She took a nap.

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Emery stared skyward as a sandwich cookie of dark and light took place before disappearing into a wink of darkness.

She touched her forehead. She's still here. Emery chuckled. She's asleep.

Rowen blinked. You are in touch with her?

She linked her emotional state to me.

That may become inconvenient.

Emery looked at him. Why?

The guys with her had their minds on mating. Rut smells similar for every species.

Oh. That might get weird.

Only if they are good at what they do. He chuckled. Void seemed to have a handle on that, and Null was enthusiastic.

Uh. Right. I don't think I should have used sad puppy face with her.

Rowen hugged her. Isn't there a phrase Do not mess in the affairs of dragons?

Yeah, but it ends For you are crunchy and good with ketchup. She looked over to Kellen holding Krya. Okay, I can see the eating aspect of it. Well, not literally.

He laughed. This will be interesting.

She grumbled, I hope they have a nice, long flight.

I doubt that it will be that long.

She groaned and thudded her head against his shoulder.

Let's dance. Dawn will be here in a few hours, and you can figure out how to numb the effect of a direct link into a dragon's brain.

That sounded like an excellent idea, so they got on the dance floor with many fatigued couples and swayed to the music. The fast stuff had ended at one; now, it was all slow dances.

They moved close to Orla and Hunter, and Emery asked, Orla, do you know a spell to dampen a direct magical emotional connection?

No, but I think I can make one.

Can you get to it as soon as things are wrapped up here, and you have a nap, of course.

Orla smiled. Sure, nap.

Hunter chuckled.

Emery smiled. It's about time.

Rowen snorted. Come on, Emery. The amount of lust pouring off our good winter avatar is going to bring on an early spring.

Orla blushed but stayed close to Hunter.

Emery glided around with Rowen for a while before muttering, Someone doesn't neglect their cardio.

He laughed and twirled her before pulling her against him again. The autumn equinox is going to be so much fun this year. The harvest moon, the blue moon. He wagged his eyebrows. Halloween.

So, you really have to participate in all those things?

Absolutely. I have an equinox party that is a lesser version of this. Just as Spring does. Summer gets the longest day and likes to rub that in.

He won't be rubbing anything any time soon.

Rowen chuckled and checked his watch. Sunrise in forty-five minutes. Do you want to go for a walk?

Sure. Avaknell is still sleeping, so things should be fine.

He nodded, and they separated, but he offered her his arm. They left the pavilion and walked onto the well-trampled snow.

So, what did you think of the seasonal celebration.

She smiled. I think it was very eventful. However will Hunter top things next year?

Well, it would have to be two years from now for baby racing to be a thing, Rowen murmured.

She stumbled. Baby racing?

He laughed. It was just a thought.

So, why are we going for a walk in giant dragon tracks?

He smiled. We never did get to the kissing portion of the evening.

Oh. Right.

And my family is far enough to see us but not coo at us cuddling. They can save that for the rest of the holidays. New Year s will be soon enough. He slid his arms around her waist and pulled her against him.

He leaned down, she went up, and they met in the middle. Her light got excited and wrapped around him until they both glowed with dark light.

The kiss got wild. She clung to him as he found out exactly how much refined sugar had passed her lips. Time ticked past, and there was a cool feeling in her mind. Uh-oh. We woke her up.

He grinned. We managed to reach a dragon in space?

Yeah. She s irritated.

I am astounded and amazed at your reach, Emery. He stroked her cheek with his thumb.

She turned her head into the touch. She looked at him. How much longer?

Ten minutes. Let s go greet the dawn, and then, we can be on our way.

Where are we going?

My place. It s bigger, and the neighbours are further away.

Do I snore?

No, but you do bite, and I really want to be somewhere secluded when that happens.

She covered her mouth. Oh, damn. They are down.

Oh, yeah. He chuckled. I hadn t realized that I only saw a fraction of them.

She kept her hand in front of her mouth as they walked back. They don t do this often.

Under what circumstances do they come down?

She thought about it. Rowen changing his shirt in front of the gym window. Rowen playing with what must have been a niece in front of his gym and walking her over to the diner for ice cream. Rowen in the sauna and the tux. Special circumstances.

Really. What features in those circumstances?

She tilted her head. Window dressing springs to mind.

He chuckled. I see.

I don t think you do.

He whispered, I wasn t advertising the gym.

She stopped and dug her feet in. What?

He laughed. Come on. We are almost out of here.

She stayed in the circle of his arm and looked at all of the warlocks, mages, shifters, and others who were standing and waiting for the flame to relight the sun.

She kept her face turned toward Rowen to hide her fangs. The bottom ones had come out to make sure that her mate wouldn't get away. He would be stuck until she let him go. He seemed excited about it.

Orla came over, and Rowen went to stand with the other seasons as the sunrise approached. To Emery's astonishment, a bright glow rose from the log, and it flew to the east. It touched the horizon as the sun came up, and a white heart filled the orb as it climbed upward by inches.

Orla hugged her. We made it through another year, but now, we are back together. It feels good to be with you again.

Me, too.

How long did you know the dragon?

It feels like it was all my life, but mainly the last fourteen years.

Do you want to meet my boss and his quad?

Emery chuckled. Sure.

They walked over to a strange collection of beings. This is my best friend and fellow star, Emery. Emery, this is Thomas, Cale, Acker, and the golden Sallen. They are

known as the fairy tale quad.

Thomas looked at her, and Sallen grinned as she said, We know Emery. Not in this body, but we know Emery. She has the best ice cream in the city. She could open a shop with just that alone.

Sallen looked around. Hey, Krys, this is Emery from the diner!

Krys left Kellen and rushed over. Oh, wow. You got me through two out of three trimesters. Kellen had an account and picked up what I needed on the way home.

Emery smiled. I know. That is how I recognized him when I saw him.

Krys looked sly. So, how can I get ten pints of ice cream in a variety of flavours?

She shrugged. Place an order. We do that kind of thing all the time.

Krys gasped. He said you didn't take orders that large. What a liar!

Kellen finished ambling over and looked at his furious partner and then at Emery. He sighed. She found out about the ice cream.

She did.

Her cholesterol was getting high. The doctor wanted it under control, so I lied.

Krys kicked him in the shin.

He winced and wrapped his arms around her, whispering into her ear. She glared but then nodded. Fine. Three times a week.

Sallen laughed. Well, I know that isn't about sex.

Emery smirked. Negotiating for how much ice cream she can eat. Who knows, with her second one, she might not have cravings.

Kellen looked hopeful, but Sallen laughed. Not going to happen.

Emery chuckled. I can reduce the sugar and swirl in some sorbets.

Thank you. The dragon inclined his mage's head.

Rowen came toward her and wrapped his arms around her. Ready to go?

Sure. Your car or mine? Avaknell left me hers.

Neither, I have a bit too much energy, and I want to run home.

Not in these boots.

He laughed. Not in this form. I did warn you about riding a stag.

She said weakly, I thought it was a euphemism.

He kissed her quickly and took her hand to walk her back to the field. Orla ran after her and put the cloak around her shoulders. It gets cold out. Talk to you in the morning. Afternoon. Soon.

Emery chuckled and kissed her friend on the cheek. They both glowed with their different lights.

When Emery turned to face Rowen, he had a stag's head, neck, and horns, and then,

his body blurred until he was the size of a moose. Whoa.

He gave her an amused look, and as promised, he knelt next to her. Emery hiked up her skirt and settled on his back, hanging onto his horns as he rose up on his front and back feet. He was really tall. She shifted her grip to his neck, where there was a tuft of hair, and he began walking, then cantering, followed by a full run as she leaned close to his neck and held on.

Familiar streets blurred past as his hooves dug into the snow as he stayed off the slippery roads.

He ran to his home on the outskirts of town and headed straight for the back yard that ended in a thick forest. He knelt again, and she slid off, staggering back as he reformed to a kneeling man.

She sighed. You are ruining your suit.

It will be repaired. Cale made it so it shifts with me. He stood up. You have very strong thighs.

Um, thanks.

He took her by the hand and pulled her into his home. She pushed the door closed and swallowed. So, we are going to...

Would you like to?

Yes, but... this kind of feels like prom night.

Did you have fun at prom?

Didn't go. Amy made sure that no one asked me. She twisted her lips. But she was the birth daughter, and I was just the trash that blew in.

You heard that a lot, I am guessing.

More than I would like. They didn't expect me to turn scary, and then, all focus was on containment. She shrugged.

He stroked her cheek. What if containment is the last thing on my mind?

You are going to get perforated.

He grinned. Then, let's start slow, and if anything upsets you or hurts, let me know.

You sound like my dentist.

He laughed and picked her up, carrying her up the stairs to his bedroom. Her cloak and corset came off easily, leaving the sweaty lower layers. He sat her on the bed, got her boots off, and then, the skirt slid free. Orla had replaced her clothing after the fight, so she was naked pretty quickly.

His clothing disappeared with a heartbeat of focus, and he sat her against the headboard and then sat next to her and held her hand.

She was expecting him to pounce, but he just smiled. We start when you want and stop when you want. I will even reset for you to a point you were comfortable.

What about if you are uncomfortable? I am pretty sure that I am going to bite. Okay, I am positive. There isn't any going back for you.

What about you?

Well, technically, if I found another Rowen around somewhere, I could have him. She shrugged. But that seems like a lot of work.

He grinned and slid down in the bed. Well, I have dreamed of you for a decade or two, so just having you here is amazing. I am content with that.

Emery looked down his body and saw the distinct proof that he was lying. Content? If that is content, I would hate to see you aroused. Do you grow a second one?

He snorted and grabbed her by the waist, draping her over him. Funny. No. One is enough. He stroked a hand down her spine. If it isn't, let me know, and I will see what I can do.

She giggled and kissed him.

He was true to his word, and they took it slow. When his stroking fingers brought her to climax, she couldn't hold back anymore, and her mouth clamped down on his arm. The surface veins on his body turned black and green before fading. When her mouth finished pumping venom into him, she relaxed her jaw and tried to kiss it better.

He stared at her in astonishment. He was shaking as he rolled her to her back and slowly slid into her. Two hours of fingering made his entrance easy.

He shuddered in relief, and she tried to get used to the feeling. When he started to move, it was carefully, and the next time she came, he was with her.

He raised his head and said, Do you know how long the venom lasts?

She shook her head. Is it bad?

How are you feeling?

Fine. No aches and pains.

Good. No, it isn't bad, but let me know if you get sore. I haven't felt this good since I learned how to walk again.

You got an erection learning to walk again? She grinned.

Oh, yeah. Finally, all the blood could move around evenly. It was eye-opening. He was moving inside her slowly.

Yeah, eye-opening is a good word. She slid her hands up his sweaty arms. Dark light was pouring out of her, and he didn't seem to mind. I will be here for you as long as you need me.

He chuckled. Welcome to the next two centuries.

Boy, are you optimistic. He kissed her, and they continued to move together, changed position, and began again.

She felt irritation from Avaknell the moment she woke up. Emery guessed at what their first contact was going to sound like and knew it would involve a lot of yelling.

The link went both ways, which was probably a surprise to the dragon.

The aches Rowen had mentioned weren't as bad as she had anticipated. She rolled over and was surprised to see him gone. That kind of hurt. She checked under the bedding to make sure she hadn't just worn him down to a nub.

Rowen came in and sighed. I was trying to get back before you woke up. He was wearing a robe made with fabric styled in a falling leaf pattern on a black background.

He carried a tray, and she rolled to her back and slowly scooted up to the headboard. He set the tray between her side and his, slid his robe off, and settled next to her, a sheet demurely across his lap. So, we are bad bosses.

Why?

We've been working off the venom for three days. One week to New Year's.

Oh, shit. I have to make some calls.

Relax. The alchemist and Orla worked out a spell to cover the township. Not only will this form be accepted as Emery, but as far as our places of business are concerned, we are on a vacation. Together.

She grabbed a croissant and peeled it apart. She paused and sniffed it. Hey, this is from the diner.

He grinned. Gabi brought emergency rations once I told her we were in a sort of confinement.

Embarrassing. She put some in her mouth. But helpful.

He laughed. This is when the big family comes in handy. Just wait until later. Meg is bringing us a care package from the restaurant.

Oh, Ribs?

And brisket and pulled pork and the pigtail fries. He grinned. Sauce, bread, and pickles.

Wow. She covered her mouth. She investigated her teeth. Almost normal.

That aroused you?

A little, but it was mainly a drool issue.

He laughed and handed her a fruit cup. Gabi was appalled when I said we hadn't eaten since the party.

Not strictly true. She blushed.

Rowen stroked her from cheek to breast. True. That was a lot of fun. I can still taste you.

She stuffed half her croissant in his mouth. That should take care of it.

His eyes were twinkling, and he quickly finished the mouthful. Well, we have a week. What do you want to do?

Um, meet the rest of your family and start figuring out what Avaknell left me?

That sounds sensible. Where did she live?

You know that huge house on the hill?

He froze. Yes.

That's her place. Or my place. Emery smiled at him. Or our place.

Rowen smiled. Her car is in the drive. No one brought it. It just showed up.

It does that.

There is also no room for a key in the door.

It knows me. We will be fine.

I don't think I will fit in it.

She patted his cheek. That is what you thought about me, and you fit just fine.

They giggled and snarked at each other for half an hour, cuddled up for a restorative nap, and ended up tiring each other out again.

The house was huge but still cozy, and on day eight after their first interaction, Emery waited until Rowen was out doing something with his family before she peed in a cup and put three different tests into action.

She paced and talked to Orla on the phone. It can't have been fast, right?

Orla was doing the same thing on the other end of the line. It's doubtful, but it is possible. We started together. We grew up in parallel, and we both have season-sensitive partners. The amount of smug growling and huffing around here was unbelievable. I tried to punch him, but then, he turned it into a boxing lesson.

Emery smiled. Hunter is very kind.

He is, but he is also annoying. If it weren't for our little Snowball, I would be nuts. He's a lovely stress reliever.

Emery paced and watched the timer. It counted down slowly. Oh, this is scary.

You could have done this with him there.

Scarier.

Agreed.

The alarm went off, and Emery muttered, Here we go.

The pale lines were on the two tests that indicated that way, and the digital was also positive. Well, hell. That explained all the venom. I definitely recognized him. A lot. Those lines are darker than they should be.

Yeah, mine, too. Orla sounded as stunned as Emery felt.

Wanna go for coffee?

Can we have coffee?

Herbal tea and a bear claw?

Done. Meet you at the diner.

On my way. As soon as I clean up. Downside to having scent-sensitive partners.

Oh, shit. Right. One quick bathroom scrub coming up.

They laughed and hung up. Emery washed everything, got the sticks and hid them in her bag, wrapped in a sandwich bag.

When everything was clear and scrubbed, she headed for the garage to take Avaknell's car out. The car was sort of a pet and definitely a car. It didn't attract speeding tickets and could always find parking. It is just a pity you aren't quite big enough for Rowen.

The car shuddered.

Sorry, sweetie. She buckled up, and the vehicle glided out of the garage. She drove down the hill and into town, heading for her diner. She parked, got out of the car, and headed into the diner.

Ally smiled and gestured toward a booth. Emery walked over and slid into the booth, waiting for Orla.

Herbal tea was waiting when her friend came through the door and scuttled to her side. Orla chuckled. We have to stop doing things together.

I don't think we can. Emery shrugged. Which sucks for you because Rowen's family has lots of kids, and I think you are going to be along for the ride.

Orla chuckled. I don't mind. Mom will be ecstatic.

Is she taking the old house, or does she want to live in my house?

I think she is going to renovate the old manor. It is just down the road from Hunter's place, so when little ones come along, Grandma can come over and babysit.

They leaned back, and Emery sipped at her tea. Avaknell is mad at me.

Why?

Because the mark she left on me goes both ways, and I was naked with Rowen, so... I set her off.

Oh. And she wasn't happy with two partners.

Nope. She's getting over it now, but it doesn't hurt that she hasn't had much time to put up a sound argument. That ogre venom lasted a very long time.

Orla chuckled.

They sat and chatted until their phones went off in unison. Orla smiled. It seems that we aren't the only ones synced up.

They answered their phones, and Rowen offered an invitation that was irresistible.

When they hung up, they paid their bill and headed to their cars. It was time once again for barbeque.

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Emery stood and supervised the wave of tiny people in her back yard. Rowen wrapped his arms around her and held her belly. I was thinking we should slow down, but every time I do, you bite, and I can't say no.

It's only six and a half so far. Orla is coping well. I feel a little guilty, but the fact that I have four girls and two boys, and she has four boys and two girls means that we aren't perfectly aligned.

Sallen and her partners arrived and released her children. The bounce houses were getting plenty of action.

Emery, how are you doing?

I am fat and waddly. How are you doing?

Pretty good. My ovaries are on a break.

Lucky. As soon as I am generally in shape from one, Rowen brings me flowers or roasted meat, and off I go again.

Rowen started laughing.

She looked up at him. Keep giggling, and next time, it's venison.

You can put me in your mouth anytime, Emery. He leaned forward and kissed her.

Sallen smirked. You two are adorable. Orla has Thomas designing all kinds of kids

furniture, so I have a household full of prototypes. They are selling well, though. He might be able to spend more time in town with the business taking off under her relentless demands.

Orla waddled over. Speaking of relentless, I am thinking of banishing Rowen the next time she's ready to go off. Just for a few months. I need a break.

Emery looked at her. Unless you can find supplemental childcare, he's staying with me. The daycare we opened next to the gym is great, but I have so much other stuff to fuss over, thanks to the lovely and scaley wonder. She handed me an empire, and I seem to want to populate it.

Rowen chuckled and supported her belly, taking the weight off, and she happily groaned as she leaned back into him. His wedding band gleamed on his finger, and hers was on a string around her neck. Dozens of tiny fall leaves in different shades of gold, from red to white, marched around the band.

They watched the kids party as Krys and Kelen came over, and when Maven, Olmin, and Argo came with their kids, the riot was on. This next generation was wild, strong, and had a protective community, as well as stern self-policing.

She turned to Rowen. Avaknell has uncoupled our emotions. So, she's no longer going to be on the baby train.

Kelen wandered over and caught the end of that. How many does she have?

Same as me and Orla. Six and a bit.

His eyes bugged out. Six baby dragons? Holy hell. Null and Void must be so happy and frazzled.

Krys caught up. Did you tell her what she said?

Kelnen shook his head. No. We have always been celebrating something. It slipped my mind.

Now is a good time.

Oh. He spoke casually. Avaknell is my descendant. The joining of my line and Blue s.

Emery smiled slowly.

Orla looked at her. You knew?

I suspected. They have the same eyes. Not the colour but the set and the same aggressive whimsy.

Kelnen smiled. And her temper.

Oh, yeah. She is going to relax now that she has made a whole bunch of little dragons.

Orla looked at her. When are you going to relax?

Emery sighed. I try, but it s a compulsion.

Rowen said, Accompanied by ogre fire and dark light.

Hunter murmured, I am going to have an extension put on the house. Don t get me wrong, my family is ecstatic if confused.

Emery shrugged. I suppose I could try to break the link to Orla.

Orla grunted. Don t even think it. I can always use birth control. Or he can. Or we

can. This has just been fun because, now, they are all going to be grown by the time I am fifty-five, and they all have little friends now.

And you won't look a day over thirty. Hunter kissed her cheek.

She chuckled. Seven is enough for you, Winter?

Definitely. They all started laughing.

Emery smiled and felt relief. She had felt horrible hauling her friends along, but ogre queens were populators. She was shooting for an even dozen, and the occasional oops baby wouldn't be amiss. Rowen's family was nuts for each pregnancy, and the amount of custom clothing and embroidered quilts she now had was extensive. The women of the family liked to create, but once the babies were done, they switched to clothing the family. That included Emery after a hasty proposal and a glorious wedding in the woods with a pathway made from arched tree boughs. Orla's wedding had occurred an hour later with the same pathway frosted and a change of family. Where Emery had had her as the maid of honour, Orla did the same. Her mother was the officiant.

The years were flying by, but it didn't matter as much as Emery had thought it would. She looked the same, and her friends looked the same, so it felt like the world was rotating past them. The kids were ways to mark the passing of time, and they would have loving family to help them deal with any part of the ogre bloodline.

The stars had fallen, and their friendship remained on the world that had called them. It had just become something that no one would have guessed. The light star was flourishing, and the dark star was on the rise.