



Treasured by the Fae Royal

(Fae Overlords #2)

Author: Sue Mercury, Sue Lyndon

Category: Fantasy

Description: The fae prince needs a human bride.

Desperate to save my ailing mother, I set off to find a skilled healer, only to be captured by flesh traders a day into my journey. Just when I think all is lost, a huge, golden-winged fae male comes to my rescue. Not only does the handsome, musclebound creature save me from the auction block, but he promises to help my dying mother. He also treats me with great deference and makes me question everything I thought I knew about the fae.

Im shocked, however, when I learn my would-be saviors true identity—Prince Lucas. The same Summer Court prince who helped conquer my homeland. How could I ever trust him? Ill never forget the bloodshed and cruelty his people visited on mine, and I fear he possesses a dark side that might emerge at any moment. But no matter how fiercely I try to guard my heart, his warmth and gentleness keep breaking through my defenses.

Despite our growing connection, I expect well part ways soon and Ill never see him again. He has a few northern kingdoms left to conquer, and Im probably going to marry a human man and settle down in a quiet village. But I never counted on his ruthless determination to make me his, and Im stunned to discover he doesnt just want me as a concubine. He wants more. He wants everything.

He wants me to become his wife.

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CHAPTER 1

YVETTE

The room is eerily quiet. I step closer to Mama as the early morning sun floods through the windows, accentuating her pale, sickly features.

She's breathing. Barely.

I swallow past the burning in my throat and readjust the pack that's slung over my shoulder. It's brimming with a week's worth of supplies. If I hurry, I can make it to Sorsston and back in just four days.

I pray all goes to plan and that I'll find a skilled healer in the secluded mountain city. If I don't find a healer, or the healer isn't willing to travel, I'll have to venture further north than planned.

Gods, please keep Mama breathing while I'm gone.

Please help me find a healer who's well-versed in treating mangga bites.

A shudder passes through me as I recall the horrible scream my mother let loose when the venomous, six-legged creature clamped down on her leg.

Mama and I were on our way to visit my aunt, whom we hadn't seen in years, when we had the frightening encounter with the mangga. It happened at the very end of our journey just as Aunt Heather's little green cottage finally came into sight. Somehow,

I managed to kill the hissing creature before it could strike again.

If only we hadn't taken that shortcut through the grassy meadow. If only we'd stuck to the main road.

Regret wells in my heart. The shortcut was my idea.

Footsteps sound in the hallway, and a second later, I feel a comforting hand on my shoulder. I turn and wrap my arms around Aunt Heather, burying my face in her chest. She smells like cardamom and vanilla and nutmeg, as well as a multitude of other scents reminiscent of a cozy home. Gods, I've missed her.

"This is all my fault." My voice cracks. "If she doesn't make it, I'll never forgive myself. I'm not just talking about the shortcut through the meadow, but the trip to visit you. That was my idea too. Mama was reluctant to leave our home in Trevos and travel all the way here, but I talked her into it and promised her everything would be okay."

Aunt Heather pulls back and cups my face. She looks so much like Mama that I almost break down in tears. "It's not your fault. Besides, she's going to make it," she says in a kind but firm tone. "Do you hear me? She is going to make it. I will take good care of her in your absence. You just hurry back with the healer and all will be well. Remember what I told you. Visit the apothecary shop and ask for Evelyn. She's an old friend of mine and the best healer I've ever known. I'm certain she'll come."

"You haven't visited Sorsston in almost a year. What if Evelyn's no longer there?" Countless worries flit through my mind, each one darker than the last. "With the Summer Court army nearby, she might've fled to a safer area." During the past few months, the fae have wreaked havoc in the human territories, conquering many villages and even large kingdoms like my home city of Trevos.

Aunt Heather's stoic expression wavers, and she glances out the window. A faraway look enters her eyes, then she blinks it away, squares her shoulders, and refocuses her gaze on me. "If Evelyn's no longer there, ask around the city. She has a lot of friends who live in the countryside like me, friends who would be glad to take her in if she had to flee Sorsston. Someone might know where she went."

I nod and blink back a fresh wave of tears. I don't dare voice the other worries I'm harboring. Like, what if Sorsston has been conquered just like Trevos? Almost a year has passed since the Summer Court army defeated my home city. Not only are they still occupying Trevos, but they plan to remain in control indefinitely, and during the initial weeks after the short but bloody battle, they wouldn't allow any humans in or out of the city, enacting a complete lockdown.

If the fae are occupying Sorsston and have it locked down, will I still be able to reach Evelyn's apothecary shop? I think of the letter I have in my pocket, penned by the newly appointed fae Warden of Trevos himself, that is supposed to guarantee my safe passage on the road. But would the letter help me gain admittance to a settlement that's locked down by the fae?

Gods, I can't fathom Mama dying. I simply can't.

"I know what you're thinking," Aunt Heather says in a gentle tone. "You're thinking about what happened in Trevos. You're worried Sorsston might've suffered the same fate and that it'll complicate your search for Evelyn."

I smile through my sorrow. "I haven't seen you in almost eight years, but it's as though no time has passed. It would seem you can still read my mind without any difficulty." An ache pierces my heart when I think about the time lost. All because my late father didn't like Aunt Heather. Eight years ago, after a disagreement with my aunt that was entirely his fault, he forbade Mama and me from visiting ever again. He even tried to prevent Mama from sending and receiving letters, the hateful man.

Aunt Heather returns my smile and smooths a hand through my hair. “Be gone with you, child. The sun has just risen, and you need to get on the road. Please promise you’ll be careful.”

“I promise.” I lift my chin. “I promise I’ll be careful, and I promise I’ll return soon with a healer. With Evelyn.” I infuse my voice with conviction. Maybe if I actually believe I’ll succeed, then I will. Fake it until I make it. I must think positive, and I must be strong. I must be brave, and I mustn’t cower.

Even if I meet the Summer Court army on the road.

I quickly remind myself of the letter that guarantees my safe passage. If any of the fae tries to hinder my travels, they’ll be risking the wrath of the powerful, highborn fae lord with whom I’m acquainted. Warden Valloc. He mated with my dearest friend, Mira, several months ago, and I have her to thank for arranging the letter.

I give my aunt another hug, kiss Mama’s cheek, then depart the cottage. The morning is bright but so cold I can see my breath. Thankfully, it hasn’t snowed yet this winter, and I pray the first snow holds off until I return with a healer in tow.

My chest tightens when I come across the grassy meadow where we encountered the mangga just yesterday afternoon. I unsheathe a knife from my belt, holding it at the ready as I give the meadow a wide berth. I reach the main road a short while later and stick to it, even though walking through the forest would be preferable because it would keep me better hidden. But where there’s one mangga, there’s always more, and I have no wish to encounter another one of those ghastly creatures.

I alternate between a moderate jog and a fast walk, wanting to hurry but also not wanting to exhaust myself too quickly. If all goes well, I’ll reach Sorsston by tomorrow evening.

The wind picks up, and I pause just long enough to wrap my cloak more tightly around my body. I also don a hat and mittens, knowing it's only going to grow colder the further north I go, and I anticipate it'll be downright brutal when the sun sets.

As I take off again, sticking to the edge of the road in case I need to make a quick retreat into the forest, I keep uttering silent prayers to any gods that might listen to please help my mother. She'd been so excited to see her sister after all these years, but by the time I'd carried her to the cottage after the encounter with the mangga, she was barely conscious.

What will I do if Mama doesn't make it?

After a long visit with my aunt, Mama had planned for us to visit Sorsston solely for the purpose of finally finding me a husband. While her pronouncement had surprised me, I hadn't argued. I trust her, and I know she would never pressure me to marry a man I didn't fancy. I also know she would carefully vet any prospective husbands to make sure they aren't anything like my late father.

My thoughts continue to roam as I break into a jog, clutching the straps of my pack so it doesn't jostle too hard with my rapid steps.

Before Papa died, I'd wanted nothing more than to get married and start a family of my own, but that desire stemmed entirely from my longing to get away from him. He wasn't a nice man; he was cruel and conniving and verbally abusive. I'd always hoped to find a kind, affectionate husband who wouldn't just be willing to let Mama stay with us, but who would also be bold enough to challenge my father if he tried to take Mama back by force.

Yet Papa habitually refused every marriage offer that came my way, even from wealthy suitors, and I never got the chance to help Mama escape.

Looking back, I suppose he probably suspected my plans. That's why he never allowed me to marry. Because he knew I would try to take Mama with me.

I would be lying if I claimed I missed him, though his brutal death had come as a shock. A few weeks after Trevos fell to the fae, he was discovered stabbed to death in an alley, likely the result of a business deal gone wrong.

As I slow to a brisk walk and reach for my canteen, I can't help but wonder what my life might be like if I'd gotten married years ago like I'd wanted. Then my heart sinks when realization sets in. I would probably be a widow with several small children, like most of the young women my age from Trevos. Thousands of men, young and old, died trying to protect Trevos from the Summer Court army.

Perhaps it's best that I'm still unmatched.

I take a quick drink of water, then shove the canteen inside a pocket on my bulging pack. I inhale a deep, fortifying breath as my appreciation for the splendor of the countryside grows. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I can't deny that I enjoy being on the open road. As a child, I used to dream about traveling the realm. But as I got older, I realized I likely wouldn't leave Trevos beyond the occasional visit to Aunt Heather's cottage on the outskirts of Sorsston.

When I round a sharp turn in the road, a massive snow-capped mountain range comes into sight. Whoa. I've never been so far away from home before, nor have I ever glimpsed mountains so tall.

The newness of it knocks the air from my chest, and I'm suddenly filled with a deep sense of awe.

It's so beautiful, and I'm so very far away from the home I likely won't ever return to. I feel like I'm shedding old parts of myself as I travel farther down the road. No

matter what happens to Mama, my return to Trevos seems unlikely.

My legs ache as the road becomes steeper, and a quick glance over my shoulder shows just how far I've traveled. From this elevation, I'm provided with a clear view of the winding dirt road that disappears into the forest at the base of the mountain, as well as distant lakes and a few small homes that rest atop the rolling hills. It's a sweeping expanse of green and blue, and gods, how it takes my breath away.

At this time of year, the forests usually aren't so green and vibrant, but the fae's magic recently started spreading from their courts and into the human lands. Ussha, the supposed lifeforce of their magic, has had a profound effect on the plant and animal life in the human lands. It causes fruits and vegetables to either glow or sparkle and grow out of season, and it makes the leaves on trees and shrubbery glimmer. It has also caused exotic animals once native to the fae lands to venture into human lands. Creatures like the mangga.

It's my understanding that the spread of ussha has also caused the fae themselves to leave their courts and create new settlements in both human and orc lands. Apparently, the fae are drawn to areas that contain high concentrations of ussha, which helps them sustain their magic.

The disagreements over land usage, however, has led to much fighting, and I can't help but wonder how long it will be until the fae have conquered the very last human and orc territories. Will my people know peace again within my lifetime?

I focus on the road ahead, break into another jog, and pray Sorsston hasn't yet fallen to the fae.

A large shadow suddenly passes overhead. My steps falter, and my stomach plummets to the ground. I glance upward.

Cold fear grips me. A winged fae male is soaring high above, and given his flight path, it would seem he's circling in on me. He flies lower with each pass. My mouth goes dry, and I instinctively reach into my pocket and touch the sealed letter that guarantees my safe passage.

I peer into the forest and consider making a run for it, despite the letter. Winged fae are always highborn, and I can't help but worry that this particular fae might somehow outrank Warden Valloc.

My gaze sweeps over the landscape as I almost hope to spot an army. If there's an army, there will be witnesses. In my case, witnesses might be a blessing.

But I don't spot an army. There's no one. I'm out here on a mountain road in the middle of nowhere with a highborn fae circling me as though I'm his prey and he's preparing to pluck me off the ground.

As he descends further, sunlight glints off his golden, near-translucent wings. His platinum blond hair is wild and long. It flows behind him like a violent waterfall as he dives straight for me.

Fucking fires, no.

In a panic, I bolt for the forest, but I only make it about a dozen paces.

The massive, highborn fae lands in front of me in a blast of warmth that leaves me in no doubt about which court he calls home. I gaze at him in utter astonishment, unable to form words.

Gods, he's stunningly beautiful. I cannot look away.

He's clad in form-fitting leather that accentuates his broad shoulders and well-defined

muscles. His skin is sparkling gold just like his wings, and his eyes are piercing blue. His full, sensual lips are twisted in a smirk.

He regards me with an air of mockery as he looks me up and down. I lift my chin, withdraw the sealed letter from my pocket, and clutch it close as I wait for the opportunity to reveal my protected status.

Why can't I find my voice?

"What have we here?" His deep voice thrums through me and somehow causes my face to flush. "Little human, there isn't a village for miles and miles. Are you lost?" His tone is as mocking as his expression.

Still, I can't speak. Aside from a few conversations with Warden Valloc, who I sort of trust since he's happily mated to my best friend, this golden creature is the only other fae who's ever addressed me.

Given his ethereal but masculine beauty, and the certainty that he could end my life in mere moments if he wanted to, I find myself struggling to breathe let alone form a proper response to his question.

When he steps closer, the heat of his body wafts over me again, an immense warmth that chases away the winter chill. I also detect the pleasing aroma of star jasmine, honeysuckle, and gardenia. A result of his Summer Court magic, no doubt.

"Are you lost, little human?" He encroaches further on my space, and fuck if I can even remember my own name right now. I feel as though he's hypnotized me with his wild beauty.

"No-no," I finally force out. "I-I'm not lost."

“Not lost?” He makes a tscking noise. “What in the fires are you doing out here on the road all by yourself? Aren’t you worried that a ravenous fae male might swoop out of the sky, steal away with you, and keep you as his pleasure slave?” His eyes dance with mischief, and I pray he’s joking.

Problem is, plenty of young women and men went missing during the early days of the fae’s occupation in Trevos, most of whom were never seen again. It’s well known that the fae like to keep human pleasure slaves and concubines. There’s a good chance he’s not joking.

A shiver courses through me, along with an unexpected warmth that pulsates between my thighs. My face heats anew. Gods, I’m not attracted to this beastly creature. I’m not.

He smiles, revealing white, sharply pointed teeth. Teeth that could easily tear a hole in my neck. I take a few steps back, only for him to match me step for step.

I clutch the letter to my chest and try to summon bravery. If he senses my fear, that will only encourage his wickedness. That’s what everyone says about the fae. That they love to feed off the fear and pain of humans, particularly virgins.

Another shiver rushes through me because I’ve never even kissed a man before. Does this golden-winged fae know just how innocent I am?

“Why are you out here all by yourself, little human? I asked you a question, and I expect an answer.” This time, his voice isn’t as mocking as earlier. There’s a bit of sternness to it that makes me tremble. I suppose he doesn’t like having to repeat himself.

I clear my throat. “I am running an errand for my aunt,” I say, not wanting to reveal the full truth. If he knows how desperate I am, he might use it against me. “I’m on my

way to Sorsston, and I have a letter of protection from the Warden of Trevos himself. Perhaps you've heard of him. Warden Valloc. He's also known as Lord Kaiden, and he hails from Linnshire in the Summer Court." I pray Warden Valloc's reputation as a powerful highborn fae is enough to scare the golden creature who's towering over me with his wings flared wide.

"A letter of protection from Warden Valloc?" He grins again. "My my. You must be someone of importance if you garnered the favor of the Warden of Trevos. Who, exactly, are you? Hm. Let's find out." He plucks the envelope from my hands, breaks the seal with a long fingernail that might as well be a talon, and withdraws the letter.

The warmth of summer increases, swirling through the air, as the golden fae scans the letter. Then he places it back in the envelope. Blue light emits from his fingers for a second or two, and the seal becomes intact again.

"The letter appears authentic enough." His eyes dance with dark glee. "Miss Yvette Harmon of the Kingdom of Trevos. You're a long way from home, sweetling." He places the letter back in my pocket, and his abrupt closeness and brief touch causes goosebumps to rise all over my body.

"So, you'll step aside and allow me safe passage?" I try to refrain from shaking while he stares down at me with an increasing smirk.

"Alas, I cannot drag you into the forest and ravish you as I was planning. I must honor Warden Valloc's wishes and allow you to pass." He clutches his chest and feigns a look of sorrow. "Ah, but what a pity I can't turn you into my little pet. You look delicious, and I bet you moan so prettily."

I flush from head to toe. I'm relieved he plans to let me pass unharmed, but his words are a bit shocking. From time to time on the streets of Trevos, I've found myself on the receiving end of unwanted bawdy talk, but until now it's never been directed at

me by a highborn fae.

He steps back and his wings flare wider. “Perhaps I’ll dream of you tonight, little human.” He winks at me, then shoots into the sky and soars away, leaving me equal parts stunned and reassured.

I quickly resume my travels north, running at full speed. I keep glancing at the sky, but he seems to have disappeared. Thank the gods. Still, I can’t help but feel paranoid that he might return.

If it weren’t for the letter of protection, would he have honestly stolen away with me? Would he have ravished me in the forest and proceeded to keep me as a pleasure slave? I shudder to think about what might be happening to me at this very moment had Mira not asked Warden Valloc to write the letter.

I’m so focused on running as fast as possible while keeping one eye on the sky that I fail to notice the newcomers until it’s too late.

Without warning, I find myself surrounded by over a dozen human males. I come to a halt and spin in a slow circle, looking from man to man. There are no friendly faces to be found, and I go cold all over. My fear deepens when I notice a wagon holding a large cage being guided in our direction. I spot a few people, both women and men, inside the cage.

Flesh traders.

Oh, gods, I’ve encountered flesh traders.

I withdraw the knife from my belt, the very knife I used to kill the mangga just yesterday, and hold it at the ready. My action causes the men to laugh, and I flush with anger. How dare they threaten me? How dare they mock me? My mama is dying

and I don't have time for this.

I must reach Sorsston. I must find a healer and save my mother.

This can't be happening. It simply can't.

"Get in the cage willingly, little lady, and we won't rough you up," the largest man says as he steps forward. He's also the cleanest and most well-dressed of the bunch, and I surmise he's the leader.

"You don't want to take me. Trust me, you don't." With my free hand, I withdraw the resealed envelope from my pocket. "I have a letter from the Warden of Trevos that guarantees my safe passage on the road." Maybe dropping the warden's name will be enough to scare these humans off. I can only hope.

The leader scoffs. "The Warden of Trevos? We heard what happened in Trevos, and we don't answer to the fae. Get in the cage. Now." He nods at the horse-drawn wagon as the driver pulls it to a stop. "There's an auction right outside Sorsston tomorrow at noon, and a pretty young thing like you will make a fine addition."

An auction? Dread coils in my gut.

After putting the letter away, I readjust my grip on the knife.

I think of my ailing mother.

I won't go down without a fight.

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CHAPTER 2

LUCAS

As I fly toward the Summer Court army, I can't vanquish thoughts of Yvette, the beautiful dark-haired human female I just encountered on the road. Her sweet scent beckoned me, and her trembling excited me in ways that are still making my pants tight.

Longing. When I looked at her, I'd felt longing . The first carnal desires I've experienced for a female in ages.

Why didn't I take her?

I growl as my frustration builds. I wanted her. I wanted her very much, and I could've taken her without consequence. Warden Valloc might've written her a letter of protection, but the warden answers to me. I'm a Summer Court prince, and though I'm a few centuries younger than him, I outrank him. He also happens to be a distant cousin of mine, and it was I who appointed him as Warden of Trevos. I gave him that power . I can rescind any of his orders or cancel any ridiculous letters of protection at any time. That half-fae, half-human female he mated with probably convinced him to draft the letter anyway. It's no secret he's treated the humans with a bit more softness since entering that mating union.

Jealousy surges within me, hot and pulsing. I try to tamp it down, but it continues spreading, until I feel ready to commit a thousand brutal murders.

Fucking fires, I'm jealous of my cousin. Jealous because he found his fated mate. Jealous because he has a fated mate, and I never will.

Long ago, before I was even born, a human mage cursed my family's bloodline. The mage proclaimed that all my father's offspring would never know a true fated mate, a damning sentence of loneliness that might very well affect the future of the Summer Court.

And so, my two older brothers haven't taken mates yet, and neither have I, nor have we produced any children. Claiming a random fae female, or even arranging to claim a specific one, won't work well and my father knows it. Unlike humans and orcs, our people don't enter arranged marriages. It's completely unheard of.

Arranged marriages would never work well for the simple fact that we all have fated mates. Or at least, we're all supposed to. But not my brothers, and not me. We're doomed.

Cursed to a life of loneliness.

Even if one of us produced an illegitimate child outside the bounds of a true mating union, it would cause a great upheaval in the Summer Court. Most of my people would refuse to follow a bastard-born ruler.

I think of the recent missive my father sent and shake my head. I still can't believe the order he'd given me. An order that he also apparently gave my two older brothers.

He'd commanded all of us to mate with humans.

Not just mate but also hold human marriage ceremonies to add some extra legitimacy to the unions.

It's his hope that perhaps our people will be convinced to follow a half-fae, half-human ruler one day. In all likelihood, it would be my oldest brother's firstborn. Considering that fae typically live for thousands of years, my father believes the eldest half-fae, half-human grandchild will have adequate time to win over all the Summer Court lords.

It's a scenario that's thousands of years in the future, and yet we must plan for it. I don't envy my father the burden of this curse, nor do I envy my mother the guilt I know she still feels because of it. The mage who cursed her offspring was once in love with her, and in his fury over discovering she'd met her fated mate, he'd traveled to the Summer Court to place his curse, even knowing my father would hunt him down and kill him.

I peer across the mountainous landscape, my wings beating steadily in the cold winter breeze as I continue hovering in the sky. I summon a wave of summer to keep out the chill while I consider my next move.

Dare I take Yvette for mine?

My father's order wasn't specific. According to the letter, any human female would do. I would imagine my brothers are trying to find human females from royal families, but I'm not so vain.

I'm also the youngest fucking son and it's doubtful my offspring would ever rule over what's left of the Summer Court.

Ussha has continued spreading from the four fae courts at a rapid pace, an event our priestesses say heralds the dawn of a new age of total fae rule over the realm. The spread of ussha has caused many of our people to migrate from crowded fae courts to more rural areas once solely occupied by humans and orcs. It's certainly possible that the four courts will have completely fallen by the time my brothers' children, or my

children, find themselves parentless.

Will my oldest brother's heir even want to bother inheriting the crown of a fallen court? I think of the former fae courts, the courts that came before Summer, Spring, Autumn, and Winter. The Unseelie and Seelie courts. Those two courts, the first fae courts, are no more. My mother was once a Seelie queen, the very last Seelie queen, and the court she grew up in and later inherited is gone. Buried under volcanic ash by the gods themselves in an act of vengeance, or so our priestesses say.

Marry a human. Fucking fires, I've been commanded to marry a human. A human! Humans hold no power, no magic. What use will a mating union with a human bring other than creating children who will never inherit the throne of the Summer Court?

I release another growl and curse my father's name. I could understand him ordering my oldest brother, Axton, to marry a human, but why me? I'm the youngest, and the possibility of my potential offspring inheriting the Summer Court throne is next to nil. For that to happen, my father and brothers, as well as my brothers' children, would have to perish long before the final days of the Summer Court. Given how powerful my father and brothers are, it's a near impossibility.

What's not impossible, however, is the final breath of the Summer Court within my lifetime. It's going to happen. I can feel it in my bones.

Not for the first time, I wonder if there's a way to break the fucking curse. Gods know my father has spared no expense in the endeavor, but the high priestesses from all four courts say it cannot be achieved. They say the gods won't assign or create fated mates for us, that our window of opportunity has long passed.

Yvette. I should take her. I should claim her. I should force her to marry me. Why not? I'm a Summer Court prince and the only fae I answer to is my own father who ordered me to marry a human, any human, in the first place. Warden Valloc can

shove that letter of protection up his ass for all I care.

I fly in Yvette's direction for a while, and as I near the area where I last saw her, a high-pitched scream pierces the sun-drenched afternoon. I slow my flight path and listen carefully. More screams rend the air. A female's screams.

A human female's screams.

Fury ignites and worry invades my senses because... what if it's her ? The sudden prospect of any harm visiting Yvette leaves me both angry and... feeling something else that's strangely akin to sorrow.

But that doesn't make sense.

I scarcely know her, and there's no way in fuck she's my fated mate. Because I don't have one.

I soar toward the area where I last saw her, following the continued screams as my anxiety deepens and my rage burns hot. If Yvette is indeed the female who's screaming, I intend to tear her tormentor from limb to limb. I intend to make them pay.

At last, I spot movement on the ground. Over a dozen human males have Yvette surrounded, and two more males are manhandling her, trying to secure rope around her wrists. At least I think it's Yvette. Tall and slender with dark hair, from my current vantage point, it looks like her. My anger heightens and I bolt in her direction. I fly as though I'm in the midst of battle and it's life or death.

That's the level of urgency I feel as I witness one of the male's kick her legs out from beneath her. Fuck, no. My gut twists when that same man crawls atop her and lifts his hand as though preparing to strike her. Meanwhile, she reaches for a knife that's

laying in the dirt, though her fingers can't quite grasp it.

I roar my rage and land on the scene in a blast of summer power that knocks the males to the ground and leaves them disoriented, including the man who'd been on top of Yvette. Shouts echo on the mountainside, and there's a flurry of confusion as I approach the small dark-haired female on the ground.

My heart nearly stops. It's indeed Yvette, and she's hurt. Her lip is swollen and bleeding, and there are scratches on her face. I lift her in my arms and hold her close. She trembles and peers at me in disbelief, though I can't help but wonder if she'll see me as her savior or just another monster.

When I first began to look for her, it was with the intention of forcing her to become my bride. I never imagined hearing her screams and seeing her hurt would provoke such tender emotion within me. I glance at the human men who have us surrounded. All are now brandishing weapons. Knives, mostly, though one holds a sword and another grips an ax.

I also notice a nearby wagon that holds a large iron cage. It's filled with dirty, frightened-looking humans. A growl rumbles from me as I refocus my attention on the men. Flesh traders. I continue growling as I bare my teeth at the men and turn in a slow circle, making eye contact with each of them. Most go pale and retreat a few steps.

"Gentlemen, do you honestly believe you stand a chance against me?" I flare my wings wider to remind them that I'm highborn. They don't know I'm a Summer Court prince, but my wings are evidence enough that I'm highborn and therefore among the most powerful fae in existence.

"We don't want any trouble," one of the men says. "Please, just let us be on our way. You don't even have to give us back that female. You can keep her for yourself if you

want. Consider her a gift. Just let us take our wagon and be on our way.” He makes a show of putting away his knife and gestures for his men to follow suit.

I watch with great amusement as all the men put their weapons away. Fools. The urge to savage them bloody rises within me, but so does the need to keep Yvette in my arms. I don’t want to put her down for even a second. Not until I tend to her wounds and verify her wellbeing.

“That’s quite generous of you,” I finally reply. “Of course, of course, you may be on your way. All of you. Go now. Go . Now .” As I summon a deadly glamour, I continue spinning in a slow circle as I repeatedly make eye contact with each flesh trader.

It doesn’t take long for the glamour to work. Of course it doesn’t. I am Prince Lucas of the Summer Court, and killing a human takes very little effort on my part. I prefer executing humans with my bare hands or using a weapon. I prefer spurting blood and pain. But in this case, death by glamour will have to suffice. Because I’m still averse to putting Yvette down.

Suddenly, one of the men bolts toward a nearby cliff that overlooks the valley. He doesn’t slow his pace. As he approaches the cliff’s edge, he runs faster. He runs straight off the mountainside and plunges to his death. My sensitive ears pick up the impact of his body hitting the rocky ground far below.

Yvette gasps and tries to escape my arms, but I hold her tighter and make shushing noises as I watch the remaining flesh traders take off for the cliff.

One by one, they run off the mountainside and plunge to their well-deserved deaths. Satisfaction brims inside me. Each splat of their bodies, a noise so soft from this distance that I doubt Yvette can hear it, is music to my ears.

Dead. Dead.

Dead.

After the last man jumps, I launch into the sky while still holding my future bride, then hover over the drop off. I intentionally keep Yvette's face pressed to my chest as I observe the spread of broken bodies on the rocky surface below. For some reason, I find myself wanting to protect her from what she might feel is a gruesome sight.

How odd, this gentleness she's calling up from within me.

"You glamourised them, didn't you?" Her voice resonates with shock, and she clutches the front of my leather shirt, holding on tight as though fearing I might drop her.

I fly back to our previous spot for a soft landing that I hope doesn't jar her senses. I'm used to taking off quickly and landing just as quickly, sometimes hard enough to crack the ground. But if I'm to transport this female, I must remember that she's a human. I have no wish to inadvertently cause her harm.

"Yes," I finally reply. "I glamourised them. I would've preferred bloody, hand-to-hand combat, but I'm so enamored by you, little human, that I couldn't bear the thought of putting you down. I like having you in my arms." While I taunted her during our first encounter, there's no mockery in my voice this time.

But judging by the look of suspicion she shoots me, I suspect she doesn't quite believe my words. She thinks I'm teasing her again. Not that I can blame her. I was rather descriptive earlier when I spoke about dragging her into the forest to ravish her.

"You're hurt." I eye her wounds, and the rage starts to return. Maybe I shouldn't have given those flesh traders such easy deaths. A growl builds in my throat as I imagine

tearing their limbs from their bodies and leaving them to bleed out on the road.

A few of the prisoners call out to us, pleading to be released. But I'm far too concerned with the pretty, dark-haired human female to deal with them yet.

Yvette draws in a shaky breath, touches her split lip, and winces. "The big one clocked me after I bit his hand." She swallows hard and gives me another suspicious look. "Thank you for saving me. If, uh, you would be so kind as to put me down, I would like to go unlock the cage now. I imagine some of those people have been stuck inside for a while." In a hushed voice, she adds, "They smell atrocious."

I vanish my wings, then walk toward the tree line and turn to face the wagon. Still holding Yvette close, I perform a quick flourish with my hand, sending a beam of blue, tangling light to the lock. The door of the cage creaks open and the prisoners start pouring out. Some of them take off down the road, while others raid the front of the wagon for supplies. I send a final wave of tangling blue light to release the horses from their confinement.

"Happy?" I ask Yvette. "They're free."

"Thank you."

I carry her into the forest and take a seat on a fallen tree. She tries to slip off my lap, but I make a noise of disapproval and hold up a hand. Healing gold light swirls in the air and tingles up my arm. She stares at my palm with wide eyes.

"Are you trying to glamour me?" Worry enters her gaze, though she stills in my lap. Her bottom presses directly on my crotch, but given the circumstances, I try to ignore the blood that's rushing to my cock. She's injured, and I must tend to her wounds.

"No, little human, I'm not trying to glamour you." I bring my face closer to hers.

“I’m trying to heal you. Please, hold as still as possible and let the magic work.”

A gasp catches in her throat, but she obeys and remains unmoving on my lap. I watch as the golden light roams over her face. Within seconds, the scratches on her cheeks fade. Her split lip also mends.

“I...” Her voice trails off and she touches her face. “Wow, it doesn’t hurt anymore. My mouth doesn’t taste like blood anymore either.” She regards me with a look of deepening shock. “Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome.” I stroke a hand through her mussed hair, attempting to tame her locks. She’s no longer wearing the hat she had on earlier, and her hair must’ve gotten tangled as she fought the flesh traders. “I only wish I’d arrived before they got a chance to hurt you,” I add as I continue combing my fingers gently through her soft hair.

She starts to lean into my touch, only to jolt in my lap and attempt to slide to the ground. “I’m fine now. I can stand up. I can walk.”

Though I long to continue holding her on my lap, especially with her flailing around and grinding her bottom down on my shaft, I don’t wish to frighten her. So, I allow her to stand, though I remain ready to catch her should she become unsteady on her feet.

She glances toward the road. “I, uh, need to retrieve my pack. My hat and mittens, too. Oh, and my knife. If it’s all still there.”

“I would imagine one of the released prisoners has already swiped your belongings and run off. But you needn’t worry. I will help you. I won’t leave you alone on the mountain to fend for yourself without any supplies.”

She turns back to me, studying me with a shrewdness that most wouldn't dare. Of course, she doesn't know my identity. If she did, I imagine she would be cowering and perhaps pleading for mercy. Or maybe not. Despite her wariness in my presence, an undeniable air of bravery clings to her. It makes me curious about the importance of whatever errand she was running for her aunt.

"It's very kind of you to offer to help me." She steps back and brushes dust from the road off her cloak. Her hands eventually go still, and she squares her shoulders while giving me a direct look. "I must confess, I'm more than a bit shocked by your actions. You saved me from flesh traders, released their prisoners, the horses too, and healed my wounds. You're a highborn fae and..." She shifts uncomfortably in place as her eyes dance around the forest.

"I'm a highborn fae and yet I saved over a dozen humans, including you. Ah, yes, I'm not living up to my people's reputation as a proper monster." I grin. "If you'd like, I could growl at you and threaten to eat your heart." My joke falls flat and causes her to take another step back, and I immediately hold up my hands in a show of surrender. "Please, please, I was only teasing. Don't go running off. I don't have a taste for hearts. Well, actually, truth be told, I've never even tried a human heart. Please promise you won't tell the other highborn fae. I have a reputation to uphold." I waggle my eyebrows at her, and though she doesn't smile or laugh, her eyes finally glimmer with the faintest hint of amusement.

"You're clearly a highborn fae from the Summer Court."

"Clearly." I send her a wave of summer warmth infused with the scents of jasmine and honeysuckle. I also swirl a hand and suddenly the forest glimmers with thousands of fireflies.

She gasps and turns to observe the sight. After a moment, she faces me again and asks, "Who are you?"

“My name is Lucas.”

“Come on. You know what I mean. What’s your full, proper title? You seem to possess more magic than Warden Valloc, although I must admit he’s the only other fae with whom I’ve interacted.”

I rise to my feet and close the distance between us. “I am Prince Lucas Brossnin of the Summer Court.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:51 am

CHAPTER 3

YVETTE

Prince Lucas. Holy gods. The huge golden fae male standing before me is a Summer Court prince. The very Summer Court prince whose army conquered my home city of Trevos last winter.

Given his powers and his great, masculine beauty, I should've known, and I berate myself for being so foolish because memories are starting to click into place.

I've seen him before.

Nearly a year ago. On Tribute Day. The day all households of Trevos were required to stand before Prince Lucas and his advisors and offer a tribute.

Ten pieces of silver or something else comparable.

On that day, my father had forced me to wear a grimy old cloak, and my mother had smudged dirt on my face to make me look unappealing to the fae. My father had also forbidden me from speaking or even glancing up once while we were in the receiving hall to offer our family's tribute, though I'd sneaked a few peeks of the massive, highborn fae males who stood on the dais.

"Stunned into silence?" The prince displays another one of his wide, teeth-bearing grins. "I suppose my importance, as well as my sheer handsomeness, has that effect on females. Lots of males, too."

“I was just remembering the first time I ever saw you. On Tribute Day. In the receiving hall of the castle in Trevos. About eleven months ago.” My voice is heavy with accusation. Because I’m recalling the families that were torn apart on Tribute Day. Households that couldn’t afford the tribute were forced to hand over a daughter or son.

“Are you certain you visited the castle on Tribute Day? If I’d glimpsed your loveliness before, little human, I am sure I would remember.”

“Yes,” I say. “I was there, but I was sort of wearing a disguise. My parents wanted me to look ugly so none of your people would take an interest in me. We wanted to get in and out of the castle as quickly as possible without any difficulties.”

“A disguise? How intriguing. But very wise of your parents. Yes, if I’d seen you on Tribute Day, dearest Yvette, I probably would’ve taken you as mine.” He steps closer and reaches for my hair as summer heat swirls around us. From my peripheral vision, I glimpse the fireflies flitting through the trees and shrubbery.

My breath catches, and I start to move away, but the prince’s gentle caresses feel so very nice. Soothing. I shouldn’t like his touch or anything about him, and yet I’m drawn to him in ways I don’t understand.

He’s not just a highborn fae, but he’s a fucking Summer Court prince, and his army is responsible for the deaths of thousands of my people. I should be screaming at him about what a monster he is. Or I should be trying to escape. Because surely he means me harm. Surely there’s no true kindness in his soul.

But he did save me from the flesh traders. I’ll never forget how he swooped down from the sky and landed with a blast of heat that knocked my attackers over. I recall how easily he healed my injuries just moments ago, and I can’t help but think of my ailing mother.

Would it be the height of foolishness to ask him for help?

I can only imagine what Aunt Heather would say if I arrived on her doorstep with a Summer Court prince at my side. As a child, she used to fill my head with gruesome stories about the fae. She was married once, very briefly, and her husband was killed by a group of fae hunters who destroyed a trading outpost he was visiting. The only survivor of the attack claimed the fae did it for the sheer joy of killing humans.

Is Prince Lucas just as cruel as those murderous fae hunters who killed my uncle over fifteen years ago? I stare at him intently as I try to get a better reading on him. He's made several comments about my beauty and his desire to keep me as his, but he hasn't yet visited any violence on me.

Still, I can't help but fear he has ulterior motives for rescuing me from the flesh traders.

What sort of fae performs such a selfless feat?

"Tell me about this errand you are running for your aunt," he says as he continues stroking my hair. His fingertips also trail over my ears and down my neck, eliciting pleasurable shivers that make my head spin.

I hesitate to answer his question. I'd hoped to reach Sorsston by tomorrow evening, but that's not likely to happen without his help. He's probably right about my pack being taken. I could go without food for a few days, but not without water, and I have no idea where the nearest stream is located. The sparkling lakes in the valley below are too far out of the way.

"I promised to help you, little human, and I will. But you must be forthcoming and tell me what you're out here trying to accomplish. Are you headed to Sorsston or somewhere beyond? And where does your aunt live?" He cups the side of my face

and regards me with a look so tender it causes my heart to ache.

Tears suddenly fill my eyes. “My mother was bitten by a mangga yesterday, and I’m supposed to visit Sorsston to find a healer. My mother is unconscious, and her breathing is ragged and slow. She’s at my aunt’s house at the base of the mountain, and my aunt is looking after her while I make the journey to Sorsston and back.” I blink fast, not wanting to break down in tears in front of this fae male. What if he does possess a cruel side? He might like my tears. He might savor them. That’s what all the stories say. Surely there’s some truth to the sordid tales about the fae.

To my astonishment, Prince Lucas’s tender expression morphs to one of compassion, and his thumb softly caresses my cheek as he continues cupping my face. I pray he’s not faking his sympathy for my plight. I pray he’s not about to burst into laughter and then glamour me to jump off the mountainside, leaving my mother to a grim fate.

Mama. I must return to her soon.

Before I can decide whether to trust the prince, he says, “I would be happy to help your mother. I’ve tended to soldiers suffering from mangga bites before, as well as a few humans who are traveling with my army who were attacked by the creatures.”

Hope rises in my chest, but it’s tempered by my pervasive distrust for the fae. I can’t help but think about the terrifying day the Summer Court army attacked and conquered Trevos.

But if Prince Lucas is truly offering to help my mother, I can’t refuse him. I would make a deal with the darkest being in the realm just to save my mother.

A deal. It hits me like a blow to the chest.

Of course. He will want to make a deal.

That's what the fae do. They make deals and they ruin lives. But if making a deal with him is what it takes to save Mama, so be it. I steel myself for the rest of his offer, but it never comes. He just keeps staring at me with compassion while his thumb trails gently along my cheek.

"And?" I finally prompt. "What's the next part? In return for helping my mother, what will you expect from me? Certain... favors ? Or perhaps even my life? My soul or?—"

"Little human, you misunderstand me." His expression softens further, and he slowly tucks my hair behind my ears. He's petting me like I'm a skittish animal he's hoping to tame. "I said I would be happy to help your mother, and I mean it. I won't require anything of you in return."

"You aren't trying to make a deal with me, then?" Gods, I'm so confused. I think of how he taunted me during our first encounter. But he wasn't cruel, not truly, and he didn't hurt me. And ever since he swooped down from the sky in a blast of Summer Court strength, he's been treating me with a level of deference no male ever has. It's unsettling though not in an unpleasant way.

He shakes his head. "No, little human, I'm not trying to make a deal with you, though I will confess that I'm sorely tempted to do so." The fireflies he summoned suddenly circle us, a swarm of magic that should be impossible during winter.

Tempted. He's tempted to force me into making a deal with him, yet he's not going to do it. Why not?

My eyes lower to his lips as more fireflies join the swarm that's already circling us. Magic thrums in the air and a warm breeze ruffles our hair.

Gods, that platinum blond hair of his. It's long and thick and luxurious, and I find

myself aching to reach up and tangle my fingers in those gleaming locks. But I don't dare make such a move. I don't want to do anything to make him change his mind about the deal. Or the lack of a deal. I very much want his help. Mama's life hangs in the balance.

"Thank you for offering to heal my mother, Prince Lucas," I say, uttering his name, along with his title, aloud for the first time. It buzzes on my tongue in a way that feels addictive. I want to say it again, but I don't. "She's quite sick. Could we leave now? Please ." When it comes to saving Mama, I'm not too proud to beg.

"Of course we can leave now." He glances toward the road. "At the base of the mountain, you say?"

"Yes, it's a small green cottage with black shutters, and it rests near a pond with a dilapidated dock. It's also close to a large grassy meadow near the main road that runs from Trevos to Sorsston. But do beware of the meadow. That's where my mother was attacked by the mangga."

He summons his wings and scoops me up in his arms, and his face is so close to mine that for a second, I think he might kiss me. But he doesn't, and I feel like an idiot for having the thought. I also feel guilty. Mama is sick and possibly dying and here I am drooling over a handsome fae prince.

"Lace your arms around my neck, little human." His voice comes out deep and raspy, and his eyes darken with what I think might be lust.

I try but fail to prevent the flush that covers my entire face.

"Very good," he says in a praising tone. "Now tuck your head close to my chest, sweetling. I intend to fly fast and I don't want you to become disoriented by the rapid wind or the precipitous drop to the ground."

I draw in a shaky breath, and I move closer to him. It feels so intimate as I tuck my head into his chest. His arms tighten around me, then he launches into the sky so quickly I think I left my stomach on the forest floor.

It takes me a few moments to adjust to the new altitude, though I don't honestly know how high we're flying. Are we in the clouds or perhaps above them? I keep my head tucked close to his chest, soaking up his warmth and his strength as he soars through the skies.

The wind becomes an endless roar in my ears, and though I'm a bit curious about the view, I've never been good with heights, and I don't allow myself to satiate that mild curiosity. The last thing I want is to become sick mid-flight.

Safe. I'm soaring through the skies in the arms of a Summer Court prince, and yet I feel strangely safe. He's not stealing away with me. He's helping me. He's helping me save Mama.

The wind abruptly stops roaring, and I realize he's making a slow descent. I finally peek one eye out from his chest, and relief fills me when I glimpse the familiar green cottage with black shutters. Aunt Heather's place.

With great care, he sets me on my feet but keeps his hands on either side of me, watching to make sure I remain steady. Not for the first time, I marvel at the regard he's showing me. But I also grow tense as I wonder if it's a trick. Perhaps I should keep my guard up.

"I'm okay but thank you."

"You're very welcome." He eyes the cottage. "Shall we go inside?"

"Yes, but let me go first. My aunt Heather, well, let's just say she doesn't hold your

people in very high esteem. It might take some convincing to get her to step aside so you can treat my mother.”

“Mangga venom works quickly, and treatment shouldn’t be delayed. If your aunt proves an obstacle, I will simply glamour her into a quiet trance so I might heal your mother.”

I give him a polite smile, though I’m more than a little amused at the idea of someone glamouring my opinionated aunt into silence. “I hope it doesn’t come to that, but if it does, I trust the glamour won’t cause any harm to my aunt?”

“I will not cause your aunt any harm.” His voice resonates with honesty. “I give you my word.”

“Good. Let’s go.” I gesture for him to follow me, but he instead takes my hand and laces his fingers through mine. I’m in such a hurry to reach Mama that I don’t try to push him away.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetling. If your mother still has a pulse, even a faint one, I can save her.”

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CHAPTER 4

LUCAS

I tighten my hold on Yvette's hand. Gods, I hope her mother is still alive. If the little human endured the long trek up the mountain and the confrontation with flesh traders only for her mother to perish during her absence, I will be heartbroken for her.

Clearly, Yvette cares for her mother deeply. Otherwise, she wouldn't have risked her life trying to travel to Sorsston for a healer. The roads in these parts certainly aren't safe. Particularly during times of war when people become desperate.

Guilt ravages me that I didn't stay close to Yvette after our first encounter, and I resolve that going forward I'll make sure she's better protected. I have a twenty-eight thousand strong army at my command. I could spare some soldiers to guard her aunt's cottage. I could also order the soldiers to accompany Yvette anywhere she might go.

A growl builds within me, but I tamp it down. Fuck. I want to protect the little human, but the idea of anyone doing it but me leaves me on the verge of roaring my rage.

Gods, what is happening? Why am I becoming so attached to the dark-haired female so quickly? I've known her for less than a day, yet I feel compelled to keep her safe.

If not for the curse, I would wonder if she's my fated mate.

As she knocks briefly on the door before leading me inside, I think about my father's order that I marry a human female. But I also remind myself that I promised Yvette I would help her mother without expecting anything in return. I told her she didn't have to make a deal with me.

Earlier in the day, right before I'd heard her scream, I'd considered taking her as my bride by force. After spending more time around her, however, I cannot fathom hurting her like that. My spirits sink a little because once I heal her mother, she'll probably expect me to depart the cottage and never bother her again.

"Aunt Heather!" Yvette calls. "I'm back, and I've brought a healer!"

"Yvette? You're back already?" comes a soft, muffled voice from the end of a hallway.

A door opens and a petite middle aged human female emerges while rubbing her eyes and covering a yawn. Aunt Heather, I presume.

"Oh, I must've fallen asleep while sitting with your mama," the woman says. "I didn't expect you back so soon, child. Who is that with you? It's awfully dim in the hallway and I'm not wearing my spectacles." She pauses, places her hands on her hips, and squints in our direction.

"Aunt Heather, I need you to promise to stay calm." Yvette clears her throat. "I've brought a very kind and very skilled highborn fae with me. His name is Lucas, and he saved me from a gang of flesh traders on the road. He also healed my injuries, and after I told him about Mama, he offered to help. He's healed people, fae and human, suffering from mangga bites before."

A very kind and very skilled highborn fae . Even though I suspect she's just trying to keep her aunt calm, Yvette's flattering description of me makes the pointed tips of

my ears burn.

Aunt Heather's eyes go wide, and I half expect her to start shrieking. I remain ready to summon a glamour, but in the end, it's not needed. The woman frowns but steps aside and gestures for us to enter the bedroom she just vacated. "Leave it to you, Yvette, to find the only kind highborn fae in existence," she says in a grumbling tone. "But considering what happened to your uncle, I don't believe you would bring this fae here without good cause. Come in, come in."

"Thanks for being understanding, Aunt Heather." Yvette glances over her shoulder and gives me a hopeful smile, as though she thinks I need some encouragement to walk past her aunt who clearly dislikes my people. I don't have to ask what happened to the uncle in question. It's obvious he met his death at fae hands.

"I promise I will heal Yvette's mother," I tell the woman, hoping to put her more at ease. Yes, I could easily glamour her, but I find myself wanting to win her over. Because if I can win this fae-despising family member of Yvette's over, perhaps I can win Yvette herself over.

The woman makes a noncommittal noise in her throat and enters the room behind us. Yvette guides me toward the bed that's occupied by a sickly female clearly suffering the effects of a mangga bite. Her telltale paleness and the sour scent of the bite wound are evidence enough.

"Show me where she was bitten."

Yvette drops my hand and pulls the covers back to reveal her mother's right leg. It's swollen and purple, and I easily spot the black fang marks on her lower calf. Immediately, I get to work, holding my hands over the bite as healing magic gathers in my palms. Spiraling waves of gold emit from my hands. Gasps sound in the room as Yvette and her aunt stand close and watch as the fang marks fade and the swelling

goes down.

“Holy gods, he’s doing it. He’s helping.”

“Of course I’m helping, Aunt Heather.” I spare a moment to meet the woman’s eyes. “I promised Yvette I would save her mother, and I am a male of my word.”

“I’m not your aunt.” She gives me a scolding look. “Just call me Heather.”

“Very well, Heather .” I smile, though too late I realize my sharp, pointed teeth have shocked her.

She gulps hard and takes a step back.

“As I said earlier, I promised your niece I would save her mother, who I suppose must be your sister. The resemblance is uncanny. Especially now that her color is improving.” I offer her another smile, this time with my mouth closed, and she gives me a cautious nod and appears a bit more at ease.

I refocus my attention on Yvette’s mother, satisfied that her eyelids are already fluttering, an indication that she’s on the verge of consciousness. Her cheeks contain a healthy flush, and her leg is no longer swollen in the slightest. A few more waves of healing magic and I’m certain she’ll wake up.

Yvette steps closer and places a hand on my arm. Tears gleam in her eyes. “This means so much to me, Prince Lucas. Thank you.”

“ Prince Lucas?” Aunt Heather groans, though she doesn’t become hysterical as I’d feared she might if she learned my true identity. “Gods, Yvette, did you really drag a Summer Court prince to my house?”

“Oops. Yes, Aunt Heather, I did. But he’s a very nice Summer Court prince. He saved me from flesh traders, remember? I would be on my way to an auction block outside of Sorsston right now if he hadn’t so gallantly rescued me.”

I lean closer to Yvette and whisper, “You think I’m gallant?”

She smirks. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late,” I whisper. “I think you must be falling in love with me.”

Her face grows red, and she fumbles for a response. Eventually, she says, “You wish,” in an adorably flippant tone. Then an expression of absolute joy breaks across her face, and she reaches for her mother. “Oh, Mama, you’re awake. I’m here, Mama. Don’t be scared. Everything will be all right. Aunt Heather is here too.”

“Carol! Oh, thank gods, you’re awake!” Aunt Heather exclaims.

I step aside, and a joyous reunion ensues. Something warm and tight affects my chest as I watch Yvette and Heather take turns hugging Carol. Suffice it to say, I find myself deeply moved by the display of affection. It brings back memories from centuries ago when my mother occasionally hugged me, a show of fondness she would only perform if my father was out of sight.

When Yvette’s mother suddenly notices me standing along the wall, a quick introduction is made, and I’m relieved she seems more accepting of my presence than her sister.

The women laugh and continue embracing one another while Yvette regales her mother with her experiences on the road. When she describes her rescue from the flesh traders and her subsequent healing at my hands, she aims a few warm glances my way. She also omits any mention of our first encounter, when I mockingly

interrogated her on the road and she was forced to produce the letter of protection.

Does she realize the letter is useless when it comes to me?

Does she understand that it's only out of the kindness in my heart, kindness I didn't realize I possessed, that's kept me from absconding with her?

Not for the first time, I wonder why I can't be as cruel as Axton and Zandorr, my older brothers. One of my first memories involves the two of them skinning an orc alive. The orc's crime? Accidentally venturing into Summer Court lands.

While I've killed plenty of humans and orcs, I've only done so during battle or in cases where it was well-deserved. Like the flesh traders who tried to capture Yvette. And yet my father consistently orders me to lead the Summer Court army. During my lifetime, I've led the army into battle far more often than either of my brothers.

Perhaps King Haratt hopes the cruelty of the soldiers and other highborn fae who make up the army will one day rub off on me. Still, I believe I've proven myself in battle. I've never lost a fight, and I kill my fair share of human and orc soldiers whenever I must.

Speaking of the Summer Court army, my soldiers along with General Dalgaard are probably wondering where the fuck I've disappeared to. I hope they aren't searching for me. Considering that I've been absent for less than a day and the army is currently occupying the recently defeated city of Sorsston, the very city Yvette intended to visit, I suppose they probably think I'm still off conducting aerial sweeps of the countryside.

But I must return to Sorsston soon. Tribute Day is scheduled for tomorrow in the newly captured city, and I must be present when each household visits the castle to offer their ten pieces of silver. Or a son or a daughter.

I try to push away the sudden guilt that visits me over the knowledge that I'll soon be responsible for ripping more families apart, and I quickly remind myself that Sorsston's army attacked my people first. A week ago, they'd nearly decimated a small settlement filled with regular faefolk.

I ignore the growl that's building in my throat. I'm a highborn fae. I'm a Summer Court Prince. I cannot show leniency when it comes to conquering the human villages and cities that attack us. Ussha, the life force of my people's magic, will only keep spreading outward from our four courts, prompting more regular faefolk who possess very little magic to resettle in human and orc territories. Regular faefolk count upon highborn fae for protection, and I cannot fail those who depend on me.

Tomorrow, I will preside over yet another Tribute Day in yet another conquered human city, and I will show no mercy. But my resolve falters when I look at Yvette as she beams down at her mother.

I don't want to leave Yvette alone and unprotected. But how can I take her with me? Her mother just woke up after nearly dying, and I doubt the pretty little human will agree to leave her aunt's cottage so soon, if ever.

"I must admit, I can't believe I'm saying this, you know, considering what your army did to my home city," Carol says as she sits up in bed while looking me over, "but I would like to thank you for all your help. I appreciate you saving my life, but more than anything I appreciate what you did for Yvette. Thank you for saving my daughter from those flesh traders. You're a good male, Prince Lucas."

A good male. I nearly laugh aloud. Nearly. Instead, I offer a respectful nod and say, "I was happy to help, and I'm glad we arrived at the cottage in time. Mangga bites are no joke."

Yvette turns to me with a brilliant smile.

Then she stuns me by throwing her arms around me and hugging me tight.

“Thank you, Prince Lucas,” she murmurs in a grateful tone. Her head rests beneath my chin. “Thank you for saving my mother.”

Too shocked to speak and unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of intimacy, I simply stand still as she hugs me. My arms remain at my sides as I gape down at her. A hug. Yvette, the lovely human I would like to claim, is hugging me.

Slowly, I bring my arms up and wrap them around her, returning the embrace. She tightens her hold on me, and a little shudder passes through her body, making me suspect I’m not the only one being affected by our closeness.

Her body is so enticingly soft against mine as she presses her stomach directly to my crotch that it takes great willpower not to become rock hard. Now is not the time and place for my pants to become tight.

“You are most welcome, sweetling,” I whisper into her ear, speaking low enough that her mother and aunt won’t overhear.

Another shudder passes through her, and her breath also catches in her throat, a lovely noise that makes me wonder what she would sound like in the throes of passion. Will I ever find out? Gods, I hope so.

Eventually, she withdraws from the embrace and regards me with a pretty flush covering her face. I allow my arms to drop away from her, but I don’t take a step back, and neither does she. The chatter of her mother and aunt falls into the background, and time seems to stop.

If we were alone right now, I’m certain I would kiss her.

“I know you aren’t requiring me to make a deal with you, Prince Lucas, but if there’s ever anything I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask. I feel as though I’m in your debt, and I am so very grateful for your assistance today. You’ve shown me a great deal of kindness, and for as long as I live, I’ll never forget it.”

She rises on her toes, takes hold of my shirt collar, and pulls me down so she can place a quick kiss to my cheek. My ears burn and heat pummels through me.

She’s too sweet. Too innocent.

I would be a monster if I tried to convince her to become my bride. She isn’t the type of human who’s cut out for a life among my people.

And yet... I still want her. I need her.

The idea of walking out of this cottage and never seeing her again fills me with an emptiness that makes my future without her seem desolate. When she smiles at me, it’s like the sun is shining directly overhead.

She takes a step back and tucks an errant strand of hair behind her ear, her demeanor shy and awkward. Another blush steals over her, and fuck if my pants don’t finally become tight.

“I will leave you to continue the reunion with your mother, sweetling,” I say in a strained voice.

Her face falls. “Oh. Are you headed back to your army? Or to the Summer Court?”

“No, not yet,” I reply before I can think better of it. “I am... exhausted from the events of today and from using so much of my magic, and I will require some rest before I can make the journey back to my army.” It’s not a total lie. Using magic does

deplete my energy somewhat. But I must stall my departure if I'm to have more time with Yvette, and I need more time. I'm not ready to leave her side just yet.

Her face lights up, and she glances over her shoulder and says, "Hey, Mama and Aunt Heather, I'll be right back." She places a hand on my arm, guides me into the corridor, then shuts the door behind her. She leads me into a sitting room and points at a plush chair. "Why don't you take a seat, and I'll get you a drink." She disappears into the kitchen and soon returns with a glass of water.

"Thank you, sweetling." Why can't I stop calling her that? The first time I uttered the endearment it was in a mocking way. But all the other times? All the other times, I've meant it.

"Are you hungry?" she asks. "Not to brag, but I'm an excellent cook. You haven't lived until you've tasted my chicken pot pie." She holds up her hands before I can speak. "That's it. I've decided. You're staying for dinner and I'm making pot pie. It's the least I can do to thank you for all you've done."

CHAPTER 5

YVETTE

My hands tremble as I quickly wash the dirt from the road off myself. After telling Prince Lucas that he must stay for dinner, I fled the sitting room before he could refuse and hurried to the bathroom so I might get cleaned up.

My heart skips a beat as I replay all the tender interactions we've shared today. The times he cupped my face and stroked my hair. The time he held me on his lap and healed my injuries. The time he gathered me close, had me wrap my arms around his neck and tuck my face into his chest, then flew me back to the cottage. That whole flight felt thrillingly intimate and like some kind of fever dream.

I take a brush to my hair and style my locks into a neat but attractive updo. I doubt he would find my chicken pot pie very impressive if he discovered one of my long dark hairs in it. I chuckle nervously as I give myself one last look in the mirror.

My dress is still rather clean, since my discarded cloak took the brunt of the dust from the road, so I decide to keep it on. Besides, if I go changing my whole outfit, Mama and Aunt Heather might suspect I'm sweet on the prince. After what happened to my uncle, Aunt Heather's late husband, it feels like a betrayal for me to harbor even the smallest attraction to the prince, but I can't help it. I like him. Very much.

I'm a practical sort of person though, despite the dreams I used to have when I was younger about traveling around the realm and exploring new places. I understand the reality of my situation, and Prince Lucas's situation. Even if we were completely

enamored with one another, a lasting relationship between us simply couldn't happen.

Fae always have fated mates. If he's not already mated to the fae female fated to him, he will meet that female one day. I try to ignore the jealousy that heats my blood when I imagine him with his mate, but it's not easy. There really is something about him that calls to me.

I think about Mira's mating union with Warden Valloc. From what Mira has told me about the fae, it is exceedingly rare for a fae to be fated to a full-blooded human. Mira, as it turns out, is part-fae herself, a fact she didn't discover until recently when her powers began to surface.

Me, however? I'm most definitely not part-fae. I've been around areas containing high levels of ussha, as evidenced by the lush, glowing forests, and I haven't experienced a sudden emergence of magic like my friend.

I depart the bathroom and start preparing dinner, and my thoughts soon become muddled. What am I doing? I shouldn't have hugged the prince so tightly, nor should I have kissed his cheek or insisted he stay for dinner. He might believe I'm encouraging him to make advances on me. I flush at the very idea. If I'm to marry a nice man from Sorsston like Mama wants, I should probably remain pure. Would my future husband know if I'd slept with another male before? I'm not sure, but I don't want to risk it.

Not that I'm giving serious thought to sleeping with Prince Lucas. Well, maybe a little thought. He's so tall and handsome and kind.

But does he possess a cruel side like most fae? I can't help but wonder. Also, how many of my people did he slaughter during the battle against Trevos?

Does he enjoy killing humans? Or does he view it as a necessary part of war?

The Trevos army attacked a new settlement of fae first, and not long after this attack, the entire Summer Court army showed up seeking vengeance. I can't fault him for protecting his own people, but the fae response was more brutal than my home city deserved, and I can fault him for that. Thousands of innocent people died or were taken as slaves.

Aunt Heather enters the kitchen and gives me a scolding look. I offer her a smile and pretend I don't know why she's glaring at me.

"He's still here. You invited the fae prince to stay for dinner, didn't you? Have you lost your mind, girl?" She pulls at her hair and makes a face. "Are you trying to get yourself kidnapped and violated? You don't realize how lucky you are that he hasn't snapped and turned into a beast and stolen you away to ravish you. Your mama would be heartbroken if you were taken by a fae and she never saw you again. So would I."

"Thus far, the prince has treated me with kindness. If he wanted to do all those things you just mentioned, why would he have brought me here and healed Mama? He didn't even try to make a deal with me, as I was taught the fae always do. He said he was happy to help without any strings attached." I give her another smile as I chop vegetables for the pot pies.

"The fae are not to be trusted." She steps closer and her eyes become haunted and filled with pain. "I love you, Yvette, and I don't want to lose you. Not after I finally have you back after all these years. You and your mama can live with me for as long as you want. Forever, even. I would love to have you. Please promise you'll be careful around the prince. Please never forget that all fae have terrible tempers and they are prone to jealousy."

"I love you, too, Aunt Heather." I pause chopping vegetables and face her. "I'm not going anywhere, and yes, I suppose Mama and I will live with you for a while.

Actually, I think Mama will want to stay with you forever, but as for me... Well, Mama wants to eventually find me a husband in Sorsston. And as for Prince Lucas, I promise I'll be careful. But after the kindness he showed me and after he saved Mama's life, it seemed rude to just send him on his way." I don't admit that I wasn't ready to watch him fly out of my life for good. I don't admit that I might've developed a little crush on him in the short time I've known him.

"You're too sweet for your own good, Yvette." She pats my arm.

"How's Mama doing?" I ask, eager to change the subject.

"She's just fine. She drank a whole pitcher of water, and she's snacking on some bread and cheese right now. She'll be delighted that you're making your famous pot pie. I know it's one of her favorites. You're a good daughter."

A good daughter . I know Aunt Heather added that last little part to remind me of my duties to Mama. To remind me that I can't go breaking her heart by absconding with a highborn fae male. Not that I was planning to. Daydreaming a little? Yes. Making firm plans? No.

Maybe I shouldn't have hugged the prince and kissed his cheek within their view. In my joy over Mama's abrupt and miraculous recovery, I'd simply launched myself at him, overcome by the need to show my gratitude.

"Well, I'm going to check on your mother again." She takes a few steps back, casts a wary look toward the sitting room, then turns and heads down the hallway.

Once again, I'm left to my muddled thoughts. I sigh and resume working on the pot pies. I think of all the romance novels I've read that included a handsome man kidnapping or coercing the heroine into becoming his bride, only for the woman to eventually fall in love with him after a period of resistance. I have an impressive

collection of books back in Trevos, but books are heavy, and I was only able to travel with a few of my favorites.

But my life isn't a novel. Neither is Prince Lucas's. We're not destined to be together after a few struggles and disagreements. There's no chance we might actually fall in love, and even if we did, there's no chance we would enjoy a happy ending.

I snort and give my head a shake. How ridiculous my musings have become. I've known Prince Lucas for less than a day, and while it's been a very exciting day, even if it weren't for the fact that he must have a fated mate somewhere out there, it would still be far too soon for me to entertain thoughts of marriage or mating.

What about a kiss?

The idea enters my mind before I can stop it.

I've never kissed a man before. Well, not a real, passionate kiss on the lips.

I flush as I imagine the prince cupping my cheeks, tilting his head, and leaning down to capture my lips in a soft, sweet, lingering kiss.

My heart flutters and heat quakes between my thighs.

He would be a skilled kisser, of that I am certain.

I hurry to finish up the pot pies. Thankful for Aunt Heather's well-stocked kitchen, I also whip up butter rolls and a peach cobbler. There. Dinner and dessert are sorted. I finish setting the table, double check to make sure everything is perfect, and hurry into the sitting room to retrieve Prince Lucas.

My eyes widen when I notice what he's holding. One of my romance novels. In my

haste as I'd brought Mama inside yesterday, I'd tossed the small pack holding my prized books into the sitting room. It would appear Prince Lucas not only found the pack, but he helped himself to the most explicit book in the collection.

He notices me watching but doesn't close the book. Instead, he reads aloud, "The warrior's muscular thighs clenched as he took position behind the fair maiden. Her swollen, pink cunny glistened in the candlelight, and her legs trembled as the warrior took a firm hold of her buttocks and spread her center wide." He pauses and meets my eyes. "This is your book, is it not? Your name is inscribed on the inside cover."

At first, I think he must be mocking me. But as I study his visage, I don't see a hint of mockery. Instead, his eyes are darkened with lust, and there's a definite bulge in the crotch area of his pants. His lips quirk in a tiny smile, then he closes the book and returns it to the pack that's leaning against the wall.

"I'd forgotten I left the books in here," I confess, knowing my face must be bright red. I feel as though I'm burning up, and I suspect it's a combination of my own embarrassment and Prince Lucas's summer heat.

He approaches me with slow steps and draws in a deep breath. "Dinner smells delicious, sweetling." His eyes darken further. "And so do you."

CHAPTER 6

LUCAS

I'm used to dining at a formal table resplendent in gleaming gold and polished silver settings, along with cups made of the finest crystal, usually in the company of over a dozen of my closest advisors, dignitaries, and other highborn fae. Dining at a small table in a forest cottage with three human women is a new experience, but it's a pleasant one. The atmosphere is cozy and relaxing, and the food is delicious.

To my surprise, I realize I don't feel like I must put on a show around the women. I feel more at ease, more able to just be myself, whoever the fuck I am. It's a relief I don't have to summon my persona as the cold, brutal, and scheming Summer Court prince everyone expects me to be.

I'm seated next to Yvette, and due to the small size of the table, or perhaps it's because I'm much larger than the average human, our legs keep brushing. Sometimes when it happens, Yvette glances at me with a blush covering her face. When she blushes, the tips of her ears also turn dark pink, and gods how I love watching her squirm in her seat.

Aunt Heather notices my wine glass is empty, and I'm surprised when she fills it with water and gives me a brief smile. "You don't want to become drunk and unable to fly back home later."

I chuckle. "It takes more than a few glasses of human wine to get me drunk. Only fae or orc spirits are capable of that feat, and even then, I'm usually able to fly without a

problem. Usually . There was that one time I inadvertently flew into a flock of birds.”

All three women laugh, though I notice Heather’s eyes don’t light up, and despite the cordial dinner conversation the four of us have shared thus far, I sense her desire to have me gone. It would be difficult to miss the concerned glances she keeps sending her niece. I suppose she’s worried I’ll take Yvette with me when I finally depart. Not that the idea doesn’t keep crossing my mind.

I consider the books. The deliciously naughty romance novels I found in a bag. Not only was Yvette’s name written inside the cover of each book, but many of the pages were earmarked, leaving me in no doubt that she’s read them many times. And those earmarked pages? They contained the most explicit passages.

I wish we’d had more time to discuss the novels, but alas, her mother and aunt had appeared in the doorway a second later. I’d planned to tell Yvette about my own reading habits. I’d also planned to tell her about the most magnificent libraries and bookstores in the realm that I’ve visited. Perhaps I’ll get the chance later.

But my heart quickly sinks, because I’m not sure later will come.

Darkness has already fallen. What am I supposed to do? Feign tiredness and ask to spend the night? I glance at Heather and notice her frowning at me, though she quickly looks away.

Spending the night is definitely not an option. Yvette’s dragon of an aunt wouldn’t allow it even if I begged, and I have no intention of begging. Secretly remain in the area to make sure Yvette is safe while also spying on her? Yes, I might do that.

I consider how humans sometimes fall in love with one another. Many human marriages are arranged, but some humans marry for love. It’s the same among orcs. It’s also not unheard of for humans in an arranged marriage to later fall in love.

The point being, perhaps I can make Yvette fall in love with me.

I think about my attributes. I'm a wealthy prince. That's a mark in my favor. I'm also a highborn fae with powerful magic. Another mark. And let's not forget my sheer handsomeness. Yet another mark.

Yvette, however, doesn't strike me as the superficial type. She would likely long for romance and a real connection. A heartfelt love. But how do I make that happen?

A plan starts to form. A plan that would make the more wicked members of my family laugh at me, but I don't fucking care.

I want Yvette as my bride, and I won't rest until she's mine.

Until she agrees to become mine.

Yes, I could glamour her into loving me, but it wouldn't be real. Perhaps she might never love me, no matter how intently I try to woo her, and maybe I won't ever fall in love with her either. But we could cultivate a friendship at the very least, and I would like to believe we might find some happiness together.

There's an undeniable spark between us, however, that makes me think our marital intimacies would be explosive.

Love isn't a guarantee, and I know there's no way we could ever share the same deep connection that comes with an everlasting bond to one's fated mate, but gods how I want to try.

All my life, the terrible knowledge that I would never have a fated mate has haunted me. It's given me nightmares and kept me awake at night, and it's caused me to experience searing jealousy every time a friend or acquaintance finally meets their

fated mate.

After dinner is over, I stand up and place a hand on Yvette's shoulder. There's a sadness to her expression that gives me hope. If she's sad I'm about to depart, surely that's a good sign. A sign she's at least mildly drawn to me.

"I must return to the Summer Court army before my soldiers start looking for me, but I would like to thank you all for your hospitality. This was a most enjoyable evening." I reach for Yvette's hand and bend to place a kiss upon it, which earns me another pretty flush from the intriguing human female. "I would especially like to thank you, sweetling, for the delicious meal and the gift of your company today." I kiss her hand again. Just because I can.

I don't care that we have witnesses during this exchange. Let her aunt gasp and let her mother stare at us wide-eyed. From my peripheral vision, I notice the two older women exchange a worried glance.

"It's us who should be thanking you." Yvette makes to get up, and I move her chair back and assist her in standing. She stammers for a moment, then murmurs, "I will walk you outside."

I exchange polite farewells with Heather and Carol, the latter of whom shakes my hand and thanks me one last time for healing her mangga bite and for saving Yvette from the flesh traders. I incline my head, giving Yvette's mother a respectful nod while claiming I was happy to be of service, and it's not a lie. I shudder to think what might be happening to Yvette at this very moment had I not rescued her on the road, and mangga bites are a painful and tragic way to go, especially for a human whose lifespan is already so short.

I place a hand at the small of Yvette's back and guide her out into the frigid winter night. But it doesn't remain cold for long. I quickly summon my magic and bring

forth a warm summer breeze. I also conjure the scents of early summer blooming flowers, and nighttime insects and trilling frogs. Lastly, I swirl a hand in the air, causing fireflies to appear in the surrounding forest.

Yvette gasps and looks around, then she peers at me with her face bathed in the moonlight. Gods, she is so beautiful, and innocent. Despite the content of the books I discovered, I sense her inexperience in her adorable blushes and equally adorable moments of discomfiture. Furthermore, I don't detect the scent of a male on her, an aroma that would linger on her for months or even longer after an amorous encounter.

Mine. My human. My bride.

Gods, how long will it take to convince her? I'm not a patient male, but for her, I would learn patience. Because stealing her isn't an option. I can't fathom forcing her to repeat marriage vows and then carrying her to my royal chambers. The very thought of her fearing my touch is maddening.

"I don't believe I've ever glimpsed such a beautiful night. Summer has always been my favorite season, and there's nothing quite like a warm summer evening." She smiles. "Thank you for sharing your magic with me. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget... you. I enjoyed meeting you, Prince Lucas."

Her words carry me to the stars, and for several seconds, all I can do is stare at her in wonderment. Though she's not my fated mate, what's happening between us certainly feels magical. In a way. Is this what it feels like when humans start to fall in love? Is it normal for humans to feel so strongly about one another so quickly?

"This isn't goodbye," I announce before I can think better of it. "I will see you again soon, sweetling."

Her eyes glimmer with excitement, and she draws in a shaky breath. "What do you

mean?”

“Tomorrow at midnight. Will you meet me outside?” Tribute Day will be over by then, and I’ll be able to escape Sorsston for a few hours without anyone missing me.

“Yes. I’ll meet you.”

I step closer and cup her face, then I lean down to place a soft but brief kiss to her lips. It takes all my self-control not to devour her, but I keep the kiss rather chaste. Not only do I want to earn her trust, but I want her to hunger for me the same way I hunger for her.

I pull back and release my hold on her as my heart thumps wildly in my chest. We stare at one another for a long, heated moment as the fireflies whirl around us and the summer breeze ruffles our hair. I grasp her hands and give them a squeeze. “Until tomorrow, sweetling.”

“Until tomorrow.”

I release her hands and take a few steps back before summoning wings and shooting into the sky.

But I don’t depart the area just yet. I land in a nearby tree out of sight, where I immediately set to work creating a protective ward around her aunt’s property. I want to ensure her safety until my return tomorrow night. Once I’m satisfied with the ward, I still don’t leave. I wait until she walks back inside. After she shuts the door behind her, I ascend to the sky and head for Sorsston.

Tomorrow at midnight can’t come soon enough.

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CHAPTER 7

YVETTE

My stomach flips when I think about tonight.

I check the time. Only four hours to go.

Gods, I still can't believe I agreed to meet Prince Lucas at midnight. Outside the cottage in secret, no less.

I've never sneaked out of the house before, not even as a teenager, and my giddiness rises alongside my worries.

What if I'm caught? Yes, I realize I'm a grown woman of twenty-four, but if Mama or Aunt Heather catch me sneaking outside at midnight, they're going to ask questions. Questions I won't want to answer.

Not for the first time this evening, I test the window in my bedroom. Thankfully, Aunt Heather placed me in a small room at the back of the cottage. On the first floor. The only problem is that Mama's right next door, so I'll have to be very quiet as I climb out the window.

I ruffle through my belongings and select the least wrinkled dress. A pretty yellow gown that's more suitable for summer than winter, but I trust I'll be warm once Prince Lucas shows up.

My heart races as I anticipate seeing him again.

Oh gods, that kiss. It was so perfect. It was everything I ever imagined my first kiss might be. Soft and exciting with the perfect amount of pressure. He'd cradled my face with such tenderness that I nearly swoon every time I think about it.

Will he kiss me again tonight? Heat surges between my thighs at the thought, and I find myself squirming on the bed as my excitement grows.

Unable to remain still, I jump off the bed and start pacing the room.

My gaze lands on my bag of books that I relocated from the sitting room. I flush when I recall the deep vibrations of the prince's voice as he read the explicit passage aloud.

How thoroughly embarrassing yet thrilling that moment was.

Even better, he wasn't mocking me, or judging me, not really. He'd seemed intrigued and even excited by the subject matter.

There's no denying the heat that flared in his eyes and the way his breath caught in his throat. And that sudden bulge in his tight leather pants sent a thrill through me.

Disbelief descends and I struggle to catch my breath.

My first kiss. My very first kiss was with a Summer Court prince.

Suddenly, I wish Mira were here. I could talk to her about this whole strange situation I've gotten myself into, and I could share my excitement as well as my worries. But she's all the way in Trevos, a full two week's wagon ride away.

Mama and I traveled by wagon most of the way, hitching a ride with a group of merchants headed for Sorsston. It wasn't until the last day of our journey that we disembarked the wagon and set off on foot, as they couldn't spare the time to take us all the way to Aunt Heather's cottage.

A quick visit to Mira isn't an option, though I hope to send her a letter soon. If I invite her to visit the cottage, will Warden Valloc permit it? My spirits sink because I'm not sure he would. He's so protective of her that he doesn't like being away from her side for long. Even though she's part-fae and stronger than most humans.

Thoughts of Mira and Warden Valloc's mating union give me pause. There's no denying he's downright possessive of her, and if another male showed interest in Mira, I have no doubt the warden would waste no time in slaughtering the man. Is Prince Lucas the same way?

My worries start to outweigh my excitement over the coming night.

I don't want the sort of trouble that might arise if the prince becomes possessive of me. I think of Mama's plan to take me to Sorsston at the start of spring for the purpose of finding me a husband. Over dinner tonight, she'd mentioned that we would travel there around that time, and Aunt Heather had chimed in that she thought it was an excellent idea. My aunt also mentioned a few local farmers' sons she wanted me to meet. It would seem both Mama and Aunt Heather are keen to play matchmaker for me.

If I meet Prince Lucas tonight, am I leading him on? It feels wrong to do that, but at the same time, it's not as though we could become mates. Somewhere out there, there's a fae female who is fated to belong to him. Maybe he just hasn't met her yet. It's my understanding that sometimes fae don't meet their fated mates until they're over a thousand years old.

If I spend too much time with the Summer Court prince and he starts to feel possessive of me, will he interfere when I later travel to Sorsston to find a husband? My stomach clenches at the thought.

I'm tired of fighting, tired of war.

All the violence I witnessed during the fae's attack on my home city was because of Prince Lucas. I shouldn't forget that. It was his massive army that conquered Trevos and brought much bloodshed to the human kingdom.

I continue pacing the room and watching the clock, my thoughts in turmoil. Despite all that's happened between my people and the fae, I can't help but think I'll regret not meeting the prince tonight.

If I don't meet him, I'll always wonder what we might've talked about and whether he would've given me another soft, perfect kiss.

Just before midnight, I stuff two extra pillows underneath the sheets and pull the covers up so it looks like I'm curled on my side fast asleep. Then, I crack the window. To my relief, it opens easily and doesn't creak. I finish opening it and peer outside. I don't see him, but then he probably won't walk straight up to the cottage. He won't want to risk being seen by my mother or aunt.

I smooth my hands through my hair, feeling a bit ridiculous for the long curls I set earlier in the night, but it's too late to change my hair now. I take a deep breath and start climbing out the window. The cold night wind makes me shiver, and a wolf howls in the distance. Ugh, it's still winter out here.

Until it's not.

All at once, a warm breeze surrounds me and the sound of locusts and crickets fill the

night, along with trilling frogs and other nighttime sounds I can't quite identify. The nearby forest also illuminates with countless fireflies and other glowing creatures I don't recognize. Exotic creatures that I suppose hail from the Summer Court.

My feet hit the ground, and I immediately close the window. I pray Mama or Aunt Heather don't decide to check on me, but I also hope the pillows under the blankets trick works if they do. Satisfied by my escape, I turn and face the glittering darkness. I don't see Prince Lucas, but I know he's here.

I follow the garden walkway as my excitement mounts. Holy gods, I actually sneaked out of the house to meet a guy. Not just any guy, but a highborn fae male. A Summer Court prince.

I smell him before I see him. The scent of star jasmine and honeysuckle hits me hard, and a second later he steps into my path. My heart stumbles when I see what he's holding. A single red rose.

The moment our eyes meet, giddiness swirls through me. I also become breathless even though he hasn't said a word or touched me yet. It would seem the anticipation of what might pass between us tonight is enough to make me deliciously unsettled. An ache pulses steadily in my core, and I swear my nipples harden in the confines of my chemise. I'm experiencing the sort of physical reaction to a male that I've only read about.

Gods, it's like I feel alive, truly alive, for the first time.

"Sweetling."

"Prince Lucas."

He hands me the rose, and when his fingers brush mine, the brief touch sends a fresh

wave of sensation straight to my womanhood.

“Thank you for the rose.” I bring it to my nose. “It smells lovely.”

“You’re very welcome.” He clears his throat. “You may simply call me Lucas, by the way. There’s no need to be so formal.”

“All right. Lucas .” I don’t mean to say his name in a breathless, seductive tone, but that’s how it escapes my lips.

“I thought perhaps we might go for a walk in the forest. It’s quite safe, I promise. As long as I’m with you, no forest beasts will dare to venture close.” He offers me his arm, and I take it.

“A walk sounds nice,” I murmur as I relish the feel of his summer heat. I’ve never liked being cold, and I usually spend the majority of winter next to a roaring fire.

“How is your mother doing?” He glances down at me as we pass a tree holding a massive quantity of glowing fruit. Pears? I make a quick note to visit this particular tree during the light of day.

“She’s doing well. Thanks to you.” My fingers briefly tighten on his arm.

As we walk deeper into the forest, I’m awestruck by the splendor of the night. Everywhere I look, the branches and leaves glitter in all colors of the rainbow. The rhythmic buzzing of locusts swells louder, and the fireflies continue dancing through the trees.

Every now and then, I exchange a look with Lucas. Lucas . Just Lucas. I like that he invited me to omit his title.

I spin the rose idly in my hand as we walk beneath a low tree bough that has large glowing purple bugs crawling on it. If I were by myself, I would give the bugs a wide berth, but I trust that nothing will hurt me out here. Not when I'm with Lucas.

"So," he says in a conversational tone, "you and your mother journeyed a long way from Trevos to visit your aunt. Did the two of you travel on foot by yourselves?"

"Yes, we did come a long way, but we were fortunate to hitch a ride on a merchant wagon that was headed for Sorsston, and we stayed with the wagon until the very last stretch of the road. When I was child, we used to visit my aunt once a year, but when I was about sixteen, my father and Aunt Heather got into a terrible argument after he insulted Mama, and he made us leave the cottage in the middle of the night. He forbade us from ever visiting again, but he died about a year ago, so we're finally here for a much overdue visit."

Lucas pauses and turns to face me, his demeanor tense. He swallows hard. "Did your father die when the Summer Court army attacked Trevos?"

"No, nothing like that. He wasn't a soldier. He was too much of a coward for that. He faked a limp so he wouldn't be conscripted." I exhale slowly as I remember the unexpected knock on a cold, rainy afternoon that heralded the news of my father's passing. "He was found stabbed to death a few weeks after the fall of Trevos."

"I'm so sorry, sweetling." He cups the side of my face and gives me a compassionate look. "Was his assailant ever caught?"

"You don't have to be sorry," I say with a thin, forced smile. "I know I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but my father was a cruel man, and if I'm being honest, his passing came as a relief to both me and my mother. But no, the assailant was never caught. He had a reputation for cheating people in business though, so I'm sure he just finally crossed the wrong person."

He smooths my hair behind my ears. “Well, I’m glad you and your mother can finally visit your aunt. Are you planning to return to Trevos eventually?”

“No, we’re not going back to Trevos.” Oh, gods. Why does this suddenly feel complicated? I almost feel like I’m lying to him by not telling him the full truth. But I can’t tell him I’ll be traveling to Sorsston soon to find a husband.

“I take it you don’t like living under fae rule.” His visage becomes guarded, as though he’s bracing himself for my answer.

I bristle as the terror of the Summer Court army’s attack on Trevos comes rushing back. “How can you ask that? Of course I don’t like living under fae rule.” I drop my hand from his arm and face him fully. “I hid in the cellar with my parents during the attack, and the house shook the entire time. I prayed harder than I’ve ever prayed before because I was convinced the house would collapse on us and we’d all get crushed to death.”

“Yvette, I?—”

“No, I’m not finished. I want to tell you the rest.” I place my hands on my hips and glare up at him. The magic of summer continues swirling around us, but the atmosphere no longer brims with romance. Despite the warmth of his summer magic, there’s a sudden chill in the air. Or perhaps the chill is inside me.

“Very well, sweetling. Tell me. I want to know what it was like for you, even if it paints me and my people as villains.”

I draw in a deep breath, then I let it all out. I tell him about the bodies in the street. I talk about the neighbors we found dead or grievously injured. I speak of the fear that permeated the whole city in the aftermath of the attack. I confess how worried I was about my best friend, Mira, and how touched and relieved I was when she visited my

home the day after the attack to check on me.

Closing my eyes, I picture the days following the battle and the horrors I witnessed, and I utter every thought that comes to mind. I tell him every terrible memory. Like the time I went on a walk with Mama, and we saw heads rotting on the parapet. And all the times I heard screaming in the middle of the night and knew the fae must be harassing some poor soul.

Next, I remind him of the runners that were rounded up and slaughtered, and all the unfortunate people who were taken as slaves, most of them young women and men. I also scold him about the injustice of Tribute Day and how wrong it was to punish households who couldn't afford ten pieces of silver. Demanding a daughter or son in place of silver was perverse, and the families he destroyed will never be the same.

By the time I'm finished, hot tears stream down my face, but I feel better. Better for having told him. He needs to know. He needs to know what he did. What his people did. He's leading the godsdamn army. Him and that general everyone talks about, General Dalgaard. It's said that since they both took leadership of the army a few centuries ago, the Summer Court hasn't lost a single battle.

I blink away the tears and glance down at my hand. It hurts. During my tirade about the fae's cruelty, I crushed the rose in my fist and embedded a few thorns in my palm.

Lucas reaches for my injured hand before I can flee into the night. He stares at me with regret, which takes me aback. Isn't he proud of what he's done? Shouldn't it make him happy to know how much suffering he's caused among my people?

"Sweetling, I?—"

"Don't call me that. I'm not your sweetling. I never should have agreed to meet you tonight. I don't know what I was thinking." I snifle. Fuck, how I hate that I just

broke down crying in front of him. “You charmed me with your kindness yesterday, and while you might not have glamourised me, you might as well have. Because surely the way you treated me yesterday was a ruse. Surely it was all fake.”

His expression gentles with concern. I wish he wouldn’t look at me that way. I wish he would laugh at my pain. I don’t want any part in the sick game he’s playing. Maybe instead of stealing away with me and keeping me as a pleasure slave, it’s more enjoyable for him to make me fall for him first. It’s more enjoyable for him to make me believe he’s a decent male worthy of love and affection and understanding.

Yes, this makes the most sense. This is all one big mind fuck. At any moment, he’ll come clean and show me his darkness. The darkness I always knew was there.

“You’re hurt, Yvette.” His nostrils flare. “I can smell your blood.” He pries my fingers open one by one.

I wince at the pain, and I’m glad I can’t see just how many thorns are stuck in my palm. He cups my wounded hand in both of his, then golden light beams outward. The discomfort fades almost instantly, and the thorns eject from my flesh and fall to the ground. He releases me and steps back, and I wiggle my mended hand, uncertain if I should thank him or spin on my heel and run back to the cottage.

“I’m not sorry for attacking Trevos, sweetling. It had to be done,” he says in a quiet voice. “But I am sorry for the pain and fright it caused you and your mother.”

CHAPTER 8

LUCAS

It would seem I ruined any chance I might've had with Yvette long before I met her. I try to think of a way to redeem myself in her eyes, but I come up empty. Yes, I rescued her from flesh traders, and I saved her mother's life, but I'm also largely responsible for the deaths of thousands in Trevos. I can't erase her dark memories of the attack, or the cruelty she witnessed on Tribute Day.

"Do you like my tears?" she asks as she wipes at her face.

"No. They sadden me and make me uncomfortable at the same time. They make me want to hug you to my chest and hold you until you cry the very last tear. They make me want to cut out my own heart because it's my fault you're crying. I ordered the attack on Trevos, and yes, I killed many human soldiers during the battle." I regard her with a sense of deepening panic. What can I say to win her back? Not that I ever won her in the first place, but I'd started to believe she desired me. I'd started to think I had a real chance at convincing her to become my bride.

"I wish I could tell whether you're lying," she says. "I grew up hearing stories that the fae couldn't lie, but I know those stories are all wrong. I know fae can lie like it's nothing. Just like humans can."

"And how do you know that?" I ask, curious about where she got her information. Among humans and orcs, it's a common misconception that fae can't lie, a myth that was born centuries or perhaps even longer ago. It's a myth my people have worked to

perpetuate because it helps us more easily make deals with humans and orcs, deals that largely benefit us.

“My best friend Mira told me. She happens to be Warden Valloc’s mate.”

“Ah. That makes sense. While I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting Mira yet, as I’ve been too busy protecting newly erected settlements of regular faefolk from marauding humans and orcs, I have heard a great deal about her.”

“You have?” She gives me a suspicious look.

“Oh yes, and I’m also quite familiar with Warden Valloc,” I reply. “He’s a distant cousin of mine, though if we’re being honest with one another, I don’t think he cares for me much. But as for lying, you are correct that fae can easily lie. I wish there was a way to convince you of the truths I’m speaking.”

“Look into my eyes,” she says in a firm tone. “Look .”

I lower my face to hers and stare directly into her eyes. I don’t blink even when she does. I don’t make a single fucking move even though I want to ask what she’s doing.

Does she honestly believe she’s capable of reading deceit in another person’s expression? I have my doubts that it’s possible, but if that’s what she’s doing, I don’t want to dissuade her of the notion, so I resolve to keep that opinion to myself.

I also resolve that I’ll be honest. Whatever she asks, I’ll answer truthfully. Even if my response causes the chasm that’s opened between us to widen.

“Why did you rescue me from the flesh traders yesterday?”

“Because the thought of those men hurting you both angered and sickened me. When

I heard a human female's scream and thought it might be you, I couldn't reach you fast enough. I was worried about your safety."

She flinches slightly, but she keeps maintaining close eye contact.

"Aren't you going to ask why I was still in the vicinity? I met you hours before and then I flew off, yet I reached you only seconds after you let out that first scream. Ask me."

"All right." Still holding my gaze, she exhales slowly. "Why were you so conveniently close when I screamed?"

"I was on my way back to the Summer Court army, but I couldn't stop thinking about you," I confess. "Your spirit and your beauty captivated me, and I kept thinking about turning around and stealing away with you. So, I turned around, even though I hadn't quite reached a decision yet. Eventually, I heard you scream, and you know the rest."

She's silent for so long I think she might be done asking questions. But finally, she has another one for me. "Why didn't you steal away with me after you rescued me?"

"Because I couldn't imagine scaring you or hurting you like that. When I saw your injuries, I was eager to mend you. I found myself wanting to take your pain away, and I also felt a strong compulsion to keep you safe. I couldn't just leave you on the mountain without any supplies."

She blinks a few times, then draws back. I finally straighten and watch as a look of disbelief plays over her pretty face. "So, you're not fucking with me? You're not pretending to be kind just so you can later be utterly cruel to me?"

"I... no ." I reach for her hands, and she permits my touch. "I genuinely like you, Yvette, and I admire you. I have never felt such a strong attraction to a female before,

and I cannot imagine treating you with cruelty. I realize what's happening between us is fast, but I-I am not certain how quickly humans fall in love. Does it usually take hours, or days, or longer?"

"Fall in love? Humans?" Her eyes dance with confusion. "I like what you said about liking me and admiring me and the stuff right after that, but why are you asking how long it usually takes humans to fall in love? You're fae, and fae always have fated mates."

I'm about to announce that I don't have a fated mate, only to hesitate and press my lips tightly together. I've never talked about the curse with anyone but my parents and brothers. I know my father has discussed our plight with priestesses, but beyond that I'm not certain anyone else in the realm knows.

It's a secret we've tried to keep hidden in the dark, but it will emerge soon enough. Because my father ordered me to marry a human, and he issued the same command to my brothers. I imagine it'll be all anyone can talk about after our marriages are announced, and the curse will finally become common knowledge.

"Lucas? Did I say something to offend you? I am simply surprised that you are speaking of love when you are fae and I'm human, and I don't believe it's possible for you to love me even if you wanted to. We just met the other day, and while the circumstances of our meeting might be considered romantic, especially the part where you rescued me, even if we were both full-blooded humans, falling in love with someone you've only known for a day isn't really possible. In my humble opinion. There are some people who believe in something called 'love at first sight' but not me. I think you must know a person for a while and allow time for affection to bloom."

"You didn't say anything to offend me, sweetling." I offer her a smile, and I'm grateful the tension from earlier has eased somewhat, though I know there are plenty

of unresolved issues between us, obstacles we must overcome as we try to understand each other. “Thank you for explaining how love tends to work with humans. I am used to watching friends and acquaintances suddenly encounter their fated mate and— boom! —instant deep and endless love and devotion.”

She tilts her head, and her lips curve in a thoughtful smile. A faraway look enters her pretty dark eyes, eyes that are currently reflecting the intermittent flashes of the nearest fireflies. “Boom. Instant deep and endless love and devotion,” she eventually says. “That sounds nice. It sounds like a fairytale. The fae are lucky in that regard. I wish it worked that way for humans.”

“We’re not all lucky,” I reply before I can think better of it. Fuck, what am I doing? Am I really about to tell her my sad story? Am I really on the verge of confessing that I don’t have a fated mate? My tongue suddenly feels thick and heavy in my mouth, and I almost take a step back from her. Instead, I breathe deeply and readjust my grip on her hand, lacing my fingers through hers.

“Not all lucky? What do you mean by that?” Her gaze brims with curiosity.

“I don’t have a fated mate.” There’s a lull in the buzz of the summertime insects right before I speak, making my words ring out louder than intended. The truth I just revealed hovers in the night, a terrible darkness I’ve been hiding for years. Now that I’ve said it aloud to someone outside my family, it feels more real than ever. My chest grows tight, and the next few breaths are difficult.

I don’t have a fated mate.

“But you’re a full-blooded fae,” Yvette says with a frown. “You’re highborn. You’re a Summer Court prince. I don’t understand. How could you not have a fated mate?” Her frown deepens. “Oh no. Did your fated mate die?”

“Long ago, thousands of years before I was born, a human mage cursed my parents’ eventual offspring.” I pause and watch the little human carefully. I don’t want her pity, but I’m not averse to her understanding, and as I prepare to tell her the rest, my chest no longer feels as tight as earlier. “The mage was apparently in love with my mother, though she held no love for him. Using dark magic, the mage decreed that no children born of my mother and father’s mating union would have fated mates of their own. And so, I am alone in this realm, and so are my two brothers. According to our highest priestesses, it’s a curse that cannot be broken.”

Her features melt with concern, and she places her free hand, the hand I just healed, on my arm as she steps closer. The glow of the ussha-blessed forest bathes her in a multitude of colors. “Gods, Lucas, I am so sorry. How awful for you and your brothers. What happened to the mage? I assume he’s long dead since he was human, but if he’s not, if he somehow used his dark magic to lengthen his life, is there a chance you might find him and get him to reverse the curse?”

“He’s long dead. My father hunted him down and killed him, though not before trying to make him reverse the curse.” I can see the mage’s death clearly in my mind, as my father once shared it with me. My father has the ability to share vivid memories simply by touching another individual, a gift I sometimes wish I possessed. Sometimes, when I’m feeling at my lowest as I contemplate my lonely future, I replay the moment my father slit the mage’s throat with a long fingernail, then ripped the male’s head from his body.

“And no one else can break the curse? You’re certain?”

“I’m certain it can’t be done. My father spent thousands of years consulting with priestesses as well as human mages he captured, and all came to the same conclusion: the mage that cursed my parents’ offspring was the most powerful mage in the history of the realm. His dark magic cannot be reversed or broken.”

“Again, I’m so sorry.” Yvette strokes my arm, and the gentle repetitive touch brings me comfort. Her expression, filled with more understanding than pity, also helps calm the rage I feel over the loss of something I never had.

She glances into the forest as a long silence descends between us, but to my relief, it’s not awkward or tense. It’s soothing. It’s just what I need after telling her my deepest, most painful secret.

“Are you the oldest child?” Her voice is a soft whisper that barely reaches me over the renewed buzzing of the locusts.

“No, I’m the youngest. The weight of the Summer Court throne isn’t upon my shoulders. Not really. My oldest brother, Axton, bears the burden of knowing he might be the last ruler accepted by the Summer Court fae.”

“What about arranged marriages for all three of you?” She shrugs one shoulder and gives me a sheepish look. “Well, I’m sure your father has probably already thought of that, and for whatever reason, it won’t work. Oh, wait! ” She shakes her head as a knowing look comes over her. “Of course. Arranged marriages won’t work because it’s not like you can steal someone else’s fated mate, even if they haven’t met their mate yet. Ah, I see how this is an extraordinary problem.”

“An extraordinary problem indeed,” I agree, and I appreciate that she understands the gravity of my situation, especially considering how much harm my people have caused hers. Not only is she perceptive, but her eyes hold a wisdom that belies her youth. I doubt she’s a day over twenty, yet she seems wiser than some of the thousand-plus year old fae with whom I’m acquainted.

“Shall we continue walking, Lucas?” she asks with a nod at the forest, and gods how I adore the sensual way she says my name.

“I would like that.” Rather than offer her my arm this time, I keep holding her hand, and we set off into the trees.

With each step, I project my magic further, wanting her to enjoy the full splendor of a Summer Court forest at night. Considering that this area contains especially high levels of ussha, it doesn’t tax my powers very much, though even if it did, I would fucking drain myself just for her. Just to give her an enjoyable night to remember.

“I’m going to ask you another question, Lucas, and I hope I’m not being too bold by asking it, but I need to know.” She glances over at me, and her features are bathed in the purple glow of the overgrown ferns lining the walking path I’ve created. Not for the first time in her presence, my heart skips a beat as I admire her radiant beauty.

“You may ask me anything, sweetling, and I will give you an honest answer. Anything.” I pause, turn to face her, and I pull her flush against my body.

Her breath catches, and I swear I detect the sweet pungency of her feminine arousal in the humid night air. Fucking delicious. Perhaps we’ll end the night with me feasting on her and letting her cries of pleasure join the echoing thrum of the summer insects and trilling frogs.

This far away from the cottage and all other civilization, no one would hear her screams of ecstasy.

“What is your specific interest in me? Are you looking for a female companion to share your bed? Are you hoping I’ll agree to become your concubine?”

I smooth my hands up and down her back, then I reach to cup her face. As I allow my thumbs to trace the softness of her cheeks, I detect a fresh wave of the slickness that’s gathering between her thighs.

Honesty. I must give her honesty.

Even though she claims humans don't fall in love within a day of knowing one another. Even though she will likely find my interest in her abrupt and perhaps desperate. But she wouldn't be wrong about my desperation. Gods, I am desperate to have her. I'm aching and eager, and I cannot help but wonder if perhaps it's fate that I met her only days after receiving the missive from my father ordering me to take a human bride.

"My specific interest in you, sweetling, might surprise you," I say, needing to stall for a moment. I also hope the pause gives her some time to brace herself for the answer that will no doubt leave her reeling with shock.

"Go on, then," she replies in another soft whisper, though there's also a taunting edge to her voice, as though she's daring me to go through with it. "Tell me."

"I want to claim you as my wife, dear Yvette. My father recently ordered me, as well as my brothers, to take human brides. Days after I received this command, I met you, and though I realize we haven't known one another for long, I am already completely besotted with you. I cannot imagine taking another human female as my bride. I want you. That is my specific interest in you. I don't want you as a concubine or a pleasure slave, though I'll admit those two options hold some allure, but I want you to become my wife."

CHAPTER 9

YVETTE

I stare up at Prince Lucas, at a complete loss for words. I'm utterly stupefied by his declaration that he wants me to become his wife.

His wife!

I won't lie. There's a part of me that wants to throw caution to the wind and accept his offer. Not just because I'm fiercely attracted to him (yes, despite all the harm he's inflicted on my people), but because mating with a fae male would cause my lifespan to expand by thousands of years. That's what Mira told me happens when humans mate with fae, that the human absorbs the fae partner's magic and typically lives at least as long as that fae partner.

I close my eyes, overwhelmed by his offer. I remind myself that he's the enemy. I remind myself of the bloodshed and horrors I witnessed in Trevos. Because ussha won't stop spreading, it's unlikely that the fae will ever stop conquering human and orc territories. One day, the fae will rule over the entire realm.

Am I a traitor for considering Prince Lucas's offer?

"It would seem I've shocked you, sweetling."

His hands move from my face, and he starts caressing my hair, and I'm unable to stop the waves of blissful sensation his touch provokes.

Is it wrong that I want more? Is it wrong that I want him to kiss me again?

Finally, I open my eyes. “Yes, by the gods, you’ve shocked me. As you might imagine, I’m feeling very conflicted right now.”

“You aren’t yet married—I know this because I don’t detect the scent of a male on you—and neither am I. I want you, very badly, and I know you harbor an attraction to me, little human. I can smell it. I can smell the slickness between your thighs.”

I gasp and take a step back, but he follows me and keeps stroking my hair. He also pulls my body flush against his, allowing me to feel the unmistakable bulge in his pants. I open my mouth, ready to deny that I’m slick between my thighs, but at the last moment, I hesitate. I’m surprised and embarrassed that he can detect my arousal, but he’s been so forthcoming with me that it feels wrong to lie to him about my own excitement.

“You’re a big, handsome, muscular fae male with an impressive wingspan,” I say instead. Never mind that his wings aren’t out at the moment. “I would have to be dried up and well past my prime to not suffer from a slickness between my thighs, as you so eloquently put it, while in your presence.”

He laughs, and his sharp, pointed teeth gleam white in the ussha glow. “Fair enough, but I daresay it’s more than physical attraction you feel for me. You’re not vain enough to be tempted by an offer of marriage based on looks alone.”

“Not vain, I’ll agree with you on that, but perhaps I am stupid for being even slightly tempted.” I sigh as he works his fingers through my hair. Gods, I never knew how wondrous it would feel to be petted like this by a male. It’s a simple thing he’s doing, but it’s making my whole body come alive with pure, carnal need. The ache between my thighs is starting to become unbearable, and I believe I just might touch myself later in the privacy of my bedroom once I return to the cottage. I’ll touch myself

while thinking about Prince Lucas, the Summer Court prince who wants to marry me. The Summer Court prince who conquered my people.

“I like that you’re tempted, sweetling.” He lowers his face, and his lips hover just an inch from mine.

I close my eyes and invite his kiss. It starts as soft and sweet as our first kiss, though it soon becomes something more. Something urgent that brims with possibility. My center lurches forward and I undulate my body against his. My hands drift up and down his back, pulling him closer and tighter to my body.

A sensual growl rumbles from his throat as he deepens the kiss, vibrating through me and sending a fresh pang of warmth straight to my core. He tightens his hold on my hair and slips his tongue inside to tangle with mine. He tastes sweet, like a mix of honey and cinnamon with a dash of vanilla. The summer warmth whirls around us, and the nighttime insects buzz louder as we remain locked in one another’s arms. A whimpering moan escapes me, and as the kiss goes on and on, I feel as though I’m floating amidst the stars.

I’d thought our first kiss was perfect, but I decide this one is even better.

Without meaning to, my hands slide up the back of his leather shirt and my fingers dig into his bare flesh. His long hair tickles my face and neck. Another growl leaves him and vibrates through me. Once more, I press my center against him, even though it’s my stomach that comes into contact with his hardness rather than my aching center. Gods, he’s so tall, for things to line up properly, we’ll have to get on the ground. Or find a bed.

A full body flush affects me, and I finally break the kiss because I’m burning up and desperate for air. I gulp in a huge breath, and it pleases me to see Lucas is panting too. The bulge in his pants feels larger than ever, and my face heats as I contemplate

just how well-endowed he must be.

Surely the gods would give a Summer Court prince an impressively large appendage.

I almost laugh at my own thoughts, but a quick look into Lucas's darkening gaze grounds me in the seriousness of our predicament.

He doesn't have a fated mate, he's been ordered to marry a human, and it's me he wants as his bride.

Why haven't I said 'no' yet?

If I were smart, I would refuse him.

What would Mama and Aunt Heather say if I told them I wanted to marry a fae prince? They would think I've lost my mind, and they would be worried for me. They would probably accuse Prince Lucas of glamouring me into wanting him.

But he hasn't glamourised me. Not once. If he wanted my easy compliance, it would be nothing for him to glamour me into forgetting about the attack on Trevos. It would be nothing for him to glamour me into falling instantly in love with him.

Now that I consider it, I think his questions about human courtship are sweet. A sign that he's interested in something real and lasting. He can't have what virtually all other fae have. A fated mate. So, he's after the next best thing. Love. I'm not certain whether it's more tragic or sweet. Perhaps a fair mix of both.

"It's getting late," I find myself saying. I'm reluctant to leave his arms, but I need to be alone. I need to get away from him before I do something rash like agree to become his wife.

“Meet me at midnight again tomorrow, sweetling.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea, Lucas.”

“Why not?” He stiffens.

“Please don’t make me say it.” Gods, I don’t want to hurt his feelings. I don’t want to be cruel. I appreciate all he’s done for me and Mama, but I cannot forget what he is.

I cannot forget who he is, just as I cannot forget what he’s done.

I’m not like Mira. She was fated to Warden Valloc, and I’m not fated to Prince Lucas. A marriage between us would start out as a convenient arrangement.

He’s not the only one who needs a spouse.

At twenty-four, if I don’t get married soon, I’ll lose my chance. People will wonder why I haven’t yet wed and surmise there’s something wrong with me. The impending trip to Sorsston might be my last chance, or I must resign myself to spinsterhood. Not that spinsterhood doesn’t hold a certain appeal, particularly when I consider my freedom, but Mama won’t be around forever, and I know she wants to see me settled and content with a family of my own.

Lucas releases his hold on me and steps back. “Perhaps you will see things differently after a good night’s rest, sweetling.”

My heart aches. I don’t understand why it’s so difficult to walk away from him. Would it be easier if I’d actually witnessed him slaughtering human soldiers in Trevos? Maybe. Maybe I need to keep reminding myself of how many of my people died, how many were tortured, and how many were taken as slaves.

“It’s getting late,” I say again. I retreat a few steps, suddenly anxious to return to the cottage.

His eyes flicker with sadness, and I swallow past the sudden burning in my throat. “Of course,” he says. “I will take you back.”

I start walking, but he reaches for me and lifts me in his arms. “Lucas, what are you doing?” Panic seizes me. What if he flies off with me and brings me to the Summer Court? His jaw has gone tight, and his visage has become rather stern. The sadness I glimpsed a few seconds ago is gone, and given how displeased he looks, I wonder if I only imagined that sadness. I tremble in his arms.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetling. I’m not about to abduct you. I’m simply going to fly you back to the cottage.” He tightens his hold on me, summons his wings in a flash of radiant gold light, and rises above the trees.

When he starts to fly toward the cottage as promised, I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. Then I allow myself to admire the breathtaking view from above. The forest glimmers in an array of colors, and I spot a few of the larger glowing bugs zipping through the treetops.

“What are those called?” I ask Lucas over the slight breeze. He’s not flying fast, and I’m grateful the summer heat is still clinging to him.

“The blue ones are varrins, and the yellow ones are called derlotts. Varrins are harmless, while derlotts will bite anything that comes too close.” His voice is a deep, soothing rumble that brings me comfort.

The stars are radiant, and the moon peeks out from behind a passing cloud. It’s peaceful up here above the trees, just the two of us. No war. No opposite sides. No difficult choices.

Too soon, we arrive at the cottage. Being in his arms again is enough to send my thoughts into another conflicted jumble. It's enough to make me want to stay with him longer.

He descends into the garden. Just before he sets me on my feet, he places a soft, brief kiss on my forehead. I can't help the sigh that escapes me, just as I can't help the flush that covers my face. When he touches me and shows me gentleness, it's so easy to forget about the monstrous acts his army committed in Trevos.

All the more reason to get away from him. He's one big walking temptation.

"Thanks for the ride back. I, uh, guess I better get going." I walk backward a few steps before turning around and practically running toward the window.

"Tomorrow at midnight, sweetling," he calls out. "I will be here just in case you change your mind. I promise I'll be here."

CHAPTER 10

LUCAS

Darkness blankets Sorsston, a thick cloud cover blocking out the moon and stars. At this late hour, only a few windows are illuminated by candlelight. I walk the streets of the defeated city, almost hoping for a fight. But no matter how many dim alleys I walk down or how many seedy streets I traverse, no one attacks me. I growl into the night, summon my wings, and shoot into the sky.

Hurt pangs in my chest. Rage and disappointment.

Is this what it feels like to be scorned?

Is this what heartache feels like?

A week ago, Yvette failed to show up in the garden outside her aunt's cottage. Not that she'd promised to meet me a second time. She'd explicitly stated she felt it was a bad idea.

Yet I'd allowed myself to become hopeful, and I'd arrived in the garden and waited for her until sunrise. Like the fool that I am, I'd also appeared the subsequent nights, only to stand in the garden outside her window, hoping for a glimpse of her, hoping she would sense my presence and sneak out to meet me.

How preposterous that I have allowed a human to affect my mood in such a way.

I soar toward the castle and land in the courtyard. A quick glance around shows over two dozen fae sentries on duty. I turn to head inside the castle when I spot the dozens of heads on the parapet, and I pause in my steps as I recall Yvette's speech about her experiences during and after the Summer Court's attack on Trevos. She'd specifically mentioned seeing rotting heads on the parapet while on a walk with her mother.

Would it assuage her conscience to know most of the human soldiers we kill during battle meet quick deaths? Yes, we keep some for questioning, and yes, some of those are tortured, but the vast number of those killed during the capture of a human kingdom don't suffer for long.

I tear my gaze from the parapet and jog up the castle steps. Despite the late hour, the receiving hall is filled with fae soldiers and dignitaries. A human musician plays a jovial tune on a flute, while a human jester attempts to juggle all the oranges a snickering soldier keeps tossing his way.

I head for the dais and take a seat on the throne. Though I'm not in the mood for company, I've been largely absent from the castle during the last week. My presence is expected as my people hold court during the days after a human castle is taken over.

A trembling human servant girl approaches me with a glass of wine. I accept the drink and eye the servant as she scurries away. "Halt!" I say, much louder than intended, and she freezes in her tracks. "Turn around and face me, girl."

The blonde human turns and regards me with wide eyes. "Yes, your lordship. Er, your majesty. Forgive me, but no one told me how I ought to address you. Please don't have me killed," she whispers. "I will bring you more wine or anything you desire."

"How old are you?"

“Nineteen, sir.” Her face goes pale, and she swallows hard.

I allow my gaze to roam over her body, and while she has a pleasing form and she’s undeniably pretty, I cannot imagine taking her to bed. Because she’s not Yvette. Fucking gods, why can’t I get the dark-haired beauty out of my mind?

I’m about to send the young servant away when her eyes fill with tears and her lips quiver. An unexpected pang of guilt affects me. I’ve struck so much fear into her, just by speaking to her, that she’s on the verge of crying. She’s also shaking so hard it looks like she’s shivering.

If Yvette were here, she would not approve of my behavior. She would not approve of this entire gathering.

I exhale a slow breath and attempt to give the servant girl a polite smile, hoping to put her at ease. It doesn’t work. A second later, she bursts into tears and covers her face.

“Please don’t have me killed, sir.”

General Dalgaard appears at my side. He’s holding a cup of strong-smelling spirits, though he’s not drunk. As the general of the Summer Court army, he never allows himself to become fully intoxicated lest his skill as a commander suddenly be required.

“Good evening, Prince Lucas,” the general says. “Or rather, good morning. I seem to have lost track of time.” He clears his throat and gestures at the sobbing human female. “Would you like me to have this servant removed from the hall?” He tenses as he continues staring at the female, and his eyes suddenly hold a strange, almost surprised gleam, though I cannot fathom why.

“Good evening. Good morning. Whatever the fucking time it is,” I snap, and I rise to

my feet. “No, you don’t need to concern yourself with this servant. She is doing an excellent job, and I would like... I would like to see that she gets a raise.”

To his credit, General Dalgaard doesn’t blink. Instead, he nods and says, “I will relay the information to the castle steward.”

The servant girl only sobs harder, and I stare at her in confusion. Is she still worried I might have her killed? Why the fuck is she still crying? Her continued sobs make my guilt deepen and remind me of the time Yvette broke down crying as she spoke about the carnage she witnessed after the capture of Trevos.

A growl leaves my throat before I can stop it, and the girl’s terror not only increases, but she falls to her knees in front of me and keeps saying, “Please, please, please.”

I exchange a look with General Dalgaard. The girl is in hysterics just because I spoke to her, and I’m uncertain how to calm her down. A small crowd has already gathered around us. No doubt my people think I’m about to mete out justice and slay the poor girl on the spot.

Fuck, how do I defuse this situation without coming across as soft? Bloodlust glitters in the eyes of the spectators. They’re expecting a show.

I step down from the dais and lift the sobbing servant girl up. I make eye contact with her just long enough to glamour her, and she finally stops crying. I clutch her close and walk her through the crowd. From the corner of my eye, I think I glimpse General Dalgaard following us, but I soon lose sight of him.

“Sorry to disappoint, my dear friends, but I prefer to fuck in private,” I call out as I head for the staircase that leads to my temporary quarters. Thankfully, the ruse works. The spectators laugh and start to disperse, though I continue escorting the girl to my quarters, cursing this entire situation. I must maintain the illusion that I’m as cruel

and depraved as my older brothers, both of whom had successful turns leading the Summer Court army.

I lead the glamoured servant into my quarters and lock the door behind me. “Please, have a seat wherever you’d like. Get comfortable. I won’t hurt you.” I make eye contact with her and release the glamour, then I repeat my words again.

She peers at me in shock, then screams and tries to escape my quarters. She bangs on the door and tries to unlock the deadbolt, but it’s too high for her to reach. The poor frightened thing.

I grab a bottle of wine and sink into a plush chair, then I uncork the bottle and gulp the red liquid down. All the while, the girl continues screaming. But I’ve played this game before, and I’m certain she’ll eventually tire herself out and calm down. She’s not the first servant girl I’ve brought to my quarters under the pretense of savagery.

“As I’ve already said, I won’t hurt you.” I take another swig of wine.

The screaming continues for another half hour, until finally the girl falls quiet and slides to the floor with her knees tucked to her chest. She regards me warily.

“Fear not. I’m not going to violate you.” Is it wrong that I brought her here so my soldiers would think I was doing just that? I remind myself that if we’d stayed in the receiving hall for much longer, her hysterics would’ve drawn an even larger crowd. A crowd that expected to witness the splattering of blood on the stone floor.

Yvette. During the last week, I’ve been second guessing my orders and actions when it comes to dealing with humans. All because of her. It’s like she’s caused me to grow a fucking conscience.

I’ve ordered fewer humans to death during the last week than I normally would,

pardoning so many runners that the soldiers are starting to whisper. Runners are the citizens who try to flee a city in the aftermath of its capture, and my people typically slaughter most of them and keep just a few as slaves. And yet, for the first time in my history of leading the Summer Court army, I've pardoned runners.

I peer at the servant girl and wonder if I should glamour her into screaming some more. No doubt all the soldiers and dignitaries in the receiving hall could hear the girl's screams. If she starts screaming again, they'll believe I'm having another go at her.

"Are you truly not going to hurt me?" The servant girl finally asks, her voice hoarse and thick with emotion.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I swear it. I prefer my females willing." I don't mention that it's been ages since I entertained a female companion.

Hope tempered with caution flares in her eyes, and she gives me a long look. "If it's not fucking you want, why did you bring me here, sir?"

"Would you have preferred I left you to the bloodthirsty crowd in the receiving hall? Hasn't anyone ever told you not to show fear in front of my people? Especially don't break down sobbing. It's more provocative than showing your tits." I finish off the bottle of wine and set it aside.

"I've heard the stories, of course, but I couldn't help crying. I honestly thought you intended to kill me, sir." The girl wipes away the last of her tears and takes a deep breath.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Amelia, sir."

“Hello, Amelia. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I straighten in my chair and give her a pointed look. “Tell me, have you ever been in love?”

Her mouth falls open. “No,” she eventually says. “I’ve had crushes, but I’ve never been in love. I’m promised to an old lord who lives on the edge of the kingdom, though I haven’t met him yet. We’re supposed to be married next month. I doubt I’ll love him, but my father says he’s a decent man. I hope we can become friends.”

“Are you certain your old lord survived the battle?”

“Oh yes. He sent his sons to fight in his stead. My father received a missive from him two days ago informing us of his survival. Sadly, his sons both perished.” Her face grows red. “My mother says he’ll want to be getting me with child as soon as possible since he’ll be needing to create an heir before his time in this realm comes to an end.”

I marvel at how talkative Amelia is when she no longer believes her life is being threatened, or that she’s about to be violated. She’s talking to me with more ease than most of my advisors. Even General Dalgaard, whom I’ve served beside for several centuries, is far too formal with me.

“Tell me, Amelia, what could this old lord of yours do to make you fall in love with him?” I fetch two more bottles of wine and uncork them. “Surely you’re not opposed to loving him just because of his advanced age, are you?” I approach the servant girl and hand her one of the bottles, and she accepts it with a grateful smile.

She takes a long gulp of the wine and wipes her mouth on the back of her hand. “Well, sir, I suppose he could treat me with kindness. How he treats others is also important to me. If I see him beating or berating a servant for no good reason, I think I would find it hard to love him. I guess what I’m trying to say is that he must have good character.” She sniffs the wine before taking another long gulp.

“What about gifts?” I ask, thinking about my father’s habit of presenting my mother with elaborate gifts whenever they have a disagreement. “Are there any sort of gifts the lord might give you that might soften your heart toward him?”

Amelia grins. “You’re sweet on someone, aren’t you, sir? And you want to know how to win her affections. What’s her name, then? You can tell me. I can keep a secret, sir, promise I can.” She takes another long gulp of wine, and it occurs to me that she might be getting drunk already.

Gods. It never fails to surprise me how little alcohol it takes to bring down a human. I doubt if Amelia were entirely sober she would be speaking so boldly. However, it’s nice to have someone with whom I might speak openly, even a drunk servant.

“Yes, Amelia, you are correct. I am sweet on someone. I’m sweet on a young human woman named Yvette, but I’m afraid she wants nothing to do with me because of who I am. She views me as the enemy, but she’s also attracted to me.” Of course, now I will have to glamour the servant and erase her memories of our entire conversation. But before I send her on her way, I don’t see any harm in extracting any useful information about the wants and needs of human females from her. Perhaps she’s in possession of some great wisdom that will help me win over Yvette.

Amelia giggles. “I knew it!” Her visage grows serious a second later, and she jabs a finger in my direction. “Here’s what you do, sir. You take your lady on moonlit walks, tell her you think she’s the most beautiful woman in the entire realm, and perform acts of kindness not just to her but to people she cares about. If you can make her family and friends like you too, then she’ll more easily fall in love with you. As for gifts, you don’t want to go too large at first, as you don’t want her to accuse you of trying to buy her love. So, start small, and try to make it personal. A bracelet made of beads the color of her eyes, or a box of candies from her favorite shop.”

I return to my seat, set the now half-empty bottle of wine aside, and lean forward with

my forearms resting on my knees. “What else can you tell me?”

Amelia lifts her eyebrows and gives me a bold look. “That depends, sir. What’s going to happen to me? After I leave your quarters, are the scavengers downstairs going to come after me for a turn of their own?”

“You’re worried you’ll be accosted and possibly violated by the males in the receiving hall once you leave here?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m worried about. Give me some assurances that no harm will come to me, and I’ll be as forthcoming as you want about matters of love. I might not have ever been in love myself—yet—but plenty of my friends have, and I have four older sisters who tell me everything that happens in their romantic lives.”

“After you tell me all I want to know, I will escort you to safety outside the castle in secret, to your parents’ home or a friend’s house or anywhere else of your choosing. I will also compensate you for your time and your troubles. How does twenty pieces of silver sound?”

“It’s a deal, sir.”

CHAPTER 11

YVETTE

I pick another pear from the tree and add it to my basket. I'm not certain if it's due to the continued spread of ussha or Prince Lucas's lingering magic, but the forest surrounding Aunt Heather's cottage has been especially fruitful during the last week. Each morning, I discover a new berry bush in full bloom or a tree laden with ripe apples, pears, or oranges.

Furthermore, winter seems to have stalled. I haven't seen my breath in days, but again, I'm not sure whether it's because of ussha or the remnants of the prince's magic.

Paranoia sweeps over me as I gaze around the forest. I keep worrying that he's watching, spying on me from some secret location in the trees.

Every strange noise puts me on edge, but I can't confine myself to Aunt Heather's property and only pick the fruits and vegetables from her garden. It would be ridiculous to ignore the abundance in the forest. If Mama and I are going to continue living with her for a while, the extra food will be needed, as we arrived on her doorstep unexpectedly.

I pick another pear and freeze when footsteps sound behind me. My stomach drops to the ground, but my heart also leaps with excitement. I swallow hard and slowly turn around. But it's not the prince. It's a stranger. A young human male wearing dusty overalls. I touch the knife on my belt and give him a direct look.

“State your name and your intentions.” I finger the handle of the knife, ready to pull it free if this stranger proves a threat. After losing my other knife on the roadside during the scuffle with the flesh traders, I recently helped myself to a new one from Aunt Heather’s kitchen.

He holds up his hands and chuckles. “Whoa there, little miss. I’m not going to hurt you.” He smiles wide, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “The name is Cody. I’m one of your aunt’s neighbors. She invited me over to meet you.”

My hackles rise. I’m in no mood to meet Aunt Heather’s eligible neighbors today, but if I’m being honest, my sudden grumpiness stems from my disappointment. When I heard the footsteps, I’d been so certain it was Prince Lucas.

Cody’s smile fades and he nods at my basket. “That’s a lot of pears. Do you like pears?”

I glance toward the cottage, silently cursing my aunt for putting me in this position. I study the farmer, who is handsome enough despite his poor teeth. But he’s no Prince Lucas. He can’t summon golden wings or call up a warm summer breeze. He can’t make me quiver with excitement with just a single glance.

“Hello,” I finally say, though I don’t bother answering his dumb question about pears. Normally, I’m a chatty person when I meet a stranger, but my mind draws a blank as I stare at Cody. I can’t think of a single thing to say to him.

“Fine weather we’re having, don’t you think?” He chuckles again and toys with the straps of his overalls. “I didn’t even need a coat today.”

“Fine weather,” I agree, though I add nothing more. Perhaps if he finds my conversational skills lacking, he’ll return to his farm.

He glances at my hand with narrowed eyes. “Are you planning on stabbing me, little miss?” When he chuckles for a third time, I almost scream.

My teeth grind together. I can’t be certain, but I think there’s a note of condescension in his voice whenever he calls me ‘little miss.’ In any case, I don’t like it, and I wish he would stop. Better yet, I wish he would go away.

“I appreciate you coming to visit me, Cody, but I’m afraid I’m not interested.” I heave the basket of pears onto my hip and take a few steps toward the cottage. “No hard feelings though.” I force a smile and take off at a rapid walk, leaving him stammering in my dust.

Though I’d really like to tell him off for calling me ‘little miss,’ I don’t want to cause Aunt Heather any trouble with her neighbors, especially since she frequently conducts trade with them, so I keep my thoughts to myself as I hurry away.

Thankfully, he doesn’t follow.

I rush into the cottage, close the door behind me, and head for the kitchen. Unfortunately, Mama and Aunt Heather are standing at the counter peeling potatoes, and they glance up with hopeful expressions.

“I’m not going to marry Cody,” I announce as I set the basket down.

My aunt draws back with her lips puckered. “But he’s a nice looking fellow and he’s the oldest son. He’ll inherit a large, prosperous farm from his father one day. Plus, the farm is only about two miles from here. You would be so close to your mama and me, Yvette. It’ll be nice to have family close when you start popping out babies.”

“I’m not popping out babies with Cody the farmer!” I practically shout, only to immediately feel guilty. I sigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to raise my voice.”

“What’s wrong, darling?” Mama asks. “Did Cody say something to upset you?”

“To be honest, I thought he was boring and a little condescending.” I turn to Aunt Heather. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t overly rude to him. I didn’t tell him off like I wanted to.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Aunt Heather says. “As you might imagine, out here it’s important to stay on good terms with your neighbors.” She leans against the counter. “I’m sorry you didn’t like him. But don’t worry. There are a few more young men who will be stopping by soon to meet you. I made a schedule.”

I rub my temple. “I’m sorry. Did you just say you made a schedule ?”

“Well of course she did, darling,” Mama says. “You can’t have two gentlemen callers arriving at the same time. That would be awkward.”

“Awkward. Right.” I struggle to take a breath.

The cottage suddenly feels too small. Or maybe it’s too hot inside. All I know is that I need to get out of here. Gods, I hope Cody has vacated the premises.

“I’m going to go pick more pears, but I’ll be back in time for dinner.” I grab another basket and head outside. A few deep inhales of the cool afternoon air helps calm my senses.

I proceed in the opposite direction from where I encountered Cody, having no wish to meet the man again. I’m sure Aunt Heather means well, and Mama too, but I can’t fathom marrying a man with whom I don’t share an emotional connection.

Prince Lucas’s handsome face appears in my mind.

There's no denying that there's a spark between us. He also happens to need a wife. Not just any wife, but a human one.

But a full week has passed since I last saw him, and I snubbed him the last time he wanted to meet me. I know he showed that night. I'd cracked my window and felt the warmth of summer on the breeze. Yet I didn't sneak out my window to meet him again.

What if he's already moved on and found another human woman to take as his wife? As I consider the possibility, my heart sinks. Despite what he did in Trevos, I don't like that we parted on bad terms.

He saved me. He saved me from being sold on the auction block, never to see Mama or Aunt Heather again. Then he flew me back to the cottage and saved Mama's life, only to ask for nothing in return. No deal, no compensation whatsoever.

Will I ever see him again?

I peer around the forest, wishing he would emerge from the trees. I also glance upward, wishing he would descend from the sky.

How can I miss him so much? It doesn't make sense.

He's a Summer Court prince, and his court is in the process of conquering the entire realm. All four fae courts are, or so I've heard. Given the size and strength of the fae armies, it won't take long for the task to be accomplished.

Maybe I should marry someone like Cody. A farmer who lives far from any large settlements the fae will be keen to conquer. Maybe the more rural areas will be safer.

Despite my friendship with Mira and my tolerance for Warden Valloc, I can't

imagine returning to Trevos and living directly under fae rule again. The constant patrol of fae soldiers on the streets is enough to put me on edge. Assuming I have children one day, I don't want them growing up in such a repressive environment.

I walk deeper into the forest than intended, and I soon realize I've veered off the path. I clutch the empty basket and turn around and around, trying to discern which way leads back to the cottage. Have I been walking in circles?

Panic ripples through me. The forest is dense and lush in all directions, and I don't see an opening anywhere ahead in the trees.

The familiar hissing noise of a mangga reaches me, and I withdraw the knife from my belt.

A second hiss joins the first one, and it's not long before it becomes a whole fucking symphony. I don't see any of the creatures yet, but it sounds like over a dozen of them. Maybe more.

I inch closer to the nearest tree, place the knife between my teeth, and start to climb.

CHAPTER 12

LUCAS

I land in the cottage garden as quietly as possible and vanish my wings. My gaze goes to Yvette's window. It's dark and I suppose she's fast asleep. How will she react if I tap on her window? What about if I flash into her bedroom? She hasn't seen me appear or disappear in a flash of light yet, and I'm not certain if she's aware it's a skill all highborn fae possess.

As I approach the window, voices at the front of the cottage reach me, and I slip from shadow to shadow until I'm able to see who's outside. It's Carol and Heather, and they both look worried.

Carol cups her hands around her mouth and yells, "Yvette!" in a voice that echoes over the countryside.

Alarm grasps me. "Where is Yvette?" My question thunders through the night, and both women gasp and spin around to face me.

I stride out of the shadows.

"Where is Yvette?" I ask again. "Did you just discover her missing? I require details." I listen to the sounds of the forest for any hint that she's nearby, but I don't hear any humanlike rustles or distant screams.

Carol and Heather exchange a look.

“You!” Heather says in an accusing tone. “I should’ve known you would have something to do with this. What did you do with my poor niece?”

Carol grabs her sister’s arm and prevents her from lunging at me.

“I just arrived here, and Yvette had no idea I was coming. What happened?” I direct my question to Carol, deciding she’s the more reasonable of the two.

Carol wipes away a tear. “She was upset and went for a walk this afternoon. She said she was going to pick more pears, but I know she just wanted some time to herself. She promised she would be home for dinner, but she never showed up. We went looking for her earlier without any luck. We just got back to the cottage hoping she’d returned while we were out searching, but she’s not here. She’s not anywhere.”

Heather gives me a murderous look. “You swear you don’t have anything to do with this? If I find out you hurt my precious niece, I’ll?—”

“I would never hurt Yvette,” I say, cutting her off. I glance at Carol. “You said she was upset. Why?”

Regret wells in the woman’s eyes. “We tried to set her up with a nearby farmer who’s in need of a wife. Apparently, they didn’t hit it off, and I don’t believe Yvette was very happy with us.”

“Where does this farmer live?” My gut twists with worry, and bloodlust burns in the depths of my soul. If this farmer had something to do with Yvette’s disappearance, I will make him pay with his life.

“About two miles that way.” Heather gestures to the left. “In a large red house. But I don’t think he would’ve hurt her. Cody’s a fine young man and he lives with his parents. Godsfearing people, the whole family.”

I summon my wings and launch into the sky, heading in the direction Heather just pointed. But before a red house comes into sight, I detect the telltale scent of a mangga swarm.

Considering that mangga rarely swarm at night, as they are largely daytime creatures, I follow the vile scent until I reach a dense area of the forest.

I'm about to call out Yvette's name, when her voice reaches me on the breeze.

"If you come any closer, I will stab you in the eyeball."

There. In a tall treetop, I spot the glimmer of a blade in the moonlight. I rush downward with my arms stretched out. I reach her just as a mangga jumps onto the branch she's seated upon. She swings her knife at the creature, but I swoop her into my arms and veer up through the branches, and we leave the hissing manggas behind.

Yvette's startled cry hurts my ears, but it doesn't take long for her to realize what's happened, and I'm pleased when she relaxes in my embrace.

Gods, it's so good to hold her again.

"It's all right, sweetling. I've got you. You're safe." I'm flying just slow enough that the wind doesn't drown out my voice.

She wraps her arms around my waist and hugs me tight as I carry her toward the cottage. I want nothing more than to keep her all to myself, but I can't allow her mother and aunt to worry about her. The older women might not approve of me as a potential husband for Yvette, particularly the aunt, but I cannot keep her from them just so I might have some alone time with her. Besides, she just experienced a fright and probably wants the comfort of her family.

“I dropped my knife.” She shudders against me.

“I will get you a new one, sweetling.”

“Oh, gods, I was so sure I was dead. Thank you, Lucas. Thank you for saving me. Again.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“It’s rather embarrassing. I went for a walk and got lost in the forest. Before I could figure out which way led to the cottage, I heard multiple manggas hissing, so I climbed a tree. Fortunately, though manggas can climb, it would seem they aren’t very good at it.” A nervous laugh escapes her, though she’s still trembling.

“You shouldn’t have ventured so far from the cottage,” I find myself saying in a scolding tone. I can’t help it. She could’ve died. If she’d stayed closer to the cottage, she would’ve been protected by the wards I’d erected to keep her safe. Not that she knows about the wards...

“Like I said, I went for a walk.”

“Your mother told me you were upset. I am sorry you were upset, sweetling, but you must promise to never do anything so foolish again.”

“Foolish?” she stiffens in my arms.

“Yes, foolish. You know as ussha spreads, more and more creatures that are native to fae lands will wander into human and orc lands. You must have a care for your own safety.”

“How dare you scold me. I’m not a child. I was just so lost in my thoughts that I

didn't realize how far I'd gone and by then it was too late. Besides, the manggas could always wander into the cottage garden. There's no fence. Following your logic, I'm not safe anywhere. No human is."

I growl. If we were on the ground right now, I might grab her by the shoulders and give her a good shake.

"The manggas, as well as any other dangerous creatures, cannot come close to the cottage," I say. "They can't come within a fucking mile of it because I placed protective wards in the forest around your aunt's residence. To keep you safe. I never imagined you would travel so far away all by yourself. Had I known, I would've expanded the wards."

She shifts in my arms, and though I can't see her face, I sense her shock. She sucks in a quick breath and exhales shakily. "Lucas, I had no idea about the wards." Her voice comes out much more subdued. "That's actually really sweet of you. But why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not certain." It's the truth. I'd created the wards before I departed the cottage on the very day I met her, but even once I returned for our midnight meeting, I didn't bother telling her about the wards. Why not? I sigh into the breeze. "I suppose I worried you would think I was being overly possessive. But I like the word you just used to describe it. Sweet."

She laughs. "Well, I think it's more sweet than possessive. It's not like you locked me in a cage for my own safety."

We finally arrive at the cottage, and I descend slowly with her in my arms. Just before I put her down, I place my lips at her ear and whisper, "If you ever worry me like this again, sweetling, trust me, I will find a cage."

Her breath catches in her throat, but before she can respond, her mother and aunt converge on us. I step back to give them space for a reunion, and her mother and aunt take turns hugging her.

“What happened?” Carol finally says.

Yvette gives her mother a sheepish look, then explains that she wandered too far and got lost. She describes the mangga swarm next, which draws huge gasps from both her mother and aunt. “But I’m perfectly fine. Prince Lucas saved me. He arrived just in time and snatched me out of the tree just as one of the mangga’s lunged at me.”

Heather gives me a look that starts out as suspicious, but it soon softens to one of respect. “It would seem you’ve saved my niece yet again. Thank you, Prince Lucas.”

I incline my head briefly. “I am glad I decided on an impromptu visit tonight.” Gods, I hate to think what might’ve happened had I not arrived just in time. My little sweetling. I can’t fathom any harm coming to her.

Carol approaches me and places a hand on my arm. “Thank you, Prince Lucas. Truly.” She snuffles and blinks away the fresh tears that fill her eyes. Then she spins and faces Yvette before I can respond. “You must never wander off like that again! I think you took about twenty years off my life. Gods, I was so worried about you, darling.”

“I’m sorry, Mama, really I am. I won’t venture that far from the cottage again. Especially now that I know about the protective wards Prince Lucas erected around Aunt Heather’s property. He told me about them as he was flying me back just now.”

“Protective wards?” Carol and Heather say in unison as their heads swivel my way.

I clear my throat. “Yes, I recently placed protective wards around the cottage that

extend a mile in all directions. There are high concentrations of ussha in this area, and as you are probably aware, fae creatures of all types are attracted to areas that contain high levels of the life force of our magic.” I pause for a moment to allow this information to sink in. “This means, it won’t be long before some of the more dangerous creatures from all four fae courts arrive in this area, though since my court is closest, I suspect more of the creatures will hail from the Summer Court,” I continue. “But the protective wards will keep all the dangerous animals out. Furthermore, the wards will prevent any individuals who have nefarious intentions from setting foot within the wards.”

It suddenly occurs to me that the farmer who visited Yvette earlier in the day obviously posed her no real harm, even though it would seem she didn’t like him. He wouldn’t have been able to enter the premises if he were an unsavory character. In my haste to find her, I’d forgotten this simple fact as I’d set off in the direction of his farm. Thankfully, it happened to be the very direction in which Yvette had wandered off.

I step closer to the little human and place an arm around her, not caring that her mother and aunt are watching. Let them watch. Let them come to terms with my intentions for Yvette. Surely they must realize how much I care for her.

To my delight, Yvette doesn’t try to evade my touch. Quite the opposite. She flushes and gazes up at me with a sweet smile that causes my chest to tighten with emotion. Gods, I cannot imagine spending the rest of my days without her. I must convince her to become my bride.

I think of all the information the servant girl named Amelia recently gave me, particularly the wisdom about winning over my future mate’s family members.

As I hold the little human close to my side, I look at Carol and Heather with what I hope is a gentle smile, and I search my mind for the perfect thing I might say to make

them understand how much Yvette means to me. The perfect thing I might say to win them over.

At last, it comes to me. “I will always do whatever I can to keep Yvette safe. I will also do whatever I can to keep those she cares about safe. If you need the wards extended, I will be happy to do so. Also, if you ever need to visit a neighbor or a village, or to travel beyond the wards for any reason, I am willing to provide you with a safe escort.”

A small gasp leaves Yvette. “That is very kind of you, Prince Lucas.”

Carol appears impressed by my little speech, but Heather does not. She crosses her arms over her chest and shoots me a suspicious glare. The night is dark, but the ussha glow provides just enough light for me to see her full expression.

“I’ll have you know, Prince Lucas, that my niece is a respectable young woman. She will not agree to become your pleasure slave or your concubine or whatever perversity it is that you have planned for her. I appreciate you saving her life, I really do, but I will not stand by and allow you to ruin her life. She must get married one day. No decent, godsfearing man will have her if she’s been used by a fae prince.”

“Aunt Heather!” Yvette hisses in a low tone, clearly mortified by her aunt’s assumption that I want her just to satisfy my sexual appetites.

“I agree that your niece is a respectable young woman,” I say. “However, you have misunderstood my intentions. I very much want Yvette to become a permanent part of my life, but not as a pleasure slave or a concubine. I want to marry Yvette. I want her as my wife. I want her as my mate.”

CHAPTER 13

YVETTE

I want to marry Yvette. I want her as my wife. I want her as my mate. Lucas's pronouncement rings in my ears.

I swallow hard and glance from my mother to my aunt. Both appear shocked, and I can't say I blame them.

"Prince Lucas doesn't have a fated mate," I find myself saying. Then I tense and look at him in question. "Is it okay to tell them what happened, or is it supposed to be a secret?"

"We can tell them, sweetling."

"Perhaps we should go inside," Mama suggests. "I'll make some tea, and we can all sit at the table and have a calm chat." I can't help but notice her eyes slide over to my aunt when she says 'calm.'

"That's a great idea," I say, and somehow, I find myself holding Lucas's hand.

We go inside the cottage and gather around the table with steaming mugs of lavender tea. The first sip helps calm my continued trembling. I pray I never encounter another mangga again, though I trust Prince Lucas will keep the wards surrounding the cottage intact.

But how much longer will I be staying at the cottage?

Lucas and I exchange an affectionate look, and I can't help but flush and scoot closer to him. He might be a Summer Court prince, but he makes me feel safe and treasured. If he asks me to marry him again, I'm not sure I'll be able to refuse.

Realization sets in, and my breath leaves me in a rush.

I want him. I ache to belong to him.

The very idea of becoming a fae prince's bride seems fantastical, yet I cannot imagine sending him away again. I'm starting to believe that perhaps this strange new adventure is the path I'm meant to take.

I remind myself that Mira made it work. Yes, she's part-fae and is also Warden Valloc's fated mate, but she viewed him as the enemy when they first met. It's my understanding that despite being mates, they still had a lot of differences to overcome.

Could Lucas and I make it work? Could we find true happiness as husband and wife?

"Well," Mama says, breaking the silence. "Let's hear what you need to tell us about Prince Lucas not having a fated mate. I have a feeling I already know where this story is going, which is why I added some whiskey to my tea."

Aunt Heather balks after she takes a sip of her own tea. "I can't believe you didn't add any to mine. Some sister you are."

Mama sticks her tongue out at Aunt Heather, and we all share a laugh that serves to lessen the tension.

I glance at Lucas. “It’s your story. Would you like me to tell them, or would you prefer to do the talking?”

He places a comforting hand on my thigh beneath the table. “Why don’t you start and I’ll fill in any gaps or answer any questions they might have.”

“Okay.” A sense of giddiness spreads through me, because I have a feeling that after tonight, my life is going to change forever. “Well, it’s like this, Mama and Aunt Heather. A long time ago, a mage cursed Prince Lucas’s parents’ mating union and proclaimed that any children born of their union would never have a fated mate of their own. And so, Prince Lucas and his two brothers don’t have mates. As you might imagine, this is a huge problem when you’re a fae royal.”

“Are you the oldest child?” my aunt asks, and I’m pleasantly surprised that she’s no longer glaring at Lucas.

“No, I’m the youngest.” He goes on to explain that he likely won’t inherit the Summer Court throne and neither would his future children. He also mentions that arranged marriages with other fae aren’t an option, a fact that causes my mother and aunt to exchange yet another knowing look.

“That’s rather tragic that you and your brothers will never have fated mates,” Mama says in an overly dramatic tone, and I think the whiskey might be kicking in. “Your people typically live for thousands of years. That’s a long time to be alone.” She aims a pointed look at me. “But I suppose that’s why you want to marry Yvette.”

“I must be completely honest with you,” Lucas says. “My father recently ordered me to marry a human female. Only days after he gave me this command, I met your beautiful daughter and found myself being... changed by her.” He places a hand over his heart. “Right here.” He draws in a long breath and appears to be gathering his thoughts. “You see, it’s because of Yvette and the profound effect she has on me, that

I didn't steal away with her and force her to become my wife. As you must know, most fae would think nothing of kidnapping a human, but I cannot fathom hurting Yvette or scaring her. I want her as my bride, but only if she's willing, and I am prepared to continue courting her if that's what it takes."

Aunt Heather leans back in her chair, her lips pinched together. "My niece is a sweet girl, and I cannot fathom her being subjected to the cruelty of the fae. I cannot imagine her living among your people."

"I would keep her safe," Lucas says in a voice brimming with conviction. "I'm one of the most powerful highborn fae in existence, and there are very few who would dare to cross me or harass my mate."

A spasm of worry hits me when I consider my future living arrangements should I agree to marry the prince. Would I be expected to travel with him as he led the Summer Court army across the realm? Or would he leave me in the large Summer Court city that I've only heard stories about? Both possibilities give me pause.

"Obviously, Yvette and I have many things we must discuss. But I want you both to know that if she agrees to become my wife, that doesn't mean you'll never see her again. I would never keep her from spending time with those she cares about." He gives my thigh another squeeze. "If she marries me, you won't be losing a daughter, Carol, and you won't be losing a niece, Heather. Yvette would still remain a huge part of your lives. I give you my word."

I'm about to ask Mama and Aunt Heather if they could please give us some privacy, only for my mother to suddenly blurt the question I'm most afraid to ask Lucas.

"If you do get married, where would you live? Surely you can't take my daughter on the road and let her watch as you conquer human city after human city. I know my daughter, and she would have a few things to say about that." Mama takes another

long sip of her whiskey-infused tea, then sets the mug aside and gives Prince Lucas an intent look.

“We would have options.” He aims an assuring look my way, but it doesn’t quite help me relax. I picture myself sitting inside a tent as he goes off to slaughter thousands of humans in battle and a shiver passes through me.

“What kind of options?” Aunt Heather asks.

“I wouldn’t take her on the road with my army, if that’s what you are worried about. I would either take her back to the Summer Court, where we could live in the palace or even in a house of our very own, or we could settle somewhere in the human lands. We could even move into this cottage. I don’t care where we live. All I care about is that we’ll be together and that Yvette is happy.”

“If I’m not on the road with your army,” I say, “wouldn’t that mean we would be separated for long periods of time?”

His eyes gleam with hope. “Why, sweetling, it sounds like you’re giving some honest consideration to becoming my wife. It also sounds like you will miss me terribly if I’m off at war. Not that I can blame you. I know I’m a catch.”

“I’m being serious.” I resist the urge to stamp on his foot.

“So am I.” He straightens. “I would let you decide where we live, and I would make whatever arrangements I must with my family to make that happen, whether it means returning the leadership of the army to one of my brothers or even my father. It’s also possible my father will agree that General Dalgaard is capable of leading the army on his own without the presence of a Summer Court royal.”

Mama stands up, and she grabs hold of Aunt Heather’s arm and pulls her upward.

“I’ve heard enough, and I’ve decided to give you both my blessing.” Her eyes glimmer with tears as she looks at me. “Yvette, darling, all I ever wanted was for you to find a kind man who would treat you well and protect you. I know what cruelty looks like, and sadly, so do you. But the prince isn’t cruel. It’s clear to me that he has a conscience on him, at least he does when it comes to you, and I believe he’s shown that he can be trusted.”

Aunt Heather opens her mouth and draws in a long breath, but Mama pushes her out of the dining room before she can offer her opinion.

“We’ll leave you two alone now so you might talk things over. Goodnight, Yvette. See you in the morning... or maybe not.” Mama sends me a tearful smile just before she departs the room.

“Goodnight, Mama. Goodnight, Aunt Heather.”

Prince Lucas turns to me and takes my hands in his. My pulse quickens and I suddenly forget all my reasons for resisting him, all the reasons I didn’t accept his marriage proposal a week ago. Except... it wasn’t really a marriage proposal. He’d simply stated that he wanted me to become his bride. Now that I think about it, he’s never asked me outright.

“Miss Yvette Harmon,” he says in a deep rumbling tone, “will you take a moonlit walk with me?”

My mouth goes dry. “Yes, Prince Lucas Brossnin,” I force out. “Yes, I will go on a moonlit walk with you.”

CHAPTER 14

LUCAS

The moment we step outside, I summon a majestic summer night. A warm, fragrant breeze. Buzzing locusts, singing crickets, and trilling frogs. I also call forth fireflies, varrins, and derlotts to flit through the trees.

I wrap an arm around Yvette and guide her beyond the garden and into the forest. Despite her recent encounter with the mangga swarm, she doesn't hesitate, and I know it's because she trusts I'll protect her. Her trust gives me hope for our future.

It gives me hope that she might say 'yes' to the question I'm preparing to ask her.

"Gods, it's a beautiful night." She snuggles closer to me as we continue down the path, past the thick ferns and the pear trees. The ussha glow is all around us, more radiant than ever before.

"If you think this is beautiful, then you must one day visit the Summer Court." I lean down to place a kiss atop her head, and I revel at the soft, appreciative sigh that emits from her throat.

"You know, when I was a child, I used to dream about traveling across the entire realm," she says in a faraway voice. "I used to fantasize about journeying to all the human and orc territories, and I used to imagine what it would be like to visit each of the fae courts."

“Is that so?”

“Oh, yes. I think it’s why I fell in love with books. I started reading adventure stories that were set all over the realm. Mama used to clean house for an elderly woman who had a large home library. Mrs. Gibbons. I always came along to help, and Mrs. Gibbons would let me borrow anything I wanted.”

“I also enjoyed stories about grand adventures when I was a child. In fact, I still do, but I’ve also developed an appreciation for both fae and human poetry, as well as orc battle narratives.” I help her duck beneath a low branch that’s covered in glowing moss. I consider how reading was an escape for me when the cruelty visited on me by my father and brothers became too much, and given what I know about her father, I wonder if perhaps it was the same for Yvette. Thankfully, my relationship with my father and brothers improved as I entered my second century and started winning battles and proving myself in their eyes, but I will never forget the lonely nights I spent curled up with a book as my only companion.

“I must confess, knowing you like to read is a huge plus,” she says. “I also appreciate that you didn’t mock me the other night when you found my stash of romance novels.”

“I’ve never read a human romance novel,” I admit, “but after glimpsing the titles in your stash, I am curious. Perhaps you’ll let me borrow one, and you could borrow one of my books, and then we could discuss what we’ve read.”

“I like that idea.” She laughs. “But be warned. I intend to select the naughtiest book from my collection for you to read first. It’s my goal to make you blush again. In the time I’ve known you, I’ve only seen you blush twice.”

I pull her to a stop and circle my arms around her. My hardening cock presses against her stomach, and I long to rut her in the middle of the forest. But not yet. I won’t

claim her until we've exchanged marriage vows. I won't claim her until we've promised ourselves to one another in the human fashion.

"When have you ever seen me blush?" I ask in a dubious tone.

"Whether you realize it or not, you blushed, for just a moment, when I introduced you to my aunt." She playfully pushes at my chest. "Remember when I referred to you as a very kind and very skilled highborn fae ? Your face and your ears went dark pink for a few seconds."

I think back to the interaction and realize she's right. "Perhaps I did blush just a little. But can you blame me? The most beautiful female I'd ever met had just paid me a sweet compliment."

She gives me a bashful smile, and the sound of nighttime insects swells louder as the breeze rustles the trees. We remain close with our arms wrapped around one another as the fireflies dance around us.

"What about the second time?" I inquire.

"The second time you blushed came very shortly after that first time. When I hugged you and kissed your cheek to thank you for saving my mother's life."

"Ah, I seem to remember my face growing a bit warm. Perhaps you are right, sweetling, though I daresay you are the only female who's ever made me blush."

I shift my hold on her and cup her face, admiring the way the ussha glow reflects in her eyes. The night thrums with magic and the promise of forever. I place a lingering kiss on her forehead and take a deep inhale of her delicious floral scent. She smells like lavender tea and honey.

“Miss Yvette Harmon, will you marry me?” I ask. Finally. Then I hold my breath as I await her answer. Gods, please let her say yes. Please let her agree to become mine.

She stares at me in silence for far too long, her expression completely neutral. Is she thinking about it? Or is she giving me a taste of my own medicine and teasing me?

Her eyes fill with tears, and she blinks rapidly, though she doesn’t appear stricken with sadness. Instead, her gaze suddenly brims with joy, and she nods in the affirmative.

“Yes, Prince Lucas Brossnin, I will marry you.”

“Oh, thank the gods.” A burst of happiness fills me, and I press my lips to hers. Clutching her face, I practically devour her as all the passion that’s been building inside me rushes to the surface.

Gods, how I ache to possess her, and I delight in her every little moan and whimper. She’s so responsive, this sweet human who has agreed to become mine.

Soon, we’ll be married. Mated.

How soon?

I don’t know much about human weddings, but I hope we can arrange for a quick ceremony in the next day or two. I can’t imagine waiting any longer. Given how fervently she’s kissing me back, I don’t think she’ll want to wait either.

I growl into her mouth as my cock swells larger and harder, and I savor her whimpers and moans. Delicious. Perfect. Gods, I adore everything about her.

At last, we pull part and stare at one another, panting breathlessly in the middle of the

ussha-blessed forest. As I hold her close, I place soft, slow kisses to her cheeks and her forehead while smoothing my hands through her long, dark tresses. The scent of her arousal thickens in the air, a sweet enticing pungency that makes my mouth water and my cock stiffen further.

I draw back to meet her eyes and cup the side of her face. She sighs and leans into my touch.

“I cannot wait to make you mine, sweetling.”

CHAPTER 15

YVETTE

As it turns out, when you're a wealthy prince from the Summer Court, arranging an impromptu wedding ceremony is no big deal.

Only two days after agreeing to become Lucas's wife, I find myself standing in an old, abandoned temple wearing a pretty white gown. The roof of the temple collapsed long ago, but the rubble has been removed to make the space open and beautiful.

Fresh flowers decorate every surface, and dazzling lights float along what's left of the stone walls. In the field outside, fireflies, varrins, and derlotts roam freely, adding an extra layer of magic to the evening.

Dozens of long benches have been brought in, and Mama and Aunt Heather are seated in the front row. As for the other attendees, they're all fae, and I don't know any of them, but Lucas says it's necessary for a good number of his people to witness our union.

The priestess utters a blessing and instructs us to face one another and hold hands. My heart races. This is happening. I'm about to marry Lucas, the Summer Court prince who won me over with his warmth and kindness. Tears burn in my eyes as I remember our first walk in the forest when he asked me how quickly humans usually fall in love.

Love. We haven't said that word to one another yet, but I suspect it'll happen soon. I

care about him very much, and I know he cares about me. I can't imagine spending my life with another male.

My life . Not for the first time since I agreed to marry him, I experience a thrill at knowing I'll likely live for thousands of years, since I'll absorb enough of Lucas's magic to cause my lifespan to match his. How incredible. I think of all the adventures we'll share and another thrill races through me.

Finally, it's time for us to repeat our vows. Lucas carefully repeats his part, and his eyes gleam with affection as he holds my gaze and squeezes my hands. I strive to keep my voice steady when my turn comes.

"Prince Lucas Brossnin and Yvette Harmon," the priestess says, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. May the gods bless your union, and may you remain together faithfully until the end of your days." Before she can instruct Lucas to kiss me, he pulls me close and presses his lips to mine, and the temple erupts in cheers and applause.

Married.

We're married.

My heart quickens with joy.

Lucas deepens the kiss and our fae guests cheer louder. It's my understanding that this is the first marriage ceremony most of them have ever attended. In Lucas's culture, there's no such thing as marriage ceremonies. Fated mates simply find one another, then physically consummate their mating unions. I'm touched that our fae guests are being so supportive, and I hope their exuberance bodes well for my acceptance as the human wife of a Summer Court prince.

“Who are all these fae again?” I clutch Lucas’s hand tighter as we walk down the center aisle.

“That’s General Dalgaard over there, and beside him are my most trusted advisors, Wills and Passal. The rest are a mix of soldiers who are currently in my favor as well as all the highborn fae who are currently traveling with the Summer Court army.” His face lights up. “Ah, and there’s my cousin and his wife. It would seem they arrived just in time.”

I follow his gaze to the guests who are standing along the far wall, and I can’t restrain a cry of joy when I spot Mira. Lucas leads me over to them, and Mira and I can’t hug one another fast enough.

“Oh, Yvette, you look so beautiful.” Mira smiles. “Congratulations. I was so shocked when Kaiden told me the news, but I look forward to hearing how this all happened.”

“It’s quite the story,” I tell her. “I hope you plan to stay for the wedding feast.”

“Of course we plan to stay.” Mira laughs. “After the long flight here, not only am I famished, but I could use a nice, strong drink.”

I laugh, then watch curiously as Lucas and Warden Valloc exchange a rather formal greeting, and I remember Lucas once telling me that he doesn’t think his cousin likes him very much. As I observe the interaction, I start to wonder if perhaps it’s because of the age difference between Lucas and Warden Valloc. At four hundred and sixty, Lucas is a few centuries younger than his cousin.

Mama and Aunt Heather soon join us, and we all walk outside to the reception that’s been set up beneath the stars. I take a look around, stunned by the ostentatiousness of the event. There are tables laden with more food and drink than I’ve ever seen in one place before, and tiered cakes adorned with flowers. Human servants, all of them

well-paid at my insistence, walk among the guests with trays of appetizers and sparkling beverages.

Lucas hugs me close. “Well, what do you think?”

“I still don’t know how you arranged this so quickly. You said we would have a small wedding.” I smile up at him as he strokes a hand through my hair.

He peers around the reception. “There aren’t even two hundred guests here. You don’t consider this small?”

I shake my head and laugh. “No, I consider this huge, but I suppose it’s perfect. We were lucky to find this abandoned temple on the edge of Sorsston.” Despite the festive atmosphere, I find myself casting an uneasy glance toward the walls of the recently conquered city, but it’s dark and I can’t see much. Just a few lights in the distance. The Summer Court army has already moved on to another settlement, this time in a nearby orc territory, though the army is close enough that many of the soldiers and highborn fae could easily travel to our wedding.

“I had all the rotting heads removed from the parapet yesterday,” Lucas says, following my gaze. “The city might be under fae rule, but I would daresay it’s looking more respectable than Trevos did in the aftermath of the battle. I’ve also pardoned more runners, and as of next week, the city will no longer be in lockdown. I’ve also appointed a warden who will be firm but fair with the citizens of Sorsston. You don’t need to worry about the people who live there, sweetling.”

“After what happened in Trevos, you know I can’t help but worry about them. But I appreciate that you’re making changes and showing my people more leniency than you have in the past. Perhaps I will be able to influence you to make even more changes.” I bend slightly so he can see directly down the front of my gown. “I can be very persuasive, you know.

His nostrils flare and he tenses. “Naughty human. You shouldn’t tease me until we’re alone. I might lose control and rut you on the steps of the temple while everyone watches.”

“That is scandalous, and I’m certain the gods would strike you down if you ever attempted something so... perverse.” Despite myself, my face grows hot, and warmth quakes between my thighs. The very idea of being claimed publicly has caused excitement to skitter through me. My breath also falters.

He takes a deep inhale and growls low in his throat. His eyes glimmer with lust, and as he steps closer, I feel the telltale bulge of his erection. A little gasp leaves me, and I glance around to make sure no one is watching our interaction. The problem is, almost everyone is watching, and I’m certain my face turns scarlet. Lucas chuckles and nuzzles his face in my hair.

“Gods, you smell delicious. I can’t wait to feast on you, sweetling. I plan to spend the better part of the night savoring the slickness that’s between your thighs.” He moves me into the shadows and kisses me thoroughly. He runs his hands up and down my back, then ventures lower to grasp my buttocks while he grinds himself against me.

I lace my arms around his neck as wanton impulses seize me. Breathless, I pull back and regard him with what I hope is a disapproving look, though I suspect it falls woefully short. “You must behave yourself, Lucas. It’s customary for the bride and groom to mingle with their wedding guests for several hours at the reception. We can’t just run off together and... fornicate.”

A very fae-like growl rumbles from his chest. “Several hours, you say? I’m not certain I will manage to wait that long. Can’t you feel how hard I am for you?” He tightens his hold on my ass and gives another violent thrust, causing repeated spasms of heat in my core. “I’ll give you two hours at most, wife, and then I’m absconding with you. You’re mine .”

CHAPTER 16

LUCAS

With Yvette ensconced safely in my arms, I fly toward the secluded tower that's been prepared for our wedding night. Like the temple where we got married, it's part of an abandoned, overgrown estate on the outskirts of Sorsston. But the structure is sound and perfect for my purposes, and I arranged for a large bed draped in velvets and silks to be brought in, among other necessities and luxuries, and I trust the workers I hired have completed the task to my high standards.

I land on the balcony, vanish my wings, and take a moment to create a protective ward around the tower, though I doubt anyone would dare bother us. Then I carry Yvette inside, anxious to finally have her all to myself. While I can appreciate some parts of the human custom of weddings and receptions, it had taken all my self-control not to steal away with my blushing bride before those two hours came to an end.

I'm pleased to find the bed is fashioned to my specifications, and there's also a functional bathroom with two large tubs with plenty of fresh water. There are also several plush chairs and sofas, a table laden with a variety of cheese, bread, fruit, and dessert, as well as a makeshift bar containing wine and stronger spirits. A fire roars in the hearth, making it unnecessary for me to beckon the warmth of summer.

"What do you think, sweetling?" I set her down on her feet only to immediately draw her into another embrace. It would seem I can't keep my hands off her.

The firelight bathes her in golden hues as she casts a quick glance around the room. She meets my gaze. “I think you’re spoiling me.”

“You deserve to be spoiled.” I grasp her bottom and give it a firm squeeze. “You also deserve to be bent over the bed and thoroughly fucked.”

Her lips part on a tiny gasp, and a blush darkens her cheeks. “Um, as you know, this is my first... my first time. I-I’m a bit nervous, Lucas. What if... what if it hurts?” Her cheeks turn an even darker shade of pink, but there’s also a glint of worry in her eyes that I don’t like. It rouses my protective instincts.

With soft caresses, I run my hands through her hair, then I place a finger beneath her chin and force her to meet my stare. “I will be gentle with you, sweetling. I promise. Eventually, we’ll work our way up to thorough fuckings, but likely not the first few times.”

A shaky breath leaves her. “I trust you, and I-I am eager. Thank you for promising to be gentle. I just hope...” Her voice trails off and a frown mars her face.

“You just hope what ?” I ask in an encouraging tone. Whatever is bothering her, I resolve that I’ll do anything I can to ease her fears. She’s my innocent little bride, and it’s my duty and privilege to guide her in the ways of mating.

“I just hope I’m good at it.” Her eyes flare wide, and she tries to look away, but I don’t release my hold on her chin. “I mean, I hope I can bring you pleasure and make you happy.”

I exhale an internal sigh of relief at her words. Gods, she really is too sweet. “Yvette, my darling bride, you don’t need to worry about pleasing me and making me happy in bed. Trust me when I say that there’s no way you won’t do that just by being yourself and following your natural urges. I will be here with you the entire time,

helping and guiding and loving you in return.” I finally drop my hand from her chin.

A look of relief starts to cross her face, only for her eyes to widen again when she glances at the bed. She tucks her hair behind her ears with a trembling hand. “Well, that makes me feel a little better. Thank you, Lucas. Thank you for being so understanding.”

“Anything for you, sweetling.”

Despite her nervousness and her worries, the scent of her arousal remains thick in the air. She might be unsure of herself and anxious about what’s about to pass between us, but she’s also aching for it.

I have no doubt that when I finally get her naked, I’ll discover her cunny is slick and swollen and ready for claiming. My nostrils flare as I take another deep inhale of her delicious aroma.

“I think we’re wearing too much clothing, sweet Yvette.” I reach for the ties at the front of her gown and slowly work open the fastening.

My movements are slow as I start undressing her, and her chest rises and falls rapidly as I prepare to bear her bosom to my gaze. At last, I have the final tie undone, and I push her gown down over her shoulders, finally exposing her generous breasts. Her nipples are dark pink and hard, and I can’t resist tracing those little buds with my thumbs. A moan catches in her throat and her eyes brim with desire.

“Gods, sweetling, you are breathtaking.” I cradle her head and place a gentle kiss on her lips. My heart beats faster. My wife. My darling mate. Affection brims in my soul as I lean in to kiss her forehead. A surge of possessiveness for her also steals through me, and I vow that I will always, always keep her safe.

I help her out of her shoes and finish sliding the gown down her petite but curvy body. She grasps my arm to steady herself as she finally steps out of the gown. I growl as my gaze roams over her. The firelight dances across her smooth, pale flesh.

“No undergarments of any kind, sweetling?”

She flushes. “No. The seamstress you hired offered me several nice options, but I decided this might be a bit more exciting.”

I lean closer and run a hand through her long, wavy tresses. “How indecent.” I bare my teeth at her, then move in for a kiss. Grasping her face, I slide my tongue into her mouth and drink in the essence of her, unable to get enough of her pretty moans and whimpers. Still breathless from our previous kiss, she pushes at my chest and struggles in my arms. At last, I take mercy on her and break away.

“You beast. If you keep kissing me like that, you’re going to make me swoon.”

I chuckle and press my forehead to hers. Our breaths mingle as I allow my hands to wander all over her body, gliding up and down her hips, the sides of her breasts, and around to cup her pert little bottom. When I squeeze her ass and draw her cheeks slightly apart, she gasps and jolts in my arms. The scent of her arousal heightens and fills my lungs with every deep breath I take.

Gods, I must have her. Right fucking now.

I release her and take a step back, then hold her gaze as I remove every stitch of my clothing. Her eyes grow wide, and her face turns an even darker shade of pink as she glimpses my unclothed body for the first time. A shaky breath leaves her and she shifts in place, rubbing her thighs together as though the ache in her core is becoming unbearable.

Despite her obvious excitement, her eyes flicker with worry as she stares at my fully erect appendage. I grasp the base of my cock and give it a provocative stroke as she watches. She makes an alarmed sound in her throat.

I close the space between us and give her a comforting look. "I said I'll be gentle with you, sweetling, and I mean it."

"You're very large," she blurts in a breathless, high-pitched voice.

"I might be very large, but you're very slick," I say as I reach between her thighs and drag a finger along the seam of her nether lips.

She whimpers and grasps hold of my arms while I continue my explorations. I slip a digit inside her core and groan at the immense wetness I discover. Gods, she's soaking, and her pussy is nicely swollen too. When I retract my finger and shift to cup her mound, the heat of her core pulses against my palm. She trembles against me and whimpers as her center lurches forward and grinds into my hand.

"Get on the bed, sweetling." I draw back and meet her eyes. "Get on the bed, lie on your back, and spread your legs."

CHAPTER 17

YVETTE

Heated anticipation swirls through me, making me quiver in place as I stare up at Lucas. His golden skin gleams in the firelight. Gods, he's so huge and muscular. His brawny thighs tense as he grips his cock again and gives it another firm stroke while holding my gaze. I struggle for air and glance at the bed, my face growing even warmer as I contemplate the order he just gave me. To lie on the bed and spread my legs wide. I flush anew as I consider how exposed I'll be in such a position. But I suppose that's the point.

The ache between my thighs won't abate, and I can't stop pressing my legs together in an attempt to quell the incessant pulses. Will Lucas's touch help settle my urges? I can't resist another glance at his massive cock, and I swallow hard as I imagine him attempting to shove that impressive length into my slick, aching core.

"Sweetling, I'm waiting." He gives his appendage another leisurely stroke and nods at the bed. "Be sure to bend your knees slightly and spread very wide for me. I want a clear view of the sweetness I'm about to plunder."

I turn and face the bed, my heart pounding rapidly in my chest. Somehow, I find myself lying on my back a few moments later, though I don't remember taking the final steps and climbing atop the mattress. It would seem my nervousness combined with my overwhelming desire for Lucas has scrambled my mind completely.

"Good little female." Lucas's eyes darken with lust as he approaches and crawls onto

the bed.

But he doesn't crawl on top of me, and I watch with bated breath and wide eyes as he shoves my legs further apart and stares directly at my exposed center. Oh Gods. I try to close my thighs, but he doesn't allow the movement. He gives me a stern look and applies a light smack to my inner thigh.

"Be obedient and remain spread wide for me."

He lowers his face to my pussy, and his warm breath caresses my slick folds. I tremble harder and can't stop whimpering. My face burns when he proceeds to splay my center apart. An appreciative growl leaves him, and when he glances up to meet my gaze briefly, his eyes are a darker blue than I've ever seen.

"Beautiful. Is all this wetness for me, sweetling?"

I open my mouth to respond, but only a strangled moan issues forth. My face burns as he pokes and prods at my core. He draws my nether folds apart and dives in to run his tongue over my clit. I grasp the covers and my knees shake. Perspiration trickles down my temples and I can't seem to hold still.

He circles my pulsating button as a steady growl vibrates from his throat. I gyrate my center against his mouth and release a keening moan. Pleasure builds and builds, a euphoria unlike anything I've known, but he hasn't even brought me to a release yet. I'm hovering on the brink, however, only seconds away from succumbing to the blissful sensations he's inflicting on me.

Just when I'm about to fall off the precipice, he draws back, removing his touch completely. I tighten my hold on the covers and peer down at him in shock.

Desperation clutches me and my hips undulate of their own accord.

His eyes glitter with passion as he stares at my center, and his lips gleam with my arousal, but he doesn't wipe it away. Instead, he licks his lips and groans, his eyes momentarily going back in his head. Then he leans closer to my aching pussy and his nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath.

All the feelings of exposure and shame that I felt upon initially spreading myself wide for him have long fled. He seems entranced by my slick folds, and he also seems to enjoy the taste of my arousal. I flush and can't help but wonder what he tastes like. As he pumped his cock earlier, I'd noticed a drop of his male essence glistening on the tip.

He draws my nether lips apart and appears to study my core, his nostrils continually flaring as he takes more deep breaths.

"You're so swollen and pink down here, sweetling. And you taste fucking delicious. I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough." His gaze collides with mine and a wicked smile plays across his handsome face. "By the way, if you want an orgasm, you're going to have to beg for it."

He dives down again, but this time he circles my clit with a maddening featherlight touch. I try to set the pace by undulating into his mouth, but he grasps my legs and holds me still, holds me in place for the delicious torture he's inflicting on me.

"You beast." I whimper and attempt to kick my legs, but it's no use. He's simply too strong. It would seem he's also determined to make me beg.

He gently, and far too slowly for my liking, coaxes me to the brink of another climax, only to withdraw his touch at the very last moment. I gasp and cry out and tear at the covers. Heat envelops me and I can't form words even when I attempt to beg. I'm close, so close, and yet he keeps leaving me suspended in a state of urgent, unrequited longing.

“I won’t disagree with you,” he says in a deep, rumbling voice that vibrates across my exposed nether parts. “I am a beast. A beast who’s ravenous to feast on you until you surrender, until you beg me for a release.”

“You said you would be gentle!” I quiver on the bed and send him what I hope is a pleading look. Why can’t I beg? Why am I holding out? Is it pride that’s keeping me from asking him to give me an orgasm? I’m not sure, but for some reason, the idea of begging him to give me those final moments of pleasure I’m seeking leaves me feeling... vulnerable.

“I believe what I’m doing to you meets the definition of ‘gentle’ well enough,” he eventually says.

He flicks his tongue over my clit and nudges at my entrance with two thick fingers, though he doesn’t push inside. The pressure of his digits and the intermittent laps of his tongue bring tears to my eyes. I force in a few deep breaths in hopes that it will calm my mounting desperation.

Why does the idea of shattering against his mouth make me feel so vulnerable? He places the tip of his tongue directly on my clit and emits a soft growl, sending a slow wave of vibrations throughout my core. I cry out and jerk my center toward his mouth, but he tightens his grip on my thighs and keeps holding me in place for his continued torture.

Intimacy. The realization suddenly hits me. I’ve never shared this level of intimacy with anyone before, and that makes me feel vulnerable.

I remind myself that not only do I trust Lucas, but I care for him deeply, and there is no other person in the realm with whom I could fathom sharing the rest of my life. There’s a sudden softening inside me, and I feel myself surrender to him fully. Our eyes meet and something profound passes between us. It’s as though he knows I’ve

just capitulated to him even though I haven't said a word.

I gulp past the abrupt dryness in my throat as the throbbing in my core deepens. "Please," I whisper.

"I'm sorry, sweetling, did you say something?" He glides a digit through my wetness and taps at my clit.

"Please, Lucas," I say in a much louder voice this time. "Please let me come. Please help me." I release a pitiful whimper and try to reach for him, but he's still holding me in place, keeping me captive for his torment.

As his gaze bores into mine, he circles my clit with his thumb, drawing moisture from my core overtop the pulsating nubbin. My body breaks into a fervent tremble. The wicked gleam in his eyes increases, and his mouth curves in what can only be described as a cruel smile.

"Keep begging, sweetling." He draws additional wetness over my clit. "Ask me for mercy."

I gasp through the teasing pleasure of his strokes. A bout of lightheadedness affects me, and my vision blurs as I struggle to hold Lucas's gaze. Gods, I can't believe what he's asking of me. Telling me I must beg for mercy is so very devious and so very... fae of him.

At last, my vision clears, and I find my voice. "Please let me come, Lucas. Please, I'm begging you, please have mercy."

His eyes flare. "Say it again," he growls, and I don't have to ask which part he's talking about. I know which specific words excited him the most.

I whimper. “Please have mercy.”

CHAPTER 18

LUCAS

Keeping Yvette's folds spread wide, I dip my head between her thighs and drag my tongue over her engorged clit, circling the pulsing bit of flesh as I growl my excitement. The sweet pungent taste of her drives me wild with need, and my cock throbs to be inside her. But not yet. First, I plan to make her shatter on my tongue.

Please have mercy. Her pleading words from earlier echo in my head, prompting me to apply more pressure to her clit.

She thrashes on the bed, and I peek up just long enough to glimpse her hair flipping wildly around her head. She's flushed with arousal, her eyes closed tight, her face twisted with pleasure. I don't believe she's ever looked so stunning.

Her whimpers increase and she gyrates faster against my mouth. I loosen my hold on her thighs and allow her the movement while keeping my tongue pressed to her clit. I increase the pace of the swirls to her nubbin just as I insert one finger in her core, gliding in fast but not too deep. When I meet the resistance of her virginal barrier, I pause and keep my digit submerged in her tightness.

"Oh, oh, Lucas."

Suddenly, Yvette cries out, and her moans of ecstasy resound in the cavernous room. Her hands delve into my hair as she rides the waves of her release. Not missing a beat as I continue lapping at her clit, I add a second digit to her chasm and commence a

slow thrusting motion. Tiny shudders afflict her body, but eventually she grows still as she gasps for breath.

I withdraw my fingers from her core, then lean back and wipe my mouth on my forearm as I regard my responsive little bride. My heart beats faster as emotion swells in my chest. My bride. We're married. Until death parts us. Though I pray we'll share a long mating union. Thousands upon thousands of years.

Prince Lucas Brossnin and Yvette Harmon, I now pronounce you husband and wife. May the gods bless your union, and may you remain together faithfully until the end of your days.

The final words the priestess spoke during our human wedding ceremony return to me now, and tenderness swells inside me, an endless devotion for Yvette that brings tears to my eyes and causes my throat to burn. I blink rapidly as I lift her in my arms and cradle her on my lap.

I smooth my hands through her hair as she continues to catch her breath. Watching her in the throes of a long, drawn-out climax was undoubtedly one of the most gratifying experiences of my life thus far, and I cannot wait to do it again.

My cock hardens further as she squirms on my lap. When a mischievous look enters her eyes, I know she did it on purpose. I give her what I hope is a stern glare, but we both break into a smile and eventually share a laugh.

"What?" Her visage grows serious, then she feigns a look of innocence. "You're allowed to tease me, but I can't tease you?"

I growl. "That's correct."

Her eyes dance with humor. "Well, that's not very fair." She sighs and snuggles into

my embrace, and I wrap my arms more tightly around her.

The waves of tenderness don't stop coming, and I once again find myself stunned by the depth of my need for her. She's not my fated mate, and yet I cannot fathom ever letting her go. Do I love her? Is that what this intense warmth mixed with possessiveness is? It's an overwhelming sensation that sometimes makes it difficult to breathe when I meet her eyes. My affection for her knows no bounds, but I cannot tell her I love her yet, can I?

I think of our conversation about timing. She doesn't believe in love at first sight, and she thinks two people must get to know one another before they're able to properly fall in love. Will she think I've gone mad if I confess my feelings to her now? Will she think it's too soon?

Gods, we haven't even fully consummated our mating union yet. Perhaps I should wait a while longer. Another few days, or perhaps a few weeks. I don't want her doubting the veracity of my words when I finally say it.

"You look deep in thought, husband." She caresses a hand over my chest. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about how I'll soon be driving my cock into your tight, slick cunny." I bare my teeth at her and release a deep growl. I also press her down on my hardness.

Her breath catches and her eyes darken. The scent of her arousal reignites, a sweet aroma that makes me ravenous to feast on her slick parts all over again. Later in the night, I resolve. After she's recovered from the slow, gentle consummation of our marriage that I promised her, I will delve my head between her thighs again and circle her clit with my tongue until she shatters.

I kiss her forehead, then draw back to give her a reassuring look. Her eyes brim with

excitement, and she softens in my arms, as though surrendering to me anew. I give her another kiss before arranging her on the bed to my liking, on her back with her knees bent and her thighs parted wide.

Her breathing picks up and she clutches at the sheets.

“You don’t have to brace yourself like that, sweetling.” I proceed to trail kisses along her stomach, and finally I shift my attention to her breasts. “I’m not about to maul you.”

She expels a nervous laugh. “Sorry. It’s just that... well, you know I’ve never done this before. I trust you though, and I’m ready.”

“You needn’t apologize. It’s okay to be nervous.” I continue kissing her bosom, and she arches her back as a quivering whimper escapes her lips. “Just promise you’ll tell me if something hurts or makes you uncomfortable in any way.”

“I promise.”

“Good little sweetling.” I drag my teeth along her right nipple but don’t clamp down very hard, and she digs her fingers into my back as she releases another noise of pleasure. Gods, I adore all the needy sounds she keeps making.

As I circle her nipple with my tongue, I reach for her slick mound and give it a firm squeeze. She gasps and jerks her center more firmly against my hand. I lift my head from her bosom and situate myself between her thighs. Gripping my cock, I drag it up and down through her nether lips, coating the bulbous tip in her moisture.

“Gods, your pussy is soaking wet.” I growl and thrust forward, careful not to penetrate her too deeply, lest I cause her any pain. Fuck, it’s taking all my self-control not to drive straight to the hilt. I pause and draw in a deep, calming breath. My cock

pulses harder with the need to be buried deep in her chasm. “Are you all right, sweetling?”

Her lips part on a huge gasp, and a blissful expression steals over her. She lifts her head and tries to focus on me but soon leans back on the pillows. “I am fine, Lucas. Perhaps... perhaps you could go a bit deeper. Please.”

I give another careful thrust, and she rewards me with a moan of pleasure that reverberates off the walls. I glance downward and the sight of our bodies joined together makes me swelter with need. It also makes my heart pang with affection.

I love her. I know I do.

It’s the only explanation for the boundless tenderness she calls up within me.

“What about now?” I’m throbbing to go deeper, but I cannot imagine causing her the slightest amount of pain. I want our first time as husband and wife to be nothing short of magical for her. As the thought enters my head, I call forth the atmosphere of a Summer Court night, complete with buzzing locusts, a warm breeze, dancing fireflies, and even the distant call of thunder.

“You.” She whimpers and presses her eyes shut as the blissful look she’s wearing intensifies. “Can. Go. Deeper.”

“Happy to oblige, my dear wife.” I withdraw from her center and give three moderate thrusts, though I go considerably deeper this time. As I plunge in and out of her, I watch her carefully for any sign that she might be in pain. I glimpse perhaps a bit of frustration as her need mounts, but I don’t see any hint of discomfort, and a thrill rushes through me as I realize just how desperate she is to be filled up with my cock, how eager she is for a steady pounding.

“More.” The word escapes her in the wake of another breathless moan.

I shove halfway inside her on the next thrust, and my scrotum draws up tight as sensation zips up my thighs. My blood heats as carnal need sweeps through me. Grasping her hips harder, I continue with the shallow thrusts, though I go a bit deeper with each gentle plunge into her exquisite tightness.

Meanwhile, Yvette keeps squirming beneath me and meeting my thrusts. Her hands are gripping the covers so hard, her knuckles have gone white, and she appears just as unsettled as she did before she begged me for an orgasm earlier.

Dark satisfaction spreads through me. I like knowing she’s aching for it. I like knowing she’s desperate for more thrusts of my cock in her tight, slick pussy.

Gods, I can’t wait to erupt inside her and fill her with my seed. The mere thought of it is enough to make me release a lusty growl and surge deeper with the next drive.

Not breaking my rhythm, I reach between our bodies and press a thumb to her clit. Her eyes flare wide and her hips jolt upward. I force her legs further apart, which allows me to go deeper. She gives a whimpering groan and shudders as I steadily swirl my thumb over her clit.

“That’s it, sweetling. Come for me. Come for me while I’m pounding you with my cock.” I’m not quite pounding her, but I am moving faster than anticipated for our first time, and she’s taking it so well. In fact, I don’t think she would mind if I thrust harder, so I do. I readjust my grasp on her hips and thrust faster and deeper, carried away by her moans and whimpers of pleasure.

When I encounter the same resistance I’d felt earlier with my fingers, her vaginal barrier, I start to pause, only for her to shake her head and reach for me.

“Keep going, Lucas. Please don’t stop. I want you. I need you.”

I take a deep breath and surge forward, and I’m relieved when she doesn’t so much as wince. I suppose her wild excitement is blocking out any pain she might’ve felt otherwise.

Her eyes flare wide again, and her insides suddenly clamp down on my cock.

She cries out and undulates her body against mine, and as her insides repeatedly contract around my length, pleasure grips me, and I erupt into her depths in quaking spurts.

Black spots cloud my vision, and my cock pulsates with each rapid gush of my essence. The sounds of a Summer Court night swell louder, and the echoes of my growls and Yvette’s moans join with the buzzing locusts and trilling frogs.

I roar as the final spurt of my seed erupts in her depths.

Panting in the aftermath of my exertions, I withdraw slowly from her tightness, and the sight of my seed leaking onto her inner thighs is enough to make me fully erect within moments of pulling out of her.

Gods, I could pound her all over again. But I won’t. Not yet. Not until she’s had adequate time to recover.

She emits a soft sigh and gives me a fatigued but contented look, and I move to her side and then gather her in my arms. I hold her close and stroke my hands through her hair. She sighs again and leans into my touch.

I kiss her cheek and nuzzle her face. “Wife.”

A smile tugs at her lips. “Husband.”

CHAPTER 19

YVETTE

I stand on the balcony of the tower, staring across the never-ending forest. I appreciate that the balcony faces the forest and doesn't have a view of Sorsston or any other hint of civilization. It makes me feel like Lucas and I are the last two people in the realm, and it also helps me forget about the war that will likely rage for years, if not decades or longer.

Lifting my face to the sky, I soak up the warmth of the sun. It's midday, though Lucas is still sleeping. Or, finally sleeping. We'd stayed up until early morning. Talking, snuggling, and making love. Heat flows through me and an ache pangs in my core when I recall all the intimacies we've shared thus far.

I glance over my shoulder and smile at the sight of my husband sprawled in the bed. His chest rises and falls steadily, and he looks so peaceful in sleep that it nearly brings tears to my eyes. I return to the bedroom and approach him, keeping my footfalls light so I don't wake him. My heart brims with affection as I stare down at the handsome fae prince I now call husband.

Husband. My pulse quickens.

I like using that word, and I like it when he calls me 'wife.' It fills me with warmth and makes me hopeful for our future.

Speaking of our future, I still haven't decided where we should live, though I'll admit

I'm stunned that he's leaving it up to me. Last night after our final round of lovemaking, we'd discussed all our options, everything from a grand new house on the edge of the Summer Court to a cottage of our own in the human territories.

The only thing I know for certain is that I wouldn't want to live in Aunt Heather's cottage. I adore both my aunt and my mother, but as a newly married woman, I want plenty of privacy with my husband and I know he feels the same. But maybe we could build a house near my aunt's place. Yes, that's certainly a possibility.

I sigh and remind myself that I don't have to reach a decision today. I have time. We have time. Gods, we're both going to live for thousands of years.

I slowly climb into bed next to Lucas. He peeks one eye open, gives me a sleepy smile, and drapes an arm around me. He pulls me snug against his body, and a warm summer breeze drifts over us, making it unnecessary to get beneath the covers.

"I was dreaming about you, sweetling." He presses a kiss to my temple, and I burrow deeper in his arms.

"Oh?" I trail a hand over his muscular chest, admiring the way the light from the sconces dances over his golden flesh. The fire has long burned out, but given his summer heat, we don't quite need it. "What happened in your dream?"

A faraway look enters his eyes, and the barest hint of a smile pulls at his lips. "I dreamed we were walking through the ruins of the Summer Court, thousands of years from now. The ruins were lovely and overgrown with flowering trees and vines. We were holding hands, and our children were with us. Our grown children. Five of them, if you can believe it, which is a huge number of offspring for my people to have. We were showing them the old court. That's it. That's the dream. It was... pleasant. Gods, you looked the same as you do now. Young and beautiful with your dark hair flowing down to your waist."

I smile as I try to picture his dream in my head. Though I've never visited the Summer Court, or any fae court, I've read enough books and heard enough stories to give me a fairly good idea of what each fae court looks like. It's said the Summer Court is a sprawling city with white, stone buildings that contain colorful roofs. I can easily imagine us walking through the ruins of the white, stone buildings, but it's difficult to picture five adult children. Gods, what if his dream comes true?

"Mira has told me that fae couples don't have a lot of children. Usually just one or two, and there's a huge span of years between the births." I continue running my fingers over his chest. "Do you really think it's possible we could have five children?"

"My parents had three children," he says in a thoughtful tone. "Some of my distant family members have been rather fruitful, now that I think about it. Did you know Warden Valloc's father has three brothers? So, perhaps we will have a large family." He smooths a hand through my hair and sits up against the pillows, bringing me with him and arranging my head to rest on his chest, directly over his beating heart.

Five children. I suppose only time will tell, and in our case, it might be a long time. It's still shocking to me that most fae siblings have hundreds of years between them. Shocking and perhaps a bit sad since those siblings can't grow up together like human children usually can.

"How long will we stay here in the tower?" I ask.

"At least a week, sweetling, if that suits you." He kisses the top of my head, then draws his fingers through my long locks. "Sometime in the near future, we must visit the Summer Court so I might introduce you to my parents, and my brothers too if they are in court, though it's very likely that they're off in the human lands now looking for brides of their own."

My stomach does a little flip, but I remind myself that I'm safe with Lucas. The idea of visiting a fae court is more than a little unnerving, but he won't let anything or anyone hurt me. I trust him, and it's comforting to know the Summer Court isn't as crowded as it once was. The regular faefolk have been migrating into the human and orc lands, following the spread of ussha, for several years now.

"We won't stay in the Summer Court for long," he adds in a reassuring tone, as though sensing my disquiet. "Not unless you wish to linger."

I peek up at him and drum my fingers on his chest. "What will be expected of me in the Summer Court? Will I have to attend any events in the palace during our visit?" I think of the stories I've heard about the fae dancing for days upon days at palace parties, lost in trances of magic. I also think about the stories of the fae forcing humans to dance into exhaustion or even death, and I suppress a shiver. I know nothing like that would happen to me, but I certainly don't want to witness any cruelty visited upon my own people while I'm there. It's no secret that there are human slaves in all four fae courts. Orc slaves, too.

"You won't have to attend any events in the palace, sweetling. In fact, I would prefer it if you didn't. But I will arrange for you to meet my parents in a quiet setting. Perhaps over dinner one night." He falls silent and a look of concern mars his visage. "It's my hope that my brothers aren't there. I don't think you would like them very much. I don't like them very much."

"Do you think your brothers are upset that your father has ordered them to marry humans?" I can't help but worry that his brothers might mistreat their human wives. Though Lucas hasn't told me much about them, I've gotten the sense that they're very... fae . Cruel and scheming. Violent.

"Yes, I'm sure they are furious, but they will also follow his orders. If they haven't already taken human wives, they will soon." He glances out the window as a small

flock of birds dives in front of the balcony before swooping upward into the clouds. “They will likely try to wed human princesses, and I doubt they will care if the females are willing or if their families approve. May the gods have mercy on their poor brides.”

“Do you think your brothers will decide to live in the Summer Court with their new wives?”

“Most likely.” He sighs and brushes an errant lock of hair from my face, his fingers lingering as he traces my curved human ear. “I suppose I should be honest with you and tell you that I wouldn’t want to live in the Summer Court. I know I told you we could live wherever you wished, but the more I think about it, the more I realize I don’t want to be in close proximity to my brothers, or even my father. Though it pains me that being far away from them means I rarely see my mother.”

I sit up in bed and face him. Then I gather his hands in mine. “I completely understand why you wouldn’t want to live in the Summer Court. Instead of leaving the decision about where we’re going to live up to me, let’s figure it out together, and let’s take our time doing it. We could even test out living in a few different places and see what we like best. I also suspect you’ll want to live close to an area that contains a high concentration of ussha, though I realize it now extends into most of the human and orc territories.”

He sits up and withdraws his hands from mine, then reaches out to cup my face. Gods, his hands are so huge, and just as golden as the rest of him. Warmth fills his eyes as he holds my gaze, his expression gentle and loving. Gods, when he stares at me like this, I feel treasured, and I feel like I’m exactly where I’m meant to be.

“You are so sweet and thoughtful, Yvette, that I fear I do not deserve you. Thank you for understanding my aversion to living in the Summer Court. Some highborn fae I am. Some prince.” He snorts.

“You’re still highborn, and you’re still a prince, no matter where you call home. Besides, the fae courts are falling. Very gradually, but it’s happening. That’s what Mira told me, that everything is changing and one day the entire realm will be under fae rule, and the Winter, Spring, Summer and Autumn courts will be gone just like the Seelie and Unseelie courts are no more.” I take a deep breath as I consider my next words. “Just because you don’t want to live in the Summer Court, that doesn’t mean you’re any less of a royal than your father and brothers. It means you’ve embraced the change that’s coming.”

“Embraced the change that’s coming,” he repeats with a small smile. “I like the sound of that. It sounds much better than ‘running away’ or ‘avoiding.’” He touches his forehead to mine and his hands drift from my face to stroke my arms. His touch causes goosebumps to rise all over me. “Gods, Yvette, you are wise beyond your twenty-four years.”

I laugh. Shortly before our wedding, he’d inquired about my age, and he’d been shocked by the answer, believing I looked to be only nineteen or twenty. He’d been further shocked when I explained that twenty-four was considered old for a woman to still be unmarried, at least a human woman from Trevos.

Then he’d announced his age. Four hundred and sixty.

My mind reels at the huge age gap, but I remind myself that as the centuries pass, and eventually, the millennia, the more than four hundred years between us will feel like nothing.

“Gods, I still can’t believe the ages of your parents. It’s remarkable, and it makes me curious to meet them.” His father is over three thousand years old, but his mother is nearly ten thousand years old. A former Seelie queen, she’s one of the oldest fae in existence, but Lucas claims she doesn’t look any older than him. “I also can’t believe your poor father had to wait so long just to meet his fated mate.”

A strange noise outside draws our attention, and we exchange a look before dressing quickly and heading for the balcony. My overprotective husband pushes me behind him and shields me with his body, and I struggle to see anything with him standing in front of me. He peeks over the railing and stiffens, then tries to push me back inside, clearly not wanting me to see what's below.

But curiosity gets the best of me, and I duck around him and look down. Just as he snakes an arm around my waist, I glimpse a huge pool of sparkling red. Blood? Why is it glittering? I don't understand, but it gives me a cold feeling, and when Lucas guides me back inside, I don't fight him. I'm eager to return to the warmth of our bedroom.

"What is that?" Worry tightens in my gut, especially when I notice a deep frown marring Lucas's face.

"It's a blood warning."

"A blood warning? I don't understand." Yes, I've read a lot of books, but I don't know everything there is to know about fae culture. I pray 'blood warning,' whatever it is, isn't as ominous as it sounds.

He meets my eyes, and I don't like the deepening anxiety in his expression. "It means someone doesn't approve of our mating union, and they want us dead."

CHAPTER 20

LUCAS

A blood warning. I can scarcely believe it. I wrack my mind for an idea of who might be responsible, but as a fae prince who's lived hundreds of years, of course I have enemies. Plenty of them. But most of my foes wouldn't be brave or foolish enough to leave a blood warning beneath my balcony on the morning after my wedding.

I finish shoving the last of our belongings into a small pack as Yvette watches anxiously. We'd had a few personal items delivered to the tower ahead of time, though most of my belongings remain in my royal tent at the Summer Court army's current camp. Most of Yvette's things are still at her aunt's house, though after learning that she'd left many possessions behind in Trevos, I'd sent a young soldier to fetch the items, and I expect everything will be delivered to her aunt's house soon, including all the books she'd left behind.

I secure the pack to my waist so it won't hinder my wings in flight. Then I face my sweet bride and give her what I hope is a comforting look. I don't like seeing her frightened, and I'm furious that this happened so soon after our wedding. We'd planned to spend a week at the tower, talking and making love and getting to know one another better, but now we're being forced to flee.

"So let me get this straight," Yvette says. "A blood warning is basically like issuing a threat, and if it's done shortly after a mating union, it probably means the culprit doesn't approve of the union for some reason. Also, the pool of blood, which is created using both magic and animal sacrifices, will attract dangerous creatures of all

sorts. Is that right?”

“Yes, that is correct, and unfortunately, some of those dangerous creatures will be capable of penetrating my wards.” I pull her close, tuck her chin beneath my head, and wrap her tightly in my arms. “Gods, Yvette, I’m sorry this happened. I don’t know who left the blood warning, but I promise I’ll find out and I will make the bastard pay.”

A shudder moves through her, and she peers at me with wide, fearful eyes. “Where are we going?” Her voice quavers and she blinks fast.

“We must go to an area that contains the highest concentrations of ussha. My magic will be more powerful there. Whoever left the blood warning isn’t highborn. Highborn fae don’t bother with warnings. If we want to kill someone, we kill them, and a highborn fae who wanted us dead would’ve flown to the balcony and attempted to burst through the protective wards I created.”

“I thought regular faefolk didn’t have much magic at all. How could a lesser fae create a blood warning like that?”

“Blood sacrifice amplifies magic,” I explain, and I fight the sudden chill that descends. “I’ve never used blood sacrifice to increase my own magic. It’s considered unsavory and most highborn fae would never consider using it. But lesser fae will use blood sacrifice when they’re desperate enough.”

“So, there’s a lesser fae out there who wants you dead... wants us dead? Someone who doesn’t approve of our mating union?” She shudders again, and I keep holding her close.

“Yes, though I don’t know whether it’s one fae or a group of my people.” I sigh. “We must leave. Now. We’re probably being watched, so I’m going to fly as fast as I can.”

“I’ll hold on tight.”

I place a finger beneath her chin and give her an intent look. “I would never drop you, sweetling. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She exhales a long breath, and to my relief, her trembling finally lessens. “But I’m still going to hold on tight,” she adds with a hint of laughter, and gods how it warms my heart to see her smiling despite her fear.

“Fair enough. Just please try not to choke me.”

She laughs again, and I place a lingering kiss on her forehead as I inhale her sweet fragrant scent. Whether she realizes it, she’s started absorbing my magic already. Her eyes hold a glimmer of fae-ness, but most noticeable of all is her scent. She smells like honeysuckle and jasmine and a variety of other summer blooms, and sometimes I even catch hints of a sun-kissed beach.

“You said we were going where the concentration of ussha is at its highest,” she says with a glance toward the balcony. “Where exactly is that?”

“In a fairly new fae settlement called Giarrla. It’s located in a small orc territory that lies between the Summer and Spring courts. I’ve been there before, and I’m pleased to tell you it’s not even a full day’s journey from here. By sky, that is.”

“What will we do once we arrive in Giarrla? Oh, Lucas, I’m worried about Mama and Aunt Heather and the rest of our wedding guests. Perhaps we should warn them before we leave for Giarrla.”

“The soldiers and highborn fae who attended our wedding have already departed, and most have probably reached the Summer Court army by now, while your aunt and mother are likely at your aunt’s cottage,” I say. “I entrusted their travel to my most

loyal soldiers, two of whom are highborn.”

She nods and some of the worry leaves her face. “All right, but I hope we can check on them soon. What if the person who’s threatening us decides to go after our family members as well?”

I turn her around and quickly plait her hair, tie it off with a ribbon, then turn her back to face me. She gives me a shocked look as she reaches back to touch the plait.

“You’ll thank me when your hair isn’t tangled in a knot when we arrive in Giarrla.” I reach back and fashion my hair in the same way, also tying it off with a ribbon. “Now, about the threat to us. I don’t think we need to worry about the criminal coming after our families, though I intend to send a missive to the Spring Court, and I will send another missive to the soldiers who escorted your aunt and mother home. I will ask the soldiers to remain at the cottage until I say otherwise.”

She glances around as though looking for someone. “And how are you going to send these missives of yours? No one is around. All the wedding guests have departed.”

I shoot her a grin as I stride to a desk in search of paper, quill, and ink. After quickly drafting two letters, I place them in envelopes and add my family seal with a wave of magic. Then I step onto the balcony and hold the missives up, one in each hand. I stand on my toes as I hold them to the sky, and I don’t move out of position even when my arms start to ache. I sense Yvette close behind me. She draws in a breath and starts to speak when suddenly a large black bird swoops down from the sky and snatches up one of the letters. A few moments later, a second bird swoops down and takes the remaining letter. The birds fly in opposite directions, one headed for the heart of the Summer Court, the other aiming for Aunt Heather’s cottage.

I turn to face my bride, and I don’t bother concealing the smirk that pulls at my lips. “When it comes to my fae magic,” I say in a haughty tone, “the ability to summon

messenger birds has long been a favorite skill of mine. One that neither of my brothers has mastered, I might add, much to their fury.”

“What other skills have you been hiding from me, husband?”

I grin wide, then disappear in a flash of light, only to reappear on the other side of the room in another flash of light. I perform this feat several times, until at last I appear directly in front of a giggling Yvette and take her in my arms. I kiss her soundly, and I revel in the moan that leaves her. Gods, I wish I could claim her one final time before we depart the tower, but I won’t risk her safety.

We must leave. Now.

I break the kiss and sweep her into my arms. Beckoning a warm summer breeze, I carry her to the balcony. She wraps her arms around my waist and holds on tight, just as she promised she would.

I stare across the forest and release a thunderous growl, knowing whoever left the blood warning is likely still in the vicinity. I hope they’re afraid. I hope they’re second guessing their stupidity.

A small but deadly creature slithers out of the forest. An orange vennba. The first of many deadly creatures that will follow the scent of the blood warning. The vennba lifts its terrible head and peers upward. It takes off suddenly and starts slithering up the tower. Fucking gods, we’ve got to get out of here. Vennba are notorious for breaking through wards.

I summon my wings, clutch Yvette more tightly to my chest, and shoot into the sky.

CHAPTER 21

YVETTE

We arrive in Giarrla late in the evening under an expanse of glittering stars.

Lucas lands outside a bustling inn and immediately vanishes his wings.

Drunken fae stumble out of the inn singing bawdy songs at the top of their lungs, and the sight brings a smile to my face. I can't help it. It's so... normal.

The regular faefolk, or lesser fae as they're sometimes called, could easily pass as human if not for their pointed ears. I watch as a male and female kiss one another passionately on the porch of the inn, though I quickly avert my eyes when the male unfastens his pants and the female drops to her knees.

"Gods, the settlement has doubled in size since I was last here," Lucas says with a glance up and down the street. "But, I suppose that's to be expected since there are high levels of ussha here." He sets me on my feet and watches to make sure I don't sway.

"I'm perfectly fine but thank you." I give him a questioning look. "Why am I perfectly fine? You flew so fast, I ought to be hurling my guts up right about now. I should at least be unsteady on my feet. But I'm not. I'm also not very tired despite having slept so little lately."

A pleased look enters his eyes. "It's because you're already absorbing my magic,

sweetling. The same magic that will extend your life for thousands of years also gives you a few other abilities. You won't have any magic yourself, but you'll remain forever young, and you'll feel stronger. You also probably won't get sick ever again." He pulls me close as a group of faefolk exit the inn, and we take a seat on a nearby bench. He wraps an arm around me and sighs with contentment, making me suspect he likes being among the regular faefolk.

"Wow, that's incredible. I-I had no idea."

He kisses my cheek and gives me an affectionate look that steals my breath.

As we watch the faefolk come and go, I find myself enjoying the jovial atmosphere and the anonymity that comes with being in a busy town.

"This reminds me of Trevos," I say. "Before the war, anyway."

"How so?" There's a hint of wariness in his visage, and I know he's thinking about my experiences during and after the attack on my home city. He was there. He was there fighting and killing humans.

"I lived in a house near the busiest marketplace in Trevos. The only bars and inns that were halfway respectable were on the street near my house, and though I was never allowed to go outside at night—as you might imagine, proper ladies aren't permitted to visit bars—sometimes I would crack my window and observe the goings-on in the street and pretend I was out there having fun with a group of friends. Not that I had many friends on account of my father's awful, hateful behavior that usually scared them all away, but I liked to pretend."

He arches an eyebrow at me. "Proper ladies aren't permitted to visit bars? Is that a human thing?"

“If a lady visits a bar or even works in one, she’s viewed as a harlot.” I shrug one shoulder. “But I would glimpse groups of men and women out together, and they always looked like they were having fun. I didn’t understand why that made the women harlots.” I go on to explain how my parents were always worried about my reputation and whether I would one day make a suitable wife for a decent godsfearing man, and I also mention how Papa refused every man who offered for my hand in marriage. For some reason, it all comes pouring out. I’ve never really told anyone how much I used to yearn for companionship and freedom, not even Mira, and it feels good to share this part of myself with Lucas.

He glances at the door of the inn. “Well, I was thinking we could stay here for a while. Rent a room upstairs. Then we can share a drink at the bar, if you’d like, and perhaps we could play some games and make friends with the faefolk.”

“Games? What kind of games?” Excitement fills me. Though we’re possibly running for our lives, or we’re at least lying low until Lucas learns who’s threatening us, visiting Giarla is one of the most adventurous excursions of my life. I’m in a settlement of regular faefolk, in orc territory, no less, right between the Summer and Spring courts. And I’m with my new husband who’s offering to take me to a bustling tavern where I might mingle with faefolk and play games. Oh gods, I can scarcely contain my enthusiasm.

Lucas grins. “All sorts of games. Card games. Darts. Spin the pixie. And drinking games, of course, though I don’t want you playing any of those. Humans can’t hold their liquor as well as fae and orcs, and I don’t want you getting sick, sweetling.”

“Spin the pixie sounds fun.”

“Oh, it’s fun, until the pixie bites off your fingertip.” He taps at his chin. “Perhaps only card games and darts are suitable for you.” He stands and helps me to my feet, then guides me toward the entrance. The pack is still secured around his waist, and he

reaches inside for a bag of coins. “Let’s rent a room and get settled first, then we will enjoy a night out among the faefolk.”

I move with a spring in my step, until I recall the danger we’re in. I think about the glimmering pool of blood beneath the tower and suppress a shiver. I pause in my steps and peer at Lucas. “What about the blood warning?” I whisper. “What if the threat has followed us?”

“Regular faefolk can’t summon wings. Even if this villain knew our exact location, whoever left the blood warning won’t be able to reach Giarra for nearly a week on foot. So, we’re perfectly safe tonight and for the next few nights.”

I consider his explanation, and relief soon fills me. I nod my agreement, and we turn and enter the inn. He holds me close as we approach the front desk. A bespeckled woman with short purple hair looks up and clasps her hands. “Prince Lucas. Long time no see. Don’t worry. We replaced the window you broke last time you were here.”

I shoot him a look. “You broke a window?” I gasp. “Did you get in a bar fight?”

“Not a fight. Just a very intense game of darts.” He winks at me, and my excitement leaps.

Lucas requests the nicest room available and passes some silver coins to the proprietress. A short while later, I find myself standing at the window of a cozy room on the third floor of the inn. My husband removes the pack from his waist and sets it aside, then he walks up and hugs me from behind. I lean into him and soak up his summer warmth. He smooths my hair to the side and proceeds to trail kisses down my neck. Heated pulses surge between my thighs, and I can’t restrain a gasp of surprise when his hardness suddenly presses into my back.

I turn in his arms. “I thought we were going to get settled in our room and then head downstairs for a drink and some games.” I caress a hand over the collar of his shirt, allowing my fingers to graze his bare flesh. The heat in my core keeps building, and suddenly there’s not enough air in the room.

His eyes darken, and a smirk tugs at his lips. “If you wanted to head downstairs right away, perhaps you should’ve better controlled your urges.” His nostrils flare and he draws in a deep breath, and I flush knowing how easily he can detect my arousal. “Lift up your skirts and bend over the bed, wife.”

CHAPTER 22

LUCAS

Warmth fills me as I watch Yvette toss a dart at the moving target. She laughs and peers over her shoulder at me after missing the target completely. “You didn’t warn me that when fae play darts, they use magic to make the target move.” She laughs again. “I suppose I can see how you broke that window.”

A group of faefolk has gathered round to watch, and they offer friendly pointers as Yvette prepares to throw the remaining four darts. As the game continues, I keep one eye on my bride and another on the goings-on in the tavern. Though we likely won’t encounter the foe who left the blood warning beneath the tower tonight, I still intend to remain vigilant.

It doesn’t make sense. Most of my enemies, who in all fairness are more of my family’s enemies than mine specifically, are highborn fae from the other three courts. As I’d already explained to Yvette, a highborn fae wouldn’t bother with a blood warning. Yet I can’t think of a lesser fae who might hold a quarrel with me or disapprove of my mating union with Yvette.

Regular faefolk depend upon highborn fae for protection, and I’ve spent my life protecting them. It’s why Yvette and I have received such a warm welcome in Giarrla. The fae who call this settlement home probably hope I’ll stay and help keep them safe from marauding humans and orcs and other dangers. I won’t lie. It’s nice to feel wanted and to have a purpose, and as I watch my bride laughing with a group of my people, I can’t help but wonder if she might be happy living in Giarrla, or a place

similar to it, permanently.

I think of the Summer Court army and my spirit sinks. In truth, I don't wish to return to the army, though I know I must eventually do so and make provisions for my eventual departure. By now, my father must've received the missive I sent, and he knows I've taken a human wife. Will he understand my need to get away from the constant bloodshed?

I think of my brothers. Axton and Zandorr. Both were angered when my father declared I would take over the Summer Court army, and in my quest to prove myself as a capable fighter and leader, I've barely known a moment's rest during the three hundred years I've held the position. But perhaps Axton or Zandorr will offer to resume leadership of the army, though I have no doubt General Dalgaard would be more than proficient at the helm. Gods know I wouldn't have enjoyed victory after victory without his help. I've never met a war strategist quite like him, especially one whose soldiers hold him in such high esteem.

Cheers erupt in the tavern when Yvette's final dart hits the target. She laughs and claps and spins to face me with a radiant smile. My heart contracts at the sight. I take her in my arms and kiss her soundly, and the faefolk cheer louder. Some offer their congratulations on our recent nuptials, and I suspect that before the sun rises the entire settlement will likely know about our arrival here.

It means we'll be found easily, and yet this is the safest place if I'm to draw upon the depths of my magic and fight whoever left the blood warning. Considering that faefolk possess such little magic, I suspect the foe will leave another blood warning in hopes that it will draw a dangerous creature out of the forest that will attack Yvette and me. I must be ready.

After ordering a round of drinks for our new companions, we settle at a table in the corner of the tavern, and the faefolk are quick to join us. We take turns regaling them

with the events leading up to our marriage, and they listen raptly while downing huge mugs of ale.

It's almost daybreak by the time we head upstairs, and as we ascend the steps, I emit a playful growl and sweep Yvette into my arms. I carry her into our room and use magic to illuminate the sconces, though I don't bother with a fire. My summer heat will keep us warm, and it'll be daylight soon anyway.

I lay Yvette atop the covers and remove her shoes. She stifles a huge yawn and stares up at me sleepily. "I think there's a nightgown in the pack you brought. Would you fetch it for me please?" She sits up and unfastens the tie that holds together the bodice of her gown, and her creamy white breasts spill out.

My cock lurches in my pants, and I make no move to retrieve her nightgown. I shake my head. "I think I prefer you to sleep naked. In fact, I command it."

She scoffs. "You command it? Oh my. That sounds rather serious. What happens if I don't obey?" She bats her eyelashes at me and starts to refasten her bodice, her gaze holding a haughty note of defiance.

I growl, flash my teeth, and withdraw my fully erect shaft from my pants. "Then you'll get what you deserve, sweetling."

I pounce on her and we tangle on the bed. She tries to push me away, but I thwart her every move. Clothes go flying and eventually, we find ourselves naked atop the covers.

Her chest rises and falls rapidly, and her face is flushed from her attempts to keep me from removing her dress. I force her to turn on her hands and knees, and she peers over her shoulder at me with wide eyes. I take position behind her, grasp her backside, and pull her center wide apart, exposing her slick pink folds and the pucker

nestled between her ass cheeks.

She gasps and tries to move out of position, but I make a noise of disapproval in my throat that causes her to go still. She exhales a shaky breath and shoots me a pleading look.

“As I said, wife,” I position my shaft at her wet, swollen core, “you’re going to get what you deserve.” I shove inside her with a feral growl that echoes off the walls.

CHAPTER 23

YVETTE

A week passes and still there's no sign of danger. But Lucas becomes more cautious, and I can't help but notice the sudden influx of fae soldiers in Giarra. I'd witnessed him standing on the balcony of our little room holding a missive the other morning, waiting for a massive black bird to swoop out of the sky and snatch it up, and he later confessed he'd sent word to his army requesting reinforcements.

The presence of the soldiers, hundreds of them, makes me uneasy. It evokes memories of the fae's occupation in Trevos. The sound of marching boots as the soldiers patrol the streets never fails to put a knot in my stomach, though I don't admit this to Lucas because I know their presence is necessary. Because if our enemy arrives and creates another blood warning, the soldiers will be needed to drive away the deadly creatures that emerge from the forest.

During the last week, Lucas hasn't let me out of his sight once. He's also become more agitated as the days pass. How much longer will we have to wait?

As of this morning, he announced I must remain in our room until our enemy is dealt with. No more trips downstairs to drink ale with the regular faefolk and play darts or cards. No more leisurely strolls through the winding gardens or trips to the bustling marketplace.

A knock sounds on the door, and Lucas answers it. He'd mentioned he was expecting a delivery this morning, though he wouldn't tell me any details. I'm pleasantly

surprised when a tall fae male hands him a stack of books. Lucas passes a few coins to the male before closing the door and fixing the deadbolt in place.

He turns to face me and places the books on a table. He makes a sweeping gesture with his hand, and there's no mistaking the anxious gleam in his eyes. My heart softens when I realize how anxious he is to impress me, and I shoot him a pleased smile as I approach the stack.

"Oh, Lucas, this is very thoughtful." I pick up the first book and feel my eyes go wide. It's a human romance novel, and it's one I've never read before. I flip the pages and my mouth falls open. It's illustrated . The naughtiest scenes, that is. "Oh my. Lucas. I had no idea such books existed.

"I didn't either until very recently. I sent a missive to the owner of Giarrla's largest bookstore and inquired about hunting down some human romance novels. She replied that she'd recently acquired a very rare collection of illustrated romance novels, and I asked her to send a few in hopes that it might keep you occupied." He sighs and glances around the room. "I know you are starting to feel trapped here, sweetling, and I'm sorry for it. But as you know, I refuse to risk your safety. You're the most precious thing in the realm to me." His voice resonates with honesty, and gods how it makes my throat burn.

I set the book aside and walk into his open arms. He kisses the top of my head, and I sink deeper into his embrace, soaking up his comforting summer scent as a warm, fragrant breeze drifts over us. My heart pangs with longing, and my adoration for my new husband grows.

"Thank you for the books, Lucas. It's a very thoughtful gift."

"You're very welcome, sweetling." He pulls back slightly and stares down at me, his gaze becoming more heated by the second. I step closer and my breath catches when

his hardness presses into my stomach. Just as I suspected. Warmth spasms in my center, and though I'm eager to peruse the books, I'm even more eager to spend the morning showing my husband just how much affection I hold for him.

We've only known one another for about two weeks. While it could be argued that ours was a marriage of convenience, it's so much more than that. Not only do I hold him in high regard, but I'm also starting to believe I might love him. I don't regret our hasty union, and with each passing day, I find myself more drawn to him.

Not only do I crave his touch, but I crave his presence. Always.

I find comfort and peace in the sweet companionship we share, and while I've felt trapped in this room a few times recently, his presence has made it entirely bearable. I've enjoyed more moments than not, and I cannot imagine ever parting ways with Lucas, the handsome fae prince who's very much a thief because he's stolen my heart.

My face flushes when I think about the illustration I just saw when I flipped through the pages of the first book. It was a pencil drawing of a woman on her knees preparing to suck her lover's appendage. While Lucas and I have shared many amorous activities, we haven't tried that particular act yet.

"Yvette, sweetling," he says with a smirk, "I don't believe I've ever seen you blush so fervently. Whatever you're thinking about, it must be very, very naughty." He growls and presses his hardness more firmly to my stomach.

I glance over my shoulder at the stack of books, and I know the guilt must be showing on my face. He follows my gaze and chuckles. Then he releases me and heads for the stack. He selects the first book and flips the pages until he comes to the very first illustration, the one I can't stop thinking about.

My face flushes anew when he looks up with a dark, devious gleam in his eyes. My breath falters when he sets the book aside and approaches me with slow, calculated steps. He circles me a few times, and if I didn't know him very well and trust him fully, that dark fae glimmer in his eyes would probably frighten me.

Finally, he comes to a stop in front of me. He places a finger beneath my chin and draws in a deep breath. I almost gasp. He's smelling my arousal. He knows just how wet I'm becoming between my thighs. The mere thought of taking him in my mouth is enough to make me achy and unsettled.

He steps back, and I think he's about to unfasten his pants, but he doesn't. Instead, he says, "Remove all your clothing, sweetling, and bend over the bed."

CHAPTER 24

LUCAS

I watch as the trembling little human approaches the bed and bends over. Gloriously naked, she peers over her shoulder at me with a confused look. Likely because she thought I was about to order her to her knees so she might suck my cock. The thought is certainly provoking, and while I intend to give her what she craves, eventually, I want to build up her anticipation first. My anticipation as well. Never mind that my shaft is already rock hard and pressing against the front of my pants.

“Spread your legs wider.” I remove my shirt and walk closer, only to discover she hasn’t quite obeyed. “I said wider .”

She sighs and finally spreads wide enough, and the sight of her slick folds makes me growl. The scent of her arousal causes my shaft to lurch, and a moment of dizziness hits me. She turns around and clutches the covers, her pale legs shaking as she remains spread wide with her swollen, pink pussy on display like an offering.

I remove my boots and pants, then fist my engorged length as I approach her. A summer breeze swirls through the room as my need for her mounts. She whimpers when I trail a finger through the seam of her nether lips. I explore her slowly, as though I’m gently opening the petals of a flower, and she quivers in place as the heightening scent of her feminine essence fills my nostrils.

“So wet and swollen.” I tap at her clit and her hips roll backward. “This little clit of yours is quite distended, too. Tell me, sweetling, are you aching for it? Are you

aching to suck on my appendage?”

Her breath leaves her in a rush. She whimpers again but doesn't say a word.

“I asked you a question, and I expect an answer.” A sense of remembrance comes over me. I've said these exact words to her before. On the mountain road when I was teasing her during our first encounter. How far we've come since then. “Answer me, sweetling, or I might stop touching your clit.”

“Yes, I-I am aching for it.” She moans and presses her center back against my hand, but I lessen the pressure on her clit because she hasn't quite answered my question.

“What are you aching for, darling wife? I need specifics.” I drag moisture from her core overtop her enlarged clit and circle the bud with precise strokes that draw more whimpers and moans from her.

“I-I am aching to suck on your appendage .” She whispers the last word as though it's the most scandalous thing she's ever said.

“Just as I suspected.” I abandon her clit only to shove two fingers deep in her core. “You're soaking wet and aching because you wish you had a cock in your mouth. Poor, poor little human.”

She rises on her toes with a gasp, and her insides clamp down on my digits. I set a rapid pace of driving my fingers in and out of her swollen pussy, and she keeps rising on her toes and jerking her center back to meet my plunges. She tears at the covers and her hair flails wildly around her shoulders.

I withdraw my digits from her center only to immediately replace them with my shaft, and I sink inside her with a growl. Grasping her hips, I give her about a dozen thrusts before pulling out. Then I reach for a pillow and help her stand. Her legs

tremble so hard that I fear she might fall, and I keep one hand on her as I guide her to the middle of the room. I place the pillow on the floor in front of her, and her face turns scarlet as she no doubt realizes my intent.

“On your knees, wife.” I step back and await her compliance, and I’m pleased when she’s quick to obey.

She drops to her knees on the pillow and stares at my glistening cock with an expectant look that makes me feverish. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, drawing my gaze to her hard nipples, and when my eyes drift lower, I glimpse the slickness of her arousal coating her inner thighs.

I close the space between us, and my shaft rests an inch before her mouth. “Look how much of your slickness remains on my cock. I expect you to do a good job cleaning it off, sweetling, and I also expect you to swallow my seed. Do you understand?”

Her eyes flare with surprise, but she nods and says, “Yes, I understand,” in a soft whisper.

She parts her lips, and I grasp her head and glide into her perfect little mouth. Gods, the feel of her tongue dragging along my cock nearly undoes me. Closing my eyes, I take a few slow, steady breaths as I attempt to regain my self-control. Once the urgency passes, I open my eyes and run my hands through Yvette’s hair, watching as she seals her lips around my girth and moves her head forward and back.

A thunderous growl rumbles from me, and I again find myself struggling for control. If she keeps moaning while dragging her tongue over my shaft just so, I’ll soon erupt down her throat.

She places her hands on my thighs and continues. Unable to help myself, I tighten my hold in her hair and give a sudden deep thrust, ramming my appendage into the back

of her throat. She gags for a moment but soon recovers, and when I detect the increasing scent of her arousal, I bite back the apology hovering on my lips.

It would seem she's not opposed to a bit of roughness, and after a few more minutes, I give her another hard thrust that makes her whimper and gag, but it also makes her pussy gush moisture.

Fuck, yes.

I hold her head in place and commence a rapid pace of pounding her mouth, though I watch her carefully to make sure she's still able to breathe through her nose.

"That's it, sweetling. Gag on my cock."

She pauses briefly and her eyes dart upward. She aims me a dirty look, and a dark chuckle escapes me. I give her hair a slight tug.

"I don't know why you're looking at me like that." I perform another harsh thrust that makes her whimper. "This was your idea."

She digs her nails into my thighs, and I chuckle again. But then she does something delicious with her tongue that finally pushes me off the precipice. She suctions her lips tightly around my length, creating a steady friction as her tongue swirls over the tip of my shaft.

I erupt in her mouth, and she swallows the first spurt of my seed. She gulps down every bit of my essence without spilling a drop, which is no small feat considering how much seed a virile fae male like myself can produce. I release her hair and gently run my fingers through her long locks, then I withdraw my cock from her mouth.

She inhales a huge breath, and I sweep her upward and into my arms, overcome by

the urge to hold her and keep her close.

Warmth abounds in my heart, an endless wave of tenderness that only reaffirms my love for her.

I carry her to the bed. “Don’t worry, sweetling, I know you’re aching terribly, and I intend to bring you to a climax very soon.” I place her atop the covers and immediately situate my head between her thighs.

Her cries of pleasure echo off the walls.

CHAPTER 25

YVETTE

Nestled in Lucas's arms, I listen to the sounds of the summer night. Never mind that it's technically winter in this orc territory, just like it is in the human territory I once called home. But it would seem it's always summer wherever Lucas is, and I certainly don't mind. I soak up his warmth, and I turn over to face him, hoping to catch sight of him sleeping peacefully.

But not only is he wide awake, he's staring at the window with a fierce scowl that succeeds in putting the chill of winter into me. I follow his gaze but don't see anything amiss. I don't hear anything either. Nothing but the locusts and crickets and frogs.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I hold my breath as I listen for any odd sound that might indicate imminent danger.

Lucas finally looks at me, and he places a finger to his lips. I nod my assent and remain silent, even though I want to ask what's wrong. But I trust he'll tell me when the time is right.

He slowly rises from the bed and puts clothes on, and he motions for me to do the same. I dress quickly in the gown I wore yesterday, and I also put stockings and boots on. I fasten the straps of the boots tight, just in case I have to make a run for it.

The building shudders, the windows rattle, and the sounds of summer fade.

Lucas grasps my hand and leads me to the door, but before he can touch the knob, everything goes dark and wind roars in my ears. Disoriented, I stumble and reach into the blackness, trying to find Lucas. I cry out and call his name, but he doesn't respond.

Gradually, my senses return, and I spin in a circle as I take in my new surroundings. A glittering ussha-blessed forest.

I think I'm alone, until dark laughter rings out behind me. A chill skitters down my spine, and I turn to face the stranger. It's a human man with cold, glowing eyes. Maybe not fully human. He's part... other. Fae? I'm not certain.

I clear my throat and try to summon bravery. "Who are you?"

He smiles, and his teeth are just as pointed as Lucas's, making me suspect he's indeed part-fae, despite his curved ears. "I'm Bartonnus."

"What do you want?"

"A life for a life." He chuckles and crooks a long, sharp fingernail at me. "Come here and I'll make it quick. You won't feel a thing."

I take a step back and scan the forest, wishing Lucas would emerge from the trees. But I don't see him or anyone else. "How did you bring me here?" Maybe if I keep him talking, it'll allow me to stall long enough for help to arrive. I can only hope. Lucas. Where is he? My heart clenches with worry. I pray he's all right. I pray no harm has come to him.

Bartonnus sneers. "Who are you? What do you want? How did you bring me here? So many fucking questions. Does it really matter when you're about to die?" He approaches me, but I take a few more steps back.

“Actually, it does matter when I’m about to die,” I say, still going with my plan to keep him talking. I study the dark-haired stranger with deeply wrinkled skin and ponder his identity. Yes, he told me his name, but who is he really? “Do you know Prince Lucas?”

He sneers again. “Of course I know Prince Lucas.” He pauses and a frown creases his face, then he displays a look of profound confusion. “Well, I don’t know him personally, but I know who he is well enough. I know that he’ll come looking for you, and once he’s here and learns your blood has been spilled in a blood warning pool, the grief will weaken him long enough to allow me to kill him. And if I don’t manage to kill him, the dark creatures that slither toward the blood warning will.”

“Why do you want Prince Lucas dead when you’ve never actually met him before?” I think of the Summer Court army and can’t help but wonder if perhaps Lucas ordered an attack on this man’s home city. Perhaps he lost someone he cares about and wants revenge.

His breath hisses inward, and he rolls his eyes. His hands clench and he makes a noise of frustration. Blue light flashes over his body, seeming to come from within. I take several more steps back as I watch him struggle.

“Prince Lucas’s father killed my father.” More blue light flashes over his body. He brushes his hands up and down his arms, as though it might help soothe the surges of magic he can’t seem to control. “I’ve been waiting for the perfect opportunity to seek my vengeance. Watching and waiting all these years. Well, watching and waiting during the last decade, anyway. Before that, I’m afraid I was imprisoned for a few centuries, or perhaps longer, I’m not certain. One loses track of time in an orc dungeon.” He barks a strange laugh. “Orcs! Accidentally create the wrong war spell for them and see how fast they lock you up and throw away the key. Praise the gods I finally managed to escape.”

“Who was your father?” I ask.

Bartonnus blinks fast and continues rubbing his arms, but the blue light keeps flashing over him. He winces, making me suspect it’s causing him pain. I don’t feel sorry for him, however, because he kidnapped me. Somehow, he brought me from the inn to this dark but ussha glowing forest.

“My father was the greatest, most powerful mage in the history of the realm.”

Ice fills my veins. The mage. The mage who wielded dark magic. The very same mage who cursed Lucas and his brothers so they would never have fated mates.

“But... how?” I ask. “You’re part-fae. At least I think you are. The mage you’re speaking about was a human, and?—”

“He tricked my fae mother into sleeping with him. Using dark magic, of course, he tricked my fae mother into bed, and after she gave birth to me, he stole me away and raised me all by himself. I adored my father, and he was taken from me too soon.”

I gape at the deranged male. “Your father was killed a few thousand years ago.” How long does a part-fae, part-human who’s also a mage normally live? My head spins as I think about it, and my fear also deepens. Because Bartonnus is hurting and grieving, and he also holds a lot of hate in his heart. Hate for King Haratt.

“Yes, yes, he was killed a few thousand years ago, yet it still fucking feels like yesterday.” He draws in a huge breath, and when he next speaks, his voice takes on a raspy tone, and his red eyes glow brighter. “He died before he could teach me all he knows and now look at me. I’m shriveled and slowly dying. The human half of me, anyway. I can’t penetrate the Summer Court to reach the king, but I can kill his sons when they venture into the human and orcs lands. And so I will.”

Keep him talking , I remind myself. Keep the fucker talking. I take a careful step back and say, “The magic you used to bring me to this forest must be powerful. Why, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He snorts. “Of course it’s powerful. It’s magic my father taught me, though it’s a pity it won’t work on highborn fae. Still, it might be better this way. The first blood warning I left at the tower didn’t kill Prince Lucas as I’d hoped, but perhaps the second one will.” His eyes glimmer with sheer evil. “He’s in love with you, and I imagine your death will bring him to his knees.”

My heart nearly stops. I stare at Bartonnus, unsure of what to say. Is the prince truly in love with me, and if so, how does this horrible male know? Grief swells in my chest. What if I never see Lucas again? What if this is the end? I’ve been in this strange forest for a while now and I’ve glimpsed no sign of him. I have no idea how far Giarrla is from this place.

“Ah, you didn’t know, then?” Bartonnus clasps his hands and grins. “I watched your wedding ceremony from afar, and it was obvious to me by the way he looked at you. I suspect it was obvious to everyone in attendance. In any case, it’s time for me to create the blood warning. He’ll probably be here soon, and I must be ready.” He lunges for me.

I spin and bolt through the trees. “Lucas!” I scream into the night. “Lucas, I’m here!”

CHAPTER 26

LUCAS

Worry and fear tighten in my gut, and my blood boils with rage. Someone took Yvette. A terrible creature. Someone not quite human or fae. Someone who emanates darkness and evil. I caught a glimpse of the dark-haired, wrinkled being just before Yvette disappeared in a black cloud.

I circle over the forest, following my senses. Thankfully, the high concentrations of ussha are making everything sharper. My hearing, my smell, and even my intuition.

A noise below catches my attention, and I swoop down. Yvette's voice reaches my ears, and I fly faster. The moment I spot her on the ground, my fear for her heightens.

Gods, no. Please, no.

A huge, wrinkled male is holding her by the throat, and they're standing in a pool of water. It's the precursor to a blood warning. He's about to slit her throat and make her the blood sacrifice. I don't have time to consider who this male is or why he's doing this. I don't think, I simply act.

Though it's difficult to disappear and reappear in a flash while flying, I put all my magic into the act as I continue soaring downward. It works, and I appear directly behind the male in the pool of water.

He's dead before he even knows it's coming.

That's how fast I kill him.

I crush his throat at the same moment I snatch the knife from his hand. Yvette cries out and starts to fall into the water, but I catch her and shoot into the sky, leaving the dead male below.

I pause above the trees and tread air as I hold her close and look her over. A few tiny scratches mar her face and arms, but I glimpse no cuts or bruises. She trembles in my arms and stares at me with wide eyes.

"Sweetling." I blink fast, overcome by emotion. Relief fills me to bursting. She's alive. She's whole. Thank the gods.

"Lucas. How-how did you find me? Where are we?"

"We're still in the same orc territory. Only a few miles from Giarrla." I resume flying, and I evoke the warmth of summer in hopes that it will stop her shaking and help dry her clothing. "I'm taking you back to the inn. Just in case that male, whoever he was, has friends lying in wait. My soldiers are out searching for you in the forest. If the male had friends working with him, they'll be discovered soon enough."

"He was working alone," she says. "Well, he didn't specifically say so, but I got a very good sense that he was alone. Don't you realize who that male was, Lucas? Lucas, stop flying so fast, and let me explain."

I cast a wary glance around and head for a wide branch in a towering tree, promising myself we'll leave at the first sign of danger. I sit on the branch and lean against the tree as I cradle Yvette in my arms. I summon healing light and move my hands over her scratches.

"Thank you, Lucas." She tries to smile, but her eyes fill with tears. "Dammit. I'm

sorry. I don't mean to cry. It was just rather scary when he forced me into that pool and came at me with a knife."

I caress her back and hold her close, wishing I could take away her fright. "I'm so sorry he was able to take you, Yvette. I had the entire inn warded. I created wards within wards. I do not know how he got through them and... gods, sweetling, are you still hurt anywhere? Did I heal all your injuries?"

She sniffles, and when a lone tear falls, I'm quick to wipe it away with my thumb. "I'm fine. You've healed all my injuries." She draws in a shuddering breath. "I know you had the inn warded, and I know you had soldiers stationed all around Giarrla keeping watch. I don't fault you for what happened. Besides, it wasn't really me the male was after. He was only using me to get to you."

"What do you mean?" I stroke Yvette's hair behind her ears, and despite her assurances about her injuries being healed, I can't help but continue scanning her flesh for more scratches.

"The male who took me was the mage's son. Yes, that mage. The one who cursed you and your brothers. The son's name was Bartonnus. Have you heard of him?"

Stunned to my core, I stare at her for a moment as I consider her revelation. "The mage's son. Gods, I would've never guessed. I didn't know he had a son. I don't think anyone did. If my father had known the mage had any sons, or apprentices, I'm certain he would've killed them too."

She goes on to explain her conversation with Bartonnus, and I listen quietly, knowing she needs to get it all out. When she reaches the part where he chased her through the forest, her voice quavers, and I give her a comforting look as I continue holding her tight while rubbing her back.

“I feared I might never see you again,” she confesses, blinking fast. “I also feared he might hurt you too.” She places a hand on my chest and aims me an affectionate look that warms me all over.

“Oh, sweetling.” I kiss her forehead, then press a soft kiss on her lips. “I’m so glad you’re safe now. If I’d suspected a mage was after us, rather than a lesser fae, I would’ve taken you to the Summer Court. Not to godsblasted Giarrla.”

She snuggles against me and runs her fingers through my hair. During my rapid flight to find her, my hair became hopelessly tangled, and she’s sweetly trying to work out the knots. Though I could untangle it within moments using magic, I don’t. Instead, I let her continue petting me. Not just because I find her touch soothing, but because ever since she unraveled the first knot, her shaking has lessened considerably.

“I don’t blame you for what happened, Lucas,” she finally says as she focuses on another knot, and I’m relieved to see her eyes are no longer gleaming with tears. “You’ve been trying your best to protect me this whole time, and you came for me. I’ll never forget that. You saved me. Yet again. Thank you.”

“Gods, Yvette, you don’t need to thank me.” I cup her face, thankful for the ussha glow that allows me to see her features clearly.

A grin tugs at her lips. “Well, it seems rude not to.”

I smile and bring my forehead to rest against hers, and we remain locked in one another’s arms for a tender moment as the chorus of nighttime insects swells louder around us. I keep beckoning a warm summer breeze, not wanting to risk Yvette catching a chill.

“There’s something I need to tell you, sweetling.” I pull back and meet her eyes. Perhaps it’s too soon to say it, but I love her, and I want her to know it. She deserves

to know, I cannot imagine another day passing without confessing the true depths of my feelings for her.

A hopeful gleam enters her eyes. “Oh? What is it?”

“I love you, Yvette. With my whole heart. With my entire being. My love and devotion for you is eternal.” I hold my breath as I await her reaction.

Her eyes fill with fresh tears, but she also breaks into a radiant smile. “Oh, Lucas. I love you too. So very much.”

Joy resounds within me to know she reciprocates the endless affection I feel for her. I release a growl of relief tinged with pleasure, then I cup her face and press my lips to hers. My sweetling. My bride. My mate.

Five months later...

YVETTE

The Summer Court is everything I imagined and more. I walk through the opulent palace holding Lucas's hand. During the week we've been here, I've met his parents and several other members of the royal household. His brothers are off in the human lands, though I know he's not bothered by their absence.

We're scheduled to leave tomorrow morning and head back to Giarrla, the bustling fae settlement that we're fairly certain will become our permanent home. We've recently rented a house on the outskirts of the town, though Lucas insists we'll have a brand-new one constructed if we decide to stay for good.

Thankfully, General Dalgaard has officially taken full command of the Summer Court army, and I'm beyond pleased that Lucas doesn't have to return to the fighting. We're free. Free to start our lives together away from the wars that have plagued the human lands for too long.

Lucas tightens his hold on my hand and guides me out on a huge balcony that overlooks a large, sparkling lake with a sandy shore. He lifts me into his arms and takes a seat on a plush chair, and we quietly watch the sun set over the distant mountains.

"Wow. It's just as beautiful as the first time I saw it." I sigh with contentment. "Perhaps an occasional visit to the Summer Court won't be so terrible."

He scoffs. “You wouldn’t be saying that if you’d met my brothers, or some of my uncles for that matter. It would seem the most offensive members of court are away in the human lands at the moment.” He runs a hand through my hair and gives me an affectionate look. “But I’m glad we managed the trip here just this once. My mother enjoyed meeting you, so much that I suspect she might come visit us in Giarrla. I overheard her telling one of her cousins just that.”

“Can you imagine if Aunt Heather and your mother visited us at the same time?” I giggle.

Lucas rubs his temple and groans. “Oh gods, they are so alike, now that I think about it, that I believe they might kill one another.”

“Hm. You’re right about that. They are quite similar in their outspokenness and even their mannerisms. It’s rather uncanny.” I glance at the horizon as the sun slips behind the mountain. “I bet Mama would get along with your mother though. She’s quite the peacekeeper, and she handles Aunt Heather so well.”

He places a playful kiss on my nose. “Perhaps one day we’ll have a huge family reunion. I’ll invite all my relatives, and you’ll invite all of yours, even the most distant ones, and we’ll sit back and watch the entertainment.”

“Ha. Very funny.” I roll my eyes and push at his chest, and as I make the movement, I become aware of his hardness beneath my bottom. An ache immediately pangs in my core. He sends me a knowing look, and there’s no doubt in my mind that he’s already detected my arousal.

He rises with me in his arms and departs the balcony with rapid steps. He nearly runs down the corridor, dodging servants and highborn fae, until he reaches his quarters. He brings me inside and shuts the door, and my pulse quickens as I think about the night to come.

I expect Lucas to carry me to the bed, but instead he sinks down on the nearest chair, still holding me in his arms. I peer up at him in question, and he gives me a tender look and presses a gentle kiss to my lips.

“Gods, I love you, Yvette.” He goes on to repeat the exact words he spoke months ago in the forest after saving my life yet again, and I can’t stop the tears from filling my eyes. “I love you, Yvette. With my whole heart. With my entire being. My love and devotion for you is eternal.”

As a summer breeze swirls through the room, I utter the exact response I gave him in return. “Oh, Lucas. I love you too. So very much.”

He pulls me close and kisses me soundly.