



Unfettered Fey (Found & Freed: The Unfettered #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: All I want is to be normal.

Especially since Flynn is back in my life. The man I used to admire from afar. The man who made me feel seen.

He's everything I'm not. Sunshine, confidence, muscles for days. The perfect himbo. He thinks I'm a top. And maybe he's right. I've never had a choice before.

But it doesn't matter. Flynn won't want me once he knows the truth of my past. No one ever will.

Born into captivity, I am the result of a breeding program to create a fey from humans with otherworldly ancestry.

Then I was sold to a billionaire as part of his harem of paranormal boys. It was a living hell, but the other boys became my found family.

Eventually, we were saved. I was free.

But the suffering wasn't over, because the fey began whispering to me. Corrupting my will and pushing me to open a portal for them to return to Earth. Luckily, my friends helped me resist.

The whispers have quieted, and I think maybe, just maybe, my life can finally begin.

So I'll savor Flynn's attention while I can. Let myself feel something for the first time in forever.

Until he discovers my secrets.

Or,

until the fey start whispering again.

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Chapter one

Jade

Is that my phone? I pause in the shower, hands mid-shampooing my hair, foam everywhere. I've frozen, as if falling motionless is going to help me decipher the sound I just heard.

I'm pretty sure it was my phone. The noise was accompanied by a buzz, just like the vibration of my phone against the countertop by the sink. But I don't recognize that notification sound. I swear it's not one I've heard before. So why is my phone making strange noises?

Suddenly, memories burst into life. Oh my god. Last night, after hours of lying in bed mindlessly doomscrolling, I downloaded a dating app. It had to have been a strange fit of loneliness. And stupidity. What the hell was I thinking? I need to delete it immediately!

I scramble out of the shower, snatch up my phone... and then watch helplessly as it slides out of my soapy fingers. It smacks against the edge of the counter before plummeting to the tiled floor and landing with a sickening crunch.

I drop down to my haunches beside it. Carefully, I pick it up. The screen is smashed to smithereens.

A heavy despondency settles in my gut. I stare forlornly at my broken phone while the empty shower runs behind me.

What am I going to do without my phone? My addiction to it is probably unhealthy, but even so, I'm not ready to go cold turkey like this. This is awful.

Wait a minute. I am forgetting several important things. I'm free. I'm no longer on the run. I have money.

I can simply go out and buy a new phone. This isn't a disaster, it is merely an inconvenience.

My, oh my, how my life has changed. It's quite shocking. As well as lovely.

I'm home. With my found family. Ritchie is dead. The harem is no more. The drama of the past year is over. My life can finally begin.

It seems too good to be true. But it is. This is my life now.

I take a deep breath and pull myself together.

A few hours later and I'm wandering around the mall. It's busy. But my incognito look is holding up. People are barely noticing me. I'm just a figure amongst the crowd, which is perfect. I wish it could be like this all the time. I wish I hadn't been born the way I was.

I hate the way I look. The angles of my face are too sharp. My hair is an unnatural looking blond, so pale that it is nearly white. And worst of all are my eyes. Too large. Too bright. Too vivid. More like polished emeralds than real eyes.

I suppose I could learn to live with it, with being different, if people were not so drawn to my appearance. I'll never understand why they find it attractive, but they do. Ritchie didn't buy me for his harem for no reason. I've accepted that.

But I still hate it. I despise the attention. Being leered at, lusted after, objectified. It all makes my skin crawl.

I shouldn't complain. It only means I need to cover up whenever I go outside. Hats, sunglasses, baggy clothes and slouching, these things are all my friends. After everything I have endured, it is hardly a hardship.

I take a deep breath and focus on savoring my freedom and enjoying my surroundings

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So much life. So much normalcy. Normal people with normal lives doing normal things. It's bittersweet to see. Everything I've ever wanted, all around me.

But I'm getting there. I'm getting closer to my dream.

I'm no longer on the run. I'm no longer a sex slave in a billionaire's harem.

I live in a shared house with my friends.

I even had a job, before my life went crazy again.

But now everything has calmed down once more, hopefully I can get another job soon.

Step by step I'm getting there. One day, I'll have a normal life.

"Jade?"

The booming voice makes me jump out of my skin. I whirl towards it. My heart beats like a wild thing.

Tall, beefy, blond. Wearing the most ridiculous shit-eating grin anyone has ever seen. Blue eyes sparkling with a happiness so profound that it is a little disconcerting.

It's Flyn.

My old work colleague from my brief stint as a normal person. The precious period of my life that I desperately want to recreate.

I can't believe Flyn is here. Standing before me.

He used to flirt with me incessantly, and I never could admit how much I liked it.

Somehow he always managed to make it feel like it wasn't my body he wanted, it was me he was flirting with.

Maybe that was just wishful thinking, simply imagination on my part. But it was still nice.

I can't believe he is here. I guess we aren't too far from the call center. But it's not as if I go out much, and it's so busy in here, what are the chances?

And how did he recognize me? My hand flies up to my hood. It's still up, covering my head. My large dark sunglasses are on. He must be super observant.

"Long time no see!" he beams, as if running into me has made all his Christmases come at once.

I lick my lips. Yeah, sorry about that. I had to disappear and go on the run from the Paranormal Council because I went crazy and nearly opened an interdimensional portal that would have allowed the fey to conquer Earth.

“Feels like forever,” I say weakly.

Because of course I cannot say any of that.

It sounds unhinged. Especially since Flynn is a mundane human.

He thinks I’m fully human. He has no idea that vampires, werewolves, demons, or kelpies exist. He doesn’t know that I live with some.

He is clueless about the paranormal world.

Nevermind flinging the history of fey plots at him.

The only things I can ever tell him are lies.

“Let’s grab a coffee and catch up!” Flynn exclaims.

I glance down at his hands full of shopping bags. I haven’t made it to the phone shop yet, but I guess there is no rush. It will be open later. After I have coffee with Flynn.

A strange tingling sensation dances through me. Sitting in a coffee shop with Flynn sounds wonderful. It is what normal people do. Have coffee with old work friends.

If he flirts with me, it will be fine. He has always kept it respectful before. I can handle it. I won’t let it go to my head.

I smile up at him. “Great idea!”

His eyes lit up like I’m a genie who has just granted him a wish. His smile grows even bigger, and with a tilt of his head, he leads the way.

There are several coffee shops in the mall. He takes to one that is a little tucked away, and doesn't seem to be a chain store. At least, it is not a big enough one that I've ever heard of it before.

He makes a beeline for a table in the corner by the window that a family has just left. He dumps his bags, grabs a tray and starts clearing the table. Once the tray is full and the table is empty, he turns to me.

"I'll grab a cloth. You still a latte man?"

I nod wordlessly and slide into one of the chairs. How does he remember what coffee I like? I haven't seen him for a year .

I watch him weave through the crowd and up to the counter.

The frazzled looking girl serving takes the tray with a smile.

Pink colors her cheeks. My heart thuds. Flyn is ridiculously handsome, so of course people are going to react to it.

And he flirts with everyone. I swear most of the time it's not even on purpose.

He simply looks at you and your toes curl.

It's just one of those things. It's completely ridiculous to feel envy over it.

I busy myself by tucking his bags neatly under the table. He's left me in charge of his things and I'm going to take the responsibility seriously.

Flyn returns surprisingly quickly with a giant latte, and a huge concoction of whipped cream and drizzled chocolate. He also has a cloth draped over his elbow.

He quickly wipes down the table, places my drink in front of me, and puts his exuberant drink down. He returns the tray and cloth, and finally sits across from me with a contented sigh.

He sips his creamy chocolate creation through a stripy straw and I can't stop smiling. The man looks like a jock. I'm sure he played some sort of violent sport at school and was captain of the team. He has the build for it. As well as the demeanor.

He is sitting there, legs spread wide, man-spreading to the extreme. While wearing a dark blue baseball cap backwards like it is the 90s. Yet he is also sipping a ridiculous drink. This is a man who very clearly has absolutely no insecurities whatsoever about his masculinity.

I take a careful sip of my latte. Goddess, that's good. Trust him to know the very best coffee shop in town.

Flyn leans back in his chair. His muscles flex. The wood groans. He fixes me with the full wattage of his attention.

“So, man. What have you been up to?”

Oh fuck.

What the hell am I going to say?

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Chapter two

Flyn

This is the best day of my life. I'm having coffee with Jade Freeman. The sweet, lovely man who I thought I had lost forever.

It was devastating when he simply stopped coming to work and vanished into thin air. When I tried calling him, a recorded voice said his number had been disconnected. I thought I'd never see him again.

Yet here he is, right in front of me. Sitting across a coffee table. I've found him, and it feels like a miracle.

He looked so flustered while he was babbling something incoherent about a family emergency being the reason he disappeared. I'm glad I swiftly changed the subject. He is entitled to his secrets. I'm just glad he is safe and sound. And back.

Though he looks a little haunted. It is hard to be sure through the dark sunglasses he is wearing, but I think there are more shadows there. He has been through some shit since I last saw him. It's such a shame. Nobody deserves shit less than Jade. He is the kindest, sweetest soul.

I hate that he clearly went through hell long before I ever met him. The look in his eyes was always unmistakable. As was his wariness. And the way he flinched at any sudden movement.

I really hope he is okay now. I'd love to beat the crap out of whoever is fucking things up for him. But I have to earn Jade's trust first. Or he will never tell me who his enemies are .

Jade fidgets with his empty coffee cup. His gaze sweeps over the crowded shop and the people hunting for a table. Any minute now, he is going to make his excuses and leave.

"Can I have your number?" I ask.

His eyebrows rise and then furrow. "My phone is broken."

Ouch. Talk about shooting me down. It's okay, I'll just have to try to run into him again and up my charm offensive.

"No, really!" Jade says hurriedly. He scrambles in his pocket and pulls out a very smashed up Android phone. "It's why I'm at the mall, to get a new one. So I don't know what my new number will be." He sighs sadly. "It's going to be a nightmare getting everyone's contact details again."

I blink in surprise. "You don't have to change your number, or lose your contacts. Just pop your sim into a new phone."

Jade stares at me. He looks at his battered phone and then back at me.

"Really?" he says hopefully.

Gosh. He really is the sweetest. I grin and give him a confident nod.

He sighs. "I'm so clueless about this stuff. The outside world is overwhelming."

He draws in a sharp breath and shoots me a panicked look. He opens his mouth, but I cut in before he has to scramble for an explanation.

“Religious parents?” I say.

It’s long been my assumption about him. He has strange gaps in his knowledge and he doesn’t seem to get any pop culture references. Which is a shame because most of my jokes are based on those.

His cheeks flush. He nods and looks away.

Poor guy. I didn’t think we had anything super religious, like the Amish, in the UK, but I don’t know everything. There are probably all kinds of things going on that I know nothing about .

“Hey,” I say brightly. “Why don’t I come with you and make sure you don’t get ripped off?”

He stares at me for a long moment. So long that I start to get nervous. Then he smiles, and it’s like the first sunny day after a long winter.

“That would be great.”

I jump to my feet and grab all my shopping bags. I can almost hear my mother’s teasing voice calling me an over excited puppy. When I look at Jade, he has a soft smile on his face, and it makes my heart flutter. He doesn’t mind my exuberance.

We weave our way out of the coffee shop and I lead him to the phone shop. An assistant with immaculate hair pounces on us as soon as we step through the door.

I tell her that we are looking for a sim free unlocked Android, and then back off to

give Jade some space. Once he has found a couple of phones that he likes, I'll help him choose. In the meantime, he doesn't need me breathing down his neck and hearing all about his budget.

I wander off a short distance and poke at some of the phones on display. The new folding ones look amazing. Maybe one day I will treat myself.

I glance back at Jade. His glasses are off and his hood is back. He is holding one of the display phones and nodding keenly while the assistant shows him all the features.

He is coping well and doesn't look bamboozled. Maybe he won't need me after all. And that's great. I still got to tag along and hang out with him for longer.

I drift over to the tablets. Someone has left an art App open, so I pick up the stylus and start doodling silly faces.

Chuckling to myself, I look over at Jade. Maybe he will appreciate my terrible art?

He has two assistants helping him now. And they are practically pawing at him. I frown. Flirting with Jade is one thing. He is absolutely gorgeous, so it's understandable, but can they not see how deeply uncomfortable he is?

I watch for a few heartbeats as Jade squirms under their attention. He pulls his hood back up and puts his sunglasses back on. The women either don't notice his discomfort or think they can win him over by perseverance. It's pissing me off.

I leave my bags on the floor and stride up to them. They both scowl at my interruption. I sling my arm over Jade's shoulder.

"Can I have my boyfriend back yet?" I say with my biggest grin.

The assistants both pale and their jaws go slack at the implication that they have been harassing a gay man.

“Um...yes...I think he’s chosen,” one of them stammers.

The other scurries away with some mumbled excuse about checking stock.

Jade shows me the phone he has been looking at. His cheeks are pink and it is the most adorable thing I have ever seen.

“I was thinking of this one?”

I give him a smile. “Yeah, that’s a good phone. The camera is good enough, unless you are hoping to be an Instagram influencer.”

He shakes his head with a wry smile. Yeah, he is far too sweet and shy to be an influencer.

I check the price with the assistant and let Jade know it’s a good deal. He trails after the woman to the counter to make his purchase while I gather up all my bags. Cara is going to go wild at me for buying Sorcha so many birthday presents, but hey, I only have one niece to spoil.

Jade walks up to me with his new phone in a shiny bag and together we escape the store.

“Sorry if I embarrassed you,” I say as soon as we are well away from the phone store. “I thought it would be the quickest way to get them to back off.”

Jade chuckles softly. “Thank you. The look on their faces’ was priceless. ”

I sneak in a shaky exhale. Phew! I'm glad I didn't overstep and upset him. It's a terrible habit of mine to act first and think later.

"Shall we grab that bench over there and I can help you set your new phone up?" I say.

Jade nods enthusiastically enough to make my pulse race. I have to temper my happy grin as we walk over and take a seat.

I put all my bags down again and quickly get to work. It doesn't take long to extract the sim card from his broken phone and pop it in his new one. I get him started on the set up interface. He is a damn quick learner and is soon whizzing through it without any help from me.

When he's done, he looks up at me with a triumphant smile that melts my heart.

"So, can I be the first number you put into your new phone?" I grin.

He flushes and agrees. He quickly taps my number in and then calls it so that I have his. He's not bad at this outside world stuff at all.

"Can I see you again?" I ask.

Even through his dark glasses, I see his eyes grow impossibly wide.

"As friends," I quickly add before he gets the wrong idea.

I used to flirt with him something crazy, so it is more than understandable if he leaps to that conclusion. But I have no intention of being pushy.

He flinches and his lips curl downwards.

My heart flings itself against my ribcage. Oh gosh. Does he really want me to take him on a date? This is amazing. But I need to tread carefully. He is a gentle soul, I can't barge in all guns blazing.

"I do like you that way, Jade!" I blurt. "But I understand it's not mutual."

I mean, I now strongly suspect it is, but this is far more tactful than saying he is a fragile, delicate flower who needs time .

"I won't hassle you. Gay guys can be friends!" I attempt to clarify, horribly.

Jesus Christ. Why couldn't I have said something sane? Something like, I really like and respect you and it would be great to take our time and be friends first.

I bite back my sigh. Too late now.

Jade's brows are furrowed. "I thought you said you were pan?"

He remembers that? That's incredible. This really is the best day ever.

My hand lifts, it clenches and it thumps my chest like some sort of gorilla. "Yep, that's me! Hearts not parts!"

Jade laughs. A full on peal of amusement.

"But," I say, because apparently it's one of those days where I'm incapable of shutting up. "The point still stands, people of attractable genders can be friends."

Oh lord, I really am babbling nonsense now. Nevertheless, Jade is grinning at me. His whole face is glowing. He doesn't seem to mind my buffoonery at all.

“Yeah, everyone I live with is gay, and we are like brothers.”

“That’s so awesome!”

It really is. Sounds like the best flatshare ever. Their parties must be wild.

“So, can we be friends and hang out?” I press.

Jade flashes me a sweet smile. “That sounds great.”

Yep. I was right. Best day ever.

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Chapter three

Jade

I feel like I'm walking on clouds as I step through the front door of the house. It's a warm summer's day, but now everything seems even brighter than when I left to go to the mall.

I need to tell my best friend everything that has happened before I explode.

I bounce up the stairs and along the corridor to Pink's room, but he's not there. I try downstairs, and hear the TV in the living room. The door is slightly ajar and I see Pink curled up on the sofa with his husband.

Silently, I back away. Monty is lovely, but the happy couple does not need me as a third wheel. I spent months on the run with Red and Brodie hiding me. I've had enough of being the third wheel for a lifetime.

Besides, Pink told me earlier about a potential lead in the search for Monty's missing brother. He was excited and happy, but now all of that seems gone from his body language. I'm guessing it was another dead end. The last thing Pink and Monty need is my inane chatter.

As I stand in the hallway, like a lost soul, the sound of Ned playing with his kids drifts down to me.

I quickly scurry away. I was such an asshole to him when I was losing my mind.

I can't believe he has truly forgiven me.

He has to just be saying that for the sake of peace and keeping our found family together .

I dart into the kitchen. Lello and Gray look up from their baking.

"I bumped into Flyn!" I blurt.

They both stare at me. The silence grows.

"The one you didn't want me to kill?" says Gray as he cocks his head to the side.

Panic surges through me. "Yes! He was only flirting with me!"

I will never forget moaning to Lello and Ned about Flyn.

It seems like a lifetime ago. But time is strange.

It probably wasn't as long as it feels. It was in this very kitchen.

Gray had been silently listening. Back then, the demon hadn't been lucid for long, and to my shame, I kind of assumed he wasn't following what I was talking about.

I'd only been bitching, pretending Flyn flirting with me was a hardship.

Thank heavens Gray had checked with me. I've had literal nightmares about him silently going off and murdering Flyn because he took my complaining too literally.

"Have you changed your mind?" asks Gray.

“No!” I exclaim a little too forcefully.

Gray blinks at me slowly, his impossibly dark eyes utterly unreadable. He drops his head and goes back to mixing ingredients in a large bowl.

“Thank you though,” I say quickly. “It’s very kind of you to offer.”

And it really is. I love that Gray wants to help me. I have no idea what I have done to deserve it. But it’s sweet. As well as very comforting. If anyone does give me grief, I have a demon to back me up. Not many people get to say that.

Gray glances back up at me and gives me a shy smile. I smile back at him. Then I turn to Lello, and yelp. The kelpie has moved closer to me. His elbows are propped on the table and his chin is resting on his hands. His eyes are large and extremely intense.

“Tell me everything!” he demands.

I swallow. Why did I start this? What was I thinking ?

“I...um... There is not much to tell,” I stammer.

Lello’s look turns deadly, and my heart pounds.

“I bumped into him and we had coffee and he helped me buy a new phone and we swapped numbers!” I babble frantically.

A huge, gleeful grin spreads across Lello’s face. “Are you going to see him again?”

Heat floods my cheeks. “I hope so.”

Lightening quick, Lello stands up. He claps his hands together, sending a cloud of flour up into the air.

“Another wedding!” he squeals. “I can be a flower boy again!”

My jaw drops open. I turn to Gray for support, but his eyes are gleaming too.

“Lello! We haven’t even been on a date yet!” I protest.

Oh goddess. Once Lello gets an idea into his head, there is no shaking it loose. He is going to start planning a ceremony soon, and bounding into my room at all hours with wedding magazines.

He pouts at me. “So? Love is in the air! Isn’t that right, Gray?”

I turn back to the demon. Hopefully he can save me. Lello might listen to him.

“You’ve not had sex since the harem,” says Gray.

The room falls completely motionless. I swear even the cloud of flour floating in the air pauses. Gray didn’t frame it as a question. He stated it. Like a fact. I guess it is something a sex demon would know.

And now it feels as if all my secrets are laid bare. I can hear my own heart pounding. So loudly that it is the only thing that I can hear. It’s the only sound in the room.

Lello’s eyes grow enormous. Then he gasps loudly. “Oh Jade, you poor thing! That’s terrible!”

My eyes close. If only the ground could open and swallow me up.

That would be great. Lello is never going to understand.

Neither is Gray. Gray is an incubus, he literally needs sex to live.

And Lello is... well, Lello. I swear he is actually a rabbit and not a kelpie.

I've never met anyone so enthusiastic about sex.

He even enjoyed it in the harem, as long as it was with Ritchie and not one of the asshole's friends.

"Are you like Blue?" Gray asks solemnly.

I blink at him. "I don't think so. I feel... attraction. Desire."

Heavens, my cheeks are going to burst into flames.

I don't think I'm like Blue. I enjoy hugs and touch.

But he has a mate now, and I have no one.

So maybe whatever is different about me is more intense?

I've never exactly had a deep and meaningful heart to heart with Blue about the way he feels things, so I don't know for sure.

What I do know is that this conversation is the worst conversation to have ever happened in the history of the world.

"Are you scared?" Lello says gently, and the compassion in his eyes gets me right in the feels.

Okay, maybe this isn't the worst conversation ever. These are my friends. My brothers in all but blood, and they care about me. I can be honest with them.

I clear my throat. "I'm ashamed, I guess. I can't imagine how anyone would want me."

And just like that, my ability to maintain eye contact is gone. My gaze drops to the floor, and my entire body squirms.

Lello makes a huffing sound. In the periphery of my vision, I see him begin to count on his fingers.

"Red, Pink, Ned, Blue, Gray and me were all in the harem with you. Do you think we are disgusting?"

My head snaps up. "Of course not!"

"Well, there you are!" Lello says with a toss of his head.

The oven beeps, and he hurries over to it. My gaze turns to Gray. Who is staring at me so intensely that it is giving me goosebumps.

"Sex is very different when it is something you choose."

I lick my lips. "I'm sure it is."

Okay. I can't do any more of this. I've had enough. I mumble some hasty excuse and flee to my room as if the hounds of hell are on my heels.

I lock my door behind me and flop onto my bed with a sigh .

My friends are the worst, and the very best. Out of all the people in the world, they are going to understand. They were in the harem too, after all. They know exactly what I have been through.

But every single one of them has someone special now. They are all paired up and lovey dovey. Why am I the only one who cannot move on?

Brodie says there is no right or wrong length of time to heal. Everyone is different. But I still feel like the odd one out. Not that that's the reason I like Flynn. I don't want a relationship just so I fit in with my friends and I'm like everyone else.

I am genuinely lonely. I like the idea of a relationship. And Flynn is lovely.

I roll over, bury my face into my pillow, and let out a strangled scream. The poor man hasn't even asked me out on a date and here I am, planning our future together, and thinking about sex.

Sex. Oh goddess.

I wonder if what Flynn said to me a million years ago is true? As I ponder that, the memory begins to play in my mind, as clear as day.

I was in the bathroom at work, washing my hands. I'd been having a bad day and was feeling frazzled.

Flynn sauntered in. He'd been flirting relentlessly, and I thought he followed me into the bathroom on purpose.

To my eternal shame, I snapped at him. "Give it a rest! I'm never going to bend over for you!"

His kind eyes had widened. “Oh man. I thought you were a top. Never been wrong before.”

I’d been too stunned to reply. I just stood there. Water dripping off of my hands and onto the floor. I’m pretty sure I didn’t even blink.

Flyn just smiled softly and left.

I take a deep breath and focus back on the here and now. In my bedroom. Lying on my back. Thinking about Flyn .

Is he right? Am I a top? I’ve never done that. Hell, I’ve never done anything consensually.

And if he thought I was a top, and he was pursuing me incessantly, does that mean he’s a bottom? Would he let me top him?

My imagination starts to go down a very filthy path. I rein it in firmly, but not before arousal floods my body.

Oh goddess. Now I’m really getting ahead of myself. We haven’t even been on a date yet. He said friends, for flips sake.

But he did say he was interested in more.

My phone pings and vibrates in my pocket. I jump so hard I nearly levitate. I pull it out and stare at the screen.

One notification. From Flyn. Three little words.

‘Dinner tomorrow night?’

Oh my goddess.

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Chapter four

Flyn

I 'm standing outside a restaurant, my foot tapping a nervous rhythm on the pavement. Hopefully, I don't look too crazy.

The cozy Italian place looks warm and inviting, lit up by soft golden lights, a perfect little spot for dinner. Too perfect, maybe. A bit too intimate.

What was I thinking, choosing this place?

The candlelit tables, the intimate booths.

Hell, even the way the wine list feels more like a seduction than a menu.

It's all just so... romantic. But I didn't think about any of that when I picked it.

I just wanted somewhere nice for us to talk.

Somewhere where we'd actually be able to hear each other speak.

I didn't want to make it awkward, but I also don't want to come off too eager. Is this too eager?

I glance at my phone, but Jade hasn't messaged yet. He's always been punctual, though. Still, it's hard not to worry. What if he gets here and thinks I've set this up as

a date? What if he gets the wrong idea, or worse, thinks I'm trying too hard?

I'm overthinking this, I know.

A few people pass by, and I glance up at the streetlights.

I straighten my shirt, run a hand through my hair, and then shove my hands into my pockets.

If I don't stop fidgeting, I'll just make myself more anxious.

I can't even remember the last time I felt this nervous.

It's like a schoolboy crush all over again.

And then I see him .

Jade walks towards me, as effortlessly cool as I remember.

His short blonde hair looks perfect, like it always does, styled with that just-got-out-of-bed vibe that somehow works for him.

He's wearing his usual pair of oversized sunglasses, probably to avoid the attention he always attracts.

He's a better man than me. If I was as stunning as him, I'd lap that shit up.

I'd flaunt it and use it in evil ways to get everything I've ever wanted.

But Jade hides his looks. And he doesn't let it go to his head. He is beautiful and not at all a jerk about it. He is the very opposite. Shy, sweet, humble. He really is

incredible.

His bright green eyes peek over the glasses as he gets closer, and that nervous flutter I've been trying to suppress rushes back again. I smile anyway, doing my best to act like it's no big deal, even though inside, my heart's beating a little faster.

"Hey," I say, my voice maybe a little higher than usual.

"Hey," Jade replies, a soft smile tugging at his lips as he stops in front of me. "Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a nightmare."

I shake my head. "You're right on time. You know me, I'm just early to everything."

Jade gives me a smirk that makes my stomach flip. "I figured."

We stand there for a beat, the cool evening air brushing against our skin, and I suddenly realize that I have no idea what to say next. "So," I start, then pause, unsure of what I was going to say. "You look good."

It's a stupid thing to say, but it's the truth. He looks really good. Even in a simple black hoodie and jeans, he's effortlessly handsome. Damn, I really need to get a grip. Fawning over him is the last thing he needs. I know he doesn't enjoy it.

"Thanks," he says, sliding his sunglasses off and folding them in his hands. He looks me up and down. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

"Not bad for a guy who spends most of his time looking like a slob, huh?" I grin, trying to keep it casual. I'm so relieved I haven't pissed him off by commenting on his looks.

Jade chuckles. "You look great, Flyn. Let's go inside before they think we're

standing here to advertise the place.”

I laugh, relieved at the ease between us.

He doesn’t seem uncomfortable, which makes me feel a bit better.

We walk into the restaurant, the warm, rustic smell of Italian food welcoming us in.

It feels like it’s been forever since I’ve had a proper dinner with someone.

A dinner like this. Casual, but not so casual that it feels like I’m not putting any effort into it.

The hostess seats us at a little table near the window, and I pull out the chair for Jade, trying to look smooth. I think I fail, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“So,” I say once we’re both seated, the menus in front of us, “How have you been?”

Jade looks up from the menu, his green eyes meeting mine. For a second, it feels like everything else in the room fades away. There’s just him, and I’m aware of how close we are, how easy it feels to talk to him after so long.

“Since yesterday?” he teases.

I grin at him. Yeah, we did talk for quite a while in the coffee shop. “Yeah, but seriously, how is life treating you?”

“Good,” he says with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Then he seems to rouse himself. “Sometimes, I miss the call center.”

“I get that,” I reply. “Call center life was never dull, was it?”

He shakes his head, letting out a soft laugh. “Nope. It was chaos, but... good chaos.” He seems like he’s about to say more, but then the waiter comes to take our order, and I’m momentarily distracted by the shift in focus.

When the waiter leaves, Jade clears his throat. “So... dinner,” he starts, looking down at the table. “I wasn’t really sure what you had in mind. I mean... yesterday we talked about hanging out as friends. But.” He stops and gestures at our surroundings. “This isn’t a date, is it? ”

I laugh, trying to mask how much that actually stings. “Of course not,” I say quickly, too quickly. “I just... honestly, I just wanted to spend time with you. I wasn’t expecting anything more.”

Jade’s lips curl into a small, knowing smile, and for a moment, I wonder if he’s playing some game, if he knows exactly what I’m trying to hide. But then he shrugs. “Okay, good. I just wanted to make sure.”

There’s something about the way he says it that makes me feel a little lighter.

Something in his tone and body language that is speaking volumes more than the words he is saying.

Between us, we’ve managed to clear the air and define exactly what this evening is.

It’s not the full weight of a date, but it’s still enough to make my heart race a bit faster. And I’m okay with that.

The waiter brings over a basket of warm bread and a small dish of olive oil.

We both reach for it at the same time, and our fingers brush.

It's a brief touch, just a fleeting second, but I can't ignore the spark it sends through me.

I pull my hand back, trying to keep my expression neutral, but I can feel my heart hammering even faster now.

"Sorry," Jade says, his voice low, and I can't tell if he's talking about the bread or if it's something else. He looks down at the basket, then back at me, his green eyes glimmering. "I've been doing that a lot lately."

I raise an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued. "Doing what?"

"Brushing against people," he says, a small, almost apologetic smile playing on his lips. "I've been... I don't know. Maybe a little more touchy than usual."

I'm not sure how to respond to that. Part of me wants to ask if he's saying he is touch starved and wants help with that, but I don't want to come off too forward. So I just laugh it off instead.

"I don't mind. I mean, it's just bread, right?"

Jade's eyes linger on mine for a moment longer than necessary, and I can't help but wonder if he really is trying to tell me something without saying it. That nervous flutter in my chest is back, and I can't seem to shake it.

The conversation lulls for a moment, and I take the opportunity to push the anxiety out of my mind. This isn't supposed to be complicated. It's just dinner. Just hanging out with an old friend. That's what we agreed on. Casual, with the door of possibility left open.

"So," I begin, swirling my wineglass, "How have you really been? I mean, we chatted

a lot of shit yesterday, but we haven't exactly caught up since... well, since you left the call center."

Oh Jesus. Why can't I talk like a normal person? That was a terrible way of wording it. But I have no idea how to convey that I'm worried about him and I really want to know why he disappeared. Because I want to help, if there is any way that I can.

Jade hesitates, his fingers tapping lightly on the edge of his glass.

It's subtle, but I can tell he's choosing his words carefully.

"Yeah, I... I've been through some stuff.

Nothing bad, just... you know, life, I guess.

"He shrugs, but I can see the guarded look in his eyes.

There's so much more he's not saying, I can tell.

"What about you? You seem like you're doing pretty well. "

He is clearly deflecting, and that's fine. He's hardly going to give up all his secrets, just like that. I am the annoying co-worker who used to flirt with him. He doesn't know me well enough to trust me. Not yet.

I lean back in my chair and give him a vague answer. "I'm good. Busy, but good." He doesn't need to hear about my boring life.

We sit in silence for a few beats, the conversation drifting into a comfortable quiet, but the tension is still there, hovering between us. It feels like we're both skirting around something we don't know how to say.

“I’ve thought about you a lot,” I blurt out, before I can stop myself.

Jade’s eyes flicker up to meet mine, his expression softening just a little. He doesn’t say anything, but his silence speaks volumes. I immediately regret being so forward, but the words are already out there, hanging in the air like an unspoken truth.

“I mean... after you left,” I continue, trying to salvage the moment. “I just... I didn’t know what happened. Why you disappeared. I guess I’ve been wondering about that ever since.”

Shit. So much for me respecting his privacy and his obvious wish to not talk about his vanishing act. When I asked him at the coffee shop, he babbled nonsense about a family emergency. I should respect that version of the truth until he chooses to tell me something else.

Right now, there’s a flicker of something in his eyes. Guilt? Regret? But then he blinks, and it’s gone, replaced by a more neutral expression.

“It’s not what you think,” he says quietly. “I didn’t want to disappear, Flyn. It wasn’t like that. It just... things got complicated, and I needed some space. I didn’t know how to explain it to you, or anyone.”

I nod slowly, processing his words. “I get that,” I say, even though I don’t completely understand. “It’s just... it was weird. I thought I did something wrong. You know?”

Jade shakes his head, his fingers brushing the rim of his wineglass again, lost in thought. “No. Nothing you did. It’s all on me.”

The way he says that makes me ache for him, even though I’m not sure what’s really going on beneath the surface. There’s something about him that’s so guarded, so careful with his emotions. I want to dig deeper, ask him why he’s holding back, but I

don't. I don't want to make him uncomfortable.

Instead, I focus on his smile. It's soft now, more genuine than the false grins he used to flash around the call center. I can't help but feel a little lighter as he meets my eyes again.

"So," I say, leaning forward a bit, "How's your life now? What's the plan for the future?"

Jade's face softens, and he seems to relax a little at the question. "I'm still figuring that out. I'm not exactly where I want to be, but I'm getting there. It's all about taking it day by day, right?"

"Yeah, I get that," I say, and I mean it. I've been in that same place, stuck in the 'what's next?' phase, constantly second-guessing myself. But somehow, sitting here with him, I feel like I'm not as alone in that feeling as I usually am.

The food arrives, breaking the silence between us.

The waiter sets the plates down in front of us with a flourish, and for a moment, we both focus on the food, a welcome distraction.

But I'm acutely aware of how close we are, how every glance feels like it means something more than just casual interest.

"I forgot how good this place is," I say, breaking the tension. "You ever been here before?"

Jade takes a bite of his pasta, his eyes narrowing slightly as he chews. "Yeah, a couple of times. My friend Ned used to bring me here. It's his favorite spot."

“Must be a good friend, then.”

Jade chuckles. “Yeah. He’s alright. He’s... we aren’t getting on that well at the moment.”

I pause, realizing I’ve stumbled onto a subject he clearly doesn’t want to dwell on. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...”

“No, it’s okay,” Jade cuts in, his voice soft but firm. “I just... don’t really like talking about this stuff. It’s complicated. But hey, let’s focus on the food. We’ve got plenty of time to talk about other stuff.”

I nod, relieved he’s steering the conversation away from anything too heavy. The atmosphere lifts, and I just enjoy the simple act of eating, and it feels... nice. Comfortable. There’s no pressure. No tension. Just two people, enjoying each other’s company.

But the more I think about it, the more I realize that this dinner? This quiet, simple night out with Jade? It feels like it could be something more. And I can’t help but wonder if Jade feels it too.

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Chapter five

Jade

The wine glass is motionless on the table.

It catches a flicker of light from the streetlamp beyond the open window, shimmering against the wall like it's pretending to be something magical.

Like it belongs in a painting. Not in my unglamorous shared kitchen, not next to the chipped bowl in the sink or the cleaning rota stuck to the fridge with magnets.

The whole house is quiet. Everyone is either asleep or out living their lives. I feel alone. Very alone, like I have been transported to a shadow realm and I'm the only living soul.

I should go to bed.

It's good that no one is around. I'd be miserable company.

I should pour the wine out and put the glass in the sink. I should brush my teeth. Sleep. Dream something forgettable.

Instead, I'm sitting here in the half-dark, still wearing my hoodie even though the night is warm. Elbows on the table. Hands around the wine stem like I'm waiting for it to say something. Waiting for it to explain how dinner turned into whatever that was.

Because it wasn't a date. Right?

We both said it. Repeated it, even. Not a date. Just catching up. Just two friends, ex-colleagues, reconnecting after a year of radio silence and one random coffee. Totally normal.

So why did it feel like I was glowing the whole time? Why did every smile feel like it was made just for me? Why did his hand brush mine on purpose ?

I close my eyes, but all it does is make the memory sharper.

Flyn's laugh. His low, easy voice. The way he looked at me when I said I'd been... touchier than usual. He didn't flinch. Didn't pull away. Just smiled and said, "I don't mind."

I almost reached for his hand again. I didn't, but I thought about it. A thousand times.

He told me he'd thought about me.

Like it was nothing. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like I hadn't disappeared without explanation. Like I hadn't ghosted him for an entire year. Like I hadn't almost destroyed everything.

I sigh heavily. I had such a wonderful night. It was pretty much magical. Flyn was great company, as always. I should be still glowing. Singing. Walking on clouds.

So why has the strange melancholy settled over me? It feels like I'm suffocating. Or drowning. Weighted by all the things that can never be.

Dinner. It was just dinner.

Yet it was also a taunt and a tease. A glimpse of how my life could be if I were normal.

If I wasn't half-fey, if I wasn't a former sex slave, or the person who nearly destroyed the world.

How, if I were none of those things, I could go on nice dates with wonderful men and maybe fall in love.

Perhaps build a life together. A life of simple domesticity.

A home, a garden. Coffee on the porch. Hurried kisses before work. Arguments over the dishwasher.

But that's never going to happen. Because I am all those things and that's an awful long way from normal.

I run my hands through my hair, pulling just enough to feel the pinch.

I'm pretty sure my stupid longing has already moved past, ' dates with wonderful men.' My wishful thinking has already repainted all those, ' arguing about whose turn it is to load the dishwasher, ' daydreams. The images are no longer merely some faceless man.

It's not a blurry figure kissing me good morning. It's not a vague man holding my hand. It's not a shadowy outline sitting next to me in the cinema.

It's Flynn, in every single image. It's Flynn.

My mind has moved on from wanting someone, to wanting Flynn.

After one coffee and one dinner.

I really am absurd. Ridiculous. Pathetic. I need to get a grip. If I want to be normal, I have to start by at least acting the part.

I drag myself out of the kitchen, the wine glass abandoned. My legs feel weirdly floaty, my chest tight. I pass the dark living room, climb the stairs and push open my bedroom door, stepping into the quiet.

I flick on the lamp beside the bed, but the warm light doesn't help. The shadows still feel like they're watching me.

There's a mirror across from the foot of the bed. I catch my reflection as I move. And freeze.

I look human enough, I suppose. My otherness is usually translated in human minds as attractiveness. They choose not to see that my cheekbones are a little too sharp. My eyes a little too large, too bright. They don't see the inhuman.

But I can still see it. I feel it. Like something just behind the skin, pressing up against the mask I've forced it to wear.

I hate mirrors. I hate seeing myself and not knowing who's looking back.

I sit on the bed, hoodie pulled tight around me. The room's quiet, except for the faint creak of the floorboards settling and the city murmuring through the window.

I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket and? throw it down onto the bed beside me. I stare down at it and it glares back up at me.

New phone. Sleek, expensive. Uncomfortably large and a little too heavy. It scans my

face now to unlock, and every time it does, I want to throw it across the room.

Because what it sees, what it records, is a lie.

But I pick it up anyway. Out of habit. Loneliness. Hope .

The message is still there.

Flyn, 'Thanks for tonight. I'm really glad we caught up. :)'

The smiley face ruins me.

Like it's casual. Like he's not curling in my thoughts like smoke. Like I didn't sit across from him tonight and nearly say, "You've made me feel like I'm not broken."

I type a reply. ' Me too.' Then delete it.

'It was really good seeing you.' Delete.

'I missed you.' Delete. Delete. Fuck.

I throw the phone down, harder than I mean to. It bounces once on the mattress, then stills, dark screen glowing faintly like an accusation.

I press my fists against my eyes until the world behind them sparks.

You don't get this, the voice whispers. You don't get happy endings. You don't get soft things. You don't get to be wanted.

I used to think the worst thing in the world was being owned. Trapped. Controlled.

It's not.

The worst thing is coming to miss the cage because at least inside it, I knew what I was. I knew the rules.

Here, in the quiet, in this halfway version of a life, I don't know anything.

Except that I'm still not free.

I lie back on the bed, hoodie bunched at the back of my neck. I stare up at the ceiling and think about the veil between realms.

How it felt the night I almost opened it.

There was a wind, even though the night was still. A low, rising hum in the back of my skull. Magic tugging at every inch of me like strings on a marionette. I could hear them calling me.

"Jade."

It sounded so sweet on their tongues. So welcoming. Just open the way. Just a sliver. Just a heartbeat.

They promised freedom. Power. Belonging. Safety.

I almost believed them.

If my friends hadn't found me. If Pink hadn't pleaded with me, his voice cutting through the sweetly calling voices of the fey. If Ned hadn't forced me to sleep.

I might have done it.

I might have destroyed the world. Reopened the portals and allowed the fey to return. Ancestors who I have never met, but whose cruelty I can feel beating in my own heart.

They promised me everything I've ever wanted, and once I'd done their bidding and destroyed the world... well, there would be no need to turn their gifts down.

I would have been rich, powerful, feared.

And now?

Now I can't even text a man back without coming undone.

Flyn doesn't know any of this.

Not the fey. Not that other worlds exist. Not the portals. Not what I am. Not what I've done.

To him, I'm just a pretty, slightly odd guy he used to work with. The one he flirted with sometimes, probably just for fun. He doesn't know the shape of my shame. He doesn't know that the touch of a kind hand can make me flinch harder than violence ever did.

He doesn't know that some nights, I still wake up screaming silently in the dark.

Or that I've only just stopped dreaming in the eerie music of the fey.

I turn my head, stare at the phone again.

The screen lights up one last time before it dims. His message sits there, waiting. Mocking me softly.

I type something.

‘I don’t know if this is a good idea.’

My thumb hovers over the send button.

I delete it.

Then I type again .

‘Don’t thank me! I want to thank you.’ Pause. ‘It meant a lot.’

I don’t add a smiley. I don’t sign it with my name. I just hit send and lock the screen before I can take it back.

Then I turn over and bury my face in the pillow.

Let him read into it whatever he wants.

Let the night swallow it whole.

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Chapter six

Flyn

I read the message three times.

Then I read it a fourth, just to make sure I didn't imagine it.

'Don't thank me! I want to thank you. It meant a lot.'

That's it. No emoji. No second message. No cute follow-up, no 'goodnight' or 'talk soon' or anything else that would give me even a sliver more information.

I flop backward onto the couch, phone resting on my chest, and stare up at the ceiling like it might hold some secret answer about what the hell this is turning into.

The glow of the screen fades, but my smile doesn't.

God. I'm a grown man, and I'm grinning like an idiot at twelve words from someone who used to work in the cubicle next to mine.

A guy who has been out of my life for over a year.

A guy who ghosted everyone, who vanished from the office and the group chats and even the shared Google calendar like he never existed.

No goodbye drinks, no farewell Slack post, nothing. Just poof.

Gone.

And then tonight he sat across from me like no time had passed at all.

His smile was softer than I remembered. A little hesitant, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed to use it. But once it settled in, it caught, like warmth seeping into the cold edges of a long winter.

And I couldn't stop wanting to kiss him .

I sit up again, phone cradled in my hands, and reread the message. Not like there's a hidden meaning tucked behind the words. It's not a puzzle. He didn't say anything dramatic. He didn't say anything about doing it again. No breadcrumbs to follow.

But still... it feels like something. It felt like something the whole time we were together.

There is something else as well. A tangible thing that is probably far more important than connection, attraction or whatever the hell it is that I'm obsessing about.

The signs of this darker thing were everywhere. I saw it in the way he fidgeted, tapping his thumb against the stem of his wineglass, in the way his voice tightened when I asked about his life, like the words were heavier than they should be.

Something's going on with him.

And not just the surface-level, 'I'm shy and hate talking about myself' kind of thing. No, it's something far deeper than that. Raw and frayed. Like he's holding himself together with threadbare string and stubborn willpower.

But even so, there were flashes, tiny moments where that tension cracked open.

When he teased me about still going to that same grimy coffee shop by the office, his eyes sparked with genuine amusement.

When our hands brushed over the breadbasket and he didn't pull away immediately.

When he smiled for real, like he forgot to be afraid of it.

In those moments, he looked alive.

Like maybe I wasn't imagining all of it. Like maybe, just maybe, I wasn't the only one who left that dinner a little bit wrecked in the best possible way.

I let out a breath and tip my head back against the cushion, letting it thunk against the fabric. The ceiling's no help, as usual. My phone buzzes against my chest and for one traitorous second my heart vaults into my throat .

Maybe it's him. Maybe he changed his mind and sent a second message. Maybe he...

Nope.

It's just the group chat. More useless memes and overzealous yelling about movie night logistics.

I should care. But right now, it feels like noise. White static beneath the hum of something far more important.

I swipe the notification away and pull up Jade's message again. My thumb hovers over the keyboard, mind racing with possible replies.

'Me too. You were kind of the highlight of my week.'

No. Too much. Way too much.

‘Glad we did it. Hope we can do it again sometime?’

...Maybe. But even that feels like it’s teetering too close to eager.

‘It meant a lot to me too.’

Almost.

I almost hit send.

But then I don’t.

Because I remember the way he looked tonight, eyes darting like he was caught between fight and flight. Like being near me felt good but dangerous, like every shared smile was setting off alarm bells in his head.

I don’t want to scare him off.

So instead, I just heart the message. Quiet. Steady. Letting him know I saw it, letting him know I’m still here. No pressure. No chase.

I set the phone down on the coffee table, farther away this time, and force myself to stand. My body feels restless, jittering with energy I can’t burn off. I go to brush my teeth, just to give my hands something to do.

Otherwise, I will end up writing him a three-paragraph message about how I’ve missed him.

How I still think about him making dumb jokes in our old break room.

How I want to know him now, not just the man he used to be, but the man sitting across from me tonight with all those new, unreadable layers.

By the time I crawl into bed, I'm still buzzing. Not from caffeine. Not from wine. From him.

From the weight of that quiet little message. From the unbearable hope that this thing, whatever it is, might not be as one-sided as I've feared.

The way he looked at me when I made him laugh. The way his fingers trembled when he reached for his glass. The way he kept checking his expression, as if afraid to let too much show.

Every stolen glance, every brush of his hand, every half-smile that never quite turned into a full one.

And the way he said, "This isn't a date," like he was trying to convince himself more than me.

But it felt like a date.

I know it's too soon. I know I could be reading too much into a few short hours and a handful of glances. But I also know what I felt tonight.

It felt like a date. And I'm not done feeling that way. Not yet.

I close my eyes and wriggle around until I find some semblance of comfortable. But still sleep doesn't come easily.

I keep shifting under the covers, kicking them off, pulling them back up. My mind won't shut up. It keeps replaying the evening like a favorite song on loop, each note

more familiar and more dangerous the longer it plays.

I think about how his eyes darted away when I asked why he left town.

How his fingers curled into his palm like he was holding something sharp and didn't want to let it go.

How, for one fragile moment, he let the guardrails down and told me, in that quiet, reluctant way, "I just needed to disappear for a while."

And God, did that hit me in the chest.

I get it. I really do. There have been a thousand mornings when I wanted to do the same.

When the weight of expectations and disappointments felt so heavy, I thought about packing a bag and walking until my legs gave out.

Maybe that's why I can't stop thinking about him now.

Because beneath all the restless energy and half-smiles, I recognize someone running from his own shadow.

The clock on my nightstand blinks. 1:17 a.m.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to sleep, but it's no use. My brain is too loud. My heart is even louder.

What if this is my second chance? The question ambushes me, half-wild and aching with hope.

What if I don't let him drift away this time?

Because I did, once. I let him go. I let him slip through the cracks of routine and unanswered group chats. He slipped away while I was keeping it casual and playing it cool. I didn't know he was going to disappear, but I still let him go.

And afterwards, when he was gone and I thought about him, and oh God did I think about him, I convinced myself it didn't matter. I told myself it was nothing. Just an old work friend. Just nostalgia.

But it's not just nostalgia. Not anymore.

Tonight proved that.

I throw the covers off completely and pace across my bedroom, restless as hell. My apartment feels too small, too quiet. I think about texting him again, just something simple, something not at all cool like 'Are you still awake?'

But I don't. Because I know if he's awake, he's probably lying in his bed, replaying tonight just like I am. And if he's not, I don't want to wake him and risk shattering whatever delicate thread is still holding us together.

Even so, my fingers itch for my phone.

I wonder if he's waiting for me to say something more. I wonder if he's staring at his screen, hoping for a second message that never came. I wonder if he's afraid. If he's standing on the same edge I am, looking down and wondering if it's safe to jump.

The truth is, I want to tell him everything .

I want to tell him I noticed the way his hands trembled.

I want to tell him I caught the flicker of sadness in his eyes.

I want to tell him I've thought about him more times than I can count, in quiet moments between calls at work, while standing in line for coffee, while lying in bed and staring at the ceiling just like this.

I want to tell him I missed him. Stupidly, deeply, irrationally missed him.

But I don't. Because I'm terrified I'll push too hard, too fast, and he'll vanish all over again.

So instead, I pace. I pace until my legs ache and my chest tightens with the weight of everything unsaid.

I have to find that thin line, that precarious balance between letting him slip away and coming on too strong and pushing him away.

When I finally crawl back into bed, the sheets are cold. My mind races in endless circles, but slowly, exhaustion drags me under.

And just before sleep claims me, a quiet thought slips through the fog.

Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow I'll say more. Maybe tomorrow I'll send a real message instead of just a heart reaction. Maybe tomorrow I'll take the risk.

Because tonight, he opened a door. Just a crack. But it was enough. Enough to let in the light. Enough to let me hope.

M orning comes too early.

The sunlight slices through the blinds, throwing bars of gold across my face. My

phone is still on my nightstand, the screen dark, no new notifications. My chest dips a little at that, but I tell myself it's fine. I wasn't expecting anything overnight.

I stretch, roll over, and grab my phone anyway, thumbing it awake like maybe, just maybe, I missed something .

Still nothing.

But I open our chat anyway, staring at his message from last night.

'Don't thank me! I want to thank you. It meant a lot.'

Twelve words. Twelve words that have taken up every inch of space in my head since he sent them.

I bite my lip, debating. Maybe now is the right time. Maybe a morning message feels safer. Less pressure. Casual, even.

I type, ' Me too. More than I expected.'

I stare at the words, my thumb hovering over the send button. My heart thuds against my ribs, wild and uncertain.

Then I think about his smile. The real one, not the careful, guarded one. The one he gave me when I teased him about always ordering the same pastry at the office cafe. When he laughed, it was like watching winter thaw into spring.

I really, really want to see that smile again.

I hit send.

The moment the message goes through, my pulse skyrockets. No taking it back now.

I toss the phone aside like it's suddenly radioactive and scrub my hands over my face. Breathe. Breathe. Just let it be.

Minutes crawl by.

Nothing.

I get up, shuffle to the kitchen, start a pot of coffee even though my stomach is too knotted to think about food or caffeine. I distract myself with small tasks, watering the plants, unloading the dishwasher, checking emails that can wait until Monday.

But when my phone buzzes, I swear my heart stops.

I snatch it up so fast I nearly drop it.

His name is on the screen.

My breath catches as I open the message.

'I'd like to see you again.'

That's it. Simple. Direct. No emojis, no fluff. But my knees go a little weak anyway .

My chest tightens, this time in the best possible way. Heat blooms behind my ribs like sunlight breaking through clouds.

I want to say yes immediately. I want to scream yes from the rooftop. But I force myself to play it cool, just a little.

I type, ‘ Me too. When are you free?’

A beat passes.

Then, ‘ Tonight?’

My breath whooshes out like I’ve been holding it all morning.

I grin, wide and unstoppable.

Tonight.

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Chapter seven

Jade

The sun is too bright.

It's stupid, really. A perfect summer afternoon, blue sky stretched overhead, a few lazy clouds drifting like they don't have anywhere better to be. Warmth soaking into my skin like something that could, theoretically, be healing if I let it. If I trusted it. Which, of course, I don't.

I sit at the edge of the pool with my bare feet dangling in the water, swirling little ripples across the surface.

The tiles are warm beneath me, sun-baked.

I pull my knees up tighter to my chest, still wearing my hoodie even though the day is begging me to shed it.

There's a pair of swim trunks under here, sure.

Hiding under the long hem of my oversized hoodie.

I put them on like a normal person. But I'm not in the mood to feel normal.

Normal feels like a lie.

Pink is stretched out like a cat on one of the sun loungers, head tipped back, sunglasses perched on his nose.

He's wearing the most ridiculous neon orange swim trunks that clash violently with the faded towel he's half-reclining on.

His skin glows bronze from the sun, sleek and glossy, like he belongs in some magazine shoot for summer decadence.

He has bloomed since meeting Monty, doubly so since getting married. My best friend is thriving. Healing. Radiating health and happiness. Despite the worry for Monty's missing little brother .

Blue is in the pool already, of course. He moves through the water like he was born from it, and that's because he was.

His blond hair is slicked back, and he runs a hand over it before ducking under again.

He surfaces with a smile, eyes bright. Even though he's been through hell, the same hell as me, he still finds a way to sparkle.

Maybe it's the siren in him. Maybe it's something stronger.

Maybe it is Sammy and the joy of having a mate. Your very own special person. Someone to share your life with.

I envy that.

I wrap my arms tighter around my knees, watching them both from the shadow I've made of myself.

“You know,” Pink drawls lazily, not even bothering to look at me, “if you don’t get in soon, I’m throwing you in. Hoodie and all.”

“I’d like to see you try,” I say, though there’s no heat in it. My voice feels like it belongs to someone else. Someone who isn’t wound tight as piano wire.

Pink glances at me, lifting his sunglasses to peer over the top of the frames. “You’re brooding again,” he observes. “It’s a nice day. No brooding allowed. House rules.”

“We have house rules?” I murmur.

“We do now.”

Blue pushes himself up onto the pool’s edge beside me, water streaming off him like liquid glass. He leans a little closer.

“He’s right, you know. You look like you’re thinking too hard.”

“But I suppose that’s allowed,” adds Pink, quick to make amends and keep the peace, as always.

Blue hums in agreement, head tilted back so the sunlight catches silver threads in his hair. “You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“That thing where you stare at the water like you think it’s going to swallow you whole.”

I glance at the pool, then back at them. “Maybe I like the idea.”

Pink pushes his sunglasses down the bridge of his nose just far enough to peer at me properly. “Maybe you should stop being so dramatic and come cool off.”

“I’m not being dramatic.”

Both of them laugh, easy and warm like the day itself, and I roll my eyes but can’t quite hide the smile tugging at my mouth. This is how it always is with them, like sunlight through a storm cloud. Like I can almost forget the weight in my chest for a little while.

I shift position. The tiles are warm beneath my skin, grounding me. I trail my fingers through the water. Cool. Inviting. Alive in a way that makes my pulse skip, even now.

Blue watches me with that knowing little look of his. “You’re distracted.”

“I’m fine.”

Pink snorts. “He’s glowing.”

“Shut up.”

“Not until you tell us who he is.”

“I didn’t say there was a he.”

“Bestie,” Pink says, sitting up straighter, his voice softening just a fraction. “You didn’t have to.”

My throat tightens. I want to deny it, make a joke, push it away like I always do, but the truth is already written all over me. I can feel it, bright and ridiculous and far too

dangerous.

I went on a not-date with Flyn and then I had a bout of insanity this morning and asked him out.

“It’s nothing,” I say. My voice isn’t even convincing to my own ears.

Blue tilts his head, studying me the way only he can. Like he’s listening to something beneath the surface of the conversation, some current pulling at me from underneath. Siren senses. He can hear lies like a song.

Pink catches the look and leans forward, propping his chin on his hands. “Jade.”

“It’s not...” I start, then stop. Exhale slowly. “It’s not nothing.”

Their eyes light up like I’ve handed them a gift.

“Oh my god,” Pink breathes. “You like him. Like, like, him .”

“Maybe.”

Blue smiles, slow and soft. “It’s Flyn, isn’t it?”

My heart stutters, the useless thing that it is. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Pink lets out a triumphant squeal and splashes water at me with both hands. “I knew it! I knew it was him! You’ve been mooning over him since forever.”

My face burns hotter than the sun overhead. “I have not.”

“You have,” Blue says gently. “And that’s okay.”

The words settle over me like a second skin, too fragile and too dangerous all at once. Because it’s not okay, not really. Not when I’ve spent so long convincing myself that I don’t get things like this. Not after everything.

But I want to. Goddess, I want to.

I lean back on my hands and let my head tip toward the sky, the sunlight warm against my closed eyelids. “We had dinner.”

Pink makes a delighted noise in the back of his throat. “Was it a date?”

“No,” I say, too fast. Then, quieter, “Not officially.”

Blue’s smile doesn’t waver. “But it felt like one.”

I swallow past the knot in my throat. “Yeah.”

There’s a beat of quiet, save for the soft lap of water against the pool tiles and the distant hum of summer insects. When I risk opening my eyes again, they’re both watching me, but there’s no teasing now. Just quiet understanding.

Pink pushes his sunglasses up into his hair and swings his legs around to sit cross-legged on the lounge. “Do you want to tell us about it?”

The question is gentle. A lifeline, if I want it.

I do.

So I tell them. Not everything. Not the whole messy tangle of nerves and longing and

fear clawing at my chest, but enough.

How Flyn looked when I first saw him again, like the sun had chosen him as its favorite canvas.

How his laugh curled in my chest and refused to let go.

How easy it was to fall into old rhythms, like no time had passed at all.

How much I wanted to reach for him. How much I still want to.

When I finish, Pink's eyes are suspiciously shiny, and even Blue looks a little glassy-eyed, though he tries to hide it behind his usual calm.

"And you're seeing him again tonight?" Pink asks, voice full of breathless hope.

I nod, unable to keep the stupid smile off my face. "Yeah. I am."

"That means this evening we need to help get you ready."

"I'm not..."

"Don't you dare say you're not making a big deal out of it," he cuts in, wagging a finger at me. "Because it is a big deal. And you deserve to feel good about it."

Blue hums in agreement. "You do."

Their belief in me feels like a weight and a blessing all at once. I don't know what I did to deserve them. I don't know how to carry this fragile hope inside me without it shattering.

But I want to try.

“He’s got you smiling,” Pink observes, triumphant.

I shake my head, the corners of my mouth betraying me. “Maybe. A little.”

The truth is, it’s more than a little. The truth is, when I think of Flyn, I feel something dangerous flickering in my chest. Not like the hunger the fey taught me to cultivate. Not the siren pull of Blue’s old songs. But something quieter. Warmer. Like sunlight through a cracked windowpane.

It’s terrifying.

It’s intoxicating.

I want it.

I want him .

“You know,” Pink says, pushing to his feet and stretching in the sun, “for what it’s worth, you deserve this. We all do. But you especially. You deserve something good. Something that’s yours.”

I swallow hard against the lump rising in my throat. I don’t trust my voice, so I just nod.

Blue gives me a nod in return before sliding back into the water with a graceful splash. He moves away, leaving me with Pink, the afternoon, and my tangled thoughts.

Pink studies me a moment longer, then flashes a wicked grin. “Come on, moody boy.

In the pool. It'll clear your head."

"I'll think about it."

"No thinking. That's the rule."

Before I can protest, he lunges. Fast. Unrelenting. He grabs me around the waist and hauls me, hoodie and all, straight into the water.

I yelp, arms flailing, but it's too late.

We crash beneath the surface, the world exploding into cold clarity. For a breathless second, everything else drops away. The uncertainty. The doubts. The weight of memory.

Just water. Sunlight rippling overhead. The muffled sound of laughter.

When I break the surface, sputtering, Pink is already grinning like he's won some unspoken victory.

"There," he says, pushing his wet hair back from his face. "Better."

And damn him, he's right.

The hoodie clings to me like a second skin, heavy and soaked, but for the first time all day, I feel unburdened. I laugh. An honest, startled laugh that actually feels like it belongs to me.

Pink whoops in triumph, and even Blue joins in, his smile wide and gleaming.

For a heartbeat, it feels almost easy. Almost possible.

Maybe tonight, when I see Flyn, I can let myself believe in that possibility .

Maybe, just maybe, I can let him see me. Not the mask, not the shadow of my past, but the real me beneath it all.

Maybe he'll stay.

“Thanks,” I say to Pink, my voice rough but real.

He just smiles softly in acknowledgement.

And for the first time in too long, I let myself hope.

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Chapter eight

Flyn

I 'm early. Ridiculously early.

The balloons are still half-inflated, the streamer bag is dumped in a heap on the kitchen counter, and the big cardboard castle Dad and I wrestled together yesterday afternoon looks like it's leaning just a bit too far to the left.

It's not a safety hazard yet, but give it ten minutes and one overly enthusiastic five-year-old, and we're probably looking at structural collapse.

"Thought you said three," Cara calls from somewhere behind a mountain of wrapping paper.

She emerges a second later, hair up in one of those messy knots she always pulls off without trying.

There's a purple streak of icing across her forearm, and she looks at me like she's trying to decide if she's grateful I showed up or if she wants to make me blow up the rest of the balloons as punishment.

I grin and hold up the bag of pastries I brought as a peace offering. "Technically, it is three. I'm just fashionably punctual."

"You're thirty-five minutes early."

“That’s within the acceptable range.”

“Maybe if you’re eighty.”

I set the bag down on the counter, narrowly avoiding a sticky puddle of what I hope is jam and not some kind of crafting mishap. “Come on, you love having me early. Admit it.”

Cara snorts, but there’s a little tug of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

She doesn’t say it out loud, but I can see it in her eyes.

Yeah, she’s glad I’m here. Things have been heavy for her lately.

Heavy in that way they get when you’re a single mum of a firecracker kid and trying to juggle work, life, and planning a miniature princess-and-dragons themed blowout in your too-small apartment.

I roll up my sleeves and gesture grandly at the chaos around us. “Right. Where do you need me?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Streamers. I gave up about twenty minutes ago.”

“Streamers, my mortal enemy.” I grab the tangled mess and start sorting them out, looping them through my fingers like I know what I’m doing. Truthfully, I’ve never been great at party prep, but I’ll be damned if I let my niece’s birthday bash fall apart on my watch.

Cara moves around the kitchen, wiping icing off her arm with a damp cloth. She’s watching me the way she always does when she knows I’ve got something simmering under the surface. It’s a big sister thing. Like she’s got some built-in radar for my

moods, even when I'm keeping things light.

"Alright," she says, too casually, "Out with it."

I feign innocence. "Out with what?"

"The thing that's making you smile like an idiot."

"Maybe I'm just happy to see my favorite sister."

"You only have one sister."

"Which makes you my favorite by default."

She arches an eyebrow at me, unimpressed. "Flyn."

Damn it. Caught.

I let out a breath and lean against the counter, running a hand through my hair. I probably could've kept it to myself, but honestly? I kind of want to tell someone. And Cara, well, she's earned the right to hear it first.

"Alright," I admit, grinning despite myself. "I saw Jade last night. "

Cara pauses mid-icing swipe. Her eyes widen just a fraction before she catches herself and tries to play it cool. "Jade?" she echoes. "As in Jade Jade?"

"The very same."

"The Jade you wouldn't shut up about, then mysteriously stopped mentioning like he never existed?"

I wince. “Okay, when you put it like that...”

“Flynn.” She abandons the cloth and plants both hands on her hips. “Tell me everything. Right now.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. Full, warm, from-the-chest laugh that feels like it’s been waiting to get out all morning.

“It wasn’t supposed to be a date,” I start, untangling another streamer and slinging it over the curtain rod. “We said it upfront, just two old friends catching up. No pressure.”

“But?”

“But it felt like more.” I glance sideways at her, my grin going soft around the edges. “It was more.”

Cara’s face does this thing, this sort of half-smirk, half-oh-brother expression she saves for moments exactly like this. She wipes her hands on a tea towel and leans on the counter, clearly settling in for the story.

I don’t make her wait.

“We met at that little Italian on the High Street, you know, the one with the candles and the world’s most seductive wine list?

” I say. “He arrived not long after I did. Same hoodie he always used to wear at the office, like comfort armor. And I swear, Cara, the moment I saw him... boom.” I snap my fingers. “Like no time had passed at all.”

I draw in a hasty breath. “I mean, we had run into each other the day before and

grabbed a quick coffee, but this was different. This felt like so much more .”

Cara’s expression softens. “You really missed him.”

“Yeah,” I say, quieter now. “I did. ”

I tell her about the conversation, how it started light, easy, with old stories and half-teasing jabs, like slipping into a favorite old jacket.

How somewhere between the second glass of wine and the laugh he gave when I told him about my disastrous attempt at sourdough baking, it stopped feeling like a casual catch-up and started feeling like gravity.

“And the way he looked at me, Cara,” I say, shaking my head like I still can’t quite believe it. “Like I was the only person in the room. Like he was seeing me and not just... I dunno. The mess I am sometimes.”

Her eyes go a little glossy, but she blinks it away fast. “You always were a sucker for that kind of thing.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“So?” She nudges my shoulder with hers. “Did you kiss him?”

I laugh, a little embarrassed, a little thrilled. “No. Thought about it, though. About a hundred times. But I didn’t want to rush it. I didn’t want to scare him off.”

Cara tilts her head, studying me like she’s seeing something new. “You like him.”

“Of course I do.”

“No, I mean you really like him. Like... more than just a bit of fun.”

I swallow past the lump rising in my throat and nod. “Yeah. I really do.”

She watches me for a beat longer, then nods once, firmly, like she’s come to a decision. “Good. Then don’t mess it up.”

I laugh again, softer this time. “I’ll try not to.”

There’s a pause as we both go back to working on the decorations.

For a moment, it’s just the rustle of streamers and the faint thrum of Sorch’s birthday playlist coming from the Bluetooth speaker in the living room.

But I can feel Cara’s question lingering in the air between us, unspoken but heavy with curiosity.

So I answer it .

“We’re seeing each other again tonight,” I say, and the words feel like fireworks in my chest. “Nothing fancy. Just... seeing where it goes.”

Cara’s smile is bright enough to outshine the wonky fairy lights strung across the kitchen. “That’s my brother,” she says, reaching up to ruffle my hair like she used to when we were kids. “Chasing the good things.”

“Gotta keep life interesting,” I reply, swatting her hand away with a grin.

She opens her mouth to respond, but just then, the living room door rattles, and Sorch’s unmistakable voice shrieks from the hallway. “Is it party time yet?”

Cara barely has time to laugh before Sorcha barrels into the room, a whirlwind of pink tulle and sparkly plastic jewelry, eyes wide with birthday excitement.

“Flyyyyyyn!” Sorcha’s shriek rattles my eardrums a full second before her small body launches at my legs like a missile. I just about catch her, scooping her up in a spin that makes her giggle, her tiny arms around my neck.

“Hey, birthday girl!” I say, peppering her cheeks with loud, obnoxious kisses that make her squeal with delight. “How does it feel to be ancient? What are you now, twenty-five?”

“Five!” she corrects me with a grin, holding up her whole hand like proof.

“Five? No way. You sure?”

She nods with solemn authority, and I play along, widening my eyes.

“Well, that explains the wisdom I see in your eyes. Very mature.” I set her down gently.

I watch her twirl away toward her pile of presents and inspect the wrapping with barely contained glee. And I realize something warm and certain is settling in my chest.

Cara’s watching us, warmth in her eyes. For a second, everything feels perfectly simple. Balloons, cake, family. Safety. Belonging .

But under all that, my thoughts keep drifting back to Jade. To the way his eyes softened when he looked at me across the table. To the way his voice dipped when he said my name like it was something precious.

Tonight, I'll see Jade again.

And for the first time in a long time, it feels like maybe, just maybe, there's something magical waiting on the other side of this day.

I hope tonight, I get to see that look again.

No, it's more than that. I hope tonight, I give him a reason to stay.

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Chapter nine

Jade

The summer air is thick with sugar and heat and music that blares from tinny speakers hung like bunting between food stalls.

Everything smells like fried dough and grilled meat.

And the colors, the neon signs, pastel paper lanterns, ribbons twirling in the wind, are too bright, too loud.

The kind of overstimulation I usually avoid.

But Flyn's here.

So. I'm here too.

He's waiting near the entrance to the fair, a riot of color behind him and that same easy smile stretched across his face like he's exactly where he wants to be.

His hair is messy in a deliberate way, blond curls catching the pink and gold of the fading sky.

He's wearing a short-sleeved button-down shirt with tiny flamingos on it like some kind of ridiculous invitation to happiness.

I hate how much I love it.

“Jade,” he calls, spotting me. He waves like I might not see him otherwise, like he’s not the most obvious, sunlit thing in the whole damn crowd.

“Hey,” I say, managing not to trip over a child wielding a balloon sword. “You weren’t kidding about this place being busy.”

I’d been so dubious when he suggested it. But the more I thought about it, the more perfect it seemed. A fair is so very Flynn. And looking at his beaming face, I was right.

“I told you,” he grins, falling into step beside me. “Chaos, noise, overpriced snacks. What’s not to love?”

Everything, I think. Except the fact that it is an embodiment of your personality. But I keep that to myself.

Instead, I nod at a cotton candy stand and raise an eyebrow. “Shall we start strong?”

“Oh, absolutely. We’re going full cliché tonight. I’m talking hotdogs, caramel apples, rigged games, maybe even a Ferris wheel if you’re lucky.”

I huff a laugh. “And if I’m not lucky?”

“Then I guess I’ll just have to bribe you with fried food until you forgive me.”

It’s too easy, falling into rhythm with him like this. Too easy to forget that this, whatever it is, is built on the fragile bones of a year-long silence and everything I’ve never told him. But right now, in the syrupy heat of the evening, I don’t want to remember.

I want this.

We skip the cotton candy, but Flyn buys a fresh doughnut within the first five minutes. He tries to offer me a bite, but it's covered in powdered sugar and already melting in his hands, so I wrinkle my nose and decline.

"More for me," he says, taking an enormous bite and immediately coughing. "Oh god. I inhaled sugar."

I laugh, actually laugh, and he looks so pleased with himself I have to look away.

We meander through the crowd, dodging toddlers and teenagers, the occasional glittery face-painter, a guy on a unicycle juggling glow sticks. Flyn's energy is pure momentum, dragging us toward anything that looks shiny or loud. It should be exhausting. It usually would be.

But when he grabs my wrist and pulls me toward a booth with oversized stuffed animals and a grumpy teen holding plastic darts, I follow without protest .

"You're good at this sort of thing, right?" he says, handing me the darts. "Mysterious past, nimble hands, acute observation skills."

I stare at him. "What exactly do you think I used to do?"

Goddess, if he thinks I'm some sort of cool assassin, he is going to be deeply, deeply disappointed.

He just smirks. "Win me a frog, Jadey. I believe in you."

I should walk away. I should scoff and fold my arms and say something cutting.

But instead, I take the darts, aim carefully, and nail three balloons in a row.

I'd give Flynn the stars if I could, so this is a small ask and a very rare occasion that I'm glad for my inhuman heritage.

Things that are apparently hard for full-blooded humans, are easy for me.

Flynn whoops in delight. He fist pumps the air. He acts as if I just won gold at the Olympics and not at all like I've just hit three balloons with wonky plastic darts.

The teenager working the stall looks deeply unimpressed. He even gives an eye roll when Flynn excitedly points to his choice of prize.

The frog is huge. Ridiculous. Fuzzy and green and so bright it hurts to look at.

Flynn cradles it like a baby.

"I'm naming him Reginald."

I stare at Flynn in bewilderment. "You're not serious."

"Oh, I'm deeply serious. He's coming home with me. He's gonna have a little place on the end of my bed. I might even get him a monocle. We'll see."

I shake my head, smiling despite myself. I like the image Flynn has painted. I like it a lot. This ridiculous frog is going to live on Flynn's bed, and every night and every morning, Flynn is going to see it. See it and think of me. The person who won it for him.

We wander for what feels like hours, pausing now and then to eat or rest or just lean against a railing and people-watch. It's warm, but not uncomfortable. The kind of

summer night that wraps around you like a loose blanket, soft, a little sticky, full of potential.

There's a band playing on a small makeshift stage near the center of the fairground. Flynn stops to listen, bobbing his head slightly to the beat. He glances at me. "You ever dance?"

"Not in public," I say flatly.

"Tragic," he says, grinning. "Guess I'll have to dance enough for both of us."

He does, for a few seconds, ridiculous and floppy and entirely unselfconscious, and I want to be annoyed, but mostly I want to grab his hand and not let go.

With one last heartfelt, belly deep laugh, he abandons his exuberant dancing and leads us to a quieter section of the fair. I snatch in a sneaky, calming breath and try to let my ever-present tension go.

Flynn either doesn't notice, or he is far too kind to mention it. Instead, he launches into a verbal adventure.

Flynn tells stories. About work. About his sister Cara's work as a wedding planner and the bridezillas she has had to deal with.

He talks about his niece Sorchia demanding a unicorn cake with 'real magic'.

I laugh at most of them. He notices when I don't and lets the silence settle without trying to fill it.

Then he buys me a drink at some makeshift lemonade stand. Mine's blueberry basil, weird and refreshing. And we sit on the edge of a fountain, the fair a glowing

backdrop behind us.

“This doesn’t feel like real life,” I say before I can stop myself.

Flyn glances sideways. “No?”

“It feels like... a memory someone else had. All the color and music and lights. It’s too much. Too perfect.”

He leans back on his hands, legs stretched out. “Real life can be pretty perfect, if you let it.”

I look at him. At the way the light spills across his face. At the softness that sneaks into his expression when he’s not performing. There’s something about the way he watches me, quietly, carefully, like he’s waiting for me to open up.

“I almost didn’t come,” I admit, my voice low.

It’s a terrible confession. Especially since meeting up again was all my idea.

“Why?” There is no condemnation in his voice. No hurt, outrage or judgment. Just a plain, simple and honest curiosity.

I shrug. “Because I’m not good at this. At... fun. At relaxing. At trusting that someone isn’t just being nice because they feel sorry for me.”

He’s quiet for a long moment.

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” he says, finally. “Not even a little bit.”

Something tightens in my chest. “You don’t even know me.”

“I’m trying to.”

I want to believe him. I want to believe that this isn’t some brief flicker of interest, that he won’t disappear again when things get hard or complicated or ugly. That he won’t look at the truth of me and flinch.

But he’s looking at me now and he’s not flinching.

“Do you ever wish you could have a redo?” I ask suddenly. “Restart your life and not make the same mistakes?”

Not that being born a freakish twisted science experiment was something I chose. Being born into slavery and then sold into a harem were not mistakes of my making. I know this, yet somehow I always feel like the blame is mine. As if I’m the one who fucked up my life.

The fey called, and I listened. I think the guilt I carry over that calamity is rational and valid. But it only seems like the icing on the cake that is the disaster of my life.

I take a deep breath. Framing it all as a mistake is the only way I can talk to Flynn about it. It’s the only way I can keep my secrets. The only thing he might understand.

Flynn tilts his head, considering. “Sometimes. But mistakes are part of life. I think about who I am now more. He’s an awful lot smarter, believe it or not. I like him better.”

“I don’t like myself,” I say, too quietly.

He shifts closer, knees brushing mine. “Then maybe it’s time to meet the version of you that exists now . I bet he’s not as awful as you think.”

I huff out a laugh, but it catches in my throat. “You’re very sure of yourself.”

“Only about the important things.”

We’re too close now. The crowd feels distant, muffled by the buzz of the generators and the thrum of my own pulse in my ears. I can feel the warmth of his skin through the thin air between us.

Flyn’s gaze drops to my mouth. Just for a second.

My breath stutters.

I think... maybe this is it. Maybe he’s going to lean in. Maybe I’ll let him.

But I hesitate. And that’s all it takes.

A kid shrieks in the distance. A car horn blares. The moment cracks.

Flyn clears his throat and leans back a little, fingers raking through his blond curls. “So. Ferris wheel?”

I nod. Smile like I’m not trembling inside. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Chapter ten

Flyn

The Ferris wheel looms like a neon halo above the fairground, spinning slow and lazy against a velvet-purple sky.

Lights blink along the spokes in cheerful bursts of color, and from where we're standing, I can just hear the creak of the seats swaying in the warm night breeze.

It looks a little rickety. A little sketchy. Perfect.

"You sure about this?" Jade asks beside me, voice low but even. Calm on the surface. But I can see the tension in his shoulders, the way he keeps smoothing the hem of his shirt like he's trying not to bolt.

"Absolutely," I say. "What, afraid of heights?"

He lifts an eyebrow. "Afraid of being trapped on a glorified tin bench with you for twenty minutes, maybe."

"Ouch. Wounded," I grin, because I can tell he isn't being serious. He's just nervous.

But he steps forward with me anyway, joining the short line. There's a couple ahead of us making out like it's a competition, and Jade very studiously looks anywhere but at them. I stuff my hands in my pockets and try to act like my heart isn't doing that ridiculous rabbit thing.

Because it's happening. A real moment. The kind you wait for without realizing you've been waiting.

The ride operator waves us on. We climb into the seat, and it rocks under our weight. Jade sits stiffly, arms crossed, knees pointed forward like he's bracing for impact. I resist the urge to nudge his shoulder. Barely.

Maybe I should have wedged Reginald the frog between us instead of squishing him on the other side, between me and the edge of the seat. He could have acted as chaperone. On second thoughts, I'm really glad that Reginald is out of the way.

The wheel jerks into motion.

The Ferris wheel creaks softly as we climb.

The sounds of the fair grow muffled beneath us, laughter and music and the clang of game bells all turning into a kind of background static.

I sneak a glance at Jade, who's doing his best not to look nervous, one hand gripping the metal bar in front of us a little too tightly.

"You doing okay?" I ask.

"I don't love heights," he mutters.

"Good thing you've got me, then."

He shoots me a look, but it's got less bite than usual. "You're not actually going to be helpful in an emergency, are you?"

"Absolutely not. I'll panic immediately and then offer you a snack."

That earns a snort. Victory.

We rise slowly, the fairground dropping away beneath us in a patchwork of lights and noise. The air is cooler up here, the breeze tugging at my hair, brushing soft against the back of my neck. Beside me, Jade lets out a breath and finally, finally, relaxes a little.

“Okay,” he murmurs. “I get it. This is... nice.”

I smile and let my knee bump his. He doesn’t move away.

The city sprawls out in the distance, blurred lights and silhouettes of buildings under the smudge of stars. I look at him, his face turned slightly into the wind, lashes dark against his cheek. He’s gorgeous. And he doesn’t even seem to know it.

“It’s kind of beautiful up here,” he says, and there’s something in his voice, something open.

“Yeah,” I say, watching him. “It really is. ”

It’s cheesy as hell, but I literally can’t stop myself. It is like I’m momentarily possessed. By a demon who has watched far too many corny romance films.

Jade eyes flick to mine. I don’t look away.

Neither does he.

Maybe saying it wasn’t so cringe after all. Thank you random demon. You’ve done me a solid and I owe you one.

The moment stretches, electric and quiet. My heart stumbles. The rest of the world

disappears.

Then the wheel jerks to a stop. Leaving us swaying at the very top. Jade flinches, looks away, and the moment is lost. Damn it.

“I used to sneak onto rooftops when I was a kid,” I say, trying to fill the silence without breaking it. “Just to feel above everything. You know? Like, for a second, nothing could touch me.”

Jade glances at me, a shadow of a smile on his lips. “I can see that. You seem like the kind of person who’d chase the sky.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I grin instead. “And you? Ever get up to anything rebellious?”

He huffs a laugh. “Define rebellious.”

“I’m thinking... late-night swimming in a hotel pool. Scaling a building. Running away to join a punk band.”

“No band,” he says. “But I did steal a car once.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

He shrugs, expression unreadable. “Not for long. Just a joyride.”

I want to ask more. I want to know everything. But I know that tone, the way he drops a truth like a stone into a lake and watches the ripples. It means, don’t dig.

So I don’t. Instead, I say, “Well, now I feel boring. Want to steal this Ferris wheel together?”

He snorts, and the sound makes something in my chest loosen. I love making him laugh. It is my new favorite thing. I think I want to do it forever and ever.

The seat sways a little, and the fair below seems impossibly far away, tiny and bright and unreal. The wind brushes past us, warm and soft. Laden with the scents of summer. Jade turns to look at me.

And suddenly, it's quiet. Not the kind of quiet that feels empty, but the kind that holds its breath. The quiet that waits. A silence that pauses out of reverence for the moment.

His gorgeous green eyes search mine. "Flyn," he says, barely above a whisper.

I don't know if he means it as a question or a warning. But I lean in anyway, slowly, giving him time to pull away.

He doesn't.

Our lips meet. Soft. Careful. The first tentative brush of something we've both been pretending we don't want.

The kiss is soft, almost uncertain. Like he's expecting to be pushed away. But I pull him closer.

It's not perfect. Our noses bump a little. He tastes like lemonade and nerves. My hand finds his, and he squeezes tight like he's afraid I'll vanish.

And then... fireworks.

No, really. Fireworks. Actual ones. Bursting in the sky just to the left of us, bright pinks and silvers and golds lighting up the night.

We both laugh, breathless, pulling back just enough to see each other's faces.

"Did you plan that?" he says, voice shaky.

"Obviously. I bribed the fair gods. Cost me a whole hotdog."

His eyes crinkle with something dangerously close to joy, and the sight of it lights up my entire soul. I swear I'm burning brighter than the fireworks. I'm iridescent and so very alive.

We don't kiss again. We sit in the soft rush of color and light, our fingers still tangled together, and I can feel the weight of the night settling around us.

Not heavy, just... real. Like something has shifted.

The fates have tied strands together in their weaving.

Things are now fixed, set. Destinies are now bound.

A glorious new future has been created .

By the time we step off the Ferris wheel, the fair is starting to wind down. Families are leaving. Lights are flickering off, one by one. The air smells like smoke and sugar.

Jade walks beside me in silence, our shoulders brushing. I want to say something, but everything in my chest feels too big for words.

Eventually, he says, "So. That happened."

"Sure did."

“You kissed me.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Pretty sure you kissed me first.”

I’m not sure of anything at all. I have no idea how the kiss happened. But this is a good line of defense and I’m sticking to it.

“Only because you were looking at me like... like that,” Jade protests, looking all flustered and utterly adorable.

“Guilty.” I grin.

He stops near the edge of the parking lot, under a flickering lamp post. His expression has shifted into something unreadable.

“I don’t know what this is,” he says quietly. “Or what it’s supposed to be. But I... I want to keep figuring it out. If that’s something you want too.”

God, how is he real? He is truly wonderful. I’m the luckiest man alive to be given this chance with him.

“Yeah,” I say. “I really do.”

We linger, not quite ready to say goodnight. I want to ask if he wants to come back to mine, or if I can walk him home. But I don’t push. I can’t push. I don’t know exactly what he has been through, but I know it’s a lot. Jade needs time.

So instead of rushing him, I squeeze his hand one more time. “Text me when you get in?”

He nods. “Yeah. I will.”

He starts to walk away, then turns back. “Flyn? ”

“Yeah?”

There’s a flush in his cheeks, barely visible in the dim light. “Thanks. For tonight.”

I smile and try to play it cool. “Anytime.”

I can’t believe he is thanking me. I wanna fall to the ground and kiss his feet for giving me the most wonderful night of my life. He shouldn’t be thanking me, it doesn’t make any sense.

He smiles softly, and this time when he turns to go, he doesn’t turn back. I watch him go until he’s out of sight, then let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I stay standing there, staring off into the dark. My heart fluttering and something magical running through my veins.

And when my phone buzzes a half an hour later with a message that just says, Home. Goodnight, I grin like an idiot at the screen.

I think I’m in serious trouble.

The very best kind.

Chapter eleven

Jade

Flyn kissed me. Or I kissed him. I'm not sure which one of us moved first, but whatever. It happened. Our lips met, and we kissed. There were actual fireworks and everything.

And now I'm home, lying on my bed even though I might as well be floating. I'm still fully dressed, and my phone is on my stomach where I dropped it after texting Flyn that I got home okay.

It's like I don't want this day to end. If I don't get ready for bed, if I don't go to sleep, then this day will last forever. The day Flyn kissed me.

Stuff like this doesn't happen to me. It just doesn't. I can't believe this is real.

A heavy sigh escapes me and echoes around my empty room. Who am I kidding? This isn't real. Flyn kissed a human, the weird boy he used to work with. The boy who disappeared. The one he thinks is an assassin or something.

He didn't kiss a half-fey. He didn't kiss a former sex slave. He didn't kiss the man who nearly destroyed the world.

Flyn did not kiss me.

He brushed lips with shadows and half-truths and if he ever discovers the truth, he'll

be horrified.

It's wrong of me to lie to him. It's selfish and immoral.

But fuck does it feel good. It is so nice to be noticed, to be seen.

To be wanted. And sure, I know he is drawn to my physical appearance.

I've seen the look in his eyes, because I'm not blind.

But it feels like so much more than that.

He likes me. Not me, obviously, just the glimmers he is allowed to see.

And maybe that's enough. Maybe I can allow myself to enjoy it. At least for a little while. Sips of water after being lost in the desert. It's far better than nothing. Or is it? Is it actually a taunt and a tease?

I put a pillow over my face and scream silently into it. Then I remove the pillow and take a deep breath. Okay, sleep. I do not want to lie here all night spiraling and angsting.

Everything always seems clearer in the morning light. A little more hopeful.

With one last sigh, I heave myself out of bed and head for my bathroom to get ready for sleep. Hopefully, my dreams will be pleasant. Hopefully, they will be about Flynn.

I quickly hide my yawn behind my hand. The steaming coffee mug in front of me hasn't had a chance to do its thing. The morning light streaming through the dining room windows is bright, and the room is filling with people as everyone gathers for this family meeting Pink has suddenly called.

I'm not awake enough for this. Tendrils of dreams are still clinging to me. I'd rather be thinking about Flyn than focussing on whatever this is.

Just as that thought crosses my mind, Ned and Morgan walk in. I quickly snatch my gaze away and hide my shudder of unease. One day I won't wilt in Ned's presence, but today is not that day.

Blearily, I look around. Everyone is here now. All the former harem members. And their assorted mates, husbands and boyfriends. Apart from me. I'm the only one sitting here alone.

Red and his boyfriend, Brodie. Lello and his mate, Carter. Gray and his mate, Mal. Ned and his boyfriend, Morgan. Pink and his husband, Monty. And me, sitting here alone like a dumbass. The odd one out. The loser.

"Thanks for coming, everyone," says Pink.

The low hum of chatter immediately stops. All eyes turn to my best friend.

He clears his throat a little awkwardly. "When we moved into this house, there were only eight of us."

Yep. The seven harem boys and Brodie. The healer slash secret agent who helped get us out.

My gaze wanders around the crowded room. The sounds of Ned and Morgan's three kids playing drift in from the living room.

Everything has changed. Everyone apart from me.

"It's become a bit of a squash and a squeeze," says Pink.

Goddess, am I in a bad mood. All I can think about is how my lovely bedroom with its ensuite is perfectly fine for me. Perfect for one. I haven't outgrown it.

Pink takes a deep breath. He glances at his husband and gets a proud smile.

"So," he continues. "Monty has an entire stately home sitting empty since his mother fled. Fifty-three bedrooms and more drawing rooms and galleries than can be counted. There even is a ballroom."

Monty stands up. "There is a boating lake for Lello to swim in."

The little kelpie lets out an excited sounding squeak. Monty smiles softly and turns to Red.

"There are large grounds and woods for Red to run in."

Red's eyes light up. Shit, I never even considered what it must be like for a wolf shifter to live in a city. Red never complains, so it never crossed my mind. Some friend I am.

"We can build a large saltwater pool for Blue," adds Pink.

Monty smiles at his husband. "There are clear skies for Gray to watch the stars, and the folly has a great view of the sunrise."

Gray sits up a little straighter and despite my self-pitying mood, I can't help but smile. I love that my scary demon friend loves to stargaze and watch the sunrise. It is so cute. Until I remember it's because he spent a hundred years chained to a bed in a dark room.

"There is so much room that Ned and his family can have their own wing of the

house, if they want. Each of the kids can have their own bedroom.”

Ned and Morgan look at each other. Communicating something silently in that way that only couples seem able to do.

Pink turns his attention to me, and he falters. Yeah. There is nothing to offer me. What do I need? I’m not interesting in any special way. Just keep me away from fey stone circles, I guess. And it’s unlikely Monty has any of those on his giant, fancy property.

“The only downside we can think of,” says Monty. “Is that it is quite far away.”

Pink quickly interjects, “But we only moved here so Ned could be close to the kids. Nobody has any ties to this area.”

“Noah and Oscar will have to change schools,” Ned says.

Pink nods solemnly.

“It is a lot to think about,” agrees Monty. “There is no rush to make a decision. Pink and I merely wished to put the suggestion forward.”

“And you’d be happy with a bunch of random people living in your ancestral home?” I ask.

For fuck’s sake. Why do I have to be such a moody bastard? Always ruining the mood and bringing everyone down.

Monty coughs. “I don’t consider anyone here to be random people. I consider you all to be family.”

He blushes, and Pink takes his hand. My bestie gazes up at his husband with an utterly adoring expression.

Chatter breaks out. Mostly people assuring Monty that they think of him as family too. It's making me seem like a right jerk.

I hide my sigh and fight to keep my expression neutral. The thing is, I do think of Monty as family. I love everyone in this room. My found family that I do not deserve

.

The boys I went through hell with, and the men that love them. So I have no idea why I said such a bratty thing.

Brodie says that sometimes when a person feels unlovable, they push others away as a defense mechanism. Pink says that everyone understands that I don't mean it. But I have a feeling he is far more forgiving than the rest.

Talk drifts on to the benefits of moving to Monty's house. I guess it's Pink's house too, now that they are married.

I sit and listen quietly. Everyone sounds excited. Happy. It sounds more like plans than a serious discussion of the pros and cons.

My stomach twists uncomfortably. This is awful timing. The very worst.

What about Flyn? Things are just starting. I have my misgivings and I'm riddled with guilt, but something is blooming and I want to see where it leads. Goddess, do I want that. More than anything.

But that's not going to happen if I move hundreds of miles away. How will I see him? I've heard that long-distance relationships sometimes work, but I'm pretty sure

whatever is happening between me and Flyn is far too early for that.

It's definitely far too early to ask him to come with me. And that might never be an option. He sounds super close to his sister and niece. Even his parents. Nevermind his job.

Oh hells. What am I going to do? Do I give up my found family for a man I've kissed once? For the hope of something that might never happen?

What if I stay here alone, and this tentative thing with Flyn doesn't work out? I'll have nothing and no one. I guess I could run up to the stately home with my tail between my legs. But if I chose a man over them, will things ever be the same again?

Oh goddess. What a terrible, awful decision to have to make.

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Chapter twelve

Flyn

I can't believe Jade is here. In my house. On my sofa. Sitting next to me.

It feels like a fever dream come true and I can't concentrate at all on this stupid Netflix film I randomly chose to put on.

Jade seemed a little on edge when he first got here. More so than usual. But he has slowly relaxed. It might be time to pull the old yawn-and-stretch-arm maneuver, and put my arm around him. I'd like that. Sitting here in the dim lighting with my arm slung over Jade sounds amazing.

Just as I am getting really excited by the idea, the opportunity appears. Jade leans forward and towards me a little. Innocently shifting his position as he reaches for the popcorn in the bowl perched between us.

I stretch. I yawn. And as I lower my arm back down, I let it come to a rest around Jade's shoulders.

He startles at my touch. He turns his head towards me and stares at me with wide eyes, his handful of popcorn frozen halfway to his mouth.

His dazzling green eyes drop down to my lips and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. It's all the encouragement I need.

I lean forward. My movement exaggerated and slow. I want my intention to be obvious, so he has every opportunity to tell me no.

His eyes widen. He doesn't move away, he moves towards me, and our lips collide halfway between us, somewhere over the popcorn bowl.

His lips taste sweet. Softer than candyfloss. Warmer than apple pie. There are fireworks again, but these ones can't be seen by anyone else. They are igniting in my soul.

I'm kissing Jade. Again. How the fuck did I get so very lucky? This is incredible.

Our kiss deepens and grows. I can taste his hunger, his need. His passion.

My heart beats loud and strong. It quickens my pulse. My head is spinning and a deep, profound arousal is burning through me.

Breathlessly, I pull away. Just a little. I rest my forehead on his.

"Can I blow you?" I gasp.

Jade squeaks and pulls away, trying to push himself into the sofa as if he wants to disappear. He stares up at me with frantic eyes.

I back off carefully.

Jade's cheeks flush a cherry red. "You don't want to do stuff like that with me."

I can feel my brows furrowing with confusion. I'm really, really sure that I do want to do stuff like that with him. All the stuff. All the time.

“Why?” I manage to say.

He squirms and looks away. “My body count is really high.”

I blink in surprise. I have no idea what I thought he was going to say, but it wasn’t this.

“You have an Only Fans or something?”

“No,” he mumbles.

I suck in a breath. “So, you went wild in your college days?”

“No,” he says in a tiny voice.

Okay, now I’m perplexed. Jade looks so miserable. He is all hunched up as if braced for a punch. He looks... ashamed. But having fun is nothing to be ashamed about. I’m only surprised because he seems so shy. I didn’t think he was the type to fly through Grindr.

Has someone told him his past is wrong? Some stupid nonsense about being dirty?

Jade draws his knees up to his chest and hugs his legs. He hides his face and turns into a small ball of misery.

I blink. Then my guts feel with cold, jagged ice. My jaw drops open with horror.

I think this is Jade’s dark past. The shit he has been through. The stuff he never wants to talk about.

He isn’t talking about consensual fun. He is talking about evil. About violence and

abhorrent violations.

Oh god. I want to hug him and hold him tight. I want to kiss him and promise him that nobody is ever going to hurt him ever again.

I lean gently closer. “I don’t care about the past. The future is the only thing that interests me.”

Jade peaks over his knees to stare at me incredulously. His green eyes are bright. Shining through the shadows of my living room.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I say softly.

His eyebrows shoot up and a silence settles around us. The film babbles away in the background, casting flickering light around the room.

“The guys I live with, we were all held captive together by a wealthy asshole.”

I nod solemnly and concentrate on keeping my expression neutral. I need to listen, not display my horror and outrage.

“He...he named us after colors. Red, Blue, Gray, Pink, Yellow, but everyone called him Lello. And Ned was Indigo, but he refused to use it. It was... we were Ritchie’s Rainbow. His harem. For his own use and for his friends.”

My mind is spinning. Whirling. It latches onto something stupid and thoroughly unimportant.

“Ritchie? Ritchie Smithson? That tech-bro jerk? ”

Jade nods slowly.

“Didn’t he fall off his balcony and die after taking too much cocaine?”

Jade grows pale. “Um... yeah. That’s how we were freed.” He squirms uncomfortably. “The harem was covered up. Bad publicity. That’s why you haven’t heard about it.”

I shuffle a little closer. Hopefully not so close that I’m making him feel crowded. I’d like to take his hand, but he’s hugging his knees so tightly I can’t reach them.

“Thank you for telling me,” I say as calmly as I can.

I don’t want him to hear my anger because it is not for him. It is for a dead man and the injustice of it all.

Jade nods and then looks determinedly at the TV screen. That’s fair enough. I angle myself away from him and also pretend to be engrossed in the film. It’s a good excuse to give him space. He’s bound to be feeling all sorts of emotions after sharing his trauma with me.

And to be honest, I’m kind of reeling too. I know dark and awful stuff happens in the world. But I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone in real life who has been subjected to something of this level.

A good twenty minutes pass in silence. It feels weighted, but not tense, and I’ll take that as a good sign. Especially when he lowers his feet down to the floor and sits in a much more relaxed position.

“Did you really want to give me a blow job?” Jade blurts suddenly.

I can see him blushing out of the corner of my eye. So, out of mercy, I keep looking at the TV.

“Still do,” I say with a grin.

Jade lets out a little squeak. “Are you just saying that to be nice?”

I chuckle. “Jade, dude, I’m not so nice that I go around offering blow jobs out of the kindness of my heart.”

Slowly, carefully, I turn my head to look at him. He isn’t blushing anymore. He is staring at me. Eyes intense and full of hunger .

My heart crashes against my ribs. I can feel my pulse in my throat. My knees have gone weak. I lick my lips.

“Can I blow you?” My words come out dry and hoarse. But maybe Jade will think it sounds sexy.

I’d love to blow him. I really, really would. But he might be feeling vulnerable because of sharing such deep stuff.

He slowly licks his own lips. Mirroring my gesture. My lungs pause. Jade nods, slowly and shallowly. But it is absolutely a nod.

My body flings into motion. My hands snatch up the popcorn bowl. My torso twists to place it on the side table. My lower half moves almost simultaneously and in no time at all, I’m on my knees on the floor in front of Jade.

He stares down at me, looking for all the world like a startled rabbit caught in the headlights of a car.

I inch closer, and slowly, oh so slowly, lift my arms up and reach for his fly.

His Adam's apple bobs again, but he doesn't look away. Or move away.

I inch even closer. I'm kneeling right between his spread legs now, and it feels heavenly.

There is color back in his cheeks, but this is a different kind. It's heated, like his gaze. He wants this, every bit as much as I do.

Carefully, I unwrap his dick. Thankfully, it's only hidden by a pair of jeans and a pair of boxers. It doesn't take me long to free it.

It's already fully hard. Long, thin, with a delicious curve to it. Pale, with a rosy flush at the head.

Just feasting my eyes on Jade's cock is making me drool. It's gorgeous, just like the rest of him. And I'm so damn ecstatic that he is this hard just from the idea of me sucking him. Talk about flattering.

I tear my eyes away to look up at his face and check he is still okay. His pupils are blown and he looks very, very okay. In fact, he looks like he really wants me to get the fuck on with it. And that's a request I'm very happy to oblige with .

I dip my head down. My tongue pokes out, pretty much of its own accord. I lick Jade's cock. One long broad stroke all the way from root to tip.

He gasps. His cock twitches under my touch. It actually moves. Bucking like a wild thing.

My lips stretch into a grin. This is going to be so much fun.

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Chapter thirteen

Jade

O h goddess. This can't be happening. This can't be real. I can't be sitting on Flynn's sofa while he kneels in front of me. He can't have just licked my cock.

I must be dreaming. Hallucinating. I'm impressed that my imagination can conjure up such overwhelming pleasure.

Suddenly, warm, wet softness laps along my cock again. The sensation shoots along every nerve ending in my body, tingling like electricity. Flynn just licked my cock, but I felt his touch everywhere.

My head falls back. My lungs suck in a shaky breath. But there is no chance to recover because Flynn licks me again.

My entire body jolts. I'm seeing stars. Oh sweet goddess, I'm not going to last long. I'm going to cum embarrassingly quickly.

I can just picture how Flynn's grinning face will look when I shoot my load in five seconds flat.

He is going to crow in triumph, and actually, that's not so bad at all.

As that realization rushes through me, I can feel my muscles relaxing.

Every last bit of tension and anxiety leaves my body.

I'm melting into Flynn's sofa. Sinking into the pleasure he is giving me.

His warm tongue caresses me again, and my brain turns to mush. Everything is the heat of his wet mouth. Nothing else exists.

A strangled cry escapes me as he takes the head of my cock into his mouth. This feels amazing. Flynn is amazing. Doing this with him, with someone I like and trust, it's... it's going to blow my mind .

I cry out again as he bobs his head down and takes more of me into his mouth.

My hips want to buck up. My cock wants to be buried deep down Flynn's throat, feeling his wet heat all around me.

But I don't allow myself to move. I will not take more than Flynn wants to give.

This is his gift to me. He gets to set the tone and the pace.

I get to sprawl here and have my world rocked.

Another carnal cry pours out of me as euphoria floods my veins. His plump lips seal around me and slowly roll down my aching flesh.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This feels so damn good. I could get addicted to this. Craving Flynn's lips on me every single day could easily become my new obsession. The very purpose of my existence.

My fingers curl frantically into the velvety material of Flynn's sofa cushions.

I'm floating on the very edge of orgasm.

Every muscle I possess is tingling. There is no blood pulsing through me, only ecstasy.

I don't think clinging onto the sofa is going to stop me from floating up to the heavens.

But I guess it's worth a try. And it's not like I have a choice.

I'm not in charge of my hands. I've lost all control of my body.

It belongs to Flynn now. It's responding to him and not to me.

My eyes flutter closed. Flynn's head moves. He bobs up and down my hard length. Pressure. Friction. Heat. Softness. It's a cacophony of sensation. Tearing through me. Overwhelming me.

It's glorious. It's divine. It's too much.

A cry rips from my lungs, tearing through my throat. It fills the room. My orgasm chases it. Exploding through me and out of me. All the ecstasy is too much to be contained, so it is bursting free.

Every cell and molecule in my body is consumed. I am alight with rapture. Burning with delight.

I'm breathless and boneless. Sprawled helplessly on Flynn's sofa. My eyes open. My hearing returns.

Weakly, I lift my head. Flynn is still on his knees in front of me. He has tucked my

cock back away, and as far as I can tell, he has drunk down every last drop of me .

He is grinning at me and his eyes are sparkling. I don't think I have ever seen anyone look so entirely pleased with themselves.

My heart flutters, momentarily losing rhythm as it tries to recover from that mind-blowing orgasm. I like Flyn looking at me like that. I really do.

I lick my lips. My tongue does what I want it to. Great. I'm regaining control of my body. I swallow. Yep. All working.

"Do... you. Do you want me to..."

Okay, my mouth is working, but my brain is clearly not quite there yet. Apparently, I'm a long way from forming coherent sentences.

Flyn's grin intensifies. I didn't think that was possible.

"You don't have to," he says. "That's not why I wanted to blow you."

"I want to!" I say, all in a rush, and far too loud.

Flyn's eyes light up. He is looking at me like I'm offering him the moon and all the stars. Not a measly blow job.

He moves gracefully. Rising from his knees with ease. He sits on the sofa next to me, and I weakly slide off of it. My legs are still trembling from the force of the orgasm he gave me, but somehow I manage to get into position between his legs.

He is wearing gray sweatpants, because of course he is. He is probably completely oblivious to what that does to people. Knowing Flyn, he probably wears them only

because they are comfortable. He really has no idea how frigging sexy he is.

I deftly pull his waistband down and I'm not at all surprised to discover he is not wearing any underwear.

His cock is very hard. It's leaking a good amount of precum onto his belly.

And oh my goddess. There is a neatly trimmed thatch of golden hair crowning the base of his cock.

I've missed pubes, I really have. It feels like it's been a long, long time since I've seen any.

They are entirely absent from porn and I had all but forgotten they exist .

I drag my eyes up a little. His cock is wide. Not overly long. A couple of nice thick veins running along it. It's perfect. It's going to fill my mouth nicely.

I hated sucking cock in the harem, but this is going to be totally different. This is going to be wonderful.

I swallow and edge a little closer. What a night this is turning out to be. And to think that I very nearly didn't accept Flynn's invitation to 'hang out'. Holy stars, am I glad I didn't sulk in my room feeling sorry for myself and the impending move out to the countryside.

A wave of uncertainty washes over me. I ignore it and push it down. Getting closer to Flynn when I might be moving far away, could very well be a stupid idea, but right now, in this moment, I could not care less.

Right now, I feel alive. Full of hope. In ways I don't think I have ever felt before. No

one and nothing is going to take this night away from me. Not even my own doubts and insecurities.

If in the future all I am going to have of Flyn is memories, then I want to make them good ones.

Mind feeling settled, I take a deep breath and get to work. As soon as I taste his salty precum, I moan. I want to inhale the manly scent of him and keep it in my lungs forever.

I exult in the taste of him as I take him all the way.

I have no idea if it is a fey thing, or caused by practice and training, but I don't have a gag reflex.

A fact that right now I'm extremely grateful for.

I want all of Flyn. I want to feel him deep inside me.

I want to consume him and devour him. Make him a part of me.

I'm hungry for him in ways I didn't know I was capable of.

Flyn groans. A deep, masculine groan that rumbles through every part of me.

"Fuck. How are you so good at that?"

He tenses. All his muscles go rigid. Shit. I was trying to let his words wash over me. I'm pretty sure I hid my flinch.

I open my eyes. He stares down at me .

Well, this is awkward. Here I am, mouth stuffed with his cock, and we are both thinking about my past as a sex slave and all the very many men I have blown.

“Sorry,” he croaks softly.

There is so much genuine dismay in his kind blue eyes. So much regret. He didn’t mean anything by it. He was merely babbling. He doesn’t seem to care about my sordid history.

My shoulders relax. I give him a look that I hope conveys I’m okay. And then I lose myself in worshipping his cock.

My mind falls blessedly silent. Wonderfully still. My world is taste, sensation, and Flynn’s pleasure.

It doesn’t take long for him to fall apart. He whines and whimpers, deep in his throat. He writhes. His legs fall open, wider and wider. His hips keep lifting up in supplication.

Flynn truly is a bottom. Seeing him like this is making me sure of it. It’s calling directly to some primal part of myself. It’s making me wonder what it would be like to sink my cock into him. What kind of noises would he make then?

Flynn cries out as he cums. I drink him down and concentrate on prolonging his pleasure. I don’t stop until his noises turn overstimulated and nearly pained.

I pull his sweatpants back up and slowly climb to my feet. He is all loose limbed. Lungs heaving. Cheeks flushed. His eyes are closed. He looks blissed out.

Something is swirling in my gut. An urge to flip him over and impale him on my cock. Fuck him even more senseless while he is all pliant like this.

“It’s late. I should go,” I blurt.

Flyn’s eyes snap open. “You don’t have to. You could stay the night.”

I stare at him.

“Not for sex,” he adds hurriedly. “Cuddles and stuff. A cozy sleepover.” His devastating grin appears .

“People do that?” I ask, my surprise making me careless. Usually, I’m far better at hiding my ignorance.

Pity flashes across his blue eyes, but he hides it quickly. “Sure,” he drawls. Then his expression turns sheepish. “Okay, not with casual hookups and such. It is way up there on the cheesy and romantic scale.”

I can feel my lips twisting upwards in a helpless smile. “I like cheesy and romantic.”

The thought of snuggling up to Flyn, of sleeping while cocooned in his strong arms, sounds like heaven. I’m sure I don’t deserve it. But I’m going to take it, nonetheless.

Flyn gives me a dazzling smile. Like I’ve just given him a million pounds. My heart flutters in response.

Yeah, staying the night with Flyn is going to be magical. It’s leaving in the morning that’s going to be hard.

Chapter fourteen

Flyn

Breakfast is looking good. I hope Jade likes it. I also hope he enjoyed staying the night because I absolutely adored every single second of it. Jade in my arms, in my bed, was like all my wildest dreams come to life.

I read somewhere once that when you sleep together, actually sleep, not sexy stuff, your bodies learn one another's. The pattern of your breaths. The rhythm of your heartbeat. The small movements you make, and the soft noises.

Last night certainly felt like that. Sleeping was far more intimate than the blow jobs. I feel attuned to Jade now. Like our hearts are beating in sync.

I turn my head towards the door, just as Jade walks in. Which totally proves my point about us being in harmony. He's wearing one of my tee shirts and a pair of my boxers and damn, does he look fine.

His green eyes are staring at the kitchen table, and he is practically gawping.

"What is this?" he asks.

"Breakfast!" I answer with a grin and a wink.

He gives me an exasperated look.

“I don’t know what you like,” I explain. “So I made different stuff.”

Jade stares at me like I’ve grown two heads .

I point at the selection on the table. “Bacon. Pancakes. Eggs. Lots of eggs. Scrambled, fried, poached, hard-boiled, soft-boiled.”

Jade’s attention slowly shifts away from me and turns to my offerings.

“Toast!” I add. “Of different levels of toastiness. And orange juice, pineapple juice, tea and coffee.”

Jade blinks. He looks a little thunderstruck. He shakes himself and then slides into a chair. He looks up at me.

“Are you only wearing that ridiculous apron?”

I laugh. I love this apron. Cara got it for me as a joke. It’s a picture of a buff naked man and actually, it’s a really good apron. The material is nice and it fits well.

“I have boxers on,” I say. “But I can take them off, if you like?”

Jade blushes and quickly looks away. He picks up a piece of toast. Note to self, Jade likes medium toastiness. That was setting three on the toaster.

“How often do you work out?” Jade asks while still avoiding looking at me.

Grinning, I quickly put the frying pan down so I can strike a pose and flex my biceps.

“Only once a day.”

Jade shakes his head. “And then you go and hide it under baggy clothes.”

He is trying so hard not to look at me, but he is definitely catching glimpses out of the corner of his eye and he is absolutely appreciating the view. I love it.

I stop my posing and resume dishing up breakfast. “Baggy clothes are comfy. I don’t work out to impress people.”

Jade finally looks at me. His expression is curious. Like he is trying to figure me out. I guess I can be a little unusual, but hey, the world would be a boring place if we were all the same.

I love that Jade clearly appreciates the way I look. But I don’t work out so I can attract people. I simply enjoy being active and feeling healthy.

Jade picks up a glass of orange juice. I smile. Got it. Medium toast and orange juice.

He takes a sip and then stares at me wide-eyed. “Is this freshly squeezed?”

I puff my chest out. “Of course! Only the best for my man!”

A beautiful shade of pink blooms on Jade’s cheeks. It’s the prettiest thing I have ever seen.

“Am I your man?” he says softly.

I clear my throat. “I guess, technically we are only dating. But hopefully one day you will be mine.”

Jade ducks his head and busies himself with putting scrambled eggs onto his plate. I’m pretty sure I caught a pleased look before he lowered his gaze.

I hope I'm not coming on too strong. I really don't want to scare the poor man off, yet at the same time, I really want him to know where I stand. I want that to be perfectly clear. No doubts. It's a tricky line to navigate, but I'll keep on trying my best.

We fall into a comfortable silence as we attack breakfast. Jade eats a good amount of food, and I do love a man with a healthy appetite.

He also makes little sounds of appreciation as he samples my cooking and I really, really like those.

I like them a lot. I could easily get used to hearing them every day.

I think he is completely unaware that he is doing it and that's just adding to the allure. He can do things to me without even realizing it. It's like his superpower or something.

"I need to get going," Jade says as he finishes his last mouthful.

I nearly pout, but I manage to control myself. Jade isn't a stray cat, I can't keep him. He has a life and stuff to do.

"Can I use your shower?" he asks.

"Sure!" I say, a little too enthusiastically because my heart is racing at the thought of getting to keep Jade for just a little bit longer .

"There are towels on the towel rack and body wash on the shelf in the cubicle. Oh! Try the fancy shampoo in the red bottle! It will make your hair so silky! Well, even more silky than it already is!"

Jade chuckles at me and heads to the shower. I stay sitting at the kitchen table. I lace

my fingers behind my head and sigh contently. The sun is shining, and after I've shoved all this into the dishwasher, the day is mine. Life is good.

The sound of the shower reaches my ears. Jade is in my shower. Jade stayed the night. Jade let me suck his cock, and then he sucked mine.

Life is more than good. Life is fucking fantastic.

Images of a wet and soapy Jade float through my mind.

My cock twitches in interest. Joining Jade would be incredible.

But I have to resist. Baby steps. I'm too much for most people, nevermind someone who has experienced the horrors Jade has been through.

I cannot go in all guns blazing. Acting like an over enthusiastic puppy.

I take a deep breath and start loading the dishwasher. Cara will be proud of me and my self-awareness and self-restraint. I can't wait to tell her.

I'm just finishing tidying the kitchen and wiping the counter down when Jade emerges wearing the clothes he arrived in last night. Shit, maybe I should have offered to wash them for him? Oh well, too late now.

"Your roommates are going to think you are doing the walk of shame," I tease.

Jade groans and covers his face with his hands. "I'm never going to hear the end of it."

Chuckling, I walk up to him. He doesn't tense in my presence, so I grab the lapels of his jacket and pull him close. He lowers his hands from his face and I lean towards

him for a kiss. He meets me half-way.

One day, when I've kissed Jade a thousand times, there might not be fireworks anymore, only a slow smoldering of embers.

But today is not that day, and we still have nine hundred and ninety-eight more kisses to go.

So right now the fireworks are here. Along with a fluttering of my heart and a curling of my toes.

We kiss and kiss, and suddenly we are crashing into the wall. I'm panting, he is panting. This was supposed to be a brief goodbye kiss. A mere peck. But now I am on fire.

I flip us around so that I'm the one with the wall at my back. The last thing I want to do is make him feel trapped.

He grinds his hard, jean-covered cock against me, and I groan. Blindly, I fumble at the button of his jeans. I pull away from our frantic kiss just long enough to gasp, "Is this okay?"

Jade nods sharply and slams our lips back together. His fingers find my cock at the exact moment mine find his. We groan in unison.

God, I love his cock. So silken, so hot, so very responsive. Stroking it is divine. As is the feel of his clever fingers wrapping around my own cock.

I gather his precum, he gathers mine. All I can hear is rapid breathing, grunts, and the slap of flesh against flesh. This feels frantic, feral. It's all hunger and need. Primal and passionate. Pure in its simplicity.

He speeds up and tightens his grip. I copy him. Mirroring his actions. We are feeling the same thing, at the same time. It is hot as fuck. I hope we can cum at the same time.

Fuck! A yell escapes me as he does a twisting thing with his wrist that I can't hope to emulate. The pleasure it shoots through me is intense. My balls are tightening. Drawing up.

"Jade...!" I cry out on a helpless wail.

He jerks at the sound. His cock throbs in my hand. Suddenly, I remember he is fully dressed and supposed to be going home in these clothes.

With my free hand, I grab my apron that's been pushed to the side, and I place my cupped, cloth covered hand over his tip, just as he erupts.

The feel of his wetness tips me over the edge and I join him in shaking and shuddering through an orgasm.

My cum is splashing onto my naked belly, but that's fine. I can grab a shower.

Panting heavily, Jade steps back. He looks down at his apron covered dick.

"Thanks."

"No problem," I wheeze.

He tucks himself away and straightens his clothes. "I really do have to go."

I nod. I don't think he is ashamed, or full of regret. A little flustered, perhaps. Possibly taken aback by the intensity of what just happened between us. So it's

totally understandable that he needs some space, some time to compose himself.

He turns and steps towards the door.

“Jade?”

He looks over his shoulder, green eyes flashing.

“Call me?” I grin.

He laughs and his eyes light up even more. “I will.”

I watch him leave. I watch the door shut behind him. I stay plastered against the wall staring at the closed door with a stupid grin on my face.

This really is the best day ever.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:19 pm

Chapter fifteen

Jade

Please, please let me be able to sneak into my room without anybody seeing me. My friends are all perceptive assholes. One glimpse of me, and they will know.

I make it all the way to the bottom of the stairs before my luck runs out. Ned and Red step out of the living room. Ned has Lottie on his hip.

“Thanks for looking after Lottie,” he says.

“Anytime,” beams Red.

Great! Maybe they won’t notice me. I skip the bottom step because it squeaks, but the damn second one decides to squeak too.

Ned’s gaze snaps to me. I freeze.

“Weren’t you wearing those clothes yesterday?” he asks.

I should say something cool. Something effortlessly nonchalant. But my brain cells have deserted me and my cheeks are betraying me by burning hotly.

It’s not as if my clothes are slutty or even nightclub wear. But they are definitely Saturday night going-on-a-date and not the usual type of thing to be wearing early on a Sunday morning.

Red's eyes light up. "Did you have a nice time?"

All I can do is nod. There is no point in denying anything.

"Good for you, kid!" exclaims Ned, and he sounds genuinely pleased for me .

It's far more than I deserve. I sabotaged his relationship with Morgan. I very nearly ruined it forever. And Ned would not only have lost the man he loves, he would have lost the kids too.

I don't deserve his forgiveness. I really don't.

"Was it Flyn?" asks Red.

I nod again. And then hurriedly blurt, "Please don't tell Lello! I'll never hear the end of it!"

They both chuckle.

"Your secret is safe with us," Red assures me.

"But this is Lello we are talking about," adds Ned. "He will find out."

I groan and cover my face with my hands. They are right. There is no escape.

"Is Pink home?" I ask. If gossip is going to get out, I want to spill everything with my best friend first.

"No, he went off somewhere with Monty for the day. Antique Fair or something," says Ned.

“Okay, thanks,” I say before running away up the stairs and to my room.

Being sad about Pink spending time with his husband is ridiculous.

It’s the natural order of things. People do not hang out with their besties all the time once they are married.

Nevermind the strain my going on the run put on our friendship.

Spending a long time apart is a challenge for any kind of relationship.

But there is not a single thing I can do about that.

I shove all thought of it from my mind and concentrate instead on getting changed as quickly as I can. As soon as the tee shirt is over my head and last night’s clothes are safely in my laundry basket, I let out a sigh of relief.

Then I stand silently in the middle of my empty room. Now what?

Now what do I do with myself?

I don’t have a husband. Or kids. Or a job.

Hell, I don’t even have any hobbies. It’s pathetic.

As well as ungrateful. I should be singing from the rooftops that I’m free.

I’m no longer a sex slave. No longer a product of a breeding program.

No longer hiding from the Paranormal Council.

I should be ecstatic. It should be enough.

With a heavy sigh, I flop onto my bed.

Finding your feet and forging a new life takes time. Everyone says that. I was set back by going crazy and nearly allowing the fey into the world. That's why I'm behind my friends. Even though they'd all reassure me that I'm not behind at all.

I sigh again. I could tidy my room. Or I could check the rota and see if anyone needs a hand with their chores. I know I'm up to date with my share, but it would give me something to do.

My gaze flicks to the laptop on my desk.

I could do a few more job applications, I suppose.

Even though the constant rejection is getting a bit tiring.

Though, what else do I expect? It's not as if I'm brimming with skills and qualifications.

It is a damn miracle I ever got the call center job, and they aren't going to take me back or even give me a reference after I disappeared without a word.

Well, now I've thoroughly depressed myself. Why can't I focus on happy thoughts? Like Flynn and the amazing night I just had. Sleeping in his arms was more wonderful than I ever could have imagined.

And that ridiculous, over the top breakfast? That's a memory to cherish forever. I'm quite sure that Flynn is just that lovely. Exuberant and full of life. He would have gone overboard for any guest, I'm not special. But my oh my, is it nice to close my eyes

and pretend that I am.

Fantasizing that Flyn likes me so very much that he wants to make me an amazing breakfast, makes me feel all warm and tingly. So why not? Pretending someone loves me might be the closest I ever get to the real thing. I can enjoy it while I can.

I take a deep breath and relax against my pillows. I'm feeling sleepy now, but that's okay. Drifting off to pleasant thoughts about Flyn sounds like a great plan. And naps are always nice .

My thoughts drift. They turn to that goodbye kiss that explosively turned into so much more. Just thinking about it is making my cheeks burn, but there is no one here to see, so it's fine.

I really don't know what came over me. That passion. That need. That hunger. It was exhilarating. I've never felt anything like it. I didn't even know it was possible. Is that what a healthy sexual appetite is supposed to be like? Is that what I have been missing out on all my life?

My eyes close. Images swirl and scatter. Thoughts of Flyn float away. Colors coalesce. I drift through mist and suddenly I'm somewhere new.

It's a clearing in the woods. A beautiful summer day. But the grass is too green. The trees too gnarled and ancient. The sky is too vivid.

Brightly colored birds and butterflies flutter and sing. Wildflowers dance in the gentle breeze. In the shade of the trees, toadstools gleam a bright red.

It's beautiful. And it feels like home. A feeling I have never experienced before, and now that I have, I know I will ache for it forever.

My lungs fill with fresh, sweet tasting air. I want to sing. To dance. To glory in this wondrous place.

But before I can move, a pair of glowing eyes catch my attention. They are loping through the trees and heading straight towards me.

Goosebumps erupt over my flesh.

A large tawny-colored wolf trots out of the shadows and right up to me. I blink and the wolf changes. It shifts shape, and now there is a young man before me. He has long chestnut brown hair, brown eyes and curling horns. He is naked, but that seems as natural as the woods.

“Welcome home, nisny,” he says with an unnerving grin.

“Am I in the fey world?” I blurt.

His grin widens. “More or less. ”

“Send me back!” I demand, but it comes out sounding more like a terrified shriek.

“No one summoned you, little nisny. You found your own way,” the stranger answers calmly. His eyes are slitted like a cat’s and for some reason that is scaring the crap out of me.

“Your soul knows what it needs,” he says smugly.

His tone is enough to shake me out of my fear and make me bristle instead.

“I don’t need this. I don’t need you!” I snap.

The stranger merely flashes his white teeth at me. His ears are pointed and there are small plaits and twists woven into his hair.

“You need Flyn,” he says.

My heart thumps. My blood turns to ice. Hearing Flyn’s name on this creature’s lips is all kinds of wrong.

“What?” I stutter. He can’t have just said what I thought I heard.

“Would be such a shame if something happened to him,” the fey all but purrs.

I swallow thickly. “You have no power in my world.”

He tilts his head to the side. For all the world like a dog. Or a wolf.

“Do you wish to bet on that?”

My heart flutters frantically, and my lungs seize up.

“Open the portals, Jade, and your Flyn will have a long and happy life.”

I gasp and shudder and all of a sudden I’m lying on my bed, and Gray is peering down at me. I yelp and scramble up to a sitting position. I’m dripping with sweat.

“That was just a dream, wasn’t it?” I plead to Gray as my mind scrambles to adjust to my new bearings. It feels like part of me is still in that clearing in the woods. As if not all of me is back in my bedroom.

Gray’s brows furrow, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he steps closer and reaches for my amulet that’s tucked into my tee shirt. The amulet Gray made me. The one I never

take off. The one that is supposed to keep the fey out of my head.

I fish it out for him, and he holds it in the palm of his hand. A warm, jagged and fizzy sensation spreads from the necklace and to my chest. Magic. It's demon magic. Gray is doing something to the amulet.

Fuck. Was it broken? Have the fey found a way around it?

Gray bites his bottom lip. He releases the amulet and takes a step backwards. The strange buzzing feeling fades.

"Is it fixed now?" I ask.

Gray stares at me with his too-dark eyes. "You went there."

I swallow. "I... I didn't mean to."

The demon stares at me for several agonizing heart beats. Then he nods and walks away, disappearing into a shadow in the corner of my room. I shudder as every hair on my body rises.

I really wish Gray would get the hang of using doors. It would be far less unsettling.

My lungs heave in a shaky breath. I wipe my arm over my sweaty brow.

Fuck. I can't believe that any of that just happened. I dream wandered into the fey realm? Or to the fey dream realm, at least.

And the fey threatened Flyn.

My stomach flips over. Despite my sweaty state, and it being summer, I suddenly feel

cold.

They can't hurt Flyn. I know they can't. Gray would be more worried if he thought they could.

So it's fine. Everything is fine.

But perhaps I should do the right thing and not take any risks. Play it safe, just in case.

Maybe I should stay away from Flyn. For his own good.

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Chapter sixteen

Flyn

“ E arth to Flyn?”

I blink and find myself pinned by my sister’s ferocious glare. Oh crap, I’m in trouble.

“Have you been listening to a word I’ve been saying?” she snaps.

Yep. I’m definitely in trouble. Frantically, I look around. We are standing in my tiny kitchen. There is a giant laundry bag on the floor, and the door to the washing machine is open. The machine looks stuffed full of Sorcha’s things.

I swallow. “Your washing machine broke again.”

The power of deduction is great, because my recollection has vanished. I only vaguely remember Cara waltzing into my apartment after letting herself in with her key.

Cara rolls her eyes. “And the other stuff I’ve been talking about for the last ten minutes?”

I stare at her helplessly while frantically hoping my brain will give me something. Anything. But it’s crickets and tumble weed in my head.

“Sorry,” I wince, admitting defeat.

Cara sighs and crosses her arms over her chest. “So, what’s up?”

“Jade hasn’t answered any of my texts for fifty-two hours!” I blurt frantically.

Her eyes narrow. “Ghosting people is childish. ”

My entire body recoils. The very idea of Jade wanting to ghost me, makes me feel physically sick. I don’t think he’d do that. But I don’t know how to explain that, and I know damn well that ghosting is exactly what it looks like.

“Normally I would agree, Sis. But Jade has been through some serious shit. He’s got a thousand reasons not to behave like an undamaged person.”

Cara’s expression turns thoughtful. “What kind of shit?”

I sigh and run my hand through my hair. “Not my place to say.”

Cara nods in acceptance, but I can tell she isn’t getting it. She’s going all big sister and blaming Jade for hurting my feelings. And I can’t stand that. I don’t want her thinking badly of Jade.

“But it’s really dark shit!” I add.

Her eyes widen.

“Darker than that,” I say as I watch her mind whirl. “Darker than you can imagine.”

Her nose wrinkles up. “Flynn, you know my imagination is pretty fucked up, right? You’ve seen the books I read?”

I nod solemnly.

Cara's eyebrows rise, and then her face pales. "Damn," she says softly.

Tension leaves my shoulders. This is more like it.

My favorite person in the world is no longer harboring ill will against my second favorite person.

Or is Jade my third favorite? Because Sorcha has to be pretty high on the list. And then there are my parents.

But then again, I have a strong feeling that Jade has the potential to fly up to the very top of that list. Although, I'm not sure ranking that includes potential is fair.

I take a deep breath. Okay. Cara, Sorcha and my parents are joint first. Jade is second, at the moment, with the very real likelihood he could join the joint first-placers.

Cara snaps her fingers in front of my nose. I startle and focus on her.

"Do you think he is okay?" she asks .

My stomach rolls over. "I don't know."

He had to disappear before. Maybe he has had to run again? The billionaire who kept him locked up is dead, but other assholes could be after him.

Cara nods decisively. "Alright, give me his number. I know a guy."

"A guy?" I repeat dumbly.

"A guy that can track the location of phones."

My eyes widen. “I’m not even going to ask.”

“Good boy,” Cara says with a grin as she pats me on the top of my head.

She really is the worst sister. And the very best.

This is a nice street, in a nice neighborhood. I can’t really get a good view of the house through the trees, especially in the dark, but it looks very nice. Huge and set back from the road, with a long driveway sweeping up to it.

This is the location Cara’s guy said Jade’s phone was, and its most frequent location. Is the mysterious tech guy right? Is this Jade’s home?

My stomach does another queasy thing. What if Jade is being held here against his will?

I take a deep breath. Tech guy didn’t say it was a new location. So, it probably is simply Jade’s home. I can’t know for sure, but that’s why I’m here. To check on Jade. Make sure he is okay. That’s all I am doing. I’m not a stalker, I’m a concerned... friend.

Friend. The word feels strange. Is that what we are, friends? We’ve kissed a couple of times. Exchanged blow jobs, and spent one night cuddling in my bed. That’s more than friends, in my opinion, but is it enough to be anything else?

Sighing, I get out of my car. It’s ten p.m. If I linger any longer, it will be too late to knock on this door without seeming like a real creep. And there is no way I could survive another night not knowing if Jade is okay.

My car beeps softly as I lock it. Here goes nothing.

I stroll up the driveway, trying to look nonchalant. There are a lot of cars crammed in here. Jade did say he lived with a lot of other people, so I guess that makes sense.

Suddenly, a weird tingling sensation races across my chest. What the fuck was that? The sensation is startling enough to stop me in my tracks.

Then I yelp and stagger back a step. There is someone standing right in front of me. Where the hell did they come from?

The stranger is a good head shorter than me, and very slender. They are wearing a white bathrobe that has seen better days. The person's hair is dark. Long enough to curl around their jaw. Their eyes are dark too. Very, very dark.

I shudder. I think this stranger is a guy, but we haven't been introduced and I don't like to assume. Especially since they are so very extraordinarily pretty in a very androgynous way.

I swallow. This person standing in front of me is tiny and pretty, yet I'm feeling incredibly uneasy and I'm acutely aware that I'm all alone in a shadowy driveway at nighttime.

"I... um... I'm looking for Jade?" I stutter.

The scary person tilts their head to the side. I've seen dogs do this, but never a human. It's giving me the creeps.

"Flyn?" rasps a surprisingly deep voice.

Oh my god! Jade has talked about me? This is amazing! I feel a grin stretching across my face.

“Yep! That’s me! I’m Flyn!”

The front door opens, and three more people walk out. They glide down the driveway and stand next to Creepy Person, effectively blocking off the drive.

My gaze flicks over them apprehensively. One of them has red hair, another bright blond. The third is more brunette, and his dark eyes are glaring at me something wicked .

“Hi,” I say weakly.

All four of these people are spectacularly gorgeous. If I didn’t know Jade, I’d easily say they were the most beautiful people I have ever seen.

“Gray, who is this?” asks the blond.

“Flyn. Mundane,” answers Creepy Person, who is apparently called Gray.

Wait a minute? Did they just call me mundane? I know I’m not the most exciting person in the world, but that’s a bit harsh.

“Jade’s Flyn?” exclaims the blond.

My heart does a little flutter. Being called Jade’s is something I could really get used to.

Gray nods.

The blond beams and reaches his hand out towards me.

“Wait!” snaps the brunette. “We don’t know how he found the house.”

Blond Guy pouts, but his hand falls back down. He gives me an expectant look, which is far more friendly than the looks his friends are giving me.

“It’s, um... complicated. I just really wanted to check if Jade is okay?”

The expressions on all four faces harden. Crap. I’ve clearly said the wrong thing. And upon reflection, I can see my mistake. I’ve more or less confessed that Jade isn’t talking to me. Which means I have very little right to be here.

And... oh shitting hell. I can’t believe I’ve been such an idiot!

These four people are clearly people who were sex slaves with Jade.

He frigging told me who he lives with. So this is basically like a domestic violence shelter.

Nobody is supposed to know where it is. For everyone’s safety and security.

No wonder they are less than impressed with me turning up out of the blue.

“I’m sorry!” I blurt. “I’m just worried about Jade. If he is okay, I’ll leave. ”

Brunette scowls at me. “Jade would have asked us before giving you this address. So, I repeat. How did you find it?”

My shoulders slump. “I know a guy who can track phone locations.”

Oh lord. Saying it out loud is awful. It makes me sound so dodgy. Fuck, I think I am actually a stalker. I was merely in denial before.

I watch as surprise, alarm and fear flow across the faces of the guys standing in front

of me and my heart sinks. What have I done? I've made them feel unsafe in their own home. After everything they have been through.

I'm great at messing things up. But this is spectacular, even for me.

The redhead stands up taller. He has clearly decided something. "Lello, go get the others, but not Jade. Tell them to gather in the dining room." The blond scampers off.

Redhead turns to me. "You better come inside."

My guts twist. Yeah, I don't think that's an invitation. It's very clearly a, 'you're coming with us whether you like it or not.'

I'm in so much shit.

Chapter seventeen

Jade

This feeling of unease is getting annoying. I'm home. Lying on my bed, scrolling on my phone. Earbuds in, listening to my favorite Spotify playlist. I couldn't be any safer.

There are six other paranormals here, seven counting Mal. And Brodie and Carter are both former Council Enforcers. Even Monty is a powerful mage. All in all, this house is probably the safest place in the universe.

Morgan and Sammy are human, but that's still extra eyes and ears. If something was wrong, somebody would have spotted it by now.

So I'm being stupid. Everything is fine. I haven't had any more freaky dreams about the fey. I haven't contacted Flyn, so he is safe. I've blocked his number, so there are no messages or missed calls weighing on my conscience.

It's all good. Except for my heart, but I'll live. Flyn being alive and well is more important than anything. I cannot put him in danger. The risk may be small, but it's not one I'm willing to take.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. But it's no good. I'm still feeling on edge. Grunting my annoyance, I pull my earbuds out and sit up.

At first, I hear nothing. Then I realize there are a lot of murmuring voices coming

from the dining room. Why has everyone gathered there ?

I get to my feet. Have I been excluded on purpose? My stomach twists uncomfortably. I'm being silly. I'm sure it's nothing.

I leave my phone on the bed and pad quietly down the stairs. As I approach the dining room, I hear a voice that I would recognize anywhere. My heart pounds, fast and strong.

Flyn? Flyn is here? But why?

I burst into the dining room, and sure enough, Flyn is sitting on the sofa. Everyone is surrounding him and none of them are looking friendly.

I rush to Flyn's side. He sees me and the look of relief on his face makes my heart flutter and guts curl. I stand by him and glare out at my friends.

"What's going on?" I demand.

"He tracked you down without knowing your address and turned up here uninvited," snaps Ned.

An icy shiver races down my spine. He's right, I haven't given Flyn my address. I wouldn't do that. Not without checking with everyone first. Not without being more certain about where things with Flyn were going. My found family's safety and security is not something to be messed with.

I twist my head to look over my shoulder at Flyn. He looks up at me with a sheepish expression.

"I know a guy who can track phone locations."

My eyebrows rise. I turn back to my friends.

“He’s explained himself,” I say sternly.

I’m surprised, I really am. I didn’t think Flyn knew people like that.

I’m taken aback that he’d be so motivated to find me.

But, this is Flyn. The most honest and sweet person in the world.

There is no way in all the worlds that he has a single nefarious bone in his body.

He has probably never even had a bad thought cross his mind in his entire life.

I look out at the sea of dubious, unconvinced expressions. My heart drops. They don’t know Flyn, so their concern is entirely reasonable.

I take a deep breath. “He is not a Revivalist. Or a hunter. Or someone employed to capture a new harem.”

Behind me, I can sense Flyn squirming. I can also sense his confusion. Most of what I just said must be like gibberish to him.

I hold my head up high and glare out at everyone. They don’t have to be worried about Flyn, and I’m certainly not going to let them do anything to him. The man is innocent.

“Do you vouch for him?” asks Red.

“Yes!” I reply immediately.

The atmosphere in the room lightens. People shift position. From one breath to another, it is not as tense as it was. They are starting to believe me, to trust my judgment.

Carter sighs. “I guess if Gray wipes his mind...”

“No!” I yelp.

Oh goddess! Flynn doesn’t deserve that. It can’t happen. It is deeply unpleasant. And the results are unpredictable. It may be selfish of me, but the thought of Flynn forgetting me is beyond awful. I can’t bear it.

I swallow tightly. “He... hasn’t. I haven’t... given him the talk yet. But he is still mine. I claim him. Flynn is my boyfriend.”

I’m shaking so hard I’m going to be sick.

I haven’t told Flynn about the paranormal world.

I’m not sure I ever intend to. As for claiming him as my boyfriend?

Oh hell, I can’t believe I’m doing this.

Where have I found the audacity? But it’s the only way I can think of to stop his mind from being wiped.

The sofa creaks as Flynn moves suddenly. I twist my neck again to give him a furtive glance. He is sitting up ramrod straight now. With the hugest grin I’ve ever seen on anyone’s face. Butterflies take flight in my stomach and I snatch my gaze away.

Lello has his hands over his mouth, and his eyes are bright. Pink is beaming. Red is

smiling softly. My gaze tracks around everyone else. They don't look quite as happy, but the mood is thoughtful, pleased. Accepting.

Thank goodness. I could cry with relief .

Blindly, I reach behind me. Flynn's warm hand slips into mine. I pull him up from the sofa and then out of the room. I tow him up the stairs and I don't slow down until we are in my room. I don't breathe until the door clicks shut behind us.

I turn to face Flynn and I find myself caught in his blue gaze. We are standing alone in my bedroom, still holding hands. And I just declared to a room full of people that he was my boyfriend. He definitely would have understood that bit.

Oh crap. I try to swallow, but I don't quite manage it. Talk about awkward.

"Sorry!" we both say at the same time.

I chuckle nervously. Flynn grins. Then his gaze slides off of me to look around my room.

He whistles. "Nice!"

Is it? I turn around and try to see my room through new eyes. It looks perfectly normal to me. A little plain and dull, if anything. It's a good size, I suppose, and it has an ensuite.

Flynn, however, looks genuinely impressed.

I blink. I guess my perception could be skewered. While I grew up in slavery, it was on an earl's country estate. And then I lived in a billionaire's penthouse in London. There has been an awful lot wrong with my life, but I guess a lack of fancy

surroundings has never been an issue.

“I am sorry for being a stalker,” Flynn says softly, snatching my attention back to the here and now.

I squeeze my hand. “I’m sorry about my friends. And for saying you are my boyfriend.”

He grins, flashing perfect white teeth. “I’d love to be your boyfriend.”

My heart does something strange inside my ribcage. Almost like it is trying out dance moves. How can Flynn be so lovely? So open, honest? So very confident in his own skin.

I give him a weak smile. I have no idea what to say .

“But you know, no pressure. I only tracked you down because I was worried about you.”

Guilt gnaws at me. I drop my gaze. “Sorry.” Ghosting him was a shitty thing to do.

Soft fingers brush under my chin. Gently, Flynn tilts my face up so that I’m looking at him again.

“Don’t be sorry,” he says softly. “I’m sure you had your reasons.”

Yeah, my fey ancestors might abduct and torture you as a way of getting me to open interdimensional portals and allow them to come to Earth and conquer it.

A wave of despondency washes over me. So intense it takes my breath away. But then, suddenly, Flynn’s soft lips are pressing against my own. Sensation shoots

through my entire body, all the way down to my toes.

My body doesn't wait for my mind to process. My body moans. My body kisses Flynn back with passion. Eagerness. Hunger and need. I'm acting like I want to devour the poor man.

He pulls away, just a little. Just enough to catch his breath. "Sorry," he gasps. "I should have asked before pouncing on you, but you looked so sad."

I grab the back of his head and shove him towards me. Our lips collide. I'm the one doing the pouncing now. We are equal. All is fair in love and war, I think the saying goes.

Having Flynn in my arms feels like a dream come true. My version of heaven. I've missed him. Two pathetic days and I missed him. Did I really think I could bear to spend an entire lifetime away from this man?

Because I can't. Kissing him now is making that perfectly clear. It may be weak of me, stupid and dangerous. But I'm not strong enough to resist. I want Flynn. I need him.

Gray didn't tell me to stay away. That's going to have to be good enough.

A rustling noise by the door startles me. Flynn hears it too, because he breaks our kiss to look over his shoulder .

There, on the carpet, where it has just been shoved under the door, is a strip of three condoms still in their silver foil.

I hear Lello's footsteps running away. Oh hells. This is the most embarrassing moment of my life, but Lello, bless him, has a point. Flynn would expect to use

condoms. He doesn't know about the paranormal world, let alone the whole 'paranormals can't carry or transmit human diseases' thing.

My cheeks are burning. I remember Lello telling me in far too graphic detail about how he was curious about condoms and wanted to try them. I guess Carter indulged his mate, and these were left over.

Flyn chuckles warmly, and the sound eases the tension in my gut. I should have known he'd take it well.

Nevertheless, I close my eyes. "Can we go to yours?" I plead.

Flyn laughs again. "That's the best idea you've ever had!"

I don't know about that. But it's a start.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:19 pm

Chapter eighteen

Flyn

Stepping into my apartment is a bit of a downer. It looks so small and dingy compared to Jade's home. But Jade is here with me, and he doesn't seem to mind at all. Besides, he has seen it before. He has even stayed the night, and that didn't scare him off.

Tonight, he asked to come here. And I really, really hope it is so he can kiss me some more. In privacy this time.

I chuck my keys in the bowl on the side table. I turn towards Jade. He closes the distance between us, cups my face and smashes our lips together. A moan escapes me. The kiss seems to shoot straight down to my cock. Arousal, lust, desire, it all ignites. Suddenly, I am a raging inferno.

I kiss Jade back with all the passion in my soul, all the hunger in my heart. We stagger, still kissing, into the living room.

Jade pulls away, just a fraction. His forehead rests on mine.

"I want to fuck you," he pants.

"Yes please!" I blurt.

He chuckles, then he is kissing me again. My hands move of their own accord. They

start tearing Jade's clothes off. He starts ripping mine off. We are working with no grace at all. Just fervor and need. It's like our clothes are suddenly on fire and we need to get them off before we die.

Kissing while undressing is tricky business.

But we are getting there, and oh my lord, seeing Jade's body being revealed is throwing me into a swoon.

His body is perfection. Gorgeous. A work of art.

The type of body that is a travesty to cover up.

Dimming such beauty behind cloth is surely sacrilege.

"Did you bring those condoms?" I gasp.

Jade blushes and nods before attacking my lips again.

Thank heavens for that, because I don't think I have any condoms in my apartment. Well, perhaps some long expired ones. In my defense, I've been single forever, and I got tired of the hookup scene a long time ago.

I've got lube, though. It's essential for solo self-care time, in my honest opinion, and now I'm going to get to use it for something a whole heap more fun. Having sex with Jade.

My head spins at that thought. I can barely believe that this is happening. Surely it is too good to be true?

Dimly, I'm aware we have made it to the bedroom. We are both naked. Things are

looking really good.

I topple us onto the bed. Our limbs entwine. This must be what heaven feels like. My hands roam over Jade. His hands explore my body, and everywhere he touches me lights up as if he is leaving fire in his wake.

His lips leave mine and I nearly whimper in dismay.

“I... I want to top,” he all but whispers. His eyes are wide and dark. Cheeks flushed.

I grin. “I know, baby. I want you to top too.”

His eyes widen even more. I swear I can see stars in them. He looks utterly adorable.

Reluctantly, I roll out of bed. “How about you pour us some wine and light some candles while I go shower and get ready?”

Jade stares up at me. Seemingly transfixed. I watch his throat bob as he swallows. He gives me a nod, and I force myself to hurry away. I need to be quick. Jade is fighting a battle with his nerves and I really, really don’t want them to win.

I dive into the shower. What if apprehension gets the better of Jade? I know he wants this, every bit as much as I do, but I also know that overthinking can be a right bitch. As well as a hell of a mood killer.

Damn it! I’m going to have to do the quickest prep in the history of mankind.

A short while later, I fly out of the bathroom with a towel slung around my waist. I haven’t dried properly from the shower, but I’ve already been gone too long.

I burst into the bedroom. Jade is sitting up in my bed, sheets pooling around his waist.

His chest is bare and I think all of him is still naked.

He has found the candles and lit them. His pale skin looks exquisite in the soft candlelight.

It's an effort to tear my gaze away. When I finally do, I see the open bottle of red wine on the bedside table.

Along with two glasses. And my bottle of lube.

And the condoms his friend slipped under the door.

The sight of it all makes me grin. I'm impressed he found everything. And the candlelight and condoms combo is strangely romantic.

I walk over to the bedside table and pour the wine. I hand him his glass and clink it softly with mine.

"Cheers!"

He smiles. A smile that lights up his face and flashes in his green eyes. "Cheers," he smirks back at me.

I take a couple of sips of the wine, then I place it down. Jade is watching me intently. Observing my every movement.

I smile at him and let my towel fall. Revealing my rather impressive erection. Impressive for its firmness, that is. I'm not under any delusions about the size of my cock.

Jade's gaze drops down, straight to my manhood. His eyes darken and he licks his

lips. It makes me want to puff out my chest with pride.

I move towards the bed and Jade hastily puts his glass down before moving over to make room for me .

I slide in next to him, and just like that, we are kissing again. As if our lips cannot bear to be apart. Like we need to breathe each other's oxygen in order to survive.

He is moaning now. Soft, breathless little sounds that are driving me wild.

The urge to reach down between us and play with his cock is strong.

He'd make really pretty noises then. But as wonderful as that would be, I'm selfish.

I want him inside me. So I can't risk him blowing his load before that happens.

I mean, he's a young healthy man, I'm sure he will be able to get it up again, but I don't want to wait that long.

"I want to eat your ass!" Jade suddenly blurts.

My toes curl before my mind has even fully registered what he has just said.

"Best day ever!" I exclaim, the words escaping my feeble attempt to stop them.

Jade lets out a snort laugh, green eyes flashing. My heart thumps in response. Then I move before Jade changes his mind. I roll onto my front, draw my knees up, and stick my ass up in the air. I want him to have full and easy access to everything he needs.

The mattress wobbles as he moves down the bed. My breath hitches as he positions himself between my legs. He hesitates for a moment. Then I'm crying out as his

warm, soft, wet tongue licks tentatively over me.

My reaction seems to be all the encouragement he needs, because he goes wild. Devouring my ass like a starving man.

My hands curl in the sheets, clutching them for dear life. I'm wailing and whimpering. My back is bowing and I'm shamelessly pushing my ass out. His tongue and lips are everywhere. Sucking, flicking, probing, lapping, swirling.

Sensation is pooling, growing. Hot as well as shivery. Intense and all-consuming. I'm drowning in it all. And I want more.

"Give me your fingers, baby!" I plead.

He shifts position. One slender finger eases gently into me. I cry out and very nearly cum .

"So good, baby. You feel so good."

One finger becomes two and I'm seeing stars. I'm drifting amongst them and leaving reality and time far, far behind.

I can feel the slickness of the lube. I can feel him sliding in and out. I can feel him carefully stretching me. It all feels so damn good. I'm burning with lust. My hard cock is leaking profusely. My balls are already drawing up. I'm on the edge and it is bliss.

"I need you, baby," I gasp. "I'm ready. Give me that gorgeous cock of yours."

Jade makes a soft noise. Almost strangled. I can hear his hunger and it speaks to my own.

His fingers disappear. The bed jiggles. The sound of a condom packet ripping open fills the air.

Jade swears, and I bite back my chuckle. Condoms are tricky things, especially when eagerness makes you fumble.

His hands take a hold of my hips and I groan. Seems like he's managed to get the condom on. Any minute now, he is going to be rearranging my guts.

The moment stretches. And stretches. Nothing happens.

"I... I don't want to hurt you," Jade croaks softly.

My heart leaps right up my throat. My stomach twists. My poor angel.

"You won't hurt me, sweetheart. You've opened me up so well, and I want you so much. You are going to make me feel so good."

Jade's swallow is audible. "I've never..."

"I know," I say calmly.

Silence settles over us. Strangely, I don't feel awkward at all, on my knees with my ass in the air. I don't think I could ever feel awkward with Jade.

"Do you want to stop?" I ask.

"Hell no!" he replies immediately, with great feeling.

I burst out laughing. I can't help it. A heart beat later and Jade is chuckling too. Then he swats me on the ass. Not very hard, but enough to sting, enough to make me moan

and arch .

And just like that, everything goes supernova. All the lust, desire, and arousal, comes rushing back with force. Burning brightly. Igniting everything into a ball of desperate carnal need.

Jade grabs my hips again. Firmer this time. Confident.

His cock nudges against my entrance. Hot, silken and firm. I grunt in anticipation. I need this. I need him. I need him to be inside of me. It feels as if my life depends on it.

Slowly, slowly, he sinks into me. My flesh opens up for him. The slight burn and sting is delicious. He continues his agonizingly slow pace while I wail and shake beneath him.

Finally, finally, I am full. Jade is inside me. Hot and potent and everything I have ever wanted.

He groans with the effort of holding still, of giving my body time to adjust.

Then suddenly, he snaps. His need to fuck is unleashed. His hips move and he begins fucking the life out of me. Fast, deep thrusts. Pounding into me. Giving me the best fuck of my life. It's incredible.

All I can do is try not to keel over as he pumps intense pleasure into me.

But it's too much. Too much when I was already so very aroused.

My orgasm explodes. It races through every cell of my body and pours out of my throat in a scream.

My muscles are convulsing. My hole is clamping down on him.

My cock is pulsing and spurting onto the sheets beneath me.

He fucks me through it all, and I hear him grunt through his own orgasm.

I can't breathe. I can't see. My head is spinning. I'm panting and sweating.

Jade falls still behind me. His head rests on my shoulder. His softening cock is still inside me.

"Wow," he breathes in a sound of pure awe and reverence.

My heart could burst with pride and satisfaction. I'm so very happy that his first time topping was good. He deserves no less.

"Can we do that again?" he asks earnestly .

A laugh bubbles out of me, hard enough to shake us both. "Yes please! As soon as you have recovered."

Jade huffs. "I've never had a problem with that."

"Well then, baby, this is going to be the best night of our lives."

And I'm pretty sure that I've never spoken truer words.

Chapter nineteen

Jade

Flyn looks so blissed out. He is on his back, his legs on my shoulders. I'm thrusting into him. My cock is encased by his tight, wonderful heat. His eyes are closed, head tipped back. Cheeks flushed and his jaw slack with pleasure.

I am so very thankful to all the deities that Flyn was able to find some more condoms in one of his drawers. Three were nowhere near enough. Having to stop would have killed me. I would have missed out on this, the way he looks right now.

He looks fucking beautiful. I've never been inspired to create art before, but he may well be my muse.

I can easily see myself spending the next fifty years striving to capture the way he looks right now.

I could carve him in marble. Recreate him in paint.

Weave him into a song. But I know I could never do him justice.

He moans weakly and begins to tremble all over. I think he is about to orgasm again. I keep thrusting into him. His back arches. His body convulses. He screams silently as his peak consumes him.

He clenches around my cock so tightly that it throws me into my own orgasm and we

cum together in blissful synchronicity.

He draws in a giant shuddering breath, mumbles something about my impressive stamina, and then falls all floppy.

Hastily, I pull out.

“Flyn? ”

His eyelids twitch, but that’s it. I force a gulp past my frantically beating heart. Flyn’s just asleep. He has to be. He is human, and they get tired easily.

I stare at his sprawled, loose-limbed form while my stomach twists in knots.

In the harem, Ritchie, or his friends, would fuck me once or twice.

But they might have then moved onto one of the other boys.

I never kept track. I have no idea what amount of sex is normal for a human in one night.

Oh sweet goddess! I’m such a fool! This really is something I should have looked up.

Too late for that, and there is no time for regret right now. I need to find out if Flyn is okay. He might need a doctor, or an ambulance. Or, he could be perfectly fine, and I’m overreacting.

I need to check. I need to know for sure.

But how do I do that? Pink won’t know. His husband is a human like him. Magic doesn’t give either of them extra stamina, as far as I know. If it does, they are evenly

matched.

Blue is a paranormal with a fully human mate. But he is asexual. I doubt he has ever fucked Sammy until he passed out.

Brodie and Carter are both human, but they are also strong, well-built, former enforcers who have always known about the paranormal world. They would have always been aware of their own limits in comparison to their lovers' vitality.

As for Gray and Mal, neither of them are human. Or ever have been.

No, there is only one person who can help me.

I run into the bathroom, deal with the condom and then tear around Flynn's apartment, looking for my jeans. I find them flung on the back of the sofa. Thankfully, my phone is still in the back pocket.

I need to call Ned. Even though he hates me. He is the only person who can help. He was a human. Then he slept around a lot once he was a vampire. And now he has a human boyfriend. A human boyfriend who knew nothing about the paranormal world when they first got together .

Ned answers on the third ring, even though it is the middle of the night.

"Jade, what's wrong?"

The concern in his voice makes me want to weep. It is far more than I deserve.

"Hopefully nothing," I blurt. "But Flynn has passed out after we had a lot of sex and I don't know if he is okay!"

“How much sex?”

My mind whirls. Memories spin. I try to count orgasms. “... Seven, I think.”

Ned whistles down the phone. “Damn, kid, that’s impressive. In the future, try to keep it to two or three, otherwise he’ll figure out you aren’t human.”

“Okay,” I agree quickly.

I hear soft rustling down the phone and I can picture Ned slipping out of his bed and padding into the next room so he doesn’t wake Morgan.

“Is Flynn breathing?” Ned asks.

“Yes!” I knew enough to look for that. “Deep, even breaths. Like he is sleeping.”

“Alright, that sounds promising. What about his color?”

I run back to the bedroom. Flynn hasn’t moved since I left him. He still looks exactly the same.

“Flushed,” I tell Ned.

“That’s good. Sounds like everything is just fine, kid. You’ve simply tired him out.”

I draw in a big shaky breath. And then another. “What if I’ve hurt him... inside?”

The silence is deafening. Full of shock and surprise.

“You topped?”

I'm not insulted. My fey ancestry definitely makes me look like a twink, the type of man who would love to bottom. It is certainly what Ritchie wanted me for .

I only recently discovered my preference myself. Nevertheless, Flynn somehow knew. He figured it out long before I did. But I highly doubt anyone else will ever guess, unless I tell them.

"Yes," I whisper down the phone. "All seven times," I add, because that is probably important information.

"Damn, when you said seven times I thought you meant... nevermind." There is a brief pause. I can almost hear Ned pulling himself together. "Did you open him up well first? Use lots of lube?"

"Yes and yes," I answer. "But... um... I was quite... vigorous. I got carried away and he seemed to be really enjoying it, which spurred me on."

My insides curl. This feels all kinds of wrong. I shouldn't be sharing such intimate details about Flynn. But I have to make sure he is okay.

Ned breathes deeply. "You should check. Have a look... down there."

I swallow. "He's out cold. Isn't that a bit violating?"

"It's better than letting him bleed to death."

My heart crashes against my ribcage. I nestle the phone between my cheek and my shoulder. With my newly freed hands, I maneuver Flynn's inert body until I can clearly see his hole.

It's pink and puffy, and despite my concern, the sight of it sends a bolt of arousal

lancing through me.

“It... it looks good,” I say softly.

Oh sweet goddess, any other word would have been a better choice. Undamaged. Healthy. Anything but what just came out of my mouth.

“Any blood? Any sign of prolapse?”

My lungs seize at the thought I could have hurt Flyn that badly. I’m going to be so, so, gentle next time. So careful, that he is going to whine about it.

“No,” I wheeze weakly.

“Great! You’ve just exhausted him. ”

“What do I do?”

“Nothing. Let him sleep, and when he wakes up, make sure he drinks water.”

“Okay. Water. Got it.” I suck in a breath. “Thank you Ned. Sorry I woke you. Sorry for... everything.”

“It’s all good, kid. This is what friends are for.”

The line goes dead and I dump my phone on the bedside table. From his corner of the room, Reginold the stuffed frog stares at me like he knows exactly how much of a fuck up I am.

I glare back at the fairground toy. I know exactly what I am. I don’t need confirmation from anyone else.

I sigh and run my hand through my hair. Now what? There is no way in hell I'm going to be able to sleep. I guess I could shower, get dressed and then tidy the apartment until it's time to make Flyn breakfast.

It's as good a plan as any, I suppose. And it's not as if anything else is coming to mind. So I take a deep breath and head for the shower.

Five hours later and I'm standing over Flyn as his eyes flutter open. I watch intently as he focuses and finds my gaze. As soon as he sees me, a huge, soppy grin spreads over his face.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

He wriggles a bit and then sighs, "Fucked out."

"In a good way?" I blurt.

His grin deepens. "The best way, baby. The very best way."

I thrust the first of the two glasses I have ready at him. "Drink!"

He raises an eyebrow, but shuffles into a semi-sitting position. I watch his face closely, but I don't see any signs of pain.

He takes the glass and gulps it down. I take the empty one and thrust the second glass into his fingers. Both his eyebrows rise this time .

"Yes, daddy," he says with a wink.

I nearly grunt as his joking words hit me somewhere, deep, deep inside. Oh my. I think I liked that. A lot. But that's something to unravel another time. Right now, I

need to take care of Flyn.

“I made breakfast,” I say.

Flyn’s blue eyes light up.

“After you’ve eaten, I will help you shower.”

I’ve been Googling while he has been sleeping. I’ve learned that it is called aftercare. Hydration and making sure his blood sugar levels are good is important. After that, being clean will make him feel more comfortable.

Flyn chuckles. A warm sound full of mirth and joy. “I could get used to this.”

“Good,” I say before I can stop myself.

He throws off the covers and swings his legs over the side of the bed. As he stands, he winces. My hand shoots out to grab his elbow.

He flashes me another smile. “I’m fine. Baby, I really am.”

My heart does a cartwheel. Baby. He started calling me that last night, and it doesn’t seem like he is going to stop. It’s another wonderful thing that I’m not worthy of.

His fingers trace my jawline all the way down until he cups my chin. “You didn’t hurt me.”

His blue eyes are intense. Somber. Full of meaning. Of understanding. He doesn’t know what I am, but he knows I was in a harem. He understands that I was used. He thinks that is why I’m so concerned. He has come to the conclusion that I believe bottoming is awful and traumatic.

He's not wrong. It is a root cause of a lot of my panic.

And here he is. Standing here. Seeing so much of me. Understanding, knowing, but not judging. For some unfathomable reason, he doesn't think I'm pathetic or disgusting. He knows I was a sex slave, he's not pretending it never happened.

Yet, miraculously, when he looks into my eyes, all he sees is me.

Chapter twenty

Flyn

This is the best omelet I have ever had. Jade is watching me keenly, as if he thinks I'm about to keel over. He really is the sweetest guy ever.

I'm bundled in my bathrobe, sitting at my tiny table eating a breakfast that Jade cooked for me. My whole flat looks suspiciously clean and my ass feels wonderfully well-used.

Sweet baby Jesus, I can't even remember how many times we did it last night. I seriously lost count. My memories are a big blur of never-ending Os. It was incredible. And now he has made me breakfast. I am one lucky man.

I'm never, ever telling him that in the world of gay hookups, tops are never, ever this caring. They just want to pound and go. And then block you.

If Jade knew how special he was, I might lose him. He is drop dead gorgeous, fantastic in bed, and he cooks and cleans. He's a unicorn, and if people knew about how perfect he is, they'd try to steal him from me.

"I only know how to make omelets," Jade says. "I don't know how to make all the stuff you made me." He flashes me an almost guilty look.

I take a swig of the freshly squeezed orange juice. "Jade, my man. This is the best omelet in the universe. I'd offer to teach you how to cook the other dishes, but then

you'd outshine me. ”

Jade chuckles as warmth and humor light up his eyes. It's a damn good look on him. Hopefully, this look will start to replace the haunted, wary and shy look he normally wears.

“Are you finished?” he asks.

“Sure am,” I say as I pat my belly.

“I could make some more?” Jade bites his bottom lip.

I smile. “I'm full, thanks.”

Jade stares at me for a moment. Like he is trying to see if I'm lying. After a few heartbeats, he nods decisively.

“In that case, shower time.”

My eyebrows rise. “Yes boss!”

Jade's cheeks flush. He looks so cute I can't help grinning. Even when he herds me into the bathroom.

“You joining me?” I tease.

“Yes,” he states, as he starts undressing.

Wow. Okay, suddenly I'm a lot more interested in this shower. Like, a whole heap more looking forward to it.

I fumble a bit with the tie on my robe, but I'm done soon enough. I shrug it off my shoulders and just like that, I'm naked.

Jade's eyes widen, and his cheeks flush again. His eyes are roaming all over me. Looking at me like he is a starving man and I'm cake.

"You're so handsome," he says softly.

Compared to him, I'm really not. But I love that he thinks so. We are going to be one of those mismatched couples where everyone always wonders how I caught him. But sod them. Jade likes the way I look, and that's the only thing that matters.

I give him my best flirtatious wink and step into the shower.

Jade follows close behind me. He lets me turn the shower on and set the temperature, but he snatches the washcloth from my hands the moment I pick it up.

Before I can say anything, he starts washing me with great care. Running the cloth over my back.

Slowly, diligently, he gently scrubs every part of my body. It's a bit sexy, but it's mostly sweet and achingly tender .

Then, with the same care and attention, he washes my hair. Nobody has done this for me since I was a kid. It feels amazing. It's making me feel cherished and special. I really, really could get used to this.

Suddenly, the water stops. I blink in disorientation. I must have completely zoned out.

Jade bundles me in towels and guides me to the bedroom. As I sit on the bed, a slight

wince escapes me.

“Are you sore?” Jade exclaims in a tone of pure horror.

“Only in the best way,” I grin.

His eyes narrow. He looks very unimpressed. “Can I check?”

My eyebrows rise. “You want to check my ass?”

Jade nods. His expression is extremely serious. He really is worried that he has hurt me. Such a sweetheart.

I roll over so that I’m bent over the bed. If it’s going to put his mind at rest, I don’t mind. Yesterday he was licking my hole, so having him look at it shouldn’t be a big deal.

I force a swallow down my throat. Yikes, actually, this is strangely intimate. It feels way more intimate than having my ass eaten.

He stands behind me and lifts up the towel. I reach back and spread my cheeks. It’s hard not to squirm as he stares at me.

“It’s still puffy,” he says hoarsely.

“That’s fine,” I say. Even though I know he has to know this. The poor guy was kept as a sex slave. He must know everything there is to know about taking care of himself and his friends.

Air currents shiver over me as Jade shifts position. I think he has dropped down to his knees.

“Can I...”

“Yes!” I squeak.

Then I squeal as his soft wet tongue runs gently over my sore hole. I can feel him so intensely. Everything is so extra sensitive down there after a night of being pounded so very well by him. It feels exquisite.

I whimper into the mattress. He licks and licks. Soft and gentle. Wet and warm. The pleasure it zings into me is languorous. Lazy like a summer day. Soporific, like soaking in a hot bubble bath.

My orgasm builds and builds. I’m surprised I have any cum left in me after last night, but apparently my body is gearing up to blow one more time. When it comes, it feels like it’s brimming over. It’s not an explosion of fireworks, it’s a swell and a surge. Washing over me. Cleansing me.

As it recedes, my power of speech returns.

“You are the best boyfriend ever,” I breathe out in a daze.

Jade chuckles. “That’s the goal.”

He’s trying to sound nonchalant, like he is joking, but I can hear the undercurrents in the tone of his voice.

He is acknowledging what we are. Accepting it.

We both are. We are boyfriends. And even more incredibly, he wants to be the best boyfriend in the world.

He means his words like a vow. His new life purpose is to be the boyfriend he believes I deserve.

My heart thumps. It beats with hope and all the excitement of a new future.

My limbs are still weak, though. Jade has turned them into wet noodles. I crawl all the way onto the bed and flop down on my side. Jade joins me and spoons me from behind. A sigh of pure, contented bliss escapes from my soul. Life really cannot get any better than this.

A few minutes later, and the soft sound of Jade's snores reach my ears. Bless him. I had a suspicion that he didn't sleep last night.

Whereas I slept like a baby. Followed by a lovely breakfast and a refreshing shower. Then a nice orgasm. All in all, now that my muscles are recovering from shooting my load all over the bed, I'm feeling rejuvenated and not at all sleepy.

Carefully, I slip out of bed. I'm an awful fidget when I'm awake. I'll only disturb Jade. So I'll go watch some rubbish TV while he naps .

Stopping only to grab some clean clothes, I tiptoe out of the bedroom. I throw my clothes on and plonk myself down on the sofa. Daytime TV is awful, but I kinda like it.

As I get settled, a wave of happiness tingles through me. This is turning out to be the most perfect day of my life. I wish I could relive it forever. A fantastic groundhog day.

Going to work tomorrow is going to suck. I want this quiet, simple domesticity with Jade to never end. It's perfect.

A couple of hours later, I hear a strange noise from the bedroom. I get to my feet and head to the bedroom to check on Jade. I ease open the door just a crack, and then I freeze.

Nothing I am seeing makes any sense.

Am I having a stroke? Did I fall asleep on the sofa and now I am dreaming? What the hell is happening?

It looks like Jade is out of bed, but still naked. That's fine, that bit makes sense. What is unbelievable, is Jade drawing strange symbols on my walls. Strange symbols that are glowing. Glowing a bright neon green.

"Jade?" I whisper in a shaky voice.

No response. Nothing. Shit, is he okay?

I stride up to him. He is fully focused on his task. He is mumbling under his breath. I can't really see his eyes because he is staring intently at the glowing patterns he is making, but what I can see looks glazed. Like the lights are on, but no one is home.

"Jade?"

I try shaking his shoulder. It's like trying to shake a statue. Damn. This can't be good.

His finger dances over the grotty plaster and luminescence springs to life. It's pretty, but it's making the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

I take a shuddering breath. Okay, I really don't think I'm hallucinating. This feels far too real. Therefore, Jade is doing some sort of magic. Therefore, magic must be real .

Sorcha was right. But now is not the time to be thinking about five-year-olds. I need to be thinking about what to do, because magic may be real, but this is sure as hell not right. I can tell that much.

My mind whirls. Jade sure is mysterious, always has been. And his friends were so damn cagey. As well as unnervingly good looking. And Gray? That dude was downright terrifying. All in all, everyone was as mysterious as Jade.

Okay, so it seems highly likely they are all down with this magic-being-real stuff, so they should know what to do.

I turn and run to the kitchen. Jade left his phone on the counter. I grab it, run back to the bedroom, and hold it up to his face. He doesn't seem to see it, but the camera sees him and unlocks.

I snatch it back and pull up the call log. The last call was to a Ned. That's one of his friends, isn't it? The one who refused to be called Indigo? The grumpy brunette?

I hit call.

It rings twice. "Is Flyn still ok?"

My heart thumps. Jade was worried about me and called his friend? That's so sweet.

"Um... I'm fine," I blurt. Then I look back up at Jade. He is still muttering and drawing. My wall is nearly all glowing now. "But I'm not sure Jade is."

Chapter twenty-one

Jade

Flyn's blue eyes swim into focus. They are inches from my face, and full of concern.

“Jade?”

I blink. My mind feels like treacle. Slow and thick. Barely moving.

Flyn smiles as relief flows over his face. “There you are!”

I blink again. I'm sitting on Flyn's sofa, wrapped in a blanket. Late afternoon light is streaming through the window.

Flyn is kneeling on the floor in front of me. And everyone else is also here. My gaze slowly tracks around. Pink, Red, Lello, Blue, Ned and Gray. Mal, Monty and Carter are all here. I don't even understand how everyone is fitting inside Flyn's small apartment, let alone the reason why.

My attention turns helplessly back to Flyn. “What is happening?”

Flyn's smile falters, just a little. “You were making the walls glow, Jadey. I needed to get help.”

Oh. That's not good. That's not good at all.

My hand flies up to my amulet. Has it stopped working? I clutch the leather tightly and look at Gray.

“It was tangled in the bedclothes,” he says. “The cord must have snapped while you were fucking.”

My cheeks heat so fast it stings, but there is no time for embarrassment. “Is it working now?”

Gray nods solemnly.

“Everything is fine,” says Pink. “We got here in time. You didn’t awaken any portals or cause any harm. You only drew some magic-gathering runes.”

A tiny flicker of relief begins to curl in my chest, but this still isn’t good. I can’t believe I didn’t notice the amulet falling off. How was I so careless, and how come I didn’t feel its absence? Either the physical weight of it, or the gentle thrum of its magic?

Even more worrying is the fact I blacked out so utterly. I don’t remember drawing on the walls. I don’t remember the fey coaxing me to do anything. The last thing I remember is snuggling Flyn in bed after giving him a shower and then rimming him.

My world has gone from heavenly to hellish in the blink of an eye. Oh goddess, I’m going to be sick. This is terrifying and deeply, deeply unsettling.

“You should lock me up!” I blurt.

My heart is racing now. What if next time I wake up, it’s to a bloody mess that was Flyn? Or a world conquered by the fey?

It is a very real possibility. I nearly opened a portal before, and I killed a very powerful vampire while I was under the fey's control. There is no telling what I am capable of.

I'm a danger to everybody and everything that I love.

"Do you think locking you up is necessary?" Red asks.

"Yes!" I all but shout. I look around my friends' worried faces and I take a deep breath. "Clearly, all the evidence is pointing to the fact that I'm a dangerous liability."

Red turns to Gray with a questioning look on his face. The demon shrugs, almost casually. "The amulet is working."

I bite my bottom lip. Gray's calm should be reassuring. He is a very powerful demon. However, I also know he is mostly bewildered by our horror at the thought of the fey invading. Gray doesn't care if our world is overrun. He only helps prevent it because he understands that it matters to us .

He is confident the amulet he created is working, but clearly, it's not infallible. It could fall off again. Or enough of the fey's whispers could reach me to tell me to take it off. For all I know, that could be exactly what happened today.

"We should see what the Grand Master says," says Carter.

I nearly bark out a hysterical laugh at that. It's such a Carter thing to say. He is still a loyal Council Enforcer at heart. Some habits die hard and he can't be blamed for that.

Ned straightens up. "Like fuck are we getting that necromancer involved in our business!"

“But he is super powerful and good at keeping everyone safe.” Lello’s blue eyes are wide and full of worry. My guts twist. Sweet little Lello should never look like that.

Ned huffs and rolls his eyes, and an agitated silence swirls around the room. The weight of everyone’s thoughts is thickening gravity.

“Wait!” Flynn suddenly exclaims. “Necromancers are real too? That’s so cool!”

I stare at his beaming face. His exuberance is so incongruous it has short-circuited my mind. My brain has stalled.

“Has someone given you the paranormal-is-real talk?” I say weakly.

Flynn puffs out his chest. “Yep! Pink filled me in!”

My gaze turns to Pink, who shrugs. “He took the news well.”

That’s it. I’m done. I’m out of thoughts, let alone words. I am completely incapable of responding.

“I can’t believe my boyfriend is part fey! And vampires can go out in the daytime if they are careful. And mermaids have legs!” Flynn winces. “Sorry, I mean sirens!” He turns to Gray. “And Gray, my man. You scare the crap out of me, so you being a demon makes so much sense.”

Gray’s lips curl up into a pleased, mischievous, and malevolent grin. I shudder and look away.

“Oops. Sorry. I’m talking too much,” Flynn says .

His shoulders droop and I can’t stand it. I find his hand and give it a squeeze. His

eyes light up again. I smile at him and keep a hold of his hand.

Lello lets out a soft little squeal. I look up at him and he mouths the word, “Wedding!” at me.

I shake my head in dismay. At least he has cheered up and is back to acting like his normal self.

Red clears his throat. “We need to file a report on Flyn being informed of the paranormal. There is a box on the form that needs a reason for disclosure.” Red takes a breath. “So Silas is going to find out anyway.”

An icy trickle runs down my spine. I spent so long running from the Council. Red and Brodie paused their lives to come with me and help me. Monty bargained with the Council for me to be pardoned. Running took me away from Flyn and everything that might have been.

And here I am again.

“Jade will be arrested,” Blue says softly.

All eyes turn to me. The attention itches along my skin.

I take a deep breath. “I’m... I’m not going to run again. Especially not when I might truly be a risk to everyone.”

Last time, the crime had been done. I’d murdered the vampire council member. I’d nearly opened a portal. Perhaps foolishly, we all thought I’d never do it again. I’d run from punishment, not prevention. Everything is different now.

Flyn’s eyes are wide, his face pale. “You’re going to magic jail?”

I flash him a weak smile. “Looks like it.”

“No! There has to be another way!” he pleads, as he squishes my hand.

My heart aches. Like it is being squeezed instead of my hand.

I don’t want to leave Flyn. Not now, not just when something wonderful was beginning.

It’s so unfair. So cruel of the universe to do this to us.

Why offer us a glimpse of something so perfect if it was only ever destined to be taken away?

Monty steps forward. “I have a very secure dungeon in my house.”

“A sex dungeon?” interrupts Lello with glee.

Monty blushes a little. “No. Simply an ordinary dungeon.”

I have no idea what is remotely ordinary about having a dungeon in your house, but I’m listening.

“If we place Jade in my dungeon,” continues Monty. “And those of us with magic work together on increasing the strength of the already very potent ancient seals and wards, it would become an extremely formidable prison.”

Everyone is staring at Pink’s husband now. He has our full attention.

He runs his hand over his frizzy white hair. “If we then notify the Grand Master. Once he sees how secure Jade is, he might be inclined to allow him to stay there.”

“We could make it nice and cozy! And take turns keeping Jade company,” Pink says.
“Hopefully it won’t be for long, just until we figure things out.”

Ned rubs his chin. “We were planning on moving there anyway. Bringing it forward is not a big deal.”

Everyone turns to look at me again. Goosebumps erupt all over my skin.

“As long as I can’t hurt anyone.”

I look at Flynn. “Monty’s house is hundreds of miles away.”

He squeezes my hand as a very intense, extremely earnest expression lights up his face. “I know it’s super early to be moving in together, but can I come?”

My heart flutters and my stomach does a full on somersault.

“Your job?” I croak.

Flynn shrugs. “I was thinking of quitting anyway.”

“Your family!” I exclaim. He loves his little niece and his sister. As well as his parents.

He gives me one of his full-wattage smiles. “We’ll still be in the same country, right?”

I nod.

“All good then!” he grins.

I lick my dry lips and look up at my friends. “Is that okay with you guys?”

A chorus of noise hits me in response. “Of course!” “Yes!” “Sounds great.” Everyone is smiling, even Ned.

Despite the shit I have put them through, despite all the trouble I am causing now, my friends are still happy for me. I really, truly don’t deserve them.

I look back at Flyn. His eyes are sparkling. I’m holding onto his hand for dear life and he doesn’t seem to mind at all.

I force a swallow down my throat. I guess I’m moving in with my boyfriend.

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Chapter twenty-two

Flyn

I fold another tee shirt and shove it into the suitcase, even though I know it won't close properly if I keep packing like this.

Half my wardrobe is already in a heap on the bed.

Shirts I never wear, hoodies I live in, socks that haven't seen their match since last winter.

The rest is scattered across the floor like I lost a fight with a tornado.

The room smells like dust and fabric softener and the lingering scent of the candle Cara gave me last Christmas, all vanilla and cedarwood, something warm.

"I still don't get it," Cara says from the doorway. Her arms are crossed, but not in that casual, judgmental big-sister way. This time it's a shield. "You're moving. Like actually moving. To the middle of nowhere. With a guy you've known for five minutes."

I sigh and try not to crumple the shirt in my hands. "It's not like that."

"It's exactly like that."

She steps into the room, dodging a pair of shoes and a pile of mismatched socks.

She looks furious. And scared. And betrayed.

All at once. My big sister, the only person in my life who's always had my back, who kept me from falling apart when everything else did, she's looking at me like I've just joined a cult.

"This is insane, Flyn."

I zip the suitcase halfway and sit on it to keep it from bursting open. "I know it looks that way."

"Then explain it to me. "

I open my mouth. Close it again. Because I can't. Not really.

How do you explain that your new boyfriend blacked out and started carving glowing runes into the plaster of your bedroom wall?

That something ancient and terrifying is trying to get into his mind?

That he's not even human, and instead of running, you looked at the shattered pieces of him and thought, Yeah. I want to stay.

You don't explain that.

Not to someone like Cara. Someone who believes in logic and structure, who finds comfort in meal prep schedules and spreadsheets. Someone who already lost one brother and can't bear the thought of losing the other to something she doesn't understand.

"I can't explain it," I say finally. "Not all of it. But this is something I have to do."

She looks at me like I've just slapped her. "You have to? Flynn, this isn't you. You're not impulsive."

"Not usually, no."

"You don't just run off to the countryside with someone you barely know!"

I give her a self-deprecating smile. "I do now."

She throws her hands in the air, pacing a slow circle in the chaos of my room. "God, listen to yourself."

"I have, Cara. I've been listening to myself more these past few days than I have in years. And you know what? I'm happier than I've been in a long time. Even with all the weirdness. Even with..."

I stop myself. Bite the inside of my cheek.

Even with the magic. Even with the danger. Even with the luminescent green light that still burns behind my eyelids.

"Even with what?" she demands.

"I can't tell you."

"That's bullshit."

"I know. But it's still true."

She folds her arms again, jaw tight. "Is this because he's hot? "

That actually makes me laugh, loud and unsteady. “It’s not just because he’s hot.”

Cara glares. “You’ve always been a sucker for pretty eyes and lost causes.”

“He’s not a lost cause.”

I say it too fast, too fiercely. And she hears it.

“Flynn...” Her voice softens, just a fraction. “What’s going on? Really?”

I shake my head. “I can’t drag you into this.”

“You already have! I’m standing in your apartment while you pack up your whole life and you won’t even tell me why. You’re moving three hundred miles away! You’re leaving your job, your friends, me. For what? A spark?”

“It’s not just a spark,” I say quietly.

She’s silent for a long moment.

“You’re in love with him,” she says, and it’s not a question.

I run a hand through my hair. “I don’t know. Maybe. I might be on my way.”

“After a handful of dates.”

“They weren’t normal dates.”

She snorts. “Clearly.”

“I don’t expect you to understand. But I need you to trust me.”

"I do trust you. That's the problem." Her voice cracks. "For all your bouncy exuberance, you're the smart one. The steady one. And you wouldn't leave me and Sorchu for nothing.

You're not the type to abandon your family.

So If you're doing something this wild, then it must be serious. And that scares the shit out of me."

I move toward her, slowly, and pull her into a hug.

For a second she resists. Then her arms wrap tight around my ribs and she buries her face in my shoulder like she did when we were kids and the world felt too big.

The weight of her is familiar, grounding.

She smells like geranium shampoo and that citrusy hand cream she's always using .

"I'm still me," I whisper. "I'm still your annoying little brother who steals your chips and forgets birthdays."

She gives me a watery laugh. "You never forget birthdays."

"Okay, fine. But you know what I mean."

She pulls back just enough to look at me. "Promise me something."

"If I can."

"If it gets dangerous... really dangerous... you'll come home."

I don't like to make promises I'm not sure I can keep. And if things get dangerous, well, it will be Gray eating me, or Jade letting the fey into Earth. Running back home won't solve either of those, and it might endanger my family.

I hesitate.

She sees it.

"Flyn."

"I promise," I say, to keep the peace. "If it gets bad, I'll come back. Or I'll find a way to bring you with me. But I'm not walking away from him, Cara. Not yet."

She nods slowly. "Okay."

"You mean that?" Hope thuds low in my chest. Cara being upset with me is awful. I'd feel a whole heap better about everything I'm facing if I had her blessing.

"No. But I'm trying." Her eyes are sad, but her expression is grouchy. I'm not going to get her blessing, but she is going to forgive me.

I smile. "That's all I can ask."

"Do you really have to go right now? You can't wait until Sorcha is out of school to say goodbye?"

My chest tightens. "Won't that upset her?" I have no idea if a couple of hours will make any difference to Jade's safety, but it might be worth the risk if Cara thinks it will be better for my little niece.

Cara sighs. "No, you're probably right. She's as over the top as you. The farewell

would turn into such a drama. ”

I chuckle. “I’ll Facetime her later.”

She sniffs and nods, and then gestures at the mess. “Do you need help finishing up?”

“God, yes. I packed six pairs of the same jeans and forgot underwear.”

“Idiot,” she mutters fondly.

We fall into a comfortable rhythm, her folding, me stuffing things into bags, both of us working in quiet companionship.

The silence between us softens, turns familiar again.

She nags me about the socks with holes in them and sneaks protein bars into my backpack.

I pretend not to notice. We take our time.

At one point she pauses, holding up a photo frame from my desk. It’s an old picture. Me, Cara, and our brother Liam. All three of us squinting in the sun, grinning like fools at some summer fair ages ago.

“You sure he’d be okay with this?” she asks, voice soft.

“Liam?”

She nods.

“I think... yeah. He always said I was too careful. Too good at being safe. He’d

probably be cheering me on.”

She sets the frame down gently. “Then I’ll try to do the same.”

We linger a little longer than we need to.

I take one last look around the apartment.

The scuffed wooden floors, the dent in the wall from when I tried to hang a mirror and it fell, the crooked shelf that never held anything heavier than a plant.

It’s not much, but it’s been mine. My first place that felt like home.

And now I’m leaving it behind for something I don’t fully understand.

Though, as I look around, something becomes clear. The happiest memories are recent ones. And they all involve Jade.

That scruffy sofa is where we kissed for the second time. It’s where I first blew him and he blew me.

The tiny kitchen is where I first made him breakfast and where he made me an omelet and was oh so attentive.

The shower is where he washed me so sweetly, so tenderly.

As for the bed, well, it is probably best if I don’t let my mind wander down that path. Not while my sister is here.

But the point is still clear, Jade is everything that’s good in my life. I’m making the right decision, I know it. I’m not leaving anything behind, I’m stepping towards a

bright new future.

I take a deep breath. My new found certainty is helping me to breathe a little easier.

Everything's packed. My mind is made. And now, in perfect timing, the cab is honking downstairs.

Cara hugs me again at the door. It's tighter this time. Like she doesn't want to let go.

"Be safe," she says.

"I will."

"Call me. Often."

"Deal."

I pull away, pick up my bags. But before I leave, I glance back one last time.

"I love you, Cara."

She smiles, eyes wet. "Love you more."

And then I'm gone.

Out the door. Down the stairs. Into the cab and on my way to a stately home I've never seen, to a future I don't fully understand. With a boy who is magic, and a heart that's already halfway lost.

And even though I should be terrified, all I feel is... ready.

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Chapter twenty-three

Jade

As dungeons go, this is a pretty nice one. Not that I have any actual experience of dungeons outside of films and books, but still. This one isn't damp or unreasonably cold. The rough-hewn stone walls are clean. I haven't seen any spiders or rats.

All in all, things could be a lot worse.

My laugh echoes around. Look at me, finally looking on the bright side instead of being a negative nelly. It seems Flyn really is bringing out the best in me.

My gaze goes to the heavy wooden door that leads to the stairs and the exit. I'm glad I finally got Flyn to go out for some fresh air. I feel guilty for lying about wanting a nap, even though it is for his benefit.

I can survive down here for a couple of hours by myself.

The double bed is comfy. The boys found a nice circular rug that covers most of the floor.

It's a shame the TV can't pick up any signal or Wi-Fi, but Pink is hunting for a DVD player and some DVDs.

In the meantime, there is a stack of books and a mountain of snacks.

It's fine, it really is. Goddess knows I've dealt with worse in my life. For all its lack of finery, I'd much rather be here than in the penthouse Ritchie kept us imprisoned in.

I take in a deep breath. I'm glad I'm feeling okay now. The little wobble I had as we swept down the drive of Monty's estate, was as unexpected as it was unpleasant. The frantic beating of my heart is not something I want to experience again .

I was born and raised on an estate like this. An earl's experiment and hobby. Like breeding horses or dogs. But that's no reason for me to get hysterical.

My childhood wasn't that terrible. I wasn't alone. We weren't experimented on or tortured. We were given an education. Fed well and taken care of.

I got to do teenage things, like fool around with boys and steal cars.

So what if I was never loved? Or was never free? Thousands of people have loveless childhoods. It doesn't make me special.

Being sold to Ritchie was spectacularly shitty, but I'm not alone in that either. The boys went through that with me.

Life has been unfair, but I'm not alone. I have a found family. I have Flynn.

A wide, stupid grin spreads across my face. Just as I'm trying to fight it, I hear soft footsteps on the stairs. I'm pretty sure it's Flynn, tiptoeing down to see if I'm awake.

I sit up a little straighter, smoothing the blanket across my lap like I haven't just been grinning at the memory of his smile. No use letting him know he has that effect on me. He's smug enough already.

The old lock clicks, and the door creaks open just enough to let in a sliver of golden

light.

I blink, eyes adjusting from the dim lighting of the dungeon.

And then there he is, Flyn, all tousled hair and sunshine, balancing a tray with two mugs and something that smells suspiciously like ginger biscuits.

He catches me looking and flashes a grin. “Knew you were faking.”

“I wasn’t faking,” I say, sitting back against the headboard. “I was simply... meditating.”

“Sure.” He shuts the door behind him with a gentle thud and pads across the room, his trainers silent on the rug. “Because nothing says ‘deep spiritual practice’ like fake snoring for ten minutes and then sighing like you’re in a Jane Austen adaptation. ”

I roll my eyes, but my lips twitch. “You’re very mouthy for someone who wants to be let into my magical panic bunker.”

He places the tray on the side table and hands me one of the mugs. Earl Grey Tea. Of course it is. He’s gone full British countryside already.

“You’re lucky I didn’t bring you kale.”

“I’d hex it.”

He gives me a mock-wounded look and settles at the foot of the bed, legs folded beneath him.

For a moment, it’s quiet between us. Warm.

Comfortable. I sip the tea and watch him from under my lashes.

He's trying not to fuss, but I can see the tension around his eyes.

I can see it in the way he keeps sneaking glances at the glowing runes that pulse faintly along the far wall.

I don't think he can see them, but some part of him clearly senses something.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah."

He raises an eyebrow.

"I am. Better, actually. The wards are working. I feel... clearer."

It's true. There's a heaviness that's lifted.

A heaviness I didn't even realize was there until it was gone.

Now I don't feel that creeping static under my skin, or the whispering at the edges of my thoughts.

The dungeon's enchantments are doing their job.

Keeping me grounded, present. Keeping them out.

Flyn lets out a soft breath, as if he's been holding it for hours. Maybe he has. He reaches out and brushes his fingers along my wrist, light and careful. "I hate that you have to be down here."

“I don’t,” I say quietly. “I’d rather be safe than risk hurting any of you.”

“You wouldn’t hurt us.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know you. ” His voice is steady, and it hits me in the chest harder than I expect. “Jade, whatever’s happening, whatever magic’s inside you, it’s yours. Not theirs. Not the people who used you. Not the ones who want to use you now. You don’t belong to anyone.”

The words are warm. Kind. They make something inside me ache. Because I want to believe him. I really do.

“I’m trying,” I whisper.

“I know.”

He leans forward, brushing his forehead against mine for a heartbeat. The contact is grounding, real, human. Not magic. Just us.

“I brought Paddington,” he says after a moment, reaching into the tote bag I hadn’t noticed slung over his shoulder. “Thought it might soothe your savage inner beast.”

“Paddington?”

“Look, don’t knock it. That bear has emotionally wrecked harder men than you and me,” he says as he proudly holds the DVD aloft.

I chuckle, and he beams like he’s just won something.

“And Pink found a DVD player, so we are all set!”

He grins at me and then gets to work battling cables and hooking up the DVD player to the TV. Watching him work is filling my chest with a warm glow.

He presses a button on the remote and when the TV displays the DVD screensaver, he lets out a whoop of satisfaction. Then he jumps onto the bed, hard enough to make it bounce, and very nearly hard enough to spill my tea.

We curl up together on the bed, not quite touching but close enough to share warmth. We watch in silence, the kind that doesn't need filling. Flyn nibbles on biscuits. I sip tea that seems like the best tea I've ever had.

But even through the comfort, I feel it.

A shift.

A tug.

Like something inside me is stretching awake .

The air chills, the faintest ripple of pressure brushing against the wards. The runes on the wall pulse once, brighter, sharper... and then settle again.

Flyn sits up straighter. “What was that?”

“Something testing the wards,” I murmur. “It didn't get in.”

“Are you sure?”

“I'm still me.” I turn my head toward him, and I see it in his face, that flash of fear he

tries to hide behind concern. “I promise.”

He nods, but I know the tension hasn’t left him. It hasn’t left me either.

I press a hand to the center of my chest. I swear the magic in me is growing. My dormant fey blood is stirring, and I’m not sure if this dungeon can make my fey side stay asleep. And I don’t know what will be left when it wakes up.

I swallow. I think I can fight the fey, with the help of this dungeon.

But I’m not so sure if I can fight the fey and stay the same.

The fey are malicious. They might call to my blood, awaken my ancestry, simply because they can, and because I’m not bending to their will.

Spite and cruelty run just as thick as blood in their veins.

I can feel it under my own skin. I’ve always been able to.

“What if I’m not the same after this?” I say softly.

He doesn’t answer right away. Just watches me, eyes serious.

“Then I’ll learn the new you,” he says eventually. “I’m not here for the version you think I want. I’m here for you. All of it.”

I swallow. My throat is too tight for words.

Outside, the wind shifts. Inside, the lights flicker. The magic holding this place together hums a little louder, a little stronger. I can feel the fey pressing against the veil. They want me. They want access. But they don’t have me. Not now. Maybe not

ever.

“I don’t want to be a doorway,” I whisper.

“Then don’t be.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It never is. But you get to choose. That’s what’s been stolen from you, isn’t it? Choice? ”

My eyes sting, but I don’t look away.

“Well,” Flynn says, leaning back against the headboard beside me. “Take it back.”

The runes on the wall flicker softly. Not wild or ominous this time, just pulsing like a heartbeat. My heartbeat.

Take it back. Oh goddess, how I want to. Take back my power. My agency. My sense of self. Take back everything Ritchie stole from me.

“I’m trying,” I say again. “I’m scared.”

“I know. Me too.”

I smile faintly. “Paddington helps.”

“Paddington always helps.”

We sit like that for a long time. The movie ends. The silence settles in. He stays with me until my eyes grow heavy, and I let myself drift, his hand wrapped around mine

like an anchor.

If I'm going to make it through this, if I'm going to stay myself, it'll be because of moments like this. Because of him. Because of my friends.

Because I am not a tool. I am not a weapon. I am not a door.

I am Jade. And for once in my life... I think I might be worth saving.

Chapter twenty-four

Flyn

Wow, I thought Gray was one scary guy, but this new dude takes the biscuit. He's got the same dark eyes, dark hair and pale skin combo as my new little demon friend. He is also incredibly beautiful, just like Gray. But this guy takes the scary factor and dials it up to one thousand.

Right now, he is simply stalking around the dungeon, staring at the blank walls. Well, they look blank to me because I can't usually see magic.

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed with Jade and holding his hand tightly because he's staring at this Silas-guy like he is Lucifer himself.

Red and Brodie are the only other people down here. I think everyone else was too scared.

Silas runs his hand over the wall and for a moment, a symbol glows red before fading away to nothing. He keeps on examining the same spot, and it's eerie as hell to think he can see stuff that's invisible to me.

A shiver trembles through me. Life has taken a very strange turn lately. All this paranormal stuff is amazing, but it is also a lot.

Silas takes a step to the right and begins peering at a different section of stone wall. I watch him work and try to get my head around everything.

Silas looks like a very hot emo boy. Leather trousers, studded belt, tight black tee shirt. It's a damn good look. But apparently not only is he a necromancer, he is a wolf shifter like Red, and, the big boss of the paranormal world.

It makes me wonder how many ordinary seeming people I've passed in the street who were actually anything but ordinary.

Not that Silas looks ordinary. Or gives off ordinary vibes.

But still, if I had met him before I knew about the paranormal world, I would have assumed he was a slightly unhinged hot emo boy, one that shouldn't be messed with.

I never, ever would have guessed all the other stuff.

Just like I didn't have a clue about Jade. I knew Jade was sweet and shy and awesome. Gorgeous, with a dark past.

But all this? Imprisoned and abused by an asshole? Part fey? The potential key to ending the world as I know it?

I was oblivious to all of that. And if I hadn't seen proof with my own eyes, I never would have believed it.

So yeah, life certainly has taken a strange turn. But through the craziness, I get to have Jade, so it is all very much worth it.

Suddenly, Silas turns around. He ignores Jade and me, and looks only at Red and Brodie.

"Alright. These wards are strong enough. Jade can stay here, on the condition he never steps foot outside of this dungeon."

“Of course,” agrees Red, his tone eager and keen.

Brodie adds his assurance and the three of them leave, shutting the ancient door behind them.

“Phew!” I exclaim loudly.

Jade’s eyes are bright. His relief is palatable. No magic jail for him. Just a magic dungeon, but I’m here too, and so are his friends. He gets to stay with people who love him.

“Hopefully, you won’t be stuck down here for too long. Silas seems like one capable dude, he’ll figure out how to stop the fey permanently,” I say brightly.

Jade flashes me a weak smile. He’s not convinced by my optimism. I hate the sadness in his eyes. I want to chase it away.

“Does anything ever faze you?” he asks .

“Spiders!” I say and then let out a whole body shake. Spiders scare the crap out of me. “If I see one down here, then you are on your own. I’m running upstairs screaming.”

Jade chuckles and shakes his head. His grip on my hand tightens.

“Seriously though. This... all has to be a lot for you. Finding out your boyfriend is a monster who needs to be locked in a dungeon.”

“Hey!” I exclaim. “Jade, you are not a monster.”

His green eyes stare deep into me. As if he is trying to absorb some of my

confidence.

“Fey aren’t nice. They are cruel, vicious and malevolent,” Jade whispers.

I hate the shame and self-loathing that is rolling off of him. I hate that he believes this about himself, when absolutely none of it is true. He is the sweetest guy in the whole entire world. I wish he could see it.

“You are none of those things, Jade. Maybe because of your human blood, maybe because you are you.”

Jade scrunches up his nose.

I squeeze his hand. “Trust me, I’m a great judge of character. I know good people when I meet them. I’m never wrong. My gaydar is top-notch too. And my topdar has also never failed me,” I say with a wink.

His green eyes widen and a pretty pink blush races along his cheeks. He looks utterly scandalized by what I just said.

My laugh bubbles out of me and there is not a thing I can do to stop it. But then my laugh is smothered by Jade’s lips. He has pounced on me for a kiss, and it is the best idea he has ever had.

Every inch of my skin starts to tingle as the kiss zooms through me. I pull Jade closer. I want to be pressed against every part of him. I want to share body heat. I want to feel him in my bones.

But he breaks away from me. I whine in disorientation and disappointment.

“Gray, can we have some privacy, please?” Jade pants .

What the hell? My head whips around, but I can't see the little guy anywhere.

"Your lust tastes delicious," rasps Gray's voice from the shadows.

I yelp and every small hair on my body stands up. I still can't see Gray.

Suddenly, a stern voice calls from the top of the stairs. "Gray, come along now. You know better than this. Feeding from your friends isn't nice."

Gray steps out of the shadows with a pout on his pretty face. His dark eyes are glinting and he is staring at us with clear avarice.

The voice at the top of the stairs lets out a quiet rumble of a growl. "Gray, you have five seconds to get up these stairs if you want to be fed tonight."

The little demon moves in a blur, dashing through the door and up the stairs so fast he's practically flying.

Footsteps move away from us, and we are alone again. I turn to Jade.

"Did he really want to eat us?"

Jade swallows. "Only our sexual energy."

Oh right. Yeah, I think someone explained to me that Gray is not any old type of demon, he is a sex demon. An incubus.

"Sorry," Jade whispers.

I smile and pull him back in to resume our kissing. "Nothing to be sorry about."

His arms wrap around me, and he kisses me exactly how I like. With hunger, need, and determination.

Oh lord. I need to get my clothes off. I need to get his clothes off. I need him to rail me until I can't see straight.

“I made you something!” declares Lello’s voice from the stairs.

I detach myself from Jade just in time to see Lello fling open the door and skip into the dungeon. The kelpie prances over to us, holding a piece of paper aloft. He shoves it in front of our noses .

At first all I see is sparkles and rhinestone. Glitter and a riot of color. Then my mind registers that the sparkle explosion is in the shape of letters.

‘Do not disturb.’

“There is sticky tape on the back so you can stick it on the door when you want to have nooky!” Lello says proudly.

I stare at him. Jade stares at him.

Lello puts a hand on his hip. “I saw Mal dragging Gray away from here, so I thought I’d give it to you now.”

It’s very sweet of him, it really is. Thoughtful and considerate. Lello really is a sweetheart.

“Thanks Lello, you are the best!” I grin.

Lello beams at me. His whole face lights up like the sun. It makes my heart ache. I

don't want to believe that anyone was cruel enough to keep this little ray of light locked up and used as a sex slave.

"Hey, Lello," Jade says gently. "How about you stick that on the door right now?"

Lello's bright blue eyes grow enormous. Then he grins. "Oh! Okay! Have fun!"

He twirls around and skips out, slamming the door behind him. I wince from the force of it.

Jade turns to me. "Goddess, I'm so sorry! My friends are a lot."

I smile and lean in close. My fingers trace along his jaw. "Your friends are amazing. Just like you."

His green eyes narrow in disbelief.

"Come on, Jadey," I chuckle. "Have you met me? What part of chaos and noise and glitter do you think I don't love? Living with your friends is going to be like living at the fairground."

He blinks, and then he laughs. A real laugh. One full of happiness and genuine amusement. My heart flutters in response. Jackpot. I think this is the best laugh I have coaxed out of him so far.

"You're the amazing one," Jade says.

"I know," I smirk. Then I flop back on the bed and stretch out. "Why don't you come and show me how amazing I am?"

He laughs again, then he is on top of me and his lips are attacking mine. I moan in

bliss as I melt into the kiss. Life has taken a strange turn indeed, but it's a very good one.

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Chapter twenty-five

Jade

I 'm staring at the pages of this book, but the words are not going in. Instead of painting vivid pictures in my mind, they are simply marks on paper. Meaningless symbols.

I sigh and rub my eyes. My thoughts are slow and sluggish. I feel like I am shutting down. Withering. Fading. I've been in this dungeon for weeks, and now my very soul is giving up.

I put the book down in defeat. The same four walls stare back at me. It could be worse, far worse, I know that.

My lovely friends are keeping me safe. They installed a proper toilet and shower down here. I'm never alone, unless I want to be.

I've accumulated a mountain of DVDs. I'm learning how to knit with Lello. Pink and I are learning Spanish together, as well as pouring through old magic books from Monty's library, hoping to uncover something that might help find Monty's brother.

It's not as if I'm short on things to do.

"It should be enough," I say to Reginald.

The stuffed frog remains silent, sitting lopsided in his spot on the end of the bed.

Maybe he is getting depressed too. Perhaps the thought of being down here for the rest of his days is starting to wear on him.

I know I am giving up hope that another solution will be found. It really looks like I'm going to have to stay here forever.

Suddenly, the sound of the door scraping open echoes around. It sinks into my chest and stirs my heart .

Flyn.

I find myself running to him. His arms wrap around me. His jacket is wet, sprinkled with raindrops. The smell of autumn clings to him. I inhale the fresh scent as deeply as I can.

"What's the outside world like?" I say as I step back while still keeping my hands on his shoulders.

Flyn smiles. The corner of his eye twitches. There are new lines there. He is finding this hard, too. I've given him worry lines.

"Awful!" he says with nearly convincing gusto. "Cold, wet, gray."

I've missed the end of summer. I'll never get it back. The seasons have turned, and I'm trapped in here where the light is always the same. No stars. No breeze. No sky.

"It's much nicer in here, honestly," Flyn says.

I smile weakly at his attempt to cheer me up.

"I've got you a present!" He holds up the plastic bag like a trophy before thrusting it

at me.

I take it and pull out the contents. I freeze for a moment while my mind tries to process what is happening. Eventually, I look up at Flynn's beaming face.

"You want me to wear a sexy nurse outfit?"

Flynn chuckles, eyes sparkling with mirth. "If that's the way you want to play it, baby, then sure. But I was hoping you'd rail me while I was wearing it."

My eyebrows rise. My imagination whirls.

The picture on the front of the plastic packet shows a female model.

Very thin. The latex-looking pale blue mini skirt is very short on her.

It would be positively indecent stretched across Flynn's muscular thighs.

As for the top part, I'm not sure if it would even stretch across his chest. If it did, it would be very tight.

It would push his pecs together and give him the beginnings of a cleavage.

His arms would be bare. The silly little hat would nearly get lost in his blond curls. I think his midriff would be exposed .

Oh my. I try to swallow, but it doesn't really work. Blindly, I thrust the costume towards Flynn. I accidentally hit him in the chest with it.

"Put it on now," I rasp. I cough and then manage to add, "Please."

Flyn's laugh is positively filthy. He hurries over to the tiny bathroom. I stare at the door for a moment before rousing myself with a shake.

I turn around and yank open the dungeon door, and flip over the 'Do Not Disturb' sign. I do it so aggressively that a gemstone pings off. Oops. I'll have to ask Lello to fix it later.

I shove the door shut. The latch catches with an ominous click. The sound sends an icy trickle down my spine. It is a noise that I am really beginning to hate.

I force my lungs to slow. Everything is fine. Sometimes being locked away from the world is a good thing. Like when you are about to make love to your stunning boyfriend.

Two more deep breaths and my body finally gets the idea.

My heart rate falls back down to a somewhat normal rhythm.

It's not going to go all the way down, because Flyn is in the bathroom putting on a sexy nurse outfit, and that's fine.

My heart is allowed to race for Flyn. That's entirely reasonable.

As if to prove my point, the thin bathroom door opens and Flyn saunters out, causing my entire body to react.

My brain cells seize up. My lungs do something strange. My stomach flips a cartwheel. Oh my sweetest goddess. He looks even better than I imagined. The outfit is ridiculously skimpy. And clinging on for dear life to stretch over his broad, manly frame.

It really is the hottest thing I have ever seen. So hot. So very hot that there has to be steam coming out of my ears right now.

Flyn's hands go to his hips, drawing attention to his waist. Oh hells, I'm literally drooling now.

"What are you doing out of bed?" he says in a strange voice .

I blink. Then I blink again. Oh, right, role play. I stare at Flyn helplessly.

"Now, now, Mr. Freeman, this just won't do."

He steps forward, takes my elbow and steers me towards the bed. Then he pushes me on to it. I lie back and stare up at him.

"Remember what to say if you want us to stop?" he says in his normal voice.

I nod. "Reginald."

We haven't done anything kinky. This has to be as close as it gets, but Flyn wanted us to have safe words anyway.

It's so thoughtful of him, as well as perceptive.

He understands that I could potentially freak out at any time.

Not that I have. So far, I've only ever felt safe with Flyn, but brains are weird and who knows what might set me off.

"Time for your bed bath."

My hands fly up to the buttons of my pajama top, but Flynn gently bats them away.

“No, no. Mr. Freeman. The doctor left strict orders. You need to rest.”

A deranged sounding giggle escapes me. This whole over-the-top thing is so Flynn. It should be ridiculous. The cheap sex store costume. The voice he is putting on. The words he is saying.

But I don't think I've ever been harder in my life.

He grins down at me. Blue eyes sparkling so brightly it is nearly dazzling. He is like sunlight incarnate.

I drink in the sight of him as he slowly, slowly strips me. Now I'm naked on the bed while he is standing there fully covered up. Well, as fully covered up as the skimpy costume is managing.

He gives me an extremely salacious wink before turning on his heels and walking to the bathroom with a sway in his hips.

I'm still reeling from that sight when he returns a few minutes later with a bowl of warm water and a washcloth.

He winks at me again. Then he drops to his knees beside the bed, somehow managing to make the gesture incredibly slutty.

Oh hells. I'm not going to survive this.

There is no need to worry about losing the will to live due to being locked down here, because I'm about to lose my mind. Flynn is going to melt it into goo.

The warm wet cloth wipes over my chest. My cock throbs. The sensation is so intense that I have to close my eyes.

Apparently, my nipples are very dirty and the nurse is having to clean them very thoroughly. A breathless moan seeps out of me. Pleasure is zapping through me like lightning. I'm tingling all over. I'm hyperaware of every inch of my naked skin.

The warm wet cloth slides down my body. It brushes over my aching cock, making me gasp.

"My, my, Mr. Freeman. This won't do. It's not good for your blood pressure. We are going to have to get it to go down."

I can't think of a single thing to say. I can't even open my eyes. I hope Flynn doesn't mind.

The next thing I know, I'm crying out. Ecstasy is exploding through me. Flynn's soft lips are wrapped around my cock and sliding down. Fuck.

My hands clench in the sheets. My lungs are stuttering. My head is spinning.

He bobs up and down my length three times, then he pulls off with a wet plop.

"Well, this really won't do. It's getting harder. We are going to have to try something else."

The bed dips. My eyes remember how to open, just in time to see Flynn straddling me. A gurgling sound sticks in my throat. I think my eyes are bugging out now. The latex skirt is so short it's not getting in the way at all.

Flynn pauses above me. His eyes are dark with lust, but his question is clear. I nod

frantically, which makes him smirk.

His fingers gently wrap around my cock and he holds me in place. I watch, transfixed and utterly awestruck, as he lowers himself onto me .

He is tight and hot and slick with lube, but astonishingly, I'm barely registering that. It's the look of intense joy and rapture on his face that has me enthralled.

He slides all the way down. He grunts. His head tips back. I suck in a shuddering breath and will myself not to cum yet.

With a deep groan, Flyn begins to move. His hips roll and he rides me. I watch him in reverence. This man is my religion. He is everything that I worship.

His pleasure builds and builds. It is glorious to see. His cheeks are rosy. His jaw loose. His lips puffy and wet.

His muscles are trembling. His thighs quaking. He moans, and slows his pace. He sucks in a breath and speeds up, bouncing away on me.

He repeats the cycle over and over again.

I drink it all in. I commit every tiny detail to memory. I am keeping this forever.

He whines.

Oh shit. I'm an idiot. Every time he gets close to orgasm, his thighs start trembling so much that he can't keep up the pace he needs.

Euphoria rushes through me. For the first time in my life, I'm so fucking happy that I have inhuman strength.

With a deep and feral cry, I grab his hips. I flip us over so he is on his back on the bed and I'm above him, still buried deep in his ass. One hand goes up to his hair and pulls it. I lean down to his ear.

"You are a very naughty nurse," I growl.

Flyn cries out. A wordless sound of helpless lust. He clenches around me. I snap my hips and pound into him. Hard and fast in the way he likes, but not so much that I risk hurting him.

"Jade! Jade! Jade!" he pants in time with my thrusts.

Then he screams my name. A full on, full volume scream as he writhes his way through a spectacular, glorious orgasm.

My own peak burns through me. Sweet, pure and exquisite. My load empties deep inside his ass and I'm so very glad we had the, 'condoms are not needed with paranormals' discussion. Because, fucking hell, knowing that I'm filling him with my cum is the most satisfying thing in the universe.

I collapse boneless next to Flyn.

"Fuck," he gasps breathlessly.

I chuckle and pull him into a spoon. Maybe being locked down here isn't so bad.

Chapter twenty-six

Flyn

Winter has hit the countryside like a slow, suffocating blanket.

Everything on Monty's estate is brown and gray and brittle with frost. The kind of cold that clings even when you're inside, sitting by the fire with a mug of tea cupped in your hands.

It's the kind of season that gets into your bones. The kind that doesn't let go.

It's still beautiful though. And I'd give anything, absolutely anything, for Jade to be able to enjoy it with me instead of being locked away.

The dungeon isn't technically a dungeon.

That's what we keep telling ourselves. It's a basement, technically.

Stone walls and a proper bed and a thick rug and books stacked to the ceiling.

It's warm, at least. Monty made sure of that.

It has a bathroom. It has a TV and a DVD player.

But calling it anything other than what it really is feels like lying.

Jade is locked underground. And it's killing him slowly.

I pause halfway down the stairs, holding a tray with soup and bread.

He's barely eating. I'm trying to make it easier.

Comfort food, warm colors, familiar scents.

I even found a candle that smells like summer, coconut and lime, but it doesn't change the stale air down here. Doesn't change the truth.

When I push the door open, the hinges creak, but Jade doesn't even flinch .

He's lying on the bed, on top of the blankets, fully clothed in a hoodie that used to be mine. His hair's longer now, grown out from summer. It curls a little at the ends. He hasn't asked for a trim in weeks. He's paler too. Shadowed. Like the light is slowly leaking out of him.

"Hey," I say softly.

His head turns just enough to look at me, but he doesn't smile.

I hate that most of all.

I set the tray down on the little table beside the bed. "Brought soup. It's the good stuff, Cara's recipe. Beef and potato. It's got, like, medicinal properties. Basically witchcraft."

A flicker of amusement, a blink-and-you-miss-it flash of humor, passes through his eyes. But he doesn't move.

“Not hungry,” he murmurs.

“You said that yesterday. And the day before that? Also not hungry,” I say, sitting on the edge of the bed. “You’re going for a record.”

Jade exhales through his nose. It might’ve been a laugh, once. Now it just sounds tired.

I want to reach for his hand. I want to run my fingers through his hair, kiss his forehead, hold him until he remembers who he is and why he’s still fighting. But I don’t do any of that. I don’t want to break him open. Not when he’s barely holding himself together.

Instead, I ask, “Did you catch some sleep while I was making soup?”

“Some.”

“Nightmares?”

“Same as always.”

I nod, staring at a crack in the stone floor that wasn’t there when we first moved in. “Same dream, or same feeling?”

Jade doesn’t answer right away. His gaze shifts to the ceiling. “They’re calling louder.”

A chill runs down my spine that has nothing to do with the weather .

“I keep thinking I can block them out. That I’m strong enough. But they’re smart. They... they change shape. In the dreams, they look like people I knew. People I lost.

My mother. Once, they looked like you.”

That one hits like a punch.

I try to keep my face steady. “Me?”

He finally meets my eyes. “They said if I opened the portal, you’d be safe. That they’d give you a place in their court. That we’d never grow old. Never die.”

“And you believed them?”

Jade shrugs. “I didn’t want to. But for a moment... it was tempting.”

I hate this. I hate how small he sounds. How ashamed. Like he’s confessing to some unholy sin instead of just being human.

“You didn’t act on it,” I say. “That’s what matters.”

“For now,” he says quietly.

I grip the edge of the bed, knuckles white. “I want to get you out of here. I hate this. I hate seeing you like this. But if I open that door, I could lose you. Or worse, you could lose yourself .”

“I know.”

“I wish there was another way.”

Jade doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to. The silence says it all.

Silas said he was working on it, but I have my doubts. He is a busy man and his

priority is keeping the world safe. He doesn't know Jade, so why would he care about his well being? Locked down here is problem solved, if you look at it coldly.

Monty and Mal work on the magic seals every day. Gray checks the amulet. Nobody thinks the fey are going to get in. As long as Jade doesn't go out.

The whole situation sucks. And worst of all, I can't see a way through this. For the first time in my life, my optimism is failing me .

The silence settles over me. If I can't help, the very least I can do is to be here with him. Physically, mentally, spiritually.

The quiet fills the air. The moment stretches.

Eventually, I reach out and take his hand. It's cold. Too cold. I rub circles into his knuckles with my thumb.

"You're not alone," I whisper.

"I feel like I am."

"I know. But I'm here. Even if all I can bring you is soup and bad jokes."

"Your jokes are pretty good," he says softly.

"Don't lie. You're supposed to be the honest one."

His lips twitch. Almost a smile.

"Do you remember," I say, "that night at the fair? The Ferris wheel?"

Jade nods faintly.

“I keep thinking about the fireworks. How your whole face lit up when they started. I’ve never seen someone so beautiful and so surprised at the same time.”

“I thought you planned them.”

“Yeah, I didn’t. But I should’ve lied and said I did. Would’ve scored me some major points.”

His hand tightens around mine. “You already had the points.”

There’s a long pause. He closes his eyes. I watch his chest rise and fall, too shallow, too slow. Like he is shutting down. But his hand is trembling, ever so slightly. Almost like a shiver.

“You’re scared,” I say.

“Terrified.”

“Good. That means you’re still fighting.”

He turns toward me, finally, fully. And it’s like the sun breaking through a snowstorm. Small. Brief. Blinding.

“I love you, you know,” he says, voice barely audible.

It stuns me. Not because I didn’t think he felt it. But because I didn’t expect him to say it now, when he’s at his lowest. It feels like a tether. Like he’s handing me the rope to pull him back .

I lean down and press my forehead against his. “I love you too. So much it’s killing me.”

My insides twist and squirm. My heart is tightening in pain while my stomach is having butterflies.

My body is as confused and conflicted as I am.

On the one hand, I’m absolutely ecstatic and elated that we are declaring our love for one another, on the other hand, I hate that it’s like this.

This moment should be purely joyous. Special.

More spectacular than the fireworks at our first kiss.

It should not be spoken in sad whispers in a dungeon while Jade is fading away.

“I don’t want to die in here,” he says suddenly, and the words stab into my chest like an icy spear.

“You won’t.”

“I’m not sure how much longer I can hold it together.”

“We’ll find a way. All of us. We’re not giving up.”

He nods, slowly. “Will you stay? Just for a bit?”

“Of course,” I say with a false smile.

Why is he asking that? I’m always down here.

I rarely leave his side. I only go up for snacks and for brief snatches of fresh air in order to preserve my own sanity.

If I thought staying down here permanently and slowly going insane with Jade would help, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

But I think staying strong for Jade is the better option.

I pull off my shoes and climb in beside him, careful not to disturb the tray. He curls into my side, head tucked under my chin, and for the first time in days, he breathes like he's safe.

I drape my arm around him and try to remember how to breathe normally.

But the whole time, I'm thinking about how thin he's gotten.

How even kissing him doesn't lift the weight in his eyes anymore.

I'm thinking about the way his voice shakes when he says my name in the middle of the night, and how sometimes I find him staring at the wall like he's already gone.

How long can we keep this up ?

How long before his mind slips, before he gives in?

It's not that I want to let him out. It's just that I want to save him. I need to save him.

If being locked away is what's killing him, then maybe the risk of letting him out is worth it. Because if he dies, if he withers away, what's the point in anything?

Maybe, just for a moment, we could find somewhere quiet. Somewhere safe. A walk

in the garden, maybe. Ten minutes under the sky. Air in his lungs, sun on his skin.
Something real to remind him who he is.

Because if I don't do something soon, I'm going to lose him.

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Chapter twenty-seven

Flyn

February is here. Finally. The longest winter ever is finally ending. Maybe I'll start being able to breathe.

I place the freshly squeezed orange juice on the tray and pop two slices of bread into the toaster.

“La la la-la la!” shrieks Lello.

Everyone in the kitchen laughs. Even Blue.

“Not quite,” he chuckles. “Try again.”

Lello takes a deep breath and repeats his noises. The only difference I can hear is the volume. This time his braying is louder. It's tempting to cover my ears.

As Lello finishes his attempt at singing a scale, he collapses into fits of giggles. It's contagious. My lungs are shaking. Who knew a siren trying to teach a kelpie to sing would be so hilarious?

The toaster pops and I grab its offerings and quickly butter them. Level three toastiness. Jade's favorite.

I quickly dash out of the kitchen before the toast can get cold. I hurry down the stairs

to the dungeon and push the door open with my shoulder.

Darkness envelops me. Along with an oppressive silence. Even the air is too still.

There are a dozen lamps down here, but they do nothing against the dark. It's an entirely different world from the one I just left. There is no joy or laughter down here. No pale winter sunlight .

Jade is a motionless lump of bedcovers in the bed. He has gone back to sleep even though I only left ten minutes ago.

I force a swallow past the lump in my throat. He is sleeping so much these days. Though I guess it is the only way he has of escaping, and it's not as if he is missing anything exciting, here down in the dungeon.

But he is missing out on so very much.

He is missing out on the nonsense upstairs. Just like he missed Christmas and New Year, even though everyone crammed down here to spend a few hours with him.

He is missing the snowdrops that have sprung to life all over the gardens. All the photos I've shown him are just not the same. He is going to miss the daffodils too.

I put the tray down on the bedside table. Jade doesn't stir, so I gently shake his shoulder.

His eyes open, and he stares at me with a blank expression. There are dark shadows under his eyes. He looks worse today. He has been fading for far too long, but something is different this morning. It's almost as if his last flicker of hope has burned out.

“Breakfast!” I say with all the cheer I can muster.

He sighs and shuffles up to a sitting position. I place the tray on his lap. He picks up a piece of toast and starts eating it robotically. Like it is a chore that has to be endured.

“I have a headache,” he says in a monotone voice. “Can you bring down some painkillers?” His green eyes are dull. The emerald sparkle has been extinguished.

“What happened to the ones I brought down yesterday?” I ask.

He shrugs and looks away. “Can’t find them.” He takes another bite of toast.

I step away from the bed and start rummaging through all of the stuff that has accumulated down here.

“What are you doing?” Jade asks.

“Looking for the painkillers.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll have another look later.”

I turn back to look at him, but he won’t look at me. “I don’t mind. Can’t have you suffering through a headache.”

Jade doesn’t answer me. He just slowly chews his toast.

Something deep inside of me pulses in pain. It feels as if my insides are twisting up into knots. I turn away from Jade to hide my shaky inhale.

It’s not the fey, I know it’s not. Between all the magic around here, the most they do is make the lights flicker and sometimes give him freaky dreams.

It's not the fey that are slowly killing Jade. It's this place. This dungeon and the unending dark.

I run my hand through my hair and sneak in another fortifying breath. Find the painkillers. Focus on that. It's something I can do right now that will help.

With that determined thought in mind, I get to work. I look everywhere. Then I search again. What the hell? I know I brought them down yesterday and I don't think I'm the one who is losing their mind.

In exasperation, I stomp over to Reginald the stuffed frog and his place in the corner of the room.

"It's okay! My headache has gone!" Jade says all in a rush.

But my body is already moving. My arms lift up the frog. Three unopened packets of painkillers glare up at me. My heart stops beating.

Slowly, heavily, I turn to face Jade. His eyes meet mine. Full of pain and shame. His cheeks flush. Then he looks down at his lap with his shoulders slumped.

I swallow, and the sound is deafening.

Far, far in the back of my mind, where I buried them and locked them away, memories are roaring at me. All but screaming. Memories of the awful way my brother Liam left me.

I rouse myself with a full body shake. "Come on. We are going for a walk."

Jade stares at me, confusion swirling over his face .

“The whole estate is magic warded, isn’t it?” I say. “And you still have the amulet.”

Jade blinks slowly.

“Let’s go!” I announce.

I step forward, grab his hand, and yank him out of bed. Then I propel him to the door and up the stairs before he has time to process what is happening.

I’m so glad I shut the kitchen door behind me. Now no one can see the hallway down to the nearest door to the gardens. I hurriedly steer Jade down it, and then fling open the door.

It’s taken less than two minutes to get Jade outside. Two measly little minutes. I should have done it ages ago.

Jade stops walking. I look at him.

His face is tilted up to the sky, even though it is only an overcast winter day. His eyes are closed. He is basking in the weak February sunlight and there is a faint smile on his lips.

I tug on his hand. I really want to get further into the gardens before anyone looks out of a window and sees us.

Jade lowers his head. His eyes open. He looks at me and a dazzling smile spreads across his too-pale face. My heart thumps. It thuds against my ribcage like a thing possessed.

I tighten my grip on Jade’s hand and all but run deeper into the beautiful gardens. I babble about snowdrops and daffodils and everything and nothing.

Jade looks around in wonder. As if I'm showing him heaven instead of a garden in a country estate. He really has been locked up in the dark for far too long.

It would take a toll on anybody, and Jade is part fey. His heritage is tied to nature and the wild. Shutting him in a dungeon is like putting a sunflower in a basement and expecting it to survive.

The path we are on meanders up to a pretty sundial. It's surrounded by a circle of white gravel, and three other paths lead away from it. It's a centerpiece, and it really is quite charming .

Pink told me that lots of things around the house and grounds are imbued with ancient magic. It wouldn't surprise me if this sundial was one of them.

Jade lets go of my hand and walks up to the weathered sundial with clear reverence. I watch him with a grin on my face and relief pounding through my veins. Jade hasn't sunk so far that he cannot be found. He just needed some fresh air and a walk. A change of scenery to revitalize his spirits.

Once a day might be enough to keep him going. Just until my endless pestering of the Grand Master pays off. One day Silas will answer my calls or emails. I know it. Then the freaky necromancer will hurry up with finding a better way of keeping Jade safe.

Jade places his hands on the sundial and suddenly he jolts. His? head snaps back as if he is looking up at the sky again, and his entire body goes rigid.

"Jade?"

I step towards him.

His eyes are milky white.

I run towards him, but I hit something solid and crash to the ground. I can't breathe. Whatever invisible thing I ran into has knocked the wind right out of me.

Jade starts to chant. Strange, melodic and alluring words that make my skin tingle and burn.

Oh crap. Oh double and triple crap. My heart is racing so fast now I think I'm going to die. Even if I wasn't winded, adrenaline is shaking my muscles so hard, I don't think I could move.

The sound of running footsteps reaches my ears. I twist my neck to look. Everyone, and I mean everyone, is running out of the house towards us.

Thank fuck.

They will know what to do. They know all about magic. They figured out how to stop Jade last time he tried to open a portal .

Everything is going to be fine. The boys will stop this. Then everyone will be furious at my stupid ass. But everyone will be okay and that is the only thing that matters.

I heave myself up into a sitting position. I watch in bewilderment as Monty and Mal do things I have no chance of comprehending. The only thing I'm grasping is that Jade is behind a magic bubble, and no one can get to him.

Ned steps forward. He is clutching a large black umbrella to keep him out of the sunlight. He tries talking to Jade. He tries to get his attention.

But Jade's head stays back. His face fixed skyward and his eyes unseeing.

He is chanting away. I don't think he is aware of us at all. He can't see us. Or hear us.

I can't even tell if he is still Jade.

Suddenly, someone dressed all in black is striding up to the invisible magic wall. It's Silas, the Grand Master. Please let him be powerful enough to stop this.

"I'm going to have to kill him," says Silas.

"No!" I cry as I scramble to my feet. "Give me five minutes, please!"

Silas gives me a deeply impatient look. Gulping down my terror, I run up to the magic wall, getting as close to Jade as I can. I place the palm of my hands on the tingling nothingness. It is as solid as glass. No wonder running into it at full speed knocked me on my ass.

Jade is inches away from me, but he might as well be on the other side of the universe. He seems utterly oblivious of my presence.

"Jadey, Baby?" I shout hoarsely. "Please don't do this."

Shouting seems like a good idea. I have no idea if the magic is keeping sound out, but turning up my volume can't hurt.

"You don't want to do this. You are strong, Baby. So strong."

Nothing. Nothing save for a slight flicker in his eyes. A ripple through his tense body .

I take a deep breath. I don't dare to hope, but that was something . Some sign that he might have heard me.

"You can fight them, Baby. Do it for me."

Jade blinks. The white drains from his eyes. He lifts his head. He looks right at me with dazzling emerald eyes. His eyes. My Jade.

My breath catches in my throat and my lungs stop working.

His hands pull away from the sundial like it is taking a huge amount of effort. As if the stone is molten and his burned flesh melded to it. I hold his gaze and will him on, lending him what strength I can.

He staggers back a step with a cry. Then he crumples. I leap forward and catch him in my arms before I remember about the magic shield. But I have him. The soft weight of him is in my arms, so the magic wall must be gone.

Everyone crowds us. Brodie snatches up Jade's limp wrist and checks his pulse. The healer looks at me and nods. My lungs begin to work again, releasing a tight breath and sucking in some fresh oxygen.

Jade is going to be alright.

I open my mouth to say something, but a flash of purple in the sky snatches my words away. It's like lightning, but far more vivid. It lights up the entire sky and then vanishes. Everyone flinches, their bodies physically recoiling from something I cannot feel.

"What's happening!" I gasp.

"The portals have opened. The fey have stepped through."

I have no idea who has answered me, but their words are searing into me. Burning into my soul with an icy horror.

I look down at Jade, who is still out cold in my arms. Was I too late?

Silas is swearing. A long list of impressive cuss words and shocking phrases. He is glaring up at the sky.

“Fucking fey!” he finishes with.

His attention snaps down to Jade, and reflexively I pull my unconscious boyfriend to my chest. As if I can protect him.

Silas growls. “Jade was a distraction all along.”

Chapter twenty-eight

Jade

What is happening? I think I'm lying on my back in a bed, it certainly feels like it. But I swear there is sunlight on my face. I can almost see it through my eyelids. And I don't know how I can tell, but this doesn't feel like my bed in the dungeon.

Tentatively, I open my eyes. The first thing I see is Flynn. He is sitting on a chair next to the bed, but he has slumped forward and his head is resting on the mattress. He is also snoring softly.

Has he really fallen asleep after sitting by my bedside? I swallow and force my gaze away from Flynn to check out my surroundings.

Absolutely enormous windows greet me. Proudly displaying a pale blue sky and an expanse of formal gardens. The sheer beauty of it is going to bring me to tears.

I tear my gaze away to look around some more because I need to know where I am. I have to try to figure out what the hell is going on.

This room is large. Old-fashioned white and gold flock wallpaper line the walls. There is a marble fireplace, and an extremely tall ceiling with pretty coving.

I appear to be in a very fancy bedroom, in a very nice four poster bed.

My guess is I've been taken out of the dungeon and placed in one of the bedchambers

upstairs.

But why ?

My nose scrunches up. I don't remember a thing. The last thing I remember is... Oh goddess. The last thing I remember is Flynn finding my stash of painkillers.

Guilt and shame race through me until I'm nearly choking. Did I try something and have been brought here to convalesce? That's awful as well as extremely dangerous. Whatever state my mental health is in, I'm still a threat. Probably even more so.

My hand flies to my amulet. Its warm weight is not particularly comforting. Especially since the buzz of its magic seems duller.

Letting me out of the dungeon is a terrible idea. However good the intentions.

Flynn stirs. His head lifts up. His hazy blue eyes fix on me. As they focus, a huge, dazzling smile stretches across his face.

My heart flutters. But I need to focus.

"What is happening!" I blurt. "How long have I been out?"

"Just a few hours," reassures Flynn.

"And?" I snap back in growing panic. I'm glad I've only lost a couple of hours, but I still don't know why or how.

I watch in horror as Flynn's smile falters. He struggles to keep it, but there is pain in his eyes that is giving the game away.

“What’s happened?” my voice shakes.

Flyn licks his lips. “I took you out of the dungeon and the fey got control of you.”

My heart is racing now. My limbs are trembling. I’m weak and dizzy. I think I might throw up.

“But you listened to me, baby! You were so strong! You took back your control!”

His smile is back, and his eyes are alight.

“I didn’t open a portal?” I ask.

Flyn vigorously shakes his head. “No, baby. You didn’t.” He sucks in a breath. “But it turns out you were just a distraction. The fey got some other poor bastard to do their bidding.”

“I...I didn’t destroy the world?” I stammer as my mind whirls and tries to comprehend .

Flyn is grilling again. “Nope. You kicked fey ass.”

I try to get my lungs to work, but they are stuck. “But someone else let them in? The fey are here?”

Flyn’s blue eyes turn somber again. I see his worry and his fear. It lances through my gut.

Suddenly, the bedroom door bursts open and Lello bounds in. His eyes are wide and frantic.

“There is a fey in the garden and he said your name!”

A wave of dizziness washes over me.

“I think he wants to speak to you!”

“Is it safe?” snaps Flynn.

Lello gives him a wide-eyed look. He shrugs and turns his attention to me.

Nothing is safe anymore. The entire world has been changed. By people whose blood I share.

I throw back the covers. Thankfully, it appears I am still dressed.

Flynn scrambles to help me, but I feel fine.

Whatever drained me and put me in bed, has done no lasting damage.

Or perhaps adrenaline is lending me strength.

Whatever the reason, I can get out of bed unaided.

I’m going to be able to walk downstairs and out into the garden, to speak to a fey.

I nod at Flynn and Lello. Together, we silently make our way out of the house. Flynn pushes open the front door and the sunlight dazzles me. As my eyes adjust, I see nearly everyone is here, standing on or near the stone steps at the front of the house.

And there is a fey standing a few feet away on the lawn.

I wrap my arms around myself in an effort to calm my shaking. It doesn't work.

I stare at the fey. I almost break out into hysterical laughter. He is the one from my dream. The one that shifted from a wolf. He is standing here now with the same long brown hair, the same cat-slitted eyes. The same antlers.

At least he is dressed this time. In fancy and exotic, flowing silk robes .

His eyes slide off of me to look over my shoulder. I glance behind me just in time to see Gray slipping out of the house.

The fey gives the demon a shallow bow. Gray nods back. I shiver.

"I propose a deal," says the fey.

And now he is looking right at me.

I force a swallow down my throat. "What kind of deal?"

The fey's lips curl upwards in something that is the vague approximation of a smile. "That amulet was the bane of my existence for months. I wish to examine it. To see how it works."

My hand flies up and wraps around the amulet that still hangs around my neck. I guess I have no use for it now. There is no need to keep the fey out of my mind. They are here in my world.

"It was the sundial that defeated it in the end," says the fey almost pleasantly. "Give the amulet to me and in return I will grant this house and grounds safety and peace. No fey will set foot here or interfere in any way."

Wow. This is a lot to take in. I look around my friends. Their blank faces stare back at me expectedly.

A roll of nausea swirls through me. Crap. Nobody else can understand him. But apparently I'm fey enough that the language speaks to me.

I try to form words, but nothing comes out. I cough and try again. "He says he wants the amulet in exchange for granting us safety."

Murmurs and shocked expressions. Everyone turns to their special person. I look at Flyn. I want to know if he thinks this is a good idea.

His expression is thoughtful, hopeful. He doesn't think it is an outright awful proposal.

"That's a damn generous deal," says Pink in a voice that carries.

Everyone falls silent. He is right. It is suspiciously easy. Far too good to be true.

Do I need to translate for the fey? I'm not sure if I know how to find fey words. Listening is one thing, speaking is quite another .

The fey is regarding Pink. He seems to understand. I guess Pink's tone and the way he has crossed his arms over his chest is clear enough.

Suspicion. Doubt. Mistrust.

The fey's terrifying smile widens. "This is Laurie's home. Where he grew up." His gaze slides to Monty. "You are Laurie's brother."

Monty pales. "Why is he saying my brother's name?"

“You know Laurie?” I ask the fey. I have no idea if my tongue used English or Fey, but he seems to understand me.

He shrugs, and the gesture somehow looks all kinds of wrong. As if his shoulders aren’t made for such a movement.

“I will do.”

I stare at him helplessly. I have no idea what to say. My mind has given up. Everything is too strange, too unexpected.

The fey tilts his head to the side. “My deal is a wedding gift to my future consort’s family.”

My brows scrunch up. “He says he will know Laurie and his deal is a wedding gift.”

Fury blazes in Monty’s eyes. I feel his magic surge. He steps forward, but Pink places a hand on his chest and holds him back.

Gray however, slinks menacingly forward. Mal is leaning nonchalantly in the doorway, seemingly utterly at ease with whatever his mate is about to do.

The fey holds his hands up in a placating gesture. I see the unease flicker across his eyes. Good. I’m glad that even fey are wary of angry demons.

Gray has never met Laurie, as far as I know. But the little incubus understandably has a thing about people being bought and sold for sex. And Laurie’s mother did claim he was going to be given to a fey. An unwilling arranged marriage is just a fancy word for sex slavery.

“I have the gift of foresight,” the fey says hurriedly. “I have not met Laurie yet. I do

not know where he is right now. ”

Gray lets out a little growl. Maybe he does understand the fey language, or maybe he is simply going by tone and body language.

“I know Laurie will come to mean a great deal to me!” the fey all but blurts. Gray has definitely got him worried. “And Laurie will likewise hold me in high regard.”

I look around and realize everyone is staring at me again. Oh crap. I clear my throat.

“Um... He has foresight, and he is being cagey about it, but I think he’s saying in the future he and Laurie are going to be in love.”

Monty’s expression is nothing short of thunderstruck. Pink looks utterly taken aback too. I know my mind is floundering.

Love. Love changes everything. Laurie doesn’t need saving from love. And of all the forces in the world, love is the one that might be strong enough to inspire a fey to do a good deed and offer a generous deal.

“In that case, it sounds like a good deal,” says Ned from under his large umbrella.

I think he’d agree to anything to keep his children safe. I slowly look around at everyone else. They all nod. Ned’s not the only one who thinks it’s a good idea. I think everyone has realized that love completely changes the equation.

I turn back to the fey.

“We agree.”

Because, love aside, it’s not like we have anything to lose.

The fey gives his creepy smile again. His hand goes to the left side of his chest. I have no idea if that is where his heart is or if he even has one, but it seems likely.

“I, Prince Selwyn Y Mabinogi, decree that this house and grounds be a sovereign territory of the current inhabitants. I grant dominion in exchange for possession of the amulet.”

He stares at me expectantly.

I stare back. He is a frigging prince? I don't know why I am surprised. It is exactly what Monty's mother said she was going to do. Hide Laurie away until he can be married to a fey prince. But we all thought she was crazy. But we also thought the fey would never make it through the veil.

Prince Selwyn's eyes narrow. Oh shit, he is waiting for me to reply.

I cough. “I... um... Jade Freeman agree with those terms.”

The glint in the fey's eyes makes my blood run cold. Fuck. I really hope making a deal was not a mistake.

With shaking hands, I lift the amulet over my head. I walk down the steps and hold it out to him on an outstretched arm.

He steps forward, takes it, and... disappears as if he was never there. I blink and stare blankly at the spot he was just standing in.

Suddenly, I'm in Flynn's arms and I can't breathe because he is squishing me so tightly. I can feel his relief. His joy. I can hear my friends' excited chatter.

Oh my goddess, is everything truly going to be okay? Can I dare to hope?

Is the future suddenly and unexpectedly bright?

Chapter twenty-nine

Flyn

I t's colder than I'd like, but I don't care.

Winter might be throwing one last hissy fit before surrendering to spring, but it's all good.

The fey invaded two weeks ago and nothing terrible has happened.

I've been glued to the news, but so far it seems the fey simply walked into the Houses of Parliament, and the White House, and other places of power, and announced that they are in charge now.

Some humans tried to fight back, but it has been about as effective as trying to put out the sun with a water gun.

As I chuckle at the thought, my breath fogs in front of me.

The tips of my ears are already red, and I still haven't put gloves on, but I can't stop smiling.

Everything is good, and today is an especially excellent day.

I'm pacing outside the house, grinning like an idiot, checking my phone even though I know the time down to the second.

Cara's coming. She's finally coming. Cara and Sorcha.

My parents are arriving tomorrow once we've finished getting all the unused rooms ready. Everyone I love is going to be under one roof.

The fey have taken over the world, but granted our house safety.

So we all decided it was a good idea to gather up any relatives and loved ones.

Morgan's got some people coming tomorrow too.

They need to be somewhere safe, somewhere protected.

Somewhere enchanted, if we're honest. Somewhere that understands the weird.

Our strange little found-family manor is perfect.

I hear the crunch of gravel and my head snaps up.

A battered van rolls up the long drive like it's just finished a cross-country quest, and I guess that's pretty much the truth.

It squeaks to a halt and the driver door opens.

Cara climbs out. Her dark hair's in a long braid, her coat is half-buttoned, and she's already squinting at the house like she's trying to work out which part might be haunted.

I bolt forward.

She spots me and lets out a squeal. "Flyn!"

We meet halfway in a tight, bouncing hug. I lift her off her feet, the same way I used to when we were kids, as soon as I was big enough, and she lets out an exaggerated oof.

“I missed you,” I say into her hair.

“Obviously,” she laughs. “You left civilization to shack up with sirens and sword-wielding sorcerers.”

I laugh, too, even though the truth is weightier than the joke. We part and she gives me a once-over.

“You look happy,” she says softly. “Like, really happy.”

I nod. “I am.”

Then something small slams into my legs.

“Uncle Flyn!” Sorcha yells.

I scoop her up and spin her around, and she shrieks with laughter, legs kicking out, arms clinging to my neck. My heart feels like it might split open. I haven’t seen her since just after her fifth birthday. She’s grown.

“You’ve gotten heavy!” I say, planting a kiss on her cheek as I set her down.

“Have not.”

“You definitely have.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. I grin.

Then I see her eyes dart past me, so I follow her gaze.

Three figures are peeking out from the side of the house. Noah, Oscar, and little Lottie, all of them hanging back shyly, half-hidden by the ivy. I wave them over.

Sorcha doesn't wait.

She marches right up to them, hands on her hips like a tiny general, sparkly wellies stomping. "I'm Sorcha," she declares. "Your new best friend."

The four of them stare at each other for half a second, and then they're off, screaming with laughter, bolting toward the back garden like a swarm of puppies.

Behind me, Cara snorts. "Well, I see your place comes with instant childcare."

"Apparently," I say, still grinning. "Come on. I'll show you around."

As we walk, she loops her arm through mine. "Is it true? What you said on the phone? We are really going to be safe here?"

"Safe as we can be. We made a deal with the fey. Jade did, actually."

Her eyebrows rise. "The love of your life?"

My ears go a bit hot. "Yeah. Him."

She hums knowingly. "Can't wait to meet him."

As we walk toward the house, Cara casts a glance at the fancy windows and the tall chimneys, her brows raised.

“So... this is where all the weirdness lives now, huh?”

“Weirdness?” I ask, half-laughing, half-bracing.

She shoots me a look. “Don’t ‘what do you mean’ me. I may be new to this whole fey and magic and otherworldly-creatures business, but I’m not stupid. You’ve told me that your new friends are all magical.”

I nod warily.

Cara exhales slowly. “Right. And your boyfriend’s a portal-magnet with ancient magic blood?”

“Yes,” I say, a little defensively.

“So, that’s weirdness!” She declares triumphantly .

I wince. “You’re taking this really well.”

“I had a mild existential crisis during the invasion, cried in the bath for three days straight, and then I got over myself,” she says matter-of-factly.

A full body laugh shakes through me. I should have known that my sister would take this all in her stride.

She grins at me, and everything feels wonderful.

We head in through the kitchen door. The warmth hits us immediately, along with the scent of cinnamon and something fruity. Cara pauses to take it all in. The hanging herbs, the mismatched mugs, the worn wooden table covered in board games and spell books.

Then the yelling starts.

“I am telling you, Lello, you can’t put moonstones in a warding wreath!”

“Why not?”

“Because they attract dream energy, and we want defense , not everyone sleepwalking into the damn hedge maze!”

Lello and Pink appear in the hallway, both carrying armfuls of dried flowers, evergreens, and various sparkly crystals. They’re facing off like two reality show contestants arguing over a cake.

“Dream energy is calming!” Lello insists. “You just don’t want to admit my wreaths are prettier than yours.”

“Pretty isn’t the point! You always do this, you make decorations, not protections ! Last solstice your garlands attracted moths the size of pigeons!”

“They were festive!”

“They were practically carnivorous!”

They are so busy glaring at each other that they don’t even appear to have noticed me and Cara.

Cara leans toward me, eyebrows raised. “So... that one’s a kelpie?”

“Lello, yes. And Pink’s human. Kind of.”

“Kind of? ”

“Look, it’s a long story.”

We escape into the living room, where the chaos is usually quieter. Sammy and Blue are curled up on the window seat, watching the winter landscape while drinking from matching mugs of tea. Sammy waves lazily as we pass.

I’m so glad everyone is listening to my request not to pounce on my family as soon as they arrive.

Jade is by the fireplace, rearranging the logs. When he straightens and sees Cara, he freezes, one hand still resting on the mantel.

“Hi,” he says quickly. “You must be Cara. I’m Jade.”

He shifts awkwardly, and I watch the nerves bloom across his face. He’s trying to make a good impression. He’s terrified he won’t.

Cara smiles. Broad, warm, effortless. “Hi, Jade. Flyn’s told me so much about you.”

She closes the distance and gives him a hug before he can protest. Jade stiffens for half a second, then slowly melts into it. When she lets go, he’s visibly blinking in surprise.

“Y... you’re okay with hugging me?”

She tilts her head. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I mean... I’m...”

He doesn’t finish. I know what he’s trying to say.

I've seen that look before, the uncertainty, the years of being treated like something to be owned or used.

The way he believes he is dirty and tarnished and that everyone can see it.

The way he is worried that Cara is going to hate him for not being fully human.

Cara reaches out and gently touches his arm.

"Jade, I'm still figuring out all of this.

A week ago, I thought vampires were a Halloween costume and that the weirdest thing about my brother was his terrible handwriting.

Then the sky cracked open, and now I've got a daughter who talks about portals like they are nothing more than garden sheds and a brother who is part of a family of paranormal people.

"She gives him a crooked smile. "But you make my brother light up. And I trust my brother's heart. "

Jade stares at her like she's just spoken in poetry. "Thank you."

"And anyway," she adds, "I've always wanted a magical brother-in-law. And my kid is going to love this place."

Jade glances at me, and his whole face softens. I see the fear loosen in his shoulders, the way he stands a little straighter now. Cara likes him. He likes Cara. We're good. My heart swells. I'm full to bursting with love.

"You're even sweeter than Flynn said," Cara announces.

Jade flushes bright red. “He said I was sweet?”

Cara grins. “He wouldn’t shut up about you.”

I cough. Loudly. “Okay, all right, let’s...”

But Jade is smiling now, that rare, soft smile that he gets when he thinks no one’s looking. He glances at me like he’s surprised, and then back at Cara.

“Can I help you bring your things in?” he offers.

“I would love that.”

They walk off together, chatting already. And something in my chest settles. Deep and profound, just like I knew it would.

I knew they’d get along. Jade’s more like family than anyone I’ve ever met. Now, Cara can see that too.

I trail after them. There is no way I’m getting out of the impending, box and furniture, and lord knows what else is in that van, carrying duty.

The three of us step back outside into the crisp February air. I breathe it in deeply. It is so damn good to be out of that dungeon, and I wasn’t even in there all the time like Jade was.

Behind me, the front door opens again. Ned steps out, sipping tea, eyes on the sky, scanning for any break in the clouds that would mean he would have to scurry back inside. When he sees the kids tumbling across the lawn, Sorchia right in the middle of them, he smiles .

Cara notices too. “They’ll be okay, won’t they?” she says, as she turns towards the vampire.

“They are going to be brilliant,” Ned replies.

And I believe it. Everything is going to be brilliant.

The sky hasn’t fallen. The fey haven’t returned to the house. Here at our little oasis, it is as if nothing’s changed.

Even so, Monty’s putting together extra wards to keep the place as protected as possible. Mal and Gray are planning some kind of new barrier system. Pink and Lello are bickering and doing whatever the hell it is they are doing.

All just in case. Everyone is pretty certain the fey are going to keep their word. Even I know that about them. Fairytales are full of stuff about it.

We are safe. Everyone I love is safe. Jade is out of that fucking dungeon. I get to live in a giant, posh and fancy house with a found family who I adore. It is chaos and noise and everything I love.

It feels like life. A real one. Maybe for the first time.

Tomorrow, my parents will get here. The final piece. We’ll all be together.

And I’ve got something big planned. I reach into my pocket and feel the small box there.

Soon. Very soon.

Chapter thirty

Jade

The dining room feels like the heart of a world I never imagined I'd live in.

It's long past sunset, but the high arched windows are glowing softly with reflected candlelight.

Warmth spills from the great hearth behind me, crackling with logs that smell faintly of pine.

The table stretches from one end of the dining room to the other, wide enough to seat an army, but it's full of family.

Messy, loud, loving family, and somehow, impossibly, I'm one of them.

There is enough space for three times as many people, but we are all squished in together at one end.

We're all crammed in elbow-to-elbow, passing plates, swapping jokes, refilling glasses.

The food is warm and homey. Roast chicken with rosemary and lemon, great bowls of buttery mashed potatoes, sharp apple-and-fennel salad tossed with honey and cider vinegar.

I can barely keep up with the offers being slung across the table.

“Have you tried the bread pudding?” “There’s still gravy!

” “Sorcha, darling, don’t put peas in the candle again. ”

Sorcha, perched proudly on a cushion that’s on a chair between Lottie and Oscar, is wearing a paper crown and bossing the entire table like she’s the Empress of Everything. Ned’s boys are dutifully obeying her every decree, while Lottie appears to be planning a quiet coup.

I smile .

To my left, Flynn’s mother is giggling with Brodie over something Red said.

Flynn’s dad is deep in conversation with Monty about whether the gardens could support a proper orchard.

Across from me, Lello is resting his chin on Carter’s shoulder and rhythmically poking a bread roll with his fork.

Every few minutes, Carter sighs and offers his mate a different dish in a clear effort to distract him.

At the far end of the table, Morgan is talking excitedly about something, while Ned offers solemn commentary.

Conversation continues, lively and joyful, and I let myself sink into the rhythm of it. There’s no tension here, no secrets, no fear. It’s as far from the harem as it’s possible to be. That place was silence and control. This is noise and mess and love in every direction.

And Flynn... Flynn is watching it all like he's been gifted a dream.

He's not talking. Not right now. Just leaning back slightly, glass in hand, gaze sweeping the room like he still can't believe this is real. I know the feeling.

He catches me watching and smiles.

My heart trips over itself.

Cara leans closer, nudging me gently with her elbow. "It's something, isn't it?"

I glance at her. "It's... everything."

Her face softens. "It's far more than I hoped for. After... well, after the invasion. After I found out magic was real and my brother's soulmate used to accidentally open portals in his sleep."

I wince. "Used to."

"Used to," she agrees, like she's proud of me.

I glance at Sorcha again, now deep in conversation with Lottie about whether or not unicorns wear hats.

"It didn't scare you? Finding out?" I ask.

Cara's face tilts, considering. "It shocked me. But scare me? No. What scared me was not knowing where Flynn was. Not knowing if he was okay. Or if you were okay."

"Me? "

"I knew before I met you that you were good for Flynn. That he needed you." She

reaches for her wine. “You love my brother. That’s enough for me to consider you family.”

I blink hard and look down at my hands. “I don’t know what to do with someone like you.”

“Like me?”

“Someone who... likes me. Without even asking me to prove I deserve it.” I swallow. “Without knowing everything.”

I don’t think Flynn has told her about the harem. He’d feel it wasn’t his place.

Cara sets her glass down and covers my hand with hers. “Jade, I’m a woman who has raised a chaos goblin for five years. Trust me. Nothing fazes me.”

Across the table, Sorcha lets out a delighted screech. “The peas are my pets!”

“Chaos goblin?” I echo faintly.

“It runs in the family.” Cara smirks. “Speaking of which, my parents like you.”

I blink. “What?”

She leans in, smiling warmly. “My parents. They think you’re sweet and clever and very polite. My mom said you have kind eyes.”

I don’t know what to say to that. ‘Kind eyes’ is not a phrase that’s ever been used about me.

“I don’t think they expected a shy, fidgety, magic-boy with perfect manners,” she adds. “They thought Flynn’s soulmate would be a whirlwind like him. But honestly?

You're exactly what he needs."

I swallow hard. "Thank you."

She keeps saying soulmate. I think she's just being flippant, using it as a turn of phrase. But I like it. A lot. It makes me feel all warm and tingly inside.

"And also," she continues breezily, "if you break his heart, I will curse your toothbrush. I'll get Gray to teach me how."

I snort, and just like that, the pressure in my chest lifts .

We laugh, and I feel it all over, this enormous, impossible joy humming in the bones of the room.

It's in the laughter. In the candlelight.

In the low background music Blue put together from old records he found in the attic.

In the way Monty slides an extra slice of pie onto Pink's plate even though Pink swears he's full, and the way Ned keeps tugging Morgan closer, like he can't quite believe he is still here.

It's in the way Flyn stands. He clears his throat.

"I just want to say something before dessert."

Half the table groans. "Flyn!"

He holds up both hands, mock-solemn. "Two minutes. I swear. And then I'll personally bring you your pie."

That earns him a grudging cheer. He waits for the noise to settle, then glances around the room, eyes full.

“There was a time when I didn’t dare dream of a day like this,” he says. “With all of us together. Safe. Happy. Alive.”

There’s a quiet murmur of agreement.

“Most of you have been through things most people can’t imagine. Things you are still healing from. And yet, look at us. ”

He gestures wide. “We’re here, together. We’re thriving. We have children throwing peas at the ceiling...” he pauses while Sorcha waves regally. “And friendships that have turned into families. It’s been a long road, for everyone. But tonight? It feels like we made it.”

My heart is thumping. How can anyone be so wonderful? Not only has he accepted me and all my very many flaws, he has fully embraced my found family as his own.

“We have made it and our future is bright.”

More murmurs. A few clinks of glasses. Gray gives him a quiet nod.

I quickly refill my glass of spiced cider. It looks like this speech might be heading towards toasts. I sneak in a hasty sip.

Flyn’s gaze finds mine.

“And there’s one more thing I want to say. ”

He steps away from the table. My stomach flips.

He pulls something small from his pocket.

My heart stops.

“I want to spend every day making you laugh, and making far too much food for breakfast.” His voice is shaking slightly. “I want all of it. The quiet days. The chaos. The cats we’ll probably end up adopting. The slow mornings. The late nights. I want you. Always.”

And then... he drops to one knee.

There’s a collective gasp from the table.

Lello jolts upright. “Wedding!” he shrieks, knocking over his water glass and nearly tumbling into Carter’s lap.

The room bursts into laughter.

Carter catches him and groans good naturedly. “Can you let the poor man finish?”

Lello presses a napkin dramatically to his chest. “I knew it! I knew it all along!”

Sorcha climbs onto her chair. “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

Flyn grins through it all, eyes still on mine.

He opens the little box. Inside is a ring. slim silver, smooth as moonlight, with a single charm stone that glows softly in the candlelight. I know that enchantment. It pulses in time with the giver’s heartbeat. Flyn is literally giving me his heart.

“Jade,” Flyn says, voice steady, “will you marry me?”

I can't speak. I can barely think. I blink. I feel like I've fallen out of time. For a moment, I don't know how to breathe.

Then everything rushes back in. The room. The people. The candlelight. The taste of apple and spice that's still on my tongue. The man on one knee, holding out a piece of forever.

"Yes," I whisper.

And then louder, because he deserves it. "Yes!"

His eyes sparkle.

"Yes," I repeat, even louder this time. "Yes, I will. Of course I will. "

He laughs and stands, and I throw my arms around his neck just as he kisses me.

The room explodes.

Cheering. Whooping. Stomping on the floor. Silverware clatters and someone, probably Lello, lets out a loud, theatrical sob.

Flyn pulls back just enough to whisper, "You're sure? I've not ambushed you and put you on the spot?"

Sammy is crying quietly into Blue's shoulder. Red's face has gone suspiciously pink.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." I assure him.

He kisses me again. The kind of kiss that confirms everything. A kiss that carves words into my soul. A kiss that says you're mine and I'm yours. And this is forever.

Around us, people begin clinking glasses. I was right about the toasts, after all.

Pink lifts his glass and calls, “To Jade and Flyn. May your life be long and your arguments petty.”

“May your love be louder than your fears,” Blue adds.

“And may your kids be weird,” Ned grins.

Everyone laughs again, and I let myself be folded into it, into this enormous, loud, ridiculous, perfect family.

I never thought I’d be anyone’s anything. I never thought I’d be safe. I never thought I’d be loved .

And now?

I’m going to be Flyn’s husband.

And I’ve never been happier.

And I, Jade, former experiment, former harem prisoner, former tool of the fey, sit down beside the man I love and take his hand in mine.

We are surrounded by joy. By family. By the people who saw me at my worst and never turned away.

There are still battles ahead. The world isn’t perfect. But for tonight, we are whole. And tomorrow?

Tomorrow, we begin forever.