



Unfettered Vessel (Found & Freed: The Unfettered #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: How do you live when you are not supposed to be alive?

I took a bullet in the brain for my friends. An exchange I was happy to make.

But my friends are paranormals with magical healing skills.

So here I am. Healing physically.

Alive when I was ready for death.

At least my intended sacrifice worked. My friends and I are free now. No longer slaves in a billionaires harem.

But I still need to allow my body to be used.

Im a vessel. I absorb magic I cannot wield. I have to give it to a mage via intimacy.

My ever helpful friends have found someone.

A mage who is happy to live in a campervan at the bottom of the garden and only interact with me when I need him.

A transactional agreement. Achingly similar to what I was always destined for.

Except Monty is unlike anyone Ive ever met.

He has never been with anyone before.

He is kind. He is gentle. He treats me with respect. He doesnt see me as an object to be used.

He just might be worth living for.

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Chapter one

Pink

I know something is wrong before I even fully wake up. Pain is swirling through me. Pounding at my skull. Pressing down on my thoughts.

This is not my usual brain injury headache. This is something more.

I'm ripe. There is no doubt about it. My body has decided that it has healed enough to start hoarding magic again, and now I'm full of it.

Sighing heavily, I force my eyes open. The plain white ceiling of my bedroom swims into focus. The house is quiet. Almost still. It feels empty and oppressive.

The urge to lie here listlessly is weighing down on me. I should get up. I should shower and get dressed. Have some breakfast. Then let a stranger fuck me and take away my magic.

It all sounds like too much work. All of it. Being fucked seems no more arduous than showering. I know that isn't rational. My brain has knitted gray matter back together, but my mind is still broken. It has shut down and cut itself off from the outside world. For its own protection, for survival. I understand the logic behind it.

But I'm free now. Well, as free as a vessel can be. My friends are all safe. We are all living together. Our imprisonment is over.

It would be nice to be able to feel the joy of it. It would be nice to feel anything. Anything at all. Because this thick, bland nothingness is hard to wade through.

Brodie says I need time. He's a brilliant enough healer to be able to glue my skull back together, so I should trust him. I need to have faith.

Time. Just give it time. It is not like I don't have plenty of the stuff.

With a deep breath, I haul myself out of bed. Robotically, I go through the motions of showering. Preparing myself and inserting a butt plug feels only like a familiar routine. It does not cause any anxiety to spike.

Then, as I am toweling myself dry, I catch my reflection in the mirror and pause.

I look healthy. I don't look like I was ever shot in the head, let alone only a couple of months ago. All the bruising and swelling under my eyes has long gone. I've regained some color in my cheeks. My hair has grown back from where it was shaved around the entry wound. I chopped the rest of it off a few days ago and now it is all more or less even.

Dark brown hair. Dark brown eyes. Pale skin. There is nothing striking about my coloring, but something about the arrangement of my features just works. I'm pretty. Pretty enough that my family were avaricious about marrying me above my station. They were even hopeful for a duke. But when Ritchie came along with his millions, my family were happy to settle for wealth over a title.

My reflection stares back at me. I will never understand why Ritchie wanted me. He was a mundane, he had no use for my magic. The other boys in his harem were paranormal. I can understand collecting an incubus, a vampire, a siren, a kelpie and a wolf-shifter omega. But me? Magic aside, I'm just a human.

I was barely eighteen, pretty, and trained from a young age on how to please and obey my future husband. But still just a human at the end of the day.

I run my hand over my fuzzy attempt at a beard. It doesn't make me look manly. It doesn't stop me from being pretty. Nearly getting my brains blown out didn't stop that. It is unfair. I think I'd like to be ugly. It has to be safer.

My thoughts are interrupted by a wave of color dancing in front of my eyes. My magic is brimming. It really is time to go and get emptied.

I clench my jaw and pull some clothes on. Tee shirt, hoodie. No underwear, just a pair of dark gray sweatpants. Easy to pull down and get to business.

But I think I will have a nice cup of tea first. It is the best way to start the day. It is not just the taste, it is the whole ritual of it.

I grab my pair of baby blue Crocs and slip them onto my feet. If only my mother could see me now. Plastic sandals and casual clothes. She'd have a complete conniption fit.

With that image firmly in my mind, I head downstairs to the kitchen.

It is empty. Which is both disappointing and greatly relieving. If any of the other boys were here, they'd probably sense that I was ripe, and they'd know exactly where I need to go next. Their concern would be all kinds of awkward. So, this really is for the best.

I fill the kettle with water and turn it on. My hands aren't shaking at all. I probably should be feeling something about the fact I'm about to be raped by a stranger. But then again, I stopped caring about that in the harem, a long time ago. I quickly learned to dissociate and send my mind far away.

Something the other boys never seemed to get the hang of. Blue was terrified. Ned was angry. Jade was ashamed. Gray's mind was broken long before any of us met him. Lello became a textbook case of Stockholm syndrome. And Red didn't think of himself, he only had concern for the rest of us.

So many different ways of dealing with being a sex slave. I have no idea if any of them are healthy or not. Not that it matters, it is what it is.

I don't care about getting fucked. What's one more man? Especially a man Brodie and Red chose for me. I trust them implicitly. So I know this man isn't going to hurt me anymore than is absolutely necessary. I have nothing to fear.

I glance down at my mug of tea. Seems I made it on autopilot while lost in thought. I'm sure it will still taste good.

I take it over to the table and sit down. The first sip is very refreshing, and a gentle hum of contentment thrums through me. It is the small things in life that matter. A clean and calm kitchen. A nice cup of tea. I can still find enjoyment in these. I guess that means there is still hope for me yet.

Another surge of magic tingles through me. I grind my teeth. Not yet. I want a few more minutes, damn it.

Dark feelings of injustice whisper at me. Why can't I be like Blue, Ned and Jade and get to be left alone in peace? They no longer need to give their body to anyone. Why can't I be like that?

With a scowl, I push the stupid sentiment aside. Life has never been fair. That's a ridiculous thought. Besides, Gray is in the basement right now with a scary and intimidating man because he is in a similar predicament to me. He needs sex to feed. I need sex to live. It all boils down to the same thing. And poor little Lello is going to

need a mate bond to stop him from dying. It is not just me. At all. Nearly half of us are stuck in a cycle of needing to offer our bodies up.

There really is no need for self-pity. If anything, I should be grateful. My trauma response has made me numb. Imagine if I had been overcome by terror instead? I could very easily be like Blue, unable to cope with even a friendly touch on the shoulder. I could be terrified about this and still have to do it. I am lucky. I don't give a shit that I'm about to traipse down to a campervan at the bottom of the garden and bend over for someone.

Moreover, it is only going to get better. This is the only time it is going to be a stranger. After today I will know him. So next time will be easier. And the time after that, even more so. It is all fine. It really is.

My mind sluggishly turns as I search my memories for what I know about the man I'm about to have sex with. I remember Brodie and Red trying to involve me in the selection. I also remember telling them that I didn't care. A cock is a cock. But they did tell me some things even though I said I wasn't interested.

I know his name is Montgomery, and like me, he is from a noble family. He is devoted to his alchemy studies and has never had a vessel before. He is twenty-eight years old, and according to Red, cute in a nerdy way.

I can deduce by the fact he lives in a campervan and is happy to park in the bottom of a garden in order to have use of a vessel, that he is a younger son set to inherit nothing and therefore would never be eligible to marry a vessel.

The fact he knows I've been used by a great many men, and he is still willing to empty me, makes me a little uneasy. But I trust my friends. This mage is likely so keen to obtain extra magic to further his studies, he doesn't care where the source comes from.

The lack of a surname is puzzling. Does he not wish to share it? Has he been disowned?

A shudder wracks my body, strong enough to make my chair scrape against the floor. That was a strong surge of magic. Damnit. I guess all my questions are about to be answered.

It is time to meet my mage.

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Chapter two

Pink

That is a big campervan. It is huge. In fact, it is more of an American style RV than a standard British campervan.

The magical wards circling it are nicely done. They are aligned to prevent anyone with ill intent from stepping over them. They should let me through with no problem, since wanting to give my ass and my magic is definitely not ill intent.

I take a deep breath. Here goes nothing. I stride through the invisible barrier and right up to the door of the RV. I knock on it sharply.

“Enter,” calls a muffled voice from inside.

I open the door and walk in. Almost immediately, there is a loud bang and a small explosion of blue smoke. Copious swearing pours out from the other side of the cloud of fumes.

“Sorry! So Sorry!”

Arms wave around and the cloud clears. I blink at what it reveals. A man a few years older than me, but with pure white hair. Hair that is sticking up wildly in all directions.

As I watch, he shoves his goggles up into his hair, an act that calms his unruly

appearance only a little.

Striking blue eyes meet mine. Nice eyes. Kind eyes.

I lick my lips. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. Now I am feeling uncertain and unsettled.

“Oh! You must be Pink. What an absolute delight to meet you! I'm Monty. Please, do come in and have a seat.” He looks around, jumps forward and hastily shoves a tottering pile of books off a chair before offering it to me.

Years of training in good manners, has me moving forward and graciously accepting the seat. My eyes flick around the cluttered campervan, trying to take it all in. A long table fills most of the space. A workbench, I guess. It takes up the entire length of the RV and most of the width. There is just enough space to squeeze along either side. The table, and everywhere, is jammed packed with stuff.

“Tea?” offers my host.

“Yes please,” I reply automatically because refusing would be rude and my mother taught me better than that.

Monty springs to action. He sets a large glass beaker of clear liquid over a Bunsen Burner. The beaker is triangle shaped with a long, round neck. A classic piece of chemistry equipment. Oh my gods. Is he using it as a kettle? Is this how he is boiling water?

Monty opens a cupboard and starts pulling out a teapot and teacups. Oh lord. He really is making tea this way.

“Making tea is a form of alchemy,” says Monty. “It requires precise water

temperature, the correct hardness of water. The quantity and quality of tea leaves need to be just so. Then there is the centrifugal force when stirring. Even the teapot and cup affect the flavor. The composition and thickness of glaze. If there are any cracks.”

I watch him work as he talks. I really can’t think of anything to say, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“If an alchemist can’t make a decent cup of tea, he has no business attempting anything else.”

He hands me a delicate china teacup and saucer. The steaming liquid is a vibrant amber. I’m not going to ask for milk and sugar. He seems like far too much of a purist for that.

“Thank you,” I say instead, and I take a sip.

Flavor caresses my tongue. Oh my goodness. This is the most wonderful cup of tea I have ever had. If Monty is half as good at alchemy as he is at making tea, he is going to be the most successful alchemist ever.

I take another sip. Delicious. But just as I return my cup to its saucer, a wave of dizziness hits me, making the china rattle.

“Um...Sorry to be blunt,” I say, “But may we get on with things?” I left coming here to the very last possible moment. I didn’t factor in time for tea and small talk. I never imagined in a million years that I’d want to get to know the mage who is going to empty me.

A beautiful pink blush spreads across Monty’s cheeks. “Oh...yes, of course.”

Oh my days. He is adorable. This is so bewildering. Mages are arrogant, chauvinistic assholes. They have all the worst traits of Alphas. They are not like this. Men on the whole, are not like this.

Another surge of magic claws at me. Everything in the RV rattles. Okay, it really is time to get on with things. I can try to make sense of it all later. Right now, I need to get this magic out of me before I explode.

My gaze drifts around the one room of the RV, and then up to the crumpled bed above the cabin, in the small space over the driver's seat. It looks cramped up there. I'm not even sure if it would fit two, and there is definitely no room to sit up.

At the other end of the van is a narrow door, but I'm pretty sure there is only a toilet and possibly a tiny shower behind it. Monty has maximized his space for his work. It is clearly more important to him than comfort.

"Shall I bend over the table?" I suggest.

Monty's blue eyes dart around his home as if taking it in for the first time. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. "Excellent idea!"

I stare at the cluttered and overflowing table. Monty jumps forward and starts clearing a space. Wordlessly, I help him. In no time at all, we have created a bare square of table. Just large enough for me to rest my elbows on and bend my torso over.

I hover next to it for a brief moment, then I pull myself together and yank my sweatpants down. I suck in a breath and get into position.

Monty steps behind me. I close my eyes and try to calm my mind.

“I...um...” Monty stammers. “Have never done this before.”

My eyes snap open and stare at the rich brown wood of the tabletop.

“Taken a vessel?” I say. “There is nothing to it. It’s just like normal sex, except, when I cum, my magic will be released and you will be able to draw it into yourself.”

Silence. Thick and heavy.

“About normal sex...” Monty says softly.

My eyebrows have risen. They have disappeared into my hairline and there is not a damn thing I can do about it. It is a bloody good thing I’m face down over the table and he can’t see my rude expression.

“You’ve never topped a man before?” I ask.

Monty sucks in a breath. “I’ve never done anything before.”

Bloody hell. You could knock me down with a feather right now. Is he really saying he is a virgin? In every sense of the word?

“I’ve been rather distracted by my studies since a young age,” he says sheepishly.

My heart flutters. He has nothing to be ashamed about, he really doesn’t. I think it is the sweetest thing ever, just very surprising. I’ve spent the last few years as a sex slave, so meeting a virgin is akin to meeting someone from a different world.

Suddenly, I’m desperately biting back a whimper as my magic claws at my guts. It can sense that a mage is right next to me and it wants to go to him. It desires to escape my useless body and inhabit the soul of someone who can actually wield it.

“Okay, well I have a butt plug in and...” Oh lord, why did I say that? He is standing right behind me and I’m bent right over. He has probably been staring at the butt plug the whole time.

I take a deep breath. “You need to pull it out and then...put your cock in.”

Oh gosh. Please let him understand the basics. He has to know about the birds and the bees, right?

Monty clears his throat. “Yes. The logistics. But how do I make it feel good for you?”

My stunned silence is like an entity all of its own. Make it feel good for me? I have never been asked such a thing. In all my days. I really don’t know what to make of it.

“You..I.. It’s,” I babble before coughing and starting again. “You don’t need to worry about that. I’m a tapped vessel. My magic wants to be free. I will orgasm.”

Silence. Deep and profound. Thick enough to wrap myself in like a blanket.

Monty breaks the silence by speaking so softly that I only just hear him. “What about things like kissing and cuddling?”

I swallow. “You don’t have to worry about any of that. We are not lovers. This is merely a mage emptying a vessel.”

“Right. Of course,” agrees Monty hastily.

The silence returns. Even thicker this time. It is as if the outside world has ceased to exist.

Monty steps closer. I can feel the heat of him. My plug moves ever so slightly as,

presumably, his fingers brush over it.

“Just pull it out?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I croak.

Heat is coiling low in my gut. My magic is stirring my lust. My cock is swelling in anticipation.

Gently, oh so gently, the plug begins to move. Monty eases it out of me with more care than I have ever known.

As it leaves my body, I suck in a breath. Monty pauses. Nothing happens.

Oh shit. My magic takes care of my arousal. He isn't blessed the same way.

“Do you need a hand getting hard?” I squeak.

Monty makes a strange noise. “Ah. No need. All very good there, thank you.”

I nearly chuckle. He is hard simply from pulling a plug from me? I think I'm blushing. I have no idea why it is so very endearing, but it is.

Warm, gentle hands take a hold of my hips. “Is this okay?”

“Yes!” I somehow manage to blurt.

The heat of a cock resting lightly against my hole takes my breath away.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes!” I gasp.

Slight pressure pushes against my entrance. My lust flares. Oh yes! This is what I want. This is what I am craving, what I am hungry for.

Everything stops. “Am I hurting you?”

My mind is spinning. Oh lord. I moaned. A tiny, barely there puff of sound.

“No, not at all!” I pant. The very opposite, I nearly say. Please, please give me more.

My body stretches. It opens as he slides in. His hot, hard cock is invading my body. Piercing it, filling it. Heat and delight. Pressure and pleasure. My toes are curling, my eyes are rolling back.

Oh gods, that feels good, and fucking hell, Monty is hung. I’m being truly impaled here. I never thought I was a size queen before, but this is amazing.

He slides all the way in. A filthy, carnal sound pours out of me. A deep, manly groan reverberates from him. My body shudders with it.

He makes another noise. One of absolute awe, joy and bliss.

Then his instincts kick in. I feel the moment it happens. Something in the air changes. It turns feral. Primal. Intense.

His hands tighten on my hips. He pulls out a little way and glides back in. I cry out. Then all I am aware of, is thrusting and rocking and the slap of skin against skin. It is everything I need and far, far more.

My orgasm unleashes. It tears through me. My magic seizes the opportunity to soar

free. My muscles seize with ecstasy. My mind burns with golden euphoria.

Monty grunts. He shudders. Hot wet gushes pump deep inside me. He came, seconds after me.

Then slowly, ever so slowly, reality begins to reform. I'm panting. He is panting. I've fully collapsed onto the table. He is on top of me. His softening cock is still in my ass.

"That was incredible!" he breathes in a tone of pure awe.

There is no fighting my chuckle. "Sex can be like that."

"No Pink, I'm quite sure it is you who is incredible."

Oh lord. Who is this man? He is unbelievable. His words have made me squirm and have caused a strange fluttering sensation in my tummy.

I think it might be hope. I think that just maybe, possibly, everything is going to be okay.

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Chapter three

Monty

P ink's magic is swirling in my soul, thrumming through my veins. I'm tingling with it. I feel as if I could walk on clouds.

It is early morning, the day after I had the pleasure of emptying him. My consciousness should be moving on. But my awareness of him has not faded. Not one little bit.

I'm lying in my tiny bed, but this may as well be paradise. All I can think about is Pink. His sad, sad eyes. His sweet, tentative smile. His gorgeous scent. And the feel of his body climaxing around me.

Oh goddess help me. I need to stop thinking about it. I'm like a man obsessed. I take back every condescending thought I ever had about people's fixation with sex. It really is quite marvelous.

Though, I suspect it is not merely the act itself that has left me on cloud nine. It is Pink. He truly is extraordinarily lovely. I can literally feel it in my bones. Magic is a porous thing. It absorbs the attributes, flavors and notes of everything around it.

This magic that is flowing in my veins, was recently inside Pink. It is imbued with him. Flavored by his soul. Fragranced by his true being. I can all but taste the truth of him. Pink is a shining light. A kind and gentle being.

I wish I could undo everything he has been through. Nobody deserves the suffering he has endured, but especially not him. It is unfair. It grates against my innate sense of justice. But the past cannot be rewritten. What is done, is done. No matter that it is an absolute tragedy.

Who knows, perhaps in another life, Pink and I are married. Our parents could have come to an accord. He could have been given to me on his eighteenth birthday, and I could have been blessed with the honor of keeping him safe and protecting his innocence.

Or maybe, in an adjoining reality, the Pink I met yesterday might be interested in dating. Courting him would make me the proudest man alive.

I sigh heavily. In this life, and this reality, none of that is meant to be. It is more than understandable that Pink has had enough of men. Our interactions are going to be transactional. Nothing more. It is precisely what I agreed to. More importantly, it is what Pink wants. It is what he needs. He recently escaped from sexual slavery. He requires a life as free from complications as possible.

The terms of our arrangement are that I do not intrude on his life. And I am nothing, if not a man of my word.

So, I need to cast all thoughts of Pink from my mind, get out of bed and go on my morning run. It always clears my head, and oh boy, do I need that now more than ever.

I climb out of bed and throw on my running gear. A few minutes later and I'm in the fresh air. It is not long past dawn and summer is slowly fading, but it is already warm.

I hurry through my warm-up, then I run. Glorious freedom. Nothing save for my legs pumping, my lungs inhaling fresh air. My heart beating fast and strong. All of it

reminding me that I am alive. Corporal. My body is in its prime and blessed with good health.

The miles pass. Disappearing under my feet. I've circled back and am very near Pink's house and my van. Technically, we are in the suburbs of the city, but this feels like a country lane. Narrow, winding, and with tall hedges on either side.

I round a corner and come face to face with Pink. My feet stop in their tracks. Pink and I stare at one another. He looks beautiful. There is color in his cheeks. His hair is soft and gleaming. His brown eyes are bright.

The shock of seeing him is exhilarating. It is wonderful. My heart is truly pumping now, fast and strong. But my mind has gone utterly blank. What do you say to someone you were intimate with just the day before?

"You run?" says Pink, sounding very surprised. But at least he has broken the awkward silence.

"Yes!" I exclaim far too vigorously. "A healthy and active body fuels an active mind!"

Pink smiles softly and nods as if my answer was a missing puzzle piece that he needed and now everything makes sense.

"You walk?" I ask. I've never seen him before, but perhaps he usually exercises at a different time.

I lift up my top and use it to wipe sweat from my brow before it drips into my eyes. Pink hasn't answered my question. I lower my top and look at him.

Oh my. He has gone as pink as his name and his gaze seems fixed on my chest. Is he

okay? Suddenly, he shakes himself and licks his lips.

“Um...sometimes. Actually, not very often. I just...felt the urge today for some reason.” He pulls his eyes from my chest and gives me a puzzled look.

That’s interesting. Could his magic be drawing him to me?

“May I?” I ask as I hold out a hand towards him.

He nods. He is clearly pursuing the same theory as I am. Clever and beautiful. What a deadly combination.

I gently place my hand on the top of his head. His soft hair tickles my palm. I am barely touching him, but my body remembers, and now it is flooding my mind with all sorts of recollections. I’m vividly reliving how it felt to sink into him. The soft noises he made. The way he arched into my touch, seeking more of me.

I swallow thickly and ignore my stiffening cock. I reach out with my magic senses and gently probe Pink.

There is only a little magic in him. A sleepy kitten of a thing. No where near a raging panther yet. I did empty him well yesterday. I did take enough of his magic. I wasn’t slack in my duty.

“You are empty,” I say as I reluctantly remove my hand from his body.

He nods his understanding. Us bumping into each other like this is merely coincidence. His magic was not driving him to seek me out. It wasn’t looking for more of the same. Yet.

In a few days, it will be an entirely different story. His magic will rage. It will

demand my attentions. Pink will be driven to seek me out, to submit to me. He will give me his stunning body and his gorgeous magic.

I cough heartily and angle my body away from Pink. My running leggings leave little to the imagination and the last thing Pink needs is to see the evidence of another man leching over him. He has had enough of that for one lifetime.

I peer at Pink cautiously. Has he noticed my arousal? Have I hidden it well enough?

He is looking at his feet as if they are fascinating. And the tips of his ears are red. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was rather flustered himself. He seems very uncomfortable in my presence.

"Are you well?" I blurt abruptly. "Did I um...Are you sore?"

Pink shuffles his feet and doesn't look up. "I'm fine. Thank you."

Relief flows through me. Thank heavens. I'd never be able to forgive myself if I had hurt him. Or scared him. But if he is unharmed, why does he look so ill at ease?

Oh goddess! I'm such an idiot! Running into me has to be all kinds of awkward for him. I have to be the very last person he wants to see. I'm supposed to just be at the bottom of his garden, for whenever he needs me. I'm not supposed to intrude on his life. The poor boy needs to be able to forget that he is a vessel and all that it entails.

He deserves to lead as normal a life as is possible. Reminders that his body will never truly be his own, are not at all helpful to his recovery.

It is imperative that I am mindful of my place and what Pink requires of me.

Discreet. Unobtrusive. Convenient.

That is what I agreed to. I'm doing an atrocious job of upholding my end of the bargain. Pink submitted to me. I am glowing with his magic, and in return, here I am pestering him on his morning walk.

"Better continue my run before I cool down too much!" I say, with far too much forced glee. "Enjoy your walk!"

I run away before poor Pink has a chance to say anything. I run as if the hounds of hell are on my heels. If only they were. That would be an easy thing to outrun. A thing I could escape.

Whereas, staying away from Pink? That's going to be hard.

It is going to be the hardest thing I have ever done.

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Chapter four

Pink

I have reread this page of my book a hundred times, I swear. The words are just not registering. I can't focus.

All because the image of Monty's abs are seared onto my eyelids. Every time I blink, it is all that I see. My mind has been frozen since the moment Monty lifted up his top.

Oh lord, help me. Monty seems so tall and lanky. The epitome of a geek. But under his clothes, oh my. Such exquisite definition. He is not ripped like a bodybuilder, more like a dancer. Gentle contours that you'd definitely feel if you ran your fingers over them. And I already know damn well that he is hung like a horse.

Oh gosh. A body to die for. A highly intelligent mind, because to be an alchemist you have to be incredibly bright. And a soul that is so very kind. What a package.

It is making my heart flutter. In another life, I think I'd be utterly smitten.

I draw in a shaky breath. Well, I guess this attraction confirms that I am gay. My sexuality was always irrelevant before, so I never paid it much mind. I am a vessel. I was always going to be given to a mage, and they are nearly always men.

My friend was madly in love with a girl and he was still married to a man. Nobody thought anything of it.

As for the harem, the men who used us certainly did not care about our opinions.

This is the first time in my life where there might actually be a point of thinking about what I like. And it seems I like Monty.

A knock on the door makes me jump out of my skin. Could it be him? No, I'm being ridiculous. Monty would never come into the house. Besides, I'd sense him approaching. His magic blazes.

"Come in!" I call out.

Jade all but bounces into my bedroom. His vivid green eyes are sparkling.

"I got the job!" he beams.

"Congratulations! Which one?"

"Just the call center one."

"The car insurance place?"

Jade nods enthusiastically. I throw back my covers and jump up to give him a hug.

"You'll be fantastic at it!"

"Thanks!"

I pull away from the hug and we both sit down on the edge of my bed.

"I'll be happy if I'm just average at it. Or good enough that they don't fire me. I just want to have a job and be a normal person."

I place my hand over his. I understand, I really do. After the harem, a boring normal life seems heavenly. To live such an existence would truly be a blessing.

Suddenly Jade's eyes widen. "Oh...did you need the mage?"

Heat floods my cheeks. I didn't know Jade would be able to sense it, but it is not entirely unexpected. His strong fey heritage seems to make him very perceptive to all manner of magical nuances.

"Yes," I say, because it is the only thing to say. I'm not going to deny that Monty emptied me. It is nothing to be embarrassed about.

Concern flows over Jade's face, and he places his other hand on top of mine. "How was it?"

I swallow. "Fine." It was far more than fine, but I am nowhere near ready to share that.

Jade stares at me intensely for a few heartbeats. "You are so brave."

"No, I'm not," I squirm.

"Yes you are," he insists. "I'm not sure I could."

I watch in dismay as the familiar shame clouds Jade's eyes.

"You will be ready one day," I tell him. "Or you won't. It doesn't matter."

Jade's shoulders slump, and he looks down at our joined hands. "Even if I was ready. Who would want me?"

“Jade!” I gasp. “You are lovely!”

He says nothing. He just keeps his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. I can all but taste his shame and devastation.

“The right person won’t blame you for being assaulted,” I say softly, but firmly.

He glances up at me briefly and gives me a weak smile. Poor Jade. I hate what the harem has done to him. I pray that one day he is free of it.

I hope what I said to him is true. That there are nice people out there. Somewhere.

I wonder what Monty thinks of my past? Clearly, he can overlook it for the sake of gaining magic, but would he be able to brush it aside for a boyfriend?

Oh gosh! Why am I thinking such thoughts?

Monty is never going to be interested in a relationship with me. Our arrangement is one of convenience. Nothing more. There is absolutely no point in allowing my thoughts to wander down a dead-end path.

Romance has never been part of my destiny. I was born a vessel. I was assigned a role of subservience from my very first breath. My fate was to be given away in an arranged marriage.

Ritchie may have exploded into my life and changed that. But really only a little. Instead of serving a mage, I served him. And his friends. I did as I was told and performed what was expected of me. My body was used.

All in all, it was only the finer details of my destiny that were changed, not the fundamentals. Those seem set in stone. Unescapable. Unavoidable.

I am a vessel. I will always need a mage. Even if by some miracle I met someone, I'd still need to see Monty, or a different mage, regularly. The chances of finding someone who would be fine with that, as well as my past in the harem, are slim to none.

No, romance and love are for other people. Not for me. I will never experience it. The fates decided that, the very moment I was born.

Oh by the gods, now I've gone and thoroughly depressed myself. As well as Jade. He bounced in here all exuberant and bright eyed, and now look at him. Some friend I am.

"We need to celebrate!" I declare loudly.

Jade's head snaps up, and he blinks at me. "We do?"

"Of course! Getting a job is something to celebrate!" I say with a confidence I am not feeling.

I'm pretty sure I'm right. Normal people obtain jobs and then celebrate the fact. I'm sure I've seen it in movies and television shows. I grew up amongst the nobility, where people either lived off the income from their estates and investments, or if they were employed, it was positions their family had arranged for them. So, I don't have any real life experience. But I am fairly confident.

Anyway, this is our home, our found family. If we want to make celebrating getting a job a custom, then we bloody well should do exactly that.

"How?" asks Jade.

I grin. "By rounding up the others and eating all the ice cream in the freezer."

Jade's eyes widen, and then he laughs. There is an awful lot of ice cream in the freezer. Brodie made the mistake of showing Lello how to order groceries online, and then he left the kelpie to it.

Eating it all is going to be a challenge. But a very fun one. I'm going to laugh and enjoy myself with my friends, and I'm not going to think of Monty at all.

It is a marvelous plan.

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Chapter five

Monty

This is terrible. I can sense Pink standing just outside the boundary of my wards. His magic is raging, brimming and full. He is very ripe, yet for some reason, he is not approaching.

Does he hate me? Did I disappoint him so badly last time that he is dreading a repeat? Was my inexperienced fumbling truly awful?

Or, heavens forbid, despite his assurances otherwise, did I hurt him?

Oh goddess, this agony of not knowing is unbearable. As is this indecision over what to do. Should I open the door and invite him in, or is it better to continue pretending that I don't know he is there?

This is impossible, and it is making me feel quite nauseous. But wait, what is this? My wards just pulsed. Pink has stepped forward. He is approaching.

He knocks on the door and never has a sound made me happier. I run forward and fling it open. Pink stares up at me in startled surprise.

Oh dear, I really need to calm down before I frighten the poor boy away. Gingerly, I step aside and beckon him into my home.

He walks through the doorway and freezes, bright eyes darting all around.

“You’ve remodeled,” he says as his gaze fixes on the double bed.

“Ah yes, well, I thought this was more practical,” I explain hastily.

My workspace and work table is half the size it was. A good portion of the van is now occupied by a double bed. The space above the cab is now used for storage. All things I should have thought of before. I am living here for the very purpose of emptying Pink. A bed that fits two and is easy to access, is a very fundamental tool.

“It is very thoughtful,” says Pink, and he looks genuinely taken aback.

Guilt twists in my gut. He shouldn’t be grateful that I have done the bare minimum for his comfort. It speaks volumes about how he is used to being treated. I hate it. Pink deserves better, so much better.

“Has it left enough room for your work?” he says anxiously.

Oh my heart.

“Yes! No problem at all!” I assure him. It is mostly the truth. It is a bit of a poke and a squeeze now, but nothing I can’t manage.

Pink lowers his trousers to his ankles and steps out of them. What is happening? I stare in complete and utter befuddlement. He gracefully picks up his discarded trousers, folds them and places them neatly on the side. He isn’t wearing any underwear. From the waist down, he is quite naked. I missed him taking his slip-on plastic sandals off, but I see them now, neatly placed by the door.

The only thing Pink is wearing is a faded cream colored tee shirt. I can see all of his slender, lovely legs.

A swallow gets stuck in my throat.

Pink walks over to my bed, climbs onto it and proceeds to adopt a kneeling position. Then he drops his head to the mattress, leaving his beautiful ass up in the air.

Oh goddess help me. He did all that with absolutely no preamble whatsoever. Presumably, it is a very clear message that he wishes to get on with things.

Hastily, I scramble forward while simultaneously trying to get out of my own trousers, socks and shoes. Somehow, I make it to the bed without tripping over.

I clamber onto the mattress and kneel behind Pink. His plain chrome butt plug seems to wink at me. Heavens.

“Same as last time?” I croak.

“Yes,” says Pink.

Okay. Remove the plug. Insert my cock. Thrust until he reaches orgasm. I have experience now. Albeit limited. I can do this, and holy hells do I know it is going to feel incredible. It is just a shame to be so functional about it.

“Actually, how does missionary sound?”

Oh crap. I can’t believe I just blurted that out. I have no right to ask anything of Pink. This is the position he chose, I should respect it.

“Sure,” says Pink easily, and he moves nimbly onto his back.

His beautiful eyes meet mine. I search them for any signs of discomfort or reluctance, but he seems calm. His magic is swirling, but this position isn’t making him feel shy.

“Are you sure this is alright?” I ask.

He blinks slowly. Then he shrugs. “One position is much like another.”

The look in his eyes is so despondent. The tone of his voice is so weary and resigned. Ice stabs my gut. I’m lanced by cold, bitter dismay and horror. The emotional wounds this wonderful boy bears.

Pink bites his bottom lip. “Are you sure you want to be this intimate with me?”

My heart beats against my ribcage in further outrage at Pink’s doubts, before my mind has processed the words. Oh my poor sweet boy.

“Yes, I am very sure. It will be my greatest honor,” I say.

I watch as a whole storm of emotions flow over Pink’s beautiful face, before settling on disbelief. Then he looks at me as if I am crazy. That is fine by me. I’m used to people thinking that of me. If it is what Pink needs to believe, then so be it. I can tell him how wonderful he is a hundred times a day, in a thousand different ways, and he can dismiss them all. But some of them will reach his soul and stick. At some point, he will believe it.

Suddenly, Pink’s eyes go hazy and unfocused. His magic pushes against the prison of his body. Tendrils of it tingle along my skin, hot and insistent.

He really needs to be emptied. Right now. Thoughts about building up his self-esteem are going to have to wait.

His legs are already spread, so I shuffle forward. My hand reaches for his plug. Pink’s eyes clear and his focus seems to resume. His gaze locks on my shirt.

“Would you mind taking that off?” he asks.

My hands have never moved so fast. They have flown to my top button and now they are swiftly working their way down. I reach the bottom and peel my undone shirt off as quickly as I can.

Pink’s pretty brown eyes light up. It is enough to make me want to puff up my chest in pride. But we really must get on with things.

My fingers lightly take a hold of the end of the butt plug. I watch Pink’s face closely as I withdraw the plug as carefully as I can. He seems utterly transfixed by my chest and not at all bothered by what I am doing. That is a relief.

I dump the plug on the covers, out of the way. Pink’s gaze lowers to my cock. Color floods his cheeks and his eyes widen. I think he was going to ask if I needed a hand, but as he can see for himself, that isn’t at all necessary.

I take a deep breath and wrap my fingers around my hard cock. I line it up to Pink’s hole. Pink shudders, but I am pretty certain it is in anticipation.

“I...um.” I cough, and try again. “Would appreciate some direction.” I swallow. “I really would like to try to make it as good for you as possible.”

Pink’s eyes grow enormous. He licks his bottom lip with the tip of his very pink tongue.

“Okay. Just slide in slowly. Ease in gently.”

That, I can do. I clench my jaw and concentrate on doing as he asked. His oiled and loosened body opens up for me. It lets me in. It welcomes me into the hot, tight heat of him.

Pink's eyes flutter closed. His head tilts back a little. I'm not sure he is breathing.

I sink all the way into him. Balls deep. We are joined. Our groins are flush.

Pink sucks in a breath. I can feel him relaxing more around me. Adjusting to my cock.

"And now?" I ask breathlessly.

"Pull out a little," he pants.

I move my hips back.

"A little more."

I draw out further.

"That's it," says Pink. "Now, slide all the way back in."

I do as instructed and am rewarded with a soft, quiet moan.

"Perfect! Now do that again, but a little faster."

My cock is throbbing. My hips are trying to take control. My animalistic lust wants to thrust fast and hard. It is demanding to fuck, to take up a primal, feral rhythm.

But I ignore it. I'm giving Pink what he wants. My urges can wait. If they are unsatisfied after Pink has peaked, I can use my own hand.

"Again!" Pink cries out.

I'm very happy to oblige. My body settles into the required rhythm. Pleasure surges through me. Warm pressure is dragging along my cock. I lose myself to the sensation.

Pink starts to moan. His hips begin to lift up to meet me. His head thrashes back and forth.

"Try," he pants. "A different angle."

I aim my thrusts to rub higher within him.

"Ahh!" he cries out. "Different!"

My hands are braced on either side of him. I shift their position slightly. I change the angle of my hips. I wish I had paid more attention to the study of anatomy, but I know roughly where the prostate is and I imagine that is where Pink wants me to apply pressure.

I try a few different angles. On my third attempt, Pink cries out and his back lifts off the bed.

"There!" he wails unnecessarily.

Grinning, I get to work. Now I have found the spot, I won't miss it.

I thrust and thrust again. Pink moans, beautiful noises spilling from him. His head tilts all the way back.

Suddenly, he clenches tightly around my cock. All his muscles go rigid. I watch in awe as he writhes through his orgasm. It is such a beautiful sight that I barely notice my own peak.

Pink's magic pours from him. I beckon it towards me and it rushes in eagerly. The sensation very nearly gives me a second orgasm.

Oh my. That was so much better than our first time. If sex keeps getting exponentially better, I really won't be able to control my emotions.

I already know it is going to be very, very hard to not fall in love with Pink. But I've never failed a single thing and I will not fail in this. Pink needs me to keep my distance. So that is exactly what I am going to do.

I have carved the command on to the fabric of my soul. I am not going to fall in love with Pink.

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Chapter six

Pink

O h lord, my body is still trembling and spasming. My mind is still stunned by the thousand fireworks that just exploded inside my head.

What the hell was that? That wasn't sex. I have had sex countless times, with very many different people. Thanks to my magic, I'm no stranger to orgasms either.

But nothing has ever, ever felt like that. The pleasure was so intense it feels like it has ripped all my layers away. I'm lying here in Monty's bed, exposed and raw. Vulnerable.

It wasn't just my body that orgasmed. It was my soul and my mind. Every part of me was scattered and has been rearranged.

"Pink?"

I open my eyes and try to remember how to focus. Monty swims into view, standing next to the bed, hovering over me. And holding out a glass of water.

Oops. I don't think that was the first time he said my name.

Quickly, I sit up and take the offered drink. The movement causes things to seep between my legs. Damnit! Clenching as hard as I can, I can only hope for the best. I really don't want to make a mess of his sheets. Even though it would be mess of his

own making. My own mess is all over the front of my tee shirt that I should have removed. I really don't know what I was thinking when I decided to keep it on.

I gulp down the cold water. Monty takes the empty glass from my fingers and carries it over to the tiny sink. I seize the opportunity to jump up and fumble into my sweatpants. My clenching really wasn't working all that well.

Now I'm dressed, it is only my own, easily washed clothes that are going to get dirty. I should be relieved. More settled and at ease. But I still feel undone. All unraveled. As if I am standing here holding the tattered parts of myself in my hands with no idea how to put them all back together.

"Tea?" asks Monty brightly.

He has thrown on some pale gray yoga pants, but his chest is still bare. A naked expanse of creamy skin and lightly defined muscles.

"Is everything alright, Pink?" His blue eyes are full of concern now.

He fucked me, took my magic, rocked my world and blew my mind. And now he is worried about me. I came apart beneath him. The pleasure he gave me tore down all of my walls. And now I am standing here, all flustered and unsure, while his cum leaks out of my ass.

"Everything is fine," I say.

His bright blue eyes are intense. I swear they can see all of me. All my flaws and every bad thought I have ever had.

"So, would you like some tea?" he asks carefully.

I blink. I don't want tea. I want to be alone. There are far too many thoughts in my head and far too many emotions in my heart. Everything is a noisy, tangled mess. I need peace and quiet. Solitude. Time to try to untangle everything and make sense of it.

"Um...no thank you," I mumble.

My gaze desperately scans the floor for my shoes. I find them by the door. I hurry over and hop into them. Then I yank the campervan door open. Fresh air and daylight hits me. Dazzling me even more.

I'm halfway across the garden before I realize I didn't say goodbye. How rude of me. But it can't be helped now. I think Monty is kind enough to understand that it wasn't intentional. He just pulled me apart and peered into my soul. I'm sure he understands all of my intentions. Probably better than I do.

I shudder and wrap my arms around myself as I hurry into the house and up the stairs. Is this why Jade and the others felt shame in the harem? Sex stripped them raw? It wasn't just a cock poking around inside them?

Oh lord. That is terrible. This is terrible. I don't want to feel like this. Being numb to it all, is much, much better. Far more bearable. I want to go back to it.

I just have to find a way.

The sun is beating down on me, heating up my very bones. This is lovely. I should have been born a cat. Though, lying here on a sun lounger by the pool is nearly as good as being a pampered feline. Right now, I certainly feel as if I don't have a care in the world. My eyes are closed, my mind is blessedly still. The only things that exist are the heat of the sun and the gentle sloshing of the water in the pool.

Summer is very nearly over. This could well be the last nice day for a while. So I am going to lap it up. Enjoy and savor every last second of it.

Blue is somewhere at the bottom of the pool. I can't hear him, and even if I opened my eyes, I probably wouldn't be able to see him. Nevertheless, I know he is there, and it feels gently companionable. I hope the siren is feeling the same. It would be lovely if he surfaced for a little chat, but I don't mind if he doesn't. Talking is still hard for him after so long masked.

A lazy coil of anger stirs in my gut. The harem stole the voice of a siren. A clear example of Ritchie's cruelty. I'm glad the twisted bastard is dead. I'm proud I kicked him in the nuts, causing him to shoot me in the head and turn me into a useless hostage.

I shiver, and it takes me a moment to realize it is not from memories. The sun has gone. Someone is here and I know who it is. His magic blazes. My eyes snap open.

Sure enough, Monty is standing in front of me with bags of groceries in his hands and blocking the sun with his body. Casting me into shadow.

"Hello," he says with a tentative smile.

My heart flutters and my stomach twists. Monty is so damn handsome. But I can sense magic that once belonged to me weaving through his aura. It is disorientating. The mage that emptied me in the harem never stuck around. By the time I needed him again, my essence had long faded from his ether.

This is disconcerting. Mostly, I suspect, because it is a stark reminder of our intimacy. I can literally sense the results of giving my body to him. He was inside me. My magic is now inside him. We are connected. Hopefully not bound.

But it means being in Monty's presence is confronting me with things I have been desperately trying not to think about. I spent hours in my room trying to untangle how I felt, before giving up on the task because it was too overwhelming. The more I contemplated things, the more things emerged from my psyche. It all threatened to turn into a bottomless pit of angst and unresolved issues. It was all far too much. So I shoved it back down.

Now Monty is here and all my trauma is stirring again. He was nice to me. Caring and gentle. Handed me the reins in the bedroom. Gave me the most intense orgasm of my life. Showed me what sex should be like.

All wonderful things. But I'm not ready for wonderful things. I'm not ready for anything. I don't want to feel anything at all. I am craving peace and calm. The blank nothing of still waters.

"Pink?" A slight frown is marring Monty's perfect features.

Oh crap. I haven't answered him. He said hello and I've just been staring at him.

"Hi!" I squeak out.

Monty's brows furrow. "Everything alright?"

Oh gosh, his care and concern is going to be the death of me. It is everything I never realized was absent from my life. My friends are nice to me, but Monty isn't a platonic friend. I don't see him that way at all, and apparently that makes all the difference.

Some part of me sees Monty as potentially being far, far more than a friend. I've never felt this way about anyone, and the implications are terrifying. Devastating. I couldn't cope with a broken heart. It would break me in ways the harem never could.

Icy cold fear floods my veins. My heart starts to beat to this new rhythm. It gives me strength, of sorts.

I lick my lips. “I’m sorry, Monty, but the terms of our agreement state that we are to have contact only as and when necessary.”

The brightness of Monty’s blue eyes fades. He nods. “Of course. I understand. I apologize for my oversight. It won’t happen again.”

Another nod and now he is turning around. I watch as he strides away. Across the lawn towards his campervan.

I swallow dryly. Why do I feel like I’ve just made the worst mistake of my life?

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Chapter seven

Monty

Cans clunk as I shove them into the small food cupboard in my van. I'm making a complete pig's ear of putting the groceries away, but I can't bring myself to care.

Pink's words are ringing in my ears. Which is not at all rational of me. Pink did not say anything unexpected. There is no need for me to feel dejected. I understand the terms of our arrangement. I agreed to them.

Access to a vessel with no strings attached, no other obligations, is a fantastic deal. Many mages would chop their hands off to swap places with me. I get to focus on my studies while regularly having use of a vessel to increase my magic reserves. It is a perfect arrangement.

A heavy sigh escapes me. On paper, the deal seems perfect. But now that I've met Pink, I'm all over the place. I never expected him to be quite so lovely. I never dreamed that sex would be so incredible. Emotions were the very last thing I was prepared for.

Even so, I don't understand why I am feeling so rejected by Pink, politely, but firmly, putting me in my place. Heaven knows I've always been terrible at making friends. Seeking something more was unlikely to go well.

I shut the cupboard door and roll up the empty shopping bags. The neat and precise order of my food supplies has been destroyed. But everything has been put away.

Despondently, I shove the empty bags under the sink. There, all done. Nothing left to do except brood in earnest.

I walk over to my bed and flop onto it. The campervan isn't big enough for an armchair and I don't feel like perching on my work stool right now. So lying in bed in the middle of the day is going to have to do.

Another heavy sigh escapes me. I'm acting like a baby. Pink has been through hell. He very recently escaped sexual slavery. Of course he needs to keep his emotional distance. He needs time to heal. He needs peace. He doesn't need unwanted attention. The fact that I'm whining about it is abhorrent. I can do better than this.

I need a distraction. My gaze drifts around my campervan. It feels strangely empty. I've never felt lonely in here before.

My attention focuses on the simmering beaker on the worktable. It needs to brew until tomorrow, and until I can analyze the results, I don't know which direction to take my studies in. So I can't distract myself with work.

My body squirms uneasily. It is as if the email on my phone is burning a hole in my pocket. The invitation is mocking me. Taunting and teasing. But accepting it certainly would keep my mind off of things. And it would be dutiful of me to attend. An obligation fulfilled and ticked off the to-do list.

Cold clenches at my stomach, but I'm not a coward. Damnit.

I roll off the bed. I'm going to wash and get dressed. And then I am going to visit my family.

My father's bedchamber smells of death. It is warm and bright in here. Well aired. Dotted with fresh flowers. Yet the scent still lingers.

My father looks impossibly small in his fourposter bed. Small, old and frail. His lungs are rattling. It is clear he is not going to open his eyes. He doesn't even know I am here. The chance to talk has passed. His last words to me will forever be bitter and cold.

I suppose I should feel sad. Remorseful perhaps? But I don't think I am feeling much of anything. I have never made my father proud. We never liked one another. And he has been dying for a long, long time.

Being sad about any of those facts would be akin to being sad about winter being cold or night being dark. Some things just are, and that is the nature of them.

I watch my father breathe. Healers cannot save him, not even with magic, but I suspect they are going to enable him to linger for a long while yet. Possibly another year or two. Years caught in this half state between life and death. I think it would be kinder to let him go, but that is an opinion I cannot voice.

I glance at my watch. It is time for dinner. I think I'd prefer to sit here in silence, shrouded by temporarily thwarted, yet still impending, death. But I'm here now, so I might as well get on with it.

Wearily, I get to my feet. As I slip quietly out of the door, a servant bows to me and slips in to take my place.

With heavy feet, I walk down to the dining room. My dark suit is uncomfortable and my shoes pinch. I have really fallen out of the habit of dressing smartly. To think I used to wear clothes like these all the time. I don't know how I did it.

Another servant bows neatly, opens the dining room door for me and announces my presence. I replace my grimace with a false smile and step inside.

My mother and baby brother politely get to their feet to greet me. Mother is dressed severely in black. As if she is in mourning for her husband already.

Laurie is dressed in an uncomfortable looking navy blue suit. It doesn't suit his lanky sixteen-year-old frame at all. His head is bowed and he is not looking at me. All I can see is his snow white hair.

We all take our seats. Laurie next to me and mother across from us. As soon as we are seated, the servants spring into action, serving the first course. A delicious looking creamy soup. I pick up my spoon and take a mouthful. Heavens, so much better than my hurried, tiny-kitchen cooking.

I'm going to try to concentrate on enjoying the good food and try to ignore everything else. Including father's empty seat at the head of the table.

"How have you been, Laurie?" I ask.

"Lawrence," Mother corrects sternly. "He is too old for pet names. He has begun his vessel training."

My stomach clenches so tightly I don't think the soup is going to go down at all.

"Which trainer did you settle on?" I ask.

Mother sniffs. "I have acquiesced to your request regarding Mr. Richards, and hired Mr. Smithson instead."

"Thank you, Mother."

The things I have heard about Mr. Richards should be more than enough to make any mother not want the man anywhere near her child. But my mother has never been

particularly maternal.

“Do you like Mr. Smithson?” I ask Laurie.

“Montgomery!” snaps Mother. “That is a very inappropriate question for a mage to ask a young vessel-in-training.”

Her green eyes blaze at me. I stare back at her. She really isn’t going to let me talk to my brother at all, is she? She has always done her best to keep us apart. Seems she is adamant about it now. She’ll claim it is some nonsense about vessels being seen and not heard, but I know it is more than that.

I bite my tongue, drop her gaze, and eat another spoonful of soup.

Silence descends. Thick and cloying. Nothing save for the clink of cutlery against crockery escapes it.

Until my mother decides it should be broken. “When are you coming home?”

A knot forms in my stomach. “I’m not sure yet.”

She sniffs daintily. “You are about to become Duke Eastminster.”

“I am aware,” I say with a calm I do not feel.

“You also need to take your father’s place in the Covenant.”

My spoon drops into the soup bowl and clangs loudly. Beside me, Laurie flinches.

“That, I will not be doing, Mother,” I say firmly.

Her eyes narrow.

I breathe in through my nose. “I do not have the head for complicated plots and politics. I would be no good at it.”

Nevermind that I think secret plans to reopen the old portals and allow the fey back into our world are absurd. A childish fixation at best, a disaster at worst, if they somehow manage to succeed. Fey were cruel. Dangerous. Thinking that they would see the noble families as their descendents, and reward us by sharing power, is deranged thinking. Nobody even knows for sure if the reason we have magic in our souls is because our ancestors were fey.

Mother says nothing, but her silence speaks volumes. She cherishes the prestige father’s position in their cult gives her. I’m quite sure she doesn’t truly believe in the cause. She just likes the status.

The staff efficiently dart in, clear the first course and serve the second. Numbly, I pick up my knife and fork.

“I suppose you are going to continue to leave all the work of finding your brother a husband to me?”

My hand tightens on my knife. So many things I cannot say. I cannot say that the cult is crazy and delusional, because they are also dangerous. A proper little secret society of cloaks and daggers. They would wholeheartedly believe they needed to kill me to keep me quiet. They’d never understand that I couldn’t care less about what they get up to as long as they leave me out of it.

As for sweet little Laurie. Mother can’t know that I am hoping that father dies before Laurie turns eighteen. Then when I am master of the house, I can forbid my baby brother being given away in servitude.

If she knew of my plans, she'd find a way to thwart them. Possibly something truly awful, like giving Laurie away before he is eighteen. Or arranging a scandal that would tie my hands.

"I am busy with my studies," I say, with the best haughty, uncaring tone I can muster.

I don't look at Laurie, but out of the corner of my eye I see his head lower even more. His shoulders slump. Not so much as to earn a berating from mother about posture, but enough that I see it.

My throat tightens. What a mess. A tangled web of misery.

Visions swim through my mind. My campervan. My worktable. The simple life I have carved for myself. Pink's pretty eyes. His kind, gentle soul.

My lungs tighten painfully.

I see it now so clearly. It is a wonderful thing that sweet Pink put up a clear boundary between us. Dragging him down into my life would be unforgivable.

This little interlude of living in peace in my campervan in the bottom of Pink's garden, is just that. An interlude. As soon as my father dies, my real life is going to drag me back kicking and screaming. There is no escaping it.

Pink deserves none of my mess. He deserves the world, or at the very least, a peaceful life. I can't court him. It would be unfair of me to try to win him over, because if I succeeded, bringing him here would be awful.

I want Pink to be safe. I want him to be happy. Therefore, one thing is perfectly clear.

I really do need to keep Pink far, far away from my heart.

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Chapter eight

Pink

ONE YEAR LATER

I like the laundry room. The swish of the washing machine. The hum of the dryer. The smell of detergent. It is all soothing and comforting.

I think it also gives me a sense of pride. I grew up with servants, and in the harem our closets were stocked with the stupid Disney-style harem outfits we had to wear. So this is the first time in my life I've done my own laundry, and I love the normalcy of it. The novelty hasn't worn off after a year, so I guess this is something I'm always going to enjoy. And why not? Life is all about the small pleasures.

Here I am, taking clothes that I chose for myself, out of the dryer and folding them. If anyone could see me now, they'd think I was a normal young man. It definitely is something to be happy about.

My calm thoughts are disrupted as a warm tingle dances through me. I grit my teeth. That was nothing to do with pride at washing my own clothes. That tingle was my swelling magic. I'm not ripe yet, but it's letting me know it will not be long before I am.

With a small sigh, I start carefully moving my pile of neatly folded clothes from the counter to my laundry basket so I can carry them all up to my room.

The simple task is not enough of a distraction. My thoughts are turning to Monty and I can't fight it anymore. Maybe I should go to him early? Empty this magic before it gets too annoying?

Monty won't mind. He never does. He is always kind, gentle, respectful. And distant. Just as I asked him to be twelve long months ago.

My stomach squirms uncomfortably. Do I regret pushing Monty away? It is something I ponder every day, but I'm still not sure what the answer is. On one hand, sex with Monty still leaves me feeling vulnerable. On the other hand, Monty's endless kindness has slowly won my battered trust. Being vulnerable with Monty no longer feels terrifying.

But is that precisely because we have been keeping an emotional distance? If I had never pushed him away, would things have become too intense, too quickly? Would trust have been obliterated before it ever had a chance to grow?

I blink and realize all my clothes are in my basket and I'm just standing here, staring off into space. Get it together, Pink.

I pick up my basket, balance it on my hip, and head for my room.

I'll never know if giving Monty a clear boundary was the right thing to do. What I should be pondering is, if I want to continue to keep this distance between us. Do I want more? Am I ready for more? Is Monty even interested in taking the next step?

So many questions. So many things to think about. And they've all been brewing for a while now. My friends have had so much drama over the last year, I keep pushing all this stuff with Monty aside to deal with later.

First there was Lello and his need for a mate to replace the twisted bond Ritchie gave

him. Then all the craziness of his herd abducting him because they wanted a sacrifice to try to open a fey portal.

Then there was Gray settling in with Mal and finding his way back to lucidity. And before the dust had barely settled on that excitement, Sammy fell into Blue's swimming pool and Blue saved him from drowning and it created a mate bond between them.

It was wonderful how everyone scrambled to help undo it. Monty was lovely and stole some books from the Old Blood library for us.

All that effort, and when we finally unbound them, the daft sods realized they did want to be mated after all.

I huff out a breath. It has been quite a year. A year of ups and downs. While through it all, Monty has been there. Calmly emptying me whenever I have needed it. No kissing, no cuddling, no foreplay. Only very traditional behavior between a mage and a vessel. But somehow still so tender. And mind-blowing. Can't forget the mind-blowing part.

As my mind goes down a very dirty path, I reach my room and start putting my clothes away.

Sex with Monty is good. Very good. I've been enjoying it while my friends have been having crazy times and falling in love. So much falling in love. Even grumpy vampire Ned is clearly enamored with his great-grandson-in-law.

Everyone is settling down. While I just have a situationship.

A sad sounding sigh pours out of me and echoes around my empty bedroom. I put my last pair of jeans away and put the empty basket in the bottom of my closet.

Tea. I need tea. It makes everything better.

With that thought in mind, I hurry down the stairs. I open the door to the kitchen and nearly yelp in fright.

Jade is standing in the corner. His back is to me and his nose has to be an inch away from the blank wall at most. It is like something out of a horror movie.

“Jade?” I try tentatively.

He is so motionless I’m not even sure if he is breathing. Is he sleep walking? In the middle of the day? Has he had a stroke?

My concern overrules my fear, and I step forward.

“Jade?” I try again, this time while placing a hand on his shoulder.

He startles and turns to face me. His emerald green eyes slowly focus on me.

“Are you alright?” I ask.

He blinks a few times. Then he licks his lips. “Yeah. I just haven’t been sleeping well.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Have you talked to Brodie about it?” I think seeing a healer would be a very good idea.

“That’s a good idea,” says Jade, creepily echoing my thoughts. “I’ll go do that now.”

He steps away from me, and my hand drops back down to my side.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I offer.

“No thanks,” he says as he walks out of the room.

I stare at the door. Well, that was strange. Very unsettling. With a shake of my head, I rouse myself and set about making tea.

A few minutes later, I’m sitting at the kitchen table with a gently steaming cup in front of me. But I can’t shake off my concern for Jade. Is he sick? Will Brodie be able to help? He is a great healer, gods know he put me back together. But Jade is part fey and nobody knows anything about them. Their anatomy and physiology is a mystery.

I sip my hot tea, but I still feel cold. My worry for Jade is heavy in my gut, and my nearly brimming magic is swirling through me. The combination is making me feel nauseous.

Fuck this. Abruptly, I get to my feet. I can’t do anything about Jade, but I can get rid of this blasted magic. I can go to Monty’s van right now. His tea is better than mine. I can enjoy it while admiring his kind eyes.

Then we can get into bed.

My cheeks heat. Thank goodness no one is here to see me. Hastily, I pour my barely touched tea down the sink and put everything away.

Then I hurry towards the garden. Birdsong and sunlight greet me as I open the back door. I pass Blue’s swimming pool and cross the lawn.

Suddenly, my feet stop. My jaw hangs open. My eyes blink several times. I still can’t believe what I am seeing. Or rather, what I am not seeing. Monty’s van is not here. It is gone. There is a tuft of yellow grass where it used to be. But that’s it. No other sign

it was ever there at all.

Monty has gone.

Numbly, my fingers scramble for my phone. Blindly, I tap at it. I hold it to my ear as it rings.

“Hello?” says Monty’s voice.

“You left.” I blurt. “I understand. I mean, I’m surprised you were able to stay for so long, I really am.” I’m rambling but there is not a thing I can do about it. “I’m sorry to call and bother you, but I wanted to thank you...”

“Pink,” interrupts Monty. “The van needed an oil change. I’ll be back this evening.”

His words don’t register. I don’t want to hear them. Platitudes are the last thing I need. What I need is Monty. But it is too late for that. I missed my chance and now I’m never going to see him again.

“You’ve been so kind Monty, you really have, and I appreciate everything you have done for me. You respected my boundaries and I’m so grateful. I’m just sorry if they seemed a bit harsh.”

Monty is saying something else, but I can’t process it at all. My mind is consumed by the devastation of Monty leaving. My heart is beating frantically. My body is trembling violently.

Is this shock? Have I gone into shock?

I’m still rabbiting on, but I have no idea what I am even saying. Oh, I think I’m begging him to come back so I can say goodbye in person and see him one last time.

It is probably a terrible idea.

Suddenly, a blast of cold air hits me from behind. I whirl around. A black portal is opening.

I stare in astonishment as Monty steps through it, his mobile phone still pressed to his ear. The portal winks out of existence. Leaving Monty in the garden, in front of me.

“Pink,” he says firmly. “I haven’t left. The van just needed to go to the garage.”

I try to swallow, but my throat is too tight. Oh my. His words are finally sinking in. He hasn’t left. Monty hasn’t left me. I’m panicking over nothing.

And incredibly, Monty opened a portal. That takes a ton of magic. He is going to be drained for months. Yet he did it because I was being all hysterical on the phone.

An anguished sob escapes me as I run forward and fling myself at him. My arms wrap around him and I burst into tears. His strong arms pull me even closer and hold me tight.

He doesn’t say a word. He just holds me and lets me sob my heart out.

He really is the best man in the world.

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Chapter nine

Monty

Pink looks adorable. Sitting in his bed, all swaddled up in a soft beige blanket and cradling a cup of tea.

I'm glad I've managed to get him settled in his bedroom. A room I have never set foot in before. In fact, I've never been inside any young man's bedroom. It is awfully intimate.

But it is what it is. It may be awkward for me, but it is comforting for Pink to be in his own space, and that is all that matters.

I watch as Pink takes a sip of his tea. He flashes me a weak smile and my heart flips all the way over. His eyes are still red from crying and his face is a little splotchy. He has never looked more beautiful.

I'm darkly pleased that he freaked out when he thought I had left forever. Being needed and wanted has lit up parts of my psyche I never knew existed. I am deeply horrified at myself. It is monstrous of me to feel this way.

Pink is an achingly vulnerable young man. There is nothing pleasing about him needing to latch onto me. It doesn't make me special. It has only happened because I've been here. A constant, unchanging presence in his life. One that has not been cruel.

Add in the fundamental facts that I am a mage and he is a vessel, a pairing formed in nature, then it is not at all surprising that his wounded mind has formed an attachment.

The very last thing I should be doing is taking glee from it. I absolutely should do nothing to encourage it. All the reasons to keep Pink at a distance and far away from my real life still stand. Nothing has changed. Except every day it gets harder and harder to do.

My fists clench tightly by my sides, blunt nails digging into my palms, and the slight discomfort gives me some focus. Some clarity on what I need to do.

“I’ll leave you in peace,” I say.

Pink’s eyes widen. “Can...can you stay?”

My heart thumps against my ribs. “Of course,” I say, because there is no other answer. Not if he is still feeling anxious. Not if he still needs me. I can resurrect my good intention to leave, just as soon as Pink is feeling calm.

Pink swallows. I watch his throat bob. He licks his bottom lip. My gaze tracks the path of his tongue.

“Actually,” he says softly. “Would you mind emptying me? I know it is a little early.”

Goddess. The most beautiful man in the world is staring up at me with large brown eyes and asking if I would mind having sex with him.

“Of course,” I say again, because I will never say no to Pink.

He places his tea on the bedside table and scrambles out of bed.

“I’ll prepare,” he says as he darts past me and into his bathroom.

The door shuts. Now I am alone in his bedroom. His private space. His sanctuary. Curiosity wants me to pry. To poke around and learn what I can about this man who is so close to stealing my heart.

But I am better than that. Pink deserves his privacy. I can’t help noticing that the room is neat and tidy and that there is an abundance of books. But I’m not going to look any further. Even though he has seen my campervan hundreds of times, and some might say a nosy would only be fair.

However, it doesn’t seem at all the same to me. I love my campervan, but it is my workspace, my office. That I also happen to sleep in. I don’t think of it as private. And even if I did, I wouldn’t mind showing it to Pink. At all.

The bathroom door swings open and Pink steps out. He is wearing a thin, white nightgown. Very similar to a traditional receiving gown. Something he might wear if he truly was my vessel and this was our wedding night.

I can feel my pulse thrumming. Blood is rushing to my cock, but I’m feeling far more than lust. I wish Pink could be mine and the wistful yearning of that hurts. An agony of the soul. An echo of which I can physically feel in my chest.

Pink flashes me another small smile as he makes his way to the bed. He has no idea that I feel every single one of his smiles in my heart. Arrows that bite with what-can-never-be. I’m scarred by them. And still I crave more.

Pink lies on the bed, on his back. Missionary has long become our routine. There are sixty-nine positions good vessels are trained to assume for their husband. I’ll never ask Pink for a single one.

I wonder how many Laurie's trainer has taken him through.

The dark thought blindsides me and I only just manage to bite back my whimper of dismay. I suck in a shaky breath. Calm. Think calm thoughts.

Laurie has the kindest trainer available. One that is known for using pictures and diagrams and keeping clothes on and not using dildos on his students.

I've done the best I can. What really goes on behind closed doors and the sanctity of a training room, no one but the vessel and trainer can ever know. There is nothing to gain by tormenting myself with thoughts of it.

"Monty?" asks Pink with a furrowed brow.

I jump forward as if electrocuted and hastily begin removing my clothes.

"Lost in thought?" Pink smiles fondly.

"Ah yes. A particularly troublesome equation," I assure him.

His smile deepens. It reaches his eyes. It sets flight to a thousand butterflies within my stomach. Pink thinks I am a sweet harmless geek and I don't mind at all. I probably do meet the definition of a geek. I try to be sweet. As for harmless, I'm working on that.

I fully divest myself of my clothes and place them on a nearby chair. I turn back to Pink and step towards him. His gaze darts down to my cock. His eyes darken with appreciation. It is enough to make me want to preen.

I climb onto the bed, and Pink spreads his legs to make room for me, so I settle over him. Hands braced on either side of his shoulders. His nightgown has ridden up

enough to give me access, as tempting as it is to push the cloth up higher.

“I didn’t put a plug in since you were right here,” says Pink bluntly.

I nod my understanding. I used to love his lack of shyness, but then I realized it wasn’t confidence, it was despondency. He didn’t care enough to be shy.

I stare into his beautiful eyes, and he meets my gaze evenly. I think that despondency has evolved into familiarity and comfort. I hope so, at least. Either way, whatever the root reason, I’m glad he is at ease with me. As much as a vessel can be. Being stripped of magic is bound to be overwhelming.

I hold in my next breath to ground myself. Pink gives me a little nod to let me know he is ready. I take a hold of my cock and line it up to his hole. A gentle push and I’m easing in. Pink always prepares himself thoroughly.

Tight, silken heat engulfs the head of my cock. I can feel my eyes rolling back. By all the gods, that feels good. Slowly, steadily, I apply just enough pressure to slide all the way inside Pink.

Then I pause, holding my hips still. I force my eyes to focus. Pink’s face swims into view. He is still looking up at me. His cheeks are flushed. His pupils are blown and his lips parted.

He gives me another little nod. He knows I will do nothing else until he lets me know he is ready.

I watch him closely as I begin to move my hips. His eyes flutter closed. Then his head tilts back, baring his slender throat to me. I grin in satisfaction.

Then I pick up the pace. Just a little. I have paid great attention to what Pink enjoys. I

know the tempo and angle that gives him the greatest pleasure. Nothing gives me greater joy than driving him to ecstasy.

He begins to moan. His body starts to undulate. It is a beautiful sight. I keep the rhythm of my hips steady, just as he likes.

Thrust, glide, thrust.

He is trembling now. So very close. I thrust with a fraction more force and Pink cries out. He clenches around me. His back arches and lifts off of the bed. His cock pumps cum between us. But most precious of all, his hands wrap around my forearms and cling on.

He always releases me long before he comes back to full awareness, so I don't think he knows that he does it. I adore it. It is precious. The feel of his touch. It is what tips me over the edge into my own peak. I shudder through my orgasm and quickly draw Pink's magic into myself.

Pink's hands fall away from me to lie limply on the bed. I wish he could hold on to me for longer. I wish we could sprawl in a tangle of limbs. I wish we could kiss. I long to suck his cock and to lap at his hole.

Things I have never done with anyone. Things I will likely never do, because I cannot imagine wanting to do them with anyone else.

Pink's eyes flutter open. He seems far more relaxed in his own bed. He is not jumping up to leave. He even looks sleepy. Though that could be the effect of his earlier emotional wobble.

I force myself off of the bed. I'd give anything to collapse next to him and hold him close. But Pink always leaves sharply after I've emptied him, so I know he wants me

to go.

I pull the covers up to his chin and am rewarded with a happy smile. I smile back at him before quickly throwing my clothes on.

My feet drag as I reach the door. Every part of me wants to stay. But life is not about getting what you want.

I take a deep breath, and I walk away.

Chapter ten

Pink

I knock on Jade's door and let myself in. I know he won't mind. Heavens know the harem has warped our ideas about privacy.

So Jade won't mind me barging in. He'll smile at me and listen patiently while I gush about Monty and how wonderful he is being. I haven't told Jade about yesterday and the whole van disappearing episode and Monty's sweetness. I can't wait to tell him everything. I'll have to be quick because it is nearly time to meet Ned's boyfriend.

I pause just inside Jade's room. All thought of a lighthearted chat withers and dies.

Jade is sitting at his dresser, staring intently at his reflection in the mirror. He doesn't seem to be moving at all.

Unease coils through my gut. "Jade?"

He startles and swivels around to face me. "Yes?" His voice is eerily emotionless.

"Ned is bringing his boyfriend over so we can meet him, remember?"

Jade blinks slowly, and something similar to his normal expression settles over his features. "Oh yes, let's go meet the incestuous couple. We don't want to be late."

Yeah, I really don't think now is a good time for a gossip and a catch-up. Jade does

not seem like he is in the right frame of mind.

Silently, we walk out of his room together. Why is Jade being so strange? So malevolent? It is not like him at all. It is very unsettling. It is also making me feel terribly guilty. I've been obsessing about Monty, while Jade has been clearly going through something. I'm a terrible friend. I need to do better.

We reach the dining room and are greeted by the sight of Ned pacing frantically. It is quite the sight.

I've always known Ned to be a bundle of nerves when it comes to anything personal, but this? This is new. He's pacing the dining room like the world is about to end, muttering something under his breath about sweaty palms. Sweaty palms? Ned went through hell with us in the harem and always appeared brave, but apparently, the prospect of his boyfriend meeting us, a bunch of chaotic, semi-functional paranormals, is enough to make him unravel.

"It's going to be fine, Ned," Lello says, his voice light and reassuring. "Everybody is going to love him, and he's going to love everybody."

I can't help but smile at Lello's optimism. The little kelpie always manages to bring a sense of hope into the room. It's sweet, but also a little naive.

Jade and I take our seats quietly. Everyone else, apart from Gray and Mal, are here. The dining room, despite its overly formal vibe, is the only space big enough to host this exciting event. My gaze drifts to Jade, who's looking at Ned with his new inscrutable expression. I really wish I knew what was going on with him.

I break the tension. "We're happy for you, Ned. We really are."

It's not a lie. Morgan seems like a good guy from what little I've heard. And Ned? He

deserves a shot at happiness. But there's an elephant in the room, and perhaps clearing the air about it, will put Jade at ease. I've been such a terrible friend, this small act is the least I can do.

"But..." I continue, watching as Ned's shoulders stiffen. He turns to glare at me, already bristling with defensiveness.

"Shouldn't you tell Morgan that you're his great-grandfather?"

"I'm not!" Ned snaps, his tone as sharp as a blade.

Jade leans forward, his voice calm but unyielding. "No, you're his dead wife's great-grandfather."

The guilt in Ned's eyes is unmistakable, but before he can respond, the doorbell rings. He practically bolts for the door, throwing out a hurried, "He's here!" as if we didn't all hear the bell.

Lello scampers excitedly after him. Carter stares after him like he is thinking he should have stopped his mate, but it is too late now.

I exchange a look with Jade, who just sighs and shakes his head. What has got in to him? I don't believe for one second that he is genuinely this perturbed by Ned's relationship. This disapproval has to be a proxy for some other discontent. I'll have to get the truth out of him somehow.

From the hallway, I hear Lello's excited voice, followed by Morgan's warm laughter. A moment later, they appear, Lello practically dragging the poor guy into the room while babbling about everything under the sun.

Morgan looks over his shoulder at Ned, who shrugs apologetically. The smile

Morgan gives him in return is genuine, and I feel a pang of relief. Maybe this won't be a disaster after all.

"Everyone, this is Morgan. Morgan, this is everyone," Ned says awkwardly, gesturing vaguely at the room.

Morgan's cheerful "Hi everyone!" earns him a few polite nods, but I notice Blue pale at the back of the room. Sammy leans in to whisper something, and the two of them slip out quietly. My heart sinks. Blue's reaction is understandable, given how scared of people he is, but it still stings to see him retreat like that.

Red steps in smoothly, guiding the conversation with practiced ease. It's what he does best, diffusing tension, keeping things pleasant. I glance at Jade, who's glaring daggers at Ned. Then my attention is drawn to Gray and Mal as they finally make their entrance.

And suddenly everything falls apart.

Morgan freezes, his eyes locking on Gray like a rabbit caught in headlights. He stumbles back, his face pale and stricken, and I realize what's happening. Gray isn't shielding his energy again. The poor little demon keeps forgetting how to do it.

"Gray! Cut it out!" Ned snaps, his tone laced with frustration.

Gray looks genuinely confused, and the sight breaks my heart. Out of all of us, I think Gray suffered the most, for the longest. It makes me wish we could resurrect Ritchie so we could kill him again.

Ned steps in to comfort Morgan, explaining the situation. "Hey, it's okay. Gray is a demon. The reaction you are feeling is a perfectly healthy human response. Demons usually shield their energy, but Gray is not right in the head and has apparently

forgotten how to.”

I wince. Saying Gray is not right in the head, is a bit harsh.

Gray crumples against Mal, sobbing into his chest, while Mal glares at Ned with the kind of fury that makes the air hum with tension.

And then the unoccupied chairs move. All of them, sliding across the floor in a not-so-subtle display of Mal’s power.

Ned’s snarl is immediate, his fangs flashing as he steps forward. “You really want to try it, motherfucker?” he growls, his voice low and dangerous.

“Stop it!” Lello’s wail cuts through the tension, his small frame stepping between the two of them. Red joins him, his arms crossed and his expression firm.

“Ned, take your boyfriend and go on your date,” Red says, his tone brooking no argument.

For a moment, I think Ned’s going to explode, but then Morgan tugs on his sleeve. “Come on, Ned. Let’s go. We don’t want to miss our dinner reservation.”

The fight drains out of Ned, leaving him looking tired and defeated. He mutters a half-hearted apology before leading Morgan out of the room.

As the door closes behind them, I glance around at the others. Lello looks worried even though Carter has a hand on his shoulder, Gray is still clinging to Mal, and Jade’s expression is gone back to unreadable and strange. I sigh, sinking back into my chair.

“Well,” I say dryly, “that went about as well as expected.”

Nobody really responds, and that is fair enough. Everyone is processing what just happened.

Hopefully, it will all blow over. Until the next time. Oh gosh, there is always going to be something, isn't there? My little found family is seven traumatized paranormals, freed from sex slavery in a harem, and their assorted mates and partners. Things are never going to be calm. Ever.

There is never going to be a good time to figure out my feelings for Monty. So I should stop procrastinating about it and face the music. The only time any of us has, is right now.

One whole night of pondering doesn't seem to have brought me any closer to a resolution. But there is no rush. I decided to stop avoiding the question, not to make my mind up instantaneously.

I hear the soft creak of the kitchen door and glance up from my tea. It's Ned. I flash him a quick smile and rise, closing the blinds to cast the room in shadows. I know he is a young enough vampire to be mostly okay with sunlight, but it has to be uncomfortable for him.

"Thanks," he says as he steps in, his shoulders relaxing a little in the muted light.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" I offer, holding up my peppermint brew as if it's some universal solution.

"No thanks, it's coffee I'm after," he says, heading to the machine.

I sit back down, watching him fiddle with the buttons as the machine hisses to life. A wave of calm rolls over me as the familiar scent of brewing coffee fills the room. It's a comfort, this quiet routine. It makes everything feel... normal, which is rare for us.

“How was your date?” I ask, even though I already know the question will annoy him.

Ned doesn’t groan, but the flicker of irritation in his eyes makes me bite back a smile. “Lovely. How were things here?” he deflects smoothly.

“It all calmed down, just fine,” I assure him.

He seems relieved, though he doesn’t say anything more, distracted by the coffee machine as it spits out the dark liquid. I watch as he inhales deeply, the rich aroma clearly bringing him some small comfort. Once his cup is full, he joins me at the table, sitting across from me.

“I... um... am really happy for you, Ned. Despite what I said about the great-grandfather stuff.”

His sharp, perceptive gaze locks onto mine, and I feel like I’m under a microscope. I mean every word, but that doesn’t stop me from fidgeting under his scrutiny.

“Thanks,” he says, his voice soft but genuine, as he sips his coffee.

Relief washes over me, and I sigh. “You’re so brave.”

“What?” he says, his brows lifting in surprise.

I lean forward, resting my chin on my hands. “Letting yourself fall in love,” I say, the wistfulness in my voice surprising even me. “I don’t think I could. I’m such a coward.”

I’m not sure why I said that out loud. Maybe it’s been bubbling under the surface for too long. Maybe I have been thinking about Monty a little too hard since my decision

yesterday to finally make my mind up.

I glance down at my cup, trying to collect myself, but when I peek up, I catch a flicker of amusement in Ned's eyes.

"What are you talking about? You are the bravest person I know," he says, his voice steady, filled with that infuriating conviction he gets when he decides to be nice to me.

I frown.

"Hey," he insists. "You were willing to sacrifice yourself to save us all."

Heat creeps up my neck, and I lower my gaze, fiddling with my cup. The memory of that day, the despair, the crushing weight of hopelessness, claws at the edges of my mind. It wasn't bravery. It was desperation.

"You let yourself get shot in the head so we could escape," Ned continues, his voice unwavering. "We'd all still be there if it wasn't for you."

I flinch as he reaches across the table and places his hand over mine. His touch is warm, grounding. When I glance up, his expression is soft, but there's no mistaking the intensity in his eyes.

He's not just saying this to make me feel better. He believes it.

The anguish I've carried for so long wrestles with the sincerity in his gaze. Slowly, ever so slowly, the doubt starts to crack, and I manage a small smile. It doesn't feel forced this time.

"That's better," Ned says, pulling his hand away to gulp down the rest of his coffee. I

finish my tea, the lingering warmth soothing in a way I didn't expect.

"Since you're such a badass," he says, his lips curving into a playful grin, "wanna come with me and be my backup while I apologize to Gray?"

I laugh, the sound bubbling out of me before I can stop it. It's been so long since I've felt this light. "Okay, but if Mal is still pissy at you, you're on your own."

"Fair enough," Ned says with a grin.

And for once, it actually feels like it is.

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Chapter eleven

Monty

I 'm staring at my phone like an obsessed person. What have I done? My arrangement with Pink is very clear. Contact only as and when necessary.

So why the hell have I sent him a text? He hasn't revoked his clear boundary. His emotional wobble does not give me the right. This foolish feeling that things have shifted between us, is quite likely all my imagination.

Oh Goddess. What have I done? Should I apologize profusely right now and retract my message? Or wait in the blind hope that he might say yes?

Suddenly, my phone buzzes in my hand. I nearly leap into the air.

It is a message. From Pink. He has replied.

I stare at the screen. 'OMW.'

What does it mean? Gosh. I have never felt so old or so socially awkward. I'm only a few years older than Pink, but right now it feels like hundreds.

I quickly open Google and scan the results. OMW means, on my way.

Pink is on his way. He is coming to the van. He has agreed to help me. And now my heart is fluttering like crazy. My silly little plan is working. This is the best day of my

life.

A few minutes later, and he is knocking on my door and I'm flinging it open. He flashes me a bright smile and steps inside. His gaze goes straight to the worktable. It is clear for a change, only covered in runes and sigils drawn in chalk.

"Oh, you are trying to invert a Dimittis incantation," says Pink.

Oh my, he really is clever. I always knew he was, but something about seeing it in action is so very endearing.

"I think an inverted Iacere rune would be more like this." He walks up to the table, picks up a piece of chalk and begins rubbing out part of my drawings.

He bites his bottom lip as he works, and I cannot tear my gaze away. He really is so utterly wonderful. I'm so glad my cunning excuse to spend more time with him is working. And his help with my studies is going to be so advantageous. This might just be the best idea I have ever had.

I step back to give him more room to work, and I watch in awe as he applies his knowledge. I know all vessels are well educated in magic theory. But I am certain that Pink is more skilled than most. Perhaps affection is making me biased, but I don't really care. My heart believes that Pink is the best vessel in the world, so as far as I am concerned, that is the truth.

As I watch him competently draw magic symbols, dark thoughts start to wash over me. It is awful to think that his talents were always doomed to be wasted. If Ritchie had not bought him, Pink's husband would have probably only ever requested very basic magic circles from him. Ones that his husband would have emptied him in. A cold shudder trembles through me. It is the usual fate of vessels. Treated as property. Mere containers of magic. Used without care or affection.

Images flash in my mind's eye. Pink lying obediently in a circle of his own drawing. Doing everything he was trained from a young age to do. Keeping still while his indifferent husband takes his body to take his magic.

My stomach nearly heaves. Nobody ever calls it rape, but it often is. Vessels are rarely given a choice. They are property to be used. Indoctrinated from a young age to believe that is all they are worth, so they don't even complain. They only serve and obey.

I wonder how many circles Laurie knows how to draw now? I wish I could talk to him. I wish my father would hurry up and die.

I suck in a breath. What a horrid thought. What an awful path my mind has drifted down. My soul truly is home to some twisted darkness.

"Tea?" I say brightly. I need the distraction and I need to be a good host.

"Yes please," says Pink without looking up from the worktable. "Did you hear the commotion last night?"

"No?" I say as I put the kettle on. "What happened?"

Pink's attention flicks briefly to the cooker and his shoulders relax in relief. My use of a beaker to boil water unsettled him, even though he never said a word. I'm so glad I bought a kettle. It always gives me a flash of joy when Pink checks what I am using, and is quietly relieved.

"Ned's boyfriend was picking him up for a date, so we all got to meet him," Pink says.

"And it didn't go well?" I hedge.

Pink sighs, but his chalk continues to glide smoothly over the table. “Blue became scared and had to leave. Jade was rude about Morgan being Ned’s great-grandson-in-law. And then Gray forgot to shield his energy, which made poor Morgan freak out, which got Ned riled, which caused Mal to get all defensive of Gray.”

Goodness. I thought my family dinners were bad.

“That sounds tense,” I say as I carefully pour boiling water over the tea leaves in the teapot.

“It was,” agrees Pink.

“How are things now?” I ask.

“Much calmer,” Pink replies. “I went with Ned this morning when he apologized to Gray and Mal. They seemed to accept it well, with no hard feelings.”

I huff out a little laugh. “I always suspected that the perceived wisdom that demons are unforgiving was exaggerated.”

Pink stops drawing, and he chuckles. “I’m still not planning on risking it.”

“Very wise.”

His eyes flash in a smile as I hand him the tea. It is so tempting to cause our fingers to brush, but I resist. And then immediately regret my self-control.

Pinks sips his tea and makes a soft sound of appreciation. My heart does a somersault. Thankfully, Pink is intently regarding his drawings. If he was looking at me right now, I’m pretty sure my adoration would be clear for him to see.

“I’m worried about Jade. He is acting strangely.” Pink’s voice is sad. Soft and distant. I’m not sure if he is even truly speaking to me, or simply thinking out loud.

Nevertheless, my first instinct is to offer my assistance. But what can I do? I am a mage, not a healer. I know nothing about matters of the mind. Nevermind the fact that the part-fey boy unsettles me. Unfair of me, I know, but I can’t shake it off.

I suspect it is because I know just how much my parents’ cult would love to get their hands on him, and if they ever discovered that I knew of his existence and didn’t hand him over. Well, my head would probably roll.

It was a rival faction that was secretly capturing fey descendants and forcing them to breed. Increasing the strength of fey ancestry in every generation. I suspect Jade is infertile, and that is the only reason he was sold to Ritchie. But that is knowledge I will never share. Neither Pink nor his friends will ever know that I’m tangled up in Revivalist cult nonsense.

The whole thing is a nasty tangled mess. So I shouldn’t be too hard on myself for finding Jade’s presence uncomfortable. The boy is innocent, but his existence comes with a lot of baggage. Stuff I’d really rather forget about.

I shake my head to try to clear it. “Have you talked to Brodie?”

Pink sighs. “Jade says he has been to see him, but I guess raising my concerns with Brodie won’t hurt.”

I nod. It is a good idea. Probably the best that can be done. Let the healer know and leave it in his capable hands. It is lovely that Pink cares so much about his friend, but I’m pretty sure there is not much else he can do.

To be perfectly honest, I’m taken aback at just how well all the former harem boys

are doing. They went through hell, so the fact that Jade is struggling is not at all surprising. They really haven't been free all that long, and trauma like that takes its tolls in different ways.

Pink is incredibly resilient, but I know the scars run deep. I wish I could wrap him in my arms and tell him he is safe and nothing bad is ever going to happen again. But he doesn't deserve my lies. I don't have the power to keep that promise.

"I think this is fully inverted now," says Pink, pulling my attention back to my experiment.

I run my gaze over the runes and sigils. It really is stellar work. It should work. But I don't want Pink to go yet.

"Would you mind staying while I give it a go? In case anything needs tweaking?"

Pink grins at me. "As long as you promise not to blow us up."

"I swear," I say solemnly, and Pink laughs.

Oh goddess. I want to capture the precious sound and keep it in a jar to cherish forever. Soon my father will die and I'll have to take up my duties. I will have to leave Pink behind and never hear him laugh again.

So every laugh I hear, every smile I see, every touch I feel, is all going to have to last a lifetime.

They will be my only treasures.

Chapter twelve

Pink

Once again, thoughts of Monty are distracting me from a good book. This time because I keep checking my phone to see if he has messaged me. I had a wonderful time helping him the other day, and I'm pretty sure he enjoyed it too. So why hasn't he invited me back? I'm sure he has lots of experiments that I could assist with.

But he hasn't said a thing. Or sent a single message. And here I am, comfy bed, good book, fresh cup of tea, and all I can think about is him. It is getting ridiculous.

A sudden knock on my door sends my heart racing even though I know it's not Monty.

I open my mouth to welcome my visitor in, but Lello bounces through the door before I can say a word.

He skips up to my bed and flops down on it dramatically. The mattress wobbles and I'm glad my cup of tea is safely on my bedside table.

"It's awful!" he wails.

"What is?" I ask.

Lello draws in a big breath. "Jade went to Morgan's house and told him Ned is his dead wife's great-grandfather, and Morgan dumped Ned, and now Ned is really sad."

Oh my goodness. It feels like a lump of ice has formed in my gut and the coldness is leaking out into my veins. Why would Jade do such a thing? How did I not know he was thinking of it? If I had been paying attention, I might have been able to stop him.

“So let’s go make cookies to cheer Ned up!” declares Lello.

He leaps up and holds out his hand. I put my book down and allow Lello to pull me out of bed. It really is impossible to say no to the little kelpie, and besides, helping him bake cookies is the least I can do towards making amends for being such a terrible friend.

We clatter into the kitchen, and Lello starts throwing cupboard doors open and grabbing ingredients. I find the mixing bowl and the baking tray and set them on the counter.

“Why is Jade being so mean?” asks Lello.

I really don’t know what to say to that. Brodie listened carefully to my concerns, but couldn’t tell me anything. Patient confidentiality, which I appreciate. It is not as if I’d want him to share my health issues with everyone. So I understand, I really do. But it means I’m completely in the dark about Jade. Maybe I can go back to Brodie and ask if there is anything I can do to help Jade? That shouldn’t break any confidentiality.

“When Jade got scared at his work, Ned dropped everything to go and help him. He had to take the kids to Morgan’s office first and everything. And that was before they were boyfriends. So Ned was worried Morgan was going to fire him.”

My body freezes. I’m in the middle of pulling the scales out of the cupboard, and now I’m motionless as a statue.

“So Ned is nice to Jade, so Jade should be nice to Ned,” huffs Lello, seeming

oblivious to my shock.

I remember the incident Lello is talking about. Clearly. I'd been so worried at the time. Everyone else was away. Red was in heat, so he and Brodie were occupied. Ned and I had received the same message from Jade's work and we decided Ned should go in case it was something more than a panic attack.

It was eventful. So why, until just now when Lello brought it up, was it absent from my thoughts? I don't think I have been that obsessed with Monty.

It almost feels like something, or someone, has been blocking my memories. I shudder and force my body to start moving. I'll ask Monty to check me over. Hopefully, we can get to the bottom of this.

But one thing has become clear. Something is very, very wrong.

"Pink! Pay attention! We have to make the best cookies ever!"

I rouse myself and give Lello my best smile. There is no point in burdening him with my concerns. So right now I'm going to focus on making cookies with Lello and trying to cheer Ned up. I've been a terrible friend to Jade. I can't let my other friendships slip too.

Lello grins at me and gets to work. His happy chatter drifts on to other, far easier topics, and in no time at all, our baking efforts are ready.

I trail behind Lello as we head to Ned's room. Lello carries the plate of freshly baked cookies, his eagerness radiating in every step. It's classic Lello, always hoping that something sweet will fix everything. I don't have the heart to tell him that Ned is probably not in the mood for company, let alone cookies. Lello wouldn't understand, and besides, when Lello gets an idea, it's easier to go along than to argue.

And it is a lovely thought and a wonderful gesture. Lello is a shining example of a good friend. His brightness kept us all going in the harem. I will forever be in awe of his unbreakable spirit and his ability to see the good in the world. I wish I could be more like him.

At the door, Lello knocks softly. There's no answer, but he doesn't wait long before letting us in. I hesitate on the threshold as Ned groans, slumping dramatically against his pillows.

"What the fuck do you want?" he snaps, shielding his eyes from the sudden light as Lello flips the switch.

"To check on you, of course!" Lello chirps, plopping down on the edge of the bed and presenting the cookies like a peace offering. "And to bring you cookies!"

I move to stand near the corner of the room, where I can watch without crowding. Ned grumbles something under his breath but shifts to sit upright. He eyes the plate warily before sighing and taking a cookie.

Lello's face lights up when Ned takes a bite. "Delicious," Ned mutters, begrudgingly, and the kelpie beams like he just won a prize.

"How are you, Ned?" I ask, keeping my voice steady.

His gaze flicks to mine, then away, and for a moment, I catch a flash of something raw. Grief, maybe, or guilt. People being kind to Ned unnerves him, I know that much. But ignoring him isn't an option. Not tonight.

"Fine," he mutters, and it's so unconvincing I almost laugh.

Lello pats his arm. "When Daddy died, I thought the world was ending, but then

Carter came along and now everything is wonderful.”

I wince. Wrong approach, Lello. Mentioning Ritchie to Ned is like poking an open wound. I see the flicker of irritation cross Ned’s face as he shoves another cookie into his mouth, probably so he doesn’t have to say anything.

I clear my throat, hoping to steer the conversation somewhere less painful. “In the harem, everything seemed so utterly hopeless and pointless. But life is so much brighter now.”

Ned exhales sharply and places the cookie back on the plate. “Guys, relax. I’m not about to yeet myself into the sun, so you can chill with this intervention bollocks.”

I can’t help it, I smirk a little. That’s the Ned I know. But his bravado doesn’t fool me, and judging by the look on Lello’s face, it doesn’t fool him either.

“I’ve been dumped,” Ned continues, his voice tight, “and I’m probably never going to see my great-great-grandkids again. I’m allowed to mope around in bed for a few days.”

Lello reaches out and pats his shoulder again, his worry as plain as day.

“Of course you are,” I say gently. “We just wanted to make sure you knew you weren’t alone.”

Ned looks at me, his mouth opening slightly like he wants to argue, but then he just slumps back against the headboard. “Thanks,” he mutters, the word barely audible.

It’s not much, but it’s something. I give him a small smile and place a hand on Lello’s arm. “Come on, Lello. Ned wants to be alone right now.”

Lello hesitates, glancing at me like I've just suggested abandoning a stray puppy in the rain. "Is that true?" he asks Ned.

Ned nods, and I can tell he means it. This is how he deals with his emotions. With distance and quiet. It's not ideal, but it's his way, and awfully similar to my own coping strategy, so I'd be a hypocrite not to respect it.

"Okay, well, if you need anything, just shout. We could do a movie night if you like?" Lello offers, his voice hopeful.

"I'll let you know," Ned says, his tone a little softer this time.

I guide Lello toward the door, shutting it quietly behind us. As we walk away, I glance back at the closed door, my chest tight with worry. Ned says he's fine, but I know better. He might need his solitude, but that doesn't mean we're going to stop keeping an eye on him.

Not for a second. I have learned my lesson about being there for my friends. I'm not going to make the same mistake twice.

Chapter thirteen

Monty

Laurie is shaking. His arm is in mine and the poor boy is trembling. His gaze is fixed on the floor. His snow white hair has grown, undoubtedly Mother's idea. It gently brushes his slender shoulders, smooth and silky. Perfect for hiding in. It is also startlingly pretty.

There is no time to talk to him. These huge double doors are about to be opened, our names called out, and Laurie formally presented to society.

I remember my own debutante ball very well. It was hideous. Busy, noisy, stuffy, and stifling under the weight of expectation. But at least I didn't have people leering at me to see if they wanted to buy me. Laurie is about to suffer that indignity.

My lungs stutter. His birthday was last week. He is seventeen now and time is running out. I'm so tempted to throw open a portal and whisk him to safety. Somewhere far, far away from here. But I do not have that right. People would come after us. Rules are sacred amongst the Old Blood.

Waiting for my father to die is a far better plan. Once I am duke and Laurie is my property, nobody will breathe a word when I announce I am not marrying him off. Of course, all sorts of vile rumors will ignite about me wishing to keep Laurie to myself. But I've never cared much for the opinions of others. And Laurie is a quiet soul. He will be content at home. Even if he wasn't, he would be safe, and that is all that matters.

I could introduce him to Pink and the other boys. Laurie could have friends.

I suck in a breath. No, that is a foolish dream. I cannot drag Pink into this life. It is too dangerous. The one tiny sliver of silver lining about the harem was that it got him free of all of this.

My rambling thoughts fall quiet as the liveried servants move in perfect synchronization to open the ornate doors. I quickly give Laurie's hand a brief pat and then I hold my head up high.

We step through into the ballroom. A dizzying sea of shimmering gowns, glittering tiaras and perfectly pressed dark suits.

“Baron Havenport, presenting Lord Lawrence Clifford on behalf of his father, Duke Eastminster.”

The majordomo's voice rings out loud and clear. Laurie and I stand perfectly still while everyone at the ball stares at us. The thirty seconds takes forever, and as soon as it is up, I hurry Laurie into the room and over to the quietest corner.

I'm so glad the first hurdle is over, but it is going to be a long, long night.

I open my mouth to ask Laurie if he would like a drink, but before I can say a word, Mother glides over, takes Laurie's arm and steers him over to a group of unwed mages.

I watch him go helplessly. Mother didn't even glance at me. I played my part and now she has no further use of me.

I wonder if I can rest Laurie back from her control at some point later this evening. I'd like to give the poor boy a break.

A portly man, whom I don't know the name of, holds out his hand to Laurie. My little brother takes it meekly, and is swept out onto the dancefloor. My heart sinks as I watch. He is a good dancer. All graceful, long slender limbs. He still looks a little gangly to me. Young for seventeen, but there are plenty of predators who will be drawn to precisely that.

He is keeping his head down demurely and his entire body language is submissive.

I watch in dismay as Laurie glides across the dancefloor. His white hair seems almost silver in this light. Our family's unusual coloring looks stunning on him. He has either not inherited the unruly texture that I have, or he has found a way to tame it with oils. His skin is creamy and flawless, and when he does peek up, his eyes flash a dazzling sapphire blue.

My baby brother is beautiful. Clearly meek and biddable. His coiled, unclaimed magic is incandescent. And he is the son of a duke.

He is a perfect vessel. Sublime. He is going to be named jewel of the season. There can be no other outcome. Mother is going to be so very pleased.

Everyone is going to want him.

The billionaire who collected Pink and the other boys for his twisted harem, would have desired my baby brother. He would have made an offer. As would any man who likes young, pretty boys.

My guts twist painfully. Why couldn't Laurie be ugly? Weak in magic? Argumentative?

Any flaw at all would be helpful. As it is, keeping him safe is going to be so damn hard.

It is going to be the hardest thing I have ever done. But I'm bloody well going to do it. As long as Laurie remains untapped, he will never need a mage. His life will be his own. Well, as much as it can be while living at home under my protection and having to remain celibate.

Nevertheless, it is far superior to the alternative. I'm sure Laurie will agree with me on that.

Everything is going to be fine. As long as my father dies before Laurie turns eighteen. It's a race of time. It is like a giant clicking clock. One I've started to hear at all times, even in my sleep.

"Baron Havenport!" booms a voice right by my ear.

It is hard to hide my flinch, but I think I succeeded. I have no wish to give the person accosting me the pleasure of seeing that they startled me. It is bad enough being addressed by my formal courtesy title. That name does not feel like mine. I doubt Duke Eastminster is ever going to feel right either.

"Good to see you, Lord Coxley," I say with my very best false smile.

"Haven't seen you in an age!"

Lord Coxley's eyes are beady, and his skin is sweaty and sallow. But that's not why I don't like him.

"My studies keep me busy," I say.

Goodness. It is so very hard to put this persona back on. Bored, privileged, arrogant duke-in-waiting who hasn't got time for society because they are too obsessed with their own brilliance.

I cannot allow anyone to know that the true reason I stay away is because I hate everything about high society and everything it stands for.

“I’m assuming Lawrence is going to a Covenant man?” whispers Lord Coxley.

An icy tingle races down my spine. “Presumably. I’m allowing my mother to deal with all of that.”

I grab a glass of champagne from the silver tray of a passing server and take a big sip while gazing out at the dancefloor. I’m an arrogant asshole who doesn’t care about his brother and who finds the whole marriage business tiresome. Everyone has to believe this.

Coxley gives me a sharp look. Hopefully, he will decide to suck up to my mother instead. Though he has to be deluded if he thinks he has a chance of being given Laurie. In any universe. There is no way in hell my mother would settle for a mere lord.

Coxley takes a sip of his drink. “Good news about the fey getting closer.”

“Indeed,” I reply dryly.

If I have to suffer a conversation, one about crazy plans to invite the fey back to our world is more tolerable than discussing my brother as if he is livestock.

“It is a shame The Covenant didn’t start a breeding program. It seems with the fey now whispering to their descendents, that’s the trick that’s going to work.”

I make a noncommittal noise. If Coxley doesn’t know I’m out of the loop, I’m not going to tell him. I would hazard a guess that my mother is still active in the cult and everyone is assuming that means I’m also a participating member.

“Do you think it’s true that a fey descendent can open one of the old portals from this end?” asks Coxley.

I shrug. “I guess we will soon find out.”

Heavens. I hope this is all rumour and hearsay. The fey communicating with their descendants doesn’t sound good at all.

Oh hells.

Jade.

Pink said Jade has been acting strangely lately. But that has to just be a coincidence, surely? The fey aren’t talking to him. That can’t be right.

I’m sure it is nothing, but nevertheless, unease is twisting my guts into knots.

How on earth do I check without exposing all my secrets? Pink only knows me as Monty and I only ever want him to think of me that way. He can’t know who I really am and all the mess I’m tangled up in. He doesn’t need to know I’m unwillingly tied to a Revivalist cult.

Pink and the campervan are my little bubble of heaven. It will burst soon enough. But not yet. I’m clinging on to each and every precious day.

When I leave, it will be to become Duke Eastminster and to save Laurie. I’ll tell Pink something else. Leaving him is going to be bad enough. I have no wish to also leave a bitter taste in his mouth. I can’t bear the thought of him hating me.

Which he would if he knew the truth. He has good reason to dislike Revivalists. His sweet little friend Lello was abducted as part of a plot to open a fey portal. And if this

business with Jade is linked, then my fate is sealed. Pink would be bound to see me as the enemy. A threat and a traitor.

I can't imagine anything worse.

It is selfish of me, but I want Pink to remember me as Monty. The eccentric alchemist who lived in a campervan at the bottom of his garden. That way, that version of me, the true me, will live on.

Existing only in Pink's memories is not such a bad fate.

I'm going to hate being Duke Eastminster and dancing a web of lies with The Covenant. But it has to be done, for Laurie.

I have to keep Laurie and Pink safe.

Protecting them is the only thing that matters.

Chapter fourteen

Pink

A noise wakes me. At first, I think I'm dreaming. There are voices echoing down the hall, muffled but frantic. My heart thuds as I sit up, blinking in the dark. What time is it? My phone's screen lights up beside me: 3:47 a.m.

This isn't normal. Even in a house full of paranormals, late-night chaos like this means something serious.

I slide out of bed and pad down the hallway, my pulse quickening. The sound leads me to Jade's room. I have a terrible, terrible feeling about this. I think all my vows to be a better friend have come far too late.

Inside, Lello and Red are already there, staring at the walls. Every inch of available surface is covered in twisting, glowing symbols that are pulsing like they're alive. My breath catches, and my stomach drops.

It's High Fey.

I recognize it instantly, though I've only seen fragments in books. My trainer taught me a little. Knowledge passed down from before the fey left our world. Seeing it like this, written in stark, humming lines of light, is nothing short of terrifying.

Ned runs into the room. His dark eyes track around the walls and he swears.

“Recognize the language?” he asks me.

I can barely get the words out. “This... this is High Fey. I didn’t even think Jade knew that language.”

Red curses under his breath, and Lello clutches his face like he’s about to cry.

“Where is he?” snaps Ned.

“We don’t know!” Lello wails.

I barely notice Carter and Brodie bursting in, their expressions turning grim as they take in the room. Lello throws himself into Carter’s arms, and I glance at Red. His lips are tight, his knuckles white as he clenches his fists by his side.

Then Lello says something that twists my insides. “Ned, you found Gray when he went missing. Can you find Jade?”

We all look at Ned, but he just shakes his head. “Jade doesn’t feed on life force. There’s no connection between us.”

I watch Ned as he says this. There’s something behind his words, something he isn’t saying. His jaw tightens, and his gaze shifts to the symbols on the walls.

Gray’s voice makes me jump.

“He’s in the stone circle.”

I whip around, my heart hammering. I didn’t even hear Gray come in. How does he do that? But here he is, standing as calm as ever, pointing south.

“Five leagues,” he says.

“How far is a league?” says Red as he looks at me.

I force a swallow down my throat. It is lovely that my friends consider me a font of all knowledge, but it is a little daunting.

“Umm...about three miles,” I supply weakly.

Carter is tapping furiously at his phone. He holds it up to Gray, with a photo of a stone circle on it. “This one?”

Gray nods.

“Great,” says Carter. He looks at everyone in the room. “It’s called Stanton Drew. It’s fifteen miles south of here. On the edge of a small village.”

The knot in my stomach tightens. I can see where this is going, even before Ned says it aloud.

“Is it an old fey portal?” The question is once again directed at me.

The room goes silent. Red pales, and Lello tenses in Carter’s arms.

“Probably. Most stone circles are,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. I’m sure they don’t need my magical education to know this, but I was asked, so I will answer.

“What made you think of that?” Red asks Ned. His face has gone deathly pale.

Carter’s arms tighten around Lello, and the kelpie bites his bottom lip. Poor Lello,

this must be awfully frightening for him. It has to be bringing back all sorts of traumatic memories from when his herd tried to sacrifice him to the fey.

Ned shrugs, “Just a hunch.”

It is a good one. Jade is part fey. He has not been himself. Now he has scribbled all over his walls in High Fey and run off to a stone circle. All the clues are pointing to something truly terrifying. Jade is trying to open a portal to the fey realm.

We don’t have time for doubts or questions. We need to act. Right now.

“I suggest less chatting, more action,” Carter says, echoing my thoughts. “Everyone, get in the cars. Now.”

“Gray, come with us. Don’t go shadow walking. We need to stick together,” adds Red.

We move like clockwork, racing to gather what we need. I bolt to the driveway. Carter’s car is already packed tight, but he waves me in anyway. The tension in the car is thick as we speed toward the stone circle.

I stare out the window, my thoughts racing. Is Jade trying to open a portal of his own free will? Or are the fey controlling him? The idea of those ancient creatures returning sends a chill down my spine. I’ve read enough to know what they’re capable of. They are the race that invented cruelty.

When we arrive, the magic hits me before I even see the stones. It’s like static in the air, prickling against my skin. The glowing runes on the stones are unmistakable, as is the figure standing among them.

Jade.

My throat tightens as I take in his wild eyes and the words spilling from his lips. It's chanting. Spell casting for a portal. Jade doesn't know how to do that. Something, or someone, is controlling him. Or feeding him instructions.

"Jade?" Red calls out.

Nothing. He doesn't even flinch.

The others seem frozen, unsure of what to do. Gray, unsurprisingly, looks completely unbothered.

"Stop him!" Ned hisses at Gray.

Gray simply shrugs. "He's not in danger."

"Not in danger?" Ned snaps. "He's opening a portal for the fey!"

Gray blinks at him, unperturbed. "So?"

The frustration radiating from Ned is palpable. He looks at me, desperation flickering in his eyes. "Pink! Are fey really as bad as the legends say?"

I swallow hard. "As far as anyone knows."

That's apparently all he needs because I've barely finished speaking before Ned steps into the circle. My heart leaps into my throat as the magic surges around him. I want to stop him, to grab his arm and pull him back, but I can't move.

He calls Jade's name, first softly, then louder. It doesn't work. He tries again, using Jade's old name, and this time, Jade blinks.

I inch closer, every instinct screaming at me to run.

“Please don’t do this,” Ned says, his voice low but firm.

Jade doesn’t respond, but his chanting has stopped.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Baltazar appears. My mind balks in bewilderment at seeing him. He is an old vampire. A member of the paranormal Council. He was involved in helping us with the drama with Lello.

Why is he here? Did someone call him? Or did he simply sense all the magic spewing everywhere and came to investigate?

There is no time to ponder it because as soon as he arrives, Baltazar strides into the clearing like some avenging angel, dagger in hand. The moment Jade sees him, everything happens too fast. Magic explodes from Jade’s body, and Baltazar is gone. Just... gone.

Nothing but a pillar of dust where he was just standing.

I scream, but the sound barely registers. My heart is pumping liquid horror through my veins. I’m trembling with it.

“Jade! Don’t hurt Ned!” I shout, stepping into the circle despite every nerve in my body telling me not to. I can’t let this happen. I need to do something.

Ned and Jade are really not on the best of terms at the moment, and if Jade is in a state of mind to coldly kill Baltazar like that, then Ned is in grave danger.

Jade’s eyes lock on me, glowing brighter than the runes. He starts chanting softly again, almost under his breath.

“Don’t let the fey in! You don’t want this!” I plead desperately. Anything to distract him from Ned.

His gaze softens. The light in his eyes dims slightly as he looks at me. I can see a glimmer of the real Jade in them. Deep, deep in there somewhere, my friend still exists.

“Jade,” Ned says, his voice sharper now.

Jade’s attention snaps back to the vampire. I bite back my wail of dismay. What the hell is Ned doing?

I watch in dread as my friends face each other. Animosity crackles in the air even more potent than the magic.

Slowly, shockingly, Jade’s body slackens. His muttering stops. I don’t know what Ned is doing, but whatever it is, it’s working.

“Stop this!” commands Ned in a voice that raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

Oh my goodness! Ned is trying to glamor Jade! What a genius idea. Jade is mostly human, so it should work. It just depends on who is stronger, whatever is controlling Jade, or Ned.

The silent battle rages. On the surface, it looks like Jade and Ned are merely glaring at each other, but I can feel the immense struggle. The clash of wills. It is intense. I can’t breathe. I can’t blink. I’m a frozen observer, mentally willing Ned on, as if my thoughts and prayers are going to help.

Long, long moments pass. It feels like a hundred years. Then, suddenly, something splinters and cracks. Like the frozen ice of a pond giving way.

It is Jade's resolve.

"Sleep!" Ned commands.

And Jade collapses. His eyes roll back, he falls and lands in a crumpled heap on the floor.

The runes flicker out, and the magic disappears, leaving only silence and the sound of my ragged breaths.

Jade lies motionless, and we all rush to him. Behind me, I hear Ned stagger, but when I turn, he's already out cold on the ground.

Lello shrieks and leaves Jade's side to rush to his best friend. Carter follows him. It is okay, Ned is being looked after. Hopefully, he is simply spent after that epic battle of wills.

I turn my attention back to Jade. He is far too still, but I can see him breathing. I watch numbly as Brodie checks his pulse.

This is awful. I should have done more with my concerns. I knew damn well that something wasn't right. Now look at this mess.

I shudder and wrap my arms around myself. I wish Monty was here. He'd know what to do. I'd give anything for him to appear and wrap me in his arms. He'd whisper that everything is going to be okay. It would be a lie. But I would let myself believe it.

Chapter fifteen

Monty

My lungs heave and suck in all the oxygen they can. I blink and try to gather my scattered thoughts. A moment ago, I was dreaming. Now, all of a sudden, I'm sitting up in my bed in the campervan. Gasping alone in the dark.

It is the middle of the night. All is quiet and still. My dream was not a nightmare. Why am I suddenly awake?

Carefully, I reach out with my magic and check my wards. Everything seems in order, but I suppose I should get out of bed and do a physical check. Something woke me. So something could be out there.

I untangle myself from the covers and throw on some clothes. Then I hurry outside. The cold night air hits me and wakes me up. The stars are shining and it is a beautiful night. A very quiet night.

A quick walk around the campervan shows me that everything is in order. Nothing and no one has tampered with my magical protection boundary. A relief, obviously. But now I am confused. I'm not in the habit of bolting awake in the middle of the night. It definitely wasn't my imagination that disturbed my peace.

I glance towards the house, and frown. Not one single light is on. Not a single sound is coming from it.

I pull my phone out of my trouser pocket. 4.25 a.m. Everyone could be asleep. That's not an unreasonable conclusion. They are all young and paranormal and there are eleven of them, but they still could all be sleeping. Nobody is a wild party animal, or an obsessive gamer, as far as I know.

My feet drift closer to the house. The silence itches at me. Damn it, it's rude to pry on a home, but hopefully I will be forgiven. Tentatively, I reach out with my magic. Goddess, I hope I don't anger the demon.

A gentle sweep of magic confirms my suspicion. The house is as empty as it seems.

My heart pounds and my limbs shake. Is Pink alright? Is he in danger? Does he need me?

Dread gnaws at my stomach. I hate this. I'm so helpless. I have no idea what has happened. I have no clue where Pink might be. I'm useless. Impotent.

And Pink didn't ask me to help.

Some disaster has clearly occurred, causing them all to flee the house, and his thoughts did not turn to me. Or they did, and he dismissed them. Did he think I wouldn't want to help? Does he not trust me?

I run my hands through my hair and suck in a deep breath. It does nothing to calm me. It doesn't ease this heavy sense of guilt, either.

I have been lying to Pink. I have done nothing to earn his trust. I should not be disgruntled that I don't have it.

Some small part of me whines in protest, claiming I haven't been lying, merely omitting the truth. It is a pedantic distinction. I introduced myself as Montgomery,

knowing damn well if I didn't give a surname, he'd assume I was disowned and didn't have one.

Pink believes I'm an outcast from Old Blood society. Like he is. And I have been relishing in it.

But that has nothing to do with this. I'm pretty sure he hasn't uncovered the truth of me. I don't think that is the cause of his mistrust. It is far more likely that he simply can deduce that I have secrets. He is a very clever man. Perceptive.

And because he knows I am shady, he has run off into the night without my help.

A small noise of distress escapes me. I stagger over to a garden bench and sit down. I need to get a grip. Everything is going to be fine. His friends will protect him. Wherever Pink is, he is with a very powerful demon. Along with a vampire, a siren, a kelpie, a shifter and a... fey descendent.

A fey descendent who has been acting strangely. At a time when the fey have been whispering to those that carry their blood.

My lungs freeze. My heart stops beating. My mind floods with dark thoughts.

No. No, no, that can't be what is happening. My mind is simply fixated on it because it is fresh information from Laurie's debutant ball. Jade isn't really out there opening a portal to the fey realm.

Pink hasn't gone to try to stop him.

I shudder. It feels like my blood has turned to ice. I should have warned Pink. I should have shared what I learned. Now I can only hope that I don't regret my poor decision for the rest of my life.

All I can do is sit here and wait. And hope. And pray to any gods who will listen.

It is hard to breathe. The night seems to have grown darker. And colder. The garden is now full of shadows. The world is now a terrible place because it has allowed Pink to be in danger.

Holy hells. I sit up ramrod straight as the realization hits me with the force of a lightning strike. I am far more concerned with Pink's safety than I am by the prospect of the fey invading Earth. To the extent that, as long as Pink is unharmed, I don't think I'd care if Jade succeeds.

I suck in another big breath. I care for my world, I really do. I'm scared of the fey and I know damn well that they are bad news. So it's not as if the fey invading is a trivial matter. It is that I care for Pink far more. A lot more.

Oh goddess. How could I have missed this blatant truth? I'm not merely fond or smitten, am I? I'm not pining for what-if's and could-have-been's. I'm in love. Truly, madly, deeply in love. Pink is the one. There never will be anyone else for me.

I'm so bowled over by this revelation that at first I don't notice the sound of cars approaching. As soon as I do register it, my heart starts racing all over again.

The moment the vehicles are within range, I probe with my magic senses. The familiar hum of Pink's ether sings back at me. Intact and unhurt. Glorious and bright. I breathe out a huge, trembling sigh of relief.

Pink is okay. And the fey have not invaded. I'm pretty sure it would be an unmissable event if they had. So all is right with the world. Disaster averted.

Gravel crunches as the cars sweep into the driveway on the other side of the house from me. I listen to the murmur of voices and the slam of car doors.

I can't make out what they are saying, but the tones are sad and stressed. But not distraught. I think it is safe to deduce that nobody has been badly hurt and no great calamity has befallen.

The sound of footsteps coming around the side of the house to the back garden has me freezing. I'm sitting out here in the middle of the night, like the worst kind of spy.

Pink comes into view. His head is down and his arms are wrapped around his slender chest.

He is heading straight for my campervan. Making a beeline for it. Pink is upset and scared and his instinct is to run to me.

My heart swoops in dark glee. It is everything I was hopelessly yearning for a few minutes ago. Whatever caused him to run off without seeking my help, it was not a fundamental part of his feelings for me. There is hope. Hope that he might love me. Or grow to.

"Pink," I say softly as I stand up and let my presence be known.

His head snaps up, but he doesn't look shocked to see me. He looks relieved. Greatly, hugely relieved.

He turns towards me and all but runs the remaining distance. My arms open wide just in time to catch him. He burrows into me and lets up a soft sob. I wrap my arms around his warm weight and press him close to me.

"Everything is going to be okay," I promise. An oath I will somehow keep if it takes everything I have to uphold it. Pink is going to be safe. Even if I have to sacrifice my soul for it.

Pink sucks in a shaky breath at my words, and then he bursts into tears.

I scoop him up and carry him to the campervan.

I'm acting as if he is already mine, and it feels wonderful.

Chapter sixteen

Pink

Waking up feels like wading through treacle. It is so hard to pull myself to consciousness. I'm warm and comfortable and Monty's arms are around me. I have never felt safer. I don't want to leave. I want to stay like this forever.

As my thoughts gather, my heart starts to race. I spent the night in Monty's bed. I cried all over him and he just held me. He didn't ask for anything in return. I should probably be embarrassed. I didn't ask if I could stay, I simply fell asleep and didn't leave.

Now it is morning and he is spooning me, and I have no idea what to do. I've never slept in someone else's bed before. What is the etiquette?

I take a deep breath. I need to calm down. It's Monty. Everything is fine. He is not one for formalities.

As if on cue, he stirs behind me. He shifts position slightly and snuffles my hair. Then he moves away and yawns.

"Breakfast?" he asks.

How does he know I am awake?

"Yes, please," I say, because I don't want to leave. Any excuse to bask in Monty's

company is fine by me.

He rolls out of bed and pads over to the tiny bathroom. I listen to the sounds of splashing water. When he emerges a few minutes later, he is wearing only pajama bottoms and his white hair is sticking up all over the place.

A smile stretches across my face. He grins back at me and strides over to the kitchen area. Two small gas burners, a tiny sink and a minuscule fridge under the counter. Somehow, he makes it work seamlessly.

I sit up in bed and watch him bring out a frying pan and a carton of eggs. He starts humming a cheerful tune and I'm mesmerized. I was going to jump into the bathroom, but now I just want to watch him.

His movements are graceful and precise. It is like watching a dance. He is scrambling eggs, making toast, boiling the kettle for tea and squeezing oranges by hand. There is no way I could multitask all of that without burning something. Monty is making it look easy.

In no time at all, he has everything ready. I'm just about to stop being a lazy head and finally get out of bed, when he puts everything on a tray and brings it over to me.

Breakfast in bed? For me? This can't be happening.

I mumble my thanks and take my tray. Monty quickly grabs his own tray and joins me on the bed.

A warm, glowing feeling heats my stomach. I could get used to this. I really, truly could.

But now that Monty has stopped being a delightful distraction, my mood is sinking.

All the fear and angst of last night is rushing back.

“Jade tried to open a portal to the fey realm!” I blurt.

I don’t think I said a word last night. I merely sobbed and Monty didn’t ask. He offered me comfort and he didn’t even know why it was needed.

Monty nods sagely at my sudden outburst. Almost as if my news is not at all shocking.

“It wasn’t really him. Something was controlling him. It was awful,” I say. I have to defend my friend. I can’t have Monty thinking badly of him.

Monty turns his head to meet my gaze. His bright blue eyes are kind and full of understanding. I huff out a sigh of relief.

“I thought he was going to kill Ned, so I ran into the stone circle to try to stop him, but it was as if he couldn’t even really see me. Thank heavens Ned was able to glamor him, but now Red and Brodie have taken Jade away to hide him, and my found family is falling apart!”

I’m not making much sense at all, but it feels good to get it off my chest. Unfortunately, I think I’m venting at Monty far more than giving him an explanation for my breakdown. But he doesn’t seem to mind. He is Monty after all. Kind and compassionate could be his middle names.

His hand reaches out and squeezes my knee. My skin tingles even though there are blankets between us.

“Pink,” Monty says softly. “You are so very brave, and I admire that about you, but please take more care of your safety.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach. “I couldn’t let Jade kill Ned.”

Monty puts his breakfast tray on the side and turns to give me his full attention. His blue eyes hold me captive.

“Your life is precious too,” he says gently, but with so much emotion that I swear I can feel the dazzling brightness of it pour into me.

He cares. Monty really, truly cares.

I cough and start to scramble out of bed. Monty helpfully takes my tray and moves out of my way.

“I need to go check on Ned,” I say, and it is true. He was out cold last night and I’m keen to know if he is okay.

Monty simply nods his understanding, and somehow that fuels my desire to flee. He is too damn nice, and it makes me feel too damn much.

I mumble a farewell, and then I run away

It’s been days now, and Ned isn’t getting better. He’s getting worse. At first, he woke up, his pale eyelids fluttering weakly, but now he just sleeps. His stillness is oppressive, his face so devoid of life it feels like a ghost haunts the bed instead of him. He is not even breathing. The only reason I know he’s still here is because of my magic. That faint spark of existence, fragile and flickering, deep within Ned’s inert body, is the only thing keeping despair from swallowing me whole.

Sitting here, helpless and silent, is a special kind of torment. I hate it. I hate seeing him like this. Brodie said Ned would be fine, that he’d wake up, feed, and recover. He did wake up, but he refused to feed, and now he’s slipping away. Every hour that

passes feels like another weight dropped onto my chest.

The soft creak of the door breaks the silence.

“Is Ned better now?” Lello’s voice is barely a whisper, like he’s afraid to disturb the stillness.

I close my eyes against the pain that question brings. I can’t bear to look at him as I shake my head.

Lello steps into the room, his small frame seeming even smaller in the heavy atmosphere. He perches carefully on the edge of Ned’s bed and gently picks up the vampire’s limp hand, cradling it like it might shatter.

“Carter has gone to find Brodie,” he says, his voice hopeful.

It’s a good idea. Brodie’s healing magic might be the only thing that can save Ned now. But a bitter knot twists in my stomach. Brodie should have been here already. Jade had to be hidden, I know that. He almost opened a portal to the fey realm, and he killed a Council member. It’s chaos. And of course Red, ever the protector, took it upon himself to get Jade to safety. And where Red goes, Brodie isn’t far behind.

I understand it, I really do, but damn it, I wish Brodie were here. We need him. Ned needs him.

A heavy sigh escapes me as I try to think of something, anything, that could help. Everything we’ve tried so far has failed. Getting Ned to feed was a disaster.

Speaking of which, “Did Gray take that poor human back to wherever he found him?”

Lello nods, his blue eyes wide. “He didn’t want to, but Mal made him. Listening to your mate is always a good idea.”

Relief washes over me. That poor bewildered and terrified human looked like he’d seen the gates of hell, and Gray was so confused why we were all aghast.

Lello shifts his gaze back to me, his expression lighting up with sudden realization.

“Oh!” he exclaims, the sound breaking through the gloom. “Ned will listen to Morgan if Morgan tells him to feed!”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, exhaling slowly. “Morgan and Ned are not mates,” I remind him.

Lello’s lips curl into a defiant pout. “So?”

“So, it won’t work.”

“Yes, it will!” Lello insists, his voice gaining a stubborn edge. “Ned loves Morgan! That’s why he’s too sad to feed, because he still thinks Morgan hates him. If Morgan came here and they made up, Ned would feed!”

His words hang in the air, and for a moment, I don’t respond. There’s a wild logic to what he’s saying, but it’s a fragile hope, strung together by emotion and wishful thinking.

Could it work?

I glance at Ned’s motionless form, my chest tightening. Maybe Lello’s right. Maybe Morgan is the key. Besides, it is not like we have much to lose.

“Come on, then!” I say, springing to my feet. The sharp scrape of the chair against the floor matches the energy surging through me. Taking action, any action, feels infinitely better than sitting around, stewing in useless frustration.

Lello doesn’t need to be told twice. He bounces up, his wide blue eyes sparkling with excitement at the sudden burst of activity, and together we race out to the driveway. The cars we all share sit there, quiet and unassuming, but one of them is about to carry the weight of our hopes.

Lello clambers into the passenger seat. “I can’t drive,” he reminds me brightly, as if that’s a fun fact.

“I know,” I reply, as I start the engine. “You know where Morgan lives. I can drive. It’s perfect teamwork.”

The drive is mercifully short, but it feels like an eternity with Lello buzzing beside me, his nervous energy filling the car. He’s practically out the door before I’ve even turned off the ignition, sprinting up to Morgan’s house like his life depends on it.

By the time I catch up, Lello is already jabbing at the doorbell with the urgency of someone trying to summon a lifeline. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever comes next.

Morgan opens the door. His dark eyes are shadowed with loss, his shoulders heavy with a sadness that seems to permeate the air around him. My heart twinges with sympathy.

Lello doesn’t wait for pleasantries. He launches straight into the story, his words tumbling over each other in a frantic rush. “Jade, the stone circle, Ned..he’s not feeding, he’s fading...”

Morgan's expression shifts from confusion to alarm. His eyes widen, and for a moment, he looks like he might barge past us to run to his car.

"Ned needs you," Lello says, his voice soft but insistent.

Morgan steps forward, then hesitates. He glances over his shoulder, back into the house, his face a mask of conflict. "The kids," he murmurs.

"I can watch them," I offer quickly. The words are out before I fully think them through, but there's no hesitation in my voice. I'm desperate to keep the momentum going, to not let anything derail this fragile chance. "I love kids," I add, hoping to sound convincing.

Morgan's dark eyes flick to me, scrutinizing. I can't blame him. I'm a stranger, standing on his doorstep, asking him to leave his children in my care.

For a moment, the silence stretches too long. Then, with a decisive nod, he steps aside and gestures for me to follow him inside.

The house is cozy, filled with the kind of warmth that comes from a family's presence. Morgan leads me down a corridor and into a sitting room where three children, impossibly adorable, are sprawled out watching cartoons.

They turn their heads in unison, their wide-eyed curiosity fixed on me.

I force a big, cheerful smile. "Who wants to play dress-up?"

Their reaction is immediate. They leap to their feet with shrieks of delight, bouncing and shouting, "Me! Me! Me!"

Morgan's sad expression softens. He glances at me, a small, grateful smile tugging at

the corners of his mouth. That single nod he gives me feels like a benediction, a passing of trust.

As he hurries back to Lello, I watch him go, a flicker of hope stirring in my chest. Morgan is going to help Ned. He's willing to put aside whatever's broken between them, and if anyone can get through to Ned, it's him.

Turning back to the kids, I rub my hands together with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Okay, let's find some costumes! Princesses, pirates, superheroes, you name it!"

Their laughter rings out, filling the house with a joyful chaos that lifts my spirits.

For the first time in days, a sense of optimism takes root. Today might not be so bad after all.

Chapter seventeen

Monty

Measuring out these shards of lead is painstaking work. The goggles help magnify the delicate details, but my hands are trembling just enough to make precision a challenge. I frown, steadying myself. There has to be a better way to do this, some clever invention waiting to be discovered. But I can't afford to get sidetracked. Not now. This method is fiddly, but for the moment, it will do.

The campervan door bursts open with a jarring bang, and I instinctively jerk upright. My carefully arranged pile of shards topples, a few spilling off the scales onto the worktable.

"Pink!" I exclaim, but there's no frustration in my voice. Quite the opposite. Seeing him standing there, beaming with excitement, instantly chases away the irritation. I push my goggles up into my hair and offer him a wide smile. It's always wonderful when he visits, especially when it's by choice and not necessity.

"It worked! Ned is okay!" Pink's face is alight with joy, his voice carrying an energy that's infectious.

"Oh, how marvelous! What happened?" I ask, leaning forward, eager to soak up the good news.

Pink grabs a stool, dragging it noisily to the end of my worktable. He perches on it, his enthusiasm bubbling over as he explains.

“Lello had this idea to get Morgan to tell Ned to feed. So we went to Morgan’s house, and I stayed with the kids while Morgan came here. By the time they got back, Ned had already slipped into a Little Death.” Pink’s voice falters slightly, but then he brightens again. “Morgan gave him his own blood. It brought him back!”

I can’t help but grin. Seeing Pink so exuberant, and hearing him talk this much, is nothing short of delightful. I think this might be the most he’s ever said to me in one sitting.

“That really is marvelous news,” I reply warmly. Then, unable to resist, I tease, “You babysat?”

Pink’s warm smile deepens, his expression softening in a way that makes my heart flutter. “Yeah, it was great. Noah, Oscar, and Lottie are wonderful.”

His brown eyes sparkle, his whole face is lit with a happiness so genuine it’s captivating.

“You like children?” I ask, my voice quieter now, almost hesitant.

Pink sighs, the sound heavy with longing and contentment all at once. “Yeah, very much. It was one of the few things I was actually looking forward to about being married.”

“Me too,” I admit before I can second-guess myself.

The admission feels raw, but Pink’s openness is disarming. The one and only good thing about Old Blood society, as far as I am concerned, is that surrogates are so common. I was planning on giving into the pressure to get married. I was going to choose a male vessel, because that is my preference, and have heirs via a surrogate. All very normal and expected.

But that plan has turned to dust. If I can't have Pink, I don't want anyone.

I'm no longer bracing myself for an arranged marriage. I'm hoping for a future with Pink.

There are obstacles, oh heavens are there obstacles. As well as a thousand reasons not to entangle Pink in my life. But there is no point to any of it if Pink is not by my side. I'm going to find a way to make it work. I have to. But first, and most importantly, I need to win Pink's heart.

Pink tilts his head, his expression curious. "You like kids?"

It takes me a moment to recall what we were talking about and to force my whirling mind to focus.

"What's not to like?" I reply with a smile.

Pink chuckles softly, the sound sending warmth spiraling through me. "Do you have any siblings?"

The question catches me off guard. My lungs tighten, the familiar ache creeping in as memories I'd rather not revisit threaten to surface. I look away quickly, hoping Pink won't catch the shadow of pain crossing my face.

"A brother," I manage, keeping my tone even. "He's twelve years younger than me."

When I glance back, Pink's face is etched with sympathy. It hits me like a blow, guilt unfurling low in my chest. He thinks my sadness about my brother is tied to me being disowned. Because that is the lie I have allowed him to believe.

Desperate to shift the conversation, I blurt out, "We should celebrate your wonderful

news!” My voice is too loud, my tone too forced, but I don’t care.

Pink’s smile returns, his warmth undeterred. “What did you have in mind?”

Inspiration strikes, sudden and bold. This could be my chance, the moment I’ve been waiting for. It is not an ideal time, but if I wait for our lives to be perfectly calm, I’ll be waiting forever.

“How about dinner? At a nice restaurant?” The words tumble out in a rush, and my heart hammers so loudly I’m sure he must hear it.

Pink blinks, clearly caught off guard. “Just me and you?”

I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. I didn’t think this through. It’s a strange way to celebrate Ned’s recovery, but I can’t backtrack now. “Yes!” I say, far too enthusiastically.

Pink blinks again, slower this time. “Like a date?”

His cheeks flush, the blush spreading quickly as his lips part in realization. He starts to speak again, likely to backpedal, but I cut him off, my own voice coming out sharper than intended.

“Yes. Exactly like a date.”

For a moment, the world seems to hold its breath. Pink stares at me, his beautiful eyes wide and unguarded. Then he takes a deep, shuddering breath, his expression softening into something indescribably tender.

“I’d love that,” he says.

And just like that, my heart feels like it might burst right out of my chest.

The restaurant is a cozy little place tucked away on a quiet street, its warm glow spilling out through frosted windows into the chill of the evening. I hold the door open for Pink, and as he steps inside, he looks around with wide eyes, taking in the low-hanging lights and the soft hum of conversation.

“This is... nice,” Pink says, his voice tinged with awe.

I smile. “I thought you’d like it. Nothing too fancy, but still special.”

His gaze flickers to me, and for a moment, I catch the faintest hint of a blush on his cheeks. “It’s perfect,” he says softly.

The hostess leads us to a small table near the window, where a single candle flickers in the center. Pink sits down carefully, his hands resting awkwardly on his lap, as if unsure where they belong. I can’t help but find it endearing.

“This place is beautiful,” he says after a moment, glancing around again.

I settle into my chair, watching him. He seems to glow in the candlelight, his brown eyes warm and luminous. “I’m glad you think so,” I say, my voice quieter now.

A waiter arrives to take our drink orders, and Pink nervously fumbles with the menu, his eyes darting over the list of options.

“Do you like wine?” I ask gently.

He hesitates, then nods. “I think so? I don’t drink much.”

“Why don’t we try a bottle of red? If you don’t like it, we can get something else.”

He smiles, the tension easing slightly from his shoulders. “Okay. I trust you.”

Those three words send a flutter through my chest, and I have to look away for a moment to compose myself.

The waiter returns with our drinks, pouring the deep red liquid into delicate glasses. Pink watches, his expression somewhere between fascination and trepidation.

“To Ned’s recovery,” I say, lifting my glass in a toast.

Pink mirrors the gesture, his smile brightening. “To Ned.”

We clink glasses gently, and Pink takes a tentative sip. His nose scrunches slightly, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Too strong?” I ask.

“No, no, it’s good,” he says quickly, though his voice lacks conviction. “Just... different.”

I chuckle, setting my glass down. “It’s an acquired taste.”

As the evening progresses, Pink begins to relax. He talks animatedly about his time babysitting Morgan’s children, recounting their antics with a warmth that makes my heart ache in the best way.

“And then Lottie insisted I wear the tiara,” he says, his laughter bubbling over. “I think she was disappointed I didn’t have much hair to clip it into.”

I grin. “You must have been quite the dashing prince.”

He shakes his head, still smiling. “More like a very sparkly pirate. She gave me an eye patch to go with it.”

The image is so vivid and so utterly Pink that I can’t help but laugh. “I wish I’d seen that.”

Pink’s expression softens, his gaze dropping to the table. “It was nice,” he says quietly. “Being around kids again. It reminded me of how much I wanted a family.”

My chest tightens at the wistfulness in his voice. I lean forward slightly, lowering my own voice to match his. “You’d make a wonderful father, Pink.”

He looks up at me, his eyes wide and vulnerable. “You really think so?”

“I know so.”

For a moment, we just look at each other, the air between us thick with unspoken things. Then the waiter arrives with our food, breaking the spell.

As we eat, the conversation flows more easily, touching on everything from favorite childhood memories to the strangest things we’ve ever encountered. Pink’s laughter becomes a constant melody, and I find myself hanging on every word he says, every expression that flits across his face.

By the time we’ve finished dessert, a shared slice of chocolate cake that Pink insisted we split, the restaurant has quieted, most of the other patrons having already left.

“This has been really nice,” Pink says as we linger over the last of our drinks. I’m still on the wine, but he has switched to a lemonade.

I smile, my heart feeling impossibly full. “I’m glad.”

He hesitates, glancing down at his hands. "I don't... go out much. This is the first time in a long time I've felt..." He trails off, searching for the words.

"Felt what?" I prompt gently.

He looks up at me, his eyes shining. "Happy."

The word hangs in the air between us, simple but profound.

"Me too," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

I drive us back to the house and the journey is silent, yet extremely comfortable. I pull up the drive and tuck my car into a corner, careful not to block anyone else in.

As we climb out of the car, the night air is crisp and cool, carrying the faint scent of rain. We walk side by side towards the front of the house, the sound of our footsteps the only noise.

Pink pulls his jacket tighter around himself, and without thinking, I step closer, offering the warmth of my presence.

"Thank you for tonight," he says after a moment, his voice soft. "It really meant a lot."

"It meant a lot to me too," I reply.

We reach the spot where our paths will part, and for a moment, neither of us moves.

Pink turns to me, his expression unreadable. The porch light casts a soft glow over his face, highlighting the sculpture of his cheekbones, the gentle slope of his nose.

“I had a wonderful time,” I say, my voice catching slightly.

“Me too,” he murmurs.

There’s a pause, a heartbeat of silence that stretches impossibly long. I don’t know who moves first, but suddenly we’re leaning closer, the space between us shrinking until I can feel the warmth of his breath against my skin. I think I’m about to kiss Pink. Our first kiss. My first kiss.

My heart pounds wildly, and I can see the same nervous energy mirrored in Pink’s eyes.

But then, just as our lips are about to meet, he freezes. His eyes dart away, and a flicker of panic crosses his face.

I pull back immediately, my stomach twisting with a mix of disappointment and understanding. After everything he has been through, it is not at all surprising that this is daunting for him.

“It’s okay,” I say gently, giving him a reassuring smile.

We have had sex a thousand times, but we have never been intimate. We were both raised in Old Blood Families, trained to think of sex as a duty. Tied to magical needs. Nothing at all to do with emotions.

Whereas a date, followed by a kiss? That is everything to do with emotions. It is nothing either of us have been taught how to deal with. Nevermind all the trauma of the harem.

Pink exhales shakily, his shoulders sagging with relief. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“Don’t be,” I reply. “There’s no rush.”

And there really isn’t. As long as Pink is in my life, and there is hope he might want us to become more, I’m happy. It’s everything I need.

He looks at me then, gratitude shining in his eyes. “Thank you,” he says softly.

I nod, stepping back to give him space. “Goodnight, Pink.”

“Goodnight,” he says, his voice barely audible.

As he walks away, I watch him until he disappears into the house, my heart still racing. Despite the failed kiss, I can’t help but feel hopeful. Tonight was a beginning, and sometimes, beginnings take time.

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Chapter eighteen

Pink

O h my goodness! I feel as if I'm walking on clouds! I nearly kissed Monty! We had such a wonderful date. I could burst into song.

Conversation flowed. We laughed and chuckled. Discovered that we both love children.

He didn't even mind at all when I chickened out of kissing. He merely accepted it calmly, like the wonderful man that he is.

I stumble to a halt outside Jade's door. The empty silence on the other side of it is profound.

Oh.

My mood dims. My feet took me to my friend, but he is no longer here. He is on the run and I don't know when I will ever see him again.

I can't tell him all about my wonderful evening with Monty.

I take a deep breath. It's okay. It is what it is. But I don't want to lose this glow Monty has given me. I'll go share everything with Lello instead.

I walk down the hallway towards Lello and Carter's room, but as I get close, sounds

reach my ears. I stop walking. Lello is busy with his mate. I'll have to catch him later.

In the meantime, who else can I talk to? Ned is probably healing his relationship with Morgan. So, I could try Blue and Sammy, I suppose? I think Sammy is the type to enjoy a good gossip. But Blue finds touch difficult and I don't want to trigger him. As for Gray, I can just picture him staring blankly at me with his too-dark eyes while I gush about nearly having my first kiss. A thousand-year-old incubus is bound to feel differently about such things.

The soft sounds coming from Lello and Carter's room grow louder.

Oops, I should probably move away from here and give them their privacy. I know Lello wouldn't be embarrassed, but Carter probably would be. And I'm not in the harem anymore. I need to adjust back to the normal world. Where sex is private. Intimate.

Sighing, I head for the kitchen. A cup of tea and then bed, I guess. If anyone wanders in, I can tell them all about my wonderful evening.

As I walk down the stairs, my thoughts drift back to the idea of sex being intimate. I wonder what it is like to have sex with someone you love? And only because you want to? When it has nothing to do with magic?

I already know that sex is a million times better with someone you like. My cheeks start to heat. When you like the other person and they are kind and gentle, sex is lovely. Monty has shown me that.

Making love must be so much better.

Kissing, cuddling, touching and exploring each other's bodies.

Oh my! Now all sorts of naughty images are racing through my mind. And Monty is in every single one of them.

With trembling hands, I pull out my tin of chamomile tea. I'm going to need something to help me sleep. My heart is fluttering, my mind buzzing, and my cock is stirring even though I'm not ripe.

I shake my head to try to clear it, but it doesn't work. So much for emotions existing only in the head. Thoughts of Monty are affecting my entire body. My feelings are physical.

As the kettle begins to boil, memories from earlier this evening flow. I can see, with crystal clarity, Monty sitting across from me in that sweet little restaurant. His blue eyes are sparkling and his smile is radiating into me.

A soppy, happy sigh escapes me as I pour boiling water into my mug.

I think I really am falling in love, and I think it might be wonderful.

There is something so relaxing about housework. The noise of the vacuum cleaner should be deafening. Carefully lifting the heavy thing up the steps as I work my way up the stairs should be annoying, but it's all peaceful.

It is a gray overcast Thursday afternoon. I'm doing chores, and I'm happy. Is there no end to Monty's effect on me?

"Pink!" calls Lello, and something in his voice makes my heart sink.

I turn the vacuum cleaner off and look up at the little kelpie. His face is a picture of misery and he is clutching a piece of white paper to his chest.

“What’s happened?” I ask.

Lello sniffs. “Ned still thinks Morgan doesn’t want him, so he has left.”

Oh. This isn’t good. It isn’t good at all. I thought things were working out for them?

I hold my hand out to Lello. “Come on, Sweetie. Let’s go to the kitchen and I’ll make you a hot chocolate.”

Lello nods and I lead him down the stairs. I get him settled at the table and busy myself with making drinks.

Blue and Sammy wander in and Lello tells them the awful news. Our found family is breaking apart. First Jade, Red and Brodie. Now Ned. Everyone is leaving.

“Ned is going to do a Long Sleep,” wails Lello.

My blood turns to ice. Oh heavens. Ned has only just recovered. I’m not sure he is going to be strong enough for that. What is he thinking?

I rub at my aching chest. Ned probably isn’t thinking at all. He has a broken heart. If Monty ever rejected me, I don’t imagine I’d ever be capable of a single coherent thought ever again.

But I’m pretty sure Ned is wrong. I saw the look in Morgan’s eyes when we told him Ned was fading away. It was unmistakable. Morgan loves him. So why has Ned run away? Did Ritchie and the harem truly make him believe he is unlovable?

I place Lello’s hot chocolate on the table. And then I hear the knock.

My stomach drops. It has to be Morgan. The timing is too perfect, too cruel, for it to

be anyone else.

For a moment, I debate letting him stand there. Maybe he'll think no one's home and leave. But no, he deserves to know. He deserves something, even if it's just the truth.

I pull the door open, and there he is, clutching a bouquet of red roses like it's his last lifeline. His suit is impeccable, his hair carefully combed.

His eyes meet mine, and I know immediately he's seen too much in my expression. He glances down at the roses, and I see the flicker of hope dim in his gaze. Damn it, Pink. You could have at least smiled, I tell myself.

"Come in," I say, stepping aside.

He hesitates, but only for a moment. When he moves past me, I can feel his nerves buzzing like static in the air. As we make our way to the kitchen, I steal a glance at him. He's gripping the flowers too tightly, his knuckles white.

Morgan freezes when he sees Lello, his eyes darting to the crumpled note on the table. The color drains from his face.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, his voice rough.

Lello jerks upright, snatching the note like it's a grenade about to go off. His eyes are wide, panicked. "Sorry! Ned said you weren't to see it! I was supposed to come and tell you."

The room goes silent except for Lello's sniffles. I bite my lip, unsure what to do. Morgan looks like he's about to collapse.

"What does it say?" Morgan croaks.

Lello hesitates, then answers in a shaky voice. “He’s gone. He’s...he’s gone to find a castle to hide in. For a Long Sleep. Ten years.”

The relief that washes over Morgan is so visible it’s almost painful to watch. He even lets out a faint, incredulous laugh. I guess he was expecting something far worse.

But I can’t let him stay in that bubble of hope. Not when the truth is worse than he realizes.

“He still hasn’t been feeding properly,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “He’s weak. I...I’m worried he won’t wake up.”

Morgan stiffens, and the relief vanishes from his face. He turns to me, eyes wide, like he’s hoping I’ll take it back. I wish I could.

“Surely he knows what he’s doing?” he asks, though his voice wavers.

I shake my head slowly. “Ned’s...young. For a vampire, I mean. He barely knows anything, and he’s...”

“An idiot?” Morgan finishes for me.

I nod, biting the inside of my cheek. The word is harsh, but it’s not wrong.

“I can take you to him,” Gray’s voice cuts through the room like a knife, making all of us jump.

I whip my head around to find him standing casually in the doorway, as if he’s been here the whole time. I swear, one day this demon is going to give me a heart attack.

“Can you?” Morgan asks, his voice a mix of desperation and disbelief.

Gray nods solemnly. “He’s in France. I can take you through the shadows.”

The color drains from Morgan’s face again, but his jaw sets in determination. “How long will it take?”

Gray lifts a hand and snaps his fingers. The harsh click echoes around the room.

Morgan flinches, and I almost feel sorry for him. Shadow walking doesn’t sound fun, but it’s better than wasting hours getting to an airport. And we don’t have hours.

“Take me!” Morgan says, his voice breaking slightly.

Gray doesn’t hesitate. He grabs Morgan’s suit jacket, and then they’re gone.

I sink into a chair, my hands trembling. The room is silent again, except for Lello’s muffled sobs.

I don’t know what Morgan’s going to find when he gets there. I just hope it’s not too late.

Chapter nineteen

Monty

I am jogging up the driveway, the rhythm of my feet a steady beat against the gravel, when Carter's car suddenly speeds past. The roar of the engine startles me, and I instinctively slow, watching as he swerves and skids to a stop right in front of the house. The tires kick up a spray of loose stones, one of which pings sharply against my leg.

Before I can call out in surprise or annoyance, Carter jumps out of the car. He doesn't even glance at the mess he's made. His only acknowledgment of me is a quick, distracted wave, an apology, I suppose, for nearly mowing me down. But it's clear his thoughts are elsewhere. His strides are purposeful and urgent as he disappears into the house without another word.

That wasn't the look of someone going about their day. That was the look of a man frantic with worry. A man desperate to reach his mate.

I stop jogging, my chest heaving slightly from exertion, and stare at the house. Has something happened? My frown deepens as unease creeps over me. I extend my senses cautiously, scanning for any ripples of magical disturbance, but the air is still. No chaotic energy, no bursts of raw power. But disasters are not always of the magic kind. Emotions and relationships and the everyday business of life can be just as explosive.

The thought hits me like a punch to the gut. Pink could be in danger, and I wouldn't

even know.

I'm not magically bonded to Pink. We are not mates. He could be dying or in great peril, and I would not be able to sense it.

The only reason I bolted awake when Jade was trying to open the portal was because it was such a surge of strange and unusual magic. Even then, it was only my deep subconscious that knew something was wrong. I didn't consciously know a thing.

Am I feeling anything now? Is this prickling unease more than anxiety? Or is my imagination running away with me?

A heavy sigh escapes me. There is only one way to find out. Cautiously, I step towards the house. I'm not entirely sure I'm welcome. Pink has never officially rescinded the, 'Contact only when and as needed', terms of our arrangement, but I like to think that informally, we have grown closer than that.

Though that could just be wistful thinking on my part. Sure, things have grown easier between us lately, warmer, even. But I'm not entirely sure where I stand. And the very last thing I want to do is overstep Pink's boundaries.

The front door is unlocked. Here goes nothing. I slip inside. The faint hum of voices draws me towards the kitchen. I hesitate at the threshold, the scene unfolding before me like a silent play.

Carter has his arms wrapped tightly around Lello, the kelpie's shoulders shaking as he cries into his mate's chest. The sight is intimate and raw, and I feel like an intruder for witnessing it.

At the table, Pink is sitting with his hands clasped tightly, his gaze fixed on nothing in particular. But then his eyes shift, and he notices me. Relief floods his face, softening

the tension in his features, and he smiles. Warm, beautiful, and so genuine that it takes my breath away.

I step forward without thinking, compelled by that smile and his clear welcome. I stand behind him and my hand finds his shoulder, a gesture of support that feels both natural and intimate. Pink's hand comes up to rest on mine, his touch gentle but affirming. He is glad that I am here.

Blue and Sammy are also in the room, their presence a quiet accompaniment to the tension. Blue gives me a wary glance but doesn't retreat, which I take as progress.

"Ned's run away to a castle in France," Sammy explains, his voice brisk but tinged with concern. "He might do something stupid because he thinks Morgan doesn't love him. But Morgan showed up here with a bunch of roses, so Gray whisked him off through the shadows to try and save Ned."

His words tumble out in a rush, and I nod, grateful for the succinct explanation. It is very kind of Sammy to fill me in without prompting. I wasn't planning to pry. Even though I was deeply curious.

Oh heavens, this is a calamity. No wonder Lello was upset and Carter was rushing to be by his side. The boys are all very close. Understandably, after everything they went through together in the harem.

Pink calls them his family. Losing Red, Jade and Brodie must have been awful for them. Now Ned is in danger again?

How awful. All of these boys deserve a peaceful life where nothing bad ever happens again. No stress. No disasters. I wish I could give that to them. I wish I could help with this, but I'm not sure what I can do.

Suddenly, a potent wave of dark magic sweeps through the room. My breath catches, and the fine hairs on my arms stand on end. The energy is dense, oppressive, and unmistakable.

The demon appears.

Gray materializes out of the shadows, his black eyes scanning the room. The air grows heavy with his presence, a suffocating mix of power and menace.

Everyone startles. Carter's protective hold on Lello tightens reflexively. Even Sammy, who is usually unflappable, tenses.

The scene is a frozen tableau. Gray is never exactly chatty, but surely he understands his friends need answers?

"What happened?" Sammy asks, breaking the silence, just as it is becoming clear that the demon isn't going to voluntarily give up a single word.

Gray's gaze shifts to him, slow and deliberate, and I suppress a shiver. "I took Morgan to Ned," he says, his voice a low rasp. His tone clearly indicating his bewilderment at being asked to state the obvious.

The demon's unhelpful words hang in the air, and Pink shifts in his seat, his hand twitching beneath mine. But it is Sammy who huffs out in exasperation, "And?"

The demon's dark eyes track around everyone in the room, his expression unhurried and unreadable. It is hard not to shudder as his gaze briefly meets my own. Slowly, he turns his attention back to Sammy.

"They are fucking," he says flatly.

A collective exhale of relief ripples through the room.

Pink sighs audibly, the tension draining from his body. Sammy grins like a Cheshire cat. Lello steps back from Carter, though he keeps a firm grip on his hand. He smiles at the demon while wiping tears from his eyes.

“They didn’t want me to watch,” Gray adds, his tone almost petulant.

Sammy lets out a loud snort of a laugh. “I’m sure Mal will take you to the sex club so you can perv all you like.”

A grin slowly spreads across the demon’s face, and his jet-black eyes light up. His dark magic surges, and then he is gone. Vanished, as if he was never here. This time, I can’t suppress my shudder.

Demons, even incubi, are terrifying. But I am going to have to get used to Gray if I want a permanent and meaningful place in Pink’s life. It wouldn’t do to be scared of one’s brother-in-law.

Pink moves to stand, and I instinctively step back to give him space. He turns to face me, his hand still holding mine.

“This is wonderful,” he exclaims, his face alight with joy.

I nod enthusiastically as my heart skips a beat at the warmth of his touch. Then I realize he is talking about Ned and Morgan resolving their difficulties, and not about us holding hands. But my nodding fits the situation. I’ve escaped a social faux pas and Pink will never know what I was truly thinking.

Pink beams up at me. He is even more beautiful when he is happy. It is enough to take my breath away. It is intense enough to inspire my soul to devotion. Pink should

always be happy. At all times. For the rest of his life. I want to devote myself to ensuring that happiness is all he ever knows.

“We should celebrate!” I say as wonderful inspiration strikes.

Pink chuckles, his laughter a melodic sound that makes my chest ache in the best way. His gorgeous eyes light up with glee.

“What did you have in mind?” he teases, playing along. He clearly remembers that this is exactly how I asked him out for our first date.

“There’s a new exhibition at the museum’s art gallery,” I suggest, my voice steady despite the nerves bubbling beneath the surface. “We could check it out and grab coffee afterward.”

Pink’s smile widens, his entire face lighting up. “Like a date?” He says, sticking to this script we’ve somehow created between us. It is wonderfully intimate and I am going to cherish it forever.

“Exactly like a date,” I confirm, my heart thundering in my chest.

“Sounds fantastic,” Pink says, and I couldn’t agree more.

Chapter twenty

Pink

The museum's grand facade beckons ahead as we walk side by side. The crisp evening air carries the faint scent of rain, and the soft background hum of city sounds is providing an almost musical accompaniment. I've always loved the quiet reverence of the museum. It feels like stepping into a sanctuary of beauty and thought, where the weight of the outside world fades away. But tonight, my thoughts aren't excited about the exhibits or the history within the walls. My focus is entirely on Monty.

His presence is a steady, comforting warmth beside me. The way he glances at me, soft and attentive, as if I'm the only thing in the world that matters, sends a thrill through me that I don't quite understand.

I think I should pinch myself to make sure this is real. I'm on a date with Monty. Again. It really is too good to be true.

The grand glass doors of the museum gleam under the streetlights. Monty opens one with a gentlemanly flourish, gesturing for me to go ahead. "After you," he says with a small, teasing bow.

I can't help but smile. "Such chivalry," I quip, stepping inside.

The quiet hum of the museum wraps around us. The gallery space is a perfect blend of modern design and classic charm, with polished dark wooden floors and high ceilings adorned with subtle, intricate carvings. The exhibition focuses on abstract

interpretations of human emotion. The first room features large, sweeping paintings that seem to pulse with vibrant energy. Colors merge and clash, creating a visceral sense of movement that seems to speak directly to the soul.

Monty walks beside me, his hands clasped behind his back as he studies the first piece. It is a chaotic swirl of reds and blacks, each brushstroke filled with raw intensity. “What do you think it’s trying to say?” he asks.

I tilt my head, letting my eyes trace the jagged strokes. “Anger, maybe? Or fear. There’s so much movement. It feels like someone trying to break free.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Or maybe someone trying to hold on. The darker tones seem to pull everything inward, as if grasping at something they can’t quite reach.”

I glance at him, struck by how effortlessly he understands these abstract expressions. “You’re good at this.”

Monty turns to me, his lips curling into a soft smile. “I’ve always been fascinated by how art reflects emotion. It’s like a glimpse into someone else’s soul.”

His words send a small flutter through my chest. There’s something so earnest about the way he speaks. It feels like every observation he makes carries a piece of his own heart.

We move from piece to piece, sharing quiet observations and trading gentle jokes. The gallery fades around us, the art becoming a backdrop to the easy rhythm of our conversation. At one point, we stop before a particularly striking piece. It is a massive canvas awash with shades of black and gray, overrun with streaks of a bright, vivid, pink that seems to shimmer in the dim light.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmur. “It feels... hopeful.”

Monty stands close, his gaze fixed on the painting. “Like light breaking through darkness,” he agrees. “It’s... radiant. Just like you.”

The words hang in the air between us. They are soft and unassuming, but they hit me like a quiet storm. Warmth rushes to my cheeks, and I look down, trying to suppress the nervous smile threatening to break free.

Oh gosh. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything so romantic in all my life. I’m at a very real risk of swooning right into Monty’s arms.

“Sorry,” Monty says quickly, his voice laced with self-consciousness. “That might’ve been too much.”

“No,” I say, looking back up at him. My voice comes out quieter than I intend. “It wasn’t too much.” It was wonderful. I could get used to compliments and affection, I really could.

His eyes search mine. For a moment, the air between us feels charged, heavy with something unspoken.

Monty breaks the tension with a soft chuckle, scratching the back of his neck. “Shall we move on?”

I nod, grateful for the reprieve. But even as we walk to the next room, the warmth of his words lingers, filling me with a strange, fluttery sense of anticipation.

We reach the end of the exhibition sooner than I’d like, and we find ourselves in the museum’s small café, sipping tea and sharing a slice of chocolate cake. The conversation flows easily as we trade stories and laughter.

“Do you paint?” I ask, trying to keep my voice casual. He seems to know a lot about

the subject. But then again, Monty seems to know a lot about most things.

Monty shakes his head with a soft laugh. “No. I’ve tried, but my attempts are laughable. My talents are more practical than creative.”

“Practical like cooking?” I tease, because I’m not going to mention alchemy in public.

Monty grins, his eyes lighting up in a way that makes my chest feel warm.

“Exactly,” he says, and then he hesitates, like he’s debating whether to say more. “Though I do have a story about a particularly disastrous attempt at... let’s call it culinary artistry.”

“Oh, you have to tell me now,” I say, laughing.

Monty chuckles and leans slightly closer, lowering his voice like he’s sharing a secret. “When I was younger, I decided to host a dinner party. It was meant to be a casual gathering, just some acquaintances and family. I thought I could handle the cooking myself. I’d watched the chef at home plenty of times and thought, how hard could it be?”

I’m already grinning. “Famous last words.”

“Precisely,” he says, his eyes twinkling. “I decided to make a roast. Simple, classic. Except I overestimated how long it would take to cook. By the time the guests arrived, the kitchen was filled with smoke, and the roast... Well, let’s just say it was more charcoal than meat.”

I laugh, the image of Monty frantically battling a smoking oven far too vivid. “What did you do?”

“I improvised,” he says, his tone dry but amused. “I sent someone out to buy bread, cheese, and wine and declared it a rustic picnic dinner. Everyone was too polite to complain.”

“I’m sure they thought it was charming,” I say, still laughing.

“They were gracious,” he admits, his smile softening. “But that was the day I learned the importance of knowing one’s limitations.”

“And now you’re a culinary genius,” I say, recalling the expert way he made me breakfast in bed in his tiny campervan kitchen.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he says, but the pleased flush on his cheeks tells me he doesn’t mind the compliment.

The café quiets as the evening wears on, the other patrons filtering out until it’s just the two of us. The dim lighting casts a soft glow over Monty’s features. I find myself watching him more than I intend to, caught up in the subtle curve of his smile and the way his eyes sparkle when he laughs.

As we step out into the night, the air is cool and crisp. The sky is a deep velvet dotted with stars. We walk slowly, neither of us in a hurry to end the evening. The streets are quiet, the city softened by the late hour.

“Thank you for tonight,” I say as we reach a small park near the museum. “It was... wonderful.”

Monty turns to face me, his expression warm and open. “The pleasure was all mine. Truly.”

We stop near a bench. The faint glow of a streetlight casts a soft circle of light around

us. My heart thrums in my chest, but this time, it's not nerves. It's anticipation.

Monty takes a small step closer, his gaze steady and searching. "Pink... can I...?"

"Yes," I whisper, my voice steady.

He leans in, and this time, I don't freeze. I meet him halfway, my hands finding their way to his shoulders as his touch anchors me.

Our lips meet in a soft, tentative kiss, and the world seems to melt away. It is gentle and sweet, full of the promise of something new and wonderful. Monty's hand rests lightly at the small of my back, grounding me in the moment as warmth blooms in my chest.

His lips are soft and tender. Brushing over me oh so tentatively. Almost cautiously. I was his first sexual partner, so this is probably his first kiss. The realization of that is making me giddy. It makes me feel special. As if I am someone worth waiting for.

The kiss deepens. I press myself closer to his broad chest. The heat of his body seeps into mine. His hand on my back becomes more confident, more sure, but still so achingly careful. A support, not a restraint. An offering and not a demand.

I have never been kissed like this before. Some of the men who used me in the harem slobbered over me, but it was nothing like this.

Oh heavens, I've just realized. This is my first consensual kiss. I'm giving my first kiss to Monty, just as he is giving his first to me. This is a special moment, truly shared.

His first kiss. My first kiss. Our first kiss.

When we finally pull apart, Monty's eyes search mine, his expression a mix of awe and joy.

"Was that okay?" he asks softly.

"It was perfect," I say, my cheeks flushing with happiness.

He smiles, his face lighting up in a way that makes my heart soar. As we stand there beneath the streetlight, the night feels infinite, full of stars and possibilities.

Chapter twenty-one

Pink

This shower is so hot I'm probably going to lose a layer of skin. It feels good. But it is not washing away the feeling of being ripe. It is not even distracting from it. I'm simply ripe while standing under a scorching hot shower. There is no running away from the fact. Nowhere to hide. No way to even delay it.

I have never hated my stupid body more. Why must it insist on betraying me and putting me in this predicament?

I like Monty. I really, really like him. We are courting. We have been on two wonderful dates. We shared a truly magical first kiss. Whatever is blossoming between us is precious. However, in the normal course of things, I would not wish to have sex with him at this stage. It's too soon.

A strange, derogatory sounding giggle bubbles out of me. In the normal course of things, I wouldn't put out until my wedding night. But I'm no virgin and Monty is never going to marry me.

But none of that changes the facts. I am ripe, so I have to let him fuck me.

On the other hand, I don't want to go back to him formally emptying me. That would be as awkward as hell. It would also put a distance between us that I do not want.

I sigh heavily as I turn the shower off. Too close to have sex without emotion, yet not

close enough to want to do it without necessity.

I wrap a towel around myself. Sex without emotion? Who am I kidding? It has not been like that with Monty for a while now, if it ever was. He has always made me feel things.

So why am I in such a tizzy? Is it because my feelings for him have grown so intense, I know I won't be able to hide them at all?

I wish Jade was here so I could talk things through with him. I miss him. I miss Red and Brodie too.

With that unhappy thought, I leave my bathroom and head for my closet. I throw on some white silk pajamas. I love the way they feel and I don't mind walking down the garden in them to Monty's campervan.

Just as I'm tying the drawstring of my pants, there is a gentle tap on my bedroom door. I whirl to face it as if I can see through the wood. My heart starts to race. I don't need laser vision. It is Monty. I can sense his magic.

I run to the door and fling it open.

Monty has tried to tame his wild hair by tying it up in a tiny neat bun. His navy blue henley shirt and black jeans are very smart, without being formal. Oh lord, he has rolled the sleeves up. And he is holding a bunch of roses and a box of chocolates.

"Come in," I say weakly as I step back.

This level of romance shortly after a very hot shower, has me at a very real risk of fainting.

Monty steps calmly into my room.

“I’m afraid I don’t keep any drinks in here, so I can’t offer you one,” I babble.

Monty smiles. “It is you I wanted, not a drink.”

My cheeks are burning, aren’t they? Monty hands me the flowers and chocolates and I busy myself with finding somewhere to put them.

“I hope you can forgive the intrusion, but I sensed you were ripe, and I thought we should discuss matters.”

“Yes, of course,” I mutter while nodding frantically. Luckily, my back is to him while I’m retrieving a previously unused vase from my shelf of knick-knacks.

“Pink, I just wanted to make it clear that I understand and respect your wishes, whatever they may be. If you wish to keep things formal, then that is what we will do.”

I dump the roses unartfully in the vase, and turn back to face Monty. My stomach is fluttering like crazy. I should have known he would understand.

“Would...would you prefer a different mage empty you, just for now?” Monty’s eyes are wide and anxious.

My hands fly up to my mouth. “Heaven’s no!” I can’t imagine anything worse.

Monty nods and I catch a glimpse of a very pleased and relieved smile before he schools his features into a neutral expression.

“Sorry for suggesting it. I just want you to be as comfortable as possible, Pink. So, I’d

like to discuss all options.”

How is anyone so lovely? It doesn't seem possible. Monty really is unlike anyone else I have ever known.

I take a deep breath and let it out, along with all my tension. “Thank you Monty, I really appreciate it. I was nervous because if I wasn't tapped...I wouldn't...yet. But...” I give up and trail off.

Monty steps forward and takes my hand. I stare into his blue eyes and see just how much he understands and just how much he feels the same way.

“What do we do?” I whisper.

He gives my hand a squeeze. “How about we start with a kiss and take it from there? If at any point, going back to being formal seems like it would be better, then that's what we will do.”

I nod. It all sounds so simple when he puts it like that.

Monty smiles at me and my heart thumps so loudly in response he has to have heard it.

“I..um...I,” I stammer. “I don't actually know how to do things informally.” In the harem, I simply did as I was told, which was mostly to lie still.

Monty brings my hand up to his lips and places a soft kiss on my knuckles. “We can learn together.”

A wave of dizziness spins through me. Monty catches my shoulders and steadies me. I blink at him as my vision returns.

“I think you just made me swoon,” I croak.

Monty chuckles, blue eyes sparkling with delight. “I’d be honored to have that effect on you Pink, but sadly, it was probably just your magic.”

“And a very hot shower,” I add.

His smile deepens. “There you go. Perfectly rational explanation.”

Now I am caught in his gaze and I cannot think of a single thing to say. My mind has gone utterly blank. The only thing I am capable of is staring at him.

“May I kiss you?” he asks softly.

Somehow, I coordinate enough muscles to make my head nod. Monty steps up close. One hand goes to the small of my back. His head lowers, then soft gentle lips are brushing over the seam of my mouth.

Sensation shoots through me. Immediate and intense. It rewrites me and blasts away all of my uncertainty and nerves. The only thing left is desire.

A moan escapes me and I hungrily open my mouth. I want more of him. I want all of him. He is kissing me with tenderness and passion and heat. Heat that builds and builds. It sinks into me. It smolders and burns. He pulls me closer, and the heat ignites. I am on fire. A blaze with need and passion.

My bed rises up to meet my back. I have no idea how we moved here, but I’m glad. I’m kissing Monty feverishly. My hands are frantically pulling at his clothes. Finally, I find a way under them and my palm runs over his abs. Tracing the contours like I have a thousand times in my dreams. The reality of it is infinitely better.

Monty is tearing at my clothes too. We are desperate for one another, as if the feel of each other's skin is the only cure for our starvation.

Eventually, we are naked. My hands roam every inch of him I can reach, mapping his body to my memory. The world shrinks. The only things left are touches, caresses, palms, fingers, lips, tongue and teeth. He is pure heat, hard muscle and soft skin. Everywhere he touches me lights up like stardust.

I'm moaning and writhing. I am a carnal beast.

My legs spread wide. I need his burning heat inside me. I want him to set me alight in the deepest parts of me. Our bodies are pressed as close as two bodies can be, but it is not enough. It is nowhere near enough. We need to be joined. We need to be one. No end and no beginning.

One creature of pleasure and lust, shot through with golden pulsing magic that flows without limits.

Monty's cock pushes gently at my entrance. I throw back my head and wail in delight.

"Is this...is this..." he sounds as if he is speaking through gritted teeth.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I cry out.

I have never wanted anything more. To be stuffed with Monty's cock would be more divine than heaven.

He starts to ease in and I am so glad I prepared in the shower. Every time I think he can't be as big as I remember, and every time I am proven wrong. Taking him is extreme. I love it. The feel of being stretched to my limits, the shock of it, the burn.

The way my body tries to resist before collapsing in complete surrender.

He slides in all the way. Claiming all of me. My legs are wrapped around his waist, my arms around his neck. I pull him down to resume our kiss. Now all parts of us are touching. The way it should be.

He rocks his hips, dragging his cock through my insides and rubbing against my prostate. My thoughts turn into fireworks. My magic glows. Oh lord. I am going to erupt. There is going to be none of me left, and that sounds wonderful.

I'm going to pass out from the intensity, and that's just fine.

Because Monty is here to catch me.

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Chapter twenty-two

Monty

Pink is lying limply in my arms. I love that I am getting to hold him. I hate that he is out cold. I know that sometimes vessels pass out from the intensity of being emptied. But Pink never has before.

Mind you, things have never been anywhere near that intense before. The sex was incredible. Mind-blowing. A pleasure like no other. In fact, I don't think it was sex at all. It was making love.

And now my soul is bloated with Pink's magic. He gave me so much, and all of it is so potent and so strong.

So, all things considered, it is not surprising that he fell unconscious. But when will he wake up? Should he still be comatose? It has been ten minutes and thirty-nine seconds. How long is too long? How long do I wait before getting help?

Just as my panic is really starting to dig its claws in, Pink stirs. A faint murmur and a gentle shifting of position.

I let out a sigh of relief. Pink's eyes flutter open and focus on me.

"That was intense," he whispers hoarsely.

"It was," I agree as I gently pull my arm out from under him.

I reach for the water bottle that I noticed earlier and unscrew the lid and hand the bottle to him. He accepts it with a smile and shuffles up to a semi-sitting position. I watch his throat bob as he gulps down the water.

“I’ve heard it can be pretty intense,” I waffle mindlessly.

Pink finishes his drink and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ve never heard anyone describe it like that.”

His beautiful brown eyes are full of questions and wonderment. He is not rebuking what I have said. He is simply mulling over the evidence.

As am I. Because he is quite right. Nobody ever describes a mage emptying a vessel being anything like I just experienced. And while it is not a topic for polite conversation, I still feel I would have heard about it. If it were a known and understood phenomenon.

I clear my throat. “Perhaps what we experienced is how things should be between a mage and a vessel. When things are neither formal nor arranged, but natural and instinctual. And when there are genuine and mutual feelings.”

I resolutely push down my desire to cringe at saying mutual feelings. It is presumptuous, but if I am explaining a theory, I need to be clear.

Pink’s eyes widen. I can almost see the cogs of his clever mind whirling. “That would make a lot of sense.”

My heart gives a little skip at Pink’s approval of my theory. He pulls himself up into a sitting position. The blankets pool around his waist, leaving his lovely chest bare. He doesn’t seem to notice. He is too busy pondering my idea.

“I think we have stumbled upon something,” he says as he stares at me with excitement.

I can’t help smiling at him, even though his enthusiasm is breaking my heart.

“Knowledge that has probably been oppressed for a reason,” I say gently.

Pink’s bright eyes widen even more, then they dim. He drops my gaze and absentmindedly fiddles with his water bottle. “Most likely,” he agrees solemnly.

My clever boy has cottoned on lightning quick. He understands what a dangerous nest of vipers the society we were raised in is. There is no need to explain it to him.

“We shouldn’t tell anyone,” I blurt out anyway. Just to be perfectly clear.

He sighs sadly. “Who would I tell?”

I claim his hand and give it a squeeze. I hate that he feels dejected by his exile, while at the same time I feel guilt at my plans to drag him back into that world.

We can hide in my house with Laurie and never see a soul from Old Blood society. Nevertheless, if I was a better man, I wouldn’t do it. I’d leave Pink in peace in his exile. I’d stick to my original determination to not drag Pink into my life.

Pink squeezes my hand back and gives me a soft smile. My heart skips several beats.

I’m not strong enough to leave Pink behind. I can’t do it. I won’t do it.

I shake my head in an effort to gather my thoughts and to focus on the here and now. I’ve emptied Pink. It was intense, but now he is fine, and he always seeks privacy after being emptied.

“Shall I leave?” I say.

Pink’s grip on my hand tightens. He blinks. “Can you stay?” he asks as a beautiful blush spreads across his cheeks.

“I’d love nothing more,” I assure him with a grin.

The smile he gives me in return is truly dazzling. He wriggles down and holds the covers open for me. I lie next to him and pull him close, tangling our limbs together like I have always wanted to.

A deep, deep thrum of contentment pulses in my veins. I am so happy I could burst with it. This moment is sheer and utter perfection.

Pink lets out a soft, happy sound and I close my eyes in bliss.

“So...are we...boyfriends now?” he whispers shyly. “Since you know, that went well and the dates have been so lovely.”

My arms tighten around him. “I’d be honored to be your boyfriend.”

I really think I might expire with happiness, or at least take a turn at fainting from the joy of it all. This truly is the best day of my life.

Pink giggles happily. “So it’s official then?”

“Looks like it,” I reply.

I’ve never had a boyfriend before, so I’m not entirely sure how it works, but it seems likely that the rules are ours to make.

One day, if I get my way. Pink will be my fiancée. Then, I will be his husband and he will be mine. Duke Consort Eastminster, is a title that will suit him greatly. I can't wait to bestow it upon him.

There are obstacles to overcome, tricky paths to navigate, but I am sure it can be done.

But that is all in the future. The present is right here. And, 'Pink's Boyfriend', is the best title I have ever had. Until it is beaten by, 'Pink's Husband', it will remain my proudest accomplishment.

Chapter twenty-three

Pink

A tiny thrum of excitement pulses through me, gently tugging me from sleep. It starts before I am even fully awake, a flutter of anticipation that warms me from the inside. Today is a day I have been looking forward to, and now it is finally here.

The campervan is still and dark, cocooned in the soft hush of early morning. Monty's arm is draped over me, holding me close as he breathes in the steady rhythm of sleep. His warmth seeps into me, a perfect anchor in the quiet. I close my eyes again for just a moment, savoring this, savoring us. Monty has been my boyfriend for three months. Twelve blissful, perfect weeks. I never thought I could feel this way about someone, but here I am, happier than I ever imagined I could be.

I should probably tell my friends about us. About what Monty and I mean to each other. But there is something special about keeping it just between us. This secret belongs to us alone, unshared and unspoiled. Besides, I'm pretty sure my friends already suspect the truth. Monty is no longer just the mage who... well, helps me. It is written in every glance we share, every subtle touch. When the time comes to announce it, no one will be shocked.

Anyway, those are thoughts for another time. Today is not about relationships or revelations. Today is Ned's one-hundredth birthday, and there are things to do!

Carefully, I start to slide out of bed, mindful not to wake Monty. The moment I move, though, he stirs, his arm tightening slightly before releasing me.

“Everything okay?” His voice is a soft, sleep-rough murmur.

“Yes,” I whisper back. “It’s Ned’s birthday. I need to get the kids ready for the party.”

His eyes snap open, bright with excitement. “Oh, yes! Wait for me!”

The grin that spreads across his face is boyish and full of delight, making my heart do a dizzy little flip. He’s out of bed in seconds, throwing on his pajamas as quickly as I am. There is something endearing about his enthusiasm, a childlike wonder that never fails to make me smile.

The garden is cool and dewy as we step outside, hand in hand. Together, we cross the yard and slip quietly into the house. Inside, it is peaceful. The kind of calm that belongs only to the earliest hours of the day. The faint creak of the floorboards beneath our feet feels almost too loud as we tiptoe through the house.

“We’re like burglars,” I whisper, a giggle bubbling up before I can stop it.

Monty flashes me a grin. “Best burglars ever,” he whispers back, giving my hand a playful squeeze.

We make it down the hallway to the kids’ bedroom. Having them live here is truly such a blessing. I think I was more excited than Ned when they, and Morgan, moved in.

I ease the door open. The room is dim, but the soft rise and fall of their little chests is visible in the faint glow from the curtains. Lottie, Oscar, and Noah lie sprawled in various poses of sleep, their faces peaceful and angelic.

Monty reaches for the baby monitor and turns it toward the wall while I cross to the

window and pull the curtains open. A pale wash of light filters into the room, coaxing sleepy murmurs from the beds.

“Wakey, wakey, sleepyheads,” I say softly, my voice warm with affection.

The covers rustle as Lottie and Oscar blink up at me, their faces still half-dreaming.

“It’s party day,” I whisper, crouching down to their level.

Their eyes go wide with excitement. In an instant, Lottie is on her feet, doing a delighted little twirl that makes me laugh. Oscar scrambles out of bed just as Noah stirs, rubbing his eyes before he catches on. A sleepy grin spreads across his face, and he throws off his covers to join his siblings.

I hold out my hands. Oscar takes one, his small fingers wrapping around mine. Lottie and Noah, however, run straight to Monty, grabbing his hands instead. He looks down at them with an expression so full of love and delight that my heart nearly bursts.

Oh lord. I’m going to swoon. Monty is gorgeous, intelligent, kind and caring, and he is good with kids. He really is far too perfect to be true.

As we leave the room, I turn the baby monitor back around. I have no desire to give Ned a heart attack when he sees a blank wall instead of his children. Hopefully, he’ll assume they wandered off in search of breakfast when he sees their empty beds.

In the kitchen, the party preparations are already in full swing. The air hums with quiet excitement. Lello lets out a delighted squeal the moment he sees us and quickly whisks the kids away to help arrange the food.

Blue and Sammy are inflating balloons, their laughter filling the room as one balloon

stubbornly refuses to cooperate. At the far end, Gray and Mal are working on the bunting, their hands swift and sure as they unravel the roll.

I'm smiling so much that my cheeks ache. I head to the cupboard and crouch down, half-crawling into the bottom compartment where the banner has been hiding. It is still there, safely tucked away. I pull it out with a triumphant flourish, the bright, hand-painted letters a testament to the kids' hard work.

I look up at the ceiling. It should fit nicely, strung across from wall to wall, and there are cabinets it could be attached to. Though I'm not tall enough. Maybe Monty could reach?

I whirl at a tap on my shoulder. Gray holds out his hands. Wordlessly, I pass him the banner. What the...? He is even shorter than me.

I blink as the little demon scuttles effortlessly up the wall like a spider.

Oh. Well, that's one way of doing it.

Mal walks over and stands beneath him, holding up tape like he has done this thousands of times before. As if your boyfriend crawling up walls is a normal, everyday occurrence.

My gaze shifts briefly to the kids, who are still busy arranging sandwiches into neat little patterns. They've clearly noticed Gray's acrobatics, but they don't seem the least bit surprised, let alone scared.

It makes me smile. It's a good thing Morgan and Ned gave up on trying to hide the paranormal from the kids. It was always a lost cause, and the children have taken it in their stride. Which is not surprising. I'm human, and I was raised with full knowledge of the supernatural. It certainly didn't do me any harm.

I think it is only when humans reach adulthood believing the world to be mundane, that they then freak out when they discover the truth. Even then, it doesn't seem to be too awful. Sammy adjusted quickly enough.

"They're coming down the stairs," Mal announces, his voice calm but urgent.

"Quickly! Everyone in position!" I say, clapping my hands lightly.

Gray finishes securing the banner just in time, dropping down with a nimble grace that is a little unsettling to witness.

I take a step back, surveying the room. The balloons are tied, the bunting is strung, and the food is laid out in colorful perfection. The kids' banner hangs proudly across the room, its bright letters spelling out a heartfelt message.

Everything's ready. Balloons and streamers? Check. Enough confetti to drive Ned insane for weeks? Definitely. The cake, chocolate, because that's Ned's favorite, sits center stage on the table, surrounded by the almost obscene amount of party food. The kids' painted handprints on the banner add the final touch, bright and messy, just like children should be.

Grinning, I turn to face the door and wait for Ned's arrival.

The knob turns, and Ned steps in. For a split second, he looks calm, maybe even a little curious. Then we all shout, "Surprise!" as we pull our party-poppers.

His reaction is everything I hoped for. Ned jumps so hard he clutches at the doorframe, his wide-eyed expression is something to behold. I can't help but grin as the kids erupt into cheers, and Gray flicks his fingers, sending a few extra bursts of confetti into the air for good measure.

Ned's gaze sweeps over the room, taking in the chaos. The balloons, the streamers, the food. I watch his face soften when he spots the cake, his eyes lighting up like a kid's. Then his attention shifts to the banner. I bite back a laugh as he stares at it, his expression a mix of amusement and pride at the kids' paint job.

Morgan steps in behind him, his presence seeming to soften Ned as always. I catch Morgan's little smirk, he's been in on this from the start, of course. He murmurs something into Ned's ear, low enough that only Ned can hear. Whatever he says, it makes Ned beam.

Ned's eyes shine, and my chest tightens. He deserves this. A room full of people who love him, who would go to the ends of the earth to make sure he knows it. And as he finally starts to laugh, wiping at his eyes, I know we pulled it off. It really couldn't get better than this.

Lello starts cutting up the cake. Oops, we forgot to tell him about singing happy birthday, and candles and how the birthday person cuts the cake. But Ned doesn't seem to mind. And the kids are so thrilled with having chocolate cake for breakfast, they don't care either.

I smile as Lello hands me a huge slice of cake on a rainbow colored paper plate. Monty accepts his offering graciously and then flashes me an ecstatic smile. I know just what he is thinking. This, all of this. The noisy bright chaos and cheap paper plates, is infinitely better than the stuffy formal events we were raised in.

"Now Ned's birthday is done, we need to start organizing the most perfect Christmas ever!" exclaims Lello with frightening enthusiasm.

The room fills with good natured groans and I laugh. Lello doing Christmas? Now that we have children in the house? That really is going to be something.

I watch as Morgan pulls Ned close and the two of them share a long, loving look. It's making me grin so broadly that my cheeks really are starting to hurt.

Sammy puts some cheerful music on, and the atmosphere is complete. I chuckle and take a bite of cake. Delicious.

If only Jade, Red and Brodie were here, then everything would be perfect.

Monty gives my shoulder a discreet nudge. I look up into his blue eyes and we share a smile. Things might not be utterly perfect, but you know what? This is damn well close enough.

Chapter twenty-four

Monty

I can't stop staring at my phone. It is as if some part of me believes that if I stare at the email long enough, the words will rearrange. The message retract.

Dimly, I am aware of the beaker bubbling over on the worktable beside me. It's nothing caustic, so I can't muster the motivation to shake myself out of this stupor and take it off the heat.

The door to the campervan opens. I hear Pink step inside. He hurries over to the worktable and turns the burner off. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him throw a rag onto the spillage that has pooled on the wooden surface of the table.

"Monty?" he asks, his voice full of concern.

My tongue appears to be stuck to the roof of my mouth, and all my muscles are frozen. I can't reply.

He gently takes my phone from my lax fingers and places it on the side, without looking at what is on the screen.

His warm hand slips into mine and his other hand runs softly through my hair, temporarily smoothing it down.

"Monty, sweetheart, what's happened?"

My lungs restrict painfully. “My father has died.”

Pink gasps. A short, sharp sound of pain. His hands move and he pulls me close. Cradling my face against his stomach and holding me here. He strokes my hair softly. My hands rise up and wrap around his waist.

Tears are gathering in my eyes, and a sob is catching in my throat. Why am I feeling this way? My father has been dying for years. I thought I had made my peace with it. I was looking forward to it, not out of malice, but for his sake. And Laurie’s.

Falling apart like this makes no sense at all. But then again, emotions are rarely logical.

“I need to leave for a few days,” I croak. “To sort everything out.”

Pink makes a soft noise of surprise.

Oh, damn. I blurted that out without thinking. Clearly, I’m too befuddled to think straight because now I have gone and put my foot in it.

An exile, one who was disowned, would have no duties upon their father’s death. The only thing to do would be to mourn. Both the loss and the could-have-beens.

“I...I’m not disowned,” I stammer weakly, as well as needlessly. I guess I am giving voice to my confession.

“It’s okay,” shushes Pink as he pulls me even closer. Two simple words, one gesture. Benediction for all my lies and deception.

His kindness, his tenderness, his forgiveness, all surround me like a hug of their own. It is far more than I deserve. My shoulders heave and my sobs break free.

Pink stands strong and holds me.

“I’m coming with you,” he says in a tone that brokers no argument.

And pathetically, I don’t even want to try to change his mind. I want Pink by my side. In all things. Always.

My knee is jiggling. In a few minutes, my ancestral home is going to come into view. James, our driver, smoothly increases the speed of the car. As if he is looking forward to reaching the journey’s end.

Beside me, in the back of the car, Pink places his hand on my knee and gives me a soft, encouraging smile. He looks dashing in his dark suit. I didn’t even know he owned any formal clothes. I didn’t ask him to put a suit on, he just did. Because he was raised in the same world that I was.

The world we are rapidly driving towards. A world of rules and obligations. Stiff formalities. Duty. Expectations. And no freedom at all.

Pink didn’t need to come back to it. But he chose to. He chose to brave it all in order to support me.

The engine purrs as we pass the last line of winter-bare trees. The house comes into view. Pink tenses, his fingers tightening around my knee in surprise.

I probably should have told him that I am the son of a duke.

Pink has figured out that I’m inheriting something, but I’ve been in such a daze that it hasn’t crossed my mind to confess everything and fill in the blanks. Pink was probably expecting me to be a lord.

But Clifford House is far grander than any lord's.

The car pulls up in front of the sweeping white stone steps that lead up to the front doors. The chance to explain has passed.

James opens the door for me and then for Pink. I am about to say something, some kind of hasty apology, when the front doors of the house open and my mother appears.

Silently, Pink and I walk side by side up the stairs to greet her.

Her green eyes are fixed on Pink. I can't read her expression at all. But she is bound to be surprised, because I didn't tell her I was bringing a guest. I was too much of a coward for that.

I swallow tightly, "Mother, this is Pink, my..."

My tongue falters to a stop. Boyfriend. The word is boyfriend. It is not hard to say. Two little syllables. A shocking and scandalous thing amongst Old Blood society. But easy enough to utter.

Mother pins me with her withering gaze,

"Vessel," I finish weakly.

Pink flinches, and I want to close my eyes against the pain.

"I know who you are," Mother says as she snaps her attention back to Pink. "Benjamin Hartley. Lord Wandsworth's youngest."

I blink in surprise. I didn't even know what Pink's birth-name was. But trust Mother

to know everything and everyone. She has a frightening ability to never forget a face. I should have foreseen this.

Pink gives her an impeccable bow. “Duchess Eastminster, I am so sorry for your loss.”

I’m not sure how they know each other, but it is not at all surprising. Old Blood society isn’t large and my Mother is quite a domineering, unforgettable figure. Pink probably crossed paths with her at one of the very many functions I avoided.

Pink’s brown eyes flick to me, to the grand entrance of the house, and then back to Mother. He pales slightly. My stomach churns. He knows exactly who I am now. There is no turning back from this. No going back to the way things were.

“Rumor was you had run away,” sniffs Mother, her cold gaze all but dissecting Pink.

Pink pales even more and I grab his hand and hold it firmly.

“Well, I found him,” I say sternly.

No way in hell is Pink going to have to share that his parents sold him as a sex slave to a perverted tech bro billionaire.

Mother raises an eyebrow. A gleam of begrudging respect glints in her cold eyes.

“Well done, Montgomery,” she says. “He is a very pretty little thing. An asset, I’m sure.”

I bite my tongue and refrain from saying a word. There is nothing to be gained from bickering with my mother. Especially when she has bestowed a rare compliment. Even if it is a dark and twisted one.

Seemingly satisfied, she turns on her heels and leads us to the drawing room. Mr. Humphries, our family lawyer, is already seated behind the desk with a mountain of paperwork. He rises and shakes my hand as I enter.

Laurie is sitting quietly in the corner. He also gets to his feet to greet me with a polite handshake. He keeps his gaze fixed on the floor like a good vessel should, but he looks well. Healthy and unharmed. It is damn good to see him.

I want to grin and pull him into a hug and tell him he is safe now. But that would be premature. I'm not officially Duke Eastminster yet. There is this paperwork to get through and then a formal investiture. But soon, soon it will all be over and Laurie will be free.

I take my seat across from Mr. Humphries and get stuck into the paperwork. Mother sits by my side and peers intently at everything I do.

After a while, I glance up and see Pink and Laurie quietly talking. Laurie's head is still down, but he looks more at ease than I have ever seen him.

My heart swells, and a smile stretches across my face.

Mother leans in close. "You do understand that you can't marry him."

Scowling, I snatch my attention away from Pink and Laurie, and get back to signing papers.

"He is only a lord's son, and a runaway," Mother adds. "Continuing to keep him discreetly on the side will be tolerable."

I bite the inside of my mouth and inhale sharply through my nose. I will not rise to her barbs. It is best to ignore them. To acknowledge them is to give them power.

An eternity later, and it is time to freshen up for dinner. Enough administrative work has been completed for one day.

A member of staff, whom I don't recognize, whisks Pink away to show him to a guest room. Wearily, I head for my bedchamber.

As soon as I open the door, I'm hit with a barrage of emotions. The room is achingly familiar, but no longer home. And it never will be, ever again. I will shortly be moving into the master chambers. This room represents my youth and everything that has passed.

A gentle tap on the door makes me flinch. I whirl around just as Pink lets himself in.

"They put me next door," he says, smirking proudly at the victory. The concession to our relationship.

Then his expression sombers. He walks right up to me, but stops when we are inches apart. The distance feels vast. The small space filled with my lies and all the heavy implications of the truth.

"Sorry," I croak hoarsely.

Sorry for not telling him who I am. Sorry for calling him my vessel. Sorry for declaring him my property and not the holder of my heart. Sorry that I am a duke and appear far above him in status. Sorry for everything.

Pink's beautiful eyes fill with emotion. I blink and then suddenly he is in my arms. I hold him tightly, so tightly he probably can't breathe. But he doesn't complain. He simply squeezes me back. We stand in the middle of my childhood home and cling on to each other, as dust motes dance in the weak winter sunbeams pouring through the window.

“Are you going to dump me when you get married?” Pink whispers.

My arms tighten around him even more, as if I am trying to push him right into my chest, next to my heart.

“No,” I say simply, but firmly.

Pink sags in relief, but says nothing further.

I’m not going to dump him when I get married. Because I am marrying him. If he will have me.

“I can’t believe you are Duke Eastminster,” Pink says.

I huff out a strange sound. “Neither can I.”

Chapter twenty-five

Pink

For one heart stopping moment, I think I'm back in the harem. My heart goes crazy and I bolt awake. I'm not in my bed at home, or in the campervan. I am somewhere different. But it is not the harem. It is Monty's bed in his enormous stately home. Because he has an enormous stately home, because he is Duke Eastminster.

I let out a shaky breath and try to calm my racing heart. My body wriggles closer to the heat of Monty's sleeping body. His proximity is reassuring, even though he is the source of my anxiety.

My new surroundings are overwhelming. The gorgeous bedroom is lit mutely by the early morning sun. Pale winter hues that make everything look faded. It is a very nice room. Not at all ostentatious, but definitely the chamber of a very wealthy person.

My mind continues to whirl. My boyfriend is a duke. A frigging duke. My parents would be so very pleased. It is what they always dreamed of, before they decided that Ritchie's money was a better option.

I wince at that thought, and it leaves a sour taste in my mouth. It almost feels as if fate has a dark sense of humor and is mocking me with it. With a grimace, I push the unpleasant thought aside. My parents are dead to me and I refuse to give them any more room in my thoughts, emotions, or life. As for the harem, that is something I am slowly untangling myself from.

Neither it, nor my parents, are going to influence my life. I won't let them. They took enough from me. They are not having my future as well.

I take a deep breath and let the long shadows of the harem and my parents go. Now I need to focus. What are the facts that I need to concentrate on?

Monty is a duke. Can I really forgive him for keeping that truth from me?

Carefully, I roll over to face him. The sight of his handsome face quickens my pulse, as it always does. But now, even in sleep he looks stressed. There is a furrowed line in his brow that I ache to smooth away.

Monty. My Monty. My lover. My boyfriend.

I know his kindness, intelligence and personality are not lies. I can feel the truth of that in my very bones. The only thing he hid from me was his title. Nothing else has changed. I know him. I see him. I understand him. If he had his way, he'd live in his campervan and study alchemy forever.

That's the true Monty. Not the duke version.

My boyfriend simply wanted some freedom before taking up his duties. A gap year, of sorts.

I can understand the desire for that. Especially after meeting his mother. And his brother.

I've only known them for a day, but the dynamic is clear to see. I sigh as I ponder that mess. Monty is going to have a hell of a fight on his hands when he arranges a kind and decent husband for Laurie. His mother is going to try to demand status above all else.

My thoughts fall quiet as Monty stirs and opens his eyes. A sleepy warm smile spreads across his face as soon as he sees me, and my heart skips several beats in response. He leans forward and gives me a soft, lazy and tender kiss.

“Let’s go down to breakfast. Annie makes the most wonderful pancakes. I’ve never figured out how she does it,” Monty says in a tone of genuine awe and respect.

But I can’t think about pancakes. Far more pressing thoughts are consuming me.

Monty is talking about breakfast, in a breakfast room, with his family, and servants. I bite my bottom lip as uncertainty washes over me.

“Do you want us to go down separately?” I whisper hoarsely.

Monty’s blue eyes flash with a multitude of emotions. All passing far too quickly for me to name. Then he finds my hand and brings it to his lips for a quick kiss.

“No,” he says firmly.

I stare at him helplessly. “Are you sure? Because blatantly carrying on with an unwed vessel...”

“Pink,” he interrupts. “You are my greatest pride.”

It’s a damn good thing I’m lying down because I am pretty sure I would be collapsing in a swoon otherwise. As it is, my head is spinning and I’m all shaky and weak.

“In that case, let’s go get those pancakes!” I somehow manage to say.

Monty grins in delight, and it doesn’t help my dizziness at all.

We get out of bed and share a quick shower. One that feels far more companionable and comfortable than sexy, and I love it all the more for that.

I put on a pair of light brown corduroys and a white polo shirt. Monty dresses in cream chinos and a navy blue linen shirt.

He smiles at me and takes my hand. And he keeps a hold of it all the way down the stairs. He only lets go of it when we reach the door of the breakfast room, and I don't blame him at all. His mother is scary.

She is sitting at the table when we enter. Dressed all in black. The sight makes me wince. I should have thought of that, but I don't have any black, smart casual clothes.

Monty guides me to the serving table and points out the pancakes. I take an empty plate and slide a pancake on it. They do look amazing, but I think I'm going to be far too nervous to eat more than one.

We join his mother at the breakfast table. She sips her coffee and gives us a vaguely disapproving look, but says nothing.

I drop my gaze and focus on eating my pancake as unobtrusively as possible. The room falls silent, apart from the gentle clink of cutlery against crockery.

After a while, Monty asks. "Where is Laurie? Is he not joining us?"

"Lawrence," replies his mother sternly. "Is not home."

Monty carefully puts down his knife and fork. "What do you mean?"

His mother picks up her glass of orange juice and takes a dainty sip. "I have sent him to a prestigious finishing school."

Monty jerks in his chair as if he has been slapped.

“First thing in the morning? Without telling me? Without letting him say goodbye?”
He bites out sharply.

The duchess dabs her mouth with a perfectly white napkin. “Yes.”

Monty inhales sharply. He grabs the edge of the table and his knuckles turn white.

His mother’s green eyes flick to me briefly, and they glimmer. “You left me no choice, Montgomery. You are entirely too soft on vessels. You need to understand that they are merely tools.”

My guts twist painfully. My lungs feel heavy and my throat is too tight. Monty’s magic coils in the air, hissing like an angry snake.

“You think of Laurie, your own son, as merely a tool?” His voice is soft, the tone measured, but the threat in it is unmistakable.

Across the table, his mother straightens. Her magic lashes in the air, like a cat preparing to pounce. She says nothing, but she doesn’t need to. Her stance is clear enough.

“Laurie is coming home,” growls Monty.

Green eyes narrow. “You’ll never find him.”

Monty sucks in another sharp breath. “Mother, what have you done?”

I try to swallow, but I can’t. What should I do? How can I help? Monty needs me, but right now it just feels like I’m trapped with two angry mages and I hate how small

and powerless it is making me feel.

“Don’t be so dramatic!” snaps the duchess. Her gaze flicks to me and the calculating look she gives me freezes the blood in my veins. “I’m simply keeping him away from you,” she continues. Then a tiny malevolent smirk curls her lips. “The fey are going to return and Lawrence will be given to a fey prince.”

Her words swirl around my mind. At first, they don’t make sense. They are just sounds with no meaning. Then Monty gasps in horror and turns to look at me with an expression of utterly broken dismay.

Then it clicks.

Fey. She said the fey are going to return. Like it would be a good thing.

Oh my god. They are Revivalists. Monty is a Revivalist. He is part of a cult that is working to bring the fey back to our world. He wanted Jade to succeed. He probably had something to do with it. It is quite possible that his whole relationship with me has been nothing more than a ploy to try to get closer to Jade. And to use my magic for their cause in the meantime.

With a sob, I jump to my feet. Blindly, I turn and run. I run as fast as I can. Where I am going, I have no idea. I’m in the house of Revivalists. They told me their secrets. They are not going to let me go.

But I have to try.

Behind me, I hear Monty calling my name.

It only makes me run faster.

Chapter twenty-six

Monty

How did I lose sight of Pink? How is he so darn quick? I skid into the ballroom. My feet sliding on the polished wooden floorboards.

“Pink?” I call desperately.

Nothing but silence answers me. Where is he? I swear he went this way. Where did he go? Curse the damn irony of vessels being impossible to track with magic.

I draw in a shuddering breath. I need to think, there is no point in tearing blindly around the house. I will never find him that way.

Thinking things through is always the better course. Brains not brawn. Planning before leaping. So, think, Monty, think.

If you were terrified and thought your boyfriend belonged to a dangerous cult, where would you go?

A cold shiver runs down my spine. You’d try to get as far away as possible. You’d try to get off the grounds.

Swearing profusely, I whip around and sprint out of the ballroom, down the Long Gallery, and burst out of the South Door and into the gardens. There, across the lawn, I see Pink, running as if his life depends on it.

I suck in a deep breath and give chase. I can't let him reach the road while all frantic, flustered and vulnerable. It wouldn't be safe. He doesn't even have a coat, let alone his wallet or phone. He'd be alone in the world with nothing and no one. A very pretty young man with no defences.

As I dash across the sodden grass, a pulsing wave of magic overtakes me. It reaches the boundary wards and they thrum in answer. Oh by the dark goddess! My mother has inverted the wards!

Sheer and utter terror floods my veins and gives my legs a new lease of life. I'm so glad I run every day. My muscles pump, my lungs heave, and miraculously I catch up to Pink, mere yards from the perimeter. With no time to lose, I rugby tackle him to the ground.

He cries out, and fights me ferociously. Wriggling, squirming, kicking and punching. Desperately trying to get away. I flip him over, sit on him, and pin his arms above his head.

"Mother has inverted the wards, they will kill you if you cross them!" I yell.

Pink stops his fight. His lungs are heaving. His hair is tousled. His face is deathly pale, despite his exertion. And his eyes, oh goddess, his eyes. Wide and terrified. Glassy. Fixed on somewhere that is not the here and now.

My stomach heaves. I'm holding him down. Pinning him to the ground. Looming over him. My groin pressed against his.

I've thrown him not only to the floor, but right back to the harem. He is reliving it right now. Experiencing hell as he lies beneath me. But I cannot let him go. He is still panicking, he could very well fling himself at the deadly wards.

“Pink!” I call out desperately. “Pink! Darling, it’s me! It’s me! It’s Monty.”

He blinks and starts to hyperventilate.

“It’s me,” I plead. “Pink, please look at me. Please see me.”

He blinks again and his eyes slowly clear. He seems to focus on me. And he still looks scared. Pink is scared of me.

My heart is breaking. Shattering. Splintering into a thousand shards. “I’m so sorry. I had to stop you. The wards would have killed you.”

I see the comprehension in his beautiful brown eyes. My clever boy. Even in the throes of a deep panic, he can quickly grasp the situation.

“I would never hurt you,” I say, but it comes out as a hoarse croak.

Pink is staring at me, calmer now, but still full of fear, doubt, and mistrust.

I swallow dryly. “My parents are Revivalists, but I never have been. It’s not a cult you can walk away from. They don’t let you go. Mother...was being Mother by telling you.”

I don’t even know if I am making any sense. Words are just pouring out of me. I can only hope that some of them achieve what I am desperate for them to do.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again, as if meaningless apologies are worth uttering. I suck in a shuddering breath and try again. “I never wanted to put you in any danger. That is why I never told you.”

Pink stares up at me. Silently. I can’t tell what he is thinking. His face is a mask of

fear and uncertainty.

“I wanted to keep you safe,” I beg. “I wanted to keep Laurie safe.”

But I’ve failed at that too. I couldn’t outwit my mother and now she has hidden him away and I probably won’t find him in time. And she has tangled Pink up into our world to spite me and he hates me now and I’ve failed at everything.

A broken, pained sob fills the air. It takes me a moment to realize it is mine. Tears are falling from my eyes. I hang my head so they don’t fall on Pink.

“Please Pink,” I try one last time. “I’m not a Revivalist. You know me. You know my heart. You are my heart.”

Pink sniffs. A soft noise of pain, angst and conflicted confusion. I lift my head up to meet his eyes. His expression is infinitely softer now.

A tiny flicker of hope ignites within me. My desperate dread recedes enough for me to notice our surroundings. It’s cold and raining and Pink is covered in mud. I need to get him inside before he catches a cold.

“Swear to me Monty,” he says. “Swear to me on everything you hold dear.”

My lungs stutter and my tears continue to fall. “You are the only thing I hold dear.”

Pink closes his eyes, and he starts to cry too, but he gives me a nod. A nod that means everything. It means absolution. It means forgiveness. It means Pink still wants me and therefore my life is still worth living.

I pull us up into a sitting position and he falls into my arms. I hold on to him tighter than I’ve ever held onto anything in my life. The warm weight of him is everything,

and it is terrifying how close I came to losing him.

“I swear on Laurie’s life I’m not a Revivalist,” I affirm, to make it absolutely crystal clear. I don’t want there to be any doubt in Pink’s mind, not even the tiniest of slivers. “I’m not a Revivalist. I will never hurt you. And I will find my brother.”

Pink tightens his grip on me and his sobs grow louder, just as the heavens open even more and pour a deluge of cold rain onto us. It is coming down so thick and heavy, I can barely see.

If it was just me, I wouldn’t care. But Pink needs to be warm and dry. I lunge to my feet, carrying Pink with me. Then I shift him into a bridal carry and stride towards the house.

Pink is mine. Mine to cherish. Mine to take care of.

And that’s exactly what I am going to do.

Chapter twenty-seven

Pink

I t's been a week and I still dart down the halls like a nervous rabbit, hoping not to run into Monty's mother. Even though I know damn well that she has taken to her rooms and is not deigning to come out.

I saw her at the funeral. A small, private, no-fuss event, held to the traditions of the Old Blood. But that was the one and only time since that awful breakfast. I should be walking around Monty's home with confidence. But sadly, I cannot muster any.

I scurry into Monty's study and breathe a silent sigh of relief. I made it. Safe and sound.

Monty looks up from his computer screen. The dark circles under his eyes make me wince. He is going through hell and he doesn't at all deserve to.

"Sandwich!" I say brightly as I hold my offering aloft.

A tray of cheese sandwiches and a glass of orange juice. He has not eaten since breakfast and it's past lunchtime, but a fair few hours until dinner.

Monty smiles at me, and I place the tray on his desk. There is no need to ask if there has been any news, because it is clear from his expression that there has not been any new leads. He has phoned and emailed everyone he knows, called in every favor, but nothing. Laurie has vanished.

Monty drinks the orange juice and takes a bite out of one of the sandwiches. “Thank you,” he says with a warm smile.

My heart gives a little flutter and I smile back at him. How could I have ever doubted this man? I’m ashamed that I panicked. But Monty is adamant that my reaction was entirely reasonable.

“It is Christmas Eve tomorrow,” he says.

And I blink as my thoughts are derailed.

“Lello must be nearly bursting with excitement,” Monty adds.

A dry chuckle bubbles out of me. Poor Carter. He must have moments of deeply regretting that the excitable kelpie ever learned about Christmas. I had been looking forward to it, but now, with everything going on, it might not be the best idea.

“We don’t have to go,” I say, biting my bottom lip.

Heavens know, it is understandable if Monty is not in the mood for a celebration. Or as Lello has been calling it, ‘The Most Perfect Christmas Ever’.

Monty shakes his head. “I want to go. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

I stare at him dubiously until he sighs and puts his sandwich down.

“A distraction, and a break, would both be very welcome,” he says with great feeling.

Oh I am so glad, because that is exactly how I have been feeling. Christmas with my found family will be a bright light amongst all that is dark.

I grin at him. “If you are sure.”

“Very,” he says with a smile that warms my heart.

Despite everything, spending Christmas with Monty is going to be wonderful.

Christmas has always felt like a storybook holiday to me, something I’ve read about or seen but never truly experienced. Amongst the Old Blood, it is not considered acceptable to celebrate it. And Ritchie never bothered to make anything nice for us in the harem.

Sure, there were fleeting moments in my life when I caught glimpses of the lights, the trees, the cheer. Now, though, standing in this bustling house filled with my friends and their chosen partners, I can feel it. The warmth, the magic, the wonder. And it is only Christmas Eve.

I’m in the kitchen with Ned, juggling oven racks and trying not to lose my mind over the logistics of cooking for this many people. It turns out, roasting enough turkey for a small army might take more than one oven. I’m so glad we decided to work out the practicalities now rather than leaving it until the big day itself.

“How long is it going to take?” I ask, holding the rack and squinting at the enormous uncooked turkey on the counter. “And will it fit?”

“At least five hours,” Ned replies, his tone clipped but not unkind. He’s focused, as always. “And it will fit, but there’ll be no room for anything else. We are going to have to use my oven in the annex as well.”

The oven rack slips from my hands and clatters to the floor with a loud bang. Hastily, I bend down and snatch it back up.

“Everything okay in there?” comes Lello’s voice from the doorway. He’s practically bouncing on his toes, radiating excitement.

“It’s fine,” Monty answers from where he’s seated at the kitchen table, sipping mulled wine and watching us with quiet amusement. “Pink just dropped the rack.”

Lello takes that explanation at face value, because of course he does, and skips back out of the room, humming a Christmas tune.

I glance at Monty, and he’s looking at me in that way he sometimes does. Soft, unguarded, like he’s seeing all of me and doesn’t mind the messy parts. It makes me want to say something clever or profound, but instead, I just clear my throat and turn back to the oven. Only to find Ned staring at me with an amused gleam in his eyes.

“What?” I mutter, trying to sound casual.

“Nothing,” Ned replies, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Just... happy to see you like this.”

“Like what?”

He doesn’t answer, but I know what he means. I’m happy. I’m in love. And Ned can tell.

“Stop staring and get back to work,” I tease, and his chuckle warms the room.

Then Ned swiftly moves on to the next problem, muttering about the timing for the side dishes. I let his words wash over me and I use them to drive all thoughts of my problems away. I’m going to focus on what I can control. Being here, in this moment, with these people.

Savoring every single second of it all. Because every moment is precious.

The next day, when Lello bursts into my bedroom at five a.m, shouting, “It’s Christmas!” I can’t help but laugh. His energy is infectious, and even though I’m groggy and would love a few more hours of sleep, I’m grateful for his enthusiasm.

Monty and I share a smile and a quick kiss and then hurry downstairs before Lello decides to come back and drag us out of bed by our ankles.

I sit cross-legged on the floor near the tree just as the kids begin diving into their presents. The room is a chaotic blur of wrapping paper and squeals of delight. Lello is glowing with joy, and even Gray, who’s been quieter than usual lately, seems to soften under the warmth of the moment.

Monty shifts beside me, clearing his throat. The adults turn to him as he speaks.

“I can only hide their presence for one day. The wards to conceal them take a lot of power,” he says.

I feel my face heat up. He doesn’t say it directly, but we all know why his magic is so strong right now. I’m the reason he has a lot of power, and I can’t decide if I should be embarrassed or proud.

And I have no idea what he is up to? What is he pulling off for one day only? What on Earth is he up to?

Before I can dwell on it, Monty lifts his hands, and a portal swirls into existence. Yellow and black energy crackles in the air, and I’m struck, as always, by how effortless he makes it look.

Three figures step through, and my breath catches. Jade, Red and Brodie. They’re

here.

Monty has planned this wonderful, amazing thing, and I'm so overwhelmed.

The room freezes, the noise of Christmas morning swallowed up by the sheer weight of the moment. I glance at Ned, who's staring at Jade like he doesn't know whether to hug him or walk away. Morgan wraps an arm around his shoulders, grounding him, and I watch as Ned takes a deep breath, nods sharply, and turns back to the children.

Relief floods me, and I feel a smile spread across my face. This is what I wanted. Everyone together, even if just for a day.

Before I know it, Lello is shrieking with joy and throwing himself at Red and Jade. The tension in the room dissolves as laughter and chatter fill the space again.

I look over at Monty, who's watching the scene unfold with a satisfied expression. He catches my eye and gives me a small nod, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

This is Christmas, I realize. Messy, chaotic, imperfect, and absolutely perfect.

That night, as I tiptoe into my bedroom at silly o'clock. I find Monty waiting for me. Sitting in bed, reading a book in the soft glow of the lamp.

He looks up at me and smiles. "Good catch up with Jade?"

"The best!" I beam. I've made the most of every minute because they need to go back into hiding at dawn.

Monty holds the covers open for me and I slide in with a happy sigh and snuggle up to him.

“Thank you so much for today. It was so very thoughtful of you to arrange it.”

“My pleasure,” Monty rumbles as he kisses the top of my head.

Warmth tingles through me. “You’ve had so much on your mind lately, what with becoming a duke, and Laurie...” I trail off. I really don’t have the vocabulary to explain how amazing Monty is. It is probably useless to try.

“About that,” he says.

I lift my head up to look at him and give him my full attention.

“I have a plan I want to run by you.”

I nod.

Monty takes a breath. “It involves threatening my mother that I will go to the Paranormal Council with everything I know about her cult, if she doesn’t hand Laurie back. And if she doesn’t bite, actually going to the Council and offering my intel in exchange for their help in finding Laurie.”

I let out a low whistle. It is a risky move. A very risky one. But definitely powerful. It might just work.

“For the second part,” I say as my mind mulls it over. “You’ll need some assurance that the Council won’t just arrest you, and that they can keep you safe from the Revivalists.”

Monty nods in thoughtful agreement.

Suddenly, I’m scrambling up to a more upright position as an idea takes hold of me.

“Ask them to pardon Jade as a goodwill gesture!” I blurt out in excitement.

It is not a wild request. The Council seem on the verge of it anyway. I know that Carter has been negotiating with Council members about it. And Gray is working on creating amulets that will stop the fey from being able to talk to Jade, or any of their descendents. The groundwork has definitely been laid.

Monty’s blue eyes sparkle. “Two birds, one stone. What a marvelous idea!”

My heart skips and my stomach flutters. “You’d really do that?”

“Of course!” says Monty, with pure guilelessness in his eyes.

Oh my poor heart. It is going to give out in a minute. Monty truly is so utterly wonderful, I could burst. He makes me so happy. I need to give him something in return.

With that thought in mind, I start to burrow under the covers and crawl down the bed.

“Where are you going?” Monty asks in confusion.

“To give you a thank you blow job,” I say happily.

Monty inhales sharply. “Oh gosh. Is that a thing?”

“It is now,” I smirk.

And then I get to work.

Chapter twenty-eight

Monty

A nxiety and anticipation are conspiring to make me sick. I feel weak and my stomach is churning. But I can't let any of that show. I must put on a brave face.

I'm about to meet with members of the Paranormal Council and it feels like my last hope. Mother literally laughed in my face at my threat. She doesn't think I will do it. She believes me to be too much her son, too much under her heel. She thinks I'm eccentric, but she admires the strength of my magic. She is proud to have a strong mage as her legacy. She assumes it means that I am like her, twisted with dark ambition.

She has no idea how far the apple has fallen from the tree. But that is fine. Going to the Council is probably the better course of action anyway. It is probably the more moral. And something many would say I should have done a long time ago.

My knee starts to jiggle, and I have to concentrate on keeping it still. My thoughts start to drift to the other daunting event I have planned for later. But one thing at a time.

"They are ready for you now, Your Grace," says the smartly dressed usher with a bow.

I take a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

I step into the Council chamber, a space that manages to look both ancient and ostentatiously modern, like someone dropped a medieval banquet hall into the middle of a luxury skyscraper. The long table of dark mahogany gleams under the light of a crystal chandelier, and the windows behind it offer a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Three figures are seated at the table, their gazes sharp as knives as they take me in.

“Your Grace,” says Master Aubery, a vampire with the bearing of a CEO and the teeth to match. Her suit is razor-sharp, black as midnight, and her platinum-blond hair is tied into a severe bun. Her voice is smooth but tinged with caution, as if she’s wondering what sort of chaos I’ve dragged into her day. Beside her, Gideon, a wolf shifter in a tweed jacket, drums his fingers against the arm of his chair. He looks like he’d rather be anywhere else, which, frankly, makes two of us. Completing the trio is Eliza, a human mage who radiates an ethereal calm that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. She’s the quiet one, the one I know to watch the closest.

I’m damn glad that the Grandmaster himself hasn’t deigned to see me. That man scares the crap out of me.

I bow just enough to acknowledge their positions, but not enough to make myself small. “Masters, thank you for seeing me on short notice.”

“Let’s skip the pleasantries, Duke Eastminster,” Aubery says, folding her hands. “Your message claimed you have information about a Revivalist cult. That got our attention. Elaborate.”

I take a quick, fortifying breath. Technically, I’m not a duke yet. I’ve not had my investiture. But being pedantic isn’t going to win me any favors.

I take the seat they’ve left for me, directly across from the three of them. The leather creaks under me, and for a moment, I feel the weight of their stares pressing down

like an interrogation lamp. Fine. Let them look.

“The faction I have intel on is mostly led by my mother,” I begin, my voice steady despite the twisting knot in my chest. “Duchess Dowager Eastminster.” If we are acting like I am already the duke, then we might as well give her the title she is also going to bear in the near future.

I clear my throat and continue. “She’s been recruiting heavily over the last two years, gathering mages, shifters, and anyone else desperate enough to buy into her vision. Her goal is simple. Reopen the old portals, bring the fey back en masse, and then exalt in the power, wealth, and status she hopes to gain as reward.”

Eliza’s calm facade cracks, her eyebrows lifting slightly. Even Gideon stops drumming his fingers. Aubery, of course, doesn’t so much as blink. But I think I have proven that I know what I am talking about.

“And you’re only bringing this to us now?” she asks, her tone sharp enough to draw blood. “Why not sooner?”

“Because up until now, I’ve been trying to handle it myself,” I say evenly. “Family matters are... complicated. But this has escalated beyond what I can manage alone.”

Lies, all lies. The truth is I didn’t care, I still don’t. I don’t think Revivalists are capable of achieving their crazy ambition. But the Council doesn’t need to know that. And, understandably, even if they feel the same way that I do, they have a responsibility to take action, just in case.

Aubery leans back in her chair, studying me like I’m a particularly tricky chess piece. “Vague information about a Revivalist group, is hardly exciting news.”

I reach into my satchel and feel around for the manilla folder I have carefully

prepared. While my hand is in the bag, I can't help checking that the small, precious box is also still inside. My fingers brush over it and the feel of it fills me with relief.

I pull the folder from my satchel and hold it up teasingly. "Names of members. Details of their current schemes. And how they finance their endeavors."

Three pairs of eyes fix on me.

I swallow dryly, "As a goodwill gesture, I will tell you that their current work is targeting ley lines, disrupting their natural flow to strengthen old portals. Especially one portal in particular. One that is on a member of the Old Blood's property."

Eliza stares at the folder, her eyes flicking over the manilla cover as if she is trying to read the contents. Gideon glances at it, and then returns the force of his stare to me, his lips pressing into a thin line.

"Assuming we believe you," Aubery says, her tone still ice-cold, "what is it you want from us?"

I meet her gaze, unflinching. "Two things. First, I need your help to find my brother, Laurie. He is an untapped vessel of great potential. My mother has hidden him somewhere. She believes she can give him to a fey prince. He's only seventeen, and he has no part in this madness."

"And second?"

"A pardon for Jade."

That gets a reaction. Gideon straightens, and Eliza's calm shatters entirely. Even Aubery's mask slips, her crimson lips curling into a faint scowl.

“Jade?” Aubery asks, her voice laced with disbelief. “The part fey who very nearly opened a portal, and who killed Baltazar?”

“The same,” I say, keeping my tone firm. “He was being influenced by the fey. He wants no part of them returning. His loyalties are to his human side and to this world.”

“And,” I add with a confidence I am not quite feeling. “The incubus, Gray, is close to perfecting amulets that will prevent the fey from talking to any of their descendents. I know the Council has been keen on that development.”

“Even if that’s true, and the amulets will work,” Gideon interjects, his voice a low growl, “Jade is a loose cannon. Why stick your neck out for him?”

“Because he’s the best friend of one of the few people I trust,” I reply. “And if Pink says Jade is innocent, then he is.”

The room falls silent, tension coiling in the air like a snake ready to strike.

My voice breaks the silence. “Pardoning Jade, is a goodwill gesture. A token of trust. It will enable me to know I am safe to divulge all that I know.”

I stop and tap on my head. “There is far more in here than I have written in this.” I shake the folder in my hand for emphasis.

Aubery exchanges a glance with her fellow masters, a silent conversation passing between them. Finally, she turns back to me.

“Your Grace, you’re asking for a great deal. A pardon for a known criminal, and resources to track your brother, all on the basis of your word.”

“Not just my word,” I say, leaning forward. “The evidence in this folder and the knowledge in my mind. Consider this. If my mother succeeds, the fey won’t discriminate. Vampires, shifters, humans, we’ll all suffer the consequences. Stopping all Revivalist factions benefits everyone.”

Aubery’s gaze pierces into mine, and for a moment, I think she’s about to reject me outright. But then she nods, a slow and deliberate motion.

“We’ll consider your request,” she says.

It’s not a promise, but it’s not a refusal either. I imagine they need to run such an important decision by the Grandmaster. I’m pretty sure I won’t be kept waiting for long.

I carefully return the folder to my satchel, then I stand, smoothing down my jacket. “Thank you for your time.”

As I leave the chamber, I can feel their eyes on my back. The Council’s help is far from guaranteed, but I’ve planted the seed. Now, all I can do is wait and hope it grows.

Chapter twenty-nine

Pink

I don't know why I keep looking at the clock on the car radio. It's not going to make the time go any faster. And I don't even know how long Monty is likely to be. How long do meetings with the Council take? I have no idea. Most people try very hard not to have to have any dealings with the Council at all. So, I'm not sure if anyone knows.

I stare up at the nondescript glass skyscraper as if it has any answers. But it doesn't tell me a thing. It looks identical to the dozens of other tall office buildings in this area. It's all very discreet.

I know the Council's true headquarters is a huge underground castle somewhere. All granite and medieval grandeur. I guess the Council only uses it for very special occasions.

Hopefully, Monty isn't about to be arrested and dragged off there to never be seen again. Charged with the crime of being a Revivalist.

I squirm in my seat and chew on my bottom lip. Surely it is going to be fine? The Council are going to want the information Monty can offer them? They are going to understand he can't help what family he was born into and that he never wanted any part of it?

Suddenly, the revolving doors at the entrance spin, and Monty strides out. Heading

straight for me. Relief surges through me. He is free at least. No dank dungeon for him.

I can't read his expression or his body language. He just looks like an incredibly handsome, smartly dressed man hurrying to get out of the gloom and the cold.

He opens the driver side door and slides into the seat. He pulls his satchel off, pats it as if checking for something, and then twists to place it almost reverently on the backseat.

"I think it went well," he says. "I think they are going to bite."

A small squeal of delight escapes me. "Oh! How fantastic!"

Excitement thrums through me. We are going to get Laurie back before he is given to anyone, and Jade is going to be able to come home. Which means Red and Brodie will be able to as well. It is all perfect.

"We should celebrate," says Monty with a mischievous sparkle in his sapphire eyes.

I grin in return. "What did you have in mind?"

He chuckles warmly. "I know a lovely restaurant just around the corner."

That does sound nice, and even if it didn't, I'm more than happy to play along. "Just you and me?"

"Yes!" Monty exclaims exuberantly

"Like a date?" I tease.

“Exactly like a date,” he beams.

We laugh in unison, and he starts the engine. My heart is racing. I hope we are still doing our daft little script when we are seventy. It means the world to me. A silly little thing that no one else would understand, because it is just for us. Monty and I. A secret love language.

We drive for a few minutes, and then Monty spots a parking space on the road. He reverses into it with a skill that is strangely hot.

We get out of the car and Monty takes my hand. As soon as I see the fancy restaurant, I freeze in my tracks.

“I’m not dressed up,” I whisper.

“You always look beautiful,” says Monty. “The first time I saw you, you were wearing Crocs and I was still utterly smitten.”

The snort laugh that escapes me is not at all alluring, but Monty smiles as if it is.

We walk into the restaurant and the maitre greets us as if expecting us and immediately whisks us to a lovely table, set alone in the curve of a gorgeous bay window. The restaurant is on the top of a hill, so the view is dazzling. All the sparkling lights of a city at night.

The lighting inside the establishment is dim. It’s mostly from collections of candles flickering softly in the center of the tables.

In the corner, a pianist is playing on a very well polished grand piano. The gentle sound glides through the air, soothing and calming.

The other patrons are seated far enough away that it feels private and intimate.

All in all, it is a lovely restaurant. Special, without being intimidating or stuffy. Monty really does know all the best places.

I sigh happily and settle in for a delightful evening. I ask Monty to order for me and he is very happy to oblige.

The food, when it arrives, is sublime. The courses are served swiftly and unobtrusively. Allowing Monty and I to bask in each other's company seamlessly. The only interruption is when Monty pops to the loo. But he isn't gone for long and our evening resumes. Our conversation flows and my soul swells with joy. This evening is turning out to be magical.

After dessert, two waiters approach our table. Champagne for Monty, and a very fancy, lemonade-inspired soft drink for me. The thoughtfulness swells my soul even more.

Our drinks are poured with a flourish into beautiful flute glasses, and then we are left alone again once more.

"Cheers!" says Monty as he holds his glass aloft.

Grinning, I clink my glass against his. "Cheers!"

As I take a sip, something metal touches my lips. I put my drink down and stare at it in confusion. There is a ring in my glass.

I fish it out and look at it. It's beautiful. Silver and set with a multitude of very dark amber gemstones.

“It’s Baltic amber,” says Monty. “The color reminds me of your eyes.”

I’m still bewildered. I look up at Monty and startle at the sight of him. Why is he so nervous? He is practically sweating.

As I watch, he slides from his chair and lands on one knee on the floor. Goodness! Is he ill? My heart starts to thud against my ribs in alarm.

“Pink, will you marry me?”

My hands fly up to my mouth, and a breathless gasp escapes me. Everyone in the restaurant is staring at us. The piano has fallen silent. What is happening? This can’t be happening. Is Monty really proposing to me? It doesn’t make any sense. Old Blood don’t do proposals. They do negotiations and arrangements. And then there is the matter of Monty’s status.

“You’re...you’re a duke!” I exclaim.

Someone in our audience gasps with delighted glee.

Monty nods solemnly. “Yes. And you will be a duke consort.” He swallows. “If you will have me.”

His blue eyes are staring up at me. Frantic, beseeching, and yearning. Oh goodness, so much yearning. This really is happening. Monty wants me. Monty wants to marry me. Monty wants to keep me forever.

With a sob, I fall to my knees in front of him. My arms fling around his neck and my lips smash against his. He jolts in surprise, but then he kisses me back with passion, and his arms wrap around me, pulling me even closer.

Dimly, I think I can hear everyone in the restaurant cheering. But I am not paying any attention. I'm busy. Very busy.

I'm kissing Monty. My fiance.

Chapter thirty

Monty

It is fitting that the sun is shining, casting golden warmth over the world, as if nature itself is celebrating. The darkest days of winter have passed, and today is a good day. A day of homecoming. A day of joy. It would be incongruous if it were raining.

I stand just outside the front door of Pink's house, my hand resting on his shoulder. He is in front of me, his posture alert yet relaxed, as we both look out down the driveway. The anticipation in the air is thick, vibrating with unspoken emotions.

Lello and Carter stand nearby, their hands twitching with restrained excitement. Gray and Mal hover at the edge of the group, their expressions hopeful yet wary, as if they barely dare to believe this moment is real. Blue and Sammy stand together, their presence a steadying force amidst the bubbling energy. Behind us, in the shade of the doorway, Ned and Morgan linger. Their children peek curiously around their legs, sensing the importance of the occasion but not yet fully understanding it.

The sound of tires crunching over gravel breaks the stillness. A battered minivan rolls into the driveway, its dented frame a testament to long roads traveled. It stops in front of us, and for a heartbeat, there is silence.

Then the doors burst open.

Jade, Red, and Brodie jump out, their faces alight with exhilaration. They are home. For good. The Council has issued Jade a pardon.

A joyous chaos erupts as Pink lunges forward, followed closely by Lello, Carter, and Sammy. I step back slightly, letting the flood of emotions take center stage. My chest swells with quiet satisfaction as I watch the reunion unfold. Laughter, shouts, arms wrapping around each other in unrestrained relief. Blue stands in the midst of it all, grinning widely but choosing not to partake in the physical affection. It is his way.

Lello, always the instigator of warmth, turns to Gray and beckons him over. The demon hesitates, his dark eyes flickering with uncertainty. But before he can second-guess himself, he is pulled into the embrace. The tension melts from his body as he beams, the delight in his expression undeniable. Demons really aren't all that scary once you get to know them.

A movement draws my attention toward Ned. He stands apart, observing the reunion with an easy smile. I hope it is the brightness of the sun keeping the vampire at a distance and not any lingering animosity toward Jade.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the crowd begins moving toward the house. Conversations overlap in a tangle of emotions, but then everything falls into sudden silence as Jade and Ned come face to face.

Jade pales. His shoulders stiffen, and he lowers his head, mumbling something I can't quite hear.

Ned responds, his voice too soft for me to catch, but his meaning is unmistakable. He extends a hand. A simple, powerful offering of forgiveness. But Jade, too wrapped in his own guilt, doesn't see it.

Lello, impatient as always, takes matters into his own hands and gives Jade a firm shove. The fey stumbles forward, crossing the invisible barrier of shade into Ned's space, and in a breath, Ned pulls him into a hug.

The gathered crowd erupts in cheers. Lello, by far the loudest, practically beams with satisfaction. Then, with a dramatic clap of his hands, he takes control.

“Enough standing around! Inside! Food waits for no one!”

The dining room is too small for thirteen adults and three children, but we make it work. It is a room filled with noise, overlapping conversations, the clatter of dishes, and the warmth of belonging. I take my seat next to Pink, my fingers barely brushing against his, yet the touch is enough to send my heart into a delighted frenzy.

There is no order to the meal, no assigned serving or structured etiquette. Instead, hands reach over one another, passing bowls, grabbing bread, laughing when someone almost topples a dish. It is messy, unorganized, and absolutely perfect. Nothing like the stiff, calculated meals I grew up with. And that makes it all the more special.

A glow of contentment spreads through me. I am sitting in a room full of happy people, and I am part of the reason for their happiness. It was me who pushed the Council into granting Jade a pardon. I made this happen.

Of course, an even greater accomplishment is the man beside me. Convincing Pink to be my fiancé is, without a doubt, my proudest achievement.

Two victories in quick succession. I have every right to feel smug. Now, all that remains is to find Laurie. And given my recent streak of success, I can feel it in my bones. Laurie will be home soon. I am on a roll. Nothing can stop me now.

It won't be easy. My mother is no feeble foe. But I will bring Laurie back safe and sound. Then, finally, my life will be complete. Heaven on Earth. Everything I have ever dreamed of, all within my grasp.

A commotion snaps me back to the present. Sammy, in a spectacular act of clumsiness, has managed to knock over the massive bowl of potato salad. The bowl rolls precariously, but miraculously, its thick contents hold firm. A collective breath is held, then released in a chorus of laughter.

Pink squeezes my hand, his chuckle rumbling low. I turn to him, heart swelling at the sparkle in his brown eyes. The sad, despondent man I first met, exists only in the past. Pink is healing. He has found a new lease on life. And I will be damned if I ever let that light dim again.

The meal settles into a comfortable lull, the clinking of cutlery slowing as stomachs fill. Then, in the quiet, Lello's voice rings out like a bright bell.

“Our next celebration will be Pink and Monty's wedding!”

Every head in the room snaps toward us. A hush falls over the table, thick with expectation.

Pink's face flushes, a lovely shade of rose blooming across his cheeks. His eyes widen, flicking to mine, mirroring my own surprise. We had spoken of announcing our news, of course, but he had wanted to keep the focus on today's homecoming. He hadn't breathed a word.

Jade is the first to break the silence. “Wait... really?”

Pink's blush deepens.

The room collectively gasps.

Then, Lello, self-satisfied beyond measure, stands tall, hands on his hips. “See! Told you!” he boasts, tossing his head like a victorious stallion.

The explosion of movement and sound is instantaneous. A thousand congratulations burst forth, filling the room with renewed energy. I grin, pull Pink close, and kiss him amidst the cheers.

Our wedding is going to be truly magical.

Chapter thirty-one

Pink

The dawn light of a spring morning streams through my bedroom window, and with it, the day I spent the first eighteen years of my life preparing for. My wedding. The day I thought Ritchie and the harem had taken away from me forever. The day that I never imagined would be anything to do with love.

I grin and stretch. I'm getting married. To Monty. It feels like a dream.

Beside me, Lello stirs. I understand his insistence that Monty and I not sleep together the night before our wedding, it is a mundane human custom and Lello has been enthusiastically researching all of those. But the logic behind why Lello needed to stay is beyond me. Not that I mind. A sleep over before the big day was fun.

Lello blasts me with a full-wattage smile and bounds out of bed. He grabs my wrist and pulls me out too, dragging me towards the bathroom before I have even found my balance. Apparently, there are all sorts of things that need to be done to my hair.

Jade and Red let themselves into my room, and just like every time I see them, I still feel a surge of joy. They are here. They are home. Everything is exactly as it should be.

Red brandishes his makeup bag at me, and I let out a good natured groan. Today is already wonderful, and it has barely begun.

A few hours later and I'm rattling with nerves. My friends have made me look beautiful and I'm about to marry a man I love. So I have no idea where these nerves are coming from.

I run an anxious hand over the thin white linen of my outfit. I'm still astonished at what an amazing job Gray has done with it. He sewed it himself. Using a traditional human white wedding dress as inspiration, but making it masculine, with an exotic flair of one of the many ancient civilizations he lived in. It's perfect. Just like the setting.

The garden is a riot of color, a vibrant symphony of fresh blossoms and lush greenery. Sunlight filters through the canopy of trees, casting dappled patterns on the soft grass. Our garden. Home. The very garden I used to traipse across to see Monty.

Though, the garden never used to look this fancy! The centerpiece of the setting is the white gazebo, draped with trailing ivy and delicate white roses. It stands like a beacon of sanctuary, offering shade for Ned, and an ethereal beauty to frame this moment.

I take a deep breath, standing at the edge of the scene. The guests murmur amongst themselves, an energy of excitement crackling in the air. I can see them all, Lello practically vibrating with excitement, his flower basket gripped tightly in one hand while he fusses over Lottie, the true flower girl. Noah, solemn and determined, clutches the ring bearer's pillow with an air of great responsibility. Oscar, the page, fidgets beside them, looking between the guests and me as if waiting for permission to break into a run.

Jade stands in the gazebo, on the small, white podium. He is dressed in crisp, dark formalwear that contrasts beautifully with the lush garden around us. I'm so thrilled that he agreed to register as an officiant. Being joined in matrimony by my best friend, makes today even more special.

He catches my gaze and smirks, raising an eyebrow as if to say, "Ready for this?" I

exhale through a quiet chuckle, the moment feeling surreal yet deeply grounding.

And then there is Monty.

My breath catches. He stands at the far end of the aisle, his gaze locked onto mine. He looks... radiant. His suit, perfectly tailored, complements his confident stance. His idea to grow out his wild, unruly, snow-white hair has definitely worked. I love his hair when it is loose and free. Running my fingers through it is one of my favorite things. But now he can easily slick it back into a tame bun, with none of it escaping.

But it's the look in his eyes that steals the breath from my lungs. Love, unwavering and fierce. For a moment, the world softens, and it's just him and me. Everything else fades into a gentle hum.

Then the music starts.

A soft melody floats through the air, played by a string quartet tucked near a bed of blossoming hydrangeas. Musicians that Blue personally auditioned. The notes rise and fall like a heartbeat, steady and true, carrying us toward the inevitable moment of forever.

Lottie steps forward first, tossing petals with gleeful abandon, her giggles carried on the breeze. Lello follows right behind her, his own flower petals thrown with dramatic flair and a little too much force. Some land in Noah's hair, but he doesn't even blink, his focus locked on the delicate ring pillow he carries. Oscar trails behind, a ball of restrained energy, his excitement barely contained, but he behaves, much to my amusement.

I glance around the garden. Familiar faces surround me, all wearing expressions of joy and warmth. Morgan dabs at his eyes with a delicate handkerchief, while Ned, standing in the shade of the gazebo, offers me an encouraging nod. Even Carter, typically reserved, has a small smile playing on his lips. While Brodie is grinning like

he is the happiest, proudest man on the planet.

Laurie is the only person who is missing, and for a moment my chest tightens painfully. But I force myself to exhale. We will find him. This is the only celebration he is ever going to miss. I only talked to him for one afternoon, but it was long enough to know that he is a lovely little sweetheart and he wouldn't want his absence to dull his big brother's day. So I take a deep breath and let the darkness go.

Then, as if the air itself shifts, it is time.

The world stills for just a second as I take my first step forward. The grass is soft beneath my feet, the scent of lilacs and freshly turned earth filling my senses. Step by step, I move toward the gazebo. Toward Monty. Toward the future waiting for us. And with every step, my heart beats a little faster, no longer with nerves, but with overwhelming joy.

Monty's expression shifts slightly, something tender and awestruck breaking across his face. His lips part, as if he wants to say something, but no words come. Instead, he just watches me, his fingers twitching at his sides as if he's resisting the urge to close the distance between us.

When I finally reach him, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. His fingers brush against mine, the touch electric despite its softness. We turn slightly, facing Jade, who clears his throat and begins the ceremony with a voice steady and sure.

The words blur together, not because I'm not listening, but because my focus is entirely on Monty. I catch fragments. Love, commitment, forever. Each syllable feels like a promise already etched into my soul. It is nothing at all like an Old Blood ceremony, and that alone makes my heart soar.

My fingers tighten around Monty's, and he squeezes back, a silent conversation in the

midst of spoken vows. Love, and freedom from the shackles of the past. A brave new beginning where we forge our own way and make our own rules. It's perfect. It's everything.

When it comes time for the rings, Noah steps forward with practiced precision, presenting the pillow with both hands. Monty takes mine first, sliding it onto my finger with a reverence that makes my chest tighten. When I do the same for him, my hands tremble slightly, not from fear, but from the sheer weight of the moment.

Jade's voice steadies. "And now, by the power vested in me, I pronounce you..."

Lello doesn't even wait for the last words before he starts clapping wildly, sending flower petals flying. The moment dissolves into laughter, but it doesn't matter. Monty pulls me close, his lips brushing against mine, and the world disappears in the warmth of his embrace.

This is it. This is forever.

And I have never been more ready.