

# ALPHA'S KISS

SHANNON WEST

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# Facts About Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are not set in our world. Think of them as taking place in an alternate reality, in fictitious kingdoms and definitely not in our own past. This story takes place in a world where magic exists, along with handsome princes, beautiful princesses and wicked queens. The characters may speak in a “modern” way at times, even though they don’t always have modern values.

This story is set in an omega verse—Alphas are dominant and controlling, but they can also be tender and sweet.

Objects and people often come in threes. Royalty is usually present, as well as magic, both good and evil. And the stories almost always begin with “Once Upon a Time.”

# Chapter One

*Once upon a time...*

“Rory! What on earth are *you* doing here?” my stepmother, Queen Berinda, cried out in a horrified tone as she spotted me at the back of the Great Hall. She clutched her chest, as if she were about to have a heart attack.

I should be so lucky.

I gave her a mocking little bow and a smile. “I live here, my queen.”

My presence had taken my stepmother by surprise, and the poisonous words had spilled out of her mouth before she could stop them, I think. She usually tried to hide the full depth of her hatred for me in front of my father. I wasn’t sure why. He never seemed to feel much differently either, really, though he did try to keep up appearances.

One must have *some* decorum, after all.

Standing beside my stepmother was my half-sister, Princess Callista, wearing a candy pink, low-cut gown and glaring at me like she could already feel her blood-red fingernails digging satisfyingly into my skin.

I suppose I had waited too late to even try coming to the Great Hall that night, where my father, stepmother and half-sister took their evening repast. I usually came much earlier to fill a container with food I could take back to my own rooms and snuggle down into my blankets to hide, thus avoiding any needless interaction with my family. We all found that so much easier to bear.

But I had been so excessively tired this evening that I had nodded off as I was reading in the library. Almost no one from court ever came there, so it was perfect for me to stay during the day. I even had a lovely corner where I’d made myself a hideaway by piling up some pillows and blankets, with the only light coming into my little cocoon was from a sliver of the nearby window that I’d left uncovered. I liked to sit for hours reading every day when the weather was too cold and dreary even for me to go out to the mountain trails to run.

Since my father’s court had very few omegas—my stepmother’s idea—everyone just thought I was weird and crazy. Which I probably was, but we omegas liked the safety and comfort of small, dark places. The nesting instinct was strong inside us, because we were usually on the small side and vulnerable to just about everybody else. Well, everyone else with a dick, anyway.

The Alpha fathers of most omegas acted as their protectors until they came of age, but my father never had much to do with me.

He'd once been a strong Alpha, but over the years, as his close family members and betas had been killed in the frequent, back and forth wars with Morovia, the neighboring kingdom to the northeast, my father seemed to dwindle away, getting smaller and weaker with each passing day. Then my mother died. And the thing about mate bonds, like the one my father had with my mother, was that even death didn't break them. He tried his best to keep going after she passed, but I knew he still suffered her loss keenly every day, making him unable to ever truly move on.

My father grieved over my mother's loss particularly hard, because she had not only been his mate, but she'd also been on his council and his closest advisor.

But since we don't miss what we never had, my father's disregard barely registered on me. I was far too engaged in a daily cat and mouse game with my stepmother.

On this particular afternoon, when I finally woke from a late nap, the soft, amber-hued light from my little sliver of window in my hideout told me that it was far later in the day than was strictly safe for me to venture out. Still, I was starving, and I thought I might have enough time to slip into the Great Hall and grab something to eat before the rest of the royal family made their grand entrance. I'd already missed the midday meal, not to mention breakfast, so waiting until they had all finished their dinner and left for the evening simply didn't feel like an option. There was no help for it—I had to go to the Hall.

Glancing at the clock in my room, I figured I might have about twenty minutes to make my way to there, sneak in, grab a little food and get out again before any of them made an appearance. Some of the court would see me, of course, but they'd simply have to deal with it. It couldn't be helped, as I was almost faint with hunger. Unfortunately, my calculations about how much time I'd have before the family arrived were slightly off.

Our winter castle was on the small side, so the Great Hall had many functions, as it was used for court business and receiving guests. It was also the place where the entire household would dine together, including the King and Queen. Their older children, along with any of father's lords or ladies who happened to be in attendance that day would join them—except for me, that is. I wanted to stay far away from anywhere the family might be making an appearance. The less we saw of each other, the better it was for all of us.

I felt a little uneasy from the moment I stepped inside the Hall, but I had to get some food, so I just kept going. I had just managed to stuff a few pieces of bread, a couple of apples and berries and some tasty-looking pieces of cheese in my pockets before reaching for one last, succulent strawberry when I heard my stepmother's shriek. I usually avoided strawberries, because they were my half-



sister's favorite and not for the likes of me. So when I heard the shriek, for just a moment I thought it was about the strawberry and dropped it like it was hot. It plopped in the gravy, made a big splash and the thick, brown goo spilled out onto the tablecloth.

I had heard the fanfare outside the entrance, announcing the royal family, of course, but I'd thought I might still have time to skulk out the back door before my stepmother made it inside. No such luck.

I swear, the woman had eyes like a hawk circling the barnyard for baby chicks. I froze, my hand still outstretched, as I turned my head slowly toward her.

"Rory!" she cried out again. "What are you doing here? Answer me this instant! You know the sight of you gives me indigestion!"

"Um...I was just getting some food, my queen." I liked to call her "my queen" because it seemed to annoy her. It was a small victory, but I took what I could get.

"While I'm *eating*?" she shrieked again.

"Technically, you're not eating yet, my queen," I replied. "You just walked in."

"Rory," my father cut in, sounding tired. "Don't be rude to your mother."

"*Stepmother*," we both loudly corrected him, almost in unison, and she glared daggers at me. I mean, I was only agreeing with her. My father waved a languid hand at us, because he didn't really care anyway and grabbed a goblet of wine.

"You knew we were having guests tonight," Berinda hissed at me. Actually, I had no idea, because nobody told me anything, but it wouldn't have stopped me if I'd known. I was too hungry and already getting those black spots dancing in front of my eyes, the ones that meant I better eat something and soon if I knew what was good for me.

"Must you ruin everything?" she hissed. "Our guests have traveled a long way to come here tonight, so the least you could do is show us all the courtesy of not appearing here in such a-a deplorable and wretched state."

All right, she had me there. My hair was a tangled rat's nest under the hood of my old cape, because I hadn't taken time to try to comb through it as it was mostly unmanageable anyway. I also had bright pink marks creased into my face from falling asleep with my head down on my folded hands in my little cocoon in the library corner. But I'd slept only an hour or so the night before, and not at all the night before that, which, come to think of it, might have accounted for the dark purple circles under my eyes. Still, I had to agree with my stepmother's remark. I was definitely not looking my best.

Even worse, I had a perverse streak inside me that made me do things I knew I shouldn't. Like a penchant I had for wearing black gloss on my lips and painting my fingernails the same color. I



figured the entire court had already decided I was irredeemable anyway, so I might as well not disappoint. Plus, if I did miscalculate and run into my stepmother, the black gloss and nail color never failed to get a reaction.

As for the visitors that she'd mentioned, I was only now aware of their presence. Three gorgeous, muscular men were seated at one of the two long trestle tables that ran down the center of the room. They were unreasonably beautiful people. And good gods, they were all Alphas. I tried to breathe through my mouth and not be affected by the pheromones streaming off them. I'd gotten one good whiff and that was plenty.

They all practically screamed dominance—it oozed from their pores, just like their strong, delicious smelling pheromones. There must be an omega in heat somewhere in here from their out-of-control scents, and I had to be careful not to get overwhelmed by them just because I was in the fallout. I looked around but couldn't find the source. Maybe one of the servants? Being affected by another omega's pheromones was another little “perk” of being an omega.

And my own fucked-up omega pheromones had me wanting to climb those Alphas like they were trees.

No one else seemed to be reacting, but then again, I was one of the few omegas who was ever at court. My stepmother Queen Berinda was a beta and heartily disliked omegas. I think she was jealous, personally, but she claimed our scents made her physically ill. It was bullshit, but that was Berinda in a nutshell.

None of the other men in the room—except for those three gorgeous Alphas—were posturing or acting aggressive in reaction to that other, unknown omega's scent either, because my father now had only weak old men and betas as his close associates. He was paranoid, fearing a strong, young Alpha might try to take his throne away by force, and he was getting so frail he wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight to stop one if they did.

It was rare to have visitors at court, not to mention Alphas like these. Some of the biggest and strongest I'd ever seen. Aggressiveness poured off them in waves. Their pheromones were raging from whoever the omega was that they were scenting and all that put together was making me feel dizzy. An odor of spun sugar emanated from the muscle-bound Alpha on the end closest to the head table. And there was a sweet smell of cinnamon apples from the one with auburn highlights in his hair. The blond Adonis closest to me had a scent like chocolate brownies.

Great. Now I was craving sugar, apples and chocolate as well as Alpha knots. Thanks a lot.

I realized that all three of them had been staring at me since I sneaked in the back. It had been their fierce intensity that had made me feel so uneasy. What was that about anyway?

Ignoring them, I turned my attention back to the real danger in the room—my stepmother. She was

finally taking her seat next to my father at the head table, which was on a raised dais, in front of the massive fireplace. The royals sat at right angles to the long trestle tables designated for their court, so it pretty effectively knocked off any heat to the rest of the frigid room. The lords and ladies seated there were all dressed in their silks, so they had to be freezing. I saw several of them trembling with the cold.

But hey—as long as the royal family was comfortable, right?

Actually, I understood why the nobles didn't complain too much about where they were sitting, and it made sense. I wouldn't have liked to turn my back on the royal family either. Much better for them to be front and center so you could keep your eye on them at all times.

The king and queen were pretty much universally hated throughout the kingdom, and most especially by their lords, from whom they demanded higher and higher taxes every year to help pay for my father's ongoing war with Morovia and my stepmother's increasingly lavish lifestyle.

I knew I needed to get out of Berinda's sight, but I stood there another moment, considering my options as to the best way to accomplish that. I could try to exit by the back door and into the scullery, where the food was prepared. It was the same way I'd come in, but this late, I'd risk irritating the head cook, who could throw a mean meat cleaver when she was ready to serve the food, and someone got in her way. Or I could brazen it out, walk past my family and out the front doors, which was the quickest way back to my room. One thing for sure, I had to leave and soon, before my stepmother lost patience completely and began chucking the silverware at me.

"Oh, just get out," Berinda snarled as I edged along the wall to the front entrance as fast as I could, having finally decided to just go for it. As I passed the three big Alphas, they turned to watch me pass. As the door safely shut behind me, I thought I heard one of my stepmother's silver-plated chargers smash against the wood, but it behooved me to just keep my head down and take off as fast as I could before she lost it completely and came after me. I wouldn't put it past her to fling one of those things down the corridor at me like a battle boomerang to try and take off my head.

Although I tried very hard to stay out of my half-sister's and my stepmother's way, they still despised me and took every chance they could to let me know how happy they'd be when I was out of their lives forever. They made no secret of the fact they wanted me totally out of the palace and out of their hair, and I was only too happy to go along with that plan. The thought of never seeing either one of them again was like a sighting of a unicorn—way too beautiful and lucky to be true.

My stepmother had, in fact, had first begun to look for a suitable Alpha for me to get me out of the way since I'd turned fifteen—which was four years ago now. I was now nineteen—well, nineteen and a half—old for an omega, and well past my prime. I was in dreadful danger of becoming an even bigger burden on my family than I already was. But finding me a mate was a big problem for them in a

few different ways, and one in particular.

“Stop!” came the sudden, shrill, imperious voice behind me as I hustled down the corridor. I turned, already ducking and dodging, only to see my half-sister coming after me. Reluctantly, I came to a stop and waited for her to reach me, because I knew she wouldn’t quit until she had me cornered, and if she had to chase me down and I’d made her run, she’d take it out of my hide. Quite literally.

“We’ve invited those three Alphas for *you*,” she said, her dark eyes glistening like the scales on a red-bellied black snake.

“*What?* Why me?”

I shifted uneasily, trusting neither Callista’s motives nor her choices. But I knew better than to make her angry, or else she might decide to rake those fingernails across my cheeks until the blood ran down my neck.

“Because Father insists you find an Alpha first. He says it’s imperative that you get a mate and have a child, so he’ll have an heir right away, before it’s too late. And you know my child can’t be an heir.”

Unfortunately, I did know and only too well. Inheritance was a huge problem because our tiny kingdom of Igella had truly Byzantine laws regarding the whole question of who inherited the throne, and my stepmother had been trying to work her way around them for years to no avail.

In our kingdom, the eldest child inherited the throne, and that would be me. *Unless* that child was an omega. Omegas couldn’t inherit, though their *Alpha* mates could rule as Regent for them. The crown would then pass to their eldest child, and so forth and so on down the line, Alpha mates still acting as Regents for any omegas or until the child came of age.

I was my father’s eldest child, but omega, so unfortunately, and because of these crazy laws, the king and queen were stuck with me as my father’s only possible heir, and I had to find a strong Alpha male to mate me, get me with child, and then boss me around as my Lord Regent for the remainder of my life. An unpleasant prospect for everyone involved, except the Regent, I guess.

Even if I were to predecease my father, the title still wouldn’t go to Callista, but skip over her entirely and go to my father’s nearest male relative, a distant and despised cousin from the southern part of the kingdom. So, while my stepmother would have gladly gotten me out of the way, it wouldn’t have helped her situation in the least. The laws were written into our Constitution, and not even my father could change them, though believe me, my stepmother had made him try on multiple occasions.

As his eldest child, then, I *had* to find a mate who was suitable as soon as possible. My father, who had lived a long, hard and profligate life, wasn’t exactly in his prime anymore. If I were to be still unmarried at the time of his death, his title would go to the aforementioned cousin and I, along with my stepmother and half-sister, would be kicked unceremoniously out on our asses.

That meant my stepmother, who liked her ass right where it was, found herself on board with finding me a mate, and *tout suite*, as she would say, because though she hated me, she liked her very comfortable lifestyle just fine

She thought she had a plan all worked out—one that would keep her in the castle. The plan involved me and her secret weapon, the remarkably beautiful Princess Callista.

Speaking of my half-sister, I brought my attention back to her, and not a second too soon, either, as she was already taking a menacing step toward me, her long red fingernails filed into sharp claws and ready for action.

“Are you even listening to me, Rory? Or are you daydreaming again? Why must you always be so strange? So stupid?”

“I beg your pardon, Callista. Yes, I heard every word. You said the guests were invited here for me. So that I can find an Alpha.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Three of them, though? Seems like overkill to me, but I’m willing if they are.”

“Oh hush, you stupid boy. They’re the cousins of the Alpha that’s coming to marry you. They’ve arrived first to arrange a contract. I already have plenty of suitors practically knocking down my door, but Mother insists I wait. She says she has a plan—if, that is, this offer goes through. It’s all so totally unfair,” she said, stomping her tiny foot.

I knew she was talking about the inheritance laws and not the offer, because I spoke Callista. Like I said, Queen Berinda didn’t think the problem was insurmountable. She had worked out a solution, and I’d heard the two of them discussing it once, just after my fifteenth birthday, when I was hiding out in the library one afternoon and they didn’t know I was there. They had ducked inside to make their plans, because they knew my father never set foot inside the place, nor did any of his lords and ladies, so they thought they’d be safe in openly discussing it.

The key, my stepmother believed, was in finding a suitable Alpha, because Berinda had discovered a loophole in the law. Though the law stated my mate would become Regent for me once my father died, it didn’t actually specify that I had to still be alive for long once another heir was born. In other words, if I were to do my husband the supreme favor of dying quickly after I produced a son for him, say of some “natural” cause, then my mate could continue on as Regent until the child reached an appropriate age.

And the beauty of the plan was that it would work just as well if my Alpha mate took matters in his own hands, and I fell down a convenient flight of stairs.

Once the queen had found the right Alpha to be my mate—i.e., a murdering bastard untroubled by scruples—my new mate-slash-Regent would then be free to choose another queen as soon as I was

out of the way. My lovely sister Callista would be right there with a bridal bouquet in hand, waiting in the wings for me to die.

First, of course, they had to find the “right” Alpha, and the task was proving trickier than Berinda ever imagined. They had found that some Alphas disliked the idea of being with a male omega. And a surprisingly high number of the ones that didn’t mind a male didn’t like the idea of being drawn and quartered—the penalty for murdering a member of the royal family, if the crime were to be discovered.

And there was one more fly in the ointment. Alphas wanted heirs, and so far, my heat had yet to come in. At the ripe old age of nineteen and a half, it was beginning to look as if I were destined to be barren. There was still my half-sister though, and even if I *never* got my heat, my stepmother had an idea for Callista to secretly produce a child that they would then pass off as mine. It was all part of the plan.

Sure, a lot of things could go wrong with their vile arrangement—I could object, for example and refuse to marry at all. But my stepmother was confident she could force me. And if I caused a problem, she could shut me up until my “accident” was arranged. That’s what dungeons were for, am I right?

Which begged the question, who exactly had those Alphas been at dinner? Had Berinda at long last found an Alpha and his pack who didn’t care about a minor consideration like murder?

I noticed that Callista was giving me dirty looks again—she had a tendency to do that when I drifted off into one of my “daydreams” as she called them.

“But back to what you were saying,” I said quickly, stalling for time. “Yes, the laws are totally unfair.” I was hoping someone would come by since we were in such a public area, and I might be able to make my escape to avoid this conversation. I didn’t think she’d come after me. And if she tried, I’d run straight back to the Great Hall, because I was faster than Callista and she didn’t like witnesses.

“Who exactly are these guests?” I asked.

“They’re Lord Lexington’s cousins—he’s the Alpha,” she told me. “Their names are Brandon, Asher and Wyatt. Lord Lexington is the head Alpha, and he’s been unavoidably detained, but he’ll be here tomorrow. I don’t know any of them well, as yet, since they’re from the far northern border, but they have strongly indicated they’ve come to offer for you. My mother has interviewed them, and she says she thinks they’ll be perfect.”

In other words, they were raging psychopaths, who wouldn’t so much as flinch at a minor little detail like murder. No wonder they’d looked at me so intently. Measuring me for a shroud, no doubt.

Callista continued her harangue. “We both know you can’t even think about turning them down

when they make their offer. Theirs will no doubt be the best one you're likely to get, because it's also likely the *only one*. The three of them are here tonight to meet the king and queen and check everything out. They may even present their offer, but it's more likely they'll be coming by again tomorrow evening with Lord Lexington to make everything official, so you need to be ready. Try to do...*something*...with yourself. Comb that ugly black hair. And for god's sake, take a bath," she said, wrinkling up her dainty nose. "You stink."

I froze in horror, as she flounced back around and took off the way she'd come, though my body was not just reacting to the news of this Lord Lexington and his pack, but to what Callista had just said.

*I stunk?* That could mean only one thing—Callista could smell my omega slick. Not only that, but those Alphas had smelled it too, and oh gods, it had been me that had their pheromones working overtime.

I was coming into heat at long last.

To anyone other than an Alpha, omega slick was strong and musky and not in a good way. Betas like Callista found it particularly disagreeable, which may have been a survival mechanism betas had developed way back in their history. If one of them ever got delusional enough to come after an omega to mate them when they were in heat, any and all Alphas would gleefully gut them, whether that omega was theirs or not. Not because they were jealous, but because they were territorial as fuck, and they liked to help betas remember their place in the world.

Also, because omegas were somewhat rare, they were considered to be quite valuable. It was a status symbol of sorts to have your own omega, which was why Alphas went after available omegas so hard.

As for what Callista smelled, I knew I was clean, because I bathed daily. If Callista scented me, and if she found that scent to be unpleasant, it could mean only one thing—my long-awaited heat cycle was finally beginning to come in and she was smelling my slick. And so had those Alphas.

This was an unmitigated disaster.

Rather than murder me outright, like they would have if I never came into heat at all and wasn't able to have a child, the Alpha could choose to have a few babies with me to establish a firm claim on the throne, then fake my death and just secretly sell me as a valuable commodity. I'd spend the rest of my life as a sex slave in some brothel somewhere, passed from one Alpha to another until I died from having too many babies, or my baby-making parts just gave up the ghost and exploded.

My heart started thumping way harder than it should have, and I knew I had to do something and fast, because if *didn't*, my only other choice was to accept this Lord Lexington as my new Alpha. I'd be pregnant before many more days would pass, and then I'd be well and truly trapped with no hope

of escape.

I was really late for my first heat, but that was on purpose. I'd been trying hard to never come into heat at all. A lot of omegas had late puberties and doctors didn't know why. But most omegas were around fifteen when they had their first and having a first heat at sixteen or even occasionally seventeen was also fairly common. I'd managed to hold mine off until now, only six months shy of my twentieth birthday, and that was pretty much unheard of, though, of course, knowing what I knew since that day I eavesdropped in the library, I'd done everything in my power to keep mine away as long as I possibly could. I had no wish to die at the hands of some overly ambitious Alpha.

I admit it wasn't a great plan. In fact, it was downright weak, considering the fact that if I never came in heat at all, they might just murder me anyway as soon as Callista produced a child. But I suppose I was living in a dream world where as long as I didn't have my heat, I didn't have to marry. And at the back of my mind, I had a plan to simply run away if my heat did arrive, despite all my efforts.

At first, I'd managed to hold it off by not eating very much at all, by starving myself and by exercising as often as I could, running along the mountain trails near the castle at least twice a day when I could sneak outside and doing crunches and chin-ups until I was ready to lose what little food was in my stomach. I never slept very much, hoping to wear my body down and make it weak.

There was another reason I didn't sleep well, actually. I was afraid of the dark. A silly thing for an almost twenty-year-old person to admit, but it was true. I'd been that way since my stepmother had locked me in a closet and left me there for three days when my old nurse, Griselda, had been sick in bed. It had been her first attempt at killing me, I guess, and by the time Griselda found me, I was really dehydrated and half dead anyway. Griselda nursed me back to health and even used to let me burn a candle at night to keep away the dark. That stopped when she was fired a few years later by my stepmother, and since then I tried to stay awake all night and feed the fire so it would blaze up as high as possible. I slept mostly during the days.

And now I was discovering that my "brilliant" scheme to just never go into heat hadn't worked at all. I felt like I had a ticking time bomb hanging over my head and it had just exploded.

I'd never had much of anything in my life, and I still didn't, but at least before this I was mostly left alone and could spend my days and nights any way I liked. I wasn't a slave to my body or anyone else's. Now I'd be vulnerable to everyone with a dick and a knot.

All my free time would be over once I had an Alpha and his pack telling me what to do. They'd probably work me to the bone and keep my belly full of their babies until I died or went crazy, whichever came first. Or until my father died, so this Lord Lexington could become Regent, and I could meet with that unfortunate accident to clear the path for him to marry the beautiful Callista. That



is, if they didn't decide to sell me. It was a toss-up as to which was the worse fate.

I made it back to my room and quickly rang for servants to bring me hot water for a bath. It took them a while, because I had been assigned the worst of the lot, but at least they came. As they poured in the steaming buckets, I found some strong, scented bath salts to add to the water in an attempt to disguise my slick. I stayed as far away from the servants as I could as they worked, hoping they wouldn't notice anything. And as soon as they left, I took off my clothes and began to soak myself in the scalding hot water. As I did, I considered my options, which I already knew were very few.

I could stay, meet these Alphas and hope for the best—though that was probably a death sentence or a one-way ticket to an omega slave trader. Or I could run away, knowing that with my first heat coming on, I would be an all too willing target for any Alpha who came across me. Not only would I welcome him, but I'd probably chase him down and beg him to mount me and fill me with his knot, along with any other Alphas in his pack who were willing to pile on. An omega with no Alphas to help him would be in constant, unrelenting pain, so I'd have little choice. When I'd been passed around to everyone until I could no longer walk, they'd give me a little rest if I were lucky and then start in again on me the next day. And the next.

I would crave being filled by an Alpha's cock almost twenty-four hours a day for the week or so that my heat lasted, and his knot would be welcome to tie us together for as long as possible. And then more knots after that until I'd been fucked half to death.

Not a pleasant prospect, but Berinda had left me with only two choices—a quick death or a slow one. Dealer's choice.

After I got out of the bath, I found some old clothes that I could rip up and fold some pieces into pads to stick over my hole to try and absorb the spotting of slick that had already begun. In the morning, I would burn the pads in the fireplace to hide all the evidence. I went to bed then, because I was so exhausted, and all my efforts at holding off my heat had been in vain anyway.

Tomorrow, I'd either have to run or submit myself to that pack of alphas. I feared my time was up.

## Chapter Two

“Your Highness, what’s wrong?”

I glanced up at Billy, one of the male servants who took care of cleaning my rooms and tried out a smile. He was new, only having just been assigned to me a few days earlier. I didn’t think the smile I gave him was too successful, though, because he was still peering down at me with a slight frown. I dashed a treacherous tear from my eyes and then turned to face him. Tears had never done me any good when I was a child, and they were a sign of weakness that I couldn’t show.

“Nothing, Billy. I’m just not feeling too well, that’s all.”

“Oh, I see. Is it because your heat cycle is coming on? Do you have pains?”

I gazed back at him in amazement. A little fear and horror was mixed in too. “How do you know that? Oh my God, can you smell my slick too?”

“Oh yes, ‘a course, but then I have a sensitive nose for pheromones. And I’m omega too, so I know what it’s like when it’s first coming in. Maybe no one else around here has noticed.” He glanced around us to see if anyone could hear, then leaned in closer. “They’re all a bunch of mean betas. Dumb ones too. I swear, Prince Rory, they gave you the worst of the lot.”

“I know, but you seem different. What did you do to get stuck with me?”

“The queen got the cook to fire me from my job in the scullery, because she gained a pound from eating the chocolate souffle she asked me to make for her every day for two weeks. Like I had the magic to somehow take all the calories out of it! It was the dumb hussy’s own fault for eating it so often,” he said and then suddenly realizing who he was talking to, he clapped a hand over his mouth. “Oh gods, I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh please,” I said, smiling at him. “Don’t worry about me. I couldn’t hate the queen anymore if I tried, and I promise you I won’t say a word. Be careful around these others though. Berinda has her spies all over the castle.”

“I know that’s the truth,” he said, casting a glance around.

“But what if they have figured it out, Billy? I don’t want my stepmother to know!” The fact that I was telling him this after meeting him five minutes ago showed how distraught I was at that moment. My servants were well-paid not to show me any sympathy. Also, to do very little cleaning and give me only the most basic care. They had always been jerks.

Billy saw my face and suspected what I was thinking. “Don’t worry. I’m not telling that old crow

anything,” he said. He dug in the pockets of his pants and handed me a small bottle. “Take these, sir. I got them for myself a while ago, but I went into heat before I could take them.”

“Oh, my goodness, are you...?”

“Pregnant. Yes, Your Highness. I know it’s hard to tell because I’m a little big boned.” He laughed good-naturedly. “Or pleasingly plump, as my smartass mate says.” He laughed heartily, wiping his eyes with the hem of his shirt. “I have five children now. This one will be number six.”

“Good gods! Then you need these heat suppressant pills a lot more than I do.”

“No, sir. I still have eight months to go yet. And a few more after that while the babe is still so young, and then I’ll get the doctor to give me more. These here in this bottle will be enough to stop your heat for a month, but since this is your first time, these pills might not keep it away for quite that long. Still, they should give you a bit of a reprieve if you want one.”

I took the pills in my hand and shook my head. I’d never been lucky, but it was so rare that anyone showed me a kindness of any kind, and I wasn’t going to take this gift lightly. I wasn’t quite sure how to take anyone being so nice to me.

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Aw, it’s all right. Your old baby nurse, Griselda, was my aunt, and it wasn’t right the way they fired her just because she got so attached to you, sir.”

“I still miss her. Is she all right? Do you ever get to see her?”

“She lives way south now—married a tinker and travels with him all across the kingdom repairing pots and pans and the like. I think my mother hears from her now and again. I’ll tell her to say hello for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, sir,” he said, dropping a little bow to me and going to the door. He stopped and turned to look at me. “Talk is that you’re supposed to meet the Alphas who are visiting tonight. If you’d like, I could come back when I finish my work and help you find something nice to wear.”

I laughed. “Good luck with finding something. But thanks anyway, Billy. I appreciate it.”

I was kind of startled by the offer. Kindnesses were rare, so I’m afraid I was instantly suspicious of him and his motives. Had my stepmother sent him?

But he must have seen how I felt because he smiled and shook his head. “Prince Rory, I’m not trying to trick you. I just know how badly you’ve been treated. I’ll come back later and if you want me to, I’ll help.” He winked at me, then turned and left, and I sat there, hating how I’d allowed my family to make me so suspicious of every good thing, no matter how small. Maybe there were still some nice people left here in the palace.

I doubted it. But maybe it was possible.

We did have some in our kingdom, though, and they had suffered a lot over the years. Griselda, my old nurse, used to tell me about how so many of the young men died in the constant wars, leaving their families destitute. Farming was a staple of our society, but with so many young men being swallowed up by the interminable war with Morovia, crops were rotting in the fields with not nearly enough men to help harvest.

It had long been my dream to actually govern our people. I didn't think I could do much worse than my father or those who had come before him. It was my dream to end the war and let the young men come back home to work their fields and live their lives with their families. I had ideas about opening up trade routes too, which would bring in a bigger food supply and more revenue by taxing the traders and not our people. I'd have loved to see better rights for omegas as well, but that was maybe a bridge too far.

Those were dreams that were never going to come true, or at least none that I'd be around long enough to see happen. And I still had to get through this meeting with the Alphas later that evening and decide what I was going to do.

I quickly opened the bottle of little pills and dry swallowed one of them. Then I collapsed back down on the bed for a while and tried to rest. My stomach hurt too much for me at first to even think about leaving, but surprisingly, the cramping eased after a little while. I fell asleep right away, and I slept so hard I was drooling when I woke up maybe a few hours later. The light spilling over the windowsill was growing faint by then. Gods, had I really slept so hard and for so long?

I staggered to my feet, just as there was a quick knock, and the door opened to admit Billy. He was drooping with exhaustion. He would have been tired by that time of the day anyway, but he was burdened down by a heavy looking bucket of steaming water in one hand, with some clothing draped over his other arm.

"Did you sleep well, sir? I peeked in once earlier and you were dead to the world."

I hurried over to take the bucket from him. "Let me carry this. And yes, I did sleep really hard. I don't know what's got into me. I never sleep this much."

He shrugged. "It's your heat, that's all. It hits some of us that way, especially when we're already worn out." He put the clothing on the bed and held up one of them—a long, emerald green, velvet coat. "I went to the storeroom in the basement and found one of your father's old trunks. The king had everything packed after he gained so much weight and some of this has gone out of style. They've been just sitting there ever since, but it's good quality."

I walked over to peer at the coat and matching trousers he was holding up and took a little sniff, expecting it to smell like moth balls, but it was surprisingly fresh. "But surely those old things must be ruined by now."

“The clothes on the top of the stacks were, but there were three or four suits I found near the middle of the trunk that still had some life left in them. Like this one. Look at this beautiful cloth.”

It was dark green velvet, expensive and still lustrous even after so many years shut away. “Hmm. Yes, it’s really nice.”

“This one was my favorite,” he said, picking it up. “The rest of the good ones were all in similar colors, but this was the only velvet coat. I remember hearing about your father when he was a younger man. Everyone said he was really handsome. His clothes were simple and classic, so they’re still in style, after all these years.”

“My stepmother will have a fit.”

“Well, it can’t be helped. Truthfully, she’d find something to say no matter what.”

Since that was perfectly true, I had no comeback.

“What do you think of this suit?” Billy asked. “I’ve heard that your mother favored the king in this color, and he wore it to match her eyes. You’d look good in it too, I think, with all that black hair and your pale skin. You have her green eyes too. As shiny as jewels. I’ve heard it was her best feature.”

“According to Berinda, she didn’t have any.”

“Don’t you believe it. That one has always been jealous. Pay her no mind. From what I’ve heard, your mother was a great beauty.”

It had been during the near constant wars with Morovia that my father met my mother. After a frantic and increasingly desperate search for a rich consort to provide my father with the funds he needed for his army, my father, then a handsome young Alpha, heard about her. He discovered that she was... how do I put this? Let’s just say my poor mother, though she was very beautiful, wasn’t exactly a cheerful girl. She wore black all the time and was never seen to smile. She “moped around a lot,” according to what I’d heard, and refused all suitors. But he decided his pack needed her big dowry, so he made up his mind to marry her anyway. I guess when you’re the king you can do that kind of thing.

It seemed that her extreme depression was remarked upon by everyone who met her, but she still had many suitors lining up to marry her, because she was gorgeous and the only child of the fabulously wealthy Lord Rory.

Griselda said my mother had been well aware of the suitors only wanting her for her money. She scorned them. My grandfather, who had made his fortune in trading, had been devastated, because his dearest wish was for my mother to find someone to love. His second dearest wish had been for her first child to be named after him.

But Vesper was a proud, independent woman who had turned down every one of her many

suitors. She might never have married, had not my kingly father heard of her and her father's great wealth, just lying around, waiting for someone to swoop in and take it.

At the time, my father was very young, and he was also gorgeous. I'd visited the royal portrait gallery, and I can attest to the fact that my father was really something to see. He was reckless and foolish with his spending, and he drank too much even then, thus he was broke, and so in need of gold to fight Morovia that he couldn't afford to be picky when it came to choosing his mate. He did what he had to do. He sucked it up, turned on his considerable charm and dazzled my mother with his good looks. He swept her off her feet, or so people said. Then he wedded and bedded her, and my grateful grandfather handed over his money and his gold. My mother had promptly become pregnant and produced me, his child and heir to the throne and my grandfather's namesake.

She then died from complications of my birth a mere eleven months later. But at least she had provided him with his heir, though, right?

Alas, my poor mother couldn't even do that properly. Because though she had indeed provided him with a child, I happened to be a male *omega*, with all that it entailed in our country's constitution.

My father hadn't been concerned about that back then though. In the days following Vesper's death, he had been surprisingly distraught, even grief stricken. No one had been able to figure it out, thinking that he should have been happy that she had done him the supreme favor of checking out early. Unfortunately, he had fallen in love with her. Deeply, madly and truly—so he spent the next few years deeply mourning her, and there were whispers that he tried to hasten his own death by taking heedless, reckless chances during battles. Almost like he had nothing left to live for.

He was lucky though and survived. After a year or two, my father had been persuaded by his council to find another wife, the ever-so-lovable Berinda, who got pregnant almost immediately and produced her own golden child, Callista. And despite all the numerous tries for years afterward to have a son, Berinda had never been pregnant again—never produced the Alpha male heir my father needed.

Everyone raved about how beautiful Callista was though. How adorable and precious. As for me, I tried to take it in stride. The role assigned to me became that of the older and definitely not as exciting or important half-brother.

After all, not everyone can be so beautiful. Someone has to applaud as people like Callista walked by. Griselda used to get angry when I came back to the nursery crying over my stepmother telling me I was a plain child. She would hold me in her lap and tell me it was all lies, because the new queen was jealous of me. I pretended to believe her.

In actual fact, though, I did look a great deal like my father, who had such extraordinarily good looks that it would have been difficult if not impossible for any ugly genes to launch a successful

assault on his formidable DNA. And of course, my mother, who according to everyone except Berinda, had been absolutely beautiful.

Not that I was quite as good looking as my father or my mother had been. At least I didn't think so. But I wasn't quite the troll my stepmother liked to pretend and make everybody around her say I was. The entire court said it so frequently and so often that I think they even came to believe it. I know I did.

"Plain like your mother" became her mantra, and I grew up believing her.

"Your mother was well-liked by all the servants, you know. She wasn't an easy person to get to know. Very secretive in a way, and so sad...but she was always kind. My mother said so and I trust her judgment. Don't you remember your mother at all?"

"No," I said, shaking my head sadly. "She died when I was only a few days old."

"And has no one ever spoken to you about her? Not even your father?"

"Especially my father. He's still grieving for her, even after all this time. Griselda used to tell me about her when she was here, but she had to be careful how much she could say because of my stepmother."

Except now that I thought about it, that wasn't exactly true. I'd heard rumors about my mother, Queen Vesper, all my life—always in soft, murmuring tones, when people thought their gossip wasn't being overheard. I liked to hide from my caretakers and read in dark corners, so I overheard a lot of the servants' conversations when they thought no one was around.

I liked the sound of her name, Vesper—all whispery and soft, but with a bit of a sharpness around the edges. It was the servants who used to whisper to each other about my mother. Sometimes, they sounded almost afraid of her, which I found odd.

"I've shaken out the velvet suit and aired it all morning," Billy said, pushing it toward me. "I think it will fit you. I brought one of your father's dress shirts along from his closet too. He won't miss it. I'll get some fresh water for you to freshen up with and then you can try it on for the dinner tonight. "

"Ugh, I wish I didn't have to go."

"The queen would have a fit. She's kept us running all day, getting things ready for tonight. After you put the suit on, I'll brush your hair and tie it back for you."

"Billy, does the queen know I'm wearing one of my father's old suits?"

"No, I daresay she doesn't."

"What does she think I'll be wearing then?"

"I doubt she's given it a thought."

Since that was true enough, I subsided and watched as Billy buzzed around the room, filling the



cauldron over the fire with water to heat up for me to wash and putting up a screen to keep out the drafts. He went to the door, calling back to me.

“I’ll be back as soon as I return this bucket outside. Now go ahead, Prince Rory, and I’ll be back soon to help.”

I picked up the suit and held it against me in front of the mirror. It was cut simply, along classic lines with a pinched in waist and it came down almost to my knees. The sleeves went all the way down to the backs of my hands, ending in little points just above my knuckles. It was a regal suit, fit for a king. And so my father was, as I would be one day, though I’d have no real power at all. That would all belong to my Lord Regent.

I laid the suit back on the bed and pulled the cauldron off the fire to dip out some water so I could wash. I had a bit of scented soap that someone had left behind in the bathhouse, and I carefully lathered myself with that. I spent a lot of time scrubbing myself, and by the time I was through, I couldn’t detect any slick odor at all. I put on fresh underthings to be sure, including another folded piece of cloth in my private area. I couldn’t detect any more secretions, but better to be safe than sorry. If there was anything at all, the Alphas would know it for sure.

I turned to see Billy holding up a corset. “Put this on, please, so the jacket will fit properly.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise, but he insisted. I groaned because I had never worn one, though I knew how they worked. I’d seen my sister trussed up in hers before, and I’d never envied her. This one was made for a man, to cinch in his waist when he wore these types of fitted coats in our country, though the chest was stiff and flat. Still, I’d never thought to wear one or have any occasion to do so.

Billy made a little hurry-up motion, and I reluctantly slipped into it so he could lace it up.

It was every bit as uncomfortable as I’d known it would be, but in the end, the jacket buttoned easily, and I was able to fasten the pearl covered buttons up all the way to my throat. Only my snowy, white cravat stuck out the top.

“It’s a good fit,” Billy said, holding up the coat to regard the tight-fitting trousers. He had a pair of old black boots in his hand and gave them to me too. “Your father has bigger feet than yours but try these. We can stuff some scraps of cloth in the toes, and it will be good enough for one night. Now sit down and let me try to tie back this hair. You’re already late.”

Reluctantly, I took a seat, and he began to brush my unruly, black curls that were way too long. I usually wore a hood to help me escape notice. That was partly why I’d taken to wearing my cape as I roamed around the palace halls, because the less people noticed me, the more they’d leave me alone.

Billy brushed my hair until my scalp tingled and then pulled it off my face and twisted it up and tied it at the base of my neck, and when he was done, I thought I looked good. Or passable, at least. I dreaded to hear what my stepmother and my half-sister would have to say. Billy even tried to put a bit

of rouge on my lips, but that was when I put my foot down.

“Enough, Billy, please. They’ll have plenty to say as it is. Maybe I should use some of my black gloss on my lips. And should I take another of those pills?”

“No, only one a day. And no gloss either. That stuff makes you look half-dead. Scrub off that fingernail polish too before you go.”

I took my pills off the dresser and put them in a drawer, grabbed an old cloth inside it and began taking off the nail polish. He made a little face at me, as I dutifully took off as much as I could. There was still a little on my cuticles, but it couldn’t be helped. I was already late.

The color of the suit made my skin look even whiter in the lamplight. I thought maybe I didn’t look too bad, though I was still so pale. I wondered what the Alpha would think of me and then I wondered why I cared. I would be nothing but a brood mare for him until my father finally died, and then my life would most likely be short and extremely unpleasant until the end.

“You look handsome, sir,” Billy said, standing back to gaze at his handiwork.

I shot him a look. “Thank you. You were a big help.”

He beamed at me and shooed me with his hands. “You better hurry so maybe you can already be sitting inside when the queen arrives. She’s expecting you tonight, but there still could be problems like last night.”

News of last night had traveled fast it seemed.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders and reluctantly stepped out to make my way to the Great Hall to meet my fate.

## Chapter Three

As I got closer, I could hear from the noise inside the Hall that I was already pretty late. I could hear my stepmother's shrill tones coming through the open door, and from inside the Hall came the voices of a large group of people, along with noises of cutlery clinking against plates. It was hardly a surprise that they'd started without me. Callista must be having kittens inside, wondering where I was. When I made my entrance, wearing this green velvet suit that I should never have allowed Billy to talk me into, I knew I'd be in for a barrage of insults at the very least.

I made it as far as the door before I chickened out. The two courtiers standing by to announce the guests as they arrived gave me a deeply suspicious look when I did an about face and went back down the corridor. I was pretty sure they didn't even recognize me. Hell, I had hardly recognized myself when I caught a glimpse of how I looked in the huge mirror I passed along the way.

I sailed to the end of the wide passageway, hung a left and went out a door that led to the ramparts of the castle walls. I liked to hide out there sometimes, getting some fresh air and maybe a look up at the stars. The night air was cool, but still lovely as I leaned against the stones and lifted up my eyes to the sky. It was a little too overcast for stars, but I looked up anyway, peering through the low-hanging clouds and hoping for a glimpse. I had always loved stargazing. My favorite quote about the stars was from a poem I'd read once. The poet had called stars "the forget-me-nots of the angels." I liked the idea of heaven being some huge celestial garden, tended by angels, with the moon as its centerpiece, like a big, showy, white cabbage rose in the middle of a bouquet.

I was standing there—well, leaning really—thinking about stars and flowers and gardens when I smelled smoke. It jarred me right out of my daydream, and I turned to see a tall, muscular young man standing a few yards to my left, leaning back against the ramparts, in the act of blowing out another white plume of the nasty smelling stuff. I saw him glance over at me, and I called to him, scarcely knowing how I was so bold.

"Thank goodness you're smoking. I thought for a moment the castle was on fire."

The man, who was dressed in an expensive looking dark suit with a long jacket and a snowy white cravat of his own, turned to look at me and raised one imperious eyebrow. Oh gods, he was an Alpha. It came off him in a wave of dominance so aggressive, it buffeted me like a hard wind, almost knocking me off my feet. It was a challenging force, and gods help me, it called to me with a dark siren's voice.

“Are you talking to me?” he said, with a slight accent, like he didn’t always speak Igellan.

Damn it, even his voice was sexy. Superior and arrogant as fuck but alluring. He *irritated* me with his perfection—which made me snap at him.

“There’s no one else out here but us. What do you think?”

It surprised a smirk out of him, but he gazed at me with a bit more interest. Damn it, the fucker even had dimples. I thought that was overkill, personally—to be that good looking and have dimples too? Showoff.

“Don’t tell me,” he said, “you’re about to say you hate the smell of smoke.”

“I do, actually, because it stinks.”

He threw back his head and laughed. The moonlight was doing flattering things to his face, and I wondered how it felt to be so effortlessly gorgeous. Everything about him was flawless—from his beautifully tailored dark suit to his sapphire blue eyes, his high cheekbones, and his chiseled jawline.

Before I realized what I was doing, I sauntered over to him, trying to breathe through my mouth so his pheromones wouldn’t overwhelm me. I pulled the slim cigar from between his lips, threw it down on the stones and ground it under my shoe, looking up into his seriously startled face.

“These things will kill you, you know.”

He recovered quickly and looked me up and down. “What’s it to you?” he said, his eyes flashing.

Then his nostrils flared at me, and I knew he was smelling my slick. Gods, if it was this strong and my heat cycle hadn’t even really shifted into high gear yet, then it would have driven him mad with lust if I’d been in full heat. As it was, it seemed to be urging him into displaying even more dominance. He turned fully toward me, squaring off, like we were about to fight or fuck. He probably wanted me to sink to my knees and suck him off. Why were my lips tingling like I could already feel them wrapped around his thick cock?

“Rude, much?” I asked, deliberately being a smart ass, while stifling the urge to fall to my knees.

“Oh, you think I’m rude? Who was insulting who just now?”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I...what?”

He was beginning to look adorably confused. It was a different look for such a fierce Alpha. But an omega’s slick was always their secret weapon, and mine seemed to be affecting him strongly. It could completely fog an Alpha’s mind when they really liked it, even if my slick wasn’t quite strong enough yet for that. But apparently, he *really* liked it.

“I asked what you were going to do about me,” I reminded him. “Any ideas?”

“A few.” He took a step closer, and his pheromones flared even higher, a scent like black gunpowder, acrid and fierce, savage and masculine. It occurred to me that I needed to lick him all

over. “Maybe more than a few.” His gaze swept over me again, and he inhaled, looking blissed out for only a second, but enough that I had seen his reaction. It flashed over his face and was gone quickly, replaced by annoyance. He didn’t like it that he was so attracted to me. I’d interrupted him, and I’d made him want me. That pissed him off, because his focus needed to be elsewhere. He must have been about to perform some important tasks that he needed to get back to.

“Where’s your Alpha? Who *are* you anyway?” he asked, getting a little aggressive as he pushed me back against the wall with his body. Goosebumps popped up on my skin and a shiver ran down my back. Arrogance like this was a fallback position for an Alpha. His pheromones were working overtime, and I knew he hated the power it gave me.

“I don’t have an Alpha.”

“Are the Alphas here all blind? You have no business being out here on your own.” He put a fingertip under my chin and turned my head to look at my throat. “With no claiming bite? Tell me who you are.”

“I’m nobody.”

One corner of his lush mouth quirked up, like I had amused him. “Interesting. Is that a first or a last name? Or just the single designation, like some performers go by?”

I was beginning to enjoy the conversation. He was being an ass, but then so was I. I made it worse by laughing at him.

“No, just the one name.”

“And is there a title to go with that? Are you Lord Nobody?”

“Sorry, but I can’t divulge any more information. Not even to handsome strangers on the ramparts in the dark.”

“A man of mystery then?” He arched an eyebrow, and I wondered where I’d ever found the nerve to say such things to him. Or anything at all. He was way out of my league.

“And did you just call me handsome?” he asked, taking another step toward me, crowding me even more. His eyes glittered as he tried to stare me down and make me whimper.

I nodded. “Oh yeah, you’re handsome. And what’s more, you know it.”

He laughed out loud at that, because it was true, and he did know it. His laugh was so infectious, I saw one of the courtiers by the doors of the Great Hall smile and glance curiously down the corridor and in our direction through the open door.

The Alpha saw it too, and he quickly took my arm, pulling me deeper into the shadows. I went willingly, not sure what was about to happen, or then again, maybe I was. I’d never been kissed before, and I thought I might be perilously close to it finally happening. The idea was setting off little fireworks inside me. His pheromones were blasting me even harder, and I thought I could easily

become addicted to that smell. The noise from the corridor suddenly faded and disappeared and even the faint hint of a breeze stopped as if the night were holding its breath. It was surreal, like we were enveloped in a space of our own, hidden from the outside world.

I was being terribly reckless. An Alpha took what he wanted, and an unclaimed omega, with no bite mark showing possession was an easy mark. I wasn't in full heat, but he could still fuck me and knot me, even bite me if he wanted to. It wouldn't be a full mating, but it would do. Nobody was around to stop him.

Not even me.

He put his hands on my waist and effortlessly picked me up to set me up on the ledge. He leaned toward me, bracing his hands on either side of me and closing me in, taking another deep inhalation.

He drew me slowly toward him and took my chin gently in his hand again to tip back my head. He bent down ever so slowly, giving me plenty of time to change my mind if I chose, but I wouldn't have missed this for the world. I let him press his full, lush lips against mine, gently at first and then harder. His kiss was aggressive and dominant, like I knew it would be, but at the same time, it was dangerously sweet, almost as if he knew this was my first time. There was so much heat between us that I couldn't draw in a good breath, and I didn't think he could either. I could feel a hard and massive ridge of flesh in his trousers pressing against me. He slipped his tongue inside my mouth and my legs went up around his waist like they were pulled there by a string. He leaned in farther, his lips ghosting over my neck.

My slick spurted out, and we both groaned. "Gods, who are you?" he whispered in my ear, kissing down to my throat. "Why are you out here all alone?" He tightened his grip on me. "If you were mine, I'd never let you out of my sight."

His tongue began to probe at my lips again, seeking entry, but just as I opened up for him, a sharp shriek of surprise made us both jump apart. It was our only warning of a visitor and just like that, the spell suddenly snapped and was broken. We both gasped and I lowered my legs as he sprang away from me. Callista surged through the door like a bad smell and glared at both of us.

"Lord Lexington! What on earth are you doing out here? I wondered where you could have gotten to." She turned a gimlet eye on me, and I could see her start of surprise as she realized exactly who I was. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Rory! Is that you? What on earth are you wearing? And what are you doing here?"

"Rory?" Lexington said, frowning and looking from me back to Callista. "*Prince* Rory?"

Callista grimaced. "Yes. You've found my stepbrother, I see."

"I have?" he said, looking clearly shocked as he stared down at me. His forehead wrinkled as if he were confused, and he didn't look at all pleased.

“Lord Lexington meet my stepbrother, Rory.”

He was silent, looking stricken so I answered Callista instead.

“Sorry, Callista, but I’m still your *half*-brother, I’m afraid, and not step.” I turned back to the man I’d just kissed. “Unfortunately, we share a father, but she likes to forget that. Sharp as a marble, that one.”

They both stared at me incredulously, which should have been my clue to shut up. “You know,” I said, making a misguided effort to explain the joke. “Because a marble is round? Get it?”

I couldn’t have told you where all this unfortunate banter was coming from. It was terrible and Callista would make me pay for it later, but at the moment, there was a faint buzzing in the air that made me feel reckless and empowered. I couldn’t be bothered to care about later. People had told me all my life that things would be better later. But nothing ever was. Later never came, and I didn’t believe in it anymore. I turned away from her shocked face and back toward the handsome Alpha.

“We’re not close,” I told the handsome man, who was still looking at me disapprovingly. How odd. Why was he looking at me like that? What on earth had my stepmother and Callista been telling him about me?

“Or perhaps you already picked up on that?”

He looked at me coldly, still ignoring my comments.

“I’m actually here to meet you... Your Highness,” he finally said, suddenly very formal and distant. The words were proper and respectful, but they seemed to be a little forced. His eyes told me a different story. The beautiful Alpha I’d just kissed was gone, and he left this icy, too-formal clone in his place. I had to admit I was disappointed. This wasn’t the man I had kissed at all, but a murderer who only wanted to take my father’s throne.

He executed a graceful, perfect little bow. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rory. I’d like to introduce you to my pack. My cousins came ahead of me, and they’re inside the Great Hall, waiting to make your acquaintance. We’ve all been so...anxious to do that, you see.”

Anxious? An odd way to put it, but I wanted to tell him I knew why. I wanted to let him know I was wise to this hateful little scheme of my stepmother’s, but I didn’t have the nerve.

Before I could answer him or even react, Callista stepped closer and took his arm. “I’m so sorry, Lexington,” she said, apparently already familiar enough with him that she was calling him just by his name and leaving off his title, like they were intimate friends. She looked up at him from under her long eyelashes. “Mother sent me to find Rory for you. We specifically told him to be sure to come for dinner, but he’s so flighty and irresponsible. I was just on my way to find him, in fact.”

I just stared at Callista, because, apparently, she didn’t require my input, and I really didn’t have anything to say to her anyway. Normally, I would have stammered out some lame apology or excuse,



which she would then reject and ridicule me for attempting, and then I'd try to slink away before she sharpened her claws on my face. But not tonight. Something was different inside me tonight, and I didn't have any idea what it was or what could have caused it. But I thought I might like it and decided to just go along with it to see where it would take me.

I glared at my half-sibling and shrugged. "It's best for you and your mother not to have many expectations of me, Callista, and then you won't be so disappointed."

She frowned, unable to work out if I'd just smarted off to her or not. "Such a strange person," she said with a fake laugh to convince Lexington, slipping her arm through his and giving me her middle finger behind his back. She glanced over her shoulder at me and mouthed the word, *Asshole*.

"Come with me, Lord Lexington, and I'll take you back to the Great Hall. We're about to have dessert and more wine."

"Then I must ask Rory if he'll do me the honor of allowing me to escort him to the Hall," he said, neatly slipping out of Callista's clutches and turning toward me. He held out his arm to me, looking very proper and formal. I missed the way he'd been when I'd first encountered him and before Callista showed up.

"Your...Highness?" he prompted. I hadn't missed the little hesitations he kept doing. Plus, he'd called me "Rory," which was a serious breach of protocol. But then again, Alphas were a law unto themselves.

I glanced from him back to Callista and threw caution to the wind. In for a penny, in for a pound, as they said. Hell, Callista could only kill me once. I gave her a mean smile and took his arm, noticing the very distinct flinch he made the minute I touched him.

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"Lexington, there you are!" My father boomed out in a loud, inebriated voice as we entered the Great Hall. He was three sheets to the wind by this time in the proceedings, probably having already been a couple sheets along by the time he arrived. He reached for his goblet of wine, missed on the first grab but got lucky the second time and turned it up to drink down the contents. Then he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Who is that with you?" he said, peering over at me. He did a double take and reared backward in his chair, "Vesper?" he whispered hoarsely, suddenly turning pale. "Is that you?" He looked like he was about to pass out.

The queen came to his rescue by giving him a hard shove. "Don't be ridiculous, Elam. That's your son, Rory—though I have no idea what he thinks he's doing."

“Rory,” she said to me, her voice wintry. “What on earth... I mean, please explain what it is you’re wearing. I don’t remember buying you a new suit. And certainly not one in that awful color. You look like a leprechaun in all that green.”

I ignored her insult in favor of answering her question. “You don’t remember it because you haven’t bought me a new suit, my queen. Not in years, or maybe a decade or more. This suit is one of my father’s old ones that he’d packed away. And now I guess it’s mine.” I glanced over defiantly at my father in case he wanted to dispute that ownership, but he was busy filling his goblet again. I noticed his hands were trembling.

Berinda gave me a glare that by all rights should have frozen the marrow in my bones and rose to her feet, holding out her hand. “Step outside a moment with me and let’s have a chat about your tardiness, child.”

“Please Madam,” Lexington said, smoothly breaking in. “Don’t blame Prince Rory. It was entirely my fault for detaining him to talk outside. I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to make his acquaintance, but I’m afraid I may have been selfish in keeping him away from his dinner so long.”

“But I thought you didn’t know who he was,” Callista said, with heavy reproach in her voice.

He didn’t even look at her but kept his gaze on me. “You were mistaken then, weren’t you?”

The internal struggle Berinda suffered then was amazingly fun to watch, and it was all right there on her face for the world to see. On the one hand, she wanted badly to take off my head for being late and for showing up in this suit. She wanted to snap at him for being rude to Callista too, but she didn’t dare do either one.

Despite her attempts to mock me, it fell short, because I was getting some very obvious, admiring glances, her reference to leprechauns notwithstanding. She also desperately needed to stay in Lexington’s good graces and get him to marry me. I thought for one moment that her head actually might blow right off her shoulders and steam would shoot up out of her neck. The effort she made to suppress her rage was sublime to watch. In fact, it was touch and go for a moment there, but in the end, she persevered, her extreme greed coming to her aid at last. She couldn’t let these Alphas see what a true bitch she was. At least not yet.

Callista had said Lexington’s was the only offer they’d been able to get, after all, considering their unique criteria, so she certainly didn’t want to chase him off with an ugly display of temper. She choked down her rage at me and actually gave him a smile. A somewhat grisly effort, but she did manage.

“Of course, Lord Lexington. You’re so kind to overlook my stepson’s shortcomings, numerous though they are.”

“On the contrary, Your Majesty. If I may say so, I find Prince Rory...charming.” The words were right, but the look on his face and the way his lips twisted as he gave me the compliment, made me think the words were like ashes in his mouth. How had this gone so wrong so fast? What had I done?

The word “charming” still almost got Berinda, though, even if Lexington did have to force it out of his mouth. She fell back in her seat like he’d struck her, but I was pretty sure she’d recover. More’s the pity.

Lexington, who still had my arm, turned and led me over to the three Alphas who’d been at dinner the night before. They all rose to their feet to give me curt little bows. “Your Highness, may I present my cousins, Wyatt, Asher and Brandon.” Their combined dominance was almost enough to knock me off my feet.

I nodded to them, barely able to make eye contact and hiding a little behind Lexington. They stared back at me almost suspiciously, giving me the same odd look as before—fascination, mixed with something dark and flaring—something that looked like distaste, mixed with lust, though they must have still been reacting to my omega scent. The waves of it coming off them made a flutter and an ache start up in my chest, and it traveled all the way down to my dick again, following the same track as before. It made me want to sink to my knees, and I gripped the chair back in front of me to keep on my feet.

But what on earth had Berinda and Callista told them about me to warrant those looks of distaste or maybe even disgust before I’d ever even really met them? I mean, they were planning on killing me or selling me to the slavers one day, so I could understand their need to be cold and indifferent to me, but this hot antipathy was like drops of molten lava dripping onto my skin. It physically hurt.

The one Lexington had called Wyatt was the largest of the three cousins. He was taller than either of the others, even Lexington, and he was huge. He wasn’t quite as handsome as Lord Lexington. That didn’t mean he wasn’t still extremely good looking. All four of them had lucked out in the looks department, so my guess was that “handsome” ran in the family. Hell, it practically galloped. He was also the one who smelled like spun sugar, and he had lovely dark brown eyes—or they would be if they didn’t look as if he were mentally constructing my coffin.

As for Brandon, he still smelled like cinnamon apples and had gorgeous auburn highlights. He had high cheekbones and full, pouty lips. I thought he might be a bit of a fashion plate too, as the outfit he was wearing was one of those black velvet suits cut to look tight and slim fitting. The suits were considered the height of fashion right now in the kingdom. He wore a red cravat, and his red shirt collar had long, sharp points. He took my hand to brush the back of it with his lips, but he let it go as soon as he decently could and took a quick step back, as if my slick offended him. He turned away, but not far enough, because I saw him bring his hand to his mouth to wipe away the taint of my skin.

The last one was Asher, the blond who smelled like brownies. He looked me up and down with disdain written all over him. His nostrils flared wide as he looked at me and his eyes were ice blue, but as hot as I imagined the chambers in hell might be. Despite the cool, serial-killer color, they *burned* in his face. His suit was black too, and too tight across his broad shoulders. For some reason, the suit looked out of place on him, like it wasn't what he usually wore, and to me, he looked like a soldier. I didn't know why I thought so. I had a sudden image of him running me through with his sword, and alarmed, I took a step away from him and tucked my hand into Lexington's arm.

It was a purely instinctive move, because my body and mind were both telling me I needed protection, but he looked down at me with an expression like I'd never seen before, full of dislike and even hatred, but with a fierce possessiveness. It surprised me so much I pulled my hand away instinctively, but he pulled it back and held onto it, even though he flinched as his skin touched mine. I thought it must be from disgust and tried again to take a quick step back, glancing up at him in hurt surprise. He looked away but held on tightly.

I just didn't see this working out with Lexington. It's kinda hard to have a relationship with someone who finds you disgusting.

What the actual fuck was going on with these Alphas? Lexington had his tongue halfway down my throat just a few minutes earlier but now he was acting like I had some disease? For that matter, all of them were giving me so many mixed signals, they were making me dizzy.

I felt as if I'd missed some vitally important clue, some piece that would solve the puzzle, but just then Wyatt pulled out a chair for me and glared at me expectantly, like he was waiting for me to sit down. Since I knew none of them would take their seats until I did, I plopped down in the chair—hoping he wouldn't suddenly pick up the butter knife and stab me with it.

I didn't think I'd be able to eat a bite.

## Chapter Four

### *Lord Lexington*

I glanced to my left at the gorgeous young prince sitting across from me, moving food around on his plate to make it look like he was eating. So, this was the son of the notorious warlock Vesper.

My cousin Brandon sat on one side of him with Wyatt on the other side. I was across the table from him with Asher beside me. We had him surrounded with our energy, but it didn't seem to faze him in the least. This fucking little omega warlock didn't seem at all intimidated by any of us.

My fingers itched to grab him by that stupid little cravat he was wearing, drag him across the table to me and show him just exactly what his place was by ravishing those pretty, smart alecky little lips of his. I never wanted to kiss anybody so damn badly before in my life. Or turn them over my knee to show them their place.

Then I thought back to earlier when he'd touched me, and I'd shuddered. He had stepped back like he thought I was going to hit him. He was so much smaller than I was—hitting him was an appalling idea—so much so that I was immediately horrified that the thought of spanking him had even crossed my mind. Even though he needed it.

I glanced over at him again, uneasy by his proximity and surprised at the way he looked. Brandon, Asher and Wyatt had seen him in the Great Hall the night before and they'd said he had taken the form of a dark troll in a black, hooded cape. They obviously had let their imaginations run away with them, but they hadn't gotten a good look at him then because they said he'd kept his hood up. Still Brandon swore that he had seen him reach for a strawberry with black claws. I looked over at his hands now, clenched in front of him and saw his cuticles still stained with black, so it must have just been polish on his fingernails and not the black claws Brandon thought he saw. Brandon could be a bit overly dramatic. So, he hadn't been an actual troll under that cape, but just a boy. It was possible that he hadn't come into his full powers yet, and I could work with that. I wanted badly to take him in hand.

I wouldn't have been surprised at anything he was, though, considering who his mother had been and how powerful she was when she was still alive.

What was unexpected was Rory's beauty, as we'd heard just the opposite. He was small and yet perfectly formed—only barely coming up as high as my chest. He had glossy black curls and eyes like

gleaming green jewels in his face. I hadn't expected him to literally take my breath away. Everyone had told us he was plain and unattractive. It was what I'd always heard about him anyway. Maybe, he was like his mother before him, and he could glamor himself to look any way he wanted to?

And since I was listing expectations, I never thought I might like him so much either, or at least like the façade he presented to me out on the castle's ramparts. In those first few minutes before I knew who he was, I thought he was funny and clever and charming. He had literally wrapped me around his little finger and that had to have been deliberate. I didn't even like omegas as a general rule.

Omegas were needy and clingy. They were like fuckable dolls that didn't really have a mind of their own, but just said whatever they thought an Alpha wanted to hear. Why was this Rory so different? I knew that most omegas were sent off to omega training once they came into heat, around the age of fifteen, and Rory had obviously been kept at home, unless our intelligence on him was bad. So maybe that accounted for it.

We'd also heard he wasn't awakened to his heat yet, which also indicated he wouldn't have come into his full powers either. We had been planning on forcing his heat on him with injections our physicians said they could give him once we got him back home, to provide him with an heir, and solidify my claim as Regent. But hell, from ten feet away I could smell his wicked, sultry slick. I'd never smelled an omega so strong, and it was still fucking with my head. It was driving me wild even now, and I had to keep taking short breaths through my mouth or bury my nose often in my heavy napkin. The scent of luscious, ripe peaches wafted in the air around him.

I wondered if it might cause too much of a scene if I pulled him across the table to me, ripped off those tight pants of his and devoured him like a peach right here in front of everyone? Probably not the best of ideas. But I had to grip my hands together under the table to stop myself from doing it.

From the way Wyatt, Asher and Brandon were acting, they were being affected by his slick too. It was messing with their heads, I could tell, and I didn't like them looking at him. I didn't like it one damn bit.

Had he realized who I was out on the ramparts? Was the way he'd laughed, and the way he'd tasted only some kind of an act? A spell he'd put on me? It had been a shock when his sister came out and told me who he actually was.

I had to move this along quickly, because I was going to have him if it was the last thing I ever did. He wasn't in full heat yet, but it wouldn't be long from the way he smelled. I could make love to him, even knot him and it would hold us both temporarily. Or maybe the four of us would go at him all at once. It would be safer for us all that way. He had even acted like the kind who might enjoy that out on the ramparts. No doubt he'd already had more than his share of men.

And yet the idea of anyone else touching him made me crazy. He had to be causing this turmoil in my brain.

A sudden image of him laid out naked on my bed, his legs spread wide and his slick running down those white thighs as he stroked his pretty cock with one hand and tweaked one of his swollen nipples with the other as I watched made me jump restlessly to my feet. All eyes turned toward me, and I hesitated, wondering if I should warn the others first. But they were all looking up at me as if they anticipated what I was about to say and were good with it. They must know how affected I was by him.

“I want to make an official offer for Prince Rory,” I blurted out, casting my gaze over at the king. Not a moment too soon either. The king had been drinking prodigiously since our arrival and had almost passed out in his chair. He roused a little at the sound of my voice, but quickly sagged back down, mumbling something unintelligible.

“It’s likely the best offer you’ll get,” I said. “And if not, I’ll match any other offer for him.”

He didn’t answer and I was about to grab Rory and just take him out of there when the queen saved the day by standing up and holding out her hand. “Give the contract to me,” she said, “I can speak on the king’s behalf.”

I quickly reached into the breast pocket of my jacket and pulled out the folded paper, passing it over to the queen. “I’d like to take possession in the morning.”

I heard Prince Rory gasp beside me, but I ignored him and focused only on Berinda. “Would you like to read over it and get back to me, or...”

“No,” Berinda said firmly, casting a mean look at Rory. “We accept your generous offer. Do you have a pen?”

I whipped one out and the queen bent to quickly sign it. “There. It’s done,” she said, passing the contract back to Lexington. “When will you take him? He can be ready tonight if you prefer?”

“We have a few preparations to make first, so in the morning, Your Majesty. If he can be ready to travel by say, nine or ten?”

“He’ll be ready.”

“Good. Make sure he’s packed, and I’ll bring the omega price to you then. Will you provide someone to perform the binding ceremony?”

“Yes, of course.”

I bowed to her again. “Then we’ll take our leave tonight and see you tomorrow.” Turning to the others, I motioned for them to join me. If I didn’t get away from Rory soon, I’d take him right there in front of everyone. I gave him one last look as we left the Hall, and he was sitting unmoving in his chair, staring straight ahead of him, looking stunned and a little shell shocked. I was sure it was just



an act, so I steeled my heart against him. We had our wards in place against any retaliation he might try. He was outnumbered and outclassed, and he had no chance of getting out of this.

“Prince Rory, we’ll collect you at nine in the morning, and we’ll leave after the binding ceremony. Be sure to bring a heavy cape—it’s cold where we’re going. Don’t forget to wear something you can ride in.”

At last, I got a response. His green eyes flicked up to me and back down. Then he shifted his gaze to the queen. “I don’t ride. I was never allowed lessons.”

“Then you can ride with me.”

I didn’t engage him any further. His slick was almost overpowering, and I needed to get some fresh air to clear my head. But despite my bravado, I still had niggling doubts. What if I were to be unsuccessful in binding his powers? I didn’t think that would happen, not with Asher to help me, but what if it did?

I could put him in some isolated tower, covered with protection spells. And I still had the option of selling him after his eventual coronation, just getting him out of my sight, as soon as his despicable father died, and he was crowned. The jury was still out on that. He’d have a child by then, but I didn’t think that problem was an issue. I could simply take the baby away from him as soon as it was born and make sure he never saw it again. I could keep it strictly away from his influence. Should the child still have a dark nature like his, I’d bind its powers, like I planned to do with Rory as soon as I could.

Or should I keep Rory in his tower indefinitely and use him as much and as often as I wanted until he was nothing more than a dried-out husk? Until he stopped tempting me so damn much. My older brother would say that was far too dangerous, and that if I was unable to bind his powers, I needed to just put a bullet in him as soon as I was crowned Regent. But I found a bit of danger exciting. It kept me on my toes.

Or maybe I could just tell myself the truth. I didn’t know if I could hurt him—I really didn’t think I’d be able to.

“Until tomorrow then,” I said to him and strode from the room. I didn’t look back. Refused to look back, because he had glanced up at me as I turned away, and I’d caught a glimpse of his eyes. I would have thought they might be angry, or that they at least would have been drenched with tears to make me feel sorry for him and play on my sympathy. Instead, they looked resigned, cornered, hopeless and almost accepting of whatever his fate might be. I told myself sternly that it was all an act—a sham to play on my sympathies.

But I’d seen that exact same look once in the eyes of a red fox once when my father’s hunting dogs had it cornered and were about to rip into it with their teeth and their claws and tear it to pieces. That had been my last day ever of hunting, and I’d never allowed my father to browbeat me into going

with him again.

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*Rory*

I sat for a while after the Alphas left, not really seeing or hearing anything—too much in shock, I guess. When I started this evening, I knew I was supposed to meet the Alphas who would bid on me, but I was so naïve, I never realized how quickly everything would happen. Stupid, really, when I considered it. I knew how much my stepmother hated me, had always hated me, and how much she wanted me out of the way.

I just thought I'd have a little more time.

Just like that, I realized that all the times I starved myself or ran down the mountain trails until I was exhausted—all attempts to hold off my heat cycle—all had been a ridiculous waste of time. I'd done it so no Alpha would have me, but it was all in vain. My heat cycle would begin in full force just as soon as the suppression pills in that little bottle ran out, and then I'd be at the mercy of my body.

The Alpha would come for me in the morning, take me to his home, wherever that was, and my life would be short and unpleasant until my father died. I'd no doubt have one child after another with him, and meanwhile, Lexington would carry on an affair with my half-sister to get her pregnant as well. He would need back up after all, in case my children didn't survive, not always a sure thing in our kingdom, where medicine was not a priority and not at all advanced. If I and my child both survived, then my "mate," Lord Lexington, would take over as Regent while I fell down some steps, or ate something that didn't agree with me, or met my tragic fate in some other unfortunate way.

Unless I did something to save myself by taking matters in my own hands.

It seemed to me I had only one option that didn't involve me giving in to him. I could run just as fast and far as I could and then hide out until he forgot all about me. Like in a hundred years or so.

It was a bad option for all the reasons I'd already thought of and for one more. Because Lexington *wouldn't* forget me; there was too much at stake. Too much money and an entire kingdom to be had. No way he'd just shrug his shoulders and say, "Oh well, easy come, easy go."

Winter was coming on too, and in this part of the kingdom, and especially to the north, where Lexington said we were going, winters could be harsh or even downright deadly. I had to also worry about going into heat from time to time and somehow managing that, on top of finding food and shelter. I had no friends and no one who cared about me except Griselda, who, according to Billy,

was married to an itinerant tinker. There was no way of telling where she was and no way to get in touch with her. I'd be nothing but prey to anyone with a dick, though only an Alpha's knot could truly satisfy me.

Chasing after a knot would be what I craved and what I longed for, day in and day out when I was in my heat cycle, but it would be dangerous, not to mention painful, and there would be no guarantees I'd even be able to find an Alpha willing to help me. No guarantees either that even if I found some benevolent, willing Alpha, his own omega wouldn't claw my eyes out for poaching.

No. Running, though it sounded good at the moment, was just *not* a viable option.

But even if it was a bad option, I had no choice but to take it. I refused to give up and give in. I refused to be afraid. I had to finish this meal as it may be the last one I got in a while, get back to my room and then once everyone left or went to bed for the night, I'd sneak from the castle and make a run for it.

I stood up to leave and Berinda's head whipped around like a snake's. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To my room to pack. If I'm to be ready to leave early in the morning, I need to get started."

She waved her hand at me, dismissing me, and then she went back to celebrating my leaving soon by drinking another glass of wine. I slipped out of the Great Hall. I wanted desperately to go to the privacy of my room and fall apart, but I didn't have that luxury. As I passed the door leading out to the castle ramparts where I'd been earlier that evening, however, I couldn't resist stepping outside for one more look up at the stars. I might never see them from these same ramparts again.

I slipped outside the door and went back over to the walls to gaze out. Time had finally run out on me. All my dreams of never going into heat at all and just living quietly in the castle had all gone up, literally, in that puff of Lexington's cigar smoke. Those dreams had all been foolish and unrealistic anyway. As soon as my father passed away, everything would have changed, and I wouldn't have had a room to hide in anymore. Berinda and Callista, not to mention the new male heir, would make certain of that.

I stood for another moment looking out at the night sky. I saw a flash of movement coming from the direction of the forest and saw an owl plunge down from a tree at the edge of the forest to pounce onto some unsuspecting lemming or mouse. Because of their large wings, owls could glide soundlessly down to attack their prey. They were beautiful and formidable hunters.

I felt a little like that unsuspecting creature that had met the owl's claws. Lexington had swooped in unnoticed, too, and attacked without warning. Now he and his gorgeous cousins had me under their claws, and I had little chance to escape.

I could run, but I knew they'd come after me and hunt me down, no matter how long it took—and

somehow, I didn't think it would take all that long.

I heard a small cry from below and I leaned way out over the narrow, vertical aperture in the fortifying wall to try and get a glimpse of the owl's unfortunate supper. I guess I identified with that little creature, in a way, and I thought someone should bear witness to the poor thing's final moments. Suddenly, as I leaned way out over the opening, I felt a rough arm around my waist as someone behind me grabbed me and hauled me back down to my feet. I had only a moment to register Lexington's furious face before he hurled me up against the walls of the castle.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Lexington, who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, yelled at me, his voice fierce and his face full of rage. He shook my shoulders for good measure, banging the back of my head once against the wall. "Are you crazy? Did you think to escape me by throwing yourself off the castle walls?"

"What? No, I..."

"You won't get away so easily, Rory. You'll *never* break free from me, do you understand?"

"What?" I got my hands up between us and pushed on his chest with both fists. I didn't budge him, but I felt better. "No, I don't understand! I don't understand *any* of this!"

I was shouting, so his hand slipped over my mouth to shut me up. I struggled uselessly against him for a moment, soon realizing his hands were like iron bands, and he was incredibly strong. "You're hurting me!" I cried from behind his hand or tried to. He must have been able to understand the muffled complaint though, because he immediately let go of me and removed his hand from over my mouth, though he kept his strong, hard body pressed against mine and pinned to the wall.

He glared down accusingly at me, his face only inches from mine. "You were trying to kill yourself, weren't you? Admit it."

"What? No!"

"You were leaning out so far your feet were off the floor. Were you trying to work up the courage to jump?"

"I said, no!" I shouted back at him, and he growled at me. *Growled.*

"Don't you talk back to me," he said, hitting me with a pouty, domineering, who-the-fuck-do-you-think-you're-talking-to look that made me want to laugh. At the same time, it was so damn overbearing it made my slick spurt out onto the pad covering my backside. Gods, he was so fucking dominant that it made me shiver. He lifted his face up and sniffed the air as my pheromones swirled between us, growling again, even louder this time, as he got a nose full of my slick.

"Stop that," he snarled at me, like I had any control over it whatsoever. "Or you'll find yourself stripped naked and riding my cock." He hesitated as if he was thinking of doing just that but then he shook his head and sighed. "You're signed, sealed and almost delivered now. I decided to bring the

omega price back and hand it over tonight, because I don't trust Queen Berinda. She could change her mind and want more gold. And it's a damn good thing I came back."

"That's when you spotted me out here?"

"That's right. I'm taking possession now, since I can't trust you not to try something stupid." He jerked me away from the castle wall and gave me a little push. "Lead the way to your rooms. I'll give you a few minutes to pack a few things, though I can furnish you with anything you need from this point on, so pack light. Just the essentials." I opened my mouth to protest, but he leaned in until his face was right up against mine. "Be quiet and do as you're told. And don't try anything either. I warn you, my powers are greater than yours, and I won't hesitate to use them."

His powers? What the hell was he talking about? Of course, he was more powerful—he was an Alpha, rich and gorgeous, while I was a small, plain omega who had less power than anyone in the castle, as witnessed by the fact that I'd just been *sold* like a slave to him and his pack.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, feeling sullen and glaring back at him.

He made a scoffing sound and took my arm in a custodial way again to pull me off the ramparts and out into the corridor where his cousins were waiting. His cousin Brandon was leaning against the wall and gave me a look that was almost challenging, like he just wanted me to start something with him. Wyatt looked menacing, like he always did, but Asher seemed to know something was up. He took an aggressive step toward me.

"What's happening? What did he do?" he growled.

"I was right," Lexington told them. "He was about to throw himself off the wall to fall to his death."

All three of them seemed shocked, and Brandon actually took a quick step toward me as if to restrain me in some way, though I had already been captured pretty damn effectively. Wyatt actually put a huge, hard hand on the back of my neck and held on. He didn't tighten it, which was a good thing as his hand wrapped all the way around my neck and he would have choked me to death if he had. But I definitely felt controlled. Lexington moved his arm to wrap around my waist, so Brandon could grab my wrist. Asher took the other wrist. It seemed to soothe something inside them, because they all stopped growling, at least. Honestly, what was up with all that growling? This was going to get on my nerves a lot sooner rather than later.

"Lead the way," Lexington barked at me, and I turned reluctantly in the direction of my room. It was almost impossible to walk with all four of them hanging onto me, but I knew resistance was futile. None of them were hurting me, though their grips were strong, and I definitely wasn't going anywhere they wouldn't allow me to. I also felt something oppressive settling over me, and it felt almost like a net dropping over my head. An invisible one, to be sure, but I could feel it constraining

me completely.

I stumbled along as well as I could under the circumstances until I got to my door and hesitated.

“I can pack by myself. The four of you can stay out here.”

“And let you swallow poison or jump from your own windows? Not fucking likely,” Wyatt said softly, but menacingly in my ear.

“Poison? Where are you getting all this from? I have no intention of harming myself. I’ll leave that up to you.”

They ignored that and opened the door to my room, shoving me inside and following me in. I straightened up and glared at them. “Now what?”

“Change into something to travel in,” Lexington said. “Something warm. Snow has started falling outside.”

I went over to my wardrobe and threw the doors open wide, so they could see the sparse contents. Over my shoulder, Lexington said, “Where are all your clothes?”

“Those are all I have.”

He snorted. “Impossible. You’re a prince. The son of the king.”

“I believe you’ve met my stepmother?”

He turned to me, looking incredulous. “She must purchase clothing for you.”

“Must she?” I replied mockingly. “Think again.”

He huffed but motioned toward my velvet suit. “Take that off and change into something more sensible for traveling.”

“Not until you all turn your back.”

“Take it off, damn you. We have no interest in your body.”

I gave that the look it deserved because I knew it for a bald-faced lie the second it came out of his mouth. I had seen the looks on their faces as they stood there regarding me. They may not all be happy about it, but they were all dying to see me naked, and they may as well give up lying about it. I rolled my eyes and backed up, only to stumble over Brandon, who put out a hand to settle me.

“Well?” I said, looking at him over my shoulder, “Can you give me some room here?”

His face actually turned pink, but he stepped backward. They all watched as I slipped out of my jacket and then, brazening it out and pretending to be casual about it, I took off my trousers, which left me in just my shirt, my drawers and my cravat.

But then there was the corset Billy had insisted I put on under my jacket. My cheeks began to burn at the idea of them seeing me in it.

There was nothing for it though—they were all staring at me, their eyes hot and intense, like they were here for a show, and they weren’t leaving until they got one. I untied my cravat and threw it to

the bed, then began to slowly unbutton my shirt. They wanted to intimidate me? Scare me? We'd see about that.

The pearl buttons were small and seemed to take forever but I unbuttoned them slowly, glancing up at them from time to time from under my eyelashes. A couple of them were shifting their feet and looking restless. Lexington was watching me as intently as a fox watches a rabbit hole.

Finally, I was done, and I slipped out of the shirt slowly, letting it fall to the floor and turning around to face them wearing the corset Billy had insisted on putting on me—was it only a couple of hours ago? So much had changed since then.

It nipped my waist in tightly, flaring a little over the ass. The four of them stared at me in my corset and underwear, their eyes roaming up and down my body, I turned around again and spoke to Asher this time. “Unlace me.”

He hesitated, so I tried out one of their growls. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

He started to step forward, but Lexington shouldered him out of the way. He gave me an angry look and reached down to pull a wicked looking knife from his boot. He saw me looking at it and smiled mockingly. Then I felt his hands brushing against my back, as he made quick slashes with his knife at the corset strings to get me out of the thing. It was over in seconds, and he didn't so much as scratch me, but I knew he had deliberately tried to scare me.

“Damn it, you could have cut me!” I yelled at him. He sneered back at me.

“Calm down. You were never in any danger.”

I gave him an eat shit and die look and tore what was left of the corset off to throw on the floor. This time before I could turn back around, one of them had grabbed the hem of my undershirt and whisked it over my head. I turned in surprise to see all four of them staring at me.

I knew I had a nice body—my muscles weren't huge, but I was lean and well-formed from the near constant exercise I did every day. Their eyes all widened, and their pheromones flared, hitting me hard with mostly the smell of gunpowder, but with a hint of candy floss, cinnamon apples and brownies mixed in too. It should have been awful, but it was a surprisingly delicious smell that made my knees weak.

I could have put my hands up to try and hide, but why bother? They'd just have made me show them anyway. Lexington licked his lips, and he traced his fingers over the red marks the stays on my corset had left on my skin. The others just stared, breathing a little too hard. I knew it was because my omega scent was hitting them particularly hard, now that my clothing was coming off. Lexington used the side of his finger to flick at one of my nipples, and it was he who spoke first.

“Take those off,” he said, frowning and pointing down at my drawers. They had seen better days and were threadbare and practically falling apart anyway. I slid them down my legs and stepped out

of them, glad enough to leave them behind, except with them came the folded cloth I'd been using to catch my slick secretions. I supposed that cat was out of the bag anyway. My omega scent was suddenly chokingly strong in the confines of my small room.

All of them inhaled sharply, and Wyatt blindly reached for me, snarling when Lexington muscled him aside.

"No," Lexington said, his voice soft, but firm and urgent. "Don't touch him. He's mine. And once I get started on him, I won't stop for a while." To me, he said, "You aren't in full heat, are you? You don't act like it."

I shook my head. "No, just coming in. It's my first, so I don't know how long it will take."

He nodded distractedly. "I'll wait until I get him out of this place," he told his cousins. "I want to take my time with him, and we may be tied up for a day or two."

Brandon and Asher nodded, but Wyatt was still staring at me like he was transfixed. His hand had moved to my waist, and he began trailing his fingers down towards my dick. I was throbbing with need, but I didn't want to show him. Still, I wasn't sure I could stand here much longer allowing his fingers to tangle in my pubic hair without my knees buckling.

Lexington snatched his hand away. "I said, he's mine."

"You got him naked right in front of us. And his omega scent is driving me crazy. What did you expect us to do?" Wyatt growled at him. "I'm not waiting for shit." He pulled me into his arms and of their own accord, my legs went up and wrapped themselves around his waist, but it wasn't him I wanted. I had little control over my body, it seemed, but it was Lex's arms I wanted to be in, gods help me. This other Alpha's scent of spun sugar took my breath away, but not in a way I wanted.

"Do you want this?" Wyatt whispered in my ear, and I moaned, afraid to speak up. Crossing an Alpha when they were in a heat lust wasn't safe.

Then Lexington charged in and put his hands on my waist to rip me away from him—it felt like a rescue, and I cried out with longing for him, but he ignored me, though he still wrapped me in his strong embrace. He turned me to face him, and he was holding me around the waist, my feet dangling above the floor, parts of my naked body pressing against his groin, so I knew exactly how affected he was. And how aggressively he was responding. Anger and outrage was radiating off him.

"I said, *no!*" he yelled in Wyatt's face, showing his teeth and asserting his dominance. "He's mine, and I don't want your hands on him. Any of you. This is probably some spell he's casting on us, don't you see? It's impossible for him to smell this good to all of us without magic. To make us all want him so much that we're fighting over him. This is what he wants."

My brain was finally beginning to kick back in. "W-what?" I said, feeling like I was being drugged by their raging pheromones. "Magic? What magic? What are you talking about?"



He ignored me, but I felt Brandon and Asher's hands reaching for me to cup my ass. Lexington shouted at them. "Stop it. You know he's off-limits. So back off."

Brandon and Asher stepped back, looking a little embarrassed, and I whimpered. With my slick flowing and my pheromones raging, I needed them to fill me with their knots, because I was suffering.

I felt Lexington's thick finger slipping into my ass, his finger that was being covered with my slick, and I sighed with relief and tried to rotate on it. Odd how I recognized his touch without even looking. I'd have known it anywhere. I moaned and felt another one of his digits slip inside me. I turned my face into his neck and breathed him in.

"Now settle down," he whispered in my ear. "I'll take care of you later." His voice was all rough and growly in my ear. He pulled his fingers away after a few moments, and I moaned in real pain, but quickly his fingers found their way to my cock, and he began slowly stroking me as the others watched. He was driving me out of my mind, not to mention what he was doing to his cousins. They were all riveted to what he was doing and breathing hard. He leaned in close and put his mouth up to my ear.

"You want me to fuck you, don't you? Don't worry. I'm gonna lick you all over and make you beg for more."

My groans were getting louder, and my slick was getting worse. Despite the pill I'd taken this fucker was going to bring on my full heat if he wasn't careful.

"It's hard to resist him," Asher muttered. "He has to be using magic against us. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

Wyatt ignored Lexington's question, his breathing ragged as he edged closer. Lexington snarled at him to make him move back.

Wyatt snarled back. "Then take care of him. You can see he needs it!"

"Stay out of this, Wyatt. I told you he's mine."

"Wait, all of you! I think I know what this is—he must be Lex's true mate," Brandon replied. "We're bonded to our cousin, so his omega is affecting us strongly too. We're reacting to Lex's pheromones as well as Rory's."

That got a huge reaction, as Lexington pulled his hand away and started protesting loudly in anger.

"Fuck that! There's no fucking way a warlock is my 'true mate.' I don't even believe in them."

Brandon grinned at him. "Maybe they believe in you."

I felt close to passing out, personally, and wished they'd all stop talking so somebody could just fuck me. I needed a knot with every fiber of my being. Not that I'd ever had one, but I knew it instinctively. I craved being filled up and claimed. I could barely concentrate on what they were

saying. My slick was flowing freely by this point, and I was humping Lexington's leg. He absently bit my ear and slapped my ass. "Stop it. Be good."

I felt my face flame in embarrassment and hid it against his chest.

"I don't believe in true mates," he said softly, turning to the others, but I noticed he kept holding onto me so tightly I could barely breathe. "There's no such thing. That's just an old wives' tale."

"Listen to me, I think we have to consider the possibility." Brandon insisted. "And our grandmother told me it was true, and she was an omega. And if one of you assholes call *her* a liar, we're gonna have a problem." He looked around challengingly at them. "Besides, when was the last time you reacted like this to an omega? Think about it."

They were quiet for a moment as they apparently did just that. The only sound was them panting for breath.

"I mean, yes, they all smell great and make you want to fuck them, but it's nothing like this. From the first time Wyatt and Ash and I saw him in the Great Hall, or I should say, caught his scent, we wanted him. Calm down, Lex, you know we'd never poach your omega. But it was all we could do to stay in our chairs that night and not just grab him and run out of the castle with him."

Lexington looked concerned and even seemed to consider what Brandon was saying, but then he shook his head. "I feel the same. But no. I don't believe it. I won't. He's using magic. I can feel it all over him and all around us."

They weren't talking to me, but come to think of it, I felt something too, even through my haze of lust. Something dark and powerful was moving around us, and over us, like some predator stalking its prey and about to pounce. I looked uneasily around the room, and I saw the Alphas were doing the same. Lexington set me back on my feet, grabbed my shoulders and turned me around to face him.

"Stop it," he said, his voice low and full of menace. "Stop whatever it is you're doing, or I'll stop you."

"But I'm not doing anything! I swear it," I cried.

He raised his hand anyway, and I flinched but glared up at him defiantly.

Wyatt and Asher both grabbed his arm and pulled it down. "Are you crazy? You can't hurt your mate."

Lexington dropped his hand and stepped back, looking a little stunned at his own actions. "I wasn't going to hurt him. I would never hit an omega. I-I was just trying to scare him and make him stop." He glanced sullenly over at me. "He's still doing it. And it doesn't help that he's naked in front of all of you, and you're all looking at him. I need to cover him up at least."

Lexington took a step back as did the others, but he leaned forward again and took my cock in his warm hand. My knees got weak, and I tried to get closer to him, but I couldn't seem to move. He had

me frozen. He looked around at all of us and murmured some words in Latin that sounded like, “*Hoc est meum.*”

The others, who seemed to have some kind of telepathy with him, knowing what he was going to do before he did it, all nodded their heads. “We know he’s yours,” Wyatt said. “And we’re sorry. We can control this. Don’t worry.”

Lexington pulled his hand away and held it over me as I stood there shivering. “*Facere vesta.*”

With a loud “whumping” sound, yards and yards of heavy material fell suddenly from the ceiling, just materializing out of the thin air and enveloping me. It was a huge, fur-lined cape falling down over my body. All three of them jumped back so they wouldn’t be covered too. The thing had full, long sleeves and was made of some kind of heavy material, much too warm in this stifling room full of pheromones and Alphas. There were no buttons or laces on the front either, so I had no idea how to get out of it.

“W-what did you do?” I cried, barely able to move under the heavy weight of the cape. “*How* did you do that?”

Lexington looked at me grimly. “You’re not the only one here with magic. It’s time you learned that.”

## Chapter Five

Wyatt picked me up and plunked me on the bed, while the other two found an old carpet bag from somewhere and began throwing my few clothing items into it. Brandon went to my dresser to get my hairbrush and the only toiletries I had, and Lexington found my old black cape with the hood. He passed it over to them to be packed too.

“Stick out your feet,” he ordered, and he slipped off my father’s dress shoes and jammed my old boots back on my feet.

“Take him,” he said, nodding to Wyatt and once again, I was picked up like a bride and this time Wyatt carried me out of the room. We headed toward the Great Hall, and Lexington pushed his way past the guards and walked boldly inside. Berinda jumped to her feet.

“Lord Lexington, what on earth? Is something wrong? I thought you’d left for the night.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Madam. But I require a priest to perform our binding ceremony right away.”

“But I thought you wanted to wait until morning.”

“I’ve changed my mind. You have my gold. Now furnish me with a priest.”

I thought it must have been a long time since Berinda was spoken to in such a way or faced all that strong Alpha energy. It was radiating off all four of them, as their blood was high on pheromones and arousal. Danger crackled in the air around us. Berinda was many things, but stupid wasn’t one of them.

She snapped her fingers at a guard and said, “Go fetch a priest. Quickly!”

Silence fell over the hall, the only sound that of my father’s soft snores. He was face down, drunk and snoring on the table, unmoving. Berinda and Callista were both staring at me with wide eyes, and I wondered if Callista might be rethinking her mother’s idea about throwing her lot in with this pack of Alphas.

As for me, I stayed as quiet and still as a mouse, wishing Wyatt would put me down, but not really expecting it to happen. Brandon was pacing up and down in front of the long head table and Asher looked like he was about to jump out of his skin. Lexington was grim and quiet. I hated everyone’s eyes on me, and Wyatt must have too, because he leaned over to whisper to me. “Pull your hood over your face, damn it.”

I did, and then turned my head to bury it in his chest. He stirred restlessly but didn’t make any move to stop me. “You can put me down if I’m too heavy,” I whispered to him, but he only made a

derisive noise deep in his throat and kept standing there holding me.

Finally, after at least fifteen or twenty highly uncomfortable minutes with the entire royal court watching us silently, the guards came back in with a priest. The poor man looked as if he'd been sleeping. He had hastily thrown on his purple robes and neither of his shoes were tied, but he had his red stole around his neck and was carrying his book of prayers. Lexington went to speak to him and finally, Wyatt set me back down on my feet. I swayed a little and he put out his hand to me. I took it gratefully to hold me up. Brandon stood on one side of me and Wyatt on the other, as if they were afraid I'd make a break for it.

If I could have moved in that godawful heavy cape, I might have.

At last, Lexington came back over to us, the priest trailing along behind him. Lexington stepped up beside me, taking my arm and the others took a step back. The priest began talking over Lexington and me in the Old Language of the gods and goddesses, and immediately, my head began to ache. It got harder and harder to breathe as he kept going, and finally, about five minutes into it, when I was literally gasping for air, Lexington shot me a dark look and said something to the priest in a low voice.

I didn't understand what he said, because by that time there was a loud buzzing in my ears, and I was about to pass out. Brandon passed me a glass of water and I drank it gratefully down. The priest waited a few more minutes until my breathing became easier and then he made a sign over us and motioned for us to step closer. He took the long, red, scarf-like stole from around his neck and wrapped it around first Lexington's hand, then mine. He said a few more words over us, and then removed the stole and put it back around his neck.

Lexington nodded to him, and then turned to Berinda. "I'm taking possession of him tonight. We'll be at my estate, should you need anything. Just send a message."

Berinda yelled something after us that sounded like, "What about Callista?" but my new mate had already turned quickly away, taken my hand in his and was pulling me along behind him until we reached the corridor. Then he bent to sweep me up into his arms and carry me out of the castle, out of my old life and into one of the darkest, coldest nights I'd ever experienced.

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Four massive horses were brought around by the stable hands, who had never unsaddled them or taken off their side packs, as the Alphas had expected to be only a few minutes. Lexington mounted his horse, a big black one with a white forelock, and he held out his arms for me. Wyatt swooped me up and deposited me in front of him. The big horse shuffled his feet restlessly and turned his head to

look back at me, showing me the whites of his eyes. Lexington spoke softly to him and reached past me to pat his neck.

“You’re making him nervous.”

“Me? What am I doing?”

“Perhaps he senses your true nature.”

“Well, that’s just bullshit.”

He didn’t answer and I was aware of Wyatt, Asher and Brandon getting on their horses behind us.

Lexington clicked his tongue to his, and we were finally on our way through my father’s castle gates and out onto the open road. The moon and the stars watched us from overhead, lighting our way. I was leaving my father’s castle at last, but the circumstances were far from what I’d wanted.

We were a few more miles down the road before I remembered the little bottle of pills Billy had given me. They were still in the drawer I’d put them in inside my room.

I was so screwed.

The wind seemed to cut right through me, mocking me and my attempts to stay warm. My new, fur-lined cape wasn’t doing enough to keep out the wind, considering I was naked underneath it. I began to shiver even harder—deep, wrenching jerks that my poor body was using to try and generate some warmth. Besides that, it was so dark I could barely see a hand in front of my face, and I hated the dark. I whimpered as I looked around—I couldn’t help it—it just slipped out.

Lexington made a sound of impatience and pulled me back against his body, to share some of his body heat. “Gods, you’re so much trouble,” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to freeze to death more quietly. Aren’t you cold?”

“Cold?” He shrugged. “I suppose a little. But we need to put some miles between us and the castle before we stop at any inns. And we’re going to travel at night for a couple of days. I don’t trust your father not to send someone after you once he’s sobered up.”

“*My* father? Send someone after *me*?”

“Yes, of course. Don’t be so annoying. You’re Vesper’s child. He’ll know your true worth, even if your stepmother doesn’t.”

“You keep saying things like that, but I have no idea what you’re talking about. What does my mother have to do with any of this? She’s been dead and gone for almost twenty years.”

“You’re the same as she was. I can feel it, Rory, so stop trying to lie about it.”

“I’m not lying, and what do you mean, the same? I have no idea what you’re talking about. Do you mean I’m plain like she was?”

“Plain? Vesper was beautiful, just as you are. A few of the artists in the kingdom tried to paint

her beauty, but they weren't ever able to capture it."

"What artists? I've never seen any of her portraits, and surely, they would have been in the royal gallery."

"They are—just not in Igella's. They're in her home country. Morovia."

"Morovia? What are you talking about?"

"It's a good act, but I'm not buying it, Rory. You couldn't be so ignorant of your true history and nature. There's simply no way."

"You keep saying things like that, but I assure you, I am, because once again, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Very well, if you want me to spell it out for you, I will, just so you'll know that we're onto you, and this pretense of yours is foolish. You're a warlock, a practitioner of black magic, like your mother before you. We know this, so don't bother to feign ignorance or try to deny it. Vesper was extremely powerful, one of the most wicked warlocks who ever lived, and we have every reason to believe that you are too. That kind of power definitely runs in families, and your grandfather was also incredibly strong, though he practiced white magic.

"He managed to flee Morovia with Vesper when she reached puberty. By then he had discovered she was a throwback to some earlier ancestor, and he knew who and what she was. Rather than lawfully register her with the king and have her powers bound, he ran with her and brought her to Igella, where neither the king nor his subjects even believed in magic."

He tightened his hold around my waist as I tried to protest. But I hadn't heard the worst of it yet.

"Be quiet and listen. Your stepmother was so anxious to be rid of you that she never checked past the color of our gold to see who *we* really are. We're not exactly who we said we were, Rory. Asher and I are both witches, too, though not your kind. We know you're a warlock, and we're taking you back to my home so you and your magic can be bound, contained and put under our control. Luckily for you, we've found no evidence you've practiced your craft as yet. That will help save you. When the time comes, I'll become Regent of Igella and your country will be under my control. Under Morovian rule. In the meantime, there's no escape for you. You'll be under my control at all times, too, kept by me under close watch and lock and key. I'll be the first thing you see in the morning and the last you'll see at night. If you behave yourself, you won't be chained, but if you don't, I won't hesitate to lock you down.

"From now on, this pack will be your whole world, so you better get used to it. If you try hard to amend your ways and renounce evil and all dark magic, we'll only bind your powers and let you live. If not, we can deal with that too."

A deep shudder wracked my body, and I could feel a strange tugging sensation in my chest. It felt

a little like a giant screw was being tightened on me from the inside of my chest, locking me down and making it hard to breathe. I cried out and he leaned over to murmur to me. “Don’t fight me, boy. There’s nothing you can do.”

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*Warlock.*

The word hung in the air accusingly, like an arrow pointed straight at my heart.

I spent a great deal of time in the library growing up, and I had read the “forbidden” books. The ones on the high shelves that you needed special permission from the Head Librarian to even look at. Everyone except the royal family, that is. No one else in my family ever cared about any kind of reading, but I consumed all books voraciously, and books on magic piqued my interest right from the start.

*The Discoverie of Witchcraft, The Key of Solomon, De Nigromancia, The Necronomicon*—they were all books and grimoires on black magic and the dark arts, mostly copies, translated (badly in some cases) from the original source. I tried to read them all. I knew about witches and warlocks, and the differences between them, though our religion in Igella forbade us believing in any of it. Our ancestors had rejected magic hundreds of years ago, but we knew all about witches and warlocks. And I knew, because I’d read the ancient books. They seemed to know what they were talking about, and they said Vesper was a warlock. The thought that I could be a warlock like my mother before me, frightened me more than anything that had happened to me so far, and that was saying a lot.

Warlocks were evil and trafficked with the dead and the demonic. They were outlaws and criminals, and they were thought of as deceivers. Liars—in fact, the word “warlock” itself was derived from an old word that meant “oath breaker.” Witches, on the other hand were more truthful and good. They were often called wise men or women who fought against the dark powers, were defenders of the king and his armies, healed the sick and even helped the crops to grow. The powers belonging to both types of magic practitioners were believed to be passed down within families.

Morovia was full of witches, and always had been. They were practitioners of magic, like the warlocks, but warlocks practiced dark or evil magic, while witches practiced “white” or good magic.

But I had never heard anything like this about my mother. Nothing about witchcraft, either dark or light. Not so much as a word. It made my head reel.



“I don’t understand any of this. How can you believe I have magic? If I had, I’d have left that castle years ago to avoid mistreatment.”

“I assume you had your reasons. I don’t pretend to know what they are. But if you doubt the darkness of your nature, think back to when the priest spoke his holy words over us during the binding ceremony. I saw how much pain it caused you. If I hadn’t told him to stop when he did, it might have injured you.”

I was silent then, because he wasn’t lying. The memory was vivid and fresh regarding the pain in my head and of how hard it had been to breathe when the priest was doing our binding ceremony. At the time, I’d chalked it up to fear and stress. *Could* it have been something more? No, I couldn’t believe such a crazy thing. I couldn’t believe my own mother was an evil warlock, a wicked witch and a practitioner of the dark arts.

“You didn’t even know my mother. Her name may have been the same as this person you’re speaking of, but they were different people. They had to be. You say this Vesper of yours had magic. I never heard that of my mother.”

“Her father, your grandfather, Lord Rory, was a powerful witch in Morovia too. He loved his daughter and when he realized what she was, he disguised her to smuggle her out of Morovia, but later she revealed her dark nature. Your father, King Elam, knew who and what she was. But he fell in love with Vesper so madly once he married her that he helped her hide her magic. Your backward country doesn’t believe in magic, good or bad. She obviously revealed her true identity to him, and he couldn’t resist her—or more likely, she gave him a love potion. Either one might have happened. Your father grieved for her for years after she died from complications of childbirth. Your birth.”

“I don’t believe you.”

I could feel irritation radiating off him. “What reason would I have to lie?”

“Because you want the crown of Igella! Because you’re a terrible person, who-who lies! I hate you!”

“The feeling is mutual,” he said calmly, but I could hear the anger in his voice. “How can you expect us to think you never knew any of this?”

“My mother died when I was only a few days old. If she was so powerful, why didn’t she prevent that?”

“Only the gods have power over life and death. Your grandfather tried to heal her, but he failed.”

“You seem to have the answers to everything, so I don’t suppose you require my input.”

He looked away, rather than give me an answer, and I was too cold and miserable to keep talking to him anyway. After a few more minutes had passed, however, he must have grown weary of my constant shivering and teeth chattering, because he picked me up bodily and turned me around to face

him. I gasped and tried to reel backward, almost falling off the horse. I grabbed for the nearest object, which happened to be him, wrapping my arms around his waist.

He pulled me closer. “Good. Now stay there and be still,” he said.

“I’m afraid I’ll fall.”

“Keep your arms around me, damn it. I won’t let you fall.”

Huffing and puffing, I did as he asked, leaning against his chest. Secretly, I loved being so close to him. He wrapped his cloak around both of us, and I was immediately enveloped in his body heat, and I wasn’t alone in the dark anymore. It was so glorious and felt so good that I sagged against him, exhausted by all that had happened. I was asleep in only minutes.

## Chapter Six

I awoke as dawn was breaking and Lexington was handing me down to Brandon. I pretended to still be asleep, because I couldn't deal with any of them right then. I had way too much on my mind and way too many things had happened to me in the span of a short time for me to be able to process them all.

Brandon carried me over to a fire that Wyatt was feeding small sticks and branches into. He put me down on a bed of furs close to the fire and covered me with even more furs. I could hear the Alphas' soft voices around me, and I found that it soothed me, though I had no idea why. Lexington had already said he was taking me "to be contained," whatever the hell that meant. Nothing good, I was willing to bet. I was beginning to drift off to sleep when I felt Lexington lie down beside me under the covers. I peeped out from under my eyelashes to see Wyatt still building up the fire with his back to us, while Brandon and Asher were taking care of the horses. They were still talking in low voices.

I was glad it was light outside and besides I was toasty warm there under those furs with Lexington at my back, blasting me with his warmth, and I dozed off again immediately. Maybe a few hours later, I roused a bit and opened one eye to peek at my sleeping arrangements. The sun was up, but the light was still weak and dim, and thick clouds covered the sullen skies. I ducked back under the covers. Lexington was lying beside me, with one arm and leg thrown across me, and he was radiating heat. His scent was strong under the furs, musky and dominant, and fucking mouthwatering, though I couldn't have said why. It comforted me, though there was no reason why it should after the things he'd said.

I flopped over onto my side to get away from it, but he hooked his arm back around my waist and pulled me back into him. My nostrils filled with his scent, so I inhaled deeply and gave up. My last conscious thought as I closed both eyes again, was that I never realized sleeping outside could be so comfortable.

The next time I woke up must have been close to late afternoon, with Lexington still plastered to me, and his arms around me. I was facing him this time and one of his hands was up under my cape and cupping my naked ass cheek—he hadn't bothered with underthings when he put that horrible thing on me. He had one knee resting inside my thighs. Gods help me, I think I'd been riding that knee in my sleep, and my ass and thighs were damp with my slick. His face was no more than two inches away

from mine, and his lips were so close that all I had to do was lean toward him ever so slightly and we'd be kissing.

Instead, I began to move away from him as slowly as I could, easing Lexington's knee away and gently rolling him over onto his back. I pushed his hands off me so I could ease out from under him. I just kept scooting down under the furs until I felt my feet coming out the end and then twisted around and crawled out. When I first poked my head out, I saw Asher sitting by the fire, but I could hear snores coming from two figures rolled up in furs next to him. It must have been Wyatt and Brandon, making enough noise that Asher didn't notice I had roused and was crawling out of the furs.

Not that I was trying to get away, because where the hell would I go? I was in the middle of who knew where with no money, no food and nowhere to run. But one thing was certain. I desperately had to pee.

Since they were all asleep, I didn't have to go too far away—just behind a nearby tree to give myself a modicum of privacy. That was the plan anyway.

I didn't want to deal with any of them yet, and I resented strongly the idea of asking their permission to relieve myself. I sneaked quietly past Wyatt and behind a big oak tree, and I gratefully relieved myself against the trunk of the tree. Navigating the heavy folds of the cape was a chore, but I managed to hoist up the hem and hold it out of the way.

When I finished, I wrestled the cape from hell back down, shivering with the cold, and that's when I heard a tiny little peep coming from close by. It sounded like a baby bird, but what was a baby bird doing on the ground? I only had to search for a moment before I found it—a tiny, newly hatched one that hardly had feathers yet. It was lying on its side in the grass under the tree, and I thought it must have fallen out of its nest. It looked as if it were about to breathe its last, and I was overcome with pity.

"Oh, you poor thing," I said softly, bending over it. I was afraid to touch it, because hadn't I heard the servants say that if you touched a wild, baby bird, then their mothers wouldn't have anything else to do with them and they'd die? I thought I'd heard that anyway. This poor little mite looked like it was almost dead already, so in the end, I picked it up carefully and let it lie in the palm of my hand, hoping I might be able to give it a little warmth and comfort as it died, at least.

As I knelt there, holding that little thing, I thought that if I could had been a witch—and I refused to think I could be an evil, nasty warlock like Lexington said I was—then I'd try to heal that baby bird. I wanted to save it and put it back in its nest. But it had stopped moving completely by then and was no longer making those tiny peeping sounds. I put a finger on its chest and felt it barely moving.

On a crazy whim, I decided why not give it a try? Nothing ventured, nothing gained, after all, and there could be some life left in the little bird yet. I closed my eyes and pictured the tiny thing waking

up in my hand. It would blink its eyes and stretch out its little wings and... well, that was as far as I got, but I wanted that bird to wake up so much. I concentrated on that picture in my mind really hard until I felt a tiny movement in my hand. I was so excited my eyes flew open and the baby bird opened its eyes at the same time and looked right at me.

*But its eyes were glowing red.*

Horried, I dropped it back down on the grass and jumped to my feet. The bird opened its little beak and let out a horrible, screechy squawk. It sounded like it came from some much larger bird of prey. More and more of those awful squawks came out of its mouth, and it began to beat its tiny wings. I yelled in alarm and did the only thing I could think of to do. I turned to run like the hounds of hell were after me and slammed right into a wall of hard flesh. That brought on an even louder shriek and before the sounds echoing through the forest could all die down, the clearing I was standing in was chock full of Alphas.

It was Asher who had reached me first, his face alarmed as he grabbed me and pushed me behind him, pivoting in a circle trying to spot my attacker. Before I could show him the bird thing, I was pulled back into Brandon and held tightly as Lexington rushed past us with his sword drawn, scanning the woods around us, back-to-back with Asher.

Meanwhile Birdzilla was still squawking on the ground by their feet. Finally, Wyatt looked down at it and then back up at me.

*“This? This thing is what you were screaming about?”*

*“Yes! I-I thought it was a baby bird that fell from its nest, but it suddenly turned into a-a monster!”*

Lexington gave me a narrow look and bent over it, its tiny body still flapping around on the ground in some kind of fit or frenzy. He had dark stubble on his handsome face, and he looked bad tempered and out of sorts. Well, what else was new? He put his hand over the little bird’s body, and the squawking and wild movements stopped.

He glanced back up at me, his eyes glittering with anger. *“You mean you turned it into a monster.”*

*“What? I... No, I-I only tried to...”* I shuddered and struggled out of Brandon’s grip to stand on my own two feet and face the big Alpha frowning down at me. *“I found it on the ground when I went to relieve myself, so it must have fallen out of the nest. It was dead, or almost, so I tried to help.”*

*“How’s that? By using necromancy? So you admit you lied when you told me over and over that you had no magic.”*

*“Well, I don’t have any, but I thought...it occurred to me how nice it would be if I *did* have some. And if I could really manipulate things around me.”*

*“I see. And your first thought was to turn a dying baby bird into some kind of evil bird *creature**

from hell?”

“No! That’s not how it happened at all. You’re just being an ass!”

I turned and stormed back to the fire, giving them all my back. Or at least I tried to storm, but the stupid cape tripped me up, and I would have fallen on my face if Brandon hadn’t grabbed my arm and helped to right me. I could feel my face flaming with heat and as soon as he set me back on my feet, I held up the hem and flounced my way over to the fire, plopping down in front of it. “Flouncing” being a relative term. I tried to anyway but kept tripping over the stupid cape. Lexington had certainly known what he was doing with that horrible thing. He couldn’t have hampered my movement any better if he’d hobbled me.

The four of them followed me more slowly, talking softly among themselves. I was shaken, because how in the hell had that happened anyway? No matter what my intentions had been, *that* shouldn’t have been the result. How had things gone so wrong? Worst of all, had I killed that poor little bird? Or at least hastened its death? I was horrified by the idea, but I vowed never to show my feelings to any of these hateful, judgy Alphas again.

They came back to the fire and Wyatt began poking at it with a stick. “I need to get more wood if we want something hot to eat,” he said to the group at large, I guess, and Lexington, who was standing beside me, nodded.

“Fine. Unless the prince here wants to start a bigger fire for us just by using his *mind*. You’ll have to show us your techniques, Rory. I’ve never seen ‘warlock mind control’ before, and I confess I’m agog to see it.”

*Fuck you* trembled on my lips, and tried to force its way out, but I swallowed down the words and didn’t say them. I contented myself with giving him the vilest look I could muster.

He smirked at Brandon and Asher and then back at me, but I was studiously ignoring him.

“How about it, princeling? Would you like to show us how you did it? It was only a baby bird, but perhaps I shouldn’t wait to bind your powers. Perhaps you’re stronger than I gave you credit for being.”

I’d like to show him, all right. I wished I could do something flamboyant and dramatic, and it would serve him right if I could. If I had the power to do it, I’d start a fire that would blaze up ten feet high in the air, so hot that it would singe off his eyebrows. I gave him another look and then focused my attention back on the fire. I sent that ill wish right at the flames with all my might.

The fire in front of us suddenly flamed up twenty feet high in the air with a loud roar. The horses screamed in terror and one of them broke his lead and ran off into the forest. The flames were only a momentary thing—and they certainly didn’t singe off anybody’s eyebrows, but the campfire did flare up way too high and right on cue. And the flames had been an ominous shade of blue. Very weird.

The whole thing lasted for only a few seconds, but I got the supreme satisfaction of seeing it startle Lexington so badly that he scrambled to jump back and fell on his delectable, muscular ass. Brandon did too. Asher held up a hand toward it like I'd seen Lexington do and only he and Wyatt remained on their feet, though they stumbled back a few steps. They both got a look of pure amazement on their faces, as they stared first at the fire and then back at me. Wyatt recovered first, running over to the horses to quiet them and find the one who'd run off. Brandon stood up, giving me a surprised look and as for Lexington—he glared at me in open-mouthed shock, tinged with absolute outrage. I knew I was in for it then, and I braced myself.

## Chapter Seven

### *Lexington*

“Of all the half-witted, irresponsible, *wicked* things to do!” I cried, taking a step toward him and pulling back my hand, getting ready to send something nasty right back at him. Maybe some mud to splatter in his face or an entire bucket of cold water falling down on his head. Then I’d let him shiver and shudder his way through the entire night with nothing dry to wear—let him freeze in those wet clothes and see how anxious he was then to get into a battle of magic.

He held up his hands as if to ward me off, and I scoffed at him and forced his hands behind his back with a single wave of my hand. He gasped and cried out as he struggled to get free.

At least I’d proven to myself what a little liar he was, claiming not to know anything at all about his mother’s history or the fact that he was himself a warlock. I wanted badly to show him my own strength. I wanted to teach him a lesson, to turn him over my knee and spank him, to strip his clothes off him right here and now and fall on top of him, burying my cock deeply inside him and fucking him until he begged me for mercy.

Brandon laid a hand on my arm, and I could feel his much calmer energy washing over me. Brandon was an Alpha, but he’d always been more like a beta, in a way. He was calm and thoughtful like they could be, and I was a much better person when he was around me. I dropped my hand and turned away from Rory, releasing my hold on him.

I was appalled at my anger. My passions for this prince ran high, and I was having trouble controlling them. It had to be that damned slick of his affecting me so badly. Today, we needed to find a place for him to bathe. I knew that until I could bite him and make love to him, I wouldn’t be able to think rationally around him and his delicious scent. His pheromones were working overtime and making me crazier by the minute. He smelled so delicious, and it was so tempting to me I could barely keep my hands off him.

“It’s that scent—like peaches,” I told Brandon softly. “It’s making me crazy.”

“Peaches? No, it’s like strawberries, when you first bite into one, ripe and delicious.”

I looked at him like he was crazy. How was he scenting something different?

Wyatt overheard us and said, “You’re both wrong. It’s cake. Chocolate cake just out of the oven.”

Gods, did he somehow smell like whatever appealed most to any given person? That could be



dangerous.

This warlock was posing an extreme danger to my pack. If he kept clouding our minds, we could even begin fighting over him, and that would be disastrous. It was also possible this was all coming through our bond, and the others were just reacting to my feelings for Rory. I took a deep breath and tried to regain some control. The first thing I needed to do was bind his powers and remove any threat, because I had a feeling we were all reacting to that too. Unusual for us to feel that from an omega, but this was no ordinary omega—after all, he was the son of Vesper, one of the most powerful warlocks who ever lived.

I stood over Rory as I said the words that would bind him. They were ancient words of power and rarely spoken out loud. It was a serious thing to bind another witch's magic and downright dangerous when dealing with a warlock. When I finished, I almost expected the earth to shake or something momentous to happen, considering who he was, but nothing did. I wondered why my father's court magicians had been so afraid. Vesper had passed her powers onto this son of hers, and why, when they first tried to bind her, had they thought it would take several of them to do it? It had been easy for me.

*Unless I hadn't bound his magic at all.*

The fact that I thought I had easily bound Rory might mean that he wasn't nearly as powerful as his mother had been. Or it could mean that he was just as powerful and batted my attempt away, like a troublesome fly. I hoped that wasn't the case. My brother had been very explicit about what would happen if I couldn't do it.

Rory stared up at me with a pouting look when it was over, and I was strongly tempted to kiss that pout right off his sweet mouth—but I restrained myself. I sat back down, letting Brandon and Wyatt get the fire going and take food from the packs so we could eat something before getting back on our way at dusk. Asher began to fix our food, and Wyatt helped as I sat there and brooded.

I had decided to travel only at night until we got some distance between us and the Igellan castle, not only to avoid any attempts to reclaim him by King Elam, but also because it would be safer that way with an omega like Rory, whom I still hadn't claimed. I'd tried to scent mark all over him that day earlier in bed, but if we were to run into another pack of Alphas, we'd no doubt have to fight for him, as delicious as he smelled, not to mention how beautiful he was and considering he had no bite marks. I couldn't claim him yet, because we didn't have the time. It would take at least a full night for me to bite him and knot him properly, even though until he went through his full heat, my knotting wouldn't be as intense or last as long. I still wanted to do it. But we had a long way to go yet and a lot ahead of us when we got there.

But gods, I'd be glad to get back home.

Our lodge lay just across the border into Morovia, and being so close, we got an occasional tradesman from Igella, who kept us informed of what was happening in that kingdom. We had known for some time about the king's deteriorating health issues and about how his second wife, Queen Berinda was frantically conducting a search for an Alpha and his pack to marry their omega son, Rory. But I didn't know the full details until my brother had told me. The rumors I'd heard said that the young prince was plain and barren to boot, so his stepmother was having some problems finding anyone suitable.

It wasn't until we opened up negotiations with Berinda that we found the real reason for the boy's lack of suitors. His stepmother also wanted someone to arrange an "accident" for him after he took the throne. That so-called accident would open up the perpetrators to charges of regicide, even though Rory would never officially become the king or take the throne. He was still the rightful heir, and the punishment, should someone be caught, would be a long and painful death by torture.

Small wonder then that so far, there had been no takers, but eventually Berinda would find someone. It was only a matter of time, and there had never been a shortage of unscrupulous Alphas in the world. Time was running out for Prince Rory.

We knew all of this, as did our king, who just happened to be my eldest brother, Harrison. My brother had sent for me a little over a month earlier, telling me he needed to speak to me on an urgent matter.

Harrison was older than I was, thirty-one to my twenty-four, so we had never been exactly close, though I greatly admired him. He was a handsome man and still in his prime, while King Elam of Igella was failing in health and probably not long for this world. The contrast was striking.

*"The cease fire between us and Igella has been going on for a while now, but there have been recent tensions. I think things are going to start up again soon. I could attack Igella and simply take it over," Harrison told me as I visited his palace at his request. "It's at its weakest point in the last fifty years or so."*

*We were in Harrison's private parlor, sipping a glass of the red wine my brother favored. Harrison said it might relax me, because I was "too wound up." It was what he always said when we were together. He said I took after our father, who was a great king in his day, but easily angered and unpredictable in that anger.*

*"I sometimes wonder if this war is ever going to be over," Harrison said, sounding tired and a bit dejected.*

*Igella had long coveted our country, because of Morovia's rich agricultural resources. The soil in our kingdom was dark, fertile, well-drained soil with a good supply of essential nutrients. It*

was great for growing most anything. Igella, on the other hand, had clay soil, which was alkaline and no good for farming. They struggled to feed the people in their kingdom. About a hundred years earlier, in the way of too many Alphas, their king had decided it would be much simpler to simply fight us and take whatever he needed instead of trading for it. The back-and-forth battles had been raging between our two nations ever since.

At least that was a big part of it. Our two countries had other fundamental differences too. Take religion and magic for instance. In our world, the two were deeply intertwined.

In Morovia, we had always embraced magic and thought of it as a gift to us from the gods. White magic, that is, or the good kind. Over our long history, we had seen the evils of black magic and had forbidden its use within our borders. In our religion, practicing it was considered one of the greatest sins any of us could commit. Even as late as twenty years ago, the penalty for possessing knowledge of the black arts had been death. Now we were more enlightened, and we simply bound a warlock's powers if and when we found them. And then, if he or she'd already committed crimes, we dealt with those as well.

Unless the warlock's powers were too strong to be bound—then the penalty was death.

"Why don't you end the war then?" I asked, responding to my brother's earlier statement, because like all of us, I was sick of the war with Igella and the toll it took on our people.

"Negotiate a treaty."

My brother drained his glass and signaled to a servant to refill it.

"I'm not willing to give anything away to Igella, because why should we? If we simply stopped fighting, that would mean their council would start up the raids against our farmers again and they'd steal more land. No, I'd have to crush Igella to get their council to stop, and I don't have the stomach for it. The Igellan people don't want this war either. And war is a costly thing, besides. I'd like to avoid another one if I could, but I keep hearing rumors about this queen of Elam's, Queen Berinda. I hear she's ambitious, and I fear her influence."

"I've heard the same," I told him. "People say she's trying to marry off her omega stepson to some Alpha who would become Regent and who would then kill the omega son as soon as he could, thus becoming king himself due to Igella's strange inheritance laws. Berinda's daughter, would step in and become his queen, and she and this Berinda would keep their comfortable lifestyle."

"I've heard those rumors too. And we can't allow that to happen."

I smiled. "We can't?"

"No. I don't want someone corrupt enough to murder her own stepson, the heir to the throne of a country so close to our kingdom. A country whose people and ours share a lot of history and common values. We have to intervene."

*“How do you propose we do that? Fight more endless battles? Our people are tired of fighting. Yes, we could win, but again, at what cost? Our farmers need to be behind the plow and not the cannons.”*

*He turned to look over at me. “You’re right and I’ve been giving it some consideration. That’s where you come in, little brother.”*

*“Me?”*

*Harris smiled and nodded. “Yes, you. I almost hesitated to ask you because I know how you are.”*

*“Oh? And how am I?”*

*“Impetuous. Rash. Too passionate and brave for your own good, and you take too many risks. You know this, Lexington. We’ve talked about it.”*

*I did and we had. And I blamed it on my magic, which was extremely powerful and getting more potent all the time. It made me think I could do anything, and I had to constantly fight against that feeling. All of my cousins had a bit of magic—mostly lower level than mine and good for small healings and minor potions. Only Asher and I, out of all of our family, had inherited the magic of our grandmother, who, though an omega, had been legendary in her day. It had mostly skipped my brothers entirely, though my grandmother had passed on many other noble qualities, like courage and intelligence and a keen sense of honor.*

*Harrison was a great man and a good king, but he had very little magic, if any. Fortunately, I had enough for all of us.*

*The thing about my grandmother’s magic was that it was tinged, ever so slightly, with the darker elements of the craft. It probably meant that we’d had a warlock operating somewhere far back in our lineage, and we had to constantly fight against the urges that had come down through our blood. My cousin and pack brother Asher’s darker side was even worse than mine, which was why he turned down leading our pack, even though he was almost as strong as I was. He felt he wouldn’t be the best leader, because he might be persuaded by extreme greed or lust.*

*“I have another plan for you,” Harrison was saying. “I’d like you to help me with an important mission. I need you to cross the border and go to King Elam’s castle in Igella. You’ll be posing as Igellan. Say you live at the edge of the northern border. It’s true enough and besides, the Igellan queen is a fool. Our spies tell us she’s unintelligent and doesn’t venture much past her castle walls. She won’t bother to check who you say you are, once she sees the color of your gold and if you agree to her plan. Negotiate an offer to this Queen Berinda for her stepson and tell her you’re willing to do what she wants. Give her plenty of gold—I’m sure she’ll go along with it.”*

*“But to what purpose? I’m not going to kill this boy, and I don’t want to bind myself and my*

pack with him either. Besides that, rumor has it that the boy is a warlock, the son of the Warlock Queen Vesper. His energy could be disastrous for both me and Asher.”

“That’s what they say about the boy, but it’s rumors only. If he is a warlock, simply bind his powers. He’s an omega, Lexington. He won’t fight you. I need you to do this for me, brother, so that when the time comes, and King Elam is gone, I’ll be able to count on you taking over Igella as Regent, instead of someone else who will no doubt be a murdering, cutthroat bastard who could pose a threat to us. We could join our two countries for the good of them both. Anyone else who came in would be a leader of a pack with no morals or scruples, who will be nothing but disaster on our borders for years to come. Just think—if you and our cousins can do this, working together, it would save lives. It would be almost like a bloodless coup.”

“And I’d be stuck with some barren warlock as my omega.”

Harris leaned forward. “But he is an omega, so that should take care of the attraction, no matter what he looks like. Besides, what does beauty matter? It’s fleeting at best. It comes and it goes, but you can help this young man learn to be a better person. Once he belongs to you, you can teach him right from wrong. You’ll have to bind his powers, but if you do, and he gives you children, you may be able to have a close friendship with him and shared interests. As you know, any kind of marriage for royals is about alliances, rarely about love.”

I regarded him closely and saw the lines that were appearing around his eyes. I knew my brother had felt he had to marry a princess from the seafaring country of Sudfarma only two years earlier, in order to secure port access for our country. Her name was Rozamond and she was a stern, religious woman, and not a beautiful one, though she was very striking. She had piercing dark eyes that didn’t seem to match her ice blonde hair. Her cheekbones could have cut glass and her chin was too strong for beauty, but I knew she was intelligent and shrewd.

She was a bit of a fanatic about her religion, though, and that always spelled trouble, in my experience. She’d brought her own personal group of Sudfarman guards with her, and they were the only ones she trusted around her. The Sudfarmans kept to themselves, as sullen and unfriendly as their queen.

She, like many Morovians, had some magic, though her talents lay in prophecy and clairvoyance. She was often able to see things that might happen in the near and distant future. That was the problem with clairvoyance, in my opinion. Clairvoyants always hedged their bets, saying this or that might happen. Anyone who had good observation powers and decent judgment could do the same, it seemed to me.

I also knew theirs wasn’t a happy union, but it was also nothing my brother ever wanted to talk about. His wife was another Alpha, like he was, and two Alphas together never seemed to

*produce happy marriages. So far, their union had produced no children, but I somehow couldn't imagine Rozamond with children—she was far too reserved to show much emotion or affection, I thought.*

*"I've had to put my country first, and I'm asking you to do the same," Harrison said.*

*My shoulders slumped, and he knew he had me. I'd do anything to help my brother and my country. He'd had to give up on a pack of his own and an omega to bind them because of his status as the eldest child of our father. He leaned forward, still trying to convince me.*

*"Omegas are getting increasingly rare and valuable. And we're not entirely sure he's barren. Omegas come into heat later than others."*

*"He's also a fucking warlock."*

*"Then teach him how to act, or if he can't or won't be taught, lock him down if you have to and only visit him long enough to get him pregnant. Look, as you know, I've never totally agreed with the law about black magic. Like everything else in life, anyone can choose how to use their gifts in this world. Warlocks utilize magic that goes against our church's teachings, so they're seen as selfish, hateful, and even demonic. The court magicians say their magic doesn't come from nature and their goal is only to get power. But I'm not sure if I believe that.*

*"Not come from Nature? Where does it come from then? Anyway, perhaps that isn't the case with this boy. I think you could change this young prince's thinking. I understand his mother died when he was only an infant, so she wouldn't have been able to teach him anything. You'll have to start right away by showing him the right way while he's still young. His grandfather was a good man. Some of that must be inside him."*

*"Tell me about this Vesper," I said. "How were her powers discovered? And why did Lord Rory take her to Igella? Why didn't he simply bind her powers instead?"*

*"It's a strange story. Vesper fell in love, apparently, with a young nobleman, when she was quite young. He was tragically killed in the war, and when Vesper learned of his death, she went mad with grief for a time. Truly mad. The story goes that when she learned of his death, she fell to the ground in some kind of convulsion, or fit. She struck the ground with her fists and a small earthquake—no one knew what else to call it—hit her village, out of the blue. Many homes were destroyed, and twenty or more people died when they fell down. Part of her own father's stone walls fell down too. They knew it had come from Vesper's unbridled passions. And still, her father didn't want her powers bound. When she had recovered a bit, she was examined by the court magicians who said her magic was unlike anything they'd ever seen before. It frightened them and they couldn't control it. Her magic didn't work the way white magic or even dark magic normally did.*

*“They bound her in silver chains to bring her before the king, but she was incredibly beautiful and her own guards helped her to escape. No one knows exactly what happened next, but the priests who had her in chains all died. She escaped. Her father, Lord Rory, pleaded with Father to end the search for her and let her go. He argued that the priests had tried to hurt her, and her magic had merely defended itself. He said her magic had struck back against them to protect her, and he spoke of it like it was a conscious thing and not totally under her control. Lord Rory said her magic was a gift from the gods, and who were we to try and bind it or stifle it?”*

*“I think he may have had a point.” He sighed and shook his head. “Father’s council didn’t agree, and in the end, Lord Rory told them he’d bring her in front of Father and let him decide if she should be bound. Lord Rory said she was so powerful anyway that the effort would fail, and that none of us could bind her. That she might be damaged or even killed if we tried.”*

*“And Father didn’t believe that.”*

*“No, he did. But he thought that if she were that powerful, she might be a danger to him as well. He demanded that Lord Rory surrender her to a new set of court magicians. I think he meant to kill her, but Lord Rory ran away instead, going over the border with her to Igella.”*

*“Imagine that.”*

*“Lex. Take this seriously.”*

*“I do, brother, believe me. But Father surely couldn’t have expected the man to turn over his own daughter to be killed by the court magicians.”*

*Harrison blew out a breath and shrugged. “It was a different time back then.”*

*“Apparently. And yet you want me to bind this boy’s powers—and if I can’t, you want me to put him to death.”*

*His brother gave him an exasperated look. “There should be no reason why you can’t bind his powers, Lex. He’s untrained and has never shown that he knows magic. That’s why I chose you. Your magic is every bit as powerful as Lord Rory’s was in his prime.”*

*“Speaking of Lord Rory, finish telling me what happened and how he escaped with Vesper.”*

*“Well, the two of them managed to hide for a time, but our father eventually found them in Igella after a few years. Father sent assassins after her, but none ever returned. They were presumed dead. By then she had married King Elam and was living inside the palace, so he had to let it go, but she never took any action against Morovia. It was still a tense time for us all, wondering when and if she would. She died after childbirth, however, before anything else happened.”*

*“I see. But what if this boy is like his mother and I can’t bind him? What if he’s as corrupt as she was reported to be? What if he’s that powerful and irredeemable as well?”*

*“Give him a chance first. We don’t know any of that for sure. Then if he can’t be handled, and he refuses to be contained, I’m afraid you’ll have no choice but to give him the same end our father planned for his mother.”*

*“You mean, kill him.”*

*Harrison raised one shoulder and looked uncomfortable, as well he should. The idea of killing this boy I didn’t even know was abhorrent to me. I tried to talk myself into it—after all, this young man was Igellan and an enemy of our people. He was almost certainly a warlock to boot, but it was no use. I was still troubled by it and didn’t know if I could do it.*

I continued to argue with my brother for an entire week, trying to find some loophole, but in the end, I’d reluctantly agreed to go to Igella with my pack and pose as a lord with a small estate on the border. I agreed to whatever Berinda wanted me to in order to get her to give him to me, though I never planned to do as she wanted. My pack understood that I’d made this decision that would affect all of us without even consulting them, and they knew how troubled I was by it.

I already knew I probably could never go through with harming Prince Rory, no matter how evil he was. I’d have to find some other way.

I’d been close to my three cousins since we were boys, and we’d remained that way since I’d taken over as the head Alpha. I would send my pack to Igella first to flash a lot of gold in Berinda’s face and get her softened up. I’d hoped it would be enough to make her not question us too closely.

I had some estate business to finish, so I’d sent them on ahead to Igella so they could report back to me. They’d sent word that Berinda seemed pleased with our offer, and they had little doubt that she’d take us up on it. So far there had been no other offers.

Then I’d arrived and met Rory in the flesh. And everything changed in one night. I never expected to be so attracted to him.

From the first moment I saw him, the little omega shocked me by being a long, long way from plain. He was actually as gorgeous as his mother had been rumored to be and close to going into his first heat when I arrived. He didn’t act like a warlock, even though I’d taunted him with the charge. I’d had some doubts, but he’d just now proven he had magic—clumsy though it might be—with those stunts with the bird and the fire. I could see that both Brandon and Wyatt were fascinated by him, to some extent. It seemed like only Asher and I had any defenses against him at all—so it would be up to us to control him.

And that was exactly what we had to do. Not only for our own sake, but for his. He was annoying and a bit of a smart ass. But though he could enrage me, making me angrier than anyone ever had, the idea of killing him and putting out that beautiful spark of life was still absolutely abhorrent to me. I



couldn't let it happen. I wouldn't.

## Chapter Eight

*Rory*

I would have loved to have known what was on Lexington's mind as he sat there brooding by the fire, staring into the flames. I was aware that he had spoken some spell over me, but since nothing had happened, and I didn't feel any different, I'd dismissed it. If something happened later, I'd deal with it, but for now, why borrow trouble? I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of asking him what he'd done, and to be honest, I was a little afraid of this big, tough Alpha, though I had to face the fact that I was also wildly attracted to him too. I'd hated the way he'd held me with his magic, but I had to admit, it had excited me a little. Okay, a lot. I didn't mind his dominance. In fact, something deep inside me seemed to crave it.

I decided I'd better behave and not stir him to any more displays of control, so I ate the food I was given, a dreadfully undercooked piece of beef and a hunk of bread. I even drank down the weak ass coffee that Wyatt made in his little tin pot. I didn't know what I'd be facing later, and I would no doubt need my strength. Besides, I'd caused enough trouble already.

Wyatt rounded up the runaway horse, and got the other animals calmed down too. He and the other Alphas—except for Lexington, or Lex, as I'd heard the others call him—bustled around getting ready to travel again. I made up my mind I was going to ask for other clothing though. This heavy cape was warm, but also stiff and bulky and terribly uncomfortable. Hard to move around in, which was probably his thought in the first place, the evil bastard. I wondered if I could change it myself, and started to try it, but thought better of it. So far, all my attempts at magic had been disastrous.

I screwed up my courage to speak to the still furious Lex, but just as I opened my mouth, he called to Asher.

“Where's the stream you found?”

“Behind those trees over there,” Asher replied and glanced at me. “It's icy cold, though.”

He nodded. “It will have to do.”

Standing up, he nodded toward me. “Princeling, you have to bathe before we get back on the road. Your scent will alert every Alpha within miles of us.”

I got up, not really insulted, because I could even smell myself, though he could have been a little less rude about it. “All right. I'll see what I can do.”

“Don’t try anything at the stream.”

“Like what?”

“Like trying to escape. We’re a long way from your father’s castle, so don’t even think about it.”

I raised my chin defiantly. I’d never talked back to my stepmother in all the years since she married my father. But since I’d met this irritating Alpha, I’d done nothing but defy him. He *bothered* me, more than any of the others, except for maybe Asher. Both of them were way too domineering.

“What if I do?” I sassed him. “What are you going to do about it?”

“How old are you, boy?”

“I’m almost twenty.”

“That means nineteen.”

“And a half. I’m plenty old enough to handle you.”

“Is that right?” he said, smirking at me.

He muttered something and waved that damn hand of his again, and I found myself frozen in place again. This was beginning to get annoying. I couldn’t even speak—all I could do was send him a look that relegated him to the lowest levels of hell. He came over to swoop me up in his arms and carry me toward this stream he’d mentioned. He carted me around like luggage, and I hated the way he so easily manhandled me.

Who was I kidding? I loved it, dammit. It greatly appealed to my omega soul.

It wasn’t far through the woods, and after we arrived, he sat me back on my feet and passed his hand over me again. Not only could I finally move, but the hateful cape vanished too, leaving me naked again..

It was good news in a way, but it left me shivering and freezing to death in the cold, because—*still naked*. “Dammit, it’s freezing!”

“I know and I’m sorry, but you have to bathe first. Then I’ll conjure you up some fresh clothing. Well, go ahead,” he said, as I continued to stand there. “Get in and wash and you can take a proper bath when we get to an inn.”

I glared at him but turned and put in a toe. I gasped in shock because it was literally freezing cold. There was ice at the edges! I looked back at him, and he was ignoring me, half turned away to give me privacy, I guess, and staring off in the trees. He looked impatient, as always. I got a really bad feeling about this but decided there was no help for it. The stream was maybe a foot or two deep, but fast running over the rocks and making a lot of noise. I took a deep breath and stepped in gingerly and promptly jumped back out again as my feet went numb. He glanced over at me in irritation.

“What’s the matter? Stop dithering around and wash yourself. It’s cold out here away from the fire.”

“I noticed! That water is freezing cold, and I’ll catch pneumonia and die if I get in it!”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop shouting at me. You’re being overly dramatic. Just crouch there on the edge and clean your...your private areas.”

“No. You clean yours. You smell too, you know.”

He frowned. “My smell won’t bring around every Alpha from anywhere close. Now wash, or I’ll do it for you.”

Since I knew he was a big enough ass to try just that, I knelt by the stream and tried to splash water over myself. The water was so cold it took my breath away.

I got back to my feet. “Okay, I’m done.”

He flicked a glance at me and shook his head. “No, you’re not. It’s not nearly enough. Sit down in the water a few seconds and really rinse off.”

“No.”

He looked back at me and narrowed his eyes. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. No. I’m not doing it. So go ahead; be a damn bully and make me. I’m not going in that water any other way.”

He took a step toward me, and I panicked. He wasn’t even doing anything except looking all big and Alpha. But I pulled back my fist and swung it toward him as hard as I could, putting everything I had behind it.

He simply stepped to one side.

Whereas I, because I was on the rocky ground and cold as hell and mad as fuck, lost my balance and my footing and tumbled backward and right into the creek, sitting down hard in an icy little pool.

It took my breath away. I literally couldn’t even gasp in a single breath, and I instantly began to panic. He must have seen it on my face because he rolled his eyes and came wading in to rescue me, picking me up and carrying me back to the bank. When we climbed out, I was shivering and felt like I’d turned into a big blob of ice, but at least I’d made him get wet too. He set me back on my feet, and we both stood glaring at each other, mad as two wet hens, our chests heaving up and down.

“I hate you!” I screamed at him.

“I don’t care!”

“You better sleep with one eye open, Lexington!”

“I already do, because I have to sleep next to you!”

I pulled back my fist to swing again, but this time he caught it in his hand and forced it behind my back. We stood nose to nose, glaring into each other’s eyes, our chests heaving.

That’s when a little whimper escaped my throat, and his eyes widened. He cursed long and loud and then he bent his head and kissed me, brushing his lips against mine very softly at first and then

again and again until I came forward that extra tiny bit and pressed my lips hard against his and threw my free arm around his neck. He slid his tongue inside my mouth, and then I didn't remember much of anything except my heart was pounding, and I could no longer feel my toes.

Admittedly, that could have been from the freezing water. But I didn't think that was the only reason.

He held me close in his warm arms, but I'd forgotten about how cold it was, and pretty much everything else. It was just like the first time we kissed, only this time I was naked in his arms, and he seemed to be in no hurry for me to be otherwise. We kept kissing for a long time, his hands moving over my body, not trying to move things along any further. At some point in the proceedings, I could feel his hand reach down to cup my balls, which suddenly felt swollen and tender and ached. *No one had ever touched me there before.* It made me gasp, but before I could recover, he bent down to sweep his tongue over one of my nipples, and then it was his teeth brushing lightly across them, and good gods, was he nibbling on it too? I couldn't draw a deep breath, as no one had ever touched me in *any* of those places before, and really, breathing was highly overrated.

He started kissing me again, and I may have lost consciousness for a second or two, because the next thing I remembered was him lifting me up so that my legs were around his waist. I couldn't seem to control my body anymore, but at the same time, I knew he wasn't doing anything to me. This was all me. I was arching against him and grabbing his shoulders, while high-pitched, begging whimpers like I'd never heard myself make before came out of my throat.

He had pushed down his trousers and was rubbing his cock against my ass. And why had I never heard about that before? It hadn't been in any book I'd ever read, because I'd read a lot of them, and this had never come up. I saw little flashes like stars bursting behind my eyes as I writhed against him, still making those noises that I knew would embarrass me when I remembered them later, but unable to stop.

I was fascinated by him, and this was my first feel of an Alpha cock—or anybody's cock for that matter, except my own. I was *not* disappointed.

I reached behind me and put my hand on his big, thick one with the luscious ring of flesh around the base of his shaft. I moaned and he ground it against me. Oh gods, it felt so good, but it still wasn't enough. He took my shaft in his hand while he sucked and bit my neck. It wasn't a claiming bite, but it felt wonderful anyway, and I bucked my hips against him again and again, wanting more, shamelessly begging for it.

I could smell my slick flowing again, and cum was leaking from me, thick and heavy between us, and it seemed to be making him excited too. He was flushed, despite the cold and his breathing was as affected as mine, at least.

“I’m going to make love to you, princeling,” he said, snarling the words, his face buried in my hair.

*Yeah, you are*, I thought, feeling happy and excited, with a yearning need almost overwhelming me.

“But not here. We can’t do this here,” he continued, crushing my dreams.

“Why not?”

I whined and groaned and frantically humped against him again, trying to show him how wrong he was and force his dick inside me. I started peppering kisses all over his face.

I felt a finger slip inside my entrance, and I arched happily to meet it. He began to finger fuck me, rhythmically moving one finger in and out, finally crooking it and finding my prostate, giving it a rubdown that made me scream out his name, amidst all the jerking and moaning and babbling. He added another finger and the stretch felt so good, but again, not enough. When he added the third, I groaned a little, and heard him give a shaky laugh.

“Please, please, Alpha,” I murmured against his throat. “I need your knot so much.”

Lexington took my shaft in his hand and moved it up and down. “Oh,” I cried, “I feel like...I don’t know what, but I think I’m coming apart.”

“You’re fine. Just excited. Stroke yourself for me. Like this,” he said, showing me by putting his hand over mine. I was afraid I’d lose it the moment I touched myself, because it was almost painful, but I did as he asked, and he watched every move I made, tightening his grip on my hand. Knowing he was helping me just tipped the hotness scale a thousand percent, and I couldn’t hold back any longer. I shut my eyes, strained toward him, and I was spurting hot cum into my hand and onto my stomach and chest as he held me through it, crooning to me.

When it was over and I was a weak, shuddering mess in his arms, he leaned down and whispered softly in my ear. “That’s going to have to hold you until we get you to an inn. I think your heat is coming on faster than we anticipated. You have to bathe all over again now.”

I gazed up at him in fucking disbelief, the idea of going back in that icy stream a nightmare to me.

“Sorry, princeling, but it can’t be helped.” He began to take off his own clothes. “If it’s any consolation, I have to do it now too.”

“I have to say, it helps a little.”

He laughed for the first time since we’d been out on the ramparts, and he kissed me again. Then he swept me up in his arms and back into the ice bath we went.

## Chapter Nine

### *Lexington*

It had been a full hour since the stream, and Rory was still shaking. I'd conjured up a blanket when I got us both out of the stream and took him back to the fire as quickly as I could. We put him near it, and Brandon found some of his old clothing in the carpetbag we'd packed for him. I took off my own wet clothes and helped him put his things on because he was shivering so hard. Brandon even tore up one of his own shirts to make little pads of cloth for Rory to put between his legs. We put his clothes on, and I wrapped him in another fur cape, this one not nearly so voluminous. I had misjudged his size a bit before in the heat of the moment, though I know he thought I'd done it deliberately. I hadn't; I just couldn't seem to think straight around him, especially when he'd been standing there, naked as the day he was born. Not to mention the others looking at him, because how could they not? Gods, he was so sinfully beautiful.

I'd heard stories about his mother, Queen Vesper, with her hair as black as coal and her skin as white as milk and her eyes as green as emeralds. I'd seen the portraits, and most of them made her look hard and cruel, too, like a warlock was expected to look. But I wasn't convinced Vesper had actually ever sat for any of those artists. I thought she probably looked a great deal like her son, and he was heartbreakingly gorgeous.

I'd seen one painting of her that was different, done by a talented young nobleman—the same one who had reportedly fallen in love with her when she'd been only seventeen. And that one had looked remarkably like my princeling. His jawline was more masculine, but it was the same perfect little nose and full, lush lips. The same classic bone structure and dark curls. And those luminous eyes. It was a strong face, and truly beautiful.

Vesper had a whirlwind romance with the young man, and in the throes of his infatuation, he'd made a miniature painting of her on a locket about four by six centimeters, with a gold chain. He carried it with him into battle, because she wanted him to keep it until he returned as a kind of good luck charm. Unfortunately, it didn't work, and he had it with him when he died, so it held a great deal of power. The tiny portrait depicted her as a lovely young girl, with the same black hair and fair skin as Rory's and those lovely eyes. But in this portrait, unlike the others, she had a sweet expression on her face, like she was gazing at the one she loved and just about to smile. She was luminous.

The miniature had eventually made its way to the Royal Portrait gallery, after Vesper and her father had left Morovia. It had been donated by the parents of the young man, and this was where the story got really interesting. They'd had it made into a watch fob after his death, but then had gotten rid of it because *they were afraid of it*. They said that they'd kept it in a small wooden box in the room that used to be his, along with some of his other belongings they couldn't bear to part with, and sometimes, late at night when they passed his room, they could hear the miniature singing softly to itself.

Surely, it had been an exaggeration or a hallucination springing from their grief, but the family was insistent. My father had taken the lovely piece for the royal collection, and had his magicians examine it. They had coated it with their holy oils, chanted over it and covered it in salt, but it made no difference.

Guards who worked in that section of the royal gallery said a sweet, young female voice could often be heard, singing a sad song of lost love, the notes echoing through the halls and bringing tears to the eyes of any who heard it. Sometimes they heard a woman sobbing.

I shook myself from my reverie, glancing over at Rory where he now sat by the fire. This cape he wore was as warm as the other one and lined with soft fur. He had quickly snuggled down into it and covered his head with the hood too. Was he hiding from me? Or was it because the late afternoon was still so cloudy and cold? Perhaps he just felt sleepy again after all the excitement at the stream.

It was finally almost dark enough for us to leave, and again, I planned on riding all night. One more night of hard riding after that, and we'd be back in Morovian territory, and we could risk stopping at an inn. I was uneasy at how strong his omega scent was becoming, and I needed to get him safely behind the walls of my lodge.

I wouldn't make the mistake of riding with the prince this time. Kissing him—making love to him by the stream had sent shock waves all through me, and I knew I was flirting with danger. I resolutely turned my back on him and walked away, each step causing my heart to protest. This wasn't good—to feel this much for a lying little omega-warlock was insane. I'd promised myself I'd have better control, and I had to remember who and what he was.

My nails dug into the palms of my hands as I kept walking away and a bolt of longing hit me hard, urging me to turn around and go back to him. Had he done that? I turned to glance back and saw him staring after me, his big green eyes looking uncertain, like he didn't know if he should follow along behind me or not. Like I was a damned mama duck. Fuck this, because I *wanted* him to follow me, and this was *not* good. What the fuck was I doing? This had to be a spell of some kind.

I found Asher and took him aside to have him check me over for any signs of dark magic, but he couldn't find anything. He did complain that Rory's scent was "all over me," though, and teased me



about what I'd been doing, but I ignored his teasing.

I went over to the edge of the forest and stared into the trees, where the shadows had begun gathering and lengthening with the sun going down. I stood there a while, reaching out with my senses to check if anyone were following us, but I couldn't detect anyone nearby. Nothing to account for this strange uneasiness I was feeling.

Suddenly I realized what it was. I *missed* Rory. Even though I'd left him only minutes ago, I yearned for him.

That could mean that perhaps this crazy theory of Brandon's was correct. Not that we were so-called "true mates." I didn't believe in that old wives' tale. But it was well known that the scent of some omegas called to us more strongly than others. No one else had mentioned or complained about how strong the scent was becoming, though. No one except me. And it definitely was calling powerfully to me—more so than any I'd encountered, so I had to be vigilant. I couldn't allow myself to become distracted by Rory, like I'd done down by the stream. Like I was doing now.

I had promised my brother to take Rory as my mate and I'd done that. When I got him back to my home, I could find out just how corrupted he might be over the next few weeks. With luck, I might still be able to reach him. I had bound his powers, and now I'd try to teach him right from wrong and provide him with religious instruction. He seemed intelligent, and I was beginning to realize he hadn't had an easy life at his father's castle. I'd been shocked by how little clothing he'd had in his wardrobe, with none of it in good shape. His boots were of poor quality and the soles had been patched. He hadn't had any decent capes to keep him warm, and his rooms were small and dark. I didn't think he got enough to eat, and he needed fattening up. And on top of all that, he'd been taught that he was worthless and plain, when just the opposite was true.

At least I could provide him with better clothing, nicer surroundings and plenty to eat. I had no desire to be abusive toward him or to treat him badly, and I wouldn't. But I would be firm with him. His well-being depended on how he accepted his new life and how closely he followed my orders.

I wasn't kidding myself, however, that I'd stand by and allow my brother to actually harm him. I wouldn't let that happen. If I had to, I'd run away with him, just like Vesper's father had done with her, and let Asher take over my place as pack leader. It wasn't what I wanted, but I couldn't even imagine hurting, let alone killing him or allowing anyone else to do it either. I might even become like Vesper when she'd lost her young nobleman—wearing dark clothing and moping through life, knowing she'd never hold her love in her arms again.

My feelings had changed for Rory in such a short period of time. And they were still changing, if the way I felt about him now was any sign.

"Ready to go, Lex?" Wyatt called to me, holding my horse's bridle in his hand, I got up and went

over to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Wyatt. Take Prince Rory with you tonight, if you don’t mind.”

“Are you sure?”

We both glanced over at him, still covered up with a fur and his hood over his face. I suspected he was asleep. I nodded. “It’s for the best. He distracts me.”

“Yes, I noticed how ‘distracted’ you were when you came back to camp earlier.” Wyatt grinned at me and glanced over at Rory again. “He’s really beautiful, isn’t he? And men are not even my preference.”

“He is, and I don’t even think he knows it, thank the gods, or he’d probably use that against me too.”

Wyatt chuckled and started walking over to him as I mounted my horse. I waited for the others to mount, including Wyatt, trying to ignore the murmured conversation he was having with Rory. Rory sounded upset, but I kept my gaze straight ahead and didn’t look over at him. When I finally couldn’t stand it any longer and glanced back, I saw Asher helping Rory mount in front of Wyatt, with the prince sitting in front of my cousin on the saddle. He had an oddly hurt but defiant look on his face as he must have felt my gaze on him and glanced up at me. He quirked up an eyebrow, but I quickly turned around, stifling the impulse to go back and haul him down into my arms. I was finding that I didn’t like the idea of him being so close to Wyatt all night, but it couldn’t be helped. It was done and I couldn’t go back on it now. I signaled for the others to follow me, and we rode out into the cold night.

Besides, he *was* a damn distraction and I needed to keep alert. I had a bad feeling, and I didn’t know why.

The road was dark and appeared to be little traveled, if the overgrown patches of weeds in the middle were any clue. I didn’t remember this road from the ride over to Igella and wondered if we’d taken a wrong turn somehow, but I didn’t know how that was possible. We had followed the same track. The trees on this part of the road seemed to lean over the road, taking too much interest in what we were doing out here after dark on this lonely road. From the position of the North Star in the sky, I could tell that we were traveling in the same general direction, so I decided to keep going at least until the next crossroad where we could stop and discuss it. This current track was far too narrow for doing that.

We’d traveled down the gloomy road for another half hour or more, when an arrow flew suddenly from the woods and struck my horse in the neck. The poor animal screamed in pain and alarm and reared back on his hind legs, unseating me. I fell back hard on the near-frozen ground, pain jolting through my back and legs. Stunned by the impact, I couldn’t draw in a good breath for a

moment or two and lay there for too long, blinking up at the black skies overhead, trying to gather my senses.

Behind me, I could hear the shouts and curses of my pack. I heard Rory's cry of fear and that finally was enough to get me back on my feet. Brandon ran up beside me, his sword drawn, slashing back and forth at our attackers, who were emerging from the woods on either side. I drew my weapon, but another arrow caught me in the shoulder. The pain was swift, but it was a distraction we couldn't afford. I grabbed for it and wrenched it out of my arm. Gouts of blood poured from the wound as I fell to my knees, but I struggled back to my feet, and with a loud cry, I pulled up my blade and attacked the nearest man. I had learned long ago to use my sword with either hand, which was helpful now. With one prodigious swing, or as prodigious as I could make it, considering how much blood I was losing, I lopped off his head. Meanwhile Brandon, Wyatt and Asher were fighting all around me, shouting savage cries as bodies fell, but it was too dark to see how many there were attacking us.

I looked around for Rory and heard his voice cursing and shouting behind us. Two large men were in front of his horse, trying to grab the reins. Rory was kicking out and hitting them with his crop, but one succeeded in pulling him down into his arms as I watched in horror. The man tried to drag him into the woods with him, but I lunged after him, knocking him to his knees, I thought he had to be an Alpha from his bulk and height.

My princeling quickly scrambled back up and ran to my side to try and help me, though all of my attention at that moment had shifted to another large Alpha in front of us, who was snarling and showing me his teeth. I pushed Rory behind me, and the Alpha brandished his long, wicked looking knife at us. I slashed my even longer sword down into the damn fool's neck and pulled Rory to my side so we could back toward the horses. The unexpected attack seemed to be winding down, as I could hear the sounds of the attackers moving away through the forest. Bodies still littered the ground around us as we picked our way through the dark. By that time, I was focused mainly on putting one foot in front of the other, so when Wyatt suddenly grabbed my arm, I flinched and cried out in alarm, pulling up my sword again.

Wyatt knocked it away with his own weapon. "Lex, what is it? Are you hurt?" he asked, patting my chest. What little moonlight we'd had was vanishing again, the moon trying to take refuge behind a cloud.

"One of them got me with an arrow. See to my horse first."

"Asher is with him now. I don't think he's too badly injured."

"I think I'm losing some blood."

"Let me see!" Rory shouted and turned me so he could look at me. The moon slipped out from

behind its cloud just then and Rory gasped out loud when he saw the gaping wound and pouring blood I'd caused by pulling the arrow out on my own. I had to admit it hadn't been my sharpest move. I was feeling a little faint, actually. I'd tend to it as soon as I had the chance, but for now, I thought maybe I should sit down for a while.

I tried to but fell straight back instead, my ass hitting the ground hard. I heard Wyatt calling for Asher, and then I felt Rory's hands fall on my shoulders. He gripped me hard, pulling me around to face him, his eyes intense and burning. And why were those pretty green eyes of his glowing red all of a sudden? What looked like little flames shot out of them and then leaped onto my shoulder, catching it on fire. I just sat there, watching the blue flames climbing higher and higher, a part of me observing as if from a distance. I was only vaguely aware that I must be hallucinating. I should have been screaming and trying to beat the flames out with my hands, but some still rational part of my brain told me it wasn't real, and *there were no flames*.

No blue fire was shooting down my arm nor upwards into my neck, but damn it, I could *feel* the heat, though it didn't burn me. If I concentrated hard enough, I could even see the fire crawling slowly up my shoulder to my neck. It was so intense and almost painful for a moment that I think I screamed out loud. Then the flames shot up my neck and reached my head. When my hair caught on fire, and my skin began to sizzle, I felt my eyes roll back in my head and the moon over our heads blinked out.

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I woke up sometime later, slumped over onto the pommel of my saddle, with Brandon riding behind me and trying to hold me on the horse in front of him as best he could. I was much larger than he was, so he was having trouble keeping his arm around me. He shifted his arm higher as I blinked and tried to wake up. I felt groggy and weak, like my limbs weighed a hundred pounds each. I tried to talk, but only garbled words came out. A steady drizzle was coming down around us, and I felt thoroughly miserable.

Brandon noticed I was awake, and he adjusted his grip again, pulling me back against his chest, so that my head lolled on his shoulder. "Just try to be still, Lex, if you can. We're riding a little way ahead to make camp or find shelter to spend the rest of the night, because Asher said it wouldn't be a good idea to stay where we were. We seem to be on an unfamiliar track, and I think Asher is having to find his way."

I nodded, or tried to, but I didn't seem to have much control over my limbs. Brandon made soothing noises behind me, murmuring in my ear. "Those arrows were dipped in poison. I'm sorry, but your poor horse is dead. As soon as Asher realized what was happening, he came running to help

you, but your omega had already saved you.”

*He did what?* I wanted to say, but I couldn’t get my mouth to fully cooperate. The idea was incomprehensible for a few reasons, including the fact that I had *bound his powers*.

I knew the binding had worked—at least temporarily, or I could have felt his power if it had still been there. Yet my so-called hallucination of the fire moving up my arm when he laid his hands on me after the attack had apparently been all too real. Not the actual flames. I had no burns at all, but I knew that what I had seen was my brain’s interpretation of his power working on me. They were a metaphorical manifestation of his magic.

As much as I hated to admit it, it had to be because of our connection. He was my true mate, and I supposed I couldn’t keep denying it. Denying him. I longed for him now and wished for the thousandth time that night that I hadn’t been so stubborn about not riding with him. His absence from me was physically painful. But then again, it could have been because I was feeling so weak. That had to be it.

Asher was leading our procession along the track, and he pulled up his horse and signaled to the others to stop. The road was widening out a bit and he wheeled his horse around to come back alongside us. He looked relieved when he saw my eyes open.

“Lex, how are you feeling?”

I made a motion to indicate I’d been a lot better, and he frowned, looking concerned.

“Still can’t talk?” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll try another healing when we find a place to stop, though I have to be honest, I don’t know exactly what Rory did to stop the poison from reaching your heart. He saved you.”

I made some kind of sound, and he nodded. “Right. We have to get you somewhere so I can work on you. We’re not on the right road at all, but we’re not far off it, I think. We must have missed a slight turn off, or else someone is practicing magic against us. There’s a cottage up ahead, though, and we’ll stop and see if they can help us. We need shelter for the night, because a bad storm is coming.” Now that he mentioned it, I could smell the moisture in the air, and I had that prickly feeling in my skin that I got when lightning was close by. Asher patted me gingerly on my chest and turned his horse around.

*Had* someone been practicing magic against us? Who the fuck would that be and more importantly, why were they doing such a thing? I’d thought those Alphas had been after Rory, and I still thought so. But had there been more to it? I’d traveled that road from Morovia just a couple of days before, and I had no idea how I’d gotten lost or managed to take a wrong turn off the main road. It made more sense that someone had used an obfuscation spell on me. They were easy enough to do. But who? To what purpose? Just to delay us?

We were close to Morovia, so it wasn’t at all inconceivable that it had been another pack—a

Morovian one, since Igellans didn't practice magic. Perhaps they had a talented practitioner who had used their magic to be able to lead us into an ambush, just to take my omega. They'd made a try for Rory, and if I was going to be able to keep him safe on the rest of this journey, I needed to know who was behind this attack and the attempt on my life.

I had so many questions about every aspect of the attack, but I was still literally reeling in the saddle in front of Brandon, and I was afraid we were both going to fall off this horse if I stirred myself to ask more questions. I fell back against Brandon and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate only on staying on the horse.

The next thing I knew I was being pulled carefully down from Brandon's arms and carried over to a pallet of furs by both Asher and Wyatt. We were in some kind of dark shed, and the wind was trying its best to break through the flimsy walls and burst through the door. I looked around me, still feeling groggy and saw Rory beside me, holding my hand in his, his face scared, while the storm was raging outside. I was soaking wet, and as soon as whoever was carrying me put me down, I began to shiver.

Asher loomed over me and began stripping my clothes off me quickly and efficiently, then tucking me under some warm furs, while Rory quickly climbed in beside me. He had taken his clothes off too, and his body, though a little chilled, still felt wonderful against my skin. I felt immediate comfort just from his proximity and felt like I could finally take a deep breath. He wrapped himself around me, making soft little whimpering noises in my ear.

I raised my hand to pat his arm, and he startled and peered down in my face. "Are you awake, Lex?" he asked.

"Mostly," I said, and though the word was still slightly slurred, my tongue didn't slide around it like it would have before.

"I was so worried," he said, kissing me on my cheek and nuzzling me. My eyes closed again and this time when I opened them and looked up, I saw Asher leaning over me.

"I've done another healing while you were sleeping. There's black magic involved here, Lex, but I think I've overcome it. Try to rest so you can get better and help me. I believe we're safe for now, but someone tried to follow us from the place we were attacked. I managed to lead them off in the wrong direction, and I'm pretty sure we weren't followed here."

"Pretty sure?"

He shrugged. "It's still unclear. I think they may have split into two separate groups."

"Where are we?"

"An abandoned peasant's hut. Or I should say an outbuilding. The hut itself was in bad shape, though, so we're in the shed. The roof and walls here are mostly intact, at least. We'll stay here until

morning so the storm can pass over. The good news is that if we can't easily travel in the storm, neither can they."

"True enough."

"But here's the thing. They'll be expecting us to find a shelter and hole up somewhere. They know you're hurt, so they'd be surprised if we did anything else."

"Yes, so? That's what we're doing."

"Yes. Except not all of us should stay. Brandon will stay here with you and Rory, while Wyatt and I circle back and find those fuckers."

"I'll go with you."

From beside me, I heard a noise and looked down to see Rory, only pretending to be asleep. His eyes were wide open and glaring at me.

"No," he said. "Are you crazy? You were almost killed."

I frowned at him. He had a bad habit of speaking out of turn and not respecting me as his Alpha. "I'm fine," I protested, but Asher put his hand on my chest and pushed me back down.

"No, Lex, listen to your omega, because he's right. Besides, if you go with us, who's going to stay and watch over him?"

"Brandon's staying. He can watch out for Rory."

"And what if they had the same bright idea we had, and they come in force? They could rape him or even kill him."

That shut me up, and I stopped arguing about it. Rory hummed happily beside me when he figured out I was staying and tangled his legs around mine again. I had to admit, it felt pretty damn good, so I didn't protest any further.

Despite all my bold talk of going with Asher and Wyatt, I fell back asleep right away and had troubling dreams of being in a battle with the Igellan army, of all things. It had been a few years since I'd last fought in a battle against Igella, but in the dream, our war with them had never stopped. Like my dreams often did, this one seemed to go on and on, with first one side winning the battle and then the tide turning again. Once I must have yelled out, because I felt Rory's grip on me tightened, and he began singing softly in my ear. It sounded like a lullaby and soothed me enough that I fell back asleep and the noise of the storm raging outside, the crash of thunder and the wind banging against the door faded into the sounds of the battle in my dreams again.

When I awoke, the storm had passed, and Asher and Wyatt had returned. Both of them were sleeping soundly, rolled up in furs by the small fire. Brandon and Rory were both awake and preparing food for us.

Rory noticed me first and poured the hot coffee I was smelling into a cup to bring it over to me.

He sat down cross-legged beside me on the furs, as I sipped it, letting the warmth seep into my bones.

“This is good,” I said, a little surprised, because none of us knew how to make decent coffee.

“Thanks,” he said and smiled.

“It’s a lot better than what we usually make.”

“That’s because none of you measure. You just throw in a handful or two and think that’s good enough.”

Since that was true, I had little to say to it, so I nodded at Brandon instead. “Did you talk to Asher and Wyatt before they went to sleep?”

“Yes. They found the camp and there was a fight. Asher didn’t tell me exactly what happened, but he said there was nothing more to worry about.”

“Good. We should still get out of here, though, as soon as they’ve slept a little.”

“Just resting my eyes,” Wyatt said, turning over and rubbing a hand across his face. He poked Asher beside him. “Ash, wake up. We need to be moving soon and try to get some miles between us and whatever is left of that pack. We did kill most of them, but a couple got away and ran into the forest.”

“Had they split up, like you thought?”

“Yes, a few of them did, but they came back once the storm really hit.”

“But we were waiting for them,” Asher said, continuing the story as he turned over. “Mostly betas in that group, though. They never knew what hit them.”

“So they won’t be following us?”

“Not likely,” Asher said. “Most are dead. I think the others had enough.”

“Were you able to find out what made them attack us?”

“One of them yelled something about the queen, and promised we’d be sorry. I cut his throat when he declined to say more.”

“The queen of Igella?”

“That’s what I thought,” Asher shrugged. “Like I said, he wasn’t very forthcoming.”

I laughed at him, noticing Rory’s eyes were wide as he followed our conversation, and he looked frightened and a little horrified at how easily we discussed killing. But we had all been soldiers together during the war and were likely to fight together again. I was glad in a way that he seemed a little afraid of us. It might even help me tame my little warlock prince. The gods knew he hadn’t been the least bit afraid of me up to now.

Not that he should be. I’d never touch a hair on his head—I just didn’t want him to be so confident of the fact. If I couldn’t get his powers bound before we went in front of my brother and his court magicians, I’d be fighting my way out of the king’s palace with him. And I really didn’t want to



go on the run with Rory, like his grandfather had to do with Vesper.

I held out a hand to him and he snuggled closer to me so I could wrap an arm around him. I felt better having him close to me like this. It had only been two days since I'd first seen him on those ramparts. Ridiculous to feel so much for a person I barely knew. It wasn't love—it *wasn't*. But it was the strongest attachment I'd ever felt for anyone. He felt like a part of me—which was another excellent argument for Rory being my true mate, whether I "believed in them" or not.

I just wasn't quite ready to admit it yet even to myself and certainly not to him. All I could do was hope this crazy possessiveness was all Alpha related and keep pretending I could easily walk away any time I wanted to. Even though a small part of me whispered that it was just a lie.

## Chapter Ten

*Rory*

Sitting close to Lex while he was drinking his coffee and talking in a low voice to his pack made me feel safer than I had in a long time. Maybe ever.

Which was crazy, because I was sitting in a freezing shed in the middle of bumfuck Egypt for all I knew, and it was too dark and too cold, and I hated both those things. I'd just been torn out of my old life by these Alphas. They were gorgeous, but they were taking me to parts unknown to do the gods knew what with me—after they'd probably all fucked me and knotted me, that is. My stepmother had a signed contract from Lex saying that they'd kill me one day when the time came, and from the rapid decline I'd seen in my father lately, that time wasn't so far off. My life was a complete disaster.

Then Lex stood up, dropping a kiss on the top of my head as he went and giving me a brief, fierce hug, and my stupid heart melted all over again. It wasn't good for me to feel so much for him. I had to somehow get a grip and ignore my crazy omega hormones, which went wild every time I was near him.

Everyone was getting ready to leave, so I found my clothes—thankfully, Brandon had the presence of mind to drape my wet things over an old crate near the fire, so they were a little damp, but not soaked. I pulled them on anyway and found my cape and boots. By that time, the Alphas were all dressed themselves and putting the packs on the horses. There was a new horse for Lex too—one that Wyatt and Asher had “liberated” from the outlaw camp after they had dealt with the men there and run all the other horses off.

Anyway, I saw Lex putting his packs on that horse, and then he turned to look for me. He held out his hand impatiently for me to come to him, and despite the arrogance in the gesture (which came with the territory with him) my heart finished its slow melt into a complete puddle. I hurried over to him, and he boosted me up, then swung up behind me. I settled back against him, like a puzzle piece slipping into its rightful slot. I fit perfectly.

“Be still,” he chided me, hissing in a breath as I wiggled around on his groin, trying to get even closer. He lowered his head and put his mouth next to my ear. “I’m about to take you behind a tree somewhere if you don’t stop moving that little ass of yours. Or pull your trousers down and let you ride my cock all day.”

“Mm, yes, please,” I said, laughing up at him, and he glared down at me, trying to adjust himself

in the saddle. He was acting all snarly, but I was beginning to realize some of that was him reacting to his own overwhelming attraction to me. He was feeling this just like I was, and the realization gave me a real feeling of power I'd never had before. I tried to be good after that and not move around so much. Most of the time. I have to admit I enjoyed those sharp intakes of breath a little too much.

We soon came back to another road crossing and Asher rode his horse up beside us to discuss something about it from the way they were gesturing. They were speaking in Morovian though, and I didn't understand. They appeared to be thinking they were on the right road again, though, and we soon started down this wider, better maintained track, this time riding much harder than before, as if to make up for lost time.

Apparently, we were traveling in the daylight now, thank the gods, and I wondered if we were getting close to their own border.

"Turn around again and hold me around my waist. I may need my hands free, and I don't want you to fall," Lex said, and I gladly obliged. It was warmer and I could get closer to him and drench my senses in that sexy, sharp, gunpowder scent of his. I burrowed under his cape too, where it was darker. I fell asleep again, listening to his strong, steady heartbeat under my ear.

The next thing I knew, we were stopping. I came floating back to the surface and pulled my head out to look around. We were in the courtyard of an inn, and the place looked to be fairly busy, or at least there was a lot of activity outside. A coach was pulled up near another building which must have been stables, and some men were changing out horses. Farther on, a small group of riders were tying their horses to a post and stretching and laughing as they moved toward the door. A large, portly man with a full beard was standing under a sign with a picture of a huge ugly hog with tusks. He stepped up to Asher as he got off his horse.

"Welcome to *The Wild Boar*, sir. Were you wanting to spend the night? I have two nice rooms that I can have ready in a short time. In the meantime, I can offer you some hot supper and some good ale."

Asher glanced back at Lex, who nodded.

"Yes, we'll take the rooms and the supper, with our thanks," Asher told the man. "We'll be at a table inside when you have the rooms ready for us."

"Very good, sir," he said, rubbing his not very clean hands together. His eyes raked over first Lex and then me. "You have an omega with you, sir?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Oh no, sir. Mostly betas here tonight. No one will interfere with her here."

"It's him, and if anyone tries to "interfere" with him, we can soon disabuse them of the notion."

"Yes, of course, of course. This way, sir."

“Are you awake?” Lex murmured to me, and I nodded, amazed by the conversation I’d heard. I had led a sheltered life in the castle, even though it hadn’t been an easy one. I could only imagine what I’d be going through now if I’d succeeded in my plan to run away. I could see how foolish that thought had been. If I had been alone, I’d have been such easy prey. This beta had noticed me and scented me from fifteen feet away. I lowered my head, suddenly feeling shy and nuzzled my face nose first into Lex’s chest.

I heard the soft rumble of laughter in his chest, and he put a finger under my chin to tip it up to him. “Come on, and let’s go inside. Just stay close and keep your hood up at all times. Don’t speak to anyone, and don’t worry. We’ll take good care of you.” He gave me a quick, hard kiss then and though I felt like swooning, I let him pick me up around the waist and hand me down to Wyatt.

Lex jumped down beside us and gave the reins of his horse to one of the stable boys who had come out to greet us. He threw a proprietary arm around me, and we went to the door.

The host went quickly ahead of us and ushered us into a big room, with a fireplace big enough to stand up in if there hadn’t been a roaring fire in it. It warmed up the whole room and we took a seat at one of the round tables near it. I sat between Asher and Lex, and I kept my hood up and scrunched down inside my cape—at least I had plenty of experience with that.

A woman with an apron came over and offered us steaming bowls of beef stew and some warm bread, fresh out of the oven. Another young girl brought us tankards of ale. The stew was full of potatoes and carrots and some other vegetables thrown in for good measure. It even had a few pieces of beef. Anyway, it was delicious, and I spooned it in my mouth quickly, barely waiting for it to cool. I sipped at the ale, though I’d never developed a taste for it. It helped warm me up, and that was the most important thing.

There was one other table in the room, and it had that group of betas who had arrived about the same time as we had sitting at it. Though they glanced curiously at me from time to time, they stopped and turned their heads away when Lex gave them a long, speculative look, like he was wondering how many of their bodies he could fit inside that giant fireplace.

By the time we finished eating, I could tell both Wyatt and Asher were sagging with exhaustion. They’d had very little sleep before we left that morning, so I knew how tired they must have been. They all did their mind-sharing thing again, looking around at each other and then got to their feet to go see if they could find the innkeeper and get keys to the rooms.

As it turned out, he was just coming into the corridor when we reached it and handed them over, assuring the Alphas that the rooms were ready. We went upstairs, Lex holding me by my arm, and three of the Alphas, Wyatt, Brandon and Asher went into one of the rooms, bidding us good night, while Lex took me to the room next door. It seemed that only the two of us would share this bed

chamber.

I went inside nervously, not really knowing what to expect. Would he bite me now? Make love to me and give me his knot? Or was he too tired? I still wasn't in full heat, but I was extremely close. He might be able to knot me, and the idea made me shiver with anticipation.

However, he'd been so injured from the poisoned arrow, and I knew he must still be in pain even though Asher had done several healings on him. He was sitting on the bed, pulling off his boots and turned to smile at me.

"I guess you're not tired, since you've been sleeping all day."

I shrugged. I felt as if I'd done little other than nap on this ride, but with so much excitement and with the adrenaline continually pumping through me, I suppose it was no wonder I still felt tired.

Instead of answering him, I went to sit down beside him and touched his shoulder. "How are *you* feeling?" I asked and he turned to smile at me.

"Better." He brushed a strand of hair from my face and gazed down into my eyes. "I know you healed me—Asher said you probably saved my life. Thank you, Rory."

I glanced up at him in surprise. That moment when I'd seen him fall back down on the ground had terrified me, and I'd acted instinctively. I wasn't even thinking about anything except wanting to make him better, to help him. I felt the energy flowing out of my fingers, but I'd still been shocked when I saw his flesh healing and knitting back together under my hand. I had no idea if it had been me doing it, because I didn't remember any conscious thought behind it. Just blind panic.

He leaned down to brush his lips over mine again. "I want you very much, Rory. I want to make love to you, but I won't force you."

"You won't be forcing anything. I want you too."

He gave a soft growl and lowered his lips to mine. One hand clutched the back of my neck while the other slid between our bodies. Lex's hand closed around my cock. I tried never to touch myself there except when bathing because it was so sensitive. In all the books I'd read about omegas, I'd been taught that my pleasure was secondary to my Alpha's anyway. And since my cock wasn't made to give *him* pleasure, it should be ignored. Yet so far Lex hadn't acted that way. He had tried to pleasure me at the stream, and I'd even felt his hand there when we were in bed together. I hissed in a sharp breath as Lex's hand started to move up and down my shaft, stroking me. I raised my face to his.

"I-I want to honor our binding ceremony, Lex. You're my Alpha, and you can do whatever you want. I won't ever fight you."

"It should be about both our pleasure, sweetheart." He looked at me dubiously. "How experienced are you, Rory? I know you must have been with men before. How many?"

I shook my head. "No, none. I haven't been with any men or women either, for that matter. I don't

know exactly what happens other than what I've read about in books. Omegas aren't given any kind of real instruction on this. I think we're supposed to be kept sheltered, and our Alphas are supposed to teach us."

Lex looked down at me and I was surprised to see him trembling. "Can this be true, sweetheart? You've never been with a man? Ever?"

"Not until the stream. And what you did to me there." I looked up at him, feeling shy. "I liked that a lot though."

He shook his head, turning away and passing a hand over his face. I put my hands on his arms and drew him back around to face me. "I want you to teach me, Alpha. If you want me..."

Lex moved toward me with a low growling sound in his throat. Something leaped in his eyes that perhaps should have frightened me, but it excited me instead. I brushed my hand over the bulge in his trousers and couldn't imagine where I'd found the nerve to do it, but it felt so amazing, so incredible that I pressed a bit harder, and Lex shuddered like I was hurting him. I pulled my hand back and he pulled me closer, his lips firmly fixing on mine and his breathing getting rapid.

Lex eased his tongue inside my mouth, gently exploring, while I clutched at his shoulders in complete dismay. No one had ever even kissed me on the lips before Lex that I could remember. Even Griselda kissed my cheeks. No one else had shown me much affection in years.

Why was Lex putting his tongue in my mouth, though? He'd done it before and I liked it, but it felt strange.

My breath coming quicker, I pushed at his shoulders, but didn't budge him an inch. Dragging my eyes open, I met his blue gaze, sparkling with some emotion I couldn't name.

My big Alpha finally pulled his mouth away from mine, but I still couldn't take a proper breath. Not with what was going on between my legs. I was harder there than I'd ever been before, painfully so, and I wanted...something, but I didn't know what it was, but I thought it was like what I'd done at the stream. I strained to get closer to Lex, and my hips started thrusting forward instinctively, like they had then. Hearing myself whimpering again, I arched my back and looked up into his eyes, silently begging him to help, but I didn't know what I wanted help for. Something was building in me, and I was afraid I was about to fly apart.

Lex smiled at me, like this was exactly what he wanted. "Come on," he urged, gripping me harder. "Come on, sweetheart."

I thought I must be dying. It was like before, when my body seized and I strained forward, making little grunting sounds. My toes tried to clench and curl. The same white, sticky stuff I'd sprayed over him once before started spurting from the end of my cock. A drop or two even hit me under the chin, and meanwhile slick was flowing out of me, drenching the sheets beneath me. I fell against Lex's

chest, totally spent and drained. Lex held me up and rubbed my back, not saying anything, just seeming to be trying to soothe me. The air was thick with both his pheromones and my own.

This wasn't the first time Lex had held me in his hand like this. He'd done it at the stream and then several times in bed. I rubbed myself against Lex's stomach, the friction almost painful now, but still feeling wonderful.

"Yes, yes," I said, getting excited. I was happy for the moment just to hang there in Lex's arms and rub all over him. He didn't seem to mind. After a few minutes, though, he stood up and began tearing off his clothes. I watched him, unable to look away. I'd seen his body before, but he certainly merited a second look.

I'd never seen any man, but I wondered if many could compare to Lex.

He was so big, with broad muscles in his chest and thighs. His skin was tanned and smooth, but all these things paled in comparison with what was hanging between his legs. He had the same things I did, only his were much larger. His cock was longer and wider than mine, and it looked impossibly hard. A big ridge of flesh bulged around the base of his shaft. I'd gotten a glimpse of it by the water that day. His knot. He had thick, curly hair surrounding it and his balls below it were big too, though just now drawn up tightly. Just looking at him made my stomach clench.

"Take your clothes off, Rory," he said, and I jumped to my feet and quickly started pulling everything off. He watched every move I made, his eyes dark with need. When I was through, I just stood there, and he smiled and gestured toward the bed, like what are you waiting for? I flung myself down and he knelt over me, his eyes hungry and savage, but he was smiling at me. "Don't hurt yourself, baby. We have all night long."

I nodded, and he grew serious. "I'm going to fuck you now, Rory. Tell me you know what that means."

A little nervous—okay, frightened, but trying not to show it—I shook my head and tensed all over, readying myself. "Yes. Go ahead. I'm prepared."

He shook his head. "It shouldn't be an ordeal you have to prepare for. Though the first time can hurt a little." Groaning, Lex fell down beside me, his own cock an angry red now and sticking up rigidly from his body. "Can you really be as innocent as you're pretending? Tell me the truth. Are you really as unsullied as you say you are?"

"I-I'm not sure."

"How can you not be sure?" Lex snapped at me, looking angry at the idea of anything else.

"Because I don't know what that word means," I said. I could see he was growing impatient, and I felt stupid and ignorant. Why had I never thought to ask anyone anything?

Lex propped himself up on one elbow and narrowed his eyes at me. "What do you mean you

don't know what it means?"

"I mean I don't know. I never heard that word before."

"It means virginal. What do you call someone who hasn't ever had sex before?"

"I don't call them anything because I'm not supposed to discuss things like that. It never came up in everyday conversation with my servants."

Lex blew out an exasperated breath. "You're killing me."

"I don't mean to," I said, wringing my hands a little. "I don't know what you want me to say."

He immediately took me in his arms and soothed me, kissing me again and again. "I'm sorry, Rory. I thought you were teasing me, but don't worry about it. You're right—I'm just being an ass. I can't stand the idea of you with somebody else."

"I haven't been. No one ever taught me anything like this before. I read some books, but that's it." I could feel my cheeks heat up and I squirmed uncomfortably. "I know you think I'm dumb and that I-I lie. But I'm not lying about this. I don't know anything much about sex."

Lex shook his head and stared at me again. "I don't think that about you. So you had no idea what I was doing to your cock just then?"

"I mean...I could figure it out."

Lex just looked at me and then tilted his head. His eyes got even narrower. "You're fucking with me. You have to be."

I looked down at myself. "I-I don't think so. I don't think I'm doing anything."

Lex raised his eyes toward the ceiling and seemed to be trying for patience. "From now on," he said. "Ask me things you don't know, and I'll tell you."

"All right," I replied.

"We'll start..." Lex said, rolling back toward me. "We'll start with how an Alpha makes love to his omega." He moved his big hand to Rory's stomach. "Now pay attention and we'll go nice and slow."

\*\*\*\*

*Lexington*

"First, sweetheart...first, you have to realize exactly what it is we're going to do. I'm going to make love to you here," I said, pushing him back against the pillows and then pushing up his knees. "Hold these here."

He held onto them and looked at me expectantly. I tapped a fingertip over his sweet, rosebud hole.



“Right here, Rory. Is that clear enough?”

“Yes. I understand.” He was a little breathless and it made me want to protect him and soothe him.

“Are you sure? I’m going to put my cock all the way inside you. Then, after a while, my knot will swell, and we won’t be able to stop. We’ll be tied together for a long time. Maybe an hour or more. Do you fully understand what that means? I’ll be biting you here,” I said, brushing a finger along the side of his throat. A claiming bite that will mark you as my mate. It won’t be a full claiming because you’re not fully in heat yet. But it will mark you as my omega.”

“I understand, yes.”

“Do you? Because once the pheromones kick in, things are going to get a little hazy to you.”

“I-I think they’ve already kicked in. Things are pretty hazy now.” He swallowed hard. “Can I put my legs down now?”

“Not yet.”

“Okay.”

I smiled at him—gods he was sweet, and I never thought I’d say that about Vesper’s child.

“I need to put some oil here first,” I told him, reaching for the oil in my packs. I found what I was looking for and began to splash it liberally all over his entrance. Then I took my hand to rub it in well. I took my time doing that, and he seemed to grow more and more desperate during the massage. The gods knew I was. I put a lot of oil on myself as well.

His omega slick might be enough, but I wanted to be extra sure. His omega secretions were seeping from his sweet ass and so potent they made me dizzy with lust. I closed my eyes, feeling weak. The smell was powerful, and he was all slicked up and ready for me. His hole was like a tiny, round, ripe peach, and all for me. There was no way I could have resisted him even if I’d wanted to. And I didn’t want to.

There was something else nagging at me through my lust haze. I realized that this—this overwhelming passion I was feeling was more than just the normal reaction any alpha has for an omega in heat. This was definitely the mate-scent I was smelling in his pheromones. I felt a fierce rush of possessiveness, and I knew I’d never be able to let him go.

This mate-scent was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I ached for this sweet boy; I craved him, and I wouldn’t be able to rest until I claimed him. I felt humbled that the gods had brought this rare creature to me. This was my mate, and I would give my life to keep him safe and beside me.

I bent to kiss him again and that’s when I stopped thinking rationally for a while and just reacted to that delicious scent. The omega lust hit me hard. His little hole was almost unbearably hot and wet and luscious. I licked it over and over, and he was opening up nicely for me, whimpering and

moaning, his whole body turned a delicious shade of pink.

I sat up a little and licked him from his balls to his pretty hole, and he squealed and screamed again and humped the air as it began to open up, in the way of all omegas, whose holes were made to open enough to take an alpha's knot. I knew the whole inn must be hearing this, but I couldn't have cared less. I swept a long finger over a spot deep inside him that seemed to light him up with electricity. His sweet body began to shake with emotion and passion. He tried to slam down on my fingers but with one more tap on that spot and another slow, hard rub inside him, I pulled my fingers away and left his entrance spasming for more, and his mouth wide open and pleading with me.

"No!" he cried out as I smiled down at him. "Please don't stop. Please, *please*."

"Shhh...be patient, baby." I stroked a hand over his leaking cock. "Wait, and I'll take care of you." Then, unable to wait any longer, in one long, smooth stroke, I sheathed myself to the hilt inside his body. He gasped and made a soft, needy noise that made me lean over to kiss him. "That's right, baby, make those little sounds for me. Tell me how much you want this."

I began thrusting into him with long, slow strokes that made me almost weep with pleasure. It felt so damn perfect. I changed angles and with my cock I raked over the spot inside him that lit him up, and he let out another scream. He tried to hump against me, but I held him down and he had to be content with the long, slow strokes that were all I would give him. He was shuddering and shaking all over after a few minutes of this treatment and begging me shamelessly for more, harder.

"More, please, Lex."

I bent low over him again, trapping and holding his hands high over his head, and this time I trailed my tongue on the edge of his ear. He moaned like he felt it all the way to his cock, which jerked hard against my stomach. Desire was rippling through me. I meant to go slow, but it was hard not to be overcome by the feel and the scent of him. Gradually, the ring of muscle at his entrance loosened even more for me, and I knew it was time. I wanted this to be good for him but taking my knot for the first time would be hard and probably painful, and there wasn't much I could do about that. Now I was about to inflict even more pain, because I needed desperately to bite him.

I sank my teeth into his throat, and he squealed with the pain. I kept my incisors inside until the blood ran down his neck, and then I pulled away and licked over the bite mark again and again. He cried out and whimpered and begged for more as if I were licking his cock.

I stroked him, and his dick was dark pink and thick and altogether perfect, with a sweet, broad head. He was moaning with his eyes tightly closed, so I hooked an arm under his ass and thrust my knot up against him again, trying to work it in with my fingers. He felt it and screamed trying to get away and then arching closer. Finally, he gave up and let his entire body relax, looking up at me so sweetly.

“Help me,” he said, and I covered his face with kisses. This was my true mate. My omega. Now that I had tasted him, I’d never let him go. I’d never be able to. He was mine, and I’d destroy anyone who tried to take him from me. I bit him again, and he screamed again, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted him to wear my bites like a necklace around his throat.

I began to slowly move inside him. An alpha’s pre-cum is copious and thick and would help to make my knot easier to take. I stroked his cock and kissed him until he adjusted to the pressure and fullness, and my knot finally began to settle into place. I stiffened then, unbearably excited as a flood of hot semen filled his ass, and I began to come, pushing my knot even farther inside him. He moaned again, only half-conscious by now, and I kissed him frantically, hating the idea that I was hurting him, but physically unable to stop thrusting. Finally, I was spent, and he sagged unconscious in my arms.

We’d be tied together for a while, now that I had him filled with my knot and my semen, he was mine. I lay there on top of him, though I eased my body off to the side, pulling him along with me and just holding him in this close embrace.

I lay waiting for the knot to soften so I could move again, knowing it might be a while. I was surprised when he spoke to me—I’d thought he was still unconscious.

“I feel so full.”

“I know, baby. It means you’re mine now.”

He sighed with contentment. “I love you,” he said, and I jolted a little with shock. It was too soon for anything like this. Our mating was far too complicated.

“That’s all right,” he said after a minute. “I don’t expect you to say it back. I just wanted you to know. I-I thought you despised me. You said I was a warlock.”

I regarded him silently for a few seconds, rubbing his back. “Despise is too strong a word. Never that. I was a little angry, yes. I thought you tried to hurt yourself rather than to be with me. And I know you must be a warlock, baby, as hard as it might be for you to understand. Your mother was too strong for it to not be passed on to you. I still don’t think I know the whole truth about who and what you really are, and so far, you haven’t been willing to tell me. But I saw your magic at the camp that night and again when you healed me. It’s unusual—I never saw anything like it before.”

“But I didn’t know anything before you told me. I’m not holding anything back. I swear it.”

I couldn’t let this go on. I had to reassert my dominance over him and make him at least a little afraid of me for his own good.

“I don’t know, Rory,” I said softly. “I think I may have to knot you again to get the truth out of you. You have to learn that you belong to me and that includes every single part of you. Even your magic. Do you understand? It may take a while, but I’m prepared to stay here as long as it takes. Inside you...making you come again and again until you beg me to stop.”

He moaned. “All right. But I won’t.”

I was so shocked, I raised up on one elbow and stared down at him.

“Don’t you understand what I’m saying? You’ll beg me over and over again to let you get up.”

He smiled sleepily at me. “I don’t think I will.”

“Damn it, I’m supposed to be threatening you. Why are you acting like you’ll enjoy every second of it?”

“Because I really will. I love everything you do to me.”

I groaned. “Well, fuck.”

I laid my head back down and just let him be, though my mind was racing.

After a while, I heard his slow, steady breathing. “I don’t think I can resist you,” I whispered softly to him, thinking he was asleep and wouldn’t hear. “I don’t think I want to.”

“Don’t,” Rory said softly.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“Not yet. I-I want you to be my Alpha, Lex. In every way. Bite me and knot me and do it again and again. I’m ready. I love you, and I don’t care if you don’t say it back. I feel it enough for both of us.”

I groaned and pulled him into my arms. I kissed him for a long time and my hands were all over him, massaging and stroking. I gave him a little bite on his bottom lip, then licked it. I wanted him to learn to associate this strange combination of pain and pleasure with his Alpha--with me, his mate.

“Keep me forever. Please, Alpha.”

Gods, he was killing me. I buried my face against his throat and licked over his bite marks again and again. “Gods, you smell so sweet. You’ll never be with any other man except me—do you hear me? No one but me.”

Rory nodded and smiled, though his eyes were closed. “Yes, Lex. But that’s the way it should be, shouldn’t it?”

Damn it. I felt my heart thump hard a few times in my chest—it must have been the last death throes of my resistance to him.

“Sweetheart,” I said, choking up a little at how much I felt for him. “Yes, that’s the way it should be. Sleep now, princeling. Try to rest. I’ll blow out this candle.”

“Could you...could you not blow it out?”

“Why not?”

His face flushed and he wouldn’t look at me. He mumbled something under his breath.

“What did you say?”

“I said...I’m afraid of the dark.” He gazed up at me so defiantly I couldn’t help but laugh. Some

wicked warlock this was. I started laughing and couldn't stop, even though I could see it made him angry.

He socked me on the shoulder, and I stopped laughing and wiped my eyes. "I'm sorry, princeling. But that was funny."

"Not to me. My stepmother locked me in a closet once and left me there. I think she wanted to kill me even then. I was only six years old."

"Oh baby," I said. "I knew I should have run her through with my sword. I wish I'd been there to help you. Can you forgive me for laughing?" I asked, kissing him all over his face, saying "sorry" with each kiss.

Rory sighed and said, "Yes. I love yu too much to stay mad," and then he sagged beside me, totally spent. I lay awake beside him for a long time as his soft snores began. I pulled the covers up over us and that's when I heard him talking softly in his sleep.

"He says he won't let anyone hurt me, but then he laughed. Can I believe him?"

His words stung, because I didn't know if they were really true. If I really could keep my brother from knowing that he had already used his magic more than once since we'd been together, and whatever binding I'd done on him hadn't worked at all. I knew that for sure now since he'd healed me so powerfully.

I knew I'd try. I'd do everything in my power to keep him safe—even if it meant leaving everything behind and running with him. Maybe this was the true dark enchantment Vesper had passed on to her son—to make the men who loved them lose everything just to be able to hold onto them—and still have them slip through their fingers.

## Chapter Eleven

*Rory*

Lex let me sleep late the next morning, not waking until I heard him talking to the other Alphas outside our door. I could hear them teasing him about all the noise we made the night before. They were interrupted by the servants of the inn bringing water for me to wash in and some breakfast for me too. The Alphas took what they'd brought, not letting them come in to see me. They brought the hot water and towels over to the fireplace and set them down, giving me a long look—but not too long, because Lex growled at them.

They left then, telling us they'd see us downstairs.

Lex came over to kiss me and we got a little caught up in that for a while. But he shook himself after a few minutes and sternly ordered me out of bed.

"It's late, and I want to be at my lodge later tonight. Wash yourself with soap and I sacrificed a shirt to leave you some new pads for your heat. I'll go down and have some breakfast, but you eat here in the room. Keep this door locked and open it to no one but me."

"Yes, Alpha," I said softly, and he shook his head and pointed a finger at me.

"I don't believe a bit of that obedience, sweetheart."

He kissed me again anyway, like he couldn't quite help himself.

After he left, I did as he'd said and washed myself all over with the clean, hot water and soap. So much better than that icy stream! Afterward, I dressed in some old, but clean clothes from my pack and put on the pads. I was cramping a little and really sore in my backside, but if I sat on one ass cheek, it wasn't too bad. I knew I'd be coming in full heat really soon now. It was good we'd be back to Lex's home soon. He told me he'd keep me in his bed every day until it was over. What I'd dreaded for so long was now something to look forward to.

Afterward, I ate some crusty bread and gooey sweet cakes from the tray of food and drank some by now cold tea. It was still delicious.

They came back to get me and made sure I wore my cape and hood on the way out. We left by the main road, but Asher, who was leading us, came back to talk to Lex.

"I think we should take the cutoff ahead—it's a quicker route than the main road, and I'm not sure I trust that innkeeper. He was way too nosy about your princeling this morning. It could be nothing, but

he knows we have money on us too.”

“Good call. Yes, we’ll take the cutoff. But have your weapons ready.”

“Will do,” he said, almost cheerfully, like he was looking forward to a bit of mischief. Alphas.

Fortunately, to my way of thinking, we didn’t have any trouble and we rode all the rest of that day, only stopping in early evening to rest the horses and eat a quick supper. We got back on the road, with only the moon and stars to light our way, but Lex told me we were close to their lodge now, and they knew these roads like the backs of their hands.

Predictably, I fell asleep, leaning back against Lex’s chest. I felt his hands stroking over the bite marks on my throat, but I pretended to be asleep. It wasn’t much longer after that until Lex shook me gently to wake me up.

“Rory, we’re home,” he said, and I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake up to see. My first impression was of a huge manor home, but not fancy like some in my kingdom. This one was rustic, in a way, but really large, with a broad front porch all along the front. It was three stories tall, with a wide front door that had servants spilling out, even though the hour was late. Lex jumped down off the horse and held up his arms to me. He put me down beside him and we walked inside, following the others, with some servants taking the horses to one of the many outbuildings in the big, cleared area in front of the house.

Inside the main entrance hall, the ceiling towered all the way up, as high as the house, with a massive chandelier made from stag horns hanging down in the middle. A wide staircase led up to the second floor

Lex gave some orders to the servants while I stood in the main foyer, looking up. I had lived all my life in a castle—a small, old, one to be sure, but still... This place that I’d heard Lex call his “lodge” was far finer and maybe even just as large as my father’s castle. I turned to look at him as he strode around, giving orders to the servants, who called him “Your Highness,” and he laughed and talked with his cousins, all of them glad to be back home. He noticed my regard and came over to me.

“What’s the matter, princeling? You can’t be tired after sleeping all day.”

“Who are you, Lex? Who are you, really? I know you said what you said, and I know you’re Morovian, but this place is so large and extravagant. Please tell me the truth.”

His cheeks pinkened the slightest bit. If I hadn’t gotten so familiar with his handsome face and expressions in the last couple of days, I might never have noticed it.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he protested. “It’s just my family’s hunting lodge. I’ve lived here for a few years now.”

“And your family? Where do they live?”

He hesitated and there was that slight flush again. “Somewhere else.” He sighed and ran a hand

through his thick hair. “I’m Prince Lexington, youngest son of the late King Robert of Morovia. My brother Harrison is the current king.”

I took a step backward, shocked at his words. “You lied to Berinda and my father about who you really were.”

“Yes,” he said, the arrogance he’d shown when I first met him making a reappearance. “And why not? Your stepmother was searching for an Alpha who would marry you for who you were, and then as soon as you inherited the throne, she wanted that Alpha to murder you and marry her own daughter. All she cared about was the gold I had. We couldn’t allow her to put someone ruthless and without honor on the throne of Igella, so close to our own borders.”

“So you volunteered to take me off her hands and do the deed yourself. And you’ll be my Regent when something happens to my father.”

He lifted his chin. “I didn’t exactly volunteer, and I have never planned to ‘do the deed,’ as you call it. I’m no murderer. My brother asked me to marry you and become Regent of Igella for the good of our people. And because he was afraid of any kind of dark magic that you might have. But basically, yes. That’s what happened. I lied about who I really was and took you for myself. And I’d do it again.”

He was staring down at me, and I noticed his cousins had stopped their conversations and were watching us carefully from near the doorway. Lex had a look of haughty defiance on his face, but his eyes were wary, even apprehensive. He was breathing a little harder too, and I knew he was just a little bit afraid of my reaction. I decided not to leave him in suspense.

Taking his hand in mine, I stepped closer to him and looked up into his eyes. “Thank the gods,” I said softly, and pressed my lips to his knuckles.

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The next few months were the best of my life. My heat came in with a vengeance after only a few days at Lex’s lodge. The days mostly passed in a haze for me after that, and I didn’t register much of what was going on around me for well over a week or more. My world revolved around Lex’s bedroom, the only place he would allow me to stay for the duration of my heat. He stayed with me all through those first days and then after that he came and went, locking me in each morning. No one except the female servants were allowed to come in, and then only when they were bringing me food or cleaning up the room or bringing me hot bath water to soothe my soreness.

Lex’s bed became a nest of furs and blankets where I slept a lot and made love to Lex as often as he’d allow it. Honestly, I would have spent the entire week or so of my heat with his big knot stuffed



inside me if he had let me, but he insisted I get hot baths every morning where I had to soak my sore bottom and afterward, he'd take me out and "inspect" me carefully for any tears or injuries.

Those close inspections led inevitably to more sex, of course. And then more after that. I think Lex was almost as insatiable as I was. The pheromones in that room were out of control. But he made sure I ate well, even if he had to handfeed me at times when all I wanted to do was sleep or fuck. When it was finally over, Lex let me go back downstairs to eat my meals with the other Alphas.

I'd missed them and they even seemed to have missed me a little too. At our first evening meal, Asher told Lex off-handedly that he had found a horse for me the way they had discussed. Choking a little on a piece of bread, I recovered a bit as Lex beat on my back and made me drink some water.

"Slow down, princeling. No one is going to take your food away from you."

"I-I know, but did I hear Asher correctly? You discussed a horse? And he found me one?"

Lex nodded. "You need a horse, Rory. We may have to travel back to Igella one day, possibly in the near future or my brother could summon us to court soon."

"But I can't ride."

"I'll teach you," he said, giving me one of his smoldering looks. "Besides, the weather is getting much warmer every day, and you need some exercise. We can take a long ride into the countryside each day, and I'll have the servants pack us some refreshments."

"Better bring along a blanket and some oil too, Lex," Wyatt said, laughing at the blush that I could feel starting at my throat and slowly rising up to my cheeks. "Just in case Rory decides he needs to take a little 'nap' along the way. You'll need to be prepared."

All the Alphas seemed to think that was hilarious, but I glared at all of them and made a huffing sound. Lex leaned over to kiss me. "Pay them no mind, princeling. They're just jealous. Now Asher, tell me about this horse you found."

"He's a Morgan horse and very gentle—a gelding and he's used to having inexperienced riders. I bought him from Lord Marlow, who used him to teach his own young son and daughter."

"What's a Morgan horse?" I asked.

"Just a breed, princeling," Lex answered. "Known for being kind and courageous. Very patient and eager to please and will work hard to figure out what his rider is asking of him."

"What's his name?"

Asher smiled at me. "Marlow's children named him Sunshine, but you can probably change that if you like."

"Oh no, I love that," I said, clapping my hands together, and they all smiled at me, with Asher shaking his head fondly.

"He's a chestnut. Marlow's grooms will be bringing him in the morning."

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Well, in the meantime, you need to begin your religion lessons. We’ll start those tonight. But first, Asher and I need to spend some time with you after supper.”

I didn’t say anything, because I didn’t want to start another argument, but I had no interest in these “lessons” Lex wanted me to start, so I dreaded what was coming. He’d told me I had to begin learning about the Morovian religion, and I even had to learn some verses from their holy books so that I could recite them by heart. When I’d protested, Lex had explained that eventually, his brother, the king, would have him bring me to his court so he could meet me. There I would also meet with his court magicians, who would no doubt quiz me on my religious instruction, among other topics. They would be checking to make sure what Lex called “my magic” was properly bound as well. That was the reason for me spending some time with Lex and Asher after supper. They were planning on working together to bind this so-called magic they said I had, since the last time Lex tried to do it alone, it hadn’t seemed to work too well.

According to Lex and his cousins, anyway—for my part, I still felt like I didn’t have any real magic, or not much anyway. So maybe that was why he couldn’t tell any difference. There was nothing there. I hadn’t seen any sign of it since I’d tried to heal Lex from the poisoned arrow. I hadn’t even been able to tell I was doing any kind of healing at the time.

Yes, I’d felt some tingling in my hands, but I had been too scared when he’d fallen down and his eyes had rolled to the back of his head. I wasn’t aware I’d been doing anything really, but all of them said I had healed Lex, and Lex himself said he’d seen little flames coming out of my hands and going over his shoulder and up onto his head. Whatever—I still wondered if he’d been hallucinating more than a little bit. He’d been *poisoned* after all. I’d been stalling and putting these lessons and such off, saying I wasn’t feeling well, but Lex knew I was feeling much better, and my heat was over for now.

At any rate, my time was up, so after we ate, Brandon and Wyatt went to another room and Asher and Lex took me to Lex’s private study. Lex gestured toward a chair in front of his desk, and he leaned his hips against it to stare down at me. Asher stood in front of me too, on my other side.

“Just relax, Rory,” Lex said. “No one is going to hurt you. But my brother ordered me to bind your powers. I tried once while we were traveling, but it obviously didn’t work, and that concerns me. It should have.”

“What makes you even think I have these powers you talk about?”

“Rory...”

“No, seriously. That baby bird could have been sick and we’re not sure the fire blazed up because of anything *I* did. I guess it looked bad, but maybe a log shifted or whatever—I don’t know. But why attribute it to me?”

“You healed me, princeling.”

“Even that’s not for sure. I didn’t consciously do anything. Maybe you healed yourself, and just hallucinated the rest of it.”

Asher spoke up then, coming down on Lex’s side, of course. “We both can feel that you have magic, Rory.”

“Well, maybe you’re both mistaken.”

They glanced at each other, and Lex shrugged. “If you have no magic, then it shouldn’t make any difference if we do a quick binding then, should it?”

“Oh, go ahead,” I said, folding my arms over my chest. “You’ll do what you want to anyway.”

Another glance at each other and then Asher went to Lex’s desk and pulled some white candles from the bottom drawer and tossed Lex a small pouch. Asher set the candles around me, one at each compass point and Lex took a handful of salt from the pouch and sprinkled it around me in a circle. Like I was some kind of demon, or something.

Resentment hit me hard, but I managed to keep my mouth shut and just refuse to look at Lex, even though he tried to catch my eye. Asher lit the candles and they began.

“Close your eyes, princeling,” Lex said.

I closed them, because I trusted Lex, even though I was mad at him. And he’d still never said he loved me. I was mad at Asher too, for that matter. But I felt nervous, and my chest was tightening with nerves. I peeked out from under my eyelashes and saw they were both on their feet, kind of looming over me. Slamming my eyelids shut again, I tensed and waited for whatever was going to happen.

They began by chanting something, using words I didn’t understand. I thought they may have been Morovian or maybe Latin. Their voices got louder, and they seemed to be working to some big finish. I felt one of their hands on my head, and then I began to feel icy cold seeping down from that hand all the way through my head and neck and into my body. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it was uncomfortable, and I could feel a pressure building in my chest. Then it intensified and began to get painful. It felt like my lungs were being turned into icicles and they were going to just shatter into a million pieces. It was getting harder to breathe, and an ache was beginning right in the center of my chest. I put up a hand to rub it and soothe myself a little.

That’s when one of them grabbed my hand and pushed it firmly down by my side. It suddenly infuriated me. Were they trying to kill me? Didn’t they even care if I was in pain? Well, not pain exactly, but I was getting very uncomfortable.

I’d always heard about people seeing red and now I knew what it meant. I was filled with rage. I seethed quietly for a moment, aware that I rarely felt anger like this, and it had to be something they were causing. My breathing got noisier, and I felt like something inside my chest was about to pop. I

didn't like being so mad at Lex. It seemed to go against everything in my heart that I felt for him, so I pushed that anger away from me as hard as I could, and suddenly there was a small explosion of sound in the room, a loud and resounding pop.

My eyes flew open in alarm in time to see Lex and Asher both being knocked backward, Lex falling on his back on the desk and Asher flying up against the wall behind him. Scared, I jumped to my feet and after one quick look to make sure Lex wasn't hurt, I bolted from the room and ran out into the front hall. I heard loud voices behind me and saw Brandon and Wyatt rushing out of another doorway, heading for Lex's study, but I passed them by and ran straight out the front door and into the dark night.

## Chapter Twelve

### *Lexington*

I'd never experienced a burst of power so strong. Asher and I had been working up to the end of the spell, which was a standard one for binding a warlock's powers. Nothing unusual or particularly harsh about it, because I'd never risk Rory that way. I had become increasingly fond of him over the last couple of weeks.

Rory told me he loved me almost every day. It would have been two or three times a day if I'd allowed it, but I was trying my best to slow down this crazy attraction he seemed to have for me if I could. I still thought it was too soon to say love, though I had finally admitted there must be something to this idea of true mates. But he was very young, and he'd been mistreated in his life, and I didn't want him to say too much that he might later regret, just because I had shown him affection.

I still had to consider what I was supposed to be doing here. My brother had deep concerns about Rory, and I had been tasked to bind his powers and make sure he didn't present any kind of threat to our kingdom. I'd been holding him at arm's length the best I could, though it was getting harder every day.

My brother had sent me to Igella on a mission for our country and not to fall in lust with an omega, no matter how beautiful and sweet that omega might be. I couldn't forget that his mother was Vesper, who was infamous in our country for some very wicked deeds that had killed many people. This was why dark magic was so dangerous and insidious, and I couldn't allow myself to forget that.

I had been watching Rory's face closely for any signs of distress. Toward the end, he seemed to be squirming a bit in his chair and he put up a hand to rub his chest. Asher pulled down his hand, because it was blocking the area we were working on. A witch's power came from their core, after all. That's when it happened. It felt like a hot wind blast bursting out of him and coming straight at us—not a burning blast of air—nothing meant to harm us, but still very warm and strong. It picked me up off my feet and thrust me away from Rory and onto my back on the desk. It had seemed to come out of nowhere, and it took both me and Asher by complete surprise.

Asher flew back into the wall but neither of us were really hurt—just shaken and surprised. Hell, we were shocked at that sudden burst of power. By the time I sat up, trying to understand what had just happened, Rory was gone, and Brandon and Wyatt were bursting into the room.

“Are you all right? It sounded like some kind of explosion in here!” Wyatt was yelling and Brandon had gone over to Asher to help him up off the floor.

“Where’s Rory?” I said, beginning to feel alarmed.

Brandon pointed toward the entrance hall. “He ran past us like something was chasing him.”

“I need to find him,” I said and got to my feet to begin running toward the hall, Wyatt’s voice following me accusingly.

“What did you do to him? Did you hurt him?”

I didn’t stop to answer. I ran out into the entry hall but there was no sign of him. The only thing to show that he’d even come that way was the open front door, the dark night yawning outside it.

It was pitch black outside with the moon hiding behind clouds, and my first thought was that Rory must be hiding somewhere inside the lodge. No way would he go outside as dark as it was—he was afraid of the dark. Even now, we had to leave a small candle burning somewhere in our bedchamber at night—I think it was the comfort of seeing even that small light that he craved. I turned and shouted back toward the others.

“Search the lodge—he must be hiding somewhere.”

I turned back to gaze outside and that’s when I felt a slight pull toward the trees at the end of broad front yard. It was only a twinge, but it was definitely there. I called for one of the servants who were milling around nervously inside the front hall to bring me a torch.

“The rest of you keep searching in here. I’m going to go outside and take a look.”

I made my way slowly toward that tree line. The closer I got, the stronger that little tugging inside my chest became. It was so dark, I was practically feeling my way, and I was amazed and distraught over the idea that he’d run this far into the dark just to get away from me. When I got about ten feet away, I stopped and listened, but the only sound was the soft sighing of the trees. I scented his sweet smell on the breeze and knew he was close.

“Rory,” I called out in a low voice, so as not to startle him. “If you’re here, please don’t be scared of me. Surely you know that I’d never deliberately hurt you.” I stopped again, and I thought I might have heard a slight whimper, but I couldn’t be sure. “Please, sweetheart. If I hurt you, I’m sorry. We can figure this out, but only if you’ll let me take you back inside where it’s warm. Just step out and you have my word I’ll just take you back inside. We won’t try anymore tonight, I promise.”

I waited, not saying anything, and the woods were quiet—too quiet, though, and I thought I felt him there, listening. “Come out, princeling. Please.”

About fifteen feet away from where I was standing, farther down toward the main road, Rory stepped out of the trees. He was hugging himself and wouldn’t look at me, but a huge wave of relief washed over me. “Come take my hand, sweetheart.”

I held it out to him, and he glanced toward me. Lifting his chin, he walked slowly toward me, but stopped a few feet away. “I guess I’ve done it now, haven’t I? You think I’m like my mother, and you’ll have to tell the king.”

I dropped my hand but took a step toward him. “I’m not telling the king anything, because we don’t know anything for sure yet. And even if I did, I would never let him or anyone else hurt you. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you’d try not to. But I’ve lived with royals all my life. Kings and their queens don’t listen to *anyone*. They do as they like. You told me they chased my mother out of Morovia, and then sent assassins after her. I’m not even a citizen here—what makes you think they’d treat me differently?”

“You haven’t hurt anyone yet, Rory. And you are a citizen now. You’re my mate.”

“You say I haven’t hurt anyone *yet*. Do you think they’ll just wait for that to happen?”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, because no, I didn’t think they would, and I didn’t want to lie to him. “I don’t know what they’ll do. I wish I did. But nothing will happen before your coronation. That’s far too important to my brother—that I be in place as Regent for you in the future. We can simply stay in Igella after your coronation, if we have to.”

“But what about your home here in Morovia? Your beautiful lodge?”

“Your life is more important to me.”

As I said the words, I realized they were absolutely true. I could never see him hurt, and so I’d do whatever it took to make sure he wasn’t. The royal hunting lodge belonged to my family, and not just to me. However, I’d moved out of the palace when Harrison married, and the lodge had long been my primary residence. No one in the family would ever expect me to leave it. I loved the old place far too much. But if it came down to that lodge or Rory’s safety, then the choice was easy.

“Don’t you think your brother would send assassins after me too?”

“He’d have no reason to. Harrison is a reasonable person. And if he tried, I could call oh half the army to back me and even come to Igella, if I asked them to. My pack and I have a lot of influence with the army. But let’s not borrow trouble. This is all just supposition, and nothing has happened yet.” I extended my hand again. “Please, princeling. Let’s go back inside.”

His shoulders slumped, but he took the few steps it took to bridge the gap between us, and he took my hand.

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*Rory*

The next few weeks seemed to fly by. People say that happens when you're happy, and I suppose it must be true. I knew I'd never felt this way before in my whole life, and I wanted these days to go on and on forever.

Lex didn't mention the unfortunate incident between us in his private study again, and neither did I. Everything was perfect, really, because Lex made love to me every night and sometimes, he'd catch me walking past a room he was in and pull me inside the door to put me against a wall. Or he'd call me over to sit in his lap and ask me to tell him what I'd been doing since he saw me last. He even bent me over the dining room table one memorable night when we were dining alone, when he said I wasn't showing him proper respect as my Alpha. He'd been teasing when he said it, though, and afterward, he held me close and kissed me for a long time. Until, in fact, it was time to go upstairs and go to bed, where I had to "demonstrate respect" to him a few more times.

He still had never said he loved me, even though I told him all the time. He'd usually kiss me when I told him or tell me I was "sweet," but so far he'd never said the words I longed to hear back to me. Still, I was happy except for those tedious lessons, which had continued. The subject of magic never came up, and I felt no need to experiment after that last time. They hadn't been successful in binding anything, but I'd lived all my life without magic, so I wasn't bothered by not using it now. I knew that Lex and Asher watched me sometimes when they thought I wasn't looking, probably speculating about me, but I tried not to be bothered by it.

There was one fly in the ointment—my stepmother sent a letter to Lex, asking if she and Callista might come for a visit, "to see our dear Rory." Lex showed me the letter over breakfast one morning, tossing it casually over toward my plate.

"What do you think, princeling? Are you pining after your stepmother and your sister?"

I stiffened as I read Berinda's letter and shook my head. The hypocrisy of the woman was stunning.

"No, I'm not. I know it's not very nice to say, but I'd be happy if I never saw either one of them ever again."

Lex finished cutting up his fruit and put a bite in his mouth to thoughtfully chew. Afterward, he took a long sip of his coffee.

"Oh, are you waiting for me to comment? It's totally up to you, Rory. I'd never prevent you from seeing your relations if you wished to, but I certainly don't want either of them here anymore than you do. Brandon," he said, glancing over at his cousin. "After supper tonight, will you help me draft a letter that sounds reasonably polite but declines the visit in no uncertain terms?"

Brandon grinned at him. "Be glad to."

"There you are, princeling," Lex said, looking back over at me. "It's as easy as that. Brandon is



much nicer than I am. He can make it so you don't ever have to see them again if that's your wish, and yet he won't be insulting. Well, not very."

Holding my breath, I nodded my head vigorously—so much so I almost pulled a muscle. Lex laughed. "In that case, I'll write to them tonight. Maybe I'll put in a strong suggestion that Callista needs to go ahead and accept one of those many invitations from her other suitors that she told me all about. I'll let them know that I'm not in the market for a wife, nor will I be at any point in the future. I have an omega that takes up a good deal of my time."

He winked at me, and my heart skipped a couple of beats. When would this crazy attraction I had for him ever lessen? It seemed to grow stronger every day, until I didn't think my heart could hold much more, though it certainly seemed willing to try.

I gave him a huge smile and he glanced up at me and blinked a few times in the face of it. We both just sat staring at each other for a little too long, with Lex's eyes smoldering, until Wyatt elbowed his cousin.

"If you're quite through staring at your pretty omega, Lex, perhaps you'll pass me the salt?"

Lex flushed and elbowed Wyatt back, and I tried hard not to smile, looking back down at my plate. I could feel my face getting red though.

The four of them started insulting each other and bantering back and forth, and I was able to go back to my breakfast again.

After we ate, I was trudging upstairs to try and read another religious tract that Lex had given me, when he surprised me by asking me if I wanted to go with him on a visit to the capitol city. "I have some papers to sign for my solicitor in the city, and you've never seen Thalia. I think you might enjoy it. You can ride Sunshine, if you like."

I most certainly did like the idea, so I ran upstairs and changed into one of the nice outfits Lex had bought for me—something I could ride in. He'd been spoiling me lately. I was already wearing my new boots he'd bought for me.

I'd been riding every day with Lex for about three weeks now and he was pleased with how well I was doing. Most of the credit went to Sunshine, my big, beautiful chestnut horse. Lex had given me one of his old saddles—which wasn't old at all, and quite nice—and I clambered up onto it the way he'd taught me when the grooms brought the horses around. Lex now rode a gorgeous big black horse that seemed a little wild to me, though he responded well when I gave him apples or petted him and told him how he was as "beautiful as his daddy." I whispered that last part to him so neither Lex nor Sunshine would hear me, of course.

I hadn't realized we were so close to Thalia, since it only took us a couple of hours to reach the outskirts of the city. It was a busy place, and I had never been in a large city before, so I followed Lex

closely, and he promised we wouldn't be going to any high traffic areas. His solicitor's office was near the palace, on the closest side of the city to Lex's lodge.

We tied our horses outside an official looking building and went inside. Lex took me over to a long sofa near a window and sat me down. "I won't be long. Keep your hood up and don't talk to anyone you don't know. If you need me, just give a shout, but you should be safe in here. Don't draw any attention to yourself, all right?"

I nodded and he kissed me and went in the inner office door. I thought it was a shame that omegas had to be so careful about who they talked to in public, but this was my life, and just the way of the world. No sense in crying about it. I was glad I had such a protective Alpha like Lex.

True to his word, it was only a few minutes until he returned. "I thought that while we're here you might like to go to the Royal Gallery," he told me. "It's just next door. The only existing portraits of your mother are there."

I'd never seen a portrait of my mother, so I was excited to go. The building was huge, with tall white columns in front, but Lex walked right up to the front doors like he owned the place, and as a member of the royal family, I guess in a way he did. We spent the next half hour walking through room after room of portraits of important looking people, mostly former kings and queens of Morovia.

He pointed out his father's portrait and his mother's. The former King was a dignified, stately man, who was very handsome, though stern looking. His queen, Lex's mother, Diana, had dark brown hair and eyes and a sweet expression. Lex told me she had died in childbirth when he was only a little boy. Both she and the babe, so he had few memories of her, but he'd choked up a little when he gazed at her portrait, and I thought he remembered more than he was saying. We saw portraits of the current king and his queen—Harrison was a handsome man, like Lex, but his queen was cold looking and not all that pretty, in my opinion. I made admiring comments about all of them though, and he took me down another long corridor to the place my mother's portraits were hanging, surrounded by various minor noblewomen I never heard of.

Vesper was undoubtedly the most beautiful of any of the women I'd seen, but like the current Morovian queen, she looked cold and unapproachable. It was my mother, though, so I spent long minutes gazing at her and trying to find my own features in her face.

We did look surprisingly alike, which was a little embarrassing since she had been a seventeen-year-old girl in most of those paintings.

"Would you like to see the infamous singing watch fob?" Lex asked and I nodded enthusiastically. He took me over to a small iron chest on a low shelf near the floor and opened the lid. Inside, surrounded by salt, was a small, rounded piece, made from ceramics with a tiny portrait painted on its front. It was my mother, but in this image, she looked young and happy, and she was looking up at

someone like she was just about to be kissed.

I clutched it to me, instantly in love with it. “It’s so *beautiful*. Oh gods, why are they hiding it away?”

“They’re afraid of it. They say it sings to itself, and they think your mother’s ghost is haunting it. Maybe we should just take it off their hands,” he said, and plucked it out of my hand to slip it into my pocket.

I gaped at him, and he laughed again and closed the lid back up.

“Seen enough?” he asked and took my hand to whisk me down the hall and out a side door.

“*Lex*,” I whispered fiercely at him. “You can’t just take it and give it to me.”

“Apparently, I can,” he said, smiling at me. “Come on, princeling. It’s time I took you for lunch. Oh, don’t give me that look. It was originally a locket that Vesper’s lover made as a gift for her. His parents made it into a watch fob after his death and may even have meant to sell it before they realized it was haunted. You are Vesper’s son and only heir. We’re just liberating the piece and restoring it to its rightful owner. Now come on and let’s find you something to eat. Considering your huge appetite most days, I’m surprised you’re not already wasting away.”

He took me across the street to a tavern and ordered a small roasted chicken and some fresh buns. I was famished, and the chicken was hot with some kind of spices on it, so it was delicious. I fell on it like a starving man. When we had eaten our fill, we went back out to retrieve the horses.

“Don’t you want to stop by and see your brother, since you’re so close by?”

“He’s a busy man, and I have things to do at home. Besides, he knows where I am if he wants to see me.”

We rode home, stopping once to rest along the way by a pretty little stream, off the main road and behind a little copse of trees. Lex spread out a blanket that he kept in his packs, and we ate some of the chicken and buns we’d had left over from our luncheon, along with some bottles of ale. He told me when I exclaimed over it all that he’d asked the innkeeper to wrap some up because we might be getting home a bit late.

After I’d eaten my fill, I got up to relieve myself against a tree, and I felt Lex’s warm hand slide around my waist. He was standing close behind me, so he drew me around and gave me a hard, sweet kiss. His lips were so hot and felt so good against mine that I instantly relaxed against him, and the kiss changed into something entirely different. We kissed often but this was somehow different and almost unbearably sweet. For once, he seemed in no hurry, like he wanted to enjoy this last part of our day as much as I did. My heart swelled with so much love for him that I thought it might burst. I had such a feeling of longing and tenderness and *rightness* about that kiss, and I wondered if he could feel it too. Was he finally falling a little bit in love with me? I sent up a little prayer to the gods that he

might be.

Lex rested his forehead against mine for a moment and whispered to me. “I can’t seem to think straight around you anymore. I think I have to fuck you again, princeling.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” I asked and he growled and pulled me back over to the blanket.

He stepped away for a moment, taking my heart with him, but he was only taking off some of his clothing. He bent down then and finished removing all of mine, tickling me and stroking me and taking his time as I laughed up at him. He was teasing and yet he was more tender than he’d ever been before. He kissed the tip of my cock when he finally had my clothes off.

“Tell me what you want, sweetheart.”

“You. I only want you. Since the first time I ever saw you,” I said softly, staring up into that compelling gaze. I told him things like this all the time, because I loved him so much, and I couldn’t seem to hold it back.

“Is that right?” Lex’s hands rubbed up and down my body as he reached down to massage me. “I’m going to make love to you.”

“I wish you’d hurry.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Bossy, aren’t you?” He kissed me again and then sat back on his heels to look down at me.

Trembling but eager, I thought I could almost feel his hot gaze as it swept over me. He bent his head and swiped a slow tongue over one of my nipples and smiled as I arched my back and shuddered.

“You like that, hmm?”

I nodded and then flinched all out of proportion as he gently squeezed my balls. “Answer me with words, princeling. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He licked my nipple again, which immediately plumped up, hard and aching. “I’m thinking I want you to get on with things and stop teasing me.”

Lex smiled and looked down into my eyes. He nipped at my bottom lip and then licked it. “You’re entirely too ill-mannered. I don’t think you talk to me the way you should. I may have to add to your lessons and punish you for your impudence. But I might make an exception this time, if you’re very good.”

“I can be good.”

He grinned at me and shook his head. “We’ll see. Lie flat on your back,” he directed, and I eagerly lay down, watching him to see what he’d do next. He lay down on top of me, all of his hard body stretched out over mine. He reached for my hands and pushed them above my head, holding them with one of his big ones. His other hand went directly to my shaft, and he began stroking me slowly

up and down.

I squirmed and huffed out a big breath. “No,” I moaned. “Please don’t—I-I’ll come! I can’t hold on.”

“You will,” he said, trailing kisses down my chest. “You’ll hold on for me.” I kept squirming, as Lex gently eased his tongue inside my mouth and thoroughly tasted me. I made a soft, whimpering sound in my throat, and he laughed against my lips.

He bent over to envelop my shaft in one quick move. He took me in so deeply that I felt his nose brush against my pubic bone. I wasn’t all that small, so the move was pretty damn impressive. I felt my eyes roll back in my head as Lex licked his way slowly up the length and sucked the head of my cock hard, grazing it lightly with his teeth. “Does that feel good?”

For an answer I screamed, unable to hold it, and then I exploded, long spurts that mostly shot up all over his chest. He groaned and kissed the head of my cock as I finished and even gave me a final swirling lick. Moving back up my body, he rubbed his afternoon stubble on my stomach and then kissed me on the mouth, letting me taste myself.

When he pulled back, I buried my face against his chest. “I-I couldn’t stop. I-I tried to warn you.”

“I suppose you’ll have to be punished,” he said, rubbing down my sides and my belly in slow, gentle circles. “I think I have to make love to you. Right. Here.” He brushed his fingers over my crease and tapped my entrance to punctuate the last two words. “Now get on your knees, princeling, and prepare yourself. This may take a while.”

I rolled over quickly and got up on my knees. I was on all fours for him, my ass in the air. It gave me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I loved it and stayed where I was, afraid to break the spell. He was making me feel so much, and I tried to pull back a little, but he held me in place and thrust a finger inside me, swirling it around in my slick. I wasn’t in heat but the second he began with me the slick had begun flowing.

I planted my elbows on the soft grass and he knelt over me on the blanket and began massaging his fingers over my crease. I moaned and cried out and he slapped my ass, though not hard at all. “Be still. This is punishment. You’re not supposed to enjoy it, bad boy.”

It felt so good I was biting my lips to keep from crying out and laughing at the same time. I felt a finger slip inside and my hole clenched around it. “Still so tight. This is all mine, isn’t it?”

I nodded breathlessly, and he eased his finger in deeper, gave me a chance to adjust to the feeling and then began to move it slowly in and out. “Spread your knees farther apart. That’s it.” He gripped my cock with his free hand at the same time he slipped another finger inside with the first one. I jumped a little, but the other hand went down to stroke my balls and continued on to wrap

around my cock.

“Oh gods,” I said, feeling trapped and controlled and absolutely perfect. The fingers inside me moved and stretched until I began to relax, and another finger came to push between my cheeks. He stretched me until I felt languid and relaxed, and my knees were trembling. Suddenly one of his fingers brushed over my prostate and it sent an electric shock through me and made me stiffen and arch my back.

“Oh, you like that, don’t you? But you’re being punished.” I groaned and he relented, giving me a good rub and laughed softly as I arched my back and moaned. I couldn’t seem to speak. I pushed out my ass and begged for more, urging him on with whimpers and moans. He pulled out his fingers and lined his big cock up with my entrance. I could feel it twitching with excitement, as he eased his way in. “I’m not going to knot you because we don’t have the time. That will have to wait until we get home.” I whimpered and he bent to give me a little bite on one ass cheek.

His velvety hot shaft fit into me like a key into a lock. He moved slowly at first and then harder as he stroked my shaft with the same rhythm. “You feel me inside you, princeling?”

“Yes,” I said, thrusting my hips for more, harder. “It’s so good.” My ass was in a perfect position and Lex began to make good use of it. He thrust against me, again and again, holding me in place with a hand on the base of my spine. He was making low moaning sounds too, and this was no longer just a fuck if that’s what it had ever been. He was making love to me, and it scared me how much I never wanted it to end.

He pulled me up so that my back was against his chest, and I was sitting on his cock. He drove it into me again and again, then leaned over and captured my mouth in another sensuous kiss. I was ready to come again. He put his hand over my leaking cock and held it tightly between us, rubbing a thumb over the tip and I couldn’t hold back any longer. He came at the same time with a shout, and I cried out because it was so good. It always was, but this was almost unbearable, and I wanted it to last forever.

I would look back on that lovemaking later and find comfort in it. He had given me the perfect day. Perhaps by wishing for more of them, I’d jinxed myself.

## Chapter Thirteen

### *Lexington*

Two more weeks passed after our little outing to the royal gallery in Thalia. It was late in the morning on the day a rider came with an urgent message. He'd been sent by Queen Berinda to give us the news that Rory's father, King Elam, had passed away two days earlier in his sleep.

The news couldn't have come at a worse time, because by that time, we knew that Rory was going to have my child. The physicians said he was about six weeks along, and though they gave him a good report, they did insist that he stop riding Sunshine until the baby came and were insistent that the trip back to Igella bouncing around in a carriage would be too much for him. Male omegas never had an easy time with pregnancy. He was having a lot of nausea and some mornings he couldn't get out of bed before noon. I decided he'd be better off at home with Asher and Wyatt to watch over him. Brandon and I would go to Igella, so I could be installed as Regent, with Rory's coronation taking place when he was well enough to travel. Rory, who dreaded seeing Berinda and Callista again anyway, didn't put up much of a fuss.

I think he was even a little happy about me going, because with me being busy in Igella, I didn't have to accompany my brother on a training exercise for a month. All four of my brothers, including the king, usually attended these bi-annual sessions, and it was a way for us to catch up with each other and get away from our spouses, not to mention keeping our fighting skills sharp.

I didn't particularly want to get away from my omega; just the opposite, in fact, but if I had stayed at home, I would no doubt have had to participate or explain to Harrison why I wouldn't be joining in. While Rory hated to see me leave, I should be back in only two weeks instead of four, so he was content enough, though still not pleased.

"I don't know why I couldn't come along," he said, watching me pack. "I can ride in a carriage if you think it would be better."

"I don't though, princeling. It will be bumpy and uncomfortable, and besides all that, your doctor has advised against it. Besides, this way, I can get rid of Berinda and Callista before you have to go for your coronation in a few more weeks and make some badly needed upgrades to the castle. Won't that be nice?"

"I guess so," he said, looking forlorn.

I kissed his lips and held him close. “Asher and Wyatt will take good care of you while I’m gone—both of you,” I said, patting his still flat stomach. And when I return, you can demonstrate to me all the progress you’ve made learning your religious verses.”

“I hate those things.” He gave me such a pouty look I almost had to take him back to bed, but Brandon was waiting for me downstairs, so I settled for a little slap to his ass. “Be good, because you know Wyatt will tell me if you’re not.”

“I’m not a child, you know.”

“Oh, I know, sweetheart. I know.” I gave him one more passionate kiss and then I made myself leave and go downstairs to meet Brandon.

We were gone for a little over two weeks, as it turned out, because Queen Berinda pulled out all the stops in trying to get me to put Rory aside and take Callista instead. I had to get very firm with her at last, but I sent her and Callista to the king’s summer residence in the end, and gave her more money, because she claimed to have “had expenses,” and have run out of all the gold I’d given her already.

Brandon, who despite his easygoing personality, had a streak of iron running down his backbone, told her she was being put on an allowance. I’d have liked to cut her off and toss her out, but after all, she was the king’s widow, and Callista was my omega’s half-sister. But after this, Brandon told her, if she spent too much, she would simply have to do without. Her tears and remonstrances fell on deaf ears and after a couple more days of stalling, we finally saw them on their way.

I arranged for some badly needed repairs to be done to the castle in my absence, left the king’s council in charge until we returned, and we got on our way back to Morovia. We’d been on the road back home for only a day, when we met a rider coming fast on the way from Morovia. It was Wyatt.

He looked exhausted and even haggard, his usual playful, teasing manner nowhere to be found. I was terrified the moment I saw him because I knew that something inconceivably bad had happened to Rory

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*Rory*

It had been three days since I’d been taken from the lodge—three miserable days of trying to answer the incessant questions and respond to the badgering of the court magicians and priests. I was trying really hard not to lose my temper, but it was getting harder with each passing hour. I could feel a pressure building inside my chest again, like it did when Lex and Asher kept chanting their spell over me, and I was afraid it would burst out of me again like it did then. Only if that happened, I knew it wouldn’t be good. Not good at all.



The queen's guard had come for me just three days ago, though it seemed so much longer. Asher and Wyatt had argued with them when they said they were taking me, but there were too many of them to fight. Finally, Asher told them belligerently that he was going with me, no matter what they said, and they allowed it as far as the palace grounds. Wyatt held me in his arms as I left and told me not to despair, because he was going after Lex as soon as the soldiers left. He said he wouldn't rest until they got me back home. I wanted to believe him, but I didn't feel optimistic. This was the queen of Morovia. And I was only the son of one of their enemies, and what she called a "warlock" to boot.

They didn't put me in chains or anything, and I think that was due to Asher's protection. He rode beside me all the way, his face grim and set in hard lines, right up to the gates of the red brick palace, where he was turned away. He, too, held me close and told me to be brave. He whispered to me to please be careful not to *do* anything, and I knew he was talking about the way I'd blasted him and Lex into a wall not too long ago when they'd been trying to bind my so-called magic.

Then I was taken before Queen Rozamond herself.

Her throne room, and indeed the entire palace, put our Igellan castle to shame. It was ornate and well-appointed, like the queen. What she lacked in beauty, she made up for with expensive clothing and an elaborate coiffure, topped by a thin, gold circlet, studded with diamonds.

She was like those diamonds, cold, pale and haughty. An uncompromising woman, but with the inner fire that every religious zealot seems to have. Right away, I could see she was afraid of me, and that scared me more than anything. I wasn't worldly or experienced, but I used to read a great deal in my shadowy hideout in the library—enough to know that fanatics feared any threat to their sacred values and what they considered to be their social identity. If something threatened that, things could get very ugly, very fast. And they'd do whatever it took to eliminate any potential threat.

The queen believed in magic, per the tenets of her church, but she also feared it greatly. And she believed that dark magic, like my mother was supposed to have, came directly from the devil. I knew I was in grave danger from her.

"Your mother was the warlock called Vesper," she began, fixing me with a cold glare.

"My mother was Queen Vesper, of Igella. Everything else you may have heard is just rumors and slander."

Her eyes narrowed, as I'm sure she wasn't used to be spoken to in that way, and she didn't like me contradicting her. She kept going, though, ignoring it as if I hadn't said a word.

"Vesper is infamous in Morovia. We know all about her and her evil, black magic."

"Then you have the advantage, Your Majesty. My mother died when I was an infant."

"She ran from this kingdom like a villain," she shouted, her voice ringing out in the echoing chamber. "The king sent assassins after her, but she died before they could reach her."

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know about any of that. As I said, it happened long before I was born. It has nothing to do with me.”

Her lips twisted, and her cold gaze pierced me. “In Morovia, practitioners of Black Magic are examined by the court magicians, and their magic is bound. Has your Alpha bound yours yet, I wonder?”

“I don’t have magic, Your Majesty.” I guess that was a lie, because I had used some a time or two, but I had no idea how it worked, and didn’t even want it. It just seemed to happen.

“That remains to be seen,” she snapped. “You’ll be taken to be examined by the priests and the court magicians. The law is absolute. If you’re found to have any of Vesper’s evil magic inside you, it will be bound. Do you understand?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Her hostility was so apparent, I don’t know what I could have said anyway.

She kept talking. “If you’re found to be irredeemable...in other words, if you won’t repent your sins and cooperate with the priests and magicians and allow us to rid you of corruption, then we’ll have no choice but to act. Do you understand?”

“No, Your Majesty, I don’t understand. I am not a practitioner of dark magic. I’ll gladly cooperate. I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but *I won’t admit to lies.*”

“Enough!” she cried, in a loud, angry voice and waved at the guards who had brought me in. “If you weren’t the omega of my husband’s brother, we would have acted long before this. My husband keeps stalling, but he and your Alpha are not here now, and I’m fully in charge. I must do as I alone think best.” She nodded toward the guards. “You’ll be examined. If you’re found to be corrupted with Vesper’s evil magic, then you will submit, and your magic will be bound. If you resist, or your magic is intractable, the penalty is death. You’ll be burned at the stake. Take him.”

They put their hands on me and I tensed, frightened out of my wits by what she’d just said, and anxious that they might hurt my unborn child. When the first one reached for me, I instinctively flung out my hand—and watched in horror as he flew through the air and landed on his back some twenty feet away.

Queen Rozamond jumped to her feet and shrieked, and her guards swarmed us, coming from what seemed like every direction. I went down under the weight of several of them, and I fell on my side, curling protectively around my belly. It was over quickly then, because I didn’t struggle or fight back. As I was dragged from the room, I could still hear Rozamond screaming.

Perhaps an hour later, I was taken in front of the court magicians. There were half a dozen of them, all wearing outlandish looking robes in various colors. All were old men with long beards, except for the one in the middle, whom I took to be the head priest. He was no more than middle-

aged, with a purple robe, elaborately embroidered in gold. He had a long, severe face and wore an odd, cone-shaped hat. He stepped forward and glared at me.

“Vesper’s son, I’m told. Tell me your name.”

“I am Prince Rory of Igella, son of the late King Elam.”

“And his warlock queen.”

I said nothing in reply and he turned to an ornate table behind him, where there laid a wooden box. He opened it and took out a long silver chain. He handed it to one of the other priests, who came over to me a bit warily and draped the chain around my neck and wound it around my shoulders. It was quite heavy but didn’t affect me at all that I could tell. Keeping his hand on it, he began to chant what sounded like nonsense words to me. I didn’t understand any of it, but a strange white light began to radiate off the silver links. The light grew brighter and began seeping inside me.

I drew back, afraid of what it might be doing to me, but one of the guards behind me poked me with the tip of a pike and I turned to glare at him and saw him flinch. The light continued to pour into me, but it didn’t hurt or cause anything at all to happen that I could tell, so I stopped moving and let them do what they wanted.

They finally finished and the head priest in the purple robe glared at me and brought over a golden goblet.

“Drink this,” he barked, and I hesitated. I had no idea what it was, but I knew they’d pour it down my throat if I didn’t do as they asked. Reluctantly, I drank it down.

It was wine, bitter and dry, but only wine as far as I could tell. I didn’t fall down in a fit or start foaming at the mouth, and I think they were a little disappointed. They took the goblet from my hands and then three of them came forward and began chanting over me again.

I recognized the chant as the same one Lex and Asher had used on me. They were trying to bind my powers, and I could feel the ice seeping into my body again. As before it started in my head and flowed down into my chest and limbs. It was horribly uncomfortable and worst of all, that same heat I’d felt before when Lex and Asher tried this began building low in my belly. It was like a pressure slowly building up, and I thought it might burst me wide open if I didn’t let it out, but I didn’t know how. I tightened my fists and gritted my teeth, willing the pressure to ease off, but it kept going, my chest getting tighter and tighter.

Suddenly, it blew out of me like water bursting out of a broken dam, and there was no way I could control it. It was like a blast of flood waters, except for how hot it was, and I could feel it swirling out of me in a sizzling hot torrent. It hit the man in the purple robe first and then splashed outward. He started screaming as he was picked up off his feet, like a mighty, invisible wave of boiling water had taken him, and all the priests were tossed violently up in the air to slam into the

wall behind them. They were screaming too.

I knew then that I was done for, and this display had nailed shut the lid on my coffin—I closed my eyes and sank to the floor so the soldiers wouldn't consider me a threat and run me through at once. Clutching my stomach, I curled myself into a ball and waited for the blows that I knew were coming and about to fall.

I didn't have long to wait.

## Chapter Fourteen

*Lex*

When I came tearing into the yard of the lodge, followed by Wyatt and Brandon, I fully intended to stay only long enough to change horses, as I'd ridden mine way too hard on the way back. I needed a new mount. I was desperate with fear, sick with it, and all I could think of was getting to Rory as fast as I could. According to my calculations, the palace guards had come for him almost three fucking days ago. They could have done anything with him in all that time, and all I could think of was him in some dark, filthy dungeon room, frightened by the dark and the rats, deprived of food and water. Maybe even cold without any blankets.

I got my first inkling of disaster when I saw Asher come running out of the house as he heard us arrive, but he went first to Wyatt and spoke urgently to him. Wyatt turned as pale as a ghost.

"What is it?" I shouted and yanked Asher around to face me. "Why aren't you with Rory? Did you *leave* him? All alone?"

"They wouldn't allow me to stay, Lex. I tried, but they only let me go as far as the palace gates. It was the queen's guard, and you know how they are."

"Damn them and damn the queen! If she's hurt him..."

Wyatt stepped forward and grabbed my arm. I tried to tear it away, but he was the strongest of us and he held on tightly. "Stop it, Lex! You have to listen to what Asher has to tell you."

"Listen to what? I have to go for Rory!"

"No, Lex, please wait. You can't!"

"What the fuck do you mean, I can't? Get me a fresh horse—don't just stand there. I'll kill that bitch with my own hands if she gets in my way or tries to stop me!"

"Lex!" This time it was Brandon, who usually could calm me, but not today. *Why were they just standing around?* "Lex, you have to listen to what Asher has to say. You can't go to Rory!"

"Why the fuck not?"

Asher came over to me and laid his hands on both my arms. I had a terrible feeling of doom, but I couldn't acknowledge it. "Because... I'm so sorry, Lex, but he-he's gone. The priests and magicians have...oh gods, Lex, the queen has had him put him to death."

I remember reeling backward as if from a terrible blow. Everything went hazy for a moment, and

I heard someone shouting. My cousins were yelling, “Grab him!” and “Don’t let him get on his horse!” and I heard words like “shock,” and “catch him!”

None of it made any sense.

I suddenly crashed back into my body and realized I was lunging frantically for my horse against the grips of both Wyatt and Asher. All I wanted was to get to Rory, because Asher was *wrong*, and I had to stop him saying such an unspeakable thing again.

“Let me go!” I shouted and felt my legs go out from under me suddenly, but Asher was holding me around the waist, and he wouldn’t let me wrench myself away.

“He’s dead, Lex. I’m so sorry!” Asher was shouting.

“Dead? No, stop saying that! You have to be wrong! He can’t be dead! I have to get to him!” I saw Brandon standing beside me with tears streaming down his face, and I grabbed his arm. “Stop it. Tell them, Brandon! You have to tell them!”

“I will, Lex. I promise I will, but you have to go inside the house now.”

*Go inside?* I reared back from him, because he was crazy. They all were crazy, and I had to get out of there. I began fighting all of them and finally, one of them—I think it was Wyatt—grabbed me and picked me up bodily, as he held down my arms by my sides and hauled me toward the lodge. He manhandled me inside and threw me in a chair. “Stop all this!” he yelled at me, and I really saw him for the first time since we rode into the yard. He looked pale and wrecked, and his face was wet with tears. I could see he was in pain. Brandon ran over and shoved a glass of something in my hand.

“Drink this. It will help you calm down.”

“What? I don’t want to drink it. I have to go after...I have to...”

Rory’s doctor appeared out of nowhere it seemed—Asher must have had him standing by. He gave me a small vial of amber liquid he held in his hand. “Take this, sir. It will help you.”

Wyatt pushed my hand toward my mouth, and I drank down the damn draught if it would shut them up and let me get out of there. I washed it down with the whiskey Brandon had brought me. And then another glassful, when they shoved that at me too. I felt like I was floating, and that none of this was real anyway. I’d wake up soon and this would have been only a bad dream.

Because it had to be.

I got back up to my feet and began swaying, but I doggedly tried to make it to the door, refusing all offers of help or aid. I got as far as the front hall when the floor suddenly rose up to hit me in the face.

Much later, I woke up, my mouth dried out and feeling like it was covered in fur. Laudanum, I thought absently—I’d had the stuff once years ago after my mother died, and I hadn’t been able to stop crying. I’d only been five years old. They had given it to me, and it had left this horrible taste in my

mouth that I still remembered. I was confused as to why Asher, Wyatt and Brandon were in my room, even though it was dark outside. Wyatt sprawled across the foot of my bed and Asher and Brandon were occupying chairs by my bed. All of them were deeply asleep.

Memory suddenly hit me like a barbed arrow right in my heart and I cried out in pain—I couldn't help it. I bolted up off the bed, which woke up all of my cousins, and Wyatt tried to get in front of me. I pushed him hard, but he stopped me with his sheer bulk and held onto me tightly.

“Lex, sit back down before you fall. That doctor gave you too much of that medicine. You've been asleep for hours.”

“Asleep? No, I...where's Rory? I need to see him.”

“He's still at the palace.”

“What? But I need to talk to him.”

Brandon grabbed my shoulders and turned me to face him. He shook me hard.

“Lex, stop this. You have to listen to us. Rory is gone. We told you. The queen had him executed for black magic. The priests tried to bind his magic, and he attacked them. He attacked some of the guards too. They claimed he left them no choice. There were a lot of injuries.”

“No, I...” I finally let myself hear the words he was saying—really hear them and understand. Rory was gone. That fucking bitch had him arrested and then she'd killed him when he'd tried to defend himself.

I sank back down on the side of the bed, my hands locked behind my head and rocking back and forth. I wanted to smash something, hit someone, but what was the use? Nothing would bring him back to me.

“*How?* Was it...fire? Did they burn him?” I finally asked, not really wanting to hear the answer, but I had to know. The priests burned those who were corrupted with black magic—while they were still alive, with flames licking around their feet and moving up their bodies as they screamed...gods, it was cruel. Insupportable. My mind touched on that image briefly and then skittered away, unable to bear it. Asher quickly came to my rescue.

“No, *stop*. He wasn't burned. When I was finally able to force my way inside the palace, I demanded to see the queen, and I reminded her that Rory was the omega of a royal prince. Her own husband's younger brother. And I told her he was carrying your child. I think that frightened the bitch enough that she agreed to a different method. She told the priests to drug him, so it would be more *humane*. They did and he-he fell asleep. Once he stopped breathing, they agreed to let me be the one who carried out the coup de grâce.”

The coup de grâce was traditional in Morovia, and it was the final blow given to prisoners by the guards to make sure they were dead. It was usually done with a pike or a sword.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Asher said. “I didn’t put a mark on him; you have to know that. I just pretended to do it to make it and let the blade fall down by his side to make it look good for the guards, because I didn’t want them desecrating his body that way.”

“You actually saw his body then?”

“Yes, Lex. I’m so sorry, but he was no longer breathing. I checked him.” Asher got up to start pacing back and forth.

“I told them all that you’d be coming for him as soon as you returned, and there would be hell to pay. I told the queen she’d interfered with her husband’s plans for Igella, and he’d be furious with her. Then I sent a strongly worded message to your brother, though it didn’t have quite the same tone as I used with his queen, him being the king and all.”

“Where’s Rory?” I heard myself ask and my voice sounded as dead as Rory was.

“They’ve put him in one of the royal tombs. By virtue of his birth and his status as your omega.”

“I have to go get him.”

“You’re in no fit shape to go now, Lex. At least wait until morning.”

“I got to my feet, reeling a little, but allowing Wyatt to steady me. “No, I have to go now. I have to actually see...*I need* to see him. To touch him. It won’t be real to me until I do.” I looked into Brandon’s eyes. “Do you understand? Then I need to put his body in a safe place where they can’t find him.”

After a moment, he nodded. “I do. I need to see him too, I think, before any of this will seem real.”

“We’ll all go,” Wyatt said. “Lex, I know you need some time alone with him, and we’ll give you that. But we need to go with you. We all loved him. Not like you did, but through our bond, and because he was yours.” He dropped his head, blinking hard to keep tears away. “We loved him for himself too. He was so sweet and...” He broke off, choking up, but I knew what he was going to say, so I nodded, still feeling like none of this was real, and I’d wake up soon and Rory would be still beside me. I stood up again and my legs almost went out from under me. Asher put a hand on my shoulder.

“Stay here another hour or so, Lex. It’s still a long time before morning. Let some of the laudanum work its way out of your system, and then we’ll go.”

Unhappy about the delay, but knowing he was right, I lay back down and closed my eyes for just a minute—and fell into a deep sleep. And I dreamed.

In my dream, I was walking down the long row of gray and dusty tombs. The tombs of my royal ancestors. I saw a figure way at the end and felt drawn toward it. When I got close, I saw that it was a beautiful woman—a woman who, from a distance, seemed oddly familiar. She turned to look at me



and I saw that it was Queen Vesper.

In the way of dreams, I wasn't even surprised at this and asked her if she'd come to see Rory. She smiled at me and shook her head. "Rory is sleeping." I shook my head with tears filling my eyes, and I told her I wished that were true.

"But he's dead," I told her.

She took my hand in hers. "No. He's in a deep sleep that looks like death, but it's only sleep for now. His magic saved him as best it could. I can't take away what's happened, but Rory can wake up, though it needs to be soon. And only with the help of one who truly loves him." She lifted an eyebrow at me. "Do you happen to know anyone like that, sir? Do *you*, by any chance, really love him? Did you ever love him?"

I woke myself up moaning, with an ache in my chest that I thought might kill me. I sat up, still feeling groggy, though not as much as before. I was alone in my room, though I actually looked around for Vesper, for it had to have been Vesper, before I came fully awake, expecting to see her there. I got up and found my boots, determined to go to the tombs to find Rory. I dreaded the idea of seeing him, his beautiful face cold and gray, and all alone there in that place, but I *needed* to see him to make this real. I didn't think I could do it otherwise.

Vesper had asked me if I ever really loved him. I hoped he always knew the answer to that, but I knew the truth was that he hadn't. Because of my own selfish need to protect myself, I never told him exactly how much he meant to me, and I was paying for it now. I had loved him from the first moment I saw him, and it was killing me that I'd never told him.

When I went downstairs, my cousins were there, waiting for me to wake up, and they were still determined to accompany me on this dreadful journey. Without another word, we went out to the barn and saddled our horses to ride into the city. I glanced over at Sunshine in his stall and had to look away again, because I'd made a fool of myself already in front of my cousins, and I couldn't seem to stop the treacherous tears that kept sliding down my face.

We rode out in the middle of a dark night. A cold wind was blowing from the north and clouds covered the sky. It seemed fitting that the stars weren't shining this night. It was a terrible journey, when everywhere I looked, I saw things that reminded me of the last time I had come this way when Rory had been with me.

When we finally arrived at the palace on the outskirts of Thalia, the first golden streaks of dawn were just coming up over the horizon, though it was still early enough that probably only a few servants were about. We rode boldly up to the front doors of the Cathedral of Saint Thaduceus, patron saint of the city. We tied our horses and went up to the massive double doors. Surprisingly—or maybe not so surprisingly since this was a church—they opened easily to us. I knew the royal tombs were on

the eastern side of the nave. My mother and father were buried there too, along with many of my ancestors. I stood looking over the rows and rows of sarcophagi, the above ground carved coffins, in this sea of dead royalty. I realized I had no idea where to even start looking.

“We could split up,” Asher said in a hushed voice. It felt like the kind of place you spoke only in soft voices or in whispers. Brandon went to a candelabra nearby and took down lit tapers for all of us. I wondered what poor acolyte kept these burning all night long, but I was glad of it so Rory wouldn’t be in the dark.

I nodded at Asher’s suggestion, and each of us took a separate aisle to search for Rory. As I walked down the aisle I’d chosen, I began to feel sick again. How would he look, my beautiful love, now that his skin was cold and stiff and gray, and his gorgeous green eyes were shuttered forever? How could I look on him and then close the lid again, knowing his face would never again see the light of day? I began to tremble in anticipation—and terrible dread.

Then from the aisle beside mine, Brandon called out, “He’s here, I think.”

I crossed to him quickly, and then stood frozen with fear. His name was written on a card and placed on top of the plain, stone lid. Perhaps they planned on carving his name later on that day.

*Prince Rory, of Igella, the card read...son of King Elam and the warlock Vesper.*

I reached out my hand to push off the top, and then drew it back. I couldn’t do it. I’d said I wanted to look on him to make this real, but I didn’t think I could stand to look on his dead face. It would be better to remember him the way he was, wouldn’t it? Even that memory alone might prove fatal. I thought that actually seeing him dead would kill me on the spot.

I almost turned and walked away, but then from inside the sarcophagus, I heard a woman’s faint voice, singing.

*Alas my love you do me wrong  
To cast me off discourteously;  
And I have loved you, oh so long  
Delighting in your company*

Sung to the tune of “Greensleeves,” the lovely old song of lost love, it was sung in the clear, high voice of a young girl. It was Vesper’s song—one of the ones the guards claimed her ghost sung to her lover late at night in his tomb. It must be coming from the watch fob with her portrait painted on the front. The one I’d given to Rory and he kept in his pocket.

“Help me get this lid off,” I cried, and all of us pushed and pulled on the heavy stone, trying to dislodge it and move it aside. I shoved with all my might, thanking the gods that the priests hadn’t yet

gotten around to using mortar. The heavy stone slid off into the floor and broke in half.

I gazed down at him, listening to the old song and marveling at his face, which still had some color in the cheeks. He looked as if he were sleeping. I could almost think I could see his chest moving up and down. I couldn't stop myself from bending over and brushing his lips with mine, even if this were to be the last time.

He opened his eyes and blinked up at me, putting up a hand to rub his face. Still half asleep, he gave me a sweet smile. "Lex," he whispered. "I knew you'd come for me."

# Epilogue

*Rory*

Everyone was so amazed when I woke up after spending two days in that stone sarcophagus, but I was none the worse for wear. I admit to being terribly thirsty, but once Lex and his cousins gave me water and carried me outside in the sweet, fresh air, I recovered remarkably fast, I guess. Anyway, they all seemed to be shocked.

They took me out of there quickly, with Lex insisting on holding me in front of him on his horse all the way, like he'd done the first night he took me out of my father's castle. I turned to face him, as I had back then, and he kissed me and hugged me all the way home. He insisted on telling me over and over again how much he loved me.

I have to say it was an enjoyable ride.

When we got home, there was a doctor there who also seemed to be totally shocked and amazed when I showed up and he checked me and my unborn baby over carefully, finally pronouncing us both fine and in excellent condition, considering.

As for my time in the sarcophagus, I didn't remember much of it. I only remembered my dreams, which were comforting more than anything else. I felt a benevolent presence all around me, one that even sang me lullabies in the dark—or maybe I just imagined that part of it.

Lex insisted on leaving as soon as we could, so once the doctor said I was okay to travel, we left and went back to Igella, taking some of our things with us but leaving much behind, with instructions to the servants to pack it all up and send it to us. Wyatt, Brandon and Asher came with us, even though Lex made it clear he wasn't coming back to Morovia.

He was furious with the queen, and a lot of that rage spilled over onto his brother. The only thing that might have made him forgive King Harrison was if his brother would put the bitch aside, and he told me that Harrison would probably never do that.

“He needs access to those ports, and she can give him that. And that's more important to him than anything else, I presume. Even me. Or his honor.”

Lex brought Sunshine along with us too, although he wouldn't allow me to ride him. Still, I got to pet his head and gave him an apple to eat when we stopped for a rest that afternoon. We spent the night at an inn along the way, and very late the next day, we arrived back at the royal castle.

Over the next few weeks, as I recovered from what Lex called “my terrible ordeal,” I got to plan my coronation, and Lex’s official one too, as my Regent. Everything was so much nicer with my stepmother and my half-sister no longer in residence. Even the servants acted differently as did the lords and ladies of court. I suppose they didn’t dare do otherwise, with my Alphas all glaring at them. I didn’t change my room, however. I let Lex bring in new appointments, like drapes and rugs and new furniture, including a bigger bed, but for now, I didn’t want to stay in my father and stepmother’s former chamber.

Lex was still angry at most of the court for their bad treatment of me. He told them to eat at home from now on and come to court only when they were called for, but he was hot headed and short tempered, and I could usually talk him down from his towering rage. All I had to do was clutch my stomach and groan, and he became solicitous and sweet again. He told me every day how much he loved me, because he said he once thought he might not ever get the chance, and he needed to make up for lost time. I loved to hear him say those words.

The baby came on a warm Sunday morning a few months after my coronation. It was a girl, and we named her after both our mothers, Princess Vesper Diana. A beautiful little girl with my green eyes and Lex’s brown hair, she was also sweet natured and slept through the night by the time she was only six weeks of age.

She had three handsome godfathers who would no doubt ensure that she’d be terribly spoiled.

The healer who helped with my delivery used a blue flame with making his magical potions, and Lex asked him about it. The healer said the fire I’d started when we first met was harmless as it was a healing blue flame. The flames Lex told me he’d seen when I’d healed him had been the same.

Apparently, the magic I had was very protective as it only came to my aid—or my lover’s aid—when my body thought either one of us was threatened. Unfortunately, that kind had worked against me with the court magicians, but I liked the idea of it being protective of me.

Six months after we got home, Lex’s brother asked if he could come to see Lex in Igella. He was very sorry about what happened, he said. He explained to Lex that the queen took it upon herself to test my magic because she was clairvoyant, and she’d had a vision before he brought me back to Morovia. In her vision she’d seen Lex leading Igellan forces against Morovia, defeating them in a decisive battle, and the two of us ruling over both the kingdoms. It had been the queen who sent members of her guard against us on the road—they hadn’t worn their uniforms, but their intention had been to kill me if they could, in order to stop her vision from coming true. They hadn’t meant to injure Lex, of course—or so his brother told him.

Lex told his brother he had no interest in ruling Morovia, or at least he hadn’t before this had all happened. But unless the queen paid for her crimes against me, including going behind Lex’s back the

way she had and attempting to murder me, he had to rethink that position. If Harrison agreed to punish her or sanction her, Lex would agree never to allow anything like another war to happen between Igella and Morovia. If not...well, then he was making no promises.

His brother said he'd have to think about that, and that was how they left it. But there was still great tension between them, and they might never be able to repair their relationship unless Queen Rozamond faced consequences for what she'd done.

Lex had been deadly serious. And I didn't hate the idea of getting rid of Rozamond by King Harrison divorcing her and sending her back home to her people. But that remained to be seen.

I sometimes thought there wasn't much that Lex and I couldn't do together.

Except perhaps make a child that had no magic. One afternoon I saw the toys dancing around in little Vesper's crib, with Vesper clapping her hands and laughing at them. I hadn't told Lex yet. I also hadn't told him how often my watch fob sings a lullaby to the baby when I leave it in the baby's room and how peacefully she sleeps whenever it happens.

There were a few things my Alpha was just better off not knowing, so he wouldn't worry so much. I was thoughtful that way.

In the meantime, it was hard to imagine my life being any happier than it was, although I thought Lex's cousins needed their own love story too. I decided to be on the lookout for suitable omegas for them all.

After all, everyone needed a happy ever after.

The End

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Shannon West** lives in the southern United States, and is a lover and avid reader of M/M romances. Shannon began writing gay romance a few years ago, and now has over ninety short stories, novellas, and novels to her credit. Her stories have been translated into French, Italian, and even one Japanese Yaoi. Her favorite genre is paranormal and most of her characters don't get really interesting to her until they grow a tail. Shannon loves men and everything about them, and writes Romance (with a capital R) unashamedly and unabashedly. She believes, in the words of Helen Steiner Rice that "love is the answer that everyone seeks, love is the language that every heart speaks." But she also believes wholeheartedly in the words of Woody Allen, that love may be the answer, but "while you're waiting for that answer, sex raises some pretty interesting questions." Shannon mostly spends her days at the keyboard, ably assisted by her cats, Scarlett and Taz, and eluding housework, which stalks her relentlessly.

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