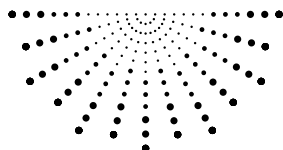


J A S M I N E M A S

PSYCHO
FAE
BOOK 2

PSYCHO FAE

CRUEL SHIFTERVERSE BOOK 2



JASMINE MAS

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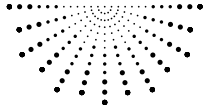
Cruel Shifiverse

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CONTENT WARNING



THIS STORY CONTAINS references to physical and sexual assault. Sadie and some of the men have a traumatic past, and their experiences are intense. Please take care of yourself and avoid if this content will be disturbing.

If you object to reverse harems, cursing, knots, violence, or spicy MM actions, this is not the series for you.

This is not a traditional omegaverse but (hint) it will become one as realm secrets are revealed. It is a three-book trilogy and there is a cliffhanger in this book, but the series will have a happy ending.

Enjoy.

INTRODUCTION

INTO THE STARS

All myths are rooted in some truth.

This series is about different planets connected by black holes.

Aka, realms attached by portals with inhabitants you've heard of in myths and dismissed as fairy tales.

There are politics, deceptions, and secrets on the macro-scale. And they vary from realm to realm.

In the human realm, the inhabitants learn they live in an anarchical system, that there is no supreme authority over earth.

They're wrong.

The High Court secretly reigns sovereign over *all* the worlds. "Realm-Wide Peace" is their motto.

Monsters enforce this peace. A next-to-impossible task because wealth corrupts, but power destroys.

And among the hundreds of planets with sentient life, a few special individuals possess power on the nuclear level—more energy in their cells than an atomic bomb.

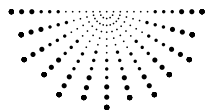
The truth: Most individuals go their entire lives without knowing or caring about the other realms or the creatures within them. They live in bliss.

In this series, ignorance isn't an option for our main characters.

Through birthright or circumstances, they're players in the macro-level game.

Now all they must do is survive.

PROLOGUE



JAX

SIX YEARS AGO...

I walked up the steep path that led to my mother's town house.

The house was built on the edge of a jagged white glacier and overlooked the raging sea.

Far below, frothy white-capped waves slammed against the ancient ice.

The shifter realm was always frigid, but the air along the sea had a salty bite.

The salt burned my eyes as I trekked up the steps carved into the glacier. The perilous path led to the only home I'd ever known.

The pain in my eyes was nostalgic.

I pushed my long braids out of my face. My golden chains tinkled as they whipped across my cheeks in an angry frenzy.

This home was a two-hour horse ride from portal three, where I had just been reassigned to work with a new alpha.

His name was Cobra, and so far it had been going well. He was quiet and said little, but seemed to be a competent general.

Plus, it didn't hurt that he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen in my life.

Emeralds and diamonds were embedded all over his skin, and I was constantly fighting the irrational urge to run my tongue along them.

I exhaled loudly into the icy wind as I approached the house and reminded myself that it was not productive to obsess over my fellow alpha. All that mattered was protecting the portals.

I didn't even know if he liked men.

Still, I couldn't quell the small bubble of excitement that burst in my gut

whenever I thought about him.

I'd been training and fighting for so many decades that ennui was setting in.

At least, it had been.

I wasn't bored anymore. Mostly because of Cobra, but also because of who waited at home with my mother.

A little over a decade ago, my elderly null mother had adopted a little baby named Jess. Over the years, I'd always visited my mother whenever I could, but now I came home every free moment I had.

I had a little sister to take care of.

It didn't matter that Jess was turning fourteen years old, and I was about a hundred and twelve years old. She was my everything.

All children in the realm were required to attend boarding school from twelve to eighteen years old. They had a few breaks throughout the school year, but most students stayed because it was expensive to send horses and pay for lodging.

Jess always came home.

I ensured it.

After being alone for so many years, having a sister to dote on filled the hole in my heart.

Now my heart swelled as I climbed the last step to the thick wood front door.

Rare electric-blue frost flowers covered the brick facade of our home, a testament to my mother's long career as a florist.

I tried to act composed, but my cheeks hurt from the strain of a wide smile.

I was home.

Without delay, I pushed open the door, ducked my head, and shuffled to the side to fit my large, seven-foot-tall, muscled body through.

A wall of warmth from the living room hearth kissed me in the face as soon as I entered.

The heat was divine after hours in the cold.

However, as I looked around the cozy living room, my smile fell. My jaw dropped open as I gaped at the inhabitants.

It was hard to shock me.

I was a seasoned alpha general in the bloody war against the fae queen. Time and time again, fellow immortal alphas got their heads ripped off and

all the blood drained from their bodies in front of my eyes.

I'd seen betas disemboweled by gruesome creatures so horrific they were beyond a person's imagination.

But right now, I was dumbfounded.

I stared at the well-worn couch next to the fire.

"Uh, what in the sun god is going on?" I asked softly. This was *not* what I had been expecting.

My elderly null mother stood up from her chair next to it and hobbled over to greet me.

I forgot about my shock on the couch as I took in her feeble form.

Ever so gently, I knelt to embrace her. Her dark skin sagged and showed off her century of existence in a way that mine never would.

"My boy," she whispered breathily as she tucked her frail body against mine, and I held her.

My chest hurt.

She'd lost weight since I'd last seen her and could barely shuffle even with the help of her cane.

"I love you, Ma," I whispered against her long braids. In this very room, she'd patiently taught me how to braid my hair. Now I always kept it long as a tribute to her.

It didn't matter that I was adopted. She was my mother in every way that mattered.

I would die for her—if only I could.

As my once tall and hearty mother quivered in my arms, I wanted to fall apart.

More often than not, immortality felt like a curse rather than a blessing. What was the point of living forever if you couldn't be with the ones you loved the most?

"Jax!" Jess squealed, and my sister chucked her little body against my side like a battering ram.

I caught her with one arm and shielded my frail mother from her flailing elbows.

At fourteen, Jess was all gangly limbs and spirit. She was also extremely outgoing and prone to exuberant outbursts.

The stuck-up shifters in the local town shook their heads at her and called her a troublemaker.

They could go fuck themselves.

I smiled down at my sister and basked in her energetic presence.

Her brown skin was flushed with a rosy glow of health, and her striking black hair had natural electric-green streaks that matched her emerald eyes.

Eyes large on her face, it wouldn't be long before she was a beautiful young woman. It also wouldn't be long before I killed any man that dared to touch her.

My gut pinched with anxiety.

The shifter realm was a cruel place with violent citizens. I didn't like that Jess had to grow up in such a rough world.

She deserved better.

Instead of spiraling with worry over the women in my life, I gently helped my elderly mother back into her chair.

Then, with a whoop of excitement, I threw Jess up into the air like she was still a baby.

Jess screamed with delight as I tossed her easily, and I found my heart swelling with gratitude for my unnatural strength and colossal size.

It was times like this that made me glad I was built freakishly strong.

Then we got into a mock wrestling match where I proceeded to easily toss her onto the ground ten different times.

Jess kept standing up and throwing herself at me like she stood a chance.

After a few minutes, she was covered in sweat and gasping on the fur rug. Personally, I hadn't broken a sweat, but I lay down beside her in solidarity.

She proceeded to fill me in on all the town gossip. At one point she said something about a squirrel biting her and her biting the squirrel back?

Truthfully, I didn't think too deeply about it. I was just blessed to be back with my family.

I was happy she was happy.

"I always wear the chain you got me." Jess showed off the gold jewelry she'd threaded through the single electric-green braid on her head.

It was a long gold chain that had a flower at the end.

"Same." I held up the matching chain threaded through one of my many braids, and we grinned at each other.

Jess ran her hand softly over my matching jewelry, then waved her hand toward the *full* couch.

Somehow, I had forgotten about it.

She chewed on her fingernail. "Also, I wanted to tell you. A man with a cloak and crazy-bright-blue eyes came and talked to Mom. He convinced her

to...ya know.”

We both clamored to our feet.

“No, I don’t know, Jess,” I said softly and leveled her with my alpha glare, the one that made beta men quake before me.

Jess pursed her lips but didn’t break my gaze.

She opened and closed her mouth, but said nothing.

I asked the critical question. “Why are there four little girls sitting on our couch?”

Jess giggled behind her hand.

“We aren’t *little* girls,” two of the *little* girls on the couch said in unison. They were twins with matching flame-red hair, blue eyes, and tanned skin.

I pursed my lips and debated the merits of getting into a fight with ten-year-olds.

A smaller child next to them piped up, “Yeah, I’m not little either!”

She had bright-pink hair, matching pink eyes, and dark skin. I estimated she was four feet tall and younger than the twins. Definitely *little*.

The smallest girl, on the edge of the couch, rolled her eyes and raised her hand.

Unlike the other girls, she didn’t have bright coloring. She had dark hair that in the firelight shone with a mix of black and navy-blue strands.

Large dark eyes glared at me and were shocking against her pale skin.

All the girls were unique-looking, but there was something unsettling about her coloring.

I stared at her raised hand in confusion until she arched her eyebrow expectantly, and I realized she wanted to be called on.

“Uh, yes?” I pointed at her.

She nodded and sighed with relief. “‘Little’ is subjective. It all depends on comparison, and frankly, it’s quite rude that you would identify us as such.”

My jaw dropped, and I just stared back at her in silence.

I—the seasoned alpha that was seven feet tall, covered in hundreds of pounds of muscles, and shifted into a ferocious bear—had just been patronized by a child.

I was over a century old, for sun god’s sake, and the little girl was glaring me down with such intensity that *I* wanted to look away.

“Um.” I struggled to respond as the four girls on the couch glared at me.

Jess grinned at my side and looked among us like it was good fun.

Finally, after a long, awkward pause, Jess clapped her hands loudly and startled us all out of the weird staring contest for dominance that I was seconds away from losing.

“These are our new sisters!”

My knees went weak.

“What?” I finally sputtered out as I turned to look at my mother.

She was asleep in her chair, snoring softly; age was taking its toll.

I glared down at Jess and searched for inner peace. “I just visited last month; how did you acquire four new sisters in that period of time?”

The shifter realm was a cold, brutal place, and orphans were not common. Children often died.

It was awful, but it was the reality of the realm.

Wanted children didn’t always survive the freezing cold, let alone unwanted ones.

Anxiety skyrocketed inside me as the implication of Jess’s statements shook through me.

I was usually calm and controlled.

I wasn’t now.

My mother was practically on her deathbed, and now five little girls were staring at me expectantly.

I turned to Jess and narrowed my eyes at her.

This was serious.

“Don’t look at me!” Jess threw up her hands. “A man in a cloak just entered the house one day with the four girls and told Mother she needed to adopt them.”

She looked fondly at our sleeping mother. “You know how she is with her age. She just accepted what the man said, and he left. That was that. Now, I have four sisters. Isn’t that so cool?”

My heart stuttered with a palpitation.

I turned to the four girls sitting expectantly on the worn couch. “Do you remember where you came from or who your parents are?”

The dark-haired smallest child rolled her eyes. “Nothing. My theory is that the cloaked man used some enchantment to wipe our memories. Although, from our threadbare clothes and emaciated forms, I suspect we’re not forgetting much.”

She gestured to her tiny frame and shook her head at me like my question was dumb.

“So you’re now my sisters? All four of you?” I asked, befuddled.

I was definitely missing something.

She threw her hands into the air, dark eyes flashing. “Oh my sun god, is he dense? I never thought I would have a brother who was an ignoramus.”

She flipped her long black hair over her shoulder and flung herself back onto the couch dramatically.

Jess put her arm around my waist. At least, she tried to; I was so large she just patted me on the back. “Relax, Jinx. I swear he’s not usually so dumb.”

Inner peace.

I’d never been shown less respect.

“Jinx?” I asked. It was surprisingly close to my name, Jax.

Jess grinned. “Oh yeah, they all couldn’t remember anything, not even their names. So we decided because you’re Jax and I’m Jess that we should all have *J* names.”

I opened my mouth to point out that it was inane to all have similar names but swallowed down the words.

Jess was looking up at me with so much happiness.

Mother was old, and it had been stressing me out that Jess was going to be on her lonesome. There wasn’t room for little girls in a war camp, so I couldn’t have her live with me.

However, having four *more* little girls to worry about didn’t seem like a solution.

I raked my hand through my long braids. “Well, if you’re all going to be part of this family, what are your names?”

Jess squealed and grabbed my hands in hers. Her emerald eyes danced with excitement as she broke out into a very awkward dance that involved a lot of flailing.

“So you’re not going to kick us out?” one twin with bright-red hair asked in a monotone voice.

“Of course not.” I wasn’t a monster who turned away little girls into the frigid shifter realm.

There was no choice.

I made a mental note to figure out schooling for them so they could stay with Jess. In the meantime, I needed to chop more firewood to fill up our storage.

“How exciting,” the other twin said in a tone that sounded less than impressed.

They had a *lot* of sass for small children.

After dropping into a split and holding her hands up with excitement, Jess climbed to her feet and pointed to each girl.

“The twins are named Jen and Jan. They’re ten years old. Jala, the one with the awesome pink hair, is eight. Finally, Jinx is six, but she’s like the smartest person I’ve ever met.”

Mentally, I repeated in my brain, *Jen, Jan, Jala, and Jinx*. I was going to have to work to not mess up their names.

“Well, I’m Jax,” I said and tried to smile in a nonthreatening way now that introductions were out of the way.

Most grown adults were overwhelmed by my large size, and I didn’t want to come across as scary or mean.

“We literally know,” Jen or Jan said while rolling her eyes.

“Are you sure he isn’t dumb?” Jinx asked Jess with a serious expression. I sighed heavily.

It didn’t appear I had to worry about them being intimidated by me.

Instead of arguing with a six-year-old that I wasn’t dumb, I focused on the important things and spoke with my no-nonsense general voice.

“Mother is old, which means if you’re all going to survive the shifter realm, I’m going to need to set some ground rules.

“First, no going outside alone.

“Second, I will try to acquire a cellphone. Sun god knows they are hard to get, so if I can’t, I’ll visit as often as possible.

“Third, always wear two coats when goin—”

I stopped speaking as Jen and Jan hopped off the couch and sauntered out of the room.

“Where are you going?” I asked in disbelief.

People *listened* to me.

“You’re boring us,” Jen, I think, called over her shoulder as they strolled away.

Jala followed them but ran over and threw her arms around my waist in a hug. “I’ve always wanted a brother.”

Her pink hair matched the blush on her cheeks as she smiled up at me, and my heart melted.

Before I could say anything, she released me and ran out of the room.

“This is going to be great,” Jess said with a thumbs-up, and then followed them out.

Suddenly, it was just me, my sleeping, elderly mother, and the small child who talked like an adult.

“Have you read Nietzsche or Plato?” Jinx stared up at me with massive, dark eyes.

“Um, no. Have you?”

She sighed heavily, like she was an overburdened adult and not a literal *infant*. “I can’t remember how or why, but I definitely remember reading it. If you did, you would realize that the primordial chaos of life, like the cold weather outside, is not what is important.”

She couldn’t weigh over eighty pounds and was barely four feet tall. The cold should 100 percent concern her.

I opened my mouth to say so.

“Shh.” She shook her head. “I realize you’re still chained to the cave Plato talked about. You will only be free when you’re turned toward the light, away from the darkness.”

Then she flipped her inky hair over her small shoulder and ran out of the room after her sisters.

With all five girls gone, the silence in the room was deafening.

The logs in the hearth crackled and popped.

I sighed heavily and sat down on the couch next to my mother. She snored softly, and I gathered her wrinkled hands in mine.

“What have you done, Ma?” I asked quietly.

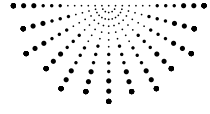
Maybe I was just losing it, but I swore the corners of her mouth turned up into a secretive grin.

It had only been a few minutes since I’d arrived and already the void in my heart felt a lot smaller. It was filled mostly with *anxiety* for the five young sisters I now had to provide for.

But it was still full, and after a century of numb emptiness, it was nice.

Once again, a smile split my face.

SADIE



THE EVIL QUEEN

“OH MY GODDESS, this is rich. What a disgusting surprise,” a tinkling female voice said above me.

I blinked open crusty eyes and immediately wished I hadn't woken up.

I'd been having a horrible nightmare that I was drowning in a sea of my blood.

Of course, because my life was depressing, I woke up to arguably *worse* circumstances. Which was hard to do.

The first thing I noted—the voice belonged to evil lady number one, aka the fae queen.

She leaned casually against the bedroom wall like she didn't have a care in the world.

Glad she was feeling relaxed.

Not relatable.

The second thing I noted—there was a breeze against my vagina.

On closer inspection, I was buck naked, with my limbs like a starfish's, tits up, scars on display, lying in the middle of a massive bed.

“What the flying fuck?” I asked. My broken voice was extra scratchy, a stark contrast to the queen's melodic tone.

I struggled to sit up, but my entire body ached with phantom pain, and I didn't even bother to preserve my modesty.

Unlike what they'd taught us in school, modest was not hottest. You know what was hot? *Not* being kidnapped by psychotic evil fae rulers.

The last things I remembered: Cobra and Jax had been drugged unconscious. Ascher had betrayed us. The queen had attacked me with her blue fire, which was painful as hell but didn't burn like a normal flame.

Then we'd all been transported from the shifter realm to the queen's palace in the fae realm. Aran had turned out to be a girl in disguise and the fae princess. A guard had knocked me out.

If I weren't so tired and sore, I would have burst into tears.

My life, which had been training for *war* at a fortress with alpha and beta shifters who were all stronger than me, had somehow gotten worse. I was so tired that I couldn't attack the fae queen like I wanted to.

Instead, I settled for raising my head slightly and death glaring at everyone in the room.

It was the best I could do.

About two dozen women cringed as I struggled to sit up.

They were the queen's servants.

They wore unique white dresses that I'd seen depicted in a book growing up. Each woman was gorgeous and had slightly pointed ears like all fae.

As I glared around the room and tried to act intimidating, the women grimaced as they stared at my torso.

My gut told me they weren't wincing because they were overwhelmed by the beauty and prominence of my nipples.

They were horrified because thick white scars covered my golden skin.

The queen walked closer to the bed, and I stopped playing the staring game with the servants.

Bright sunshine streamed through gold windows, and her hair sparkled a rich dark blue. The queen had dark eyes and a perfectly symmetrical face, and she wore a gossamer spider-silk dress.

It reminded me of the spider fae whose web had shredded my flesh in battle.

My neck cramped, and I flopped back onto the bed in a poor imitation of a dead fish. Not my strongest moment.

The queen sneered down at me, "Does Cobra know how brutalized your skin is? How ugly you are?"

Who asked someone such a rude question? Clearly, living in a palace didn't make you classy.

I perched my right elbow beneath me, coughed, and said, "What a trashy question. And really, you don't like my scars? I thought they were pretty."

Yes, I had just called the evil fae queen with insane fire abilities "trashy." It was called living without regrets, and it was my new motto.

There was a pregnant pause as everyone in the room stared at me like my

tits were out and I was crazy.

Both were true.

Of course, I hated my scars and low-key suffered crippling anxiety, but I wasn't about to tell the *evil* queen that.

I might look dumb and was probably concussed from the guard knocking me out, but I still had a few brain cells left.

The queen arched a perfectly trimmed eyebrow. "You're quite annoying, aren't you?"

I grinned, wrinkled my nose at her condescendingly, and asked, "You're quite the bitch, aren't you?"

The servants gasped and bowed their heads, and for a long moment, the queen and I stared at each other.

I tried to act like I wasn't five seconds away from losing consciousness because sitting up was too much effort.

Finally, the queen leaned over the bed and said softly, "You're barely a beast, while I'm a full-blooded fae with eons of experience crushing crass little fools like you. I'm going to break you."

"Where is Aran? What did you do with her? You better not hurt her," I whispered back, and her face was so close to mine that our breath mingled. If she'd hurt my friend, I'd kill her.

Her eyes lit with anger. "It's *Arabella*, and since she's my daughter, I will do whatever I want with her."

I punched her in the throat.

People must not punch her often, because my fist landed hard. She sputtered and fell backward.

There was one universal truth to life: no one looked elegant after a chop to the trachea.

While the queen choked, I collapsed back onto the bed as the room spun around me.

Every muscle in my body was exhausted, and the only thing standing between me and a coma was sheer willpower.

Beside my bed, servants scrambled around the gasping queen and tried to help her, but she slapped their hands away and straightened her spider-silk dress.

She slowly turned toward me, her pretty face contorted into an ugly mask of fury. I sneered back.

Then the bitch lit me on fire.

With a whoosh, blue flames consumed every inch of my naked body.

My mouth opened, back arched, and eyes watered as her power consumed every one of my cells in stinging pain.

It was agony.

Once again, the flames didn't burn like fire. It felt like a thousand needles stabbed into my skin and ripped the flesh off my bones.

I gasped and twitched as tears streamed down my face.

Seizing on the bed, I reached into the dark recess of my mind and tried to flick on the numb.

My homicidal alter ego, which shielded me from pain, hadn't recharged. I must not have been unconscious for long.

With no way to relieve the anguish, my naked body twisted and convulsed on the satin covers.

Through a wall of blue, the queen smirked at me.

I tried to scream, but my broken voice only made weak, gasping noises as I gurgled air.

Tears poured as the misery continued.

The queen snapped her fingers, and the flames disappeared.

Gone, like they'd never existed.

Every single muscle and bone in my body relaxed.

I'd never been so relieved to *not* be on fire.

For a long moment, I gasped and stared up at the painted ceiling of fae wielding the four elements—water, earth, air, and fire.

A water fae held a massive ice sword, an air fae was flying, an earth fae swung a boulder, and a fire fae was covered in flames.

I focused on the first three images because the last one was triggering.

Pretty, my overstimulated brain supplied unhelpfully as I stared at the gorgeous female water fae.

In the aftermath of torture, my body trembled with relief and my brain was only functioning at half capacity.

I choked and said to the queen with a gravelly rasp, "I always preferred the water fae in stories. Their weapons are cooler than your little flames."

It was a bald-faced lie; I'd always been obsessed with the stories of the fire fae.

They were the strongest, the masters of pain, makers of kings, and slayers of gods. Notably, they seemed less cool now that one was literally *lighting* me on fire.

The queen laughed, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Please, the water fae are pathetic compared to the fire wielders."

I argued back, "Maybe, but the half warriors would still destroy you in a fight."

At the mention of half warriors, the queen's perfect smile fell.

Her tone was sharp as knives. "They are no longer a threat to me or this realm. It doesn't matter how powerful they were. I broke them."

"For sure, dude." I rolled my eyes like I was bored and not panicking.

I'd grown up worshipping the half warriors; part alpha and part fae. They not only shifted into beasts, but controlled a fae element.

They were called the Big Three—three half warriors who roamed the fae lands, fighting off monsters and protecting the realm from evil.

If the queen had somehow defeated them, I 100 percent didn't stand a chance.

As if she could read my thoughts, she smirked at me, then turned to address the servants. "I wanted to wait until the prisoner was awake to announce the good news. Today, we have a special treat for the realm. Cobra is back."

Immediately, the women squealed with excitement.

My first reaction—embarrassment flooded through me just hearing Cobra's name. He was an asshole. Literally, he'd fingered my asshole while he ate my pussy like dessert.

I didn't know what they'd put in that wine at the Ianuarius party, but boy had it really lowered my inhibitions. I'd been fighting with him the day before, then I'd just let him put his face in my vagina.

That had not been very alpha of me.

If I were a bad bitch, when he'd pinned me against the closet wall, I would have slammed my knees into his crotch, flashed my vagina, and slinked away in my high heels.

Instead, my resistance had crumbled.

My second reaction—pure terror.

Cobra hated all women and refused to talk to them. Yet he was some type of celebrity in the fae realm, someone the queen referred to by name?

The whole situation had trauma and abuse written all over it.

My flesh tingled, and I trembled as awful scenarios flashed through my brain. I tried to follow the buzzing and shift into my alpha form of a saber-toothed tiger.

No matter how hard I pushed and strained, nothing happened.

“Alphas can’t shift in this realm. I’ve ensured it,” the queen said casually.

Any hope that was left in my body disintegrated into smithereens.

My mouth dropped open, and I gaped at her.

If I were standing, my legs would have collapsed beneath me. Good thing I was lying buck naked on a bed surrounded by strangers.

The little glass vials with blue smoke had restricted our ability to change in the shifter realm.

The smoke in the vials was blue, just like her power. Somehow, the queen’s fire could stop alphas from shifting in the entire realm.

I might as well just find a shovel and start digging my grave.

The full extent of how fucked everything was crashed down around me. I didn’t stand a chance against her.

The queen continued speaking, “As you all know, Cobra is the prettiest man to ever exist and our most popular *entertainer*. He is still an eligible bachelor, and I have set up a treat for the realm.”

My chest hurt. She said Cobra’s name like he was a fucking object, not a person. I hated the gleam of ownership in her eyes.

I leaned up on my arms and growled, “He’s not fucking eligible. He’s with Jax, and they love each other.”

“No!” the servants shouted and gasped like I’d told them the sun god was dead.

For a split second, the queen’s lips pinched together as she glared back at me.

Her eyes clouded with worry as she said, “Settle down, girls. Am I not your queen? I assure you he is very much eligible and will be providing his usual entertainment.”

I laughed loudly. “No, I assure you all he is very much *not* elig—”

Flames lit my body, and the stabbing sensation was ten times worse than before.

Instantly, I was paralyzed with pain.

I gasp-screamed as every neuron in my body writhed and sputtered. Blue fire consumed my existence.

After endless moments of suffering, the agony stopped.

I heaved.

The queen sneered down at my convulsing form like she’d beaten me.

If I had any sense of self-preservation, I would have kept my mouth shut.

Too bad the bitch had triggered me.

I choked on saliva and said loudly, “Cobra’s with Jax and never touches women. In fact, because of whatever shit is going on here, he hates all women and thinks they are disgust—”

My words were cut off because, again, she set me on fucking fire.

The world thrashed in blue flames, and it felt like my bones disintegrated into wisps of dust as my veins exploded like grenades.

Vomit spewed up my throat, but it had nowhere to go because my body was paralyzed with agony.

I choked and gasped.

For the longest moments, I desperately gurgled. Tears streamed down my face, and my lungs screamed for relief.

This was how I was going to die, naked and choking.

Not the most relaxing end.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the flames extinguished.

I leaned over the bed and spewed chunks across the gleaming white marble floor.

With a gasp, I tried to catch my breath and struggled to push my sweaty limbs up into a sitting position.

“Are you done?” the queen asked in a bored tone, like she was late for her afternoon tea, not torturing me with flames.

She was so rude.

Like a mature, independent woman who was good at comebacks, I asked, “Are you done?”

The queen’s dark eyes clouded with annoyance, and she stepped closer to me. “No, I’ve only just begun. I’m going to welcome Cobra back to our realm with a *bang* of a performance. I wasn’t going to use you—I couldn’t give him something he might actually want—but that was before I saw your naked, hideous flesh.”

She paused for dramatic effect and as the servants held their breath in anticipation.

I looked down at my fingernails like I was bored, while every cell in my body shook with terror.

It took everything I had to school my expression and act like I didn’t care.

The queen clearly loved drama, and I was not giving it to her.

She continued gloating, “Now that I have seen the extent of your ugliness, I know Cobra would never dare touch your awful flesh. He covets

strength above all else, and darling, you are the opposite of strong.”

Her words burned because she was right. Cobra did covet strength, which was why he was obsessed with Jax.

Jax was literally three times my body weight and one hundred times stronger than me. He could also run for five minutes without wanting to die, which was impressive and not relatable.

Sure, Cobra had eaten me out in a closet, low-key the best moment of my life, but my dress had covered my entire torso, and the closet had been dark.

The jeweled bastard had sneered at my small stature and inability to run, and he didn’t even know the true extent of my weakness.

I never wanted him to see my scars.

The queen snapped her fingers, and a painting on the wall transformed.

The painting rippled, and a naked Cobra was displayed on what seemed to be the fae’s enchanted equivalent of a television.

On the screen, Cobra was displayed naked on an ornate bed. *Same*.

However, he also had a diamond-studded collar wrapped around his neck and cuffs around his wrists, and he leaned against the headboard like he didn’t have a care in the world.

But his emerald eyes were frozen chips of darkness.

In my room, the servants tittered and ran around to get closer to the screen. They shoved at each other, jockeying for a better view.

The queen turned to me and said, “I’ve decided that because of your insolence, you’re going to be Cobra’s first guest.”

My soul left my body, and my stomach twisted into a million knots.

Before I could sink fully into panic, the queen grabbed my arm and wrenched me out of the bed.

I slipped in my vomit and barely kept myself upright.

When I straightened, everyone in the room looked down at me.

Now that I stood up, the fae were taller than I’d realized. Also, they were all unnaturally gorgeous. Everyone’s features were perfect, hair glossy and skin glistening.

In both realms, I was small and *not* perfect.

The queen tilted her head down to smirk at me. “Cobra is a professional, but there’s no way he’ll be able to keep his cool when he sees your horrid flesh. Afterward, he’ll beg me to let a gorgeous fae fuck him.”

My brain struggled to understand what she was saying.

Fuck him?

Before I could process what was happening, the queen called for guards, and large fae men burst into the room.

With every inch of strength left in my exhausted body, I straightened my head, pushed my tits forward, and clenched my butt.

I fought and kicked as they dragged me down a crowded, ornate hallway. My struggling did nothing.

People pointed at my naked, scarred body as the guards manhandled me.

I refused to be embarrassed about my less-than-ideal nude state, so I focused on the paintings on the wall and not on the fae staring and taunting me.

Just like the bedroom ceiling, symbols of the fae elements were carved and painted with exquisite details.

A guard shoved me forward down the hall with so much force that my legs collapsed beneath me.

I fell to my knees.

Fae laughed. Instead of looking at their cruel expressions, I focused on the painting at the bottom of the wall.

Now that I was on the floor, I could see that the image differed from the rest.

It depicted a male fae lying prone, with bright-red blood flowing from cuts on his wrists. His body was limp like he was dead, but his eyes were wide open.

The image was graphic and horrible.

My brain shivered with foreboding.

A guard hauled me to my feet and shoved me through a gold door, and I pushed the horrifying image out of my thoughts.

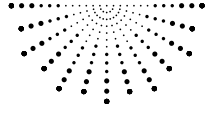
As I stumbled to catch myself, I turned toward the bed.

An unnaturally gorgeous shifter leaned against the wall.

Cobra looked like a pale Adonis.

His snake eyes stared at me.

COBRA



OLD PRISONS

“Oh, he’s so pretty, so sparkly!” the fae bitches exclaimed as they dragged soapy sponges over my bare skin.

I sat in the massive tub with my legs tucked against my chest, head buried in my knees.

With a whoosh, I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth.

It didn’t help.

The void consumed me, and I sunk into the swirling abyss of despair. I was back in my own personal hell.

It had been years since I’d been this exposed, this empty and alone. My black heart writhed in my chest.

Six years, to be exact.

That was how long I’d been free of this hell.

At a hundred years old, it felt like I’d lived free of chains for only a blink of an eye. I had tasted freedom and loved it.

But it had all been for nothing.

The sponges dragging across my exposed back might as well have been daggers cutting me open.

I’d worked hard to escape this realm and live. Escape from the mindless beast I’d become—the hollow shell of rage, hatred, and bloodlust.

Just to find myself back in the same prison.

The only things that kept me from sinking so deep into the void were twin sparks of anger that kept me tethered to reality.

Jax and Sadie.

How dare Ascher betray us?

How dare the horned bastard fucking hurt them?

Drugged and weak, I'd woken up to watch Jax's and Sadie's limp bodies dragged out of the palace hall. I'd failed them both.

If I could go back in time, I would slit the fucking cat's throat and beat Ascher until he begged and cried for his life.

Then I would torture him for days. No, years.

I would hang him up by his toes and slowly cut every inch of flesh off his body.

He didn't deserve mercy.

But Jax and Sadie—I wouldn't let them break like I had. It would be over my dead, immortal body that the fae took the light from their eyes.

First, I had to survive my personal hell, gird my loins, and stomach the fae's advances.

If I played along like a good toy, the queen might not hurt Jax and Sadie.

It was my only hope.

The fae queen was too powerful to defeat. She was covered with powerful enchantments that protected her from harm.

It was infuriating.

The only way to kill an elite fae was to rip out their heart and eat it. The stronger the fae, the harder it was to attack them.

Since the queen was the most powerful person in the realm, she was basically un-killable.

All we could do was try to survive her. I'd done it before, so I could do it again.

As the servants bathed me and tittered over my jeweled muscles, I couldn't help but compare them to Sadie.

They were so fucking giggly it made me want to rip my hair out.

Their voices were too high, their eyes too soft and vapid. I missed Sadie's deep, raspy voice and blood-red eyes that were sharp and cold.

She gave as hard as she took. She didn't fucking giggle and touch men against their will.

Even drowning in a maelstrom of pain, I couldn't help but dream of her cranberry wine.

Only a day ago, her juices had dripped down my face, and she'd been completely at my mercy.

Fuck.

I slammed my fists against my forehead.

My hands were cuffed in front of me and bound by ten-foot enchanted chains nailed into the wall. The restraints were a joke.

If I really wanted to, I could easily snap the fae servants' necks.

The queen knew this and had done it on purpose. She probably wanted me to lose my shit so she could broadcast the violence to the realm.

Every move the bitch made was calculated for maximum shock value. Calculated to increase her power and her control.

I wanted to play into her hand and kill the woman touching me.

However, instead of murdering every servant in the room, I imagined Jax's calm strength and Sadie's fiery passion. They wouldn't approve if I mindlessly slaughtered fae women.

With a deep breath, I tried to pretend I wasn't half-drowning in the dark void where my soul should have been—an abyss that held an endless capacity for violence.

A servant brushed her hand near my groin, and I shoved my shoulder into her side.

She fell over with an overdramatic shriek and cried like a baby. I'd barely touched her. Sadie would have punched me in the throat.

I slammed my cuffed fists into my forehead and growled with frustration. If they hurt her, I didn't know what I would do.

I was worried about Jax, but he was a fucking mammoth of a man who was over a century old. He could take care of himself.

In contrast, Sadie was young and inexperienced. She was only twenty years old, for sun god's sake. She needed our protection.

She was also so short and petite that a stiff fucking wind could blow her over. The more I thought about her stature, the more agitated I became.

I needed to figure out where she was.

A part of me was shocked by my own thoughts. Somehow, I'd done the unthinkable: I was obsessed with a woman.

When Sadie had been pinned against the wall and surrendered beneath me, something had shifted inside of me. She might be an annoying little terror, but she was *my* terror.

No one else was going to fucking taste cranberry wine.

Ever.

Rage built inside my chest, so fast and explosive that I bellowed into the room. Servants screamed and ran.

The thought of someone else touching Sadie, some fucking fae, was too

much for my psyche to take. I pushed closer to the void.

A servant's voice quivered as she pointed at the bed and said, "The queen wants you on the bed now. We're going to start."

I stood up slowly, but I didn't look at her. I didn't talk to women, especially not fae women.

Sadie was the only woman I talked to. She didn't count.

As I sloshed water out of the tub, the servant skittered back in terror, but her eyes clouded with lust as she stared down at my cock, at the jewels embedded in it.

Fae coveted pretty, shiny things, and I'd never met anyone else with jewels embedded in their skin.

I sauntered across the room like I was unbothered by her stare, like it didn't disgust me.

Lounging on the bed, I glared at the purple crystal levitating in the middle of the room. It was pointed directly at me, enchanted to broadcast my every move across the realm.

The fuckers.

I was back in the opulent room they had trapped me in before. The room where they'd forced me to have sex with the powerful men and women who'd paid to sample the exotic snake shifter with the jeweled cock.

Once again, I was lying on red velvet sheets and a black comforter. They hadn't redecorated in the last six years.

It was like they'd preserved it on purpose, like they'd been waiting for me to be back.

I breathed deeply and rested my arms casually behind my head. I'd survived this once before, so I could survive it again.

All I had to do was put on a little performance. Then I could find Sadie and Jax.

Maybe I would hold whoever the fae sent in as a hostage? Maybe I would play the good little toy and wait until my captors let their guard down? Maybe I would attack.

All I had to do was stay calm and survive.

I breathed deeply, shoved the void down, ignored the bile that crept up my throat, and pretended my stomach didn't burn with pain.

There was a commotion in the hall.

A new fae cunt on her way to sample the exotic Cobra. I hated the bitch, and I hadn't even met her.

The door opened.

For a second, my eyes flickered to snake eyes and the golden sunlit room transformed into a shadowy space. Servants gave off bright-blue heat signatures as they hurried into the hall.

A small figure with a bright-red heat signature stood in the doorway. The figure gave off a ruby temperature I'd only seen on freshly spilled blood.

Intrigued, I shifted my eyes back.

For a second, time stopped. Sadie stood in the doorway.

Naked.

Her gorgeous body stole my breath. She was delicate and stunning. Long white hair hung in a silky sheet down to her butt, and her golden skin sparkled in the sunshine.

Then I saw them.

Awful marks covered her torso—a brutal patchwork of stark white scars.

The type of wounds that only years of repeated abuse could create.

The type of wounds that could only mark the prepubescent flesh of an immortal ABO.

Since Sadie was an alpha, that meant some dead fucker had brutally beaten her as a child.

Every time I'd taunted her for wearing a sweatshirt while running or called her a prude for hiding to change flashed through my mind like a horror film.

The void splintered.

It took all my willpower not to launch myself off the bed and scream into her face until she told me who hurt her.

I also wanted to fall to my knees and beg for her forgiveness.

My anger won.

I imagined the fucktard that had marred her golden skin so brutally. They wouldn't die; oh fuck no, they would bleed for all eternity.

I would ensure it.

"Go to the bed," a fae guard barked as he walked through the door and shoved Sadie forward.

He dared to touch her.

He dared to run his flesh across her golden skin and mix his scent with that of cranberry wine.

In a blur, I leaped off the bed and grabbed his hands, my long chains clinking behind me.

After seeing the abuse Sadie had suffered, I was more void than man. More animal than person.

If the queen wanted violence, she would fucking get it.

I grabbed the guard's arm with my cuffed hands, twisted my body around, and popped his arm out of the socket.

As he screamed, I wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled with all my might.

Guards stood at the door, watching me as the fucker choked to death beneath me.

No one moved to help. The levitating crystal circled around us and broadcasted my every move.

The entire fae realm was watching me choke the man to death. They were probably salivating at the violence.

Since he was a lowly guard and only the elite fae could harness the elements, he was no match for my alpha strength.

Sadie raised her eyebrow as I slammed the guard into the floor and stomped on his neck.

There was a loud crack as I crushed his windpipe.

"Was that necessary?" she asked dryly. Her cherry nipples were on display, her hands on her tiny waist, and the apex of her thighs was bare.

We both stood there naked.

A dark thought filtered through my blood-lusting brain: there was no clothing in the way of me taking her.

The guard's blood was splattered across my pale skin. Like blood across fresh snow.

At that moment, I was more beast than man.

My muscles strained with the urge to pounce on Sadie, to throw her over my shoulder and ravage her.

But I forced myself to saunter slowly toward her.

My much larger body dwarfed her petite frame. I leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "He touched what was mine. No one else is allowed to smell like cranberries. Only me."

Sadie shivered with her pupils blown out, and the intoxicating scent of cranberry wine wrapped around me.

I groaned as she licked her ridiculously plush lip and stared up at me.

"On the bed!" a guard yelled from the hall, but the coward didn't set foot in the room.

Sadie slowly walked forward, showing off her ridiculously cute heart-shaped butt, and more fucking scars.

My skin itched with lust as my heart contorted with rage.

I'd never been so turned on and so angry at the same time. My thick cock bobbed against my abs as I walked forward, and I wished it would just settle down.

I wanted to own her, possess her, protect her. I wanted to brand her name across my black heart, carve her name into my flesh so she wouldn't feel alone in her scars.

Everyone would know I'd claimed her as mine, that her vengeance was mine to dole out.

I breathed deeply and tried to calm my throbbing erection.

She was naked and covered in scars, manhandled by guards, and I was aroused by her.

I was a piece of shit.

Like a fucking little kitten, she gently sat on the edge of the bed, but her ruby eyes were sharp, her jaw set with determination. She was nobody's victim.

Sadie asked, "So what now? I just wanted to say that even though you're super hot and, sure, I kind of want to...do you, what happened in the closet was a *mistake*. It was a moment of weakness that won't happen again."

Her voice was low and raspy, and my cock jolted at the sound. It was almost so distracting that I didn't hear what she said.

Almost.

I stepped forward slowly, and the levitating stone flashed in my peripheral vision.

From experience, I knew the stone was broadcasting our every move to millions of fae across the realm, and I'd forgotten about its presence.

Fuck, everyone could see her naked body.

It was *mine*, not theirs.

As quickly as I could, I grabbed a blanket off the ground and wrapped Sadie in it. It was hard to maneuver with my hands chained, but there was no fucking way I was letting the entire realm see her.

Her little golden face and red-streaked white hair peeked out from the top of the thick blankets, and she looked adorable. Like a harmless bean that needed protection.

I smirked at her. "So, Kitten, you want to do me?"

Her forehead wrinkled as she frowned. “Oh my sun god, Princess was a bad enough name. Don’t start calling me Kitten. Also, no, I said it was a *mistake*. Are you deaf or just dumb?”

I smirked at her; she was so cute when she got angry.

A little cat with claws. Hell, her alpha bark was so weak I had to swallow down a laugh every time she used it.

If I hadn’t seen her shifted form, a giant saber-toothed tiger with massive fangs, I never would have believed she was actually an alpha.

I leaned forward and whispered softly in her ear because I didn’t want the entire realm hearing our conversation.

My warm breath tickled her ear, and she shivered beneath me. “Kitten, the only mistake was me not fucking you in the closet like I should have. I said you were mine, and I meant it.”

She opened her mouth to argue, and I moved my head so our faces were aligned. I snaked my tongue inside her plush lips.

I put my bound hands over her head, trapped her in the cage of my arms, and slowly consumed her.

Her tongue sparred with mine, and she arched closer to me. She tasted like sweet cranberry wine, and I wanted to get drunk on the taste for the rest of my miserable life.

The room grew thick with the scent of my frost mixing with her sweetness.

My erection strained and my gut twisted with the need to take her and make her mine, to etch her name across my heart in icy letters.

She moaned and arched beneath me.

Her delicate nipples strained through the blanket and rubbed against my bare torso. She mewled as I deepened the kiss, giving her everything I had.

It wasn’t a kiss; it was a promise.

I pulled my arms back, and her high golden cheekbones flushed a delicate pink, her ruby eyes were hooded with desire, and her red highlights framed her stunning features.

Her lush lips were slightly parted, pupils blown out with arousal.

She said with a deep voice that was even raspier than usual, “Still doesn’t mean shit.”

I groaned aloud; my dick leaped at her sinful voice.

My fucking kitten was killing me.

Everything about her challenged me. She made me want to toss her

around until she submitted to my dominance, until she surrendered beneath me.

“But it’s okay. I can do this.” Sadie nodded and breathed deeply like she was talking about going for a run or learning a fighting maneuver.

Not like she was being forced to have sex with a male in front of the entire fae realm.

Even after her scars had been bared for all to see, even after the guard had touched her naked flesh, she was worried about me.

Something inside me broke.

I growled at her, “Remember, Kitten, you belong to me and only me. Anyone touches you, they die. Anyone looks at you, they die. Understood?”

Her ruby eyes sparked with fire. “Um, hard no. I belong to myself, and I’m an alpha, even though you keep forgetting. Just because I let you put a finger in my ass, that does not somehow make you my owner—”

I knocked her out with a crack across the face.

My stomach twisted in horror as she slumped back, even though I’d held back and hit her as gently as possible.

I pulled the blanket up so it covered her unconscious body.

She was wrong.

It wasn’t okay.

I wasn’t taking her fucking virginity in front of the entire fae realm.

Her body belonged to me and me alone, no matter what she said or thought.

She would realize eventually.

I stood guard over her prone form and spoke loudly to the queen through the enchanted stone, “If you don’t release me, Sadie, and Jax right now, I will reveal to the entire realm why you have to wrap this diamond collar around my neck. I’ll reveal the secret of my shifter ability.”

It was the one calling card I had, and I wasn’t going to waste it until I had to.

For some reason, when the fae queen had found out about it last time, she had panicked and sworn me to secrecy.

As a stipulation of me not revealing it to anyone, she’d released me from the realm, from my chains.

It was the only reason I’d found freedom six years ago.

At the time, I had agreed with the queen to keep it a secret because I’d just wanted to get away. It had been a tool to be used for another day.

This was the day.

When she'd sent Sadie through the door, all bets were off.

There was no way in fuck I was playing her game if she was going to put Sadie in harm's way.

Suddenly, the fae queen appeared in the doorway in a flurry of spiderwebs and silk. Her dark eyes glowed pure black with rage.

She grabbed the enchanted stone that was levitating in the middle of the room into her fist. Her flames burned the stone to ash and it crumbled through her hands.

I said to her, "If you don't fucking release me, Sadie, and Jax right now, I will tell the realm the first chance I get. Put me anywhere near a stone and the secret's out."

At the end of the day, I was profit to her.

Elite fae women paid to fuck me, and my celebrity status brought more gold and riches into her hands. If she couldn't put me in front of a camera, then I was of no use to her.

Instead of screaming with frustration like I expected, the queen smiled. "Oh, Cobra, there is so much more to your celebrity than just sex. Don't think I don't have other plans for you."

She had to be lying.

I was *the* fucking sex icon of the entire fae realm. What else was my purpose if it wasn't to be chained to a bed?

I said nothing back, just stared and let her see the depth of my hatred—the depth of the void within my soul.

If she weren't so powerful, I would have tried to wrap my chains around her neck and rip her heart out with my hands.

I would *love* to eat it.

My mouth watered at the thought of tasting her heart.

But her flames would stop me before I got close, and I couldn't act until Sadie was safe.

The queen kept smiling, and I fantasized about smashing her head until her brain gore splattered everywhere. The imagery calmed me.

She taunted, "I was going to go easy on you. Let you stay in the palace, all comfortable and pampered, but now your fate is sealed."

Then the queen turned and walked out the door.

"Assistant Laerke!" the queen yelled down the hall, and a young girl sprinted to her in a rush. The queen ordered, "Sign the alphas up for the Fae

Games. It appears Cobra wants to compete.”

My legs shook, and I ran my bound hands across Sadie’s silky hair. Her breathing was even, and she looked almost relaxed, wrapped up in the blanket.

I wanted to howl with rage.

The Fae Games were a violent, bloodthirsty showdown that made the human gladiator Colosseum look like a kids’ playground.

When the guards came and reached for Sadie’s prone body, I lost my shit.

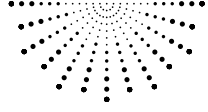
With all my strength, I battered them with my fists and knees.

Guards streamed into the room in a never-ending rush and overwhelmed me. They slammed my flesh with batons that glowed with the queen’s blue flames.

My last thought before I passed out—when I woke up, I would kill every guard that had touched my kitten.

I would bathe in their blood.

SADIE



DUNGEONS

“RELEASE ME,” I said to the two guards who were hauling my ass through the freaking thousand hallways that made up the fae palace.

I pitied whoever had to keep it clean. The damn building was never-ending.

The good news—I was no longer naked.

A long, scratchy black dress dwarfed my frame and dragged well past my feet along the shiny floor. My vagina lips were no longer flapping in the breeze.

A minor victory, but an important one.

The bad news—I was being dragged by two massive guards.

They gripped my biceps tight enough to leave bruises, and my hands were cuffed in front of me.

Somehow, my life had gone even *further* downhill.

I’d woken up from unconsciousness to the guards manhandling me down the hall, and with the memory of Cobra knocking me out.

You know what hurts? When the controlling alpha who is high-key problematic, but also sexy as sin, knocks you out instead of railing you with his jeweled dick.

Talk about a blow to my feminine ego.

For the first time, I was hyperaware of the fact that I was a twenty-year-old virgin.

Most girls had sex by my age, but I hadn’t worried about my unpenetrated status. I’d been too busy trying to survive in the shifter realm. Now I felt like a complete loser.

My skin might be horribly scarred, but my lady bits worked just fine.

The fact that Cobra chose violence over sex with me had my heart twisting like an insecure twit.

“Would you have sex with me if I weren’t a prisoner?” I asked the fae guard.

He arched his eyebrows and gaped down at me.

I made a gagging noise when I realized where his mind had gone. “Ew, I meant hypothetically. Don’t make it weird.”

The guard said nothing, just tightened his grip on my arm and shoved me forward. His hand was unbearably tight, and I swallowed down a yelp of pain.

I guess that was a *no*.

Instead of whining because apparently nobody wanted to rail me, I focused on the important things.

I was handcuffed and unable to shift into my tiger form, and that the queen had probably told the guards to throw me off a cliff.

She was such a ho.

I used my most commanding tone and alpha-barked at the guards, “Release me now!”

In a shocking move, the guards ignored me.

At this point, I’d never successfully gotten anyone to do anything with my alpha bark, which was totally lame and not cool.

People always said it was important to assert what you wanted out of life and go after it. Well, I wanted to not be dragged down the hall like a carcass.

The palace was bustling with tall, gorgeous fae. Most of them didn’t even glance at me, like it was common for women to be dragged through their halls. Not a good sign.

Finally, after we walked down many opulent hallways, the guards stopped at a narrow staircase that led down into darkness.

I squinted my eyes at the creepy blackness and asserted what I wanted out of life. “It’s a no from me. I’m not going down there.”

The guard who was gripping my arm too tightly shoved me forward.

Of course, my head ungracefully bounced off the side of the wall, and I just barely caught myself from face-planting to my death.

I saved my body, but the throbbing in my head told me that my last functioning brain cell had bitten the dust.

When I got to the bottom of the rickety stairs, I turned to run back up.

The guards blocked my way and pushed me into what could only be

described as a dungeon of despair.

Dim blue lanterns illuminated a large, dirty space, and I couldn't look at the blue flames that resembled the queen's power without suffering PTSD.

Unfortunately, the rest of the room was also highly triggering.

I would survive one day down here.

Max.

The dungeon was full of prisoners, rotting corpses, grime, despair, and rats.

Not cute rats either—big black things with red eyes and a thirst for vengeance. I could tell from the way they chittered at me.

I'd been around enough rats to know from the tone of their squeaks that they were cussing me out.

They were nothing like the small brown rats that had lived in Dick's tavern with me. Those guys were small and cute.

These rats were the size of cats. Not small and not cute.

A rat lunged at me, and I screamed like a little girl.

Thankfully, it only took a small bite out of my ankle before swerving to run at a prisoner thrashing on the ground.

"Go squeak yourself!" I yelled at the rat as it scurried away.

Once again, my guards gaped at me. Their pointy fae ears twitched like they'd never heard a woman speak to a rat before.

Uncultured pussies.

Moans and grunts of pain distracted me, and I looked around the room.

Hundreds of prisoners were chained on the walls along the perimeter of the dungeon, and they moaned and sputtered as the guards led me deeper into the long, dark space.

Their bodies were mangled, and my heart clenched at their jaundiced eyes and bruised bodies.

The guards led me deep into the recess of the dungeon, back to the far wall, where there was still some space available for another person.

With a loud clack, they hooked the chain attached to my handcuffs onto a massive metal bar that ran along the perimeter of the room.

Everyone was chained to it.

I curled my legs up under my butt and tried to not touch the filth that coated everything.

Big black rats scurried around my feet, covered in gore and sludge from the prison floor.

I breathed and tried to pretend this was an adventure, like in an epic fantasy book about the half warriors, and not the single worst day of my entire life, and scary, and horrible and... I was panicking.

So I did what I did best.

I ignored my lack of mental health and relied on inappropriate humor and unhealthy coping mechanisms to survive.

I turned to the prisoner next to me.

“Wow, you look like you’re in great shape compared to the rest of these poor saps. How did you get down here? I started out as a weird captive sex lady, but I’ve been demoted to the dungeon. A part of me feels like I didn’t even get the chance to show off my bedroom skills, ya know?”

The massive prisoner turned his head and blinked startling gray eyes.

“Why is there a bruise on your cheek?” Jax’s voice was guttural, and a low growl vibrated through his massive chest.

His growl was so loud you could almost hear it over the prisoners shrieking all around us.

Almost being the key word.

I shrugged casually as I thought about the guard throwing me into the wall. “Guard man did it. I think he doesn’t like me.”

Jax’s nostrils flared, and he asked, “Which one?”

Both my guards were standing a few feet away. They were kicking a prisoner, who was moaning in pain.

I pointed at the asshole who had gripped my arm too tight.

Before I could tell Jax that it didn’t matter, because I was so glad he was alive—and that I needed a hug because I was mentally crumbling—his massive leg lashed out.

Jax’s hands were also cuffed in front of his body, and his chains only gave him a foot or two of room.

A normal man wouldn’t have been able to move far.

But Jax was about seven feet tall and covered in muscles.

He was the opposite of normal.

Jax lunged out with his massive legs and swept the guard’s feet out from beneath him.

With insane strength, he hooked his heels around the fallen guard and dragged him toward us.

Then Jax slammed his body weight down atop the guard and pummeled the fae’s skull with his elbow.

Blood sprayed, and I watched, openmouthed, in shock as the protective and kind Jax decimated the man's existence.

The howling prisoners chanted and cheered like a pack of wild dogs.

A couple of guards watched what Jax was doing, but they didn't move to help. They just backed away as the big man went psycho on the now very dead body.

Suddenly, I understood why people might be a little scared of Jax.

When he was done cracking the man's cranium like a grape and giving me *more* PTSD, he kicked the mangled corpse away like it was trash.

"Who are you?" an emaciated man chained next to Jax asked in wonder.

"I'm Ja—"

"He's called the Meat Grinder," I said before Jax could finish.

A name had power, and if we were ever getting out of here, we needed to establish some.

I knew this because one year at school, everyone had called me Scrawny Bitch. In the shifter realm, school was free, but your parents or master paid for a meal plan.

Dick, my abusive master, had generously given no money. The school had fed me once every other day, which had not helped my already small stature.

As a result, shifters had whispered the name wherever I went. Still, I'd found it empowering to be infamous.

I was 99 percent sure the principles that applied to mean prepubescent shifter teens applied to bloodthirsty adult fae with insane powers.

The emaciated man next to Jax said, "Thank you, Meat Grinder. He's been terrorizing us for years. He's the worst guard. You don't know what you've done for us."

I choked on laughter at the name.

Jax nodded solemnly, but gave me a look that promised there would be hell to pay later.

Whatever, he'd eventually be grateful.

In other sad news, the shrieking in the dungeon escalated as the prisoners grew raucous with elation and flung poop at the guard's dead body.

I closed my eyes and wished I were cuddled under my warm blankets with my little kitten curled up on my chest.

My stomach fell further. Too bad my kitten was a traitor who'd gotten me locked in this prison.

My head throbbed with tension because the kitten made me think of a certain tattooed man with horns who had also betrayed me.

I rocked back and forth with my eyes closed.

Jax alpha-barked loudly into the room, “No one touches her or they fucking pay. Understood?”

His dominance was so powerful I had a sudden urge not to touch myself, which made no sense.

“Meat Grinder, Meat Grinder, Meat Grinder!” all the prisoners chanted back, his name catching like wildfire.

The noise was unbearably loud, and I opened my eyes to find the prisoner next to me karate chopping the air and screaming nonsense.

Everyone was getting riled up.

Not the most relaxing atmosphere. I had regrets about the name.

The noise crescendoed around me, and so did my anxiety.

I shifted closer to Jax and whispered the awful secret that was choking me alive, “Cobra knocked me out instead of having sex with me in front of the entire fae realm.”

My rational brain knew that not being forced to have sex in front of people was a good thing.

My irrational virgin brain knew that my crush had just punched me in the face rather than have sex with me.

I was good enough for a little closet play, but not good enough to go all the way with.

“They were going to force you both to have sex?” Jax asked quietly.

The loud rumble that rattled through his chest and shook the brick walls of the prison betrayed his emotions.

Suddenly, like a wild animal, he roared.

The dungeon went dead silent.

You didn’t mess with an angry alpha; it was instinctual.

Jax’s gray eyes glowed like a lightning storm was ripping through his skull, and he slammed his cuffed fists into the sternum of the dead guard.

He turned to me, and the harsh glow in his eyes dimmed as he inspected my huddled frame.

I was pressed against the wall, arms wrapped around my knees, as I struggled to avoid the guard’s blood splatter while also trying to not touch any of the filth that covered the floor.

As I looked around, I realized I was the only woman in the prison. *Not* the

female empowerment movement I wanted to be a part of.

The silence broke as everyone started to shriek again.

“Are you okay?” Jax whispered and scooted closer.

“Um, no,” I whispered, and coughed at the stench of rotting flesh and feces. Someone needed to light a candle ASAP.

“Come here,” Jax growled as he lifted his large, cuffed arms above his head and motioned for me to lean against his wide chest.

I ignored the gore covering his fists and immediately snuggled against him so his warm heat completely enveloped me.

This was the second time I’d cuddled against Jax, and it was as comforting as I remembered.

His muscles were large and cushy, and his body temperature burned like a furnace.

Jax’s golden jewels tinkled as he adjusted me against him.

In the howling den of violence that was the fae prison, we held each other in comfortable silence.

He was a shelter in the middle of a blizzard.

“The whole realm saw my scars,” I whispered quietly.

Jax grew stiff beneath me, and a low rumble vibrated against my back. The resonance was soothing.

“I’m so sorry, little alpha. No one should see your skin unless you want them to.” He rubbed his cheek across my head and offered me comfort.

I said quietly, “Cobra has seen them, and I-I’m worried he’s going to think less of me or pity me. Also, I don’t know if he’s okay. I got separated from him. I’m so sorry, Jax.”

Jax squeezed his biceps around me comfortingly. “Cobra can take care of himself. He’s a century old and a master warrior. We have to trust him and his skills.”

I nodded and tried to reassure myself that the sparkly man would be okay.

Also, damn, I hadn’t known he was a century old. Apparently, a grandpa had gone down on me, and I didn’t know how to feel about it.

Jax growled softly, “Little alpha, Cobra will not think less of you or pity you, even if he wants to. Since day one, he has tried to hate you, but no matter how hard he tries, he can’t.”

I buried my face against his chest and scolded myself for acting like a ninny about my scars. We had bigger things to deal with.

My stomach pinched, and I prayed to the moon goddess to look after

Cobra. The sun god knew she wasn't bothering to look after me.

There was a commotion among prisoners as new guards marched through the dungeon.

They dragged a man behind them. His face was mottled with wicked bruises, and his body was limp in their arms.

I gagged at the man's beaten state. He looked awful.

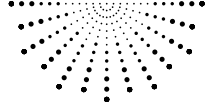
Eight guards restrained him, and they held long batons in their hands. The batons glowed with the blue flames of the fae queen.

As they dragged the abused man across the room, he looked up.

Familiar emerald eyes stared at me.

It was Cobra.

SADIE



REALM LIES

THE GUARDS DRAGGED Cobra across the room toward us.

Jax lifted his arms from over me and gently pushed me aside.

When the guards stepped close to us, Jax lunged at them in a blur of power and rage.

A loud crack echoed, and prisoners screamed as three guards slammed their batons into Jax's back, and the big man writhed in pain as blue flames leaped against his dark skin.

A stick cracked against his skull, and Jax passed out on the ground next to the dead body of the guard he'd killed.

The guards hooked Cobra's chain to the wall and stepped over their dead colleague like he wasn't even there.

I scooted closer to Jax and ran my chained hand across his brow as his body convulsed horribly.

"Is he okay?" Cobra asked me.

"I think so," I said as I wiped Jax's braids off his sweaty face and checked his pulse. I looked up at Cobra to reassure him and almost vomited.

He no longer looked like an elegant Adonis. His massive frame was beaten and bloodied.

Not an inch of his skin was free of abuse. Blood coated his jewels, and he sagged forward like all his bones were broken.

A zing traveled across my lower back, and I realized it was the little shadow snake. Cobra still didn't know that I had one of his snakes on my skin, and I was grateful for its presence.

It sent me another zing of happiness; the little guy was trying to reassure me that everything would be fine.

I smiled and sent warm thoughts back. At this point, the little snake was my entire support system. As it zinged and sent comfort straight to my heart, I focused on the bloody alpha beside me.

I asked Cobra, "Why did they do this to you? What can I do to help?"

Instead of answering, he stared at me intently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm literally fine. What happened to you?"

"They beat me because I wouldn't be their sex slave again, and I threatened the queen in front of everyone. Is your head okay?" Cobra's jade eyes, even puffy and covered in blood, were soft as he stared at me with concern.

He still smelled like icy snow, but his voice no longer had its cruel edge. I'd never seen him like this.

The bastard had been beaten within an inch of his life, and he was concerned because he'd barely tapped my head with his fist.

I wanted to cry.

All sexual problems aside, the bastard didn't deserve this.

Cobra coughed up blood and wiped it away. At the same time, Jax dragged himself into a seated position as his large muscles spasmed.

We'd all had better days.

Jax looked back and forth between us, like he was afraid we would disappear.

Cobra coughed as he looked at the dead guard lying on the ground in front of us. "When the guards came to take you from me, I killed a couple and beat off the rest as best I could. I'm sorry I didn't stop them."

Annoyance sparked hot and heavy in my chest. "Stop. You don't need to apologize for anything. I can handle myself."

Both Jax and Cobra had fought guards on my behalf. At this rate, we would never survive the damn castle if they kept killing people.

Cobra sneered with his trademark scorn, and his voice was a frosty whip. "Oh yeah? Then how come you never told me about your scars? Doesn't look like you can handle yourself."

So much for him being uncharacteristically kind. He was clearly feeling like his old, aggressive self. "Excuse me, they are my scars and not yours to know about."

"Everything about you is mine to know about," Cobra scoffed, like the idea that I had bodily autonomy was laughable.

I wanted to stab him.

“Fine, you want to know, you piece of shit?” I asked.

Cobra’s emerald eyes flickered to snake eyes and back, and he nodded.

“A beta fucker named Dick raised me as his servant in a tavern, and as soon as I turned ten years old, he started beating the fuck out of me with his belt whenever he could. He said I talked too loudly, and he needed to ‘beat the sass out of me.’ Happy?”

“No, Kitten, I’m not happy,” Cobra said softly as Jax’s chest rumbled.

Two alphas stared at me, with glowing gray and emerald eyes.

“We are going to kill him,” Jax said calmly.

Cobra nodded and said, “He hurt my kitten. He will suffer forever.”

I snarled back, “Stop calling me Kitten, and stop killing people on my behalf. It’s annoying as shit. As I showed in the shifter realm, I can kill people myself if I want to!”

“But you are my kitten.” Cobra said softly, like I was being dumb.

I saw red.

The shadow snake zinged with comfort, but it did little to calm me.

“Did you say you were from the shifter realm?” the prisoner chained to the wall beside me asked in a shocked tone. “And that you are alphas?”

I turned away from Cobra because the man was infuriating beyond belief. I welcomed the distraction and said, “Yeah, why?”

The emaciated man stared at us with a stunned expression. “How did you escape?” Just like Cobra, a crystal collar was around his neck.

“What are you talking about?” Jax asked.

My skin buzzed with foreboding.

I never would have predicted what he said next.

He raised his eyebrows. “The shifter realm is where the beast realm sent all its prisoners centuries ago. Rumor has it they’ve abandoned the pack system and have stopped birthing ABOs. Their population is growing weak, so they’ve started kidnapping alphas.”

We all gaped at him.

After a long, awkward pause, he scoffed at our disbelieving faces and explained himself. “I’m Legolas and a treasurer for the High Court that oversees the realms. I’m stuck in this fucking dungeon because I discovered the queen was being paid by the shifter realm to kidnap alpha babies from the beast realm. She controls the portals to both realms.”

My brain exploded.

The shifter realm was a cold, brutal place; it wasn’t hard to imagine the

wasteland as a punishment for criminals.

Also, parental abandonment versus kidnapping felt way different. Lucky for me, both came with massive amounts of emotional trauma.

The worst part was Legolas's words made sense.

Lucinda and I had been told we were orphans, but I'd always thought it was weird that no shifter knew who our parents were.

The realm had a small population, births weren't that common, and towns were spread out.

Holy sun god's tits. I asked warily, "The relict realm?"

Legolas jumped. "Yes, that was what the realm was called before the beast realm banished their prisoners there. So, *you do know* about it?"

"No, I just saw that label in a book of maps," I said slowly as I examined Legolas. He didn't have fae ears like everyone else in the prison, and even though he was emaciated, he was still taller and wider than everyone else.

It was hard to tell because he was so malnourished, but his sunken features appeared to be sharper and his eyes darker than any alpha's or fae's I'd ever seen.

It wasn't hard to believe he was from a different place.

Jax grumbled, "That doesn't make sense. The shifter realm is at war with the fae queen."

Legolas shook his head. "The shifter leaders are dumb bastards. They think they're paying a fae crime lord. Not the queen herself."

Wow.

I'd never been the best student when it came to history, and this entire situation screamed "complex."

A metaphorical candle lit in my brain.

The fae queen had called me a beast earlier. The map had shown a beast realm next to the fae realm. John had said he was saving me when he'd dragged me toward the portal.

Jax's chest rumbled. "Why would you tell us this?"

Legolas's sunken eyes stared sadly at Jax. "Because you're the first prisoner I've ever seen take down a guard. If you somehow escape this realm, alert a council representative that Legolas from the High Court, position 4444, is imprisoned by the fae queen."

We said nothing.

None of us were going to make a promise we couldn't keep.

Still, I said his name and the number in my brain repeatedly, on the off

chance we were actually the saviors he thought we were.

I summed up the situation, “So our entire lives have been a lie, and we’re completely fucked.”

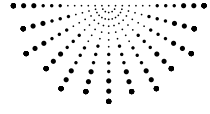
Jax scooted over until his large body leaned against mine, and I melted into his warmth.

Cobra stared at both of us with snake eyes.

My intuition told me I was one second away from the biggest mental breakdown of my entire life.

It hadn’t been wrong yet.

ASCHER



DECEPTIONS

I WALKED into the queen's receiving hall. My steps were light, my face a stony mask of indifference.

Xerxes walked beside me. He was slightly taller than me, almost as tall as Jax, but built leaner like Cobra.

The scent of cinnamon wafted off him, but it wasn't subtle and sweet like the first time I'd met him.

It was a powerful punch of cloves that choked my throat and raised my hackles.

He looked calm, but looks could be deceiving.

His purple eyes were clear, breath even, and long blond hair curled down his back in soft waves. The hair should have made him look feminine.

It didn't.

His broad shoulders, harsh features, and lean muscles were entirely masculine.

Together, our steps made no sounds as we walked.

We were both spies, trained soldiers who completed missions on behalf of our leaders.

The only difference—I worked for my father and the syndicate, and Xerxes worked for the fae queen.

My body was tight, back straight, eyes hooded, as I took measured steps toward the dais where the queen sat.

She lounged on her golden skull throne and talked to an adviser.

We both said nothing, just stood and waited.

Around us, the golden hall sparkled with opulence and riches. Massive bay windows, arched ceilings, and golden gables came together in a

brehtaking architectural feat.

Its perfection angered me.

I wanted to punch out the perfect fucking windows and scream with rage, take a shard and slit the queen's head off her shoulders.

I would have tried if I hadn't known the extent of her abilities. She'd have me up in flames before I sneezed in her direction.

I'd carefully crafted my spy persona for too long to throw it all away.

Outside, I was as calm and indifferent as a block of granite. Inside, my soul burned alive with flames.

I'd been sitting in a bedroom when the painting on the wall had transformed into a television.

At first, I had been confused why Cobra's naked body was on display. The queen had promised she would send the alphas back to the beast realm.

My confusion had turned to blinding rage when Sadie had joined Cobra.

I'd swallowed the urge to kill for so many reasons: the guard had dared touch her naked flesh, she'd been broadcast to the entire realm, and her perfect little body was covered in horrible scars.

Scars she'd kept hidden from me.

Part of me wanted to fall to my knees and beg her for forgiveness. I wanted to puke thinking about every fucking time I'd taunted her for being a prude.

However, I also wanted to wrap my hands around Sadie's neck and scold her for keeping such an awful secret. I wanted to punish my princess until she never kept a secret again.

Instead of bashing my head through a window like I wanted to, I pushed all my rage back into the burning flame of my soul.

Xerxes stood silently beside me.

I didn't know why, but he hadn't removed the heel that the princess had stabbed into his bicep. His skin had healed around the pike, yet it stuck out from his muscle.

I breathed slowly and tried not to think about Sadie. With massive effort, I calmed the fire burning my soul.

My muscles relaxed.

I was in full control of myself and my environment.

The fae queen whispered furiously to her adviser, who jotted down notes on a golden scroll.

We didn't interrupt.

The queen's throne was a warning. It was a towering seat constructed entirely of skulls coated in gold foil and decorated with priceless jewels.

It towered hundreds of feet into the air behind the queen and was called the seat of death.

Every person who had ever sat on it was a power-hungry, bloodthirsty, monstrous fae that had proven themselves stronger and more ruthless than the last leader.

Fae were immortal and notoriously difficult to kill.

As a result, in the realm, there was no inheritance of power. Leaders were born through violence. Whoever could rip the heart out of the monarch and eat it became the next ruler of the realm.

For the last five centuries, the fae queen had sat on the seat of death.

Before her reign, no one could remember a time when the monarch wasn't a full-blooded fire fae. And all the leaders with fire abilities had specialized in one area—torture.

There were four elite-fae abilities, and everyone's power manifested differently.

Of course, there were some trends: fire was usually associated with pain, water with ice weapons, earth with the creation of boulders, and air with the ability to fly.

But besides these generic trends, plenty of fae had unique abilities.

Some water fae could only create ice swords, while others made spears; some air fae could fly fast, while others could spin in circles and create cyclones; some fire fae made flames that hurt like daggers, while others could read the future; some earth fae could create massive boulders and throw them, while others could grow dangerous vines.

Besides the four categories of elite abilities, fae powers were not an exact science.

Nevertheless, the fae monarch remained a fire fae.

No earth, air, or water fae had ever been strong enough to breach a fire fae's defenses. Now the queen's power was unmatched, her reign unthreatened.

I knew this because the syndicate smuggled weapons between the two realms, and the queen was the largest buyer.

As syndicate leader, my father was involved with the fae queen and privy to top secret information about more than just the shifter realm. As my father's heir, so was I.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been taught the intricacies of the fae world and the court and tested on the knowledge like my life depended on it.

Since I was heir to the syndicate, the fae queen was my future business partner.

I didn't know how my father had gained a connection with the queen, and frankly, I didn't want to know. You didn't question my father's choices; you bowed your head and obeyed.

Even though I didn't care for my father, I'd never despised him or worried about his business proclivities.

Now I did.

My mission had been to return kidnapped alphas to the beast realm.

When I'd first learned about the smuggling of alpha children, I'd hoped I was also kidnapped. That I had a caring family waiting for me in a faraway realm.

My father had assured me he'd fucked an omega, and I was his seed. I was just another weapon in his arsenal.

When he'd told me about the mission, my father had explained that the shifter oligarchy thought they were paying a fae crime lord to kidnap the children. They didn't know they paid the queen herself.

But that was just one side of the story because the queen was a two-timing fucking bitch.

That was where my mission came in.

The beast realm didn't know who was kidnapping their children, and recently the queen had agreed to help them get their alphas back.

They'd paid her an exorbitant amount to bring back their lost alphas. At first, she'd sent spider fae through the portal to retrieve them.

Once the beast realm had started paying her more money to return the alphas than the shifter realm had paid to kidnap them, she'd switched sides.

My father said she was a businesswoman.

I preferred royal cunt.

Her problem—the spider fae were only able to kidnap the weakest alphas. The strongest remained.

Desperate to earn the exorbitant reward for their return, the queen paid the syndicate to help her capture the last alphas.

That was where I came in. Of course, my father got a generous cut for every alpha brought back.

And I'd agreed because I didn't have a choice, and the alphas were being

returned to their families.

That was the mission.

At least, it was what I had been fucking told.

I'd completed the mission, and Sadie, Jax, and Cobra should have been immediately brought back to the beast realm and reunited with their families.

Rage burned in my gut.

They weren't supposed to be paraded naked in front of the entire realm.

My stomach hurt with shame, and I swallowed down the urge to scream as I remembered how betrayed the princess had looked when she'd realized I was working for the queen.

She hadn't expected it. No one ever did.

Since I was five years old, my father had raised me to be the perfect spy. The key was to craft new personas.

That was what I had done the last year with the alphas. I was an angry person, but I wasn't an annoying hothead. That was my fake persona.

In reality, my anger didn't manifest in annoying outbursts.

It manifested in the need to control my body, control my posture, control my facial expressions, and control my environment.

My body was a weapon.

Every tattoo that covered my flesh was a testament to my ability to kill.

Every time I'd sparred with Jax or Cobra, I'd held back from using my true abilities. It had been infuriating, but necessary.

When Sadie had arrived, the mission had almost fallen apart because I didn't want to yell and scream at her like my hotheaded persona would.

No, I wanted to wrap my fingers around her delicate throat and order her to kneel beneath me.

Everything about the delicate, feisty alpha triggered my beast. She triggered my urge to control and brought it to new heights.

Every time I was around my princess, my horns lengthened and the scent of sweet cranberries burned my nose.

I wanted to bathe in cranberries. I needed to pin her beneath me and feast upon her. I dreamed about her pretty neck bowing low in submission. I wanted to own her soul.

In the syndicate, they called me the devil for a reason.

I'd been the devil before the large onyx horns had sprouted from my skull, before I'd first shifted into the monstrous ram.

The reason for my nickname—I killed mercilessly with precision and

control.

The problem was my calm facade shattered around the princess. My usual exactness disappeared, my muscles spasmed, and my soul burned bright with passion.

I had no way of controlling myself around her, so the solution was simple—I needed to control her.

With a deep breath, I swallowed the urge to scream at the injustice of what the queen had done to the princess. She'd displayed her naked form for the entire realm to see. Bile burned my throat, but I didn't act on my impulses.

Instead, I held myself completely still and waited.

After a long time, the fae queen shooed her adviser away. The queen jumped when she realized we were standing in front of her.

We held ourselves so still she didn't notice our presence.

She fluttered her eyelashes dramatically and leaned forward to show off her ample cleavage. "Ascher, Xerxes, what can I do for the two of you?"

It wasn't a secret that the queen wanted to fuck us. She acted flirtatiously every chance she could. I hadn't touched her, and as far as I could tell, neither had Xerxes.

She did nothing for me.

Most women wanted to fuck me. Women were sluts, and every experience I'd had with them had reinforced my beliefs. At least, most of my experiences had.

I couldn't help but compare the queen to a certain white-haired alpha with ruby eyes.

I spoke softly with no inflection in my voice, "You told me you wouldn't hurt the alphas."

"They are fine. Don't worry about it." The fae queen waved her hand dismissively.

I responded coolly, "The mission was to return them to the beast realm."

She licked her lips. "You're such a perfect soldier. I'm quite intrigued how your father created you to be so...dedicated to your job."

I said nothing as I stared at her. My face gave nothing away.

After a long pause, the queen rolled her eyes. "Relax, Ascher, your cut has already been paid. You're now the richest man in the shifter realm."

Still, I said nothing.

She huffed dramatically. "Fine, if you must know, they *will* be returned to

the beast realm, but first, they are going to compete in the Fae Games. I might as well make a little more money off them while they're here. The beast realm will never know, and then they will be sent back. Your mission is completed. You're free to go."

The flames in my soul exploded into a bonfire as my subconscious screamed for violence, for bloodshed.

The Fae Games were violent and dangerous. Usually, women weren't allowed to compete. There was no fucking way my princess would survive.

I swallowed down the urge to vomit.

My face didn't twitch an inch.

"Most competitors die in the Fae Games," I said slowly.

The queen shrugged. "Well, that's not my problem, is it? If they want to survive, they will."

"My mission was to return them to the beast realm."

A long moment passed.

A sneer contorted her face. She was done playing coy. The heinous power she possessed and the murders she'd committed to claim the seat of death were reflected in her dark eyes. "Go home to your father, Ascher. Take your riches and leave."

"I must complete the mission." My tone was bored, body language impassive, face devoid of expression.

The only thing the queen could see me as was the perfect soldier.

That was the persona I wore for the queen, and if I was anything else, she would destroy me.

"Oh my sun god, slit my throat." She banged her head back against the gold skulls of her throne. "You won't leave, will you?"

I said nothing.

She sneered, "If it weren't for how extremely advantageous my relationship with your father is, I would murder you right now."

I believed her. Alphas were immortal, but we could still be killed if all the blood was drained from our bodies and then we were decapitated before we could shift into our beast forms.

It was extremely hard to actually drain all our blood, but she'd banned alphas from shifting in the fae realm. Plus, the easiest way to drain our blood was to use a monstrous fae vampyre. Rumor had it the queen had an extremely powerful one under her heel.

Still, I said nothing. Just stared at her, an emotionless soldier who

couldn't abandon his orders.

She waved at me dismissively. "Fine, you'll be the guard for those useless alphas. You can help them fight and stay alive so you can complete your mission."

I nodded. She was sending me to my death, thinking she would just get rid of me, but it was the perfect solution.

I would fight and protect them, then I would return all the alphas to the beast realm. Afterward, I would make the princess mine.

The queen turned toward the blond omega beside me. "Xerxes, what can I do for you?"

It still shocked me that the queen had an omega working for her. They were extinct in the shifter realm, and the oligarchy would do anything to have one. Without an omega, you couldn't birth alphas.

From what I knew of the beast realm, they were extremely coveted there too.

Xerxes was rare and highly sought after. He'd told me he was from the beast realm and had voluntarily enrolled in the fae queen's army.

I couldn't imagine why.

"I wish to oversee the alphas. I don't trust them," Xerxes said, his lyrical accent smooth as butter.

When he said "alphas," his cinnamon omega scent spiked spicy and less sweet.

His face was impassive, but like me, he wasn't what he seemed.

"Yes, that would probably be good." The queen nodded as she got distracted reading a scroll that another servant handed her. "Ascher will fight with them to make sure they live, and Xerxes, you will guard them to make sure they don't cause trouble."

She waved her hand. We were dismissed.

Without another word, we both turned in unison and walked out of the atrium.

When we were in the hall, I turned toward Xerxes.

"Why the fuck did you request that?" I asked him.

The image of the princess's naked body on the screen flashed before my eyes, and I fought the urge to roar in his face. Xerxes had seen her nude body, and I didn't trust him.

He was a male omega, and she was a female alpha. Both rare, and biologically compatible. The fire in my gut burned brighter.

Xerxes's violet eyes flashed with disgust. "Because I don't trust any of them, including you. I know all about alphas, and I understand how you bastards work."

I took a deep breath and stalked down the hall, away from him. He understood nothing.

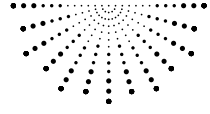
He had no clue the depth of my, Jax's, or Cobra's depravity.

We weren't alphas from the civilized beast realm; we were alphas from the cold, desolate shifter realm.

He had no idea what he was up against.

But then again, neither did I.

SADIE



CHARIOTS & BETRAYERS

I WAS awoken from my depression nap by guards yelling at us to move. Unfortunately, it hadn't been a rejuvenating experience, because I'd dreamed of blood.

In my nightmare, Dick had beaten me until blood had splashed in my eyes. At first, it had burned, but then the warm, sticky substance had been almost...comforting.

I was officially losing my mind.

Instead of dwelling on my creepy dreams, I let the guard escort me out of the prison without a fuss.

Jax and Cobra growled and scowled, but they didn't lunge at the guards, who pointed glowing batons in our direction.

With a sad, sleepy wave to Legolas, we were escorted out of the dungeon without explanation.

Since people were no longer throwing their feces at the dead guard, things were definitely looking up.

Also, unlike last time, the guards didn't shove me forward as they led us down the palace halls. They walked a respectful distance behind, with their flaming batons held out in front of their bodies as a warning.

Our hands were cuffed, and they held our long chains, but they didn't shove us around.

I understood their hesitancy.

Jax was a mammoth of a man, and he towered over all the guards in height and width.

Meanwhile, Cobra's body was mottled with bruises and covered in blood splatter. The crystal collar around his neck made him look like a chained

animal, and he bared his teeth every time a guard looked at him.

Plus, let's not forget the fact that Jax had popped a guard's head like a grape and Cobra had beaten a guard to death in the bedroom.

At this point, I was the only alpha who hadn't killed someone in a fit of rage.

Who would have thought *I* would be the most mentally stable?

Not a role I'd ever seen for myself.

As I walked beside them, my long dress dragged across the ground. Apparently, being five and a half feet tall made me unnaturally short in both the shifter and fae realms.

Besides Jax and Cobra with their impressive physiques and general energy of unwellness, I looked like a nonthreatening child playing dress-up.

As we walked down the massive halls painted with elaborate murals and covered in gold foil, I tried to get my bearings.

The problem was, I was overwhelmed by everything we'd learned about the realm, and I was too hungry to think critically.

My big takeaway—the queen was a cunt, and I'd been kidnapped.

I probably should have been over the moon that I might have a loving family waiting for me in another realm, but all I felt was sadness. Lucinda was my family, and she was an entire realm away.

The only blessing was she was at school until she turned eighteen and had no idea the bullshit that I was going through.

I tried to visualize a plan.

All I had to do was survive the queen, escape from the fae realm, navigate through the freezing shifter realm, go to Dick's tavern, kill Dick if he was still alive...and be waiting for Lucinda when she returned.

Thank goodness she wouldn't return for two more years. Something told me I was going to need all the time I could get.

My stomach hurt, and my eyes burned with tears of frustration. Could life be easy, just once? It didn't feel like I was asking for too much.

Instead of sobbing like a little bitch, I breathed in deeply through my nose and focused on the positives.

We were no longer in the rancid prison, and I wasn't naked.

It could be worse—I could literally be on fire.

A guard pointed his glowing baton at a golden archway and yelled, "Walk out those doors!"

I stepped through the golden stained-glass door and almost passed out.

Good news—the fae realm wasn't forty degrees below zero and a cold hellscape like the shifter realm.

Rays of sun tickled my cheeks, and my golden skin danced as warmth bathed my body. Hot, warm, toasty, cuddly, bright, brilliant, fantastic sunshine slapped my face with a juicy kiss.

Holy tits.

Two massive suns hung bright and bloated in the sky. One was a bright yellow, and the other was a bright green.

I'd never felt such delicious warmth before. It was like soaking in a hot bath. From the impressive heat radiating all around me, I could tell that even on their own, each sun was way warmer than the red sun in the shifter realm.

"Wow, the shifter realm sucks," I said as the warmth wrapped me in the toastiest hug. Before this very moment, I'd never stepped outside a building without my skin prickling in pain as icy wind blasted my face.

I didn't know the air could be so comfortable.

Shit, if the entire realm was like this, I wanted to live outside. Who needed buildings?

"It's too hot," Cobra grumbled like he wanted to be back in the cold of the shifter realm.

Since he was covered in bruises, and just generally an asshole, I ignored him. He'd taken too many blows to the head, and it showed.

Jax smiled down at me and then tilted his massive head to the warm, bright-blue sky. His gold piercings glinted and the chains in his long braids twinkled in the breeze. "I'm glad you like it, little alpha."

I smiled up at him and admired how his dark skin shone underneath the bright suns.

Sure, my life sucked, but everything felt less awful because Jax was by my side. His big presence and calm energy were relaxing.

For a moment, it was just the two of us smiling in the sun.

"Oh my sun god, it's just a little sunshine. Stop acting so dramatic," Cobra sneered as he stomped past us.

Moment over.

I fought the urge to punch Cobra in the dick. Even though he was bruised and bloody, the hundreds of jewels embedded in his skin refracted the sunshine in a beautiful halo.

Just like Jax, Cobra was breathtaking to look at. However, unlike Jax, he did not give off calm energy.

“Walk to the chariot,” a guard ordered behind us.

Startled, I looked away from the aqua sky and its dual suns and took in the rest of the fae realm.

My mouth dropped. It was glorious.

We stood on a white brick path that cut through an expansive lawn of bright-green grass.

At the end of the grass, there was a golden road with hundreds of chariots rolling by.

On the other side, a forest of green and pink expanded as far as the eye could see.

There wasn't a mountain in sight. I never knew that land could be so... flat.

Sprinkled throughout the lush foliage of the forest, big pink flowers swayed in a warm breeze. Their petals were longer than my body and looked huge, even from far away.

The forest didn't contain any tall pine trees like the shifter realm. Instead of conifers, vines and ferns jutted from the earth in every direction.

Everything seemed to sparkle in the bright sunshine.

I hated to say it, but the fae queen was a *beast* at landscaping.

The palace lawn was so gorgeously manicured that I almost forgot she was an evil hag I wanted to brutally murder.

Our chains clacked together as we walked down the white brick path.

I squinted and pretended I was a spoiled princess enjoying her riches. Little ponds with waterfalls and fish lined both sides of the path, and at its end, a golden chariot waited for us with an open door.

It was just like the other chariots that passed along the busy road beside it. I'd read about the chariots in fae books, but they were even more breathtaking in person.

Massive white stallions, three times the size of horses in the shifter realm and less furry, were attached to the golden carriage.

The horses' coats were white as snow, and their manes were long and glossy, with rainbow streaks.

A part of me recognized that I was bound and chained, being carted away to sun god knew where at the orders of a psychotic, evil, immortal queen.

However, the other part of my brain just said, *sparkly*, and little bubbles of excitement traveled up my throat.

“What are those?” I asked Jax as I pointed to the funky-looking plants

that lined our path. They had long stalks, and their leaves cast shade across the bricks. The gurgling ponds meandered around them.

They towered so high in the sky that I tilted my head back to see their leaves.

Jax shrugged his massive shoulders. "I have no idea."

Cobra sneered, "Oh my sun god, they are palm trees, not that exciting."

We both stared up at the *palm* trees and pretended Cobra wasn't being a grouchy ass. Jax just rolled his eyes and smiled at the snake shifter; he was used to his frosty attitude.

Instead of snarking back at Cobra, I focused on the epic landscaping.

If the shifter realm was cold and gray, then the fae realm was warm and bright. The sheer number of colors that surrounded me was overwhelming. It was an explosion across my senses.

I saw a piece of the fae castle in my peripheral vision.

Holy mother of the moon goddess.

I almost broke my neck whipping my head around.

Once again, my mouth dropped. I ignored the angry-looking fae guards holding batons of pain and focused on the *castle*.

The palace towered over the landscape. Massive colonnades, round turrets, arches, and thick green vines decorated its gleaming gold facade. The palatial structure sprawled so far across the horizon that I couldn't see where it began and ended.

But the most shocking feature was its roof.

Massive gold cups that resembled chalices were covered with vines and pink flowers and jutted off the roof of the structure.

Sunshine streamed into the chalices and formed glowing balls of blue light. As rays hit the golden edges of the cups, steam swirled across their rims and formed glowing balls that hovered in the air above the cauldrons.

The glowing balls of turquoise were like nothing I'd ever seen before, and there were at least a dozen floating atop the structure.

It was breathtaking.

"Into the carriage," a guard ordered, and I unbroke my neck to face forward because our chariot awaited. Literally.

I grinned like a loon. It was getting harder to remember I was being held captive.

I stared at Cobra's misshapen, swollen face to remind myself the fae realm sucked. He rolled his emerald eyes at me, and my gut sparked with

annoyance.

His wounds were already healing, and technically, he wouldn't have been beaten up if he had just had sex with me.

It was hard to pity him.

"Get into the carriage!" a guard shouted near my ear, and I jumped with surprise.

My hands were still chained in front of my body, and I squinted at our transportation.

The good thing was I didn't have to mount a horse, something I was not very skilled at.

The bad thing was the edge of the chariot was level with my chest, and it didn't come with a convenient step stool for shorter folks. A massive design oversight.

As if sensing my plight, one of the guards put his hands on my waist and began to lift me.

I jolted because no one likes to be touched by a strange man. I resigned myself to the help.

Cobra and Jax did *not* resign themselves.

The guard's hands touched me for point five seconds.

Then, in a blur quicker than I could track, Jax slammed the guard to the ground with his cuffed fists and Cobra stomped on his face.

The fae screamed in pain, and all the guards backed up.

"I told you to stop attacking people!" I alpha-barked at my men with annoyance.

Instead of respecting my prowess, female fortitude, and ability to make decisions for myself, Cobra and Jax grinned at each other and fist-bumped with their chained hands.

Yes, they were bonding over *stomping* on a man's face. I couldn't find some normal fucking dudes to spend my time with?

I got psycho alphas.

"He was just helping me inside," I grumbled and mouthed "sorry" to the downed fae, who was still writhing on the ground.

"He touched you against your will," Cobra spoke softly, and his emerald eyes flickered to snake ones.

Jax knelt and cupped his large, bound hands in front of his body like a step. "We will help you up, little alpha."

They both moved closer to me, and the scent of frosty chestnuts made my

mouth water. My skin prickled at their proximity; they were both so large and *delicious*-smelling.

The guard moaned on the ground, and sanity returned.

I shouldered past and ignored them both. "I can do it myself."

Like a strong, independent woman, I jumped over the edge of the chariot and entered with no help.

Just kidding.

I struggled for at least five minutes, trying to shimmy myself in with my hands shackled in front of me.

Who'd made these damn things so inaccessible?

It was just rude.

I jumped but only got a good two inches off the ground.

My saber-toothed form was made for jumping. This form was made for enjoying brisk walks and lounging while reading a book.

When it was clear jumping would not work, I tried to use my bound arms to pull myself up over the edge.

I blamed my lack of nutrition growing up for what happened next.

Long minutes passed as I strained with all my will and failed to get into the carriage. I pulled at least three muscles, trying to get my body up and over the damned edge.

I'd just barely pulled half of one of my small boobs over the edge when sweat began to pour from my forehead like a fountain.

Suddenly, Cobra swore viciously.

Before I could yell that I was doing fine by myself, a lie but a hill I was *going* to die on, Cobra grabbed my kicking feet and shoved me forward.

In an ungraceful heap, I fell into the carriage.

For a second, I lay gasping on the gold floor and felt sorry for myself.

Not only had I *not* conquered the task, but I'd also lost every shred of dignity I'd had left.

Spoiler—there hadn't been much to lose.

With a heavy sigh, I scrambled up and onto one of the benches. Before I could lie back and enjoy a much-needed exhaustion nap, the carriage tilted and shook.

Both Jax and Cobra easily cleared the lip.

They jumped like they were built for vertically flying five feet in the air with their hands bound in chains in front of them.

I was slightly mollified when Cobra slammed his head into the low

ceiling because he'd jumped too high.

Cobra smirked at me. "Impressive display of strength. You really showed us."

I smirked back. "How's your head feeling?"

Jax raised his eyebrows at us but shook his head and said nothing, because, unlike Cobra, he wasn't a complete ass.

The guards stood outside the door, holding our three chains in their hands, but didn't move or close the door behind us.

I shifted to try to get more room on the bench while we waited. The inside of the carriage was quite small.

Cobra sat next to me on the bench, and he spread his legs wide so his large body took up most of the space.

I tried to spread my legs to get some space of my own, but his legs were like tree trunks and didn't move, no matter how hard I pushed.

Jax sat across from us, and his wide shoulders and muscles managed to take up an entire bench. If a guard joined us, which I assumed they would, because of the chains, it was going to be a tight squeeze.

We waited.

After a while of me fighting for more space on the seat with Cobra and Jax resting his eyes, the carriage rocked.

The newcomer turned to the side to fit his wide shoulders through the door and then stared down at all three of us.

Familiar golden hair and large, curling onyx horns sat atop his head, and colorful flame-and-rose tattoos covered every inch of his exposed skin.

His amber eyes were familiar, but there was a hard edge to them, a calculated gleam that hadn't been there before.

The intoxicating scent of conifer and pines wafted through the small carriage, and my stomach clenched. Frosty chestnuts and pine went together *too* well.

It was unfair.

"Hello, Princess," Ascher said in his deep, husky voice.

The shock at seeing Ascher after his betrayal quickly wore off. Before I could tell him to suck his own dick and not to call me Princess, Cobra launched himself off the bench and slammed him to the ground.

Then Jax threw himself into the fray.

There was a loud crash as limbs slammed against the walls of the carriage. I backed up against the wall as fists punched with power and blood

splattered.

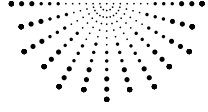
Ah yes, the alphas were engaging in *more* violence—shocking.

The entire carriage tipped precariously to the side, and the horses whinnied. Loud grunts, growls, and roars shook through the small space as the men beat on each other.

I sighed heavily and wondered for the billionth time what god I'd pissed off in my former life.

Also, one thing was clear: I needed to stop hanging out with psycho alpha men.

SADIE



RUDE OMEGAS

TRUE DISCOMFORT WAS SITTING in a hot carriage with your body pressed against the wall. Cobra's frosty scent overwhelmed me as his large muscles pressed against me.

For some reason, the guards had shut the carriage door, but we hadn't moved an inch.

This must be some new cruel and unusual punishment—lock us in a confined, hot space until we died from heat exhaustion.

If that was their plan, it was working.

Ascher stood in the middle of the two seats and stared down at me, which was creepy, and I was trying to pretend it wasn't happening.

My small body was half pressed against Cobra and half pressed against the sidewall of the chariot. Jax still had an entire bench to himself because he was too big to share.

Ascher had tried to stand near me, and Cobra had gone crazy. According to the snake alpha, Ascher couldn't touch me because, and I quote, "Sadie isn't your property. She's mine."

To which Ascher had replied, "For now."

Yes, you heard that right.

The tattooed betrayer had agreed I was Cobra's property. You would think after his betrayal, he would be kissing my ass to make it up to me.

They were both completely delusional. There was no other explanation for their ridiculous behavior.

Hours later, in our never-ending wait for the chariot to *move*, I was still fuming. The only good thing was the alphas were no longer throwing their fists around like children.

The biggest surprise from the beat down à la chariot was the fact that Ascher hadn't been completely decimated.

Unlike in training, Ascher wasn't slow compared to Cobra or weak compared to Jax.

The entire time we'd trained at the fortress, he must have been holding back.

In the rocking vehicle, Ascher had traded punishing blows with Jax. Cobra had moved quickly, but Ascher had dodged and spun like he, too, was built for speed.

At one point, Ascher had rammed his horns into Cobra's side and pinned the large man against the ceiling while he boxed with Jax.

I was definitely pissed at Ascher, but it had been very satisfying to watch Cobra get slammed against the roof. The frosty bastard was getting out of hand. Plus, I was still a little salty about him knocking me out instead of taking my virginity.

After what had felt like forever of the three men fighting in too small a space, a stray limb had knocked me in the arm. It hadn't been a hard hit, but I'd made a sound of surprise.

Each alpha had gone completely still, all their attention focused on me. They'd looked at me with expressions of concern, like I was a little doll that was going to break because a foot had glanced off my arm.

I was starting to think the men didn't know me at all.

After assuring Jax twenty times that I was fine, ignoring Ascher's attempts to inspect the bruise and Cobra's random comments about ownership, they'd settled down.

Sort of.

Now I was pinned against the wall, and Cobra's hot body was making me sweat. It was weird, but for the first time in my life, I understood how heat could be uncomfortable.

I also understood that Cobra had a leg spreading issue and needed to learn how to take up less space.

There were too many large bodies in the hot carriage, and it didn't help that you could cut the tension with a knife.

Unlike how he'd acted back in the shifter realm, Ascher didn't swear, rant, or rave with annoyance.

He stood completely still with his back erect and his face a hard block of marble.

Before, his tattoos had added to his hotheaded mystique. He'd been the bad-boy womanizer type.

Now his colorful tattoos and harsh demeanor changed him completely. He was the scary "I'll silently kill a motherfucker" type.

I didn't miss the old Ascher, because he'd been annoying, but I wasn't thrilled about this new version.

He was dangerous. It was apparent from the way he'd fought off Jax and Cobra while remaining completely calm.

"Sadie, do you want to sit on my lap? You'll have more room," Jax said as he tried to scoot his massive frame backward.

My stomach pinched at the thought of sitting on Jax's lap, and I had to cough a few times to clear my suddenly dry throat. "Thanks, but nah, I'm good making love to this wall." I shifted a little, so my small tits weren't completely smushed.

It hurt.

All three alphas growled, and my skin broke out in goose bumps. My instincts screamed at me to slit their throats and make a run for the massive pink-flower forest.

Mostly because I wanted to frolic among them and pretend like my life wasn't falling apart.

The tension ratcheted up, sweat dripped down my face, and my arm began to fall asleep. Suddenly, it became harder and harder to breathe.

I gasped erratically.

Of course, my body decided *this* was the moment to develop claustrophobia, because I didn't have enough problems to deal with.

"Shift over. You're scaring her," Ascher alpha-barked, and Cobra immediately pressed his large body away from me.

I relaxed a little as the crushing weight in my chest loosened.

Then the tension in the chariot tripled. Everyone realized what had just happened. Cobra had instinctually obeyed Ascher's alpha bark.

The hierarchy of alpha dominance was usually Jax, then Cobra, then Ascher.

I didn't include myself in the hierarchy because as a woman, my power was different, and I liked to believe I had unique leadership qualities.

In my mind, I was more persuasive than Jax. For some reason, my alpha bark failed to reflect my *true* level of dominance.

We all coped in different ways.

But now it appeared Ascher was more dominant than Cobra.

The snake alpha slowly turned toward Ascher, and rage flowed between them like a live flame.

I rubbed at my forehead and said, “Hey, ultimate betrayer number one and annoying fucker number two, why don’t we cool it for a second, or I’m going to suffer a panic attack and cry like a baby and maybe pee myself from sheer terror.”

The men turned away from each other.

Cobra gave me a “you’re full of shit” face, and a tiny furrow wrinkled between Ascher’s brow.

Their momentary beef was forgotten as they focused on me.

Yeah, I know, I had mad leadership skills. We all had to be good at something.

“When is this damn carriage going to start?” Jax asked as he wiped sweat off his forehead.

A horrifying thought dawned on me. “Oh my sun god, what if they just brought us here to blow us up? Odds the fae queen has a bomb rigged to this thing.”

“You can’t kill an alpha with a bomb. We’re immortal.” Cobra rolled his eyes like I was a dumbass, and I fantasized about poking out both of his eyeballs.

Everyone said alphas were immortal, but technically we could still die from blood loss and decapitation, but I was confused about the specifics.

It did *not* seem obvious to me that a bomb wouldn’t kill us all.

Before I could launch into an argument with Cobra about how we were all going to die via explosion, the chariot door slammed open, and a fresh breeze cooled the stagnant air by a few degrees.

Another figure jumped into the small space. Ascher stepped backward to give the newcomer room.

“You,” I sputtered intelligently as a handsome face, purple eyes, and long blond hair came into view.

It was Xerxes, my ex...kitten.

His hair was so silky and wavy that it put my straight locks to shame.

I told myself I wasn’t jealous of my betrayer kitten’s hair, but I knew I was full of it.

I tried to focus on my urge to kill him and not my urge to ask him what hair products he used.

He rolled his bright-purple eyes and sneered. “I’ll be your guard during the games. I’m going to ensure none of you escape or pull any bullshit. I know how alphas work, so you won’t deceive me.”

His voice was deep but the words lyrical, and he ran his tongue over them like honey.

I hadn’t noticed before because I’d been so overwhelmed by the fact that my cute, cuddly kitten had betrayed me, but Xerxes had an *amazing* accent.

It sounded like a honeyed version of a British accent from the human realm.

I had heard the British accent in a bootleg movie about a red-haired witch who was smarter and prettier than everyone else. She waved a stick around to get her point across and had two male lovers.

It was really good and one of my favorites.

Too bad Xerxes was a jerk, because his honeyed British accent combined with his warm, sugary, cinnamon scent made me want to open my mouth and lick every inch of his olive skin.

In the small carriage, cinnamon, pine, frost, and chestnuts filled my senses.

I held my breath, puffing out my cheeks, and tried to stop inhaling the intoxicating combo.

All the men said nothing. They just stood and stared at Xerxes with blank expressions.

In contrast, I stared at him like he was a buttered bread roll hot from the fire. But also laced with poison.

“What games?” Jax asked, and I realized Xerxes had said something about guarding us during games.

My stomach twisted, and I prayed to the moon goddess that they were talking about board games or a party activity.

Xerxes said, “The queen has ordered you to compete in the Fae Games, where you will fight as gladiators against the deadliest warriors in the realm.”

His accent was delicious, but his words were horrifying.

Of course.

It couldn’t be a knitting competition just this one time. Not that I could even knit, but I was willing to learn. That was the important part.

I gently banged my head against the wall of the chariot and prayed for a swift, violent death. *Please, moon goddess, just pop my head off and save me from all this suffering.*

A long moment passed, and unfortunately, my head stayed attached to my body.

Whoever was in charge of the universe was a piece of shit.

If the moon goddess was doing this to me, well, then I was over her. She clearly hated me and wanted me to suffer. Not very girl boss of her.

Xerxes whipped his head to the side and stared at me, his purple eyes glowing with anger. “Don’t hit your head.”

“Don’t talk to her,” Cobra and Ascher said at the same time.

I would have hit my head against the wall again, but clearly that was just going to set everyone off.

Instead, I imagined wrapping their intestines around their necks and slowly choking them out while they begged for mercy. The imagery helped calm me.

While I was fantasizing about maiming them, I noticed my stiletto heel was still sticking out of Xerxes’s large bicep.

The skin had healed around it, and I didn’t understand why he hadn’t pulled it out.

Since he was an omega shifter, or *beast*—I was still confused by the whole beast realm thing—he was immortal and had advanced healing like the rest of us. There was no need to keep it in.

“Nice stiletto?” I asked, with confusion.

Xerxes’s purple eyes hardened, and his lyrical accent deepened until it was barely understandable. “It’s a reminder that all alphas are the same.”

I regretted making conversation and scolded myself for not seeing it coming.

Another melodramatic male with deep personal issues that needed extensive therapy. Check.

I scoffed back with fake bravado, “Good. Remember that.”

At least he thought I was a badass like the other alphas and not different because I was small, weak, and couldn’t run to save my life. I would take all the supporters I could get.

Beggars could not be choosers.

Xerxes flashed twin daggers in his hands. They looked wicked sharp, and from the way he spun them in his palms, he knew what to do with them. He said, “I’m leaving your chains in the carriage. Try anything and I’ll stab each one of you. I’ll start with the bitch.”

Three alphas growled back at him.

Jax's chest vibrated, Cobra sneered, and Ascher stared him down with an intensity that scared me.

I chose to take the high road and, instead, made an immature face back at him.

With those comforting words, Xerxes threw our chains into the chariot and slammed the door.

The silence in the carriage was deafening.

"Finally, someone recognizes I'm a badass bitch," I said with relief as we *finally* began to travel forward.

"He said 'bitch,' not 'badass.'" Cobra rolled his eyes.

I fought the urge to stick my tongue out at him. "Please, we all know what he meant."

Then, with the first clop of the horses, my body rattled against the wall. So much for taking a nap.

My skull vibrated as we were tossed back and forth.

The chariot was clearly not built to hold four massive shifters that averaged over six and a half feet tall and one small, but still just as impressive, alpha.

"So who's excited for the Fae Games?" I asked sarcastically.

My joke fell flat.

No one said anything.

Then I realized something. "Ascher, why are you even here? Shouldn't you be betraying us to the queen?"

I looked over at him to find that he was *still* staring at me like a maniac. It was unsettling to have the full weight of his gaze on me.

"Because, Princess, I asked the queen if I could join you."

"Don't call me Princess. And why would you do that? I thought you followed her orders?"

Ascher ran his hands over his onyx horns and growled. "Princess, I was lied to. The mission was to return you to the beast realm. If I knew you were in real danger, I never would have handed you over to her."

I didn't miss the way he intentionally emphasized "Princess" or the way he only said he wouldn't sell me out, not Cobra or Jax. He was such a piece of shit.

My chest rumbled with a low growl. "Well, maybe you should think a little harder next time before you listen to the lies from the *evil* fae queen. Are you dumb or just stupid?"

Ascher's amber eyes were unreadable, and no emotion showed on his chiseled face. "I made a miscalculation, Princess. I'm here to atone for it."

If he called me Princess one more time, I was going to stab him with the pointy edge of his horn until he lost his cool. I wanted to poke him until he showed his true colors.

Then again, I thought about his smirk as he walked away with the fae queen; he'd already shown them.

My voice dripped with disgust. "You can't atone for anything. You've made your choices. Because of you, my naked body was on display and I was almost forced to fuck Cobra in front of the entire fae realm."

The unspoken truth of what we had been through, and my awful scars, hung heavy in the air.

Jax growled at my statement, and Cobra's eyes flickered to snake eyes.

Finally, emotion flashed across Ascher's face, and he fell to his knees in front of me. "I had no idea. I would never have allowed her to put you in that position if I had known."

"You already did." I turned to the wall.

I ignored his pleading expression and the pathetic sight of the big man on his knees. Tightness welled in my chest, and my eyes burned with pressure.

Sure, I was an alpha that shifted into a massive saber-toothed tiger, and yes, I had a homicidal voice inside my head. But I was still a woman who wanted to be loved and respected.

I closed my eyes and pretended not to notice the way Cobra's elbow "accidentally" knocked into Ascher's head or that Jax's foot "happened to" bounce up and slam into Ascher's kneeling body with every bump.

Violence couldn't fix the past.

After an hour of awkward silence, I thought everyone was napping when Cobra gently jostled my arm. "Are you okay?" he whispered quietly. His emerald eyes were wide and held some unspoken emotion.

He almost appeared *soft*.

His frosty scent was slightly...sweet.

"Not really," I whispered. My throat was tight with emotion as I stared at his glittery skin.

For the longest moment, we just stared at each other. Jax and Ascher snored lightly as they napped, and the carriage rocked beneath us.

"I can't believe..." Cobra trailed off as his eyes flickered to snake eyes and his face contorted into a scowl. He clenched his pale, glittery fists like he

wanted to punch someone.

I raised my eyebrow at him, confused about what was going on.

He breathed deeply. "Whoever hurt you like this." He looked down at his feet like he couldn't meet my eyes. "You deserve so much better."

My chest hurt as I looked at the large, gorgeous man hunched over staring at his feet. Anxiety and sadness practically wafted from him.

Something told me this was as close to an apology as Cobra knew how to give.

I forced a smile on my face and shrugged my shoulders, like the crushing weight of everything I'd ever been through wasn't churning painfully in my stomach. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

Dick's belt flashed before my eyes. I fought the urge to rub at my scars.

"You will never be *used* to it again," he growled softly. Multicolored snake eyes pierced me.

Suddenly, the carriage came to a stop, and the other alphas stirred awake.

"I am yours, Kitten," Cobra whispered softly, his inky hair a swath of darkness that contrasted with his pale skin and sparkling jewels. He really was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

For a long second, I stared at him, unsure how to proceed.

There was no manual for what to do when an alpha with snake eyes called you a kitten and told you they were yours. I didn't know what to feel.

"Um, cool." I pretended to shoot him with two finger guns and threw myself out of the carriage. Internally, I scolded myself for being so awkward. Who does finger guns?

Immediately, I was distracted from my embarrassment.

A massive stadium towered so high into the sky that it completely blocked out both suns.

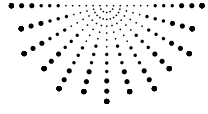
"Fae Games" glowed in neon letters on enchanted screens around the perimeter of the building.

Some of the other symbols on the hundreds of screens were a skull and crossbones, a sword, a large machine gun, a monstrous beast, and a dying body writhing and on fire.

Yes, you guessed correctly.

Against all odds, my life had gotten worse.

SADIE



THE FAE GAMES

EVER BEEN UNWELL?

Same.

No one gave me a chance to relax in the fae sunshine and enjoy the nice weather the realm had to offer.

No one gave me a chance to have a depressive episode over the fact that the fae queen was trafficking alphas from the beast realm into the shifter realm and, allegedly, we had all been kidnapped.

I needed a month to cry and process the situation.

Instead, we were immediately escorted by Xerxes into the massive colosseum that, apparently, was the arena of the Fae Games.

He led us into a room with showers and clothes and told us to change for the “opening ceremony.” Whatever that was.

My gut told me it wouldn’t be a peaceful celebration of love and life.

In the small room, Xerxes unlocked our chains.

My handcuffs fell away with a clack, and I moved my fingers with relief.

Instead of apologizing for the queen humiliating us with nudity, throwing us in a dungeon, and just generally being an ass, Xerxes just smirked.

His smile was full of gloating.

Omegas were rumored to be physically perfect, and Xerxes was living up to the hype. From what I could tell, alphas had sharper features, with more severe cheekbones and jawlines. Myself included.

In contrast, Xerxes’s features were classically handsome in a way that made him look soft and approachable.

Like a fairy-tale painting of a prince coming to life.

His unique purple eyes were large and breathtaking and complemented

his silky blond hair.

Everything about his large shoulders, lean muscles, and breathtaking features screamed “handsome.” I’m sure he had loads of female fans. Too bad his personality screamed “unwell.”

Xerxes twirled his daggers in his hands, and he stared at me. “Try to escape, and I’ll stab the alpha bitch.”

Ascher growled and lunged forward, but I threw myself in front of him before his actions *literally* got me stabbed.

Men were so dense.

It was obvious Xerxes was goading them so they would attack. I could practically feel the violence radiating off him.

He *wanted* to stab me.

“You hurt her...,” Ascher said, his words trailing off in warning as he clenched his hands and his horns lengthened atop his head.

I kept my legs braced so he couldn’t push by me. The only problem was his large muscles pressed against my back, and his heady conifer scent overwhelmed me.

Xerxes grinned and leaned forward to taunt Ascher. As spicy cinnamon mixed with pine, my mouth watered.

I glowered at the omega and tried to act like I wasn’t sniffing the air and inhaling the delicious combination of their scents.

Either I died in the games in the next couple of hours, or I enrolled in extensive therapy. Those were my only two options because I was losing my mind.

Who sniffed their enemies? Unwell people.

Suddenly, Ascher’s warmth disappeared. I turned around just as Jax threw the tattooed alpha across the room.

The big man’s muscles expanded as he glared at Xerxes, but unlike Ascher, he didn’t lunge forward.

Next to him, Cobra’s snake eyes glowed bright with otherworldly colors. “You play with fire, little omega.”

Xerxes smirked back. “Remember your place, little alpha. You’re at the queen’s mercy.”

I squinted. If six and a half feet tall was little, then I was puny.

Cobra’s cut jaw tightened, and his body went impossibly still.

My heart clenched as I thought about Cobra chained naked to the bed, how all the servants had screamed his name. How the queen had basically

said he was their sex slave. A famous one.

I whirled toward Xerxes. “Oh yes, let’s not forget you serve an evil bitch who chained him naked to a bed. And now you want to taunt him with that? Are you disgusting or just scum?”

Something close to shame flashed in Xerxes’s purple eyes, and his cinnamon scent spiked spicy.

He glared down at me, jaw clenched, eyes glowing, then turned with a huff. “You have ten minutes to change,” he growled as he stomped out the door.

For a moment, I heaved with anger. It was disgusting how the queen treated people, and I wanted to rip the bitch’s face off with my tiger fangs.

“Thank you, Kitten,” Cobra said quietly as he walked up to me. His eyes flickered back to emerald, and for a second, they burned with unspoken emotion.

His gorgeous features softened as he gave me a small smile. The jewels in his skin twinkled. His frosty scent wrapped around me, but it didn’t burn like usual. No, it was a sweet, icy kiss.

A snowflake on the cheek.

Cobra’s sharp cheekbones hardened, and his jaw clenched, all softness leaving his expression. “But, Kitten, I can fight my own battles. Focus on keeping yourself safe. Sun god knows you need to.”

And there he was.

I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue. If Cobra could just act *normal* for one conversation, it would make my life way less stressful.

Jax sighed heavily. From the way he looked back and forth between the two of us, he was torn between reprimanding Cobra for snapping at me and comforting him.

“Whatever,” I grumbled under my breath and moved around to inspect the room. Cobra being unwell and Jax wanting to help, were two universal truths in life.

“You can shower first,” Ascher said as he handed me a towel.

In contrast, Ascher was all over the place. I had no idea how he was going to act at any moment.

He’d literally *betrayed* me, then wanted to protect me?

He’d gotten mad at Xerxes on my behalf, but acted like an emotionless statue in the chariot.

I was confused.

One thing was for sure: if he thought giving me a towel and letting me shower first was going to make me forget about his betrayal, then he was clinically insane.

I grabbed the towel from his tattooed hands and tried to ignore the veins that stuck out in his hand and traveled across his strong forearms. For some reason, they made my stomach pinch with need.

I avoided the pleading in his amber eyes.

“You are *not* forgiven,” I said with force.

“Of course, Princess.” Ascher bowed his golden head to me.

With a heavy sigh—that only a badass alpha female forced to deal with nicknames like Princess and Kitten could make—I stomped off to enjoy my shower.

Under the deliciously scalding water, I scrubbed with a brush until my skin shone bright pink.

Then I kept scrubbing.

No matter how hard I pressed, I still smelled the offal from the dungeon. I saw Legolas’s emaciated form pleading with us for help.

I cleaned my skin until it was raw.

Afterward, I walked out in a towel to grab my clothes.

Instead of hiding like usual, I mentally said, *Whatever*, and walked around with my scars exposed. They’d all seen them; there was no hiding my ugliness anymore.

The three alphas whipped their heads to watch me when I returned to the changing room. All three sets of eyes glowed with rage as they stared at my scars that were exposed above the towel.

“Don’t scrub so hard, little alpha,” Jax whispered quietly.

My skin was bright pink all over. Still, I turned and narrowed my eyes at the big man. It was bad enough dealing with Ascher and Cobra.

Jax chuckled at my hell-raising expression and raised both his palms in front of his body like he surrendered.

Next to him, Ascher muttered under his breath some expletives about me hurting myself, then he stomped away to shower.

Cobra said with all seriousness, “This Dick you spoke of. I will eat his liver and bathe in his blood.”

Jax nodded beside him and cracked his knuckles. “We will bathe in his blood.”

I pursed my lips at them. “Love the support. Truly. But I think if anyone

is going to eat his liver, it will be me.”

The alphas really loved to forget I was *also* an alpha with a terrifying shifted form.

When I got my hands on Dick, the man was going to wish he’d never been born. Someday, I was going to make every fantasy I’d ever had of maiming him come true.

It would be a treat to myself.

Self-care, if you will.

Cobra handed me a stack of clothes and stared down at me. His emerald eyes slowly trailed over my towel-clad body, and he bit down on his lush lips. The jewels in his skin winked at me as he tensed his jaw.

Frost and lust emanated from him in a tantalizing cloud.

“Let the girl change in peace,” Jax growled and grabbed Cobra by the back of his neck.

The snake shifter shuddered at the manhandling and licked his lips. Jax rolled his eyes and dragged Cobra away from me, then pressed him against a locker and whispered in his ears. His chest shook with a deep growl.

Goose bumps trailed down my spine, and I reminded myself this was *not* the time to get turned on.

There was something about watching Jax handle Cobra that made my core clench.

Jax’s massive muscles strained, his gray eyes filled with lust, and I wished he were pinning *both* of us beneath him. He was so large he could easily do it.

With that concerning thought, I focused on the clothes left out on the bench.

Of course, because my life was a series of depressing events, they didn’t have a “uniform” in my size; said uniform was a pair of tight white pants and a tight white top.

At least, it was tight on the men. On me, the shirt hung like a dress, and the pants didn’t stay up.

Jax shook his head, ripped a strip off the scratchy dress they’d given me, and fashioned a belt. Without it, I would have 100 percent flashed the fae my vagina lips.

A rebellion I was not yet ready to commit to.

At this point, the whole realm had already seen my naked body. But it was the principle of it.

No way was I flashing people for free. They better at least pay me first. It was called knowing your worth and having class.

Jax offered to braid my hair, and Cobra asked if I needed ice for the bruise on my cheek.

I waved them off, too stressed about the upcoming games to let them dote on me. However, I did shake my head when I saw myself in the mirror.

With my wet hair plastered to my head, a black bruise on my cheek, and clothes hanging three sizes too big off my body, I looked like a drowned rat.

Let's just say, there had been prisoners in the queen's dungeon who looked more put together.

Just how I wanted to present myself to the fae realm.

Jax dragged Cobra down the hall, to the shower, and left me alone with a half-naked, wet Ascher.

Once again, my stomach pinched, but this time it had nothing to do with betrayal.

A towel hung low across Ascher's hips and showed off his prominent V line. Flame-and-rose tattoos covered every inch of his eight-pack of abs, and his muscles rippled as he changed.

Unlike when we'd roomed together, Ascher didn't drop his towel and show off his tattooed dick.

No, this was much worse.

He turned around to change and showed me his butt. Who knew that flame tattoos would look so good on someone's ass?

The flames traveled up to two prominent back dimples. From there, an intricate mural of fiery roses covered his entire back.

Ascher was a work of art.

After he pulled on his pants, he flashed me his eight-pack. His amber eyes burned with heat. He said nothing, just stared at me with intensity as he dragged the white shirt over his bulging shoulders and abs.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

I swallowed thickly as my brain short-circuited.

We stood alone in the locker room, and the silence between us was deafening. A live wire of tension.

It seemed to last forever. Neither of us said anything. The truth of his betrayal hanging silently in the air.

"Who used all the warm water?" Cobra grumbled as he and Jax walked out of the shower together.

I sighed heavily and cracked my neck back and forth, grateful for the distraction.

There was too much going on to worry about the fact that the alpha who had betrayed me was giving me serious sex eyes.

Talk about *not* having your priorities straight.

I focused on tightening my makeshift belt in the mirror and arranging the oversize shirt so it looked less like a dress on me.

Before I could ask for some dirt to rub on my face to complete my unfortunate appearance, Xerxes opened the door and yelled at us to follow him.

As we walked down a narrow staircase and low-ceilinged tunnel, my anxiety tripled. Xerxes ordered us to walk down a dark hallway, and that was the last thing he said to us.

Now we waited in the wings of the massive colosseum.

The entranceway was dark and shaded, and we were the only people in the small space. Fae guards stood behind us and blocked our escape.

The only way out was forward. And that was one direction I did *not* want to be going.

Our narrow hallway led into the sandy arena. White sand glistened under the dual suns, and the fae crowd roared in a packed stadium.

The screams were so loud the ground vibrated beneath my bare toes. It shook with the reverberance of their exaltation and their bloodlust. I'd never seen so many people in one place before, never known so many *existed*.

It was cool in the entranceway, but sweat dripped down my pits, and my stomach churned.

"It's going to be okay, little alpha. Stand behind me," Jax whispered and shifted in front of me.

"We will protect you." Ascher nodded and moved closer.

Cobra arched his brow at the tattooed alpha's statement. He bit his lip like he was holding himself back from attacking him. His eyes flickered to snake eyes, but he said nothing.

We had bigger things to deal with than Ascher's betrayal.

Much bigger things.

Cobra shifted his attention from Ascher to me, and his voice was a frosty whip. "Stay behind us."

It wasn't a question.

It was an order.

“I’m an alpha. I can protect myself,” I grumbled without heat, but I didn’t move away from the men, and I let them box me in.

With a deep breath, I tried to focus on anything other than my impending doom and nausea.

I looked around and tried to process what was happening. Xerxes had disappeared somewhere, probably to watch and cheer as we suffered. In front of us, the two suns reflected blindingly bright light off the chrome fixtures of the stadium.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the crowd, and the fae screams ratcheted up to a deafening level.

My eardrums burned. It was a miracle they didn’t burst from the sudden pressure.

I wiped stress sweat out of my eyes.

The stadium was a large bowl that started narrow near the bottom, then flared out impossibly wide in the middle, and narrowed again at the top. I’d never seen a structure look anything like it before, and I didn’t understand its purpose. The bulk of seats were in the middle, far away from the ground.

It didn’t make any sense.

It was also so large that I couldn’t see the upper portion of the seats. Even when I squinted, I saw nothing but shadows.

One of the many massive neon screens flashed, “One Million Fae, Full Capacity.”

There were a million fae in attendance. The shifter realm only had a few thousand people in total.

The sheer size of the fae realm was mind-blowing.

Also, of course it would be a sellout event.

Was it too much to ask that the fae decide against having a bloodthirsty fighting match at the *exact* time we get kidnapped into the realm?

Although, now that I thought about it, the fae queen had definitely planned that shit perfectly.

My evil foe couldn’t just be slightly dumb and easy to break; the universe had given me the fucking evil lady from hell who was overpowered, beautiful, and playing two *realms* against each other.

This was the big league. I’d never felt smaller.

Guards stepped up and pushed us forward.

“Welcome, contestants. Please walk into the center of the arena,” a melodic female voice echoed loudly through the stadium. The moderator’s

tone was sweet and lyrical, completely at odds with the bloodthirsty atmosphere.

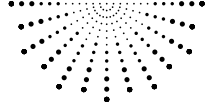
As she spoke, graphic images of people being slaughtered flashed on hundreds of giant screens.

Jax's chest rumbled with a growl beside me. Cobra's eyes flickered to snake eyes, and Ascher's horns lengthened on his head.

I pushed my shoulders back and tried to project, "I'm a competent, short woman."

Together, we walked forward onto the hot sand.

SADIE



GLADIATORS & HALF WARRIORS

AS THE FOUR of us stepped into the arena, the heat from the dual suns slapped against us.

The roar of the crowd was unbearably loud.

Jax walked in the front, and Ascher and Cobra walked on both sides of me in an unspoken agreement. They shielded me with their massive frames.

“Please welcome the alpha group to the games,” the moderator said with a tinkling laugh. Her high-pitched voice echoed around us.

The crowd of fae screamed in response, and the hot sand vibrated beneath my bare toes.

My ears burned.

A group of guards led us to the center of the arena. They spoke, and we could barely hear them above the screeching from the crowd. With aggressive hand gestures, we finally understood they were telling us to stand within a glowing outline of a square on the sand.

The four of us barely fit within the outline.

I didn’t even care that I was pressed flush against Ascher and Cobra; I was too busy trying to comprehend what was happening.

Turned out standing in the middle of an arena with vicious fae screaming for my blood was the *least* of my problems.

In a single heartbeat, things got worse.

Way worse.

Suddenly, the hot sand shifted beneath us, and a metal platform emerged from the arena floor.

It levitated into the air. The platform was enchanted.

All four of us gasped as we rose.

The ground whooshed further away, and I was blown to the side as the wind battered against us.

Both Ascher and Cobra shot their hands out to grab me. If it weren't for their quick movement, I would have fallen.

Far.

My stomach traveled to my throat, and my skin erupted in sweat as the stadium passed before us in a blur.

The four of us locked arms and pressed our backs together. Well, I tried to lock arms, but the men wrapped themselves around me. Cobra grabbed one of my hips in a death grip, and Ascher's bicep flattened across my stomach to ensure I didn't fall.

We rose higher and higher until the guards were little dots on the ground beneath us. It was like balancing on the edge of the glaciers in the shifter realm.

Irritation mixed with fear. Was it too much to ask that someone warn us we would be standing on a small platform that literally flew in the air?

We barely fit, and if one of us jostled, it would shove the rest of us off. It was the ultimate trust exercise.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to vomit as we kept rising. After what felt like forever, the platform finally stopped and hovered midair.

Now I understood why the stadium was shaped like a bowl with most of the seats in the middle section.

Our platform was levitating in the middle of the massive stadium.

If I weren't afraid for my life, surrounded by screeching, bloodthirsty fae, and forced to participate because of the evil fae queen, I *might* have enjoyed the experience. I'd always wanted to fly.

Instead of staying still, because that would be *too* reasonable, the platform moved beneath us. It slowly circled in an elliptical orbit around the center of the stadium.

Our platform stayed about twenty feet away from the crowd, but it was still close enough for us to see each fae individually. Men and women alike were dressed to the nines in bright-colored silks, with intricate hairstyles and pretty makeup.

Everyone was breathtakingly beautiful. The fae were tall and lithe, with willowy figures, delicate ears and stunning bone structures.

Too bad they were also maniacs who screamed like psychos as we passed, and yelled slurs at us.

People called me a cunt as we flew by.

It was overwhelming.

My forearms burned from how tightly I hung on to the men, and I was definitely going to be deaf after this experience.

As we orbited around the middle of the stadium and I closed my eyes and prayed for the spinning to stop, the moderator introduced us.

Her sweet, melodic voice was a loud tinkle that echoed over the screaming fans. “These alpha beasts are warriors from a faraway land. They consist of Jax the Meat Grinder, Ascher, a girl, and Cobra, the realm’s famous sex god.”

First, wow, someone needed to give me credit for coming up with Jax’s name, although I’d only made it up a few hours earlier. How in the sun god did they know about it?

Second, the bitch did *not* just call me a girl. Third, the crowd went nuts when they said Cobra’s name.

Also, because why the hell not, the massive screens around the stadium rippled with enchantment, and a video of Cobra violently fucking a fae woman against the wall played in graphic detail.

There were upsetting moments in your life, and then there were *upsetting* moments in your life. This was the latter, and I was unwell for so many reasons.

I closed my eyes and refused to watch. Next to me, Cobra’s hand tightened across my hip, and a slight tremble ran through him.

I gripped his bicep and gave him a squeeze. I peeked open my eyes to stare up at him. His emerald gaze was far away, a dark emptiness reflected in them.

How could they treat him this way?

Cobra’s sex noises played throughout the stadium, and I glanced at the massive screen. He thrust into the fae woman.

I threw up, and it burned as I swallowed it back down.

The fae kept screaming, the platform kept spinning, and Cobra’s gorgeous body kept penetrating the fae woman across the screens.

This was my hell.

Finally, the video stopped.

If I weren’t floating, I would have dropped to my knees with relief.

Cobra trembled beside me, and I wanted to wrap my arms around him. I wished with all my might that we were back in the alpha room in the shifter

realm, teasing each other as we pushed food into each other's faces.

I didn't realize how relaxed everything had been until now.

The moderator's voice boomed, and the crowd quieted. "As you all know, the gracious fae queen has banned all alpha shifting in the realm for the safety of all her precious citizens. These alphas cannot access their second forms and are extremely pathetic and weak."

Cobra's and Ascher's forearms tightened with rage against me.

I didn't know what they were smoking, but nobody in their right mind would ever look at the men and think "weak," especially not Jax. Me, on the other hand—I got that.

The fae citizens booed and threw popcorn at us as we orbited past them.

The moderator continued, "Don't worry, the fae queen is a gracious host who loves her citizens. As a special treat for this millionth centennial celebration, the queen will allow them to fight in their shifted forms in certain matches."

The crowd screamed louder with excitement, and the sound caused our platform to wobble back and forth as we spun around.

I choked on more throw-up and swallowed it down.

We were just toys to be played with by the fae queen. Objects of entertainment.

Finally, after ten more orbits from hell, the platform stopped spinning and moved to the center of the ring.

Then the floating black square shivered beneath our feet and extended in every direction.

We all exhaled with relief.

It gave us enough space to stand without falling off. Still, Ascher and Cobra didn't release me; they held me in their death grips.

They couldn't have made the platform a little larger as we'd spun and orbited for our lives? I wanted to kill whatever air and earth fae controlled the platform. They were so rude.

The next minutes passed in a blur of me leaning over with my hands on my knees and hyperventilating. I told myself not to look over the edge, to the ground, but I couldn't stop glancing down.

At any second, I expected the platform to disintegrate beneath our feet and for us to fall to a brutal, violent death.

Jax rubbed his hand across my neck comfortingly. Cobra wrapped his fingers around my arms like he wanted to make sure I wouldn't fall, and

Ascher scooted in front of me to block my view of the vile, screaming crowd.

The waves of screams had changed, and now they chanted “shifter cunt” in unison.

Part of me was impressed that all million fae could join in synchrony.

A larger part of me wanted to cry for the mother I’d never had.

I envisioned Dick, my abusive captor who’d given me scars, as a mother figure, and the disturbing image made me laugh. The dark humor was the only thing that kept the tears at bay.

The crowd alternated between calling me a cunt and screaming Cobra’s name like he was a superstar.

My ears gave me a wind tunnel sensation as my anxiety grew.

I barely heard the moderator welcome a group of four water fae, a group of five air fae, and a group of three earth fae.

All of them orbited around the stadium on tiny platforms, then came to hover near us in the center of the stadium. From my peripheral vision, I noted they were all massive men.

I was starting to understand why “shifter cunt” was being chanted with such vigor. It seemed like the Fae Games was a male-only experience. The fae realm appeared to have a tiny sexism issue, which was ironic because they had a queen for a leader.

Also, it was clear as day that I was *not* the woman to help educate them.

In books, the women who broke barriers and did heroic shit were usually tall and strong. And if they weren’t physically impressive, then they were wicked smart. Also, I was pretty sure every empowered female I’d read about could run for five minutes without asphyxiating.

I couldn’t.

I was *not* the woman for the job. Sure, sexism sucked. You know what also sucked? Being heckled by a million people because you had vagina lips and small, unimpressive breasts.

If the fae realm wanted to keep me locked in a kitchen, making bread and knitting, that was fine. I would get my yeast and yarn ready to go.

Now I just needed to talk to the moderator lady and explain to her that I was a little woman, and I did not want to fight anyone or anything. Ever.

My panic attack was interrupted by a tidal wave of screams from the crowd. I covered my ears with my hands and ducked my head as I prayed my eardrums wouldn’t burst.

The last group of competitors whizzed around on their platform so fast

that I couldn't discern what they looked like.

A sign flashed in my periphery, and I did a double take at the neon letters. They read, "The Half Warriors, 100-Year Gladiator Champions."

My mouth dropped open in shock, and the buzzing that tingled my skin had nothing to do with the screaming crowd or the horrible death drop below my feet.

When the flying platform came to a stop near us, I didn't know if I wanted to cry, smile, scream, or laugh.

Three men stood on the platform, and unlike every other person I'd seen in the fae realm, they didn't have pointed ears.

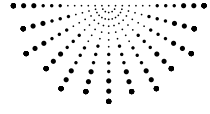
The tallest of the men was built as wide and tall as Jax. He had long black hair that hung past his waist in a silky sheet, bright-pink eyes that glowed against his deeply tanned skin, and black tribal tattoos that covered his body.

My mouth dropped open, and I gaped because I'd seen the men before, drawn in the pages of my favorite book growing up.

They were the Big Three. The half warriors.

And the largest man with the pink eyes was Demetre, my childhood idol.

SADIE



DEMETRE SUCKS

SOME THINGS in life you could prepare for.

Floating hundreds of feet in the air on an enchanted platform, in the middle of a packed stadium, with fans calling you a cunt, while your childhood idols stood near you *was not* one of them.

The alphas had moved so all three of them stood in front of me and blocked me from the crowd screaming slurs at me.

Ascher gave me a weird look as I pushed his arm to the side to get another peek at Demetre.

Holy sun goddess, the Big Three were cool as shit.

Demetre's bright-pink eyes practically glowed against his tan skin, and his mountains of muscles rippled as he stretched his neck back and forth.

His long black hair, which reached to his butt, blew in the breeze. Unlike Xerxes's long, wavy blond locks, his hair was pin straight and silky.

Behind him, the twin half warriors Noah and Shane stood like statues of physical prowess.

Their dark skin glinted in the summer sun, and their blood-orange mohawks glowed atop their heads. They had bright-green eyes and were also built massively tall and wide.

Demetre's shifted form was a dragon, and the twins were rumored to shift into tigers, although no one was exactly sure what their fire abilities were.

Actually, now that I thought about it, no one was exactly sure what Demetre's was either.

They were half fae, but none of them had pointed ears. Their tall frames and slightly catlike features were the only indications that they were part fae.

I stepped back and hid behind Ascher's large frame, afraid that they

would see me staring and think I wasn't cool.

A fae spectator, with impressive aim, threw a cup, and it bounced off my arm. Now the whole stadium chanted "kill the girl" in unison.

Never mind. There was no way they thought I was cool.

Still, I hid behind Ascher and peeked around his flame-tattooed arm. Demetre still hadn't seen me. Thank the sun god.

"Stop looking over at them." Ascher moved to block my view.

I scoffed at his hubris and kept using him as a human shield. "Excuse me, Mr. Betrayer. If I ask to look, you become the window."

"That doesn't even make sense," he grumbled, but held still and allowed me to play peekaboo around his arm.

As long as Ascher remembered he was a piece of shit and followed every single thing I told him to do, we would get along fine.

If he gave me so much as an *ounce* of sass, I would kill him.

It was the only solution that protected my heart and my self-esteem. I couldn't just let men walk all over me.

Suddenly, a loud banging noise started.

Sun god forbid the sound level *not* be crippling. If I had a single functioning eardrum after this experience, it would be a miracle.

A roof appeared atop the large bowl, and the entire stadium became pitch dark. Then the drumbeats picked up.

Hundreds of fae with large fake wings and bodies painted in glowing bright colors flew around us. In synchrony, they elevated through the air, twirling and leaping to the drumbeat.

They were all air fae, and just like the paintings at the palace depicted, they were flying.

I held my breath in awe as the child in me gaped with wonder. People were *flying* around me, and a warm breeze drafted across my skin.

We weren't in the shifter realm anymore.

That was for sure.

The beat dropped, and the hundreds of flying fae danced. Thousands of balls of sparkling blue flames floated around them. Fire fae in the crowd glowed as they controlled the balls.

It was breathtaking.

Fae screamed and clapped, and they reached their hands out and tried to touch the floating orbs. I clenched my hands at my side to stop myself from doing the same. My blood tingled, and a voice in my brain said, *shiny*.

I should have been afraid, but...I wasn't. Everything about the fae culture was gorgeous.

It was easy to forget to be afraid.

The orbs and the dancers glowed bright in the pitch black and created a stunning illusion.

The moderator's voice seemed louder in the dark. "It is time for the realm's anthem. Please join us in singing our pride." A fast, lyrical tune began to play, the drum rhythm picked up, and the entire stadium clapped in rhythm.

Our platform vibrated with the force of the claps. The winged dancers whirled, and the blue balls of fire floated up and down in time with the beat. Then the stadium sang, and with each stanza, their volume rose until they were shrieking:

*"Kill the heart, rip the soul, destroy the weak and sad,
Eat the brain, stab the loin, torture till they're mad,
Fae is might, fae is best, our realm surpasses the rest,
Air, water, earth, fire, attack them till they break,
Raise the head, cut the legs, burn them at the stake!"*

Every person in the crowd clapped three times, stomped their feet, and fell silent. I was also silent, mostly because of shock.

What an upbeat, inspirational song.

Not.

Why were the fae so dramatically unwell? It was almost inspirational how terrifying every single person was.

The lights stayed off. Then, with an enchanted ripple, the enormous screens above our heads showed a figure.

It was the fae queen.

She waved her hands at the crowd and addressed them.

She spoke, and her pretty, terrifying voice was projected loudly. "Thank you, citizens, for attending this year's Fae Games. As you see, we have a very special lineup this year. As usual, the teams will be ranked after each competition, and at the end of the month, the winners will be awarded a fortune of five billion gold pieces."

My stomach rolled over inside my body.

A month.

They expected me to fight for my life for an entire *month*.

I'd thought this little shindig would last a day, or maybe even a week total.

But an entire month?

I might as well just buy a shovel and start digging my grave right now, because there was no way I survived that long.

While I suffered a panic attack over my impending doom, the queen droned on and on about her leadership prowess, and how safe and rich the realm was under her rule.

I forgot about my dramatic, shallow breathing when another gorgeous woman appeared on the massive screen.

The queen said, "Now I have special news for the realm. My lost daughter, Arabella, who was kidnapped from our home, was returned to me last eve!"

The stadium roared with excitement.

"Arabella, everyone!"

It was Aran, but different.

She must have worn an enchantment that disguised her true state before, because there was no way this gorgeous woman could ever be mistaken for a boy. Her short aqua locks now hung to her butt in long, silky waves.

Before, her features had been slightly blocky and her stature masculine.

Now she was stunning.

Breathtaking.

Lush red lips and bright-blue doe eyes sat atop a sculpted female face.

Her cheekbones were high and her neck long and willowy. She was draped in a gossamer gown like her mother, and it floated over her long, slender limbs like the finest silk.

I wouldn't have believed it was my best friend if it weren't for her eyes—her bright-turquoise eyes were alight with rebellion, just like I remembered them.

A diamond-studded collar, like Cobra's, wrapped around her long neck.

Most shocking, however, a massive pair of breasts pushed up in her low-cut gown. Either I was partially blind, or Aran had *not* had those last time I'd seen him.

Her, I reminded myself.

The willowy pale creature on the screen was so gorgeous I almost didn't believe it was my friend.

The queen waved her hands at her daughter like she was an item at the market. “As the realm knows, Arabella does not have any elemental abilities. However, she has always been the sweet, kindhearted jewel of the realm.”

All around, fae citizens screamed that they loved Arabella and wanted to “mate” with her.

From the queen’s description, it was clear she didn’t know a single shit about Aran—*Arabella*.

My friend was loudmouthed, aggressive, and slightly annoying. Still lovable, just not an angel of lightness by any means.

“Sweet” and “kindhearted” were not the descriptors I would have used.

“Arabella, what do you have to say to your fans?” the queen asked with a fake sugary smile. The woman was a master actress.

“Hello, everyone.” Arabella’s voice was lyrical and high-pitched, way different from back at the compound. She must have used an enchantment to disguise it.

“I just want to say that I love my mother to...death and am so grateful we can be reunited. The bonds of love are truly stronger than all else. They defeat rancid evil, gross abuses of power, and leaders who deceive.” Her face contorted into a snarl, and it looked like she was seconds away from launching herself at her mother.

Yep, that was definitely my friend.

From the tight pinch of the queen’s mouth, she wasn’t happy with the thinly veiled threat.

Arabella laughed, and the tinkling tune was light and sparkly, like bubbles and warm sunshine.

Everyone basked in her presence.

She raised her fist into the air, and everyone in the crowd raised theirs in response. With a turn, she faced her mother.

She stared the fae queen dead in the eye and chanted while the whole stadium chanted back, “Never forgive those we hate, ever dead is their fate. All who fight against are foe, fae prowess the killing blow. Fae prowess the killing blow!”

She pumped her fist in the air close to her mother’s face and smiled like a sweet debutante without a care in the world.

From the way the fae queen stared back, I would bet all my money she would retaliate against Arabella for her words later.

Also, what was with the fae and rhyming?

It was weird.

Although, now I remembered Aran telling me about how the fae language was based on poetry and it held power. Still, I never could have imagined this spectacle was what she was thinking of when she said that.

The queen regained her composure, wrapped her arm around her daughter, and laughed like it was all part of her plan.

They disappeared off the big screen as it replaced them with a view of the floating competitors, but a spotlight highlighted a midlevel row with two thrones.

The queen and Arabella sat on a raised dais in the middle of the stadium, separate from everyone else. They were close enough that when Arabella turned and stared at me, I could see the pleading in her eyes.

I nodded slightly to let her know I was still her friend.

Her shoulders slumped with relief.

With a whoosh, the roof disappeared, and bright sunshine lit the stadium. I blinked and tried to adjust to the blinding light.

My pits dripped with stress sweat and my knees clacked together because the awful drop came back into view again.

I'd forgotten for a moment; we were still terrifyingly far off the ground.

The moderator's voice played on the speakers. "Now we will commence the Fae Games in the traditional manner. One competitor from each of the five teams will get to choose another team's member to fight against."

If my life got *any* worse, I was going to suffer a heart attack and keel over from stress. *Come on!*

I had just gotten done admiring the pretty, sparkly lights, seeing my best friend in the new realm, and listening to some bloodthirsty fae poems.

I needed a moment to process.

The moderator gave zero shits about my mental health and kept speaking.

"As per tradition, this will be a battle of pure physical prowess. No weapons and no fae elements will be allowed. The competitors will fight on floating platforms. The first competitor to fall off loses the round. The winning team will receive a bonus in the next competition."

The crowd screamed and stomped their feet with excitement.

My chest burned with anxiety.

The moderator said, "The half warriors get to choose first, since they are the hundred-year reigning champions of the game."

I turned to watch as Demetre and the twins bowed their heads together

and whispered. Their massive forms were covered in muscles and sinew, and they looked back and forth among the teams.

I hid my body completely behind Ascher.

With a prayer, I crossed my fingers and my toes and promised the moon goddess I would sacrifice a goat every month in her honor if she just let me make it through the next few minutes without being picked.

The good thing was, the Big Three were men of honor and integrity.

In every book, they saved women and children and always used their power to help those weaker.

I wasn't worried about them.

I was worried about the mammoth man on the water fae team that stared directly at me with hate in his eyes. It was a familiar look, one I'd seen on Dick's face every day growing up.

Sun god forbid one male with mental health issues *not* target me.

"Half warriors, have you made a decision?" the moderator asked.

Demetre and his brothers broke apart.

"Speak the name of your competitor."

Demetre opened his mouth, his stunning pink eyes glinting underneath the dual suns.

The fae collectively held their breath as everyone waited to see who would fight against Demetre, a god among men.

For once, the stadium was dead silent.

Demetre thumped his fist against his tawny chest and shouted loudly, "I would like to challenge the girl from the alpha team!"

Every person turned to stare at me.

Fuck you, universe.

I pointed at Ascher and asked, "Him?"

"No, you." Demetre's voice was loud and rough.

It was official: all men sucked.

With two syllables, my childhood crush poofed into smithereens and my world twisted upside down.

Growing up, Lucinda had been right for thinking Demetre sounded scary. Clearly, I was a dumbass.

I searched for the lever in my brain.

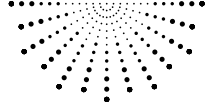
The switch flipped, and relief flooded through me.

The numb had recharged.

It clicked on.

Kill him.

SADIE



BLOODY KNUCKLES

I STOOD on the suspended platform beside the alphas in the middle of the stadium.

The air was hot and stagnant. All the teams hovered at the same level.

The crowd was dead silent.

Everyone waited.

Suddenly, there was a loud whoosh as three empty platforms whizzed past. They came to staggered stops near me.

One platform floated close to me.

The moderator said, "Demetre has challenged the alpha girl. Please both proceed to the gold platforms."

I cracked my neck back and forth.

Demetre smirked over at me. He thought he had me cornered, trembling, quaking with fear.

Kill him.

I was numb.

I didn't feel fear.

He should be afraid.

"You can't do this. We need to come up with a plan," Jax said, and a long growl vibrated through his chest as he slowly moved toward me. His large biceps bulged as he flexed his hands.

Cobra stepped forward, chest heaving with anger, the diamonds and emeralds in his face glinting in the sun. "I forbid you."

I backed away from them until my heels hung off the edge of the platform.

Ascher reached his hand out like he was going to grab me.

Jump.

I threw myself backward off the platform, away from the three alphas, and for a split second, I floated over hundreds of feet of air. My legs and arms flailed.

With a slap, my bare feet landed on the gold platform, and I snapped my back straight to maintain my center of gravity. The platform shook back and forth beneath me.

The substance under my toes felt like metal, but it didn't burn under the rays of the hot suns. The platform was ice-cold against my feet, as cold as the ice that ran through my numb veins.

Suddenly, the platform zoomed upward, higher and higher, away from the other competitors.

Jax bellowed.

Cobra screamed an expletive as his eyes flickered to snake eyes.

Ascher said nothing, just stared up at me with his large onyx horns glistening in the bright sun. His amber eyes burned, and his tattooed hands fisted with rage.

I ignored the men.

Stay calm. Remain balanced.

Like usual, the numb was a reassuring homicidal voice inside my head. I was calm and measured, unfazed by any situation. I didn't feel a single emotion, just blessed numbness.

Colors weren't as bright, and the million people screaming at me were no longer a terrifying, distracting crowd.

They were of no concern. Just people. Bystanders.

They meant nothing to me.

The hundreds of feet of air beneath my feet were no longer nauseating. It was just air. I was steady on the platform.

Movement flashed to my right, and I turned to observe it.

I was projected on massive screens around the stadium so a million fae spectators could watch me fight in high resolution.

Bounce on the balls of your toes. Legs wide.

Again, I cracked my neck and relaxed my shoulders. My muscles were warm and springy as I shifted back and forth on my toes.

Eyes on your enemy. Stay calm.

The numb voice was familiar but also different. It was louder in my head compared to its usually slightly muffled sound.

The numb commands echoed crisply through my skull.

As usual, I obeyed them.

I focused on Demetre down below me on his platform, and everything bled out of focus. The bright suns were no longer a distraction. The world dimmed into cool shades of blue and gray.

I slowed my heartbeat.

Life was action and reaction, peace and violence, stillness and bloodshed.

It was all it had ever been. All it would ever be.

My shoulders relaxed, and my breathing slowed. My vision hyper-focused to take in every twitch of Demetre's large muscles.

He is much larger. Use your size to your advantage.

Demetre leaped away from his team onto one of the gold platforms they had ordered us to fight on. His platform whizzed up toward me, his long black hair billowing behind him in a dark sheet.

Demetre easily balanced his weight and rode the platforms like it was second nature.

He was the hundred-year champion for a reason.

A part of me wondered what had happened to the half warriors. How had they gone from realm heroes to gladiators? Was it because they'd lost their abilities to shift into their alpha forms?

I shook my head and shoved the questions out of my brain. It didn't matter why or how he'd gotten here. All that mattered was right now.

The challenge, the fight. The victory.

Demetre's platform stopped in the air a few feet away from mine.

Up close, he was as tall as Jax and might have been wider. His face was chiseled and hard, his harsh eyes promised death.

Demetre's alpha pheromones wafted toward me, and I breathed him in.

He smelled like fire and steel. His scent was rough and tangy. It burned my nostrils and the back of my throat.

It wasn't intoxicating like Jax's, Cobra's, or Ascher's.

No, it was a brutal scent.

A warning.

Scissor kick his trachea. Rip his balls off with your hand.

I breathed in hot air and burning steel, and I exhaled concentration.

The moderator's tinkling voice echoed loudly, and the crowd fell dead silent. "First match of the game: Demetre the half warrior challenges the girl from the alpha team. The first person to fall off the platform loses."

There was a long pause as everyone in the stadium held their breath. The only sound was the whooshing of a soft breeze as it raced along the metal edge of the stadium.

Demetre's bicep and left foot flexed.

The moderator bellowed, "Begin!"

At the same time the moderator spoke, Demetre leaped off his platform and threw himself at me. Hundreds of pounds of tattooed muscle flew toward me.

I'd been expecting his move.

A platform is three feet to your right, slightly elevated.

I turned away from him and leaped with all my might to the third gold platform. It was larger than the other two, at least ten by fifteen feet. But it was further away.

I didn't jump far enough.

My feet didn't land.

Reach with your arms.

The crowd held its breath. The stadium was still dead silent.

I reached my upper body forward and strained my arms toward the platform. There was a loud slap as my sternum slammed against the edge of the cold metal.

For a long second, my legs kicked over empty air.

My biceps strained, my nails scraped desperately across the metal, and I slowly dragged my body up and over the edge.

Behind you, approaching fast.

I didn't look back, and I didn't stand up. There wasn't time.

Facedown on the platform, I swung my right heel out in a hard arc behind my back, and I scissored my other leg after it.

My leg rocked with the vibration of slamming against hard muscle.

Demetre had thrown himself after me, and my heels slammed into his side.

His large body rocked backward, but he caught himself before he stumbled off the platform.

In a flash of movement, he grabbed my heel with both hands, lifted me, and slammed me face-first down against the platform.

There was a loud crack as my nose splattered against the metal hard. Blood gushed down my face in a familiar rush and spilled all around me.

My vision watered and blurred, and the world spun.

The platform bounced up and down beneath me, ricocheting from the force of my frame being slammed against it.

Kick out your other leg. Slam into the side of his face. Regain purchase. Get on your feet.

I went limp.

The bloodthirsty crowd screamed with excitement, and my eardrums popped from the pressure.

I barely discerned Cobra screaming obscenities below and Jax roaring like he'd transformed into his bear form.

Demetre's grip on my leg loosened infinitesimally, and he reached down to grab my limp form, probably to throw me over the edge.

It was all I needed.

While he was bent forward, I whipped my body around and slammed my knee across his head.

There was a loud crack, and pain vibrated up my thigh where it slammed into his skull. Blood pooled across my leg where his skin split from the force of my blow.

The crowd was silent in shock as Demetre's blood sprayed and splattered across the platform.

He stumbled back and shook his head, his already harsh features tightened into a hard scowl.

With his black hair streaming behind him, red blood splashed across his tan skin, pink eyes glinting with rage, he looked like his alpha form—an angry dragon.

I slipped in blood as I scrambled backward away from him on all fours.

The edge is five feet behind you.

The scent of burning steel became thicker and more oppressive. It was cloying and heavy, and just like Demetre, it demanded surrender.

Blood flowed from the cut on his face. His tribal tattoos were streaked with red. He was a macabre painting come to life.

He lunged forward.

Flip backward. Kick out your leg.

I threw my body backward into a handspring that ended with a roundhouse kick midair. If I weren't numb, I would have been shocked by my fighting skills.

I was numb. My body was a weapon.

Demetre dodged my kick and wiped sweat and blood off his brow. He

narrowed his eyes, and his face scrunched up in confusion.

He hadn't been expecting me to put up a fight. From the tilt of his head and the question in his eyes, he was realizing just how badly he had underestimated me.

Keep your eyes on him.

I took a deep breath as we circled each other, and narrowed my eyes with confusion as I took in my attacker.

Demetre hadn't used any fae ability. He was fighting like an alpha who couldn't shift, not a half warrior with fae abilities. I racked my brain as I tried to remember the stories, but I couldn't recall anyone that had talked about him directly using his power.

There were stories of fae with abilities that weren't always weaponizable in every situation: fire fae who could see into flames far into the future, air fae who could speak to the wind, water fae who could communicate with monstrous sea creatures, and earth fae who could plant docile forests.

Concentrate.

As we circled, Demetre's unnatural pink eyes flashed.

No one knew what fae abilities the Big Three possessed. All the stories were about their impressive alpha forms.

My intuition told me it wasn't a coincidence they were secrets. That they were unique powers they kept hidden for a reason.

If that was true, I stood a chance against him.

The warm air was rich. It inflated my lungs and muscles with vibrating energy; every cell in my body burned with the need, the energy, to destroy my opponent.

I didn't want to leap, kick, fight—I had to. It was my life's purpose.

Platform to your left. Jump up and grab it.

Demetre's calf muscle bunched slightly.

I ducked low at the same time Demetre threw his large body forward. Air whooshed past my face, and I dodged his massive fist by a hair's breadth.

He stumbled past me.

I used my downward momentum to spring as high as I could to the left.

My fingertips grabbed the edge of the other gold platform, which had slowly floated until it hung in the air above us. I barely hauled my ass up and scrambled to a standing position.

Step back.

Demetre cleared the edge of the platform a second later, much more

easily than I had.

I moved backward, but he was quicker.

He grabbed my shoulders and threw me to the side with all his might. I flailed as my momentum took me over the edge of the platform.

However, I'd been expecting his move.

Midair, I twisted my torso and wrapped my legs around his thick waist. As my weight carried me over, it carried him with me.

Jax, Cobra, and Ascher bellowed with fear.

Instead of sailing through endless air like I expected, we both slammed back into the other platform. It had drifted over below us.

Beneath our bodies, the platform grew larger, then moved around at a ridiculously fast clip.

The crowd chanted and screamed. Fae reached their hands out and tried to grab at us as we passed.

Bend your knees. Lean forward. Stabilize yourself.

I crouched low as the wind whipped through my white hair.

Across from me, Demetre also bent forward, his dark hair a cloak behind him. His powerful muscles and excessive height weighed him down and made it easier for him to stand up.

The wind pushed me back, and it felt like any second it would fling me off the side.

Belly down. Reduce friction.

Neither of us could move forward with the platform spinning so quickly. I crouched low and kept my eyes trained up on him as we both held on for our lives.

Suddenly, the platform stopped with a jerk.

A loud, pulsing song played throughout the stadium. The heavy bass vibrated through my bones, and the arena trembled as the fae stomped along to the beat.

It reminded me of the loud songs at the Ianuarius celebration.

"Fight!" flashed across the stadium in bright neon letters, and a million fae chanted it back.

I jumped to my feet and stumbled as the podium splintered in two. It separated beneath us.

Then both our platforms splintered into dozens of smaller squares. We balanced on the small sections.

Whoever was in charge wanted us to fight more.

Arms forward, feet bouncing.

Leap now.

We both jumped off our small platforms and there was a loud smack as we collided midair.

Demetre's powerful fist slammed into my sternum as my foot crunched his knee.

Fight. Show him who you are.

For the longest moments, we leaped from section to section. We fought for our lives. There was nothing but air beneath my feet as I flew, kicking midair and balancing precariously on the small platforms.

Demetre leaped and spun, his long limbs flashing as I dodged and kicked like I was built to fight.

For the first time in my life, exhaustion didn't set in the longer I exerted myself.

No, something different happened.

Something magical.

My muscles warmed, my heartbeat steadied, and adrenaline coursed through me like a cold flame. I couldn't stop the grin that split my bloody face as I leaped.

For a second, a smile flashed across Demetre's face. I stumbled mid-step in surprise as his pink eyes danced. His energy was volatile, but it wasn't malicious.

Why would he challenge me? It didn't make any sense for him to target the smallest alpha and only woman in the games.

Concentrate, the numb ordered me.

It was too late.

My moment of confusion cost me, and I leaped backward a split second too late. Demetre slammed his fists against my body in quick succession. I scissored my legs at his kidneys and punched his neck.

For the longest moment, we grappled midair, limbs flying as we punished each other with brutal blows.

The crowd fell dead silent as they held their breath to see who would win.

My feet crashed down on one of the dozen small floating platforms, and Demetre grabbed onto one with his hands. He easily hauled himself up.

With gasping breaths and sweaty brows, we stared at each other.

Arms up. Deflect. Attack.

This time, Demetre lunged at me faster than I could follow. I barely

blocked his right fist, but I wasn't able to dodge his left fist.

He slammed it against my cheek, and a loud crack echoed through my head.

Another podium is one foot to your right. Jump behind you.

I jumped backward onto the floating square, but Demetre expected my move.

His massive arm shot out and wrapped around my neck.

Standing still, with just that one arm, he lifted my slight frame off the podium and choked me out.

A smirk slit onto his handsome face as I kicked my legs against the air desperately. No matter how hard I dug my fingers into his hand, I couldn't get any purchase.

He shook me back and forth like a cat with its prey. He toyed with his kill.

Use the snake.

Cobra's shadow snake zipped across my lower back with anxiety. It communicated with me, but I'd never tried to communicate with it. Mentally, I sent it image after image, hoping it could understand what I wanted.

The shadow snake zipped up my spine and stopped at my neck. It sent me a zing of acknowledgment.

It understood.

My eyes watered, and my throat burned.

The little black body traveled along my neck, down my arm, and across where my hands clawed at Demetre's choking hand.

It opened its mouth and showcased wicked fangs. The snake reared back and bit Demetre. His hand spasmed, and I jammed my nails underneath his fingers.

The half warrior released me.

As I fell, I reached my hand forward for the little snake. It leaped off Demetre's skin and for a split second became a solid emerald snake that refracted sunshine.

Then the little snake slammed against my outstretched palm.

The solid crystalline body melted into my skin and zinged at me in welcome. I tightened my fingers around it and sent it images of love and thanks back.

Brace for impact.

I plummeted through the air, and the stadium whooshed around me as the

fae screamed in a bloodthirsty roar of excitement.

Above me, Demetre tipped forward, his body paralyzed from the snakebite. His massive form followed my trajectory.

The crowd gasped in surprise as he hurtled after me toward the hard ground.

Through the crowd's roar, I heard Cobra scream with horror and Jax roar. Even though I was numb, their anguish made my stomach pinch uncomfortably.

My heart hurt.

I didn't want to leave them.

Protect your head. Sacrifice your legs. Land with your feet extended.

I contorted my body, aware I was about to break every bone on impact.

Satisfaction coursed through me.

I'd taken Demetre down with me, and that was all that mattered. I hadn't lost.

Still, what happened next, even the numb couldn't predict.

A hard body slammed against me.

Midair, large onyx horns flashed in the sunshine, and colorful, tattooed skin wrapped around me in a cocoon of warmth. The musky scent of pine and conifers overwhelmed me.

"It will be okay, Princess, I got you," Ascher's deep voice growled as he gripped me.

The jerk had jumped to save me. Now we were both plummeting hundreds of feet through the air with no way to brace ourselves.

He still isn't forgiven.

The ground rapidly approached, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I embraced the inevitable.

At the last moment, Ascher flipped us around midair so his large body would take the brunt of the impact.

He tucked my head against him protectively. "I'm so sorry, Princess."

Crack.

For an infinitesimal moment, every neuron in my body reverberated from the shock of colliding with hard sand.

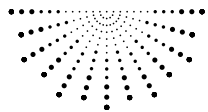
Yet all I could focus on was the feel of Ascher's hard body squeezing me tight protectively.

"Please be okay," he whispered.

As the world exploded around me, I concentrated on Ascher's words.

They vibrated through my skull.
Then everything went black.

JAX



TERROR

A FEW MINUTES EARLIER.

Sadie flipped backward through the air.

Her white hair billowed around her golden face. The intensity in her ruby eyes was mesmerizing.

I held my breath as she leaped, spun, and kicked with finesse.

She was breathtaking.

The crowd no longer chanted obscenities. There was an eerie hush in the stadium as a million fae watched the small, unassuming girl fight like it was her life's purpose.

Now they all knew what we did.

She was an alpha.

She was born for this.

Half of me was frozen with awe because Sadie was glorious. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the hard expression on her face and the deadly concentration in her eyes.

It was the same thing that had happened back at the compound: the outspoken little alpha was now a cold killing machine. She was as intense as Cobra.

Maybe even more so.

Speaking of Cobra, he stood next to me and was completely still as we watched Sadie fight above us.

From the outside, he seemed bored, but I'd been with him long enough to know that the fingernails digging into his palms, and the furrow in his brow, meant he was freaking out.

We all were.

Beside us, Ascher's chest heaved up and down, and his amber eyes flashed like they were lit with a live flame.

I rubbed at my chest as a low rumble shook through it. The vibrations ran through my entire body.

It was his fucking fault the little alpha was fighting for her life above us. It was his fault we were in the games.

It was his fault I was trapped in this sun-god-forsaken realm and not in the shifter realm with my sisters.

If we didn't get out of this realm soon, I would lose my ever-living shit.

After my mother had died six years ago, I'd made a deal with the oligarchy to send all the girls away with Jess to school before they were twelve years old.

It had all worked out because Jinx wasn't even twelve yet, and she was already one of the star pupils. She was brilliant, but I worried about her.

Over the years, I'd noticed she had a tendency to get so consumed with reading or studying that she forgot to take care of herself. I made sure to always check on her over school breaks.

Plus, the school only housed children until they were eighteen, and Jess had been home alone for two years, running my mother's florist shop by herself.

I visited whenever I could to make sure she wasn't lonely.

Jess would expect a visit from me soon, and no way was I not showing up. I was her brother.

I was a calm man, but being a realm away from all five of my sisters was driving me insane.

And now Sadie was fighting for her life in front of me.

Rage like I'd never known ripped through me.

There was one thing I would *not* tolerate being fucked with—the women in my life.

I contracted every muscle in my body as I fought the urge to attack.

The urge to throw myself at Ascher and beat him till he bled. The urge to throw myself up at the half warrior who dared fight *my* little alpha.

Demetre was the name they called the bastard attacking her.

If I weren't so angry, I might have been shocked. I had heard the stories and read the books. Everyone knew the half warriors were famous.

The Big Three were legends, more myths than men.

All I felt was hatred.

It didn't matter that he was half alpha and half fae. It didn't matter that he was famous, because every fist he swung at my little alpha sealed his fate.

He was a dead man walking.

My stomach rolled as a loud crack echoed through the stadium. He slammed Sadie's body down against the platform.

For a split second, her tiny body was still as it vibrated from the force of his attack.

Her gold limbs trembled. She turned her head, and red blood poured from her nose, down her face as she kicked back with her legs.

My chest rumbled louder, and I fought the urge to vomit. After everything she had been through, everything she had survived, she didn't fucking deserve to take any more abuse. I'd promised her I would protect her.

I was failing.

Inside my blood, my protective instinct reared until every cell in my body was tense with the overwhelming urge to help my little alpha.

I couldn't think. My vision blurred; I could barely see.

A growl rumbled louder from my chest, and I gnashed my teeth until I tasted blood.

As I panicked, Sadie shone.

The platform they were on spun, and a grin split my little alpha's face as she crouched low and showed Demetre her bloody teeth.

She was glorious.

They stopped spinning, and the platform broke off into hundreds of smaller pieces.

Midair, the two alphas leaped from section to section. They slammed fists and feet into each other. Jumping weightlessly through the air, they sparred like macabre soul mates meeting in the afterworld.

The large half warrior was tan, with his swirling sheet of black hair highlighting his bright-pink eyes; Sadie was golden, with her dancing white hair contrasting violently with her red eyes.

Usually, they reminded me of rubies. Now they reminded me of blood.

She grinned as Demetre's fist pummeled her sternum, and she turned and slammed her foot into his knees.

The little alpha was magnificent.

Bile burned the back of my throat as my brain clouded with irrationality. I didn't want her smiling at the alpha who was hurting her.

I wanted him dead.

Blood splayed, and the stadium erupted in screams.

The two beasts pummeling each other enraptured everyone. They jumped from platform to platform like they were weightless.

I rubbed my fist harder against my chest.

It didn't matter that the little alpha could protect herself; every smack of a blow against her skin broke something inside me.

If the queen hadn't made shifting impossible, I knew I would be a roaring bear attacking the man who dared hurt one of my team.

The fact that Sadie barely came to Demetre's armpit didn't help my protective instincts.

Logically, I knew she was holding her own and that it was an even match.

But my skin was tingling with instincts and irrational thoughts.

I trained women and men equally; I was fully aware that females had the physical and mental prowess for war. Sometimes, they were more logical and detail-oriented than the male soldiers. It made them more cunning and effective.

Yet all my prior experiences and ability to remain calm dissipated around the little alpha.

She wasn't just another soldier.

My beast roared in my skull that she was ours, and that meant she didn't fucking fight. We fought *for* her.

Images of my bear gnawing on her attacker's mutilated flesh flashed before my eyes, and my fingertips tingled like my claws were trying to burst free.

A high-pitched whine sounded in Ascher's throat as one of Demetre's punches landed. Ascher didn't get to act upset.

Anger coursed through me, and it took all my restraint not to body-slam Ascher off the platform.

He was the reason the little alpha was forced to fight in front of the bloodthirsty crowd while balancing above a perilous drop.

I raked my hands through my braided hair and focused on my little alpha. Fear, appreciation, and anger burned through me with equal fervor.

Mentally, I willed Demetre to just fucking fall already.

The longer the fight went on, the higher the chance that Sadie would slip up and let him get the better of her.

The little alpha might be cold as ice, but I'd seen her run. It was only a matter of time before her lack of stamina caught up to her.

I tugged at my long braids. If only Sadie could shift into her beast form. It was the only time I didn't worry about her.

She was a massive saber-toothed tiger with teeth longer than my arm.

Right now, she could be snapped like a twig. Sun god help me, I needed to fucking feed her more.

I had been prioritizing her health by reminding her to eat, but I hadn't been militant about it. That was going to change.

She needed more muscles.

Sweat poured from my forehead as Demetre's blows rained harder and her body rattled with the impact.

My chest vibrated louder, a low growl working its way up through my heart.

Then a hand wrapped around her little throat. With a snap, my vision shifted red, and a low buzzing noise coursed through my skull.

With one arm, the fucker dangled Sadie's squirming body above the deathly drop.

She was an immortal alpha, her body built to survive most anything and regenerate quickly. But she was young and scrawny, and there was no guarantee that she wouldn't bleed out completely on the sandy floor.

Terror paralyzed my limbs, and every inch of my skin tingled mercilessly as my beast thrashed inside my skull, desperate to shift and save her.

Demetre smiled as he waved her little body back and forth. He was toying with her before he dropped her.

Something broke inside me, and I roared. Fuck the fae queen; no way was I watching passively.

I wasn't alone.

At the same moment, Cobra and I threw our bodies forward onto fragments of the platforms that floated like stairs between us and Sadie.

In unison, we leaped from fragment to fragment, hoisting our bodies frantically higher and higher toward her.

Something happened between them. A black shadow flashed from Sadie's to Demetre's skin, and the half warrior twitched.

Sadie pried the hand off around her throat. There was nothing beneath her; she was dangling over empty air and a ridiculously far drop.

In slow motion, the hand released her neck, and she pushed away from him.

Sadie reached her hand forward, and a sparkling emerald object

transferred from her attacker into her hand.

Cobra and I were too far away to catch her, and she plummeted past us.

I roared in terror as she hurtled away from us—toward the hard earth.

Cobra leaped atop the platform and slammed his body against Demetre with all his might. The fucker's body flew toward the ground, but it didn't matter.

Sadie was falling.

In a whirl, Ascher threw himself off the platform as Sadie plummeted past.

He dove headfirst through empty air and hard sand with his hands outstretched—a bullet flying toward Sadie.

My beast screamed as Ascher grabbed our little alpha and wrapped his body around her small frame. It should have been *my* body protecting her.

Endless seconds passed as my vision shuddered and horror clenched my heart.

At the last second, Ascher flipped them midair and took the brunt of the fall.

In quick succession, three figures slammed into the sand.

The crowd was dead silent.

Then a thunderous roar shook the stadium as a million fae screamed at the same time.

Bile burned my throat as I looked at the bloody figures lying still in the bottom of the arena.

Tearing my eyes away from the horrific sight, panic and the urge to do something steamrolled through me. I scanned the arena and locked eyes with the cunt who was responsible for Sadie's pain.

About a hundred feet in front of us, the fae queen's blue eyes flashed as she gloated in the stands.

"Help her!" Cobra bellowed at the fae queen as he clawed desperately at the crystal collar around his neck.

The queen smirked at us, and my blood boiled. I didn't anger easily, but when I did...my vision flashed red, and my beast bellowed through my skull.

The cunt was dead.

I grabbed one of the smaller platforms that floated near my head. With all my might, I hurled it at the fae queen.

Whatever fae were controlling the platforms must not have expected an alpha to chuck them in a fit of rage, because it zoomed through the air and

crashed into the stands where the queen had been sitting.

She moved at the last moment, and it missed her.

I roared with frustration.

Then the whole stadium went to hell.

The crowd screamed with excitement at the chaos and violence, and suddenly, a million fae were fighting. Fists flew and people screamed as they attacked each other in a massive brawl.

Pandemonium was contagious.

The moderator said something, but I couldn't discern it over the sounds of chaos.

I knew from stories that only elite fae powerfully controlled an element. But every fae had a small affinity.

In the arena, the fae threw tiny balls of fire, brandished ice daggers, levitated their bodies, and chucked pieces of the concrete stadium at each other.

I didn't care about the fae and their tantrums. My blood boiled that the cunt queen was still alive and fine while Sadie was lying broken at the bottom of the stadium.

Before I could chuck another platform at her, I started to drop from the sky. The levitating platforms, and all the competitors, fell toward the ground.

Whoever had been controlling them wasn't doing it anymore.

"Reach for me!" I bellowed at Cobra as he plunged downward beside me.

He reached out his arms, and I grabbed him. With all my might, I threw him toward the stadium. He flew to the side and crashed into the brawling crowd unharmed.

The platforms dropped around me, and I launched myself across them, pushing off with all my leg strength and leaping ridiculous distances.

I fought against gravity as I threw my body toward the side of the stadium.

Sadie needed my help.

If I fell from this height, it would knock me unconscious, and I needed to help her. I needed to get to my little alpha.

With one massive grunt, I pushed off a platform with all my alpha strength. Hands outstretched, flying fifty feet through the air, I grabbed the wall on the edge of the fighting crowd with the tips of my fingers.

As I hauled myself over the edge of the arena, the crowd gave me a wide berth. They fought each other, but no one touched me.

In the middle of the stadium, the air fae hovered above the ground and smirked at the chaos all around.

On the sandy pit that was the floor, a large mound was raised hundreds of feet in the air. The earth fae competitors had caught themselves when they'd fallen from their platform.

Meanwhile, the water fae competitors had constructed weapons. They were all hanging safely off the side of the stadium. They'd speared themselves with ice arrows and somehow shot themselves against the wall. Elite fae were virtually indestructible; they'd be fine.

The surrounding chaos blended away as I stared at Sadie's limp form on the sandy floor. She lay atop Ascher's broken body in a pool of blood.

I roared with rage.

Cobra's pale frame leaped past me as he jumped down the sides of the stadium. The jewels in his skin twinkled in the sun, and his gorgeous face was a harsh mask of hatred. We felt the same.

He was a beast of a man, hurtling himself forward at impossible speeds, his powerful muscles bunching and contracting.

I followed him.

We were both ruled by our beasts, desperate to make sure Sadie didn't bleed out. Desperate to help our little alpha. She needed to be okay.

When my feet slammed against the sand, I sprinted as fast as I could toward Sadie. My chest rattled with a roar.

Xerxes stood over Sadie's and Ascher's unconscious forms and looked down at them with a shocked expression.

Ascher's entire body was covered in blood.

Sadie lay atop him, her limbs at odd angles.

Cobra fell to his knees beside her.

"Don't touch her. You could make it worse," I alpha-barked when he reached for her golden limbs.

For the first time in a long time, I prayed to the sun god, asking for the blood to be Ascher's and the little alpha to be all right.

Her broken body would forever be imprinted in my memories, a nightmare I would have for the rest of my immortal life.

"She needs help!" Cobra yelled back at me. Fear and desperation rolled off him in waves.

His frosty scent burned, like stabbing an ice pick through your skull, his alpha pheromones screaming, *Back off!*

“I know.” I pulled at my braids. If we moved her, we could cause her to bleed out.

“Out of my way!” the blue-haired fae princess yelled as she ran across the sand toward us.

Instinctually, I threw my body in front of Sadie and roared a warning. No way was I letting this cunt near my little alpha. She’d just been sitting next to her heinous mother in the stands.

“It’s me, you big oaf!” she screamed back, and my brain struggled to connect dots that were just outside my reach.

“It’s me, Aran! I’m Aran! I can help her, so move before we lose her!”

Aran?

The facial features and bright-aqua hair slightly resembled the beta warrior I’d trained. The princess crossed her arms and tilted her head in the same way Aran had. Her aqua eyes were full of terror as she glanced behind me at Sadie.

Holy shit.

We’d been training and fighting beside a fae for the last months. Every time Ascher and Cobra had wanted to beat up Aran, and I’d stopped them, flashed through my mind.

Aran wasn’t just any fae; she was the lost fae princess. Daughter of the evil queen.

I blinked in confusion.

She was also Sadie’s best friend. They’d been inseparable back in the shifter realm. He had apparently been a she.

So much was happening.

My instincts told me to trust her.

I locked my jaw and moved to the side so the princess, Aran, or whoever could look at Sadie.

Aran pressed her fingers to Sadie’s neck and squeezed her eyes shut. She opened them and said frantically, “We need to bring her to the medical bay. She’s not too far gone. But we need to move now.”

“Nobody can touch her,” Cobra snarled but didn’t look at Aran. Clearly, he was still refusing to talk to women, even in this tense moment.

“Oh, shut the hell up. I never liked you,” Aran growled back with fire.

“Move!” I bellowed at the two squabbling idiots and gently lifted Sadie into my arms.

I didn’t want to disturb the little alpha, but I had to trust Aran. We were

prisoners in the bloodthirsty fae realm. We didn't have many choices.

With Sadie cradled gently in my grasp, I ran out of the arena. Cobra ran beside me and clutched the little alpha's hand in his like he was afraid to let her go. Aran ran ahead and led the way.

We left Ascher behind. He was larger and more resilient than Sadie; he would live. Frankly, if he didn't, I didn't care. It was his fault the little alpha was unconscious in my arms.

Xerxes followed behind us silently. I didn't know why the omega was watching us, and I didn't trust it.

After Ascher's betrayal, I would not ignore my instincts ever again.

When he'd first arrived, I'd thought the horned bastard's demeanor and attitude were suspicious.

I had ignored my suspicion, and look where it had gotten us.

Now my gut was screaming at me that Xerxes was going to bring trouble.

His cinnamon scent was sharp and spicy. If Sadie weren't limp against my chest, I would have confronted him.

I shook my head and focused on following the fae princess, who was sprinting through the massive stadium.

Aran led us down long tunnels and then turned abruptly and pulled a big purple lever on the wall. A floating platform appeared.

She stepped onto it, and I hesitated, remembering everything that had just happened on floating platforms outside.

"Come on, hurry!" Aran ordered, and I reluctantly followed her.

The platform plummeted, and I pressed Sadie to my chest gently, afraid that the sudden movement would injure her.

After endless seconds of falling, the platform came to a soft stop. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw.

Holy shit.

There was an entire *world* under the stadium.

Green grass and a forest of trees surrounded a massive palatial complex. It was a building within a building.

The only sign we were under the stadium was that there wasn't a sky above, just exposed industrial beams thousands of feet above.

I didn't gape at the underground world because Sadie was still limp and unresponsive in my arms. Blood coated her body.

"Hurry!" Aran yelled and ran to a small glass building that sat among trees across from the massive structure.

“I need the best healer. Heal her now!” Aran screamed as we entered the glass building.

A dozen fae immediately sprinted toward us.

My chest vibrated with a growl as I placed Sadie’s limp form onto a gurney.

Before I could order them to take care of her, the doctors whisked her away and slammed the door shut behind them.

“Fae doctors are extremely private, and healing is intense. No one is allowed back with patients,” Aran grumbled and flopped into a comfy chair in what appeared to be a waiting room.

I ignored her and pounded against the door. Cobra screamed expletives and demanded to be let in to see “his kitten.”

The door never opened.

After what felt like forever, I grabbed Cobra and shoved his shaking form into a chair. I slumped beside him and said nothing.

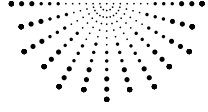
Both of us trembled with rage and fear.

Xerxes stood like a statue against the wall, and I took the opportunity to death glare at him.

Our little alpha better be all right.

No other option was acceptable.

SADIE



PRINCESS BESTIES

“SHOULDN’T she be awake by now?” an effervescent female voice asked above me.

A stuffy male voice said haughtily, “Your highness, she’s lost seventy percent of the blood in her body. It will be a miracle if she wakes up in the next few days. She has been in a coma for three days and is disturbingly small, weak, and scrawny. Frankly, I don’t understand how she has survived as lon—”

“Boo,” I said as I opened my eyes and shot up out of bed.

The fae doctor screamed like a ninny and threw his clipboard against the wall. It rattled with a loud crack.

“Not dead yet, bitch.” I made a duck face and held up two peace signs.

There was a long moment as the doctor and gorgeous girl sitting beside my bed gaped at me.

Then I ruined the moment by suffering an aggressive coughing attack. I wheezed and hacked as my lungs struggled to inflate.

The numb no longer coursed through my body, and I desperately wanted it back.

Every bone in my body ached, which made sense because the last thing I remembered was going splat against the ground.

Frankly, I was shocked to still be alive.

Also, a tiny part of me was annoyed that I *was* still among the living. At this point, I was looking forward to the sun god’s afterworld.

Something told me it was going to be more relaxing than my current reality.

At least I hadn’t suffered from nightmares about blood while I was passed

out after falling hundreds of feet. A minor consolation.

The doctor gave me an unimpressed look, then stomped out of the shiny white room in a huff. He mumbled something about “a psychotic alpha” under his breath.

I finger-waved as he left.

One thing was consistent in both realms—men were so dramatic. It was exhausting.

The steel door rattled closed behind the doctor, and I admired its shininess.

Everything inside the room was fancy steel, glass, and sleek lines. It was shiny and new, nothing like the gothic architecture of the shifter realm.

Before I could call after the doctor and ask for a gallon of pain medication, and maybe heckle him a little, long limbs slammed against me.

With an “oomph,” I struggled against my attacker.

The scent of frosty death overwhelmed me, and it took my brain a second to process that I wasn’t being attacked.

I recognized the scent. It wasn’t a cool frost like Cobra’s scent. It was so icy and dark it made my eyes water.

I was surprised my tears didn’t freeze on my face.

“Oh my sun god, are you okay?” a feminine voice asked in a rush.

“Are you by chance my lying BFF?” I slapped my hands along the fae’s lithe body.

“Duh, it’s me!” Arabella, the fae princess—also known as my best friend, Aran—raised her head back and speared me with a familiar arched eyebrow.

Her brilliant turquoise eyes sparkled with familiar mischief.

“You smell weird,” I blurted out.

The scent of icy death was seriously throwing me off. It was so overpowering it made the hairs on my arms stand up and goose bumps break out all over my body.

“And you’re a whore who just took a century off my life.” Aran hugged me tighter, like she was afraid I was going to disappear into thin air.

“So want to explain your breasts?” I gently patted her hair.

The longer she held me, the more her scent grew on me. I no longer wanted to push her away and run for my life.

Still, my head was spinning from the aftermath of the numb, and every cell in my body hurt from going splat.

The room was a hazy daze.

A random thought trickled through my brain as I inhaled her scent. *Aran is extremely powerful.*

My alpha instincts, the saber-toothed tiger in my soul, recognized that I was in the presence of a predator.

My best friend grinned at me and rolled her eyes dramatically. “Yes, I am extremely voluptuous. Next question.”

I grinned back and chuckled.

It didn’t matter how powerful she was or who her mother was; this was my best friend. Her energy matched mine, and I relaxed for the first time since the kidnapping.

“I wouldn’t *exactly* say that.” I gestured to her lithe body and smaller proportions. “Hate to break it to you: we’re in the same itty-bitty titty committee.”

Aran threw her head back and laughed.

Her long, bright-aqua hair fell in a silky waterfall down to her waist. Up close, her features were stunning.

I groaned and threw my hand over my forehead dramatically. “Dude, you’re so pretty. This is going to kill my self-esteem. We can’t be friends.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Aran went to slap me but stopped at the last minute when she remembered I was covered in bruises.

“Obviously I’m joking,” I chuckled weakly and scooted over so she could lie beside me on the bed. “It’s actually way cool that you’re also a girl. Now we can have sleepovers or whatever, and it won’t be weird.”

“Thank the sun god,” she said sarcastically as she rested her head on my shoulder and snuggled closer.

For a long moment, we lay in silence.

“So a lot has happened,” I said sarcastically. “Want to explain the whole princess thing?”

She turned and stared at me.

Her turquoise eyes were heavy with sadness.

Her mouth opened and closed, like she wanted to speak but didn’t know where to start.

I asked the important question: “So when you were masquerading as a boy, did you have a dick?”

She nodded. “Massive cock. Literally the biggest.”

“Wow, really?” I was impressed.

“Sadly, no.” Aran chuckled and showed off the silver ring on her finger.

“If I twist it three times, it creates an enchantment that disguises me as a boy. It’s very powerful, but all enchantments have their limits. It mostly focused on disguising my hair, face, and chest. Mostly, everything else stayed the same.”

“Why not just cut your hair?” I asked as I stared at her gorgeous features. The enchantment had done an amazing job of disguising her beauty.

Aran shook her head. “My blue hair is weird. I literally can’t cut it. It won’t break. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

I ran my hand through the long tresses, and the strands fell through my fingers like spun silk. From what I’d experienced, the fae were gorgeous and deadly.

Aran fit the bill perfectly.

“I wanted to tell you soooo many times. I’m so sorry.” Her signature cocky smile fell, and she stared at me with a haunted expression.

I hugged her to let her know I didn’t care and asked in a mocking voice, “Well, what do I call you now? Aran or Arabella, the realm’s loveliest fae princess?”

Her face split with a toothy grin. “You can call me—the baddest bitch in the fae realm.”

I raised my eyebrow

She laughed. “I’m obviously joking.”

She wasn’t joking.

“Call me Ara. That’s what I’ve always gone by.”

“Really? You seem like more of an Arabella. All pink and princessy.”

“I’m going to kill you.” She hit me gently with her hand.

I winced as my arm smarted. It felt like someone had thrown me off a thousand-foot platform.

Oh, wait, they had.

Once again, my life was upsetting.

I rubbed at my arm. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Sorry, but you’re Aran to me. I can’t call you something else now.”

“Whatever,” she said, but couldn’t hold back her smile.

For a long moment, we just grinned at each other in comfortable silence.

Then I addressed the elephant in the room. “So how long have you been on the run from your genuinely awful, terrifying, horror-inducing mother? She seems like a *super* nice lady.”

For a second, Aran’s pale skin went white as a sheet and her eyes

rounded, large and haunted.

When she spoke, her gaze was distant, like she was reliving some trauma. “Since I was a baby in the cradle and she lit me on fire every time I cried.”

I grimaced and hugged her gently.

Aran continued quietly, “I ran off to the shifter realm when I was fifteen years old. That’s when she wanted to enroll me in the realm’s elite breeding program.”

It looked like both of us needed extensive psychological help. “Breeding program?” My brain struggled to understand what that could even mean.

“Let’s just say the fae realm is very open about sex. There are clinics where anyone can just walk in and choose partners with similar desires as themselves, and they’re normal and unproblematic. But the elite society has their own special breeding programs that are way less consensual. Trust me, it’s creepy. You don’t want to know.”

I asked the important hard-hitting question: “As a person from another realm, hypothetically, what are the chances that I could participate in one of the unproblematic sex clinics?”

Aran rolled off the bed and glared down at me. “You are *not* wondering about a sex clinic after you almost died? Do you know how stressed I’ve been?”

With a serious expression, I said, “Yeah, but I saw the moon goddess after I went splat, and she told me I had to go to a clinic and lose my virginity in order to save the realm from the evil queen.”

There was a long pause.

“Really?” Aran squinted, like she couldn’t decide if I was joking or not.

“No, dumbass. I saw the dark abyss of death and then woke up to a fae doctor talking shit about me.” The girl was embarrassingly gullible.

Her blue eyes darkened, and the smile fell from her face at a reminder of how close I’d been to death. “My mother’s such a bitch. I ran through a random portal at fifteen to escape her, but I never imagined she would force a woman to compete in the Fae Games.”

I tried to smile, but it came out more of a grimace. “Yeah, she sucks.” Another question popped into my head. “Wait, how did you fool people into thinking you were a beta?”

Aran shook her head in confusion. “Dude, it’s so weird. I hid out in a small shifter town, working in the stables as a boy until I was eighteen. One day, a man in a cloak said I needed to go with him. He knocked me out

before I could react, and I woke up at the fortress to everyone calling me a beta.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait, a dude in a black cloak who kept himself completely hidden? He was super tall?”

Aran squinted at me. “Yeah, but all I saw of his face was electric-blue eyes. Why?”

Holy sun god’s tits.

I remembered blue eyes glowing at me as he’d flung me over his shoulder and run from the sacred lake.

I was going to be sick.

A horrible thought struck me—what if all the servants in the shifter realm weren’t really getting tested?

“A cloaked guy randomly came for me too,” I whispered.

A long moment passed as we stared at each other in silence.

Aran asked, “Why does creepy shit keep happening to us?”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked her.

“That we’re cursed and totally in some deep shit that is way over our heads and we don’t even realize it?”

I pursed my lips. “I was actually going to say that it’s super weird that Demetre has beef with me. Like he was my childhood crush, and then he just *turned* on me like that? So rude!”

Yes, I knew that the cloaked man was freaky.

I also knew that I was five seconds away from a mental breakdown and needed to focus on something less terrifying.

Aran choked. “You had a childhood crush on Demetre? Are you unwell? That man is the rudest, most pigheaded, misogynistic asshole to ever walk the fae realm.”

I pursed my lips and thought about it. “Well, in stories, he seemed cool. He’s a half warrior, and his alpha form is a *dragon*. You can’t tell me you never had the tiniest crush on him.”

Objectively, the man was sexy as hell.

Subjectively, after the events in the Fae Games, he had the personality of a schizophrenic rock.

But you couldn’t argue—the man had a presence.

“No, an ass is an ass. The man choked you out and dropped you to your potential death. I can’t believe you’re defending him!” Aran punched the air aggressively like she always did when she was angry.

Except now she was so gorgeous, that sparkles and glitter practically filled the surrounding air. She was *not* intimidating.

I shook my head. “I’m not! I literally want him to die painfully and as soon as possible. I’m just pointing out that he is totally crushable before you get to know him.”

Aran mimed vomiting.

“Speaking of celebrities, any perks of being a princess? Want to get me out of these Fae Games so I can keep living?” I gave her a big smile and a thumbs-up.

Aran tugged at the diamond collar around her neck. It was the same one that Cobra wore. “I wish, but Mommy dearest has me under lock and key.”

She started pulling at it so aggressively that I worried she would choke herself out.

Clearly, mental health was neither of our strengths.

Aran groaned as she wrenched at her neck. “Not that it really matters. I’ve never shown any sign of elemental ability, so I don’t know why she bothers with the enchanted collar. I’m worse than useless against her.”

“You don’t smell powerless. You smell like frosty death.”

Aran kept tugging at the collar like a maniac. “Elite fae *always* show signs of their power at a young age. I never have. Even if I show abilities, I’ll be weak.”

My scratchy voice was rough with emotion. “I know what it’s like to feel powerless.” Dick whipping me flashed through my mind.

For the longest time, my soul had been crushed by the chains of an awful existence. When you woke up and went to sleep every night knowing you were powerless, it changed you.

It hardened you. Not in a good way.

“But I still think you’re powerful,” I said as I inhaled her scent. I’d bet all my money on it.

“Nope.” Aran threw her head back and sighed with the heaviness of a much older person as she tugged at the crystals around her neck.

“Well, at least we’re both screwed together.” I tugged her into a bear hug to stop her from pulling frantically at the collar.

Aran melted against me, and my heart sparked with satisfaction. I was getting good at hugging.

Suddenly, she pulled back. Her face was set in her signature stubborn expression. “No, I’m still a fucking princess, and you’re an alpha that shifts

into a saber-toothed tiger. We aren't screwed. I have palace resources. I can't directly oppose my mother, but I can take little steps to help you."

I blurted out, "Could you somehow find a man in the shifter realm for me?"

"Done. I have a couple of guards under my thumb. Who is the man?"

"Dick. He's a century-old beta who lives and works in a tavern named after him in a small town up north."

"What do you want me to do with him?" Aran asked as she looked at me curiously. I had never told her about him.

Never told *anyone* until recently.

"Preferably, kill him. At least capture him and maybe even bring him here so I could question him."

Aran didn't ask a single question; that was why she was my best friend. Instead, she smiled, and it wasn't a friendly expression. Her gorgeous features were hard as ice, her aqua eyes blizzards of rage.

For a second, she reminded me of her mother.

But instead of fear, I just felt pride that she was my friend.

She'd grown up under the queen's thumb and was still a badass.

"As an apology for deceiving you, and my mother kidnapping you to make you fight in the Fae Games, I will bring you Dick's liver. Warm." She licked her lips like a maniac.

I felt less pride. "All right, let's try to rein in our crazy. But seriously, if you kill or bring me Dick, I'll forgive you for all your lies," I said dramatically.

Aran nodded, spit into her hand, and held it out for me to shake.

I grimaced at her spit. It was probably a weird fae custom, an enchantment to bind our promise.

I spit into my hand and held it out.

She shook my hand aggressively.

"So, are we now bound to our promise forever or something?" I asked.

Aran grinned. "Nah, I saw it in a bootleg human movie about a camp during the summer months. Apparently, it makes a promise extra solid."

I regretted touching her hand.

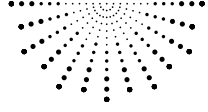
"We're gonna survive," I said with conviction to reassure myself as I wiped her gross spit off my hand.

"Oh, I definitely will. The stake master is still out on whether you live through the games."

I narrowed my eyes at her but didn't ask who the stake master was.
Something told me I didn't want to know.

The fae realm was all sorts of messed up.

SADIE



REUNIONS

“PUT ME DOWN RIGHT NOW!” I alpha-barked with command and force.

Of course, Jax didn’t put me down; he just squeezed me tighter against his massive chest.

I huffed like I was annoyed, but played with one of his gold-covered braids and relaxed appreciatively against him.

The aftermath of the fall, and the numb, had left me weak.

According to Aran, the doctors didn’t allow visitors in the health clinic, and she’d only gotten through because she was the literal princess. She’d said the alphas had lost their shit while I’d been in a small coma.

Aran had also explained that we were prisoners underneath the stadium. The one elevating platform that led out was enchanted, so only pure-blooded fae could work it.

Therefore, we weren’t kept in physical chains and had free rein to live our lives underneath the fae’s direction.

You didn’t need chains when you were trapped in an enchanted world in the fae realm.

I wasn’t dumb enough to think escaping was an option. We were completely under the thumb of the fae queen.

Still, I was grateful they didn’t chain me in a dark, feces-smeared cellar, which was where I’d seen my life heading a couple days ago.

When I’d first walked out of the health clinic, I’d been nervous that the alphas were being kept somewhere else. That we would be separated and I would be on my own.

The alpha men might be annoying, but I’d become accustomed to their constant overbearing energy.

As soon as I'd hobbled out of the glass clinic doors, my fears had been relieved because three alphas had attacked me.

Jax had immediately wrapped me in a bear hug and squeezed with all his might.

I was 99 percent sure he'd broken one of my ribs, but I didn't tell him because I knew he would freak out if he thought he hurt me.

His enormous chest rumbled against me with steady vibrations that reminded me of a cat's purr, and the scent of roasted chestnuts warmed me as he carried me across the world underneath the stadium.

Without the two suns, the air had a slight chill, and fans blew a breeze that made me shiver.

It had taken one day of hot sunshine for me to become a wimp.

I breathed in his chestnut scent and sighed as my body relaxed further against him. Jax was so warm, large, and sturdy, it was impossible to not feel completely at ease around him.

"I thought I almost lost you," Jax whispered softly as he held me tight against him. He then mumbled a bunch of things under his breath about sisters and women being the death of him.

"Nope, you're stuck with me." I grinned up at him, and his warm chestnut scent spiked richer as he enveloped me.

As Jax carried me through the forest, Ascher lifted a tattooed hand like he was going to touch me.

"Touch her and you die," Cobra sneered and grabbed Ascher's wrist before his hand made contact.

Unlike Jax, the other alphas were *not* relaxing.

Ascher and Cobra stared each other down, and Jax just walked ahead of them, ignoring their antics.

"You are not relaxing!" I shouted back to them with exasperation, just to clarify that their energy was *not* cute.

Men needed to be reminded that they were problematic. Often.

"I'll show you relaxing," Cobra sneered back automatically.

"Is that a threat?" I asked with a yawn as I snuggled against Jax's warm chest muscles. I was unbothered by Cobra's energy. The man was perpetually unwell.

"It could be," Cobra said, but he licked his lips in a way that was extremely unthreatening. He appeared almost...hungry.

Jax's chest rumbled louder, less of a purr and more of a warning to stay

away. “Don’t threaten her,” he said as he cradled me like I was precious.

I nodded and cuddled against the big man while smirking over his shoulder at Cobra.

The frosty snake man narrowed his stunning emerald eyes at me like he knew exactly what I was doing.

Unlike Jax, Cobra’s first reaction had not been to hug me.

No, when I’d first come out from the health clinic, Cobra had grabbed my shoulders and screamed in my face.

He’d ranted on and on about how I’d put myself in danger and acted inappropriately. Since tension had literally radiated off him in waves, I’d given his bad coping skills a pass.

It was clear he’d been worried about me and freaking out.

A part of me liked that I’d caused such a stir. She was toxic Sadie, and I wasn’t proud of her.

As a result, I’d smiled and nodded while Cobra ranted at me, but truthfully, I’d zoned out as soon as he’d started speaking.

All I was getting was that he was *obsessed* with me.

At this rate, I was doing a lot with the whole badass, fighting saber-toothed tiger form. It was about time someone became enamored.

Cobra’s handsome face had been inches from my own as he’d ranted, and the emeralds dusting his high cheekbones were sparkly. When Cobra had yelled something about obedience, I had snapped out of admiring his beauty and shoved him away.

Nope, I took it back. His energy was *not* cute.

The man was unhinged.

In contrast, since I had come out of the clinic, Ascher had stood still and said nothing. He’d been just staring down at me with an emotionless expression.

His jaw was clenched tight, like he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

Ascher also looked awful.

Scrapes and bruises covered his tattooed skin, and his gold hair was brown with sand. The tip of one of his onyx horns had broken off.

Since I was also covered in scrapes, I wasn’t one to talk.

I didn’t want to say anything to him, but it felt like I was breaching some etiquette by not. I needed the manual on “what to do when your betrayer swan dives thousands of feet onto the ground to cushion your fall.”

It was confusing.

Therefore, I expressed my emotions like a mature, rational adult. I leaned over the side of Jax's hold, punched Ascher in the arm, and said, "Nice catch."

All three men growled.

"Don't touch him," Cobra sneered at the same time Ascher said, "Never do that again, Princess."

"Too soon?" I asked as Jax squeezed me tighter and cradled me to his chest like I was a little kitten that needed protection.

The rest of the way, he carried me gingerly, like I was a delicate flower that would break at any bump.

Every time I offered to walk, his chest rumbled with a growl and he held me closer.

So I laid my head back and relaxed against his warm biceps as we walked over plush grass, through a forest of spindly trees.

It was nice to be carried for once.

If I hadn't looked up at the exposed ceiling beams, I would have thought I was outside. Not deep underground, beneath the stadium.

It was bizarre.

Aran led the way in front of us, Jax followed with me against his chest, and Ascher and Cobra muttered expletives beside us as they fought with each other.

Xerxes trailed behind the group silently.

He said nothing, just walked in the shadows with his long blond hair flowing in a glorious wave, reminding me I couldn't remember the last time I brushed my hair.

As I stared at the handsome omega over Jax's shoulder, I realized my stiletto heel was no longer sticking out of his bicep.

I couldn't decide if I was sad or glad that he'd taken it out.

Suddenly, we stepped out of the random forest and stood in front of a massive building that I had somehow missed.

There was a giant structure *within* the colossal stadium. It was at least twenty times bigger than the health clinic I had just been in.

I still couldn't figure out why there was a *forest* in the arena's basement.

It was official: the fae realm was weird and confusing.

I gaped at the massive structure before us. Steel and glass glinted under the fluorescent lights on the ceiling high above.

Long bamboo stalks lined the entrance, and they clacked together in the

hum of the fan-generated breeze.

It was industrial and natural at the same time—something I didn't know was possible.

The building was about two stories tall, but it spread out across the grassy plain of the underground stadium as far as my eye could see.

It was palatial.

Jax put me down, and I wobbled on my tired legs. Every inch of body was covered in bruises and ached something fierce.

Aran hugged me tightly. "This is where you train during the games. I have to go before my mother dearest loses her shit and sets me on fire. I'll be back as soon as I can."

She didn't laugh, and I blanched when I realized she wasn't joking. Her mother might actually set her on fire.

Since I was literally a prisoner in a gladiator-style game and had just cannon balled onto hard sand, I wasn't in any position to feel bad for anyone.

Still, I found my stomach churning for Aran.

She had disguised herself and gone to extreme measures to escape her mother. Now she was back under her thumb.

Aran sprinted off across the grass, and I fought the urge to run after her. I didn't want her alone with her mother.

Just as I was about to chase her down, the massive glass door of the palatial complex slid upward and revealed a marble, steel, and glass atrium.

The five of us stepped forward hesitantly.

I gaped at the throng of fae inside. The air buzzed with the chaotic noise of many people in one place.

The building had an open floor plan of two stories, and fae bustled around everywhere. There was an uncovered walkway above our heads and doors all over the walls.

Massive marble statues were the focal point of the atrium.

We stepped forward into a wall of cool air.

The air inside the stadium had been temperature controlled, yet this building was even *cooler* inside. My head hurt trying to make sense of it all.

"Alpha team, reporting," an automatic voice echoed loudly through the atrium as soon as we entered.

A few fae stopped to look at us, but most ignored us as they hurried past. Some held briefcases like they were doing business, while others carried tools and metal like they were constructing things.

“Welcome to the Fae Games Training Village,” a tall brown-haired fae said as she seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Apparently, they had a welcoming committee.

Not the vibes I had expected after we’d just fought for our lives in the gladiator complex.

The fae guide didn’t offer us her name, just stood in the atrium and gestured around like we were supposed to be impressed by the “village.” It was an entire ecosystem unto itself.

With wide eyes, I inspected the statues that almost touched the ceiling of the two-story atrium.

They were the largest marble statues I’d ever seen, and they appeared to depict the fae elements.

The first statue was of a male fae flying with his arms spread.

The second male was holding a long, icy sword.

The third had flames for hair, and the fourth had rocks floating around his head.

It was clear what they symbolized: air, water, fire, and earth.

But it was the fifth statue that captured my attention.

Unlike the others, the massive structure depicted a fae lying on the ground. A pool of painted blood surrounded him.

“What is that fifth statue?” I pointed to the bloody person with a grimace. The sculpture reminded me of the painting on the wall of the queen’s palace.

The fae guide said dismissively, “A long-lost race of fae. We don’t speak of them. The fae queen disposed of them for the safety of the realm.”

“Then why is there still a statue of them?” I asked with confusion. It looked like the fae was dying, and I didn’t understand how the queen had eliminated a threat.

Knowing her royal bitchiness, she’d probably just killed them off for the fun of it.

The guide gasped and looked at me like I was covered in fecal matter or something equally heinous. “We don’t destroy art in this realm!”

I squinted at her.

They were fine with torturing innocent people in aggressive physical combat situations, but destroying art was where they crossed the line?

She squinted back.

After a long, awkward standoff, I realized she wasn’t joking, and I chuckled to myself.

I definitely would not be telling her about the time I'd broken a statue in school because I'd run into it.

I had learned the hard way that other girls didn't like it when you fed the rats in your room and made them a home under your bed. My roommate had chased me down the hall and threatened to kill Peaches—my pet rat.

While running for Peaches's life, I accidentally knocked over a statue of the sun god and broke it. As punishment, the school had made me spend the night in the forest in the dead of winter without a jacket on.

The temperatures had gotten well below negative forty degrees.

But the joke was on them because one winter, Dick hadn't let me wear a jacket at all.

My shifter blood was thick in my veins, and that night, only four of my fingers had turned white with frostbite.

The headmistress had definitely thought I would die. I'd shown her.

About a dozen fae walked by talking loudly, and their chatter brought me out of my musings and back into the present.

Hopefully, the fae would learn to respect sentient life as much as they respected art.

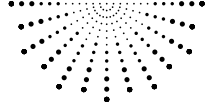
Still, as the carved-out eyes of the massive statue stared back at me, I couldn't help but shudder at the blood that was painted in a pool around the keeled-over fae.

My skin prickled with foreboding, and I swallowed down a sudden bout of nausea.

How had an entire species of fae become extinct?

I didn't want to find out.

SADIE



SLEEPING ARRANGEMENTS

THE COMPLEX WAS a massive architectural monument of metal, mirrors, and plants.

Every time I thought about the fact that I was in a building within a building, underneath a stadium, my brain exploded.

With a clack of her high heels, our tour guide motioned for us to follow her and blabbed excessively about the village's gyms, shops, and eateries.

The guide gestured to door after door as she gave us a tour of the complex.

"So, is this where we live in between fights?" I asked with confusion as she pointed out yet another beauty parlor and an office space.

She smiled at me nicely, like we were talking about something pleasant, not the brutal games I was being forced to take part in.

"This is where competitors fight and train to hone their skills so they can put on the best performance for the realm."

My gut twisted, and something died inside of me.

With a deep breath, I spoke my truth. "I'm not training. I refuse."

My poor body could literally not handle another second of damn physical training.

I really had thought we would just chill all day in a dungeon, then randomly fight for our lives in the games, and then chill some more.

At this point, the thought of sitting all day and not moving was downright erotic.

"Would you like me to inform the fae queen of your insubordination?" the guide asked with a serene smile.

"Nope, I'm good." Turned out I was also a coward.

The guide nodded like she'd expected my response. "I will show you to your living facilities. You have the freedom to choose your fitness schedules and routines, although some group classes are mandatory to ensure peak performance."

Her shiny heels clacked loudly on the marble as she led us through the massive building.

"Oh my sun god, is that Cobra?" fae whispered as we walked past. Jax shifted to block their view of him.

Others loudly pointed and said, "Look, it's the alpha shifters and the girl."

I opened my mouth to point out that I was also an alpha, but before I could start a fight, Ascher moved in front of me and growled, "Don't look at her."

His tattoos rippled across his massive frame, and he appeared extra menacing with half of his horn chipped off.

Hell, the way he held himself ramrod straight with his biceps tensed radiated, "stay the fuck away."

Unsurprisingly, the fae shut up when he growled at them, and hurried away.

I turned to point out to Ascher that he was not forgiven and had no right to defend me, when the guide stopped in front of a door and said, "This will be where you live."

The space was three rooms: two bedrooms, each with two beds, and a living area connecting them.

Unlike the cozy brick walls and fireplace in the shifter realm, this space was shiny and modern, with high ceilings.

The room might be large, but with the three alpha men and Xerxes, who were all well over six feet tall, it seemed small.

"We need an extra bed," Xerxes said coldly as he looked around the space and counted the beds.

All four of us bristled and turned to him.

"Can't you find somewhere else to stay? I'm sure your precious queen could make accommodations." I glared at him.

It was bad enough that the rude bastard kept following us everywhere. I didn't want to live with him.

I didn't need his bad energy in my life.

You could just tell when some people were toxic. He was some people.

Xerxes's purple eyes flashed with fire, and he scoffed, "You would want

me gone. Classic alpha. You think you're too good to bunk with an omega?"

"No? I just don't want your rude ass ruining the room's Feng Shui."

He stepped forward threateningly, his massive frame and large muscles bunched with anger as he tried to use his size to intimidate me.

"Step away from her," Jax growled, and shoved me behind him.

"Kitten, play nice," Cobra purred as he petted my hair and cradled my head like a creep.

I struggled to get away from the big snake psycho, but he just laughed like the insane person he was.

"Fuck off," I growled as I tried to regain an ounce of dignity.

When I finally untangled myself from Cobra's frosty-scented grip, Jax and Ascher had cornered Xerxes against the wall.

The omega held twin daggers to their throats and grinned like he wanted to spill blood.

Across the room, the fae guide watched the chaos with a bored expression on her face.

"The queen ordered me to live with you," Xerxes said slowly, his honeyed British accent rolling sweetly off his lips.

At his words, our fae guide snapped to attention and asked us, "Would you like me to inform the fae queen of your insubordination?"

I wanted to stab her, but groaned out, "Fine," before anyone could disagree. No way was I going back to the dungeons.

The guide nodded. "Perfect. Follow me to the bathing area."

There was a long moment as Xerxes held his daggers to Ascher's and Jax's throats, but eventually he pulled away, and we all reluctantly followed the guide.

"Kitten, will you hold my hand?" Cobra purred and held out his pale hand with jewels embedded in it.

"Um, maybe later?" I mumbled as I moved away from him.

The frosty bastard threw his head back and laughed like I had said a hilarious joke, and even Jax looked over at him with concern.

Somewhere between me riding his face in the closet, being naked in front of the entire realm, and swan diving onto hard sand in the arena, something had shifted in Cobra.

He was still the gorgeous snake man who was quick to sneer and be obnoxious, but he was also *different*.

It was almost like he cared about me, but had zero clue how to show his

affections like a normal person.

As the guide showed us the bathroom, I tore my eyes away from Cobra's ridiculously handsome face.

It was a couple of doors down from our bedroom, and the room was large, with a series of stalls and shower heads. There were no privacy curtains or doors.

Just twenty different showers in a long room. Completely open so everyone could see your naked bits.

Since I was the only female competitor, the fae had probably never worried about modesty issues.

I shuddered because it didn't look like I would be showering.

I was about to be a very dirty bird. My sand-coated skin itched just thinking about it.

Before I got the courage to ask about different accommodations, our tour guide led us further down a long hallway.

Finally, we got to the good part.

We exited into a massive cafeteria with different food options along the walls. There were cuisines in shapes and sizes I'd never seen before.

Instead of stopping to grab a bite to eat because I was one second from starving to death, the tour guide hurried down more long corridors.

She showed us a ridiculously large indoor swimming pool, an indoor weight center, an indoor sparring gym, an indoor track, and a door that led to an outdoor running path.

I dry-heaved when she said the last one.

The cat in me loved a good dramatic vomit.

Unaware of my panic attack, the guide handed each of us a flat amethyst crystal. It was smooth, and I touched its glossy surface.

Suddenly, it heated in my hand, and a floating screen popped up above the crystal. Like a cool cucumber, I screamed with surprise and caught it before it broke on the floor.

Once I calmed down, I realized a schedule was projected off the crystal's surface. It must be some type of fancy fae enchantment, and it reminded me of a cell phone in a way.

After I stopped admiring the enchanted stone and actually read the schedule, my will to live left my body.

The schedule was depressing as hell, mostly because it said breakfast ended at eight in the morning and the kitchen closed at nine at night. *So much*

for sleeping in and late-night snacks.

Although, those were the least of my problems.

The schedule also informed me I had group training three times a week in the afternoon, and group runs at five in the morning, four times a week.

A tiny tear slipped out of the corner of my eye when I read the last part.

For a second, I considered telling the fae queen I couldn't do it and just letting her torture me.

I'm not proud of how close I was to choosing the dungeon over running.

The memory of screaming, emaciated prisoners and feces touching my skin was the only thing that stopped me from giving up.

Finally, after what felt like the longest tour ever, our guide left us at the cafeteria. She clacked off in her high heels with a smile, ready to ruin someone else's day.

My stomach rumbled as I took in the crowded eatery.

The village was full of pointy-eared fae: guards, stadium workers, accountants, doctors, and other people milled about, creating a steady buzz of activity.

The palatial structure was so much more than a place for competitors; it was the ecosystem that supported the stadium above. Since a million fae had been in attendance, it made sense that so many people worked and lived beneath it.

"Oh my sun god, it's Cobra!" a woman squealed and gestured to her gaggle of friends.

Suddenly, a stampede of people was heading directly toward us.

They marched like a military unit, and their eyes had the same crazy look that the most intense beta soldiers had back at the fortress.

Jax stepped in front of Cobra protectively. He tugged off his green hoodie and showed off his mountains of impressive muscles.

Then he handed it to Cobra, who quickly pulled it on and tied the strings. He beelined away from the fae and hurried deeper into the crowded cafeteria.

My stomach churned as he hunched his shoulders and ducked his head, desperate to not be recognized.

I swallowed down bile.

Not only had he been forced against his will, but he was also a celebrity for it.

I couldn't even imagine what that did to a person.

Once we lost the terrifying army of fae fans, Cobra stopped sprinting like

his life depended on it, and I looked over the food options.

I gave him a soft, sympathetic smile and reached out to hold his hand.

He whirled and glared down at me, his emerald eyes cold and harsh.

For a long second, I thought he was going to rip his hand away and sneer at me like he always did.

Instead, his eyes softened infinitesimally, and his long fingers tightened around mine. The jewels embedded in his warm skin were cold to the touch.

My stomach turned over and my chest squeezed. It was just holding hands, but it felt like so much more.

“So, what should we get to eat?” I asked to ease the tension that strummed between us.

I inspected all the sign options. There were pictures of all types of dishes, and my brain hurt trying to decide.

Instead of discussing the food options like rational adults, Jax pulled out a table seat and alpha-barked, “Sit down.”

Cobra released my hand and alpha-barked, “Don’t move.”

And Ascher alpha-barked, “Obey.”

Instinctually, I plopped down into a chair because their alpha barks forced my body to comply.

For a long moment, I couldn’t move a muscle, and I fantasized about grabbing the chopstick off the table and ramming it up their asses.

“You need to rest. You’ve exerted yourself too much after being in a coma for three days.” Jax clenched his fists at the reminder of my flightless bird moment.

I glared up at him, betrayed by his attitude.

His features softened at my expression, and he gently cupped my chin in his large, callused hand.

His fingers were warm as he slowly dragged them across my jaw. “Please, Sadie, I’m worried about you. You’re covered in bruises. Just rest here for me?”

I couldn’t help but nod as he stared at me with his warm gray eyes and caressed my face.

Cobra nodded. “Yes, stay put. You need to rest.” A weird rattle shook through his chest as he stared at me. He whispered, “I’m going to kill that half warrior fucker. How dare he bruise you like this?”

I rolled my eyes at his melodramatics as my stomach growled.

At this rate, I was going to lose my mind if they didn’t let me hunt down

and kill a bread roll.

Apparently, comas made you *very* hungry.

Who knew?

Jax dropped his hand, which had been subconsciously stroking my face. He tucked it against his side awkwardly, like he had to fight the urge to keep caressing me.

I opened my mouth to point out to Cobra that Ascher had also gone splat and was missing half a horn and no one was making him sit down and rest, but the three of them turned around and sauntered off toward the food.

Cobra looked over his shoulder and winked at me.

With both hands in the air, I flipped him off.

He licked his sinful lips and turned around, unbothered by my rage.

I huffed. So much for me thinking I'd been having a *moment* with Cobra when we'd held hands.

The man was chaotic.

Also, I made a mental note to work on resisting alpha barks, because no one was showing me the respect I deserved.

Xerxes pulled out a seat at the table and sat down across from me.

He said nothing.

Great, now I was abandoned and stuck with the table companion from hell.

"What shampoo do you use?" I asked him the question I'd been dying to say since we'd first met, when he'd betrayed us to the fae queen.

It straight up haunted me how luscious his hair was.

Xerxes scrunched his face up like I was an idiot and asked, "What?"

"What?" I asked back intelligently.

"If it isn't the little alpha cunt," a deep voice said and interrupted my riveting conversation with Xerxes.

I looked over to find a tall fae man with a blockhead and dark eyes staring back at me. He was the water fae who had given me the death glare during the opening ceremony.

My brain ached with a tension headache.

I'd done this song and dance before, and it didn't take a genius to see where it was heading.

First, it had been the bearded beta in the shifter realm; then John, who I'd thought was a nice guy; then Ascher's betrayal; and now this completely random dude wanted to have beef with me?

“I physically can’t deal with your toxic energy right now. You hate me; I get it. Take a number and get in line.” Rubbing my hands into my eyeballs, I prayed he would suffer cardiac arrest and keel over.

Either there was something wrong with me, or men were generally unwell and at the root of all problems in society.

It was definitely the latter.

Blockhead dude just gaped down at me with his meaty hands clenched into fists and sneered, “Women don’t belong in combat.”

“I totally agree,” I said with a heavy sigh and looked around for the other alphas. They better be getting me something good.

“You-You,” the blockhead man sputtered like he hadn’t expected me to agree with him.

You could practically see his last two brain cells trying to function.

With a few fortifying breaths, he regained his unwell energy. “I don’t care what you agree with. You don’t belong here, and I am going to make sure the realm knows it. You heretic women and your campaign to replace men in battle—it’s disgusting. I won’t allow you to poison the female minds of this realm.”

I gave him a thumbs-up and a big smile. “Good luck with that. It seems like you’re in a real healthy place mentally.”

I was going to go off on a mental limb and guess that this man had never had sex.

Blockhead dude gave off *big* virgin energy. He needed to visit one of those clinics Aran had been talking about because he was so tense and angry.

It just wasn’t healthy.

Sadly, he might be dumb, but he was smart enough to realize I was mocking him. His face turned bright red, and he leaned forward into my personal space.

Suddenly, Xerxes unsheathed one of his wicked blades and reached across the table.

The steel edge pressed flush against the fae’s neck, and a small amount of blood trickled down his throat where the blade pressed into his skin.

“Walk away or you will be reported to the fae queen,” Xerxes said softly.

The water fae looked at the blue crest on Xerxes’s chest and turned pale; all the queen’s guards wore them.

It signaled Xerxes was her bitch.

Blockhead dude backed away without another word.

“Appreciate it,” I said to Xerxes, who cleaned the blood off his blade by licking it. A highly disturbing practice that had me shifting my chair further away from the table.

A small part of me noticed how hot Xerxes looked while licking blood off a dagger.

I ignored that part of myself.

She was unwell and beyond saving.

Xerxes tilted his head like he couldn’t figure me out. “Why didn’t you warn him off? You’re an alpha, yet you did nothing?”

I harrumphed and motioned to my small, unimpressive frame. “Well, you’ve seen me. Even when I can shift, half the time I think there’s been a mistake and I’m not actually an alpha.”

Xerxes narrowed his amethyst eyes. “But you fight like an alpha.”

I scratched my head and wondered how I could explain I had a homicidal voice in my head without sounding like a complete lunatic.

At that exact moment, Jax placed a heaping plate of meat and potatoes in front of my face, and Xerxes’s mask fell back into place.

The omega leaned away and went back to glaring at all of us. His cut jaw and handsome features were tense.

My stomach rumbled, and I greedily shoveled food into my mouth.

Cobra pushed a drink in front of me, and Ascher put down a basket of bread rolls and an entire tub of butter.

The men sat down with their plates but didn’t eat. They just sat and watched me inhale food like absolute freaks.

“So, are we going to talk about the fact that we are all kidnapped from the beast realm?” I asked Jax.

A lot had happened since the dungeon, but I was still trying to process it all.

Jax shook his head. “We have too much to deal with, with the games. We will worry about that later. Eat, little alpha.”

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but the scent of food made my stomach howl.

Instead of arguing, I focused on the delicious dough melting in my mouth and not the fact that I was kidnapped, or the pheromones that saturated the air with all the men sitting so close to me.

Warm chestnuts mixed with rich conifer, frosty snow, and spicy cinnamon.

Together, the men emitted a heady scent, which made it hard to concentrate on my food.

I wanted to lean over and lick them all.

Roll around in their scents until they completely consumed me in a protective bubble of warmth.

Instead of acting like a hussy, I took a massive scoop of butter and placed it on another yeasty roll.

As I focused on stuffing my face, I tried to remind myself that they were controlling psychos and not delicious candies.

Cobra smirked across the table, like he knew what I was thinking about. His handsome face contorted in its signature sneer.

The bread was warm on my tongue, and the buttered dough slowly restored my will to live.

Cobra swiped his red tongue over his luscious lips, Ascher's colorful tattoos bunched as he clenched his jaw and stared at me. Jax's gray eyes were stormy with intensity, and Xerxes's luscious blond hair blew around him in a phantom breeze.

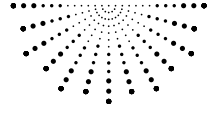
Sun god help me, the men were fine as hell.

Too bad they all had major red flags.

Well, Jax didn't. And Cobra had been through so much. I still didn't forgive Ascher, but he *had* sacrificed his body to save mine.

I was so screwed.

SADIE



HOT SITUATIONS

I WOKE UP SWEATING.

The nightmare had been the worst one yet—because it had been a memory.

It was one of the first times Dick had beaten me and whispered, “I’ll beat the bloody devil out of you. I have to do it. Someday, you’ll understand.”

He hadn’t stopped until I was kneeling in a massive pool of my blood. Lightheaded, I’d barely stumbled to my feet.

I still didn’t understand.

Now I shuddered and cuddled against the warm heat that was surrounding me.

It was delicious.

With a groan, I pulled against my comforters to smother deeper into them.

I stilled.

The first thing I noticed—my blanket was hard as a rock and massive.

The second thing I noticed—the bed smelled like chestnuts over an open fire, and the scent was mouthwatering.

The third thing I noticed—I was sprawled out across Jax’s naked chest and was using one of his pecs as a pillow.

My brain struggled to figure out how I’d gotten into this delicious situation.

I remembered that last night when we’d gotten back from dinner, Ascher and Xerxes had both offered to sleep on the floor.

Then Cobra and Jax had said they would sleep on the floor.

Five minutes later, all the men had been arguing that they should be the

one to *not* sleep in a bed.

Since I'd role-played being a bird with two broken wings a few hours earlier, I was not about to offer to take the floor.

If they all wanted to act toxic and order me around, then I was going to reap the benefits.

Still, I'd been tired as hell, and they wouldn't shut up about why they should sleep on the floor.

So I'd alpha-barked at Jax to get into bed with me and for everyone to shut the fuck up.

The most shocking thing—Jax had *actually* crawled into bed with me. He'd just nodded, pulled back the covers, and slid his massive body beside mine.

All the men had gone dead quiet.

I'd chosen Jax because he was the nicest and cuddliest.

Also, I didn't have the urge to stab him every time he opened his mouth.

However, I hadn't factored in the fact that the man was over seven feet tall and at least triple my bodyweight.

The bed was big, but it wasn't built for a giant.

Still, it had been nice to fall asleep on his bicep as he cuddled against me. He'd smiled down and given me a soft kiss on my forehead.

That was when the sweetness had ended.

I blearily remembered being pushed off the bed a couple of times and fighting for every inch of covers. Jax was a spreader, and boy, did his limbs take up a lot of space.

He wasn't fighting now.

No, at some point Jax must have grabbed me and laid me atop his massive frame.

My face was buried in his pec, and one of his large hands draped across my legs.

The good thing—Jax was wearing boxers, and I had on a big T-shirt and shorts because our room was pre-equipped with male workout clothes.

The bad thing—Jax's boxers weren't doing much to restrain his massive dick, which was stabbing into my stomach like a spear.

Warmth radiated off it through my clothes, and every time he moved, one of his piercings pressed into me.

It was still dark in the room, and from the soft snores, Cobra was still sleeping. There were two beds in two rooms, connected to each other by a

living area in the middle.

Ascher and Xerxes were in the room across the way. It was just me, Jax, and Cobra in this room.

My stomach pinched with queasiness as the scent of roasted chestnuts grew more potent.

I turned my head to the side and stared at one of Jax's gold nipple piercings. I had the most irrational urge to lick it.

Jax shifted underneath me and mumbled some nonsense in his sleep, and as he moved, his large hand shifted up my thigh underneath my shorts. His hand was so massive it wrapped completely around my limb.

The queasiness got worse.

My stomach pinched and my core tingled as the callused pads of Jax's fingers slowly scraped back and forth across my leg.

His breath was even and steady as he slept peacefully beneath me. In contrast, every cell in my body was slowly lighting up into an inferno.

Then I acted crazy.

The longer I stared at Jax's nipple piercing, the more it taunted me.

The more I wanted to lick it.

My mouth watered, and I reassured myself that the room was pitch black and both men were fast asleep. A little lick wouldn't kill anyone.

Just for scientific purposes.

I slowly leaned my head forward and stuck my tongue out a little. I gave his pierced nipple a little taste.

Delicious, warm chestnuts exploded against my tongue. The heat contrasted with his cold piercing, and a shiver tingled down my spine.

My core burned.

His taste and scent perfumed around me, and I swallowed down a groan of desperation. My mouth watered with the urge to drag my tongue across the ridges of his abdomen, across all his impressive muscles.

I wanted to lick him; I wanted to mark him; I wanted to own him.

Before I could decide if it was worth risking another lick, a large hand grabbed the back of my head and tangled in my hair.

Jax pulled me up and forward until his lush lips pressed against my ear.

He whispered super quietly, more breath than sound, "What are you doing, little alpha?"

His hand was tugging on my hair, and his other hand slowly crept higher up my thigh until it rested just below my ass.

The scent of chestnuts became so heady it smelled like they were on fire.

I tried to move my head to look at him, but his hand tightened in my hair so I couldn't move an inch to answer him.

Apparently, it was a rhetorical question.

His tongue flicked out, and he slowly licked from my ear, all the way down my neck. Goose bumps erupted across my skin, and I swallowed down a moan.

I didn't want Cobra to hear us.

"So you want a taste?" Jax whispered against my neck with his lush lips as he ever so slowly scraped his teeth down along my neck. His already deep voice was extra deep from just waking up.

His rough fingers slowly dragged across my ass.

I couldn't hold back a soft moan as I ground against him.

Suddenly, he grabbed my waist with both his hands and rolled over.

I was pinned beneath hundreds of pounds of aroused alpha, and his large body completely dwarfed my smaller frame.

He pushed forward and rubbed his massive dick against my core. A low moan escaped my throat, but Jax pressed his hand across my mouth.

My moan was muffled against his hand.

He leaned forward, his stormy gray eyes glowing softly in the darkness. "Quiet," he ordered, and kept his hand over my mouth.

I nodded as his hips rocked forward against me.

Every time he pressed against my core...stars erupted.

I raised my hips to shove him harder against me, but he held himself still and gently ground against me. He teased me.

My core flamed with fire, and I wanted to scream at him.

Then Jax leaned forward onto his elbows but kept his hand covering my mouth. His golden-jeweled braids fell around us and the cold chains scraped against my overly sensitive skin.

His other hand traveled up my torso. With painful slowness, he dragged his callused fingertip over my stomach and up to my boob.

Warm chestnuts and burning need overwhelmed me so completely I barely noticed that he was touching my scars. From the hardness pressing against my stomach, he didn't either.

Suddenly, his callused fingertips pinched my nipple, and my hips arched off the bed.

Jax pressed his hand harder against my face to muffle my cries.

His finger mercilessly tweaked my nipple, then slowly trailed back down across my stomach.

The callused pads ran over my hip bones and sent shivers through my core.

Jax leaned forward so his hot breath fanned my ear, and his warm body pressed hard against me. "You think you can handle me, little alpha?"

He slipped his fingers under the waistband of my shorts and cupped my pussy in his hand.

I shuddered against him, and he pressed harder against my mouth. His thumb rubbed back and forth against my neck, and he stared down at me with burning desire.

He leaned forward, and his fingers ground against my center.

My mouth parted in ecstasy, and he moved the hand covering my face so his two fingers pressed into my mouth.

Jax wasn't rough as he held my mouth open, but he also wasn't gentle.

With his other hand, he rubbed against my pussy relentlessly, and my vision sparked. Nearly silent, breathy moans escaped from my throat as my body soared higher and higher.

"I know what you and Cobra did in the closet," Jax whispered in my ear as he mercilessly strummed my body higher. "You think I can't smell sweet cranberries dripping off his skin? He still reeks of your scent."

His one hand pressed hard against my clit, and I hurtled over the edge.

I would have yelled from the force of my ecstasy, but Jax put his other massive hand over my mouth.

He shoved his fingers against my tongue so I couldn't make a noise. Pinned to the bed, he mercilessly rubbed my pussy until my limbs stopped shaking with orgasm.

Then he took his soaking fingers away from my core and sucked them into his mouth. I shuddered beneath him at the sight of Jax licking my juices.

I wanted to taste him the same way; I wanted to bathe in roasted chestnuts.

"You're going to take me. All of me," Jax said as he freed his massive cock.

I nodded, delirious with ecstasy from my orgasm.

Sure, Jax was the sweet one, but he was also the massive man who bossed Cobra around in the bedroom.

Now that I was on the receiving end of his dominance, my entire body

strummed with need.

He was delicious.

Jax leaned back. He balanced atop me with his powerful thighs spread wide.

Slowly, he dragged his fingers away from my mouth and pulled his large cock out of his boxers.

Gold piercings studded his dick with its large knot, and his balls were swollen and large below it.

I reached forward tentatively and touched him.

I tried to wrap my fingers around him, but he was so large my fingers couldn't touch, and as I grabbed him, his cold metal piercings contrasted with his warm skin and burned my hand.

Jax jerked at my touch and bit down on his knuckles to silence his groan.

He reached forward with his other hand and tweaked my nipples as I stroked him.

With his large thighs resting atop me, he looked like a dark god from a sinful realm who had come to ruin me.

I wanted him to.

His alpha knot was thick and heavy at the base of his shaft, and as I stroked him, it grew impossibly large.

Jax jerked, and pre-cum dripped onto my hands.

Then I brought my fingers to my mouth and licked it tentatively. Jax shuddered above me and bit down on his knuckles.

Warm chestnuts and spice exploded across my tongue, and my belly clenched with need. He tasted better than I'd imagined, richer and headier than his scent.

I leaned my head forward to taste him, and he scooted up so his impressively weighty body was hovering above my shoulders, his pierced dick in front of my face.

He fisted my hair and dragged my face closer to his dick.

Jax whispered, "Lick it so I can take you deep."

His one hand gripped my hair, and his other wrapped around my neck.

My shirt was bunched up, so my body was exposed beneath him, but he didn't look down at my scars with disgust.

No, his gray eyes glowed, and he looked at me with an intensity that made my core spasm. He stared down at me like he wanted to consume me.

He guided his massive, pierced dick to my face and tugged lightly on my

hair as he pushed into me.

My mouth barely fit around his massive dick, and I choked, trying to suck on its wide girth.

Jax's grip on my hair tightened, and he moved my head back and forth, his abs bunching as he watched me take him into my mouth with an intense expression.

He owned me, and I was loving every second of it.

"Don't fucking touch her," Cobra said with an icy voice from the bed next to us. The scent of frosty ice mixed with warm chestnuts and burned my nose.

It smelled like a snowstorm had blown into the room.

Both of us stilled.

Jax buried his hands in my hair, and he pushed my mouth further down his dick until I choked.

My pussy spasmed.

His entire body was impossibly hard, his massive muscles bunching as he tensed.

If his gray eyes were stormy before, now they were blizzards.

A low rumble shook through his chest, and he ever so slowly dragged me by my hair off his dick.

There was a pop as I released him from my mouth.

Instantly, I missed the taste of roasted chestnuts.

"She's not your property," Jax growled back as he reached a hand down and tweaked my oversensitive nipples.

I arched beneath him as my core flooded with need.

He guided my head back to his dick, and his hands forced my head up and down as he groaned louder. I moaned around him, and his powerful hips jerked.

It was hot as hell to hear Jax tell off Cobra while fucking my mouth.

Jax's gray eyes stared down at me as he ignored the other alpha.

I had his full attention.

Then Jax pulled his wet dick out of my mouth and shifted back down the bed until our bodies were aligned.

I arched my pelvis up, and with one yank, Jax ripped my shorts clean off my body.

Once again, he leaned forward and grabbed the back of my neck with one of his massive hands.

This time, his warm body weight pressed flush against me. With each grind of our hips, his fingers tightened slowly around my throat.

My vision burst with stars as he gently choked me and rubbed against me.

Slowly, Jax positioned himself against my entrance.

I arched, desperate to feel him. He looked down at where our cores met and spit into his hands. He ran the spit down onto his dick and then rubbed it against my clit.

My legs trembled and my need spiked higher at the sight of the big man prepping me. My arousal gushed across the tip of his dick.

“You’re going to take all of me,” Jax said as he stared at me with glowing gray eyes.

I nodded, but it wasn’t a question.

Jax’s tip slowly penetrated me as his fingers rubbed against my clit, and I saw stars.

I mewled beneath him.

Suddenly, the weight above me disappeared.

Cobra’s body slammed Jax off the bed and growled with a weird rattling noise. Jax roared back.

I bit back a scream of frustration as loud slaps echoed through the room as the two alphas beat the shit out of each other.

Jax threw Cobra against the wall, and I rolled my eyes.

“She is mine. My kitten!” Cobra roared and grunted as they grappled until Jax pinned him against the wall.

Jax growled, long and low. “We’ve talked about this. You can’t just possess people. That’s not how it works.”

Cobra said through gritted teeth as they traded blows, “But you’re mine. Now so is she.”

Jax shook his head, long braids flying, and threw Cobra’s body against the wall. “Learn to fucking share, or you won’t have to worry about possessing *anyone*.”

“Is that a threat?” Cobra’s eyes flickered to snake eyes.

I was momentarily distracted from the dramatic alpha entertainment because the bedroom door was thrown open.

“What’s going on in here?” Ascher stood at the door, shirtless, with his golden hair disheveled, sweatpants hanging low and showing off his tattoos and V line.

Suddenly, my mouth was dry.

His amber eyes flashed as he took in the fact that both Jax and I were naked.

Ascher grunted and adjusted his dick in his sweatpants. He tensed his hands and licked his lush lips slowly.

He stared at me with the hunger of a starving man, and I quickly wrapped a blanket around my torso to hide my scars and exposed breasts.

Apparently, the alphas weren't repulsed by my scars because they weren't looking at me with anything *close* to disgust.

After years of self-hatred, it was weird.

"What the fuck?" Xerxes growled as he stepped forward behind Ascher. He was also shirtless, and his skin was shockingly unmarred compared to Ascher's tattooed flesh.

Of course, because the moon goddess hated me, Xerxes also had an eight-pack of muscles and a deep V line that was as impressive as Ascher's.

He was slightly taller and wider than Ascher, and his muscles bunched deliciously in the dim light.

Xerxes's long blond hair was slightly tousled, his amethyst eyes practically glowed with annoyance, and his twin daggers flashed. He sneered, "You're all pathetic. Classic, savage alphas."

"Don't look at her." Ascher turned and growled at Xerxes. He stood in front of him to block his view of me.

"None of you look at her!" Cobra shouted loudly.

Jax and I both rolled our eyes. I was wrapped up in a blanket for sun god's sake; there wasn't anything to see.

I coughed twice. "Can we *please* get a little more sleep before training today? You're all seriously unwell and need intensive psychological help."

Four half-naked, extremely handsome shifters narrowed their eyes at me.

I pursed my lips and spoke my truth. "Frankly, I can't live like this."

Cobra sneered back, "Frankly, Kitten, you're going to live how I tell you to live."

Jax threw him back into the wall.

Ascher, who hadn't stopped staring at me, walked up to the bed. "Are you okay, Princess? Do you need me to get you anything? You can sleep in my bed."

His words were sweet, but the husky rasp of his voice and the clench of his tattooed jaw were anything but innocent.

Sexual tension radiated from him, and I couldn't help but notice the

hardness that strained against his sweatpants.

If he weren't a literal jackass who betrayed me, I might have taken him up on his offer. His body was a work of art, and his tattoos mesmerized me.

Too bad he was.

"I'm good." I waved him away with my hand and busied myself snuggling under the covers, but I stilled as Ascher reached forward.

He slowly dragged his tattooed thumb across my lips. "You only have to ask, and I'll give it to you." Then he walked out the door.

I gaped at his retreating tattooed back.

Xerxes bared his teeth like a savage animal and followed him out the door. Who knew what his problem was?

With the two men gone, Jax and Cobra sauntered toward me, and I narrowed my eyes at them. What were they going to do—TKO me in a fit of rage?

"Scoot over," Cobra whispered, and shoved me forward gently.

Suddenly, I found myself sandwiched on the bed between Cobra's and Jax's large bodies.

"Um... Are we going to?" I asked the million-dollar question.

"Shut the fuck up, Kitten, and go to sleep," Cobra snapped and covered my eyes with his hand like he could physically put me to sleep.

A growl vibrated through Jax's chest. "Don't talk to her like that."

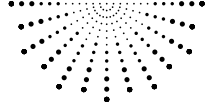
Cobra tucked me against his chest, pulled blankets up over himself, and mumbled sleepily, "I'm gonna kill you both."

Jax and I scoffed but said nothing, and I snuggled my face into Jax's warm chestnut-scented chest.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face because Cobra's words had somehow, in some twisted way, felt like a declaration of love.

It was official: I was unwell.

SADIE



DEMETRE APOLOGIZES

“I CHOOSE DEATH.” I choked on air and wondered if I suffered from asthma.

My body burned with agony, and I would have strangled myself to end my misery if I thought I could manage it.

“We’ve run half a mile,” Cobra said with exasperation as he bounded in front of me like his life’s purpose was to run and be an ass.

“Do you enjoy being a dick?” I asked in between heavy gasps.

“Yes.” He smirked and kept prancing like a goddamn deer.

You know what ate deer? Saber-toothed tigers. I wanted to rip my teeth into him and gnaw on his kidneys.

“Focus on your breathing,” Jax said calmly as he ran easily beside me.

A blush spread across my cheeks as the large alpha spoke to me. For some reason, I couldn’t look him in the eye after our bedroom activities.

Jax was the sweet, kind one who liked to cuddle and wasn’t completely unwell.

At least he’d used to be.

Now he was a massively muscled alpha who made my stomach cramp every time I looked at him.

He had big “call me Daddy” energy, something I’d never been into, but I was discovering there were a lot of things I didn’t know about myself.

Like the fact that I wanted Jax to choke me and order me around while he speared me with his massive, pierced dick.

Not the journey I’d ever seen for myself, but it was the path I was on.

I tripped over a tree root and barely caught myself. We were running on the path through the woods outside of the complex known as the village.

A loud growl rumbled behind me, and I realized all the men had stopped

running. Four sets of eyes glowed and gave me a weird look.

My stomach pinched. “Did I say something aloud?”

“Just that you want Jax to order you around while he spears you with his massive, pierced dick,” Cobra said with a frown on his face.

It was official: I was giving up on life. Embarrassment flooded through me, and my face burned.

Then I did something I never thought I would ever do...I voluntarily sprinted away from the alphas.

Arms pumping, chest heaving, I flew over the ground like the devil himself was on my heels.

There was no way I was ever going to be able to look Jax in the eye. He was a seasoned alpha who had probably fucked hundreds of men and women. Meanwhile, I was acting frazzled and crazy around him.

I had big virgin energy right now, and it was *not* cute.

Once again, I thought about the sex clinics Aran had said were popular. The village was a massive compound full of fae, and my gut told me there was probably a clinic nearby.

Chestnuts, pine, snow, and cinnamon overwhelmed my gasping lungs as the men easily caught up to me.

Instead of sprinting away impressively, I just tired myself out. Sweat dripped down my brow as I vomited a little in my mouth.

At this rate, I was 99 percent sure I had a puking problem I needed to see a doctor about.

“It’s fine, little alpha. Don’t worry,” Jax said softly and smiled down as he jogged up beside me.

I made the mistake of looking into his stormy eyes. My ovaries combusted, and my face flamed with heat.

He was so sweet and dominant. It was an addicting combination that I hadn’t known I wanted.

It also reminded me I still needed to lose my virginity.

Good thing was that four handsome men jogged beside me. It wasn’t like I had to date any of them, just have sex.

Except for Xerxes, he obviously didn’t count because he was *literally* working for the enemy and clearly had issues.

Still, that left Jax, Cobra, and Ascher. Since Ascher had betrayed me, realistically he was also off the list.

I had *some* standards.

Sadly, that left Cobra and Jax, who were a couple themselves, which made things a tad complicated.

No big deal, I reassured myself. I could always go to a sex clinic. Plus, it wasn't like losing my virginity was a top priority or anything.

Frankly, surviving was at the top of the list.

It just felt like something I needed to take care of. A life experience I needed to check off because I might literally be murdered in gladiator games any day now.

Impending doom really puts things into perspective.

Also, maybe if I lost it, I could look at Jax without acting like a complete fool.

It was weird, because after my closet experience with Cobra, I didn't feel any different around the snake alpha.

Although, it was probably because the only feeling I had around him was the urge to strangle him violently with my own hands. And *not* in a sexual way.

After this morning, that clarification was necessary.

My core heated just thinking about Jax above me in bed, his callused fingers running all over my body.

Oh my sun god, when he'd told me I was going to "take all of" him, something had come alive inside me.

I mentally fanned myself. It was for sure going down as one of the hottest experiences of my life.

I tripped over a rock as my legs gave out beneath me.

Faster than I could track, Ascher reached a hand out to steady me.

"Thanks," I said as I heaved in air and tried to channel "strong, independent woman who can run" energy.

It was much harder to project than it should have been.

Ascher said nothing, just nodded and kept staring at me with his amber eyes. It was disconcerting how calm he was. I kept expecting him to swear and yell at me like he'd used to.

Instead of being a hothead, he was calm as shit.

Too calm.

The corners of his eyes crinkled slightly, and the colorful tattoos covering his body bunched as his muscles moved. His large horns curled high and proud off his body.

The jagged, chipped edge of his right horn was a reminder that he had

nose-dived off a platform for me.

My stomach turned over, and I didn't know how to feel.

It was hard to hate someone when they threw themselves thousands of feet over empty air to cushion your fall.

I was still pissed at him, but no longer had a burning desire to slit his throat and ask Jax to bury his body.

It was a light burn of anxiety that made me wary around him.

One thing was for sure: he still wasn't forgiven. Which was too bad, because his flame-and-rose tattoos were extremely attractive.

"Stop looking at him," Cobra snapped.

Cobra, on the other hand—I would dig his grave *any* day of the week. "Jax, will you help me bury Cobra's body?" I asked.

My stomach pinched just saying Jax's name, but I forced myself to act relaxed and normal. No way I could live and fight beside the big guy if I started acting weird.

"Sure, little alpha." Jax smiled at me, and I focused on jumping over a tree branch and not my exploding ovaries.

I didn't concentrate hard enough, and I tripped again.

This time, I face-planted into a tree trunk too fast for anyone to stop me.

My concussed brain rattled inside my skull.

I moaned and choked on excessive spit as I tried to right myself and continue the death march.

The trainers at the village had told us we only had to do one lap on the trail around the compound.

They'd forgotten to mention that the outdoor trail never ended.

"How can she not run? She's an alpha. I don't get it," Xerxes asked from the back of the group.

His luscious blond hair streamed behind him, and his purple eyes were bright with confusion as he jogged like he was weightless.

The other alphas just shook their heads; they were used to my inability to run.

"This is better than usual," Ascher said dryly, and I flipped him off as I stumbled and continued the run.

I was a queen at multitasking.

"It can't be any worse than this?" Xerxes asked with shock.

I choked on a fly that flew into my esophagus and blocked all airflow. We were underground; how were there any insects?

The fae realm was bizarre.

“I thought she genuinely had two broken legs the first time she ran,” Cobra said. He winced in pain as Jax slapped him across the back of the head.

Blessedly, no one said anything after that for a long while.

When we finally finished, I marked it as a win in my book that I hadn’t keeled over.

In the final ten feet, my left boob burned with pain, and I’d been 99.9 percent sure I was suffering from a heart attack.

Shockingly, for good or for bad, I had not died.

We were the last group to finish the run. A large fae trainer asked with confusion what had taken us so long.

Instead of answering his inane question, I gracefully face-planted onto the grass.

After a few minutes of inhaling dirt and feeling sorry for myself, I rolled over and inspected the other competitors.

The teams lay on the ground, stretching in their groups.

The three earth fae were short, stocky men built wide with enormous chests.

The five air fae were taller and willowy with lean limbs, and the four water fae weren’t particularly tall or short. They looked average.

Other than that, the fae all had different hair colors, eye colors, and skin colors. The fae were an eclectic-looking group.

In contrast, the half alphas, and my alphas, were much taller and wider. They were chiseled and covered in muscles like statues of warriors.

Demetre and Jax stood out as much larger and stronger.

I was the runt of the group. But I didn’t let it get to me; someone had to do it. I liked to pretend I represented vertically challenged people everywhere.

On the soft grass, I stretched with the other teams. I focused on trying to touch my toes, which was an impossible task.

Apparently, running and flexibility went together.

Highly disappointing.

A water fae shouted, “Ryak!” to the blockhead dude who’d yelled at me in the cafeteria.

He had a dumbass name to go with his dumbass personality.

I didn’t feel bad about making fun of his name, because he was *still* glaring at me. The only good thing was he kept glancing over at Xerxes in

fear.

I also avoided turning my head to the side because in my peripheral vision, Demetre and the twins huddled together and whispered.

They were deep in conversation, and I couldn't help but worry that they were plotting how to murder me.

Also, seeing Demetre again reminded me of the little shadow snake and how it had helped me.

I mentally took stock of my body and realized I couldn't feel the shadow snake's presence zinging.

It was gone.

My heart plummeted to the ground, and my eyes burned with unshed tears. I couldn't help but feel like the little snake guy had sacrificed himself to save me.

He was a small piece of comfort that I hadn't realized how heavily I relied on. I focused on pulling out the grass and didn't let my tears fall.

For the little snake, I would be strong. He had always been around, offering me comfort and helping me when I felt down.

Before I could break down into an emotional mess in front of the other competitors, a shadow blocked the fluorescent lights from the ceiling high above.

I squinted up, and my stomach plummeted even further.

Demetre's large form stood above me.

I looked over and realized Ascher, Jax, and Cobra had walked away to talk to each other in a huddle. Xerxes stood behind them, listening, and all their backs were facing me.

My heart fell because they hadn't included me.

I searched for the numb, but it still needed to recharge and was just out of my grasp.

If I weren't so exhausted from running, I might have panicked that I was 100 percent about to be murdered.

It was slightly embarrassing, but I was still relieved my torment was about to end.

Technically, if Demetre killed me right now, I would never have to run again.

The logic was sound.

I may or may not have lain back on my elbows and accepted my fate.

"I just wanted to talk to you," Demetre said quietly.

Up close, his alpha scent of burning steel choked me.

I raised my eyebrows at him—call me crazy, but I didn't really want to have a conversation about how to disembowel me.

Like if he was going to end me, I got it, but he should try to be a little respectful about it. Clearly, the half warrior had *no* class.

There was a long, awkward pause as neither of us said anything.

Finally, I addressed the elephant in the room. "Um, you almost killed me."

The betrayal hurt worse because I'd worshipped him growing up.

Demetre knelt until he sat next to me on the grass, like he was trying to appear less large and intimidating. Or just getting a better angle to slit my throat.

His pink eyes stared at me, and they glowed unnaturally bright against his olive skin.

He frowned. "I didn't mean to attack you like that."

I checked my pulse to make sure I hadn't died and gone to an alternate universe. "You challenged me to the fight. How in this realm did you not mean it?"

The man was nuts.

"I challenged you because I know the water fae, Ryak in particular, has it out for you. He's notoriously extreme when it comes to his beliefs about a woman's role."

My last functioning brain cell struggled to process what was happening.

"So you challenged me to a duel and beat me viciously to save me?"

Whose mans was this? Someone needed to get him and check him into a mental institution.

"No." He ran his hand through his long black hair roughly. "I was going to knock you out, or just throw you over the platform. You're an immortal alpha; you would have survived the drop. But if Ryak had illegally used one of his weapons, he could have gutted you and held you while you bled out. I've seen him cheat before."

I picked at the grass and wondered when Aran would visit or if there was a knitting group in the village.

I needed to rant to some women about these men because they were unreal.

"Okay, so then why did you become so violent?" I asked as I remembered the feel of his fists slamming into my flesh, breaking my cartilage and bone.

His olive skin flared a bright pink, and Demetre looked away like he was embarrassed. “*The song of the hunt* overwhelmed me. It’s something that only affects the most powerful half warriors. I’m more powerful than most, and when I’m challenged, it completely consumes me. I wasn’t expecting you to fight so well, and your alpha dominance made me lose control.”

I sighed heavily and tried not to let my elation show on my face.

My childhood crush had been triggered by my alpha dominance.

Finally, someone recognized my prowess.

“Don’t do it again, and I’ll forgive you,” I said honestly.

My list of enemies was so long that I couldn’t afford to isolate people who apologized.

Also, he was my childhood idol, so I would probably forgive him for anything. Was that embarrassing for me? Yes.

Did I care? No.

Rationally, I knew I should not be forgiving this man, because he had literally *dropped* me to my potential death.

Irrationally, Demetre was my idol.

Plus, he’d said sorry.

Part of my brain was shouting at me to wake the fuck up and not be a pushover.

The other part of my brain wanted me to ask for his autograph and tell him it was no big deal, that he’d thrown me off a cliff.

What could I say? Reading about Demetre’s adventures had gotten me through Dick’s abuse. I was 100 percent aware that logic made no sense, but I had never pretended to be well.

If Demetre wanted to throw me off a cliff *and* be my bestie, this friendship was setting sail.

“Get away from her!” Jax roared across the yard and started sprinting toward us.

“Okay, cool, see you later.” Demetre smiled and gave me a thumbs-up, and it was so boyish and at odds with his muscular build that I choked on laughter.

He ran back to his group as my psycho alphas approached.

When Jax got to me, he fell onto his knees and ran his hands over my body like he needed to make sure I was all right. “Did he hurt you?” he whispered in a horrified voice as he held me close.

“Mmph.” I tried to mumble no, but it was muffled because I was

plastered against his massive chest.

Cobra stood above us and growled, “Kitten, why didn’t you call me over? You are not allowed to be alone with another man.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, genuinely flabbergasted by his words. Who did he think he was? My lady’s chaperone?

This wasn’t the eighteenth-century human realm.

The man was nuts.

Next to Cobra, Ascher glared over at Demetre like he wanted to kill him. He narrowed his eyes at me like he was remembering me staring at the warrior during the opening ceremony.

And I tried to keep an innocent expression on my face. Ascher totally knew I was obsessed with Demetre.

Behind the three alphas, Xerxes hung back and watched the spectacle with a shake of his head.

“I made a friend.” I smiled at the men just to piss them off.

It worked.

Cobra made a weird, rattling roar noise that echoed through the yard. “He fucking almost killed you. What is wrong with you?”

I held up three fingers on my hand and put them down one at a time. “First, what is wrong with *you*, ordering me about like I’m your possession? Second, he apologized, and I am a good person who doesn’t hold grudges. Third, what were *you* all just talking about and why wasn’t I included?”

Jax winced, and Ascher looked away from me.

Cobra stared at me with a frosty scowl. “We’ve decided none of us are going to fuck you while we’re stuck in these games. It’s dangerous and could affect our team’s dynamic. We need to keep you safe, not fight over you.”

My ovaries sobbed.

I turned toward Jax.

“Really?” I asked quietly, and I couldn’t keep the hurt out of my broken, raspy voice.

“Just for now, little alpha. It’s best for your safety,” Jax said softly and looked at me with regret as he ran his hands through his long braids.

“Good, well, I didn’t want to fuck you guys either.” I needed to find Aran and get more information about the sex clinic ASAP. Or just find some dope enchanted vibrator. Being around so many amazing, scented alphas was bad for my libido.

It was officially an emergency.

“Are you mad?” Jax asked as he gnawed on his lush lower lip.

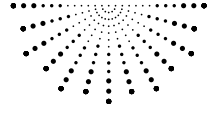
“Nope,” I said and popped the *p*.

Then, like a mature, independent woman who *was* going to lose her virginity soon, I stomped away to eat breakfast, mope, and probably cry over some waffles.

Rationally, it didn’t matter, and I was a bad bitch who didn’t need a man.

Irrationally, I was a woman who just wanted to get railed and told I was pretty.

XERXES



CONFUSING ALPHAS

I WATCHED with confusion as Sadie got punched in the stomach for the fifth time.

Cobra shook his head at her and yelled at her to move quicker.

He was pulling his punches and was moving embarrassingly slow. Yet somehow, his fist still landed on Sadie.

Every time he touched her, my annoyance spiked higher.

It enraged me that she wasn't defending herself.

In the opening ceremony, Sadie had been a killing machine. She'd dodged and kicked like she was weightless and built to fight.

Now she couldn't dodge a slow punch that Cobra telegraphed. If she didn't take this seriously, she was going to get destroyed in the games.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and breathed calmly to center myself because my head was scrambled, and it shouldn't be.

I was here on behalf of the fae queen to keep an eye on the alphas.

They were the enemy.

It didn't matter if they got hurt in the games.

Sadie dodged too slowly, and Cobra's leg sent her to the ground. She gasped and chuckled as she struggled to get up.

I fought the urge to march over and yell at her. A completely irrational response.

"You're an alpha shifter. Fight like it!" Cobra yelled at her as she failed to dodge yet another blow.

For some reason, they referred to themselves as shifters. Where I was from, we were called beasts. A more fitting name.

From what I had overheard, their entire realm was a prison for beasts.

Bizarre. The whole situation stunk of the High Court.

Since my mother was a beta, I'd attended elite ABO schools growing up. Since ABOs lived longer than nulls, we were privy to certain information that they weren't.

The key information being that the High Court secretly ruled over all the realms.

They gave us just enough information about them so we could identify who they were if we got in trouble or needed their help.

I swallowed down a reprimand as Sadie's legs were swept out from beneath her. Cobra stood over her gasping body and glared down at her with annoyance.

To an outsider who didn't know them, it would appear that the large, gorgeous alpha hated her.

His emerald eyes stared at her with a frightening intensity.

I didn't know what he felt toward her, but it wasn't hate. That was for sure.

In some ways, none of the alphas I was in charge of acted like traditional alphas. They were just as large and violent, but they didn't have the cruel edge.

No, they are all monsters.

They were getting to me.

I twirled my blades in my hands to calm my racing thoughts.

Instead of obsessing over the alphas, specifically the little alpha that smelled like cranberries and sunshine, I focused on why I hated them.

Why I sprayed scent blockers constantly all over my body. Why my skin crawled with wariness every time an alpha used their alpha bark.

I needed to remain vigilant.

I couldn't let the past repeat itself.

At fifty years old, I was young for an immortal omega beast, but my soul was old and heavy.

Decades had passed, but the trauma of my youth still defined me.

Even though the fae queen was a ruthless leader, she was still miles better than the alpha leaders of the beast realm, who coveted omegas above all else.

Unfortunately, male omegas were the rarest of them all.

Discovering my identity had been so much worse because I'd grown up thinking I was a beta. Hell, even now I looked more like a beta than an omega.

Since I was a young boy, I was larger and stronger than other children.
My life had been planned out: I was going to be a soldier.

My mother was a beta, and my father had died before I was born. We never talked about him. Sun god knew we should have.

She'd forgotten to mention he was an omega.

If she had, maybe I would have had a chance to escape.

We'd grown up in Serpentes City, where neon skyscrapers housed a population of fifty million beasts and growing.

Like most cities in the beast realm, it was a glitzy den of depravity and violence.

The alpha Mafia ruled it. The Don was in charge, and his iron fist was the only thing that kept order among violent beasts.

The High Court might rule over all worlds, but in the beast realm, the strongest and most ruthless citizens ruled the cities.

The only laws, the only structure, were the ones the Mafia imposed on Serpentes City.

As a result, alphas ruled and kept order in society.

But not all alphas were in the Mafia. Not all of them wanted order and structure, and not all of them wanted peace.

The few thousand "independent" alphas were apex predators living among the millions of null sheep. Since they were usually rich, immortal beings, it was nearly impossible to control them.

Betas were the enforcers of alphas. Omegas were their highly coveted breeders.

Since Serpentes City held the realm's financial district, it was the home of billionaires, luxury cars, high-end exchange markets, and the best designer clothes the realm offered.

With such exuberant wealth, controlling the drug, arms, and skin trades were not easy jobs.

Unsurprisingly, because they had centuries to amass their fortunes, alphas ruled over all these sectors. Within the rules of the Mafia or outside them.

That was where the don's alpha and beta enforcers came into play—peace enforced through violence.

Since I'd enjoyed training, physical combat, and weapons, as a child, I thought becoming an enforcer was the perfect fit for me.

When I'd gotten tested at a sacred lake on my twentieth birthday, my life had gone to hell.

Instead of getting trained in combat, they had expected me to attend omega school and learn my “role” in the city.

Nulls worshipped us, betas were jealous of us, and alphas wanted to possess us.

If there were millions of nulls, thousands of betas, and about three thousand alphas, then there were a few dozen omegas.

Alphas formed packs of four-to-seven men and the occasional women and competed desperately for omegas. A completed pack, alphas who had bonded with an omega, was a status symbol in the beast realm.

Bonded packs with omegas were celebrities.

After all, they were the only ones that could birth alphas. And they always birthed ABOs, never nulls.

Also, omega bonds were said to tame alphas. They kept alphas from going feral over the centuries.

I knew better from personal experience.

It was all bullshit.

Alphas would always be vicious creatures, and omegas were nothing more than their breeding toys and tickets to greater wealth and fame.

It was all fucked up, and a rare male omega was the greatest status symbol of all. Female alphas would fiend over me for biological purposes. Male alphas just wanted to brag.

At first, being an omega hadn’t been all that bad. As I’d learned more about my specific omega needs, the anxiety I’d always suffered from had become more manageable.

Before omega school, insomnia had been a nightly occurrence.

It was silly in hindsight; all it took was a pile of a dozen pillows and three fuzzy blankets sprayed with chemically tailored alpha scents and I slept like a baby.

For a time after I’d perfumed, I’d put aside my blades and committed to embracing my new reality.

But then the alphas had happened.

Day and night, I’d been stalked.

Alpha men, and a few alpha women, had followed me everywhere I went. The armed guards that the Don granted all omegas had been on high alert at all hours.

I’d been cornered in bars, elevators, and the grocery store.

Paparazzi had photographed me wherever I went, and screaming null fans

had tried to reach out and touch me.

No matter how many scent blockers I sprayed on myself, people had still screamed when they sniffed cinnamon and chased after me.

That had been the least of my problems.

As an omega in the school, you were introduced to interested alpha packs. Omegas were *supposed* to have the ability to choose.

Like with everything in Serpentes City, money and power corrupted.

An “independent” alpha pack who lived outside the Mafia’s rules but had an exorbitant amount of wealth had paid a small fortune to buy me.

The omega school had handed me over like I was chattel.

I was never given a choice.

The alphas who’d bought me were four men. Four rough, abusive men who wanted to possess the rare male omega.

Four wolves.

Wolves were the most violent of all the beasts; everyone knew to avoid them because they were ruled by their baser urges.

Fueled by sex, money, violence, and terror.

From a young age, all Serpentes City children were taught to run if they encountered a wolf shifter on the streets, put their heads down and fucking *sprint* in the opposite direction.

Every single wolf alpha was on the don’s most wanted list.

They ran the deadliest skin trades.

My alphas were no different, and they’d wanted to break me so they could brag about it to their friends.

The problem was, even though I was an omega and had subservient inclinations, I’d grown up training to be a warrior.

Most omegas were trapped by their own instincts.

My new alphas had learned quickly that my response was to fight. Violently.

It was a match made in the bowels of the hell realm.

Four wolves and a kitten.

I’d refused to break, and they liked it when I fought back.

One night, after a particularly brutal encounter with the lead alpha, I’d shifted into my omega form to protect myself.

Unlike betas, omegas shifted into a secondary animal form. However, our forms were usually small and innocent. Nothing like an alpha’s.

My form—a fluffy white kitten.

The lead alpha had laughed uproariously, with his bloody cock still hanging between his legs, as I'd shifted into my small cat form for self-protection.

He'd chased me around the room, laughing like a lunatic.

The ritzy town house they lived in was locked tight with security. I knew because I'd tried numerous times to escape but failed time and again. Guards were stationed at all the doors, and the windows were barred.

As the alpha had chased me, he'd laughed because he'd known I was trapped.

My terror was a game to him.

However, he hadn't factored in that my kitten form was small enough to slip through a small mouse hole in the back of the closet.

On four tiny legs, I'd run through the tunnel while mewling with fear that one of the wolves would find me.

When the tunnel had led me out into the dark alley behind the town house, I'd been stunned to find myself free for the first time in months.

Sanity had quickly returned, and still in my kitten form, I'd slipped through the rainy city streets.

Puddles of water had reflected the bright neon lights from the towering skyscrapers. Supercars had hummed by, and businessmen and women had run to avoid the rain.

No one had noticed the shivering fluffy kitten that slipped through the shadows.

Finally, after hours of running down city streets, I'd sneaked under the secure barrier that blocked the general populace from the underground subway system.

Everyone knew the subways connected the beast realm to other realms. And only the most elite ABOs, the ones with upper-level clearance, could access the trains.

I'd stayed in my small form because there were security cameras everywhere in the subways.

Hiding behind posts, I'd managed to leap onto a subway train and hide underneath one of the plush reclining seats.

Luckily, there'd been no one else in the train car because I'd meant to stay alert, but I'd been exhausted, and my little head had fallen forward against my will.

I'd woken up from my nap when the train had jerked to a stop and a

female had announced, “Fae realm.”

I’d never heard of the realm before, and the realms I had known about weren’t appealing.

Everyone knew the angel and demon realm was full of overpowered psychopaths.

The hell realm, monster, and titan realms were also known to be violent, bloodthirsty places.

With a deep kitten breath, I’d taken a chance.

As fast as possible, I’d sprinted off the train and leaped with all my might up the long stairs that led out of the subway.

At the top of the subway stairs, a swirling black void sucked away the fluorescent lights.

The portal was so dark it hurt to look at it.

It was like looking at the sun, but instead of blinding bright light, it was impossibly dark shadows.

I’d never felt anything like it.

Before I could question my sanity, I’d thrown my little body into the darkness.

I’d landed on a bed of flowers and picked my head up to look around.

The world had been impossibly hot and bright. Two suns had hung heavy and bloated in the glittery turquoise sky.

I’d been lying in a field of vibrant flowers.

Soft pink petals had floated in the air on a cool breeze.

The beast realm was a rainy concrete jungle that was perpetually overcast with artificial, glowing neon colors.

I’d never known the world could be so bright and *pastel*. There was no other word to describe it.

The shock of my new surroundings had worn off, and I’d transformed back into my much larger form.

No longer at eye level with the flowers, I’d admired the lush landscape as I cracked my neck with relief and stretched my biceps.

The only problem—I’d been naked without any knives for defense.

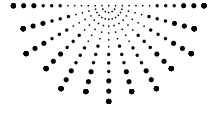
Suddenly, guards in strange uniforms had appeared out of nowhere and demanded I come with them. They’d said I lacked proper identification to enter the realm.

At first, I’d fought them.

Months of abuse, and the stress of fleeing the only home I’d ever known,

had been a heavy weight on my chest. What was the point?
I'd given up and allowed myself to be captured.

XERXES



OMEGA INSTINCTS

THE GUARDS HAD TRANSPORTED me to the royal fae palace to meet their monarch.

An archaic system I had learned about in school growing up.

The fae queen had taken one look at my large stature and muscles and made me an offer I couldn't resist.

I'd joined her royal guard and never looked back.

Sure, the queen wasn't the best employer, her temper was unmatched, and she had a cruel streak a mile wide. However, she gave me the freedom to fight and work as a *man*, not an omega.

I wasn't a possession.

Plus, when I disagreed with her harsh edicts, her realm was so large and there was so much to deal with that she granted me leniency to make my own decisions.

When she ordered me to execute people for questionable reasons, I banished them or set them up under aliases.

My life wasn't perfect, but I had a life and the freedom to fight for it.

In the beast realm, I was a piece of property to be used and abused by the highest bidder.

In the fae realm, I was the right hand of the queen. A feared soldier who could make a difference.

It didn't matter that she had banned shifting into animal forms; my kitten form was small and pathetic.

I wasn't even a cat...I was a fucking kitten. All it was good for was fleeing like a coward.

I hated it.

Now as I stood in the training gym in the village and twirled my knives, I ruminated that there was only one thing I loathed more than being helpless: alphas.

Lately, I'd been surrounded by them again, and it was slowly driving me crazy.

The harsh scents of the half warriors burned my nose and brought back awful memories.

Weirdly, Jax's, Cobra's, Ascher's, and Sadie's scents didn't irritate me like the half warriors'.

For the first time, I could stand in the presence of alphas without wanting to hack in disgust at their harsh scents because they triggered my memories.

But it didn't matter.

My mission was to keep them in line and then return them to the beast realm. I would accomplish it and forget about them.

They would be easy to forget: the men were tolerable and didn't interest me in the slightest.

Sadie was the problem.

My body responded every time she was in my presence.

Worst of all, I had the most disturbing urge to shift into a kitten and sit on her lap. I wanted to purr and comfort her. Cuddle against her and fall asleep.

It was horrifying.

In my shifted form, every alpha, male or female, laughed at me. Alphas were too macho and strong to be interested in weak animals like kittens.

It was their predatory nature.

Back in the shifter realm, the plan had been to sneak into the training compound and watch the alphas from the shadows.

Instead, I'd been scooped up by a blue-haired boy that smelled like icy death, and he'd brought me straight to Sadie.

It had shocked me when a delicate alpha held me to her chest. She'd cuddled me under the blankets while kissing my head, cranberries and sunshine flowing off her like a warm summer day in the fae realm.

Until Sadie, no alpha had ever embraced my kitten form.

She hadn't just embraced me; she'd *smothered* me. Constantly kissing my head, petting my white fur, and holding me like a common pet.

It had been embarrassing.

At one point, she'd sobbed under the covers and held me against her while mumbling nonsense.

None of the other alphas had realized she was crying silently.

My gut had sparked with an emotion I'd never felt before, and it had taken all my willpower not to transform back and hold her against my chest.

Which was completely irrational because she was a fucking *alpha*.

My insanity was probably a result of my kitten brain being confused. I'd enjoyed her pets and snuggles just a little too much.

Now I shook my head as Sadie failed to dodge another telegraphed blow. I swallowed the urge to yell at her to put her fist up in front of her face.

I helped train fae guards to fight because my skill with blades was unmatched. That was the *only* reason I wanted to correct her form.

She was just a student I wanted to teach. Every time I remembered she was an alpha, the urge to help her fled my body. At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

At their cores, all alphas were the same, and I didn't know what Sadie's angle was.

I needed to find out why she acted so...weak.

Why didn't she posture and assert herself over others like alphas always did?

Why was she constantly saying the strangest things, making inappropriate jokes and sassing people with no genuine anger?

Half the time, she was completely pathetic.

Her tendency to appear weak had distracted me from her true nature. When it had come time to bring her into the fae realm, a small part of me had wanted to disobey the queen and protect Sadie.

But the queen had saved me, so I couldn't. My life was hers. So I'd gone through with the mission.

Thank the sun god I had.

Sadie had stabbed her shoe's heel into my arm, and the deceptively sweet alpha had shown her true fucking colors.

I'd kept the heel in my arm to remind myself that all alphas were the same; they were all violent and ruthless.

She was no different.

Therefore, when the queen had delayed the mission to return them to the beast realm and ordered them to fight in the Fae Games, I had thought nothing of it.

The Fae Games were a bloodthirsty, violent event, but alphas could easily handle it. There was a reason the half warriors were the hundred-year

champions.

Overall, the fae were violent, but individually, beasts were unmatched warriors.

It should have been a simple mission: monitor the four alphas while they competed and then escort them to the beast realm.

I gnawed on my lip with frustration; if Sadie didn't start training better, then I wouldn't be bringing all the alphas back.

My gut burned with an unfamiliar sensation, and I twirled my knives in my hands to comfort myself.

I reminded myself that I didn't fucking care if she wanted to act like it was a joke and get herself killed.

Alphas were *not* my concern.

Therefore, I said nothing as Cobra barked instructions at her for hours as he tried to improve her abysmal hand-to-hand combat skills.

She'd shown her skills before, so it was obvious she was lazy and didn't take training seriously.

Jax brought her a water bottle and dabbed at her face with a towel during a break, while Ascher stood next to her and glared at Cobra.

It didn't escape my notice that the alphas were completely obsessed with her, in a way that made them act...less like alphas.

They doted on her with more attention than I'd seen alphas give omegas. It was confusing and weird.

That night at dinner, Sadie pushed her food around her plate instead of inhaling it like usual.

She mumbled something about running ruining her appetite, and I swallowed the urge to yell at her.

It's not my fucking concern. She can starve to death for all I care.

It didn't matter, anyway; Ascher cut up her meat, while Jax and Cobra alpha-barked at her to eat.

I fought the urge to whine at their alpha barks.

It took all my years of training to calm my racing heart and sit casually at the table.

You're in control.

I gripped my knives tightly in my hands; omegas were overly sensitive to alpha barks. It was in our nature to want to please alphas.

Rationally, I didn't give a fuck about any of them or what they wanted. But my body was still overcome with stress at the sound of an alpha's

distress, regardless of what I wanted.

Blessedly, the dinner was a mostly silent affair, with everyone eating and slumped over tiredly after training.

Later that night, when all the men went to shower, Sadie lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling fan while I sharpened my knives at the table.

Her cranberry scent was tangy with distress and filled the room.

I held my breath and tried not to breathe it in.

When the alphas came back from their showers and filtered back into their bedrooms, Sadie looked at their toweled forms longingly.

It dawned on me that the showers were open, so anyone could see everything.

I don't fucking care.

She flopped backward and gnawed on her lower lip. Melancholy practically radiated from her.

My gut filled with inexplicable rage.

She was so pathetic. It was embarrassing.

I snapped at her, "I'll guard the door as you shower. You fucking reek. It's disgusting."

Stupid omega instincts. *She smells, that's why I offered.*

Sadie looked up at me with a tentative smile, her ruby-red eyes sparkling on her golden face. You would have thought I'd offered her the world. Not a single shower.

"Let's fucking go. I don't have time to babysit you." I stalked out the door, and she hurried after me.

Outside the shower room, I stood guard with my blades drawn.

A few fae who worked in the village walked past and gave my blades questioning glances but said nothing.

Water slammed against the tile, and I couldn't help but envision Sadie's naked body under the spray.

Back at the palace, I'd quickly looked away when her body had been projected on the screen. The fae realm's love of broadcasting people was one thing I loathed most about this place.

Still, for a split second, I'd seen the awful scars that covered her torso.

They were more proof that she was a classic alpha. A seasoned warrior, she'd likely gotten them while torturing innocents on a battlefield or terrorizing nulls.

With how badly she'd fought today, it made sense that she'd gotten

herself scarred. *She's just another monster.*

A water fae competitor came up to the door with a huff and glared at me. "I need to shower," they demanded.

"It's occupied. Wait your fucking turn," I said softly.

The fae looked at the queen's symbol on my chest and paled. He nodded and quickly hurried away down the hall.

If I hadn't been here, he would have walked in on her.

A sudden burst of rage burned my chest, and I twirled my knives to calm myself.

The next person to approach me was a pretty fae female. She sauntered forward in a short, shimmery dress. "Hey, you work for the queen, right? Will you be free...later?" She fluttered her sultry eyes at me.

I twirled my blades faster. "No."

She pursed her lips but shrugged and continued down the hall, unperturbed by my rejection.

I sighed heavily at her retreating form. I had nothing against women, and she had been pretty.

The problem was, at my core, I was an omega.

It wasn't in my nature to fuck someone casually and walk away.

I didn't want to be touched by just anyone. The few one-night stands I'd tried had been anxiety-inducing.

How could you explain to a stranger that you needed to be cuddled and praised? That you wanted to take your time worshipping them and being worshipped?

A hot fuck wasn't what I needed.

I wanted more.

Therefore, I didn't bother trying.

My right fist was relieving enough. It was better than having to explain my unique nature to a stranger.

Suddenly, Sadie opened the door.

A large, baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants dragged across the floor, and her long white hair was plastered across her face.

"Thanks, I appreciate you standing watch." Sadie's voice was low and raspy, and she smiled up at me tentatively.

"Whatever." I stalked back to the room and refused to look at her.

That night, I lay down on my makeshift bed on the floor in the common area and punched at my pillow.

I didn't mind sleeping on the ground, but my omega nature still whined at the lack of comfort.

The couch was too short for my large body, so it was just easier to lie on the floor.

It didn't mean I liked it.

"Here," a soft, raspy voice whispered down to me. Sadie handed me two pillows and two soft blankets.

Her rough voice sent chills down my spine. It was pure seduction.

Before I could do anything, she draped both blankets over me and put the pillows next to my head.

"It's stupid that you have to sleep on the floor because of their dumb sex pact. Classic males acting like they can't control themselves if they share a bed with a woman. It's so embarrassing for them." She rolled her eyes. "Hope that helps make you more comfortable. I get chilly at night and have experience sleeping on the floor. Sometimes...it makes the nightmares worse."

A haunted expression flashed across her face. For a second, she was transported somewhere else.

I wasn't the only one who suffered from bad dreams.

Sadie shook her head and smiled like nothing had happened. "Although, sleeping on the floor can be a vibe. My sister always says it helps center you."

I stilled in shock as she tucked a soft blanket around my wide shoulders.

"I don't need your fucking help." I yanked the blanket out of her hands.

Instead of getting mad, she shrugged and smiled. "Sleep tight." Then she wobbled away, because she couldn't even walk properly after training. Pathetic.

Instead of throwing off her blankets and pillows just to spite her, I turned over and shoved my nose into the pillow and tucked the blankets under my chin.

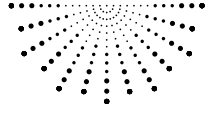
They reeked of cranberries and sunshine.

For the first time in my entire life, an alpha scent that wasn't manufactured comforted me.

She's a monster, I reminded myself. All alphas were.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from sniffing the blanket one more time before I fell asleep.

SADIE



BEATDOWNS

WE STOOD ALONE in the wings of the fae stadium and waited for the second match of the games to begin.

This morning, a random fae had knocked on our door and told us to get ready. Who gave someone an hour's notice before they had to fight to the death? *So rude.*

I didn't even get to eat breakfast, which was not cool. Dying on an empty stomach was just so...depressing. Not the journey I wanted for myself.

"Stick behind me, and I mean it this time." A growl shook through Jax's chest, and his usually warm gray eyes flashed with warning.

The big man was pissed.

He was clearly referencing the first time we'd fought in the woods, when he'd told me to stay behind him. Instead, I had almost gotten run over by a monster spider fae and had shifted into a saber-toothed tiger.

I rolled my eyes at him and cracked my neck back and forth. "I'm also an alpha. I don't need to hide behind anyone."

If Jax wanted to cock-block me, that was fine, but I wasn't about to roll over and act like a weak little girl.

I had a *reputation* to uphold in the fae community.

Yes, part of that reputation was face-planting aggressively in front of a million people.

Everyone had to start somewhere.

Public relations wasn't an easy business, and I knew I'd woo them with my alpha prowess, eventually.

"You will listen to him," Cobra sneered and pressed his chest against me until his large body pinned me against the wall. A weird rattling hiss shook

his chest.

Jax stepped forward beside Cobra and they crowded my space.

Great, I was stuck between two mentally unwell men who were growling like animals right before I was supposed to battle for my life.

Not the energy I was trying to create for myself.

I pretended not to notice that they were both gorgeous. I also ignored the fact that Cobra had wrapped his long fingers around my throat and was exerting a bit of pressure that I didn't hate.

My ego didn't love it.

With a grunt, I wrestled Cobra's jeweled hand off my skin and threw my long hair over my shoulder with sass. "Your energy is toxic and ruining my pre-fight headspace. Also, you both sound like rabid animals and should probably get that looked at."

The men backed up, and I breathed with relief as the temperature instantly cooled around me. Sweat dripped down my torso from my pits.

It had taken being kidnapped into a different realm for me to discover I had a sweating problem. Highly unfortunate and *not* fun and flirty.

"Here, let me help," Jax said as he slapped Cobra's hand and pushed him away from me.

The snake man had been slowly reaching his hand out like he was going to choke me again.

It might just be me, but I was 70 percent sure Cobra was acting more unhinged as of late.

Cobra muttered expletives, his jewels casting refractions of light across the shadowy wings of the stadium.

I smirked as Cobra stumbled away.

Instead of sneering back like I expected, he raked his jeweled hand through his dark hair and slowly ran his red tongue over his sinful lips.

I gaped at him...was he trying to seduce me before a *gladiator* tournament? Who did that?

Jax's warm fingers brushed against my neck, and I jumped as the sensation sent tingles down my spine.

Wow, the big man had said he didn't want to have sex with me and now he was casually touching my neck?

The mixed signals were throwing me out of whack.

I steadied my breathing and tried to act like I wasn't hyperventilating.

Before I could complain about him sending mixed signals, he turned me

around and tightly braided my long hair.

Thank the moon goddess I had said nothing. That would have been awkward.

Also, *of course* the big guy liked to do something as sweet as freaking braid hair. My ovaries sobbed, and I tried to discreetly shuffle further away from his magnetic pull.

He was the most addicting combination of sweet and aggressive, and it was scrambling my brains.

I handed him hair ties that I always wore on my wrist—you never knew when you might have to fight for your life—and thanked him for his help.

“No problem. I’ve always done my sisters’ hair for them. I like to braid.” Jax’s smile fell as he spoke, and he clenched his jaw.

Suddenly, the big man was tense and quiet. Tension radiated off him.

“We’ll get back to them before they even know you’re gone,” I said as I thought about Lucinda and my stomach pinched with pain.

Everyone knew Jax’s five sisters were his world; they were his favorite thing to talk about at dinner.

A small part of me dreamed of a world where all our sisters met and became best friends. A world where we didn’t have to train and fight for our lives.

“The braid looks good,” Jax said softly as he fiddled with it. It was clear he didn’t want to talk about his sisters.

“Hmph,” Ascher grunted and arched an eyebrow at Jax.

The colorful flame tattoos that decorated his neck and the side of his face looked menacing against the dark shadows of the narrow wing.

If Jax was sweet and aggressive, then Ascher was aggressive and aggressive.

“Got something to say about Jax?” Cobra stalked forward and shoved his chest into Ascher. Their noses were inches from each other.

On the other hand, Cobra was just psychotic.

But it was cute that he was defending Jax’s love of hair braiding.

“Nope.” Ascher backed away from Cobra’s posturing and leaned casually against the wall.

Clearly, Cobra just wanted to fight, because he whipped his head around and stalked back toward me.

Jax rolled his eyes as once again the handsome jeweled shifter invaded my personal space and glowered down at me.

Cobra snarled, “You still need to obey Jax’s orders. Stay behind us.”

My chest tightened with anger. He might treat Jax with respect, but he sure as shit didn’t treat me as anything other than a possession.

I was tired of men telling me what to do.

Suddenly, a memory of Dick looming over me with his belt flashed before my eyes, and I stumbled backward in desperation.

“Step away from her,” Xerxes said with his smooth accent as his cinnamon scent spiked spicy in the small space.

A long rattling hiss erupted from Cobra’s throat, but he immediately stepped back and gave me space.

“Are you okay, Kitten?” Cobra whispered quietly as he clenched his hands into fists. He gnawed on his lower lip and reached forward, like he wanted to go to me but didn’t know what he’d done.

“No, she’s not okay because of you.” Ascher snarled at Cobra and cracked his tattooed knuckles like he was finally ready to fight.

“Well, technically you’re the reason—” I was cut off from correcting Ascher because Jax shoved me behind him as he and Cobra stalked toward the ram shifter.

There was a loud scrape as Xerxes withdrew his twin daggers and stepped forward beside Ascher.

I could practically smell the testosterone and rage in the air.

Three alphas and one omega stared one another down. Gray, green, amber, and purple eyes glowed in the shadows.

Notably, the one woman, and only *rational* person in the group, did not engage in the showdown.

My eyeball twitched with annoyance as the men flexed their biceps and postured at one another.

And men called women irrational. Anyone who was around any male for any extended period would realize immediately that was a joke.

“ALPHA TEAM, COME ON OUT,” the moderator’s female voice boomed loudly through the stadium and ended the shifter showdown.

Suddenly, guards came out of nowhere and shoved us forward out onto the hot sand. Xerxes stayed back and watched us go with a scowl on his face.

His purple eyes were cold and unforgiving.

He was probably excited to watch us fight to the death.

Even though Xerxes was clearly an ass, there was a tiny part of me that thought he cared a little. That he wouldn’t laugh over our corpses.

My instincts were telling me he was a good person at his core and that something had happened to make him so rude.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the million fae screaming at me, and not my irrational urge to bond with a handsome omega that hated alphas.

The feminine urge to try and fix a sinfully handsome but rude man was real and highly inconvenient.

As we walked forward, my bare feet burned from the hot sand, and my ears ached from the reverberations of the roaring crowd.

Fae guards guided us forward with outstretched, glowing batons and forced us to come to a stop in the middle of the stadium.

Instinctually, the four of us stepped close together with our backs touching. We all remembered the platform elevating beneath us last time.

We pressed against each other and linked arms, the tension from earlier forgotten. Fighting for your life in a bloodthirsty tournament in a foreign realm would do that to a person.

Arms locked with Ascher and Cobra, I squinted and tried to take in the sheer magnitude of the stadium.

Once again, voices screamed Cobra's name, and his gorgeous jeweled face flashed across the large screens.

My head ached from sensory overload, but I noted that the crowd no longer screamed "cunt" at me.

Of course, at that very moment, they stopped screaming for Cobra and started chanting, "Kill the girl!"

I took it as a good sign—my public relations plan was working.

Sweat dripped down my forehead, and Ascher and Cobra gripped my arms so tightly that they ached, as the four other teams emerged from different wings around the stadium.

Ryak glared at me as he walked out with the water fae team. From his expression, he was *really* enjoying the chanting crowd.

Suddenly, there was a new wave of chants, and "dismember the girl" started echoing through the stadium.

Rumbling noises came from Jax's chest. Cobra did his weird rattling hiss thing, and Ascher death glared at everyone.

The three alphas shuffled closer, and Cobra stepped in front of me to block me from the crowd.

A part of me was grateful that they guarded me from the crowd's vitriol.

A large part of me gagged because the men were sweating up a storm,

and three large bodies pressed against me was not a pleasant sensation.

My white shirt stuck to my clammy skin, and I wondered if fae ever just walked around naked in the intense heat. If I'd grown up here, I would 100 percent be on the nudist train.

Suddenly, the sand trembled beneath our feet, and the men pressed tighter together.

I gasped and tried not to suffocate. The crowd would just *love* that.

This time, however, a small platform didn't elevate beneath our feet.

Nope. The entire freaking floor of the stadium, sand and all, lifted into the air.

Of course, because whoever oversaw this little shindig was seriously disturbed in the head, the massive elevating platform began to rotate.

Sun god forbid we *not* get motion sickness while fighting for our lives.

Frankly, it was a little inconsiderate, and a part of me wanted to ask to speak to whoever was in charge of the death games.

Good news—the platform rotated slowly, and it was so big that the risk of falling off was slim to none.

Bad news—my stomach did not care.

Any spinning was too much spinning. I tried to breathe through the nausea.

The sensation magnified until I gasped shallowly.

“Sadie, are you okay?” Ascher asked with concern.

Since I was bent over with my hands on my knees, heaving like a cat, I think it was clear I was *not* okay. The man had the observational skills of a rock.

The men stepped forward, and a cool breeze whipped my face.

The nausea slowly subsided, and I thanked the moon goddess for the gusts of air, which cut through the stifling heat.

A horrible thought dawned on me: what if I got hairballs?

“Kill the cunt!” echoed loudly around through the stadium.

I didn't mean to be dramatic, but this was the worst day of my life.

Relief spread through me when the roaring stadium went dead silent at the moderator's voice.

“The queen has lifted the shifting ban for this round of the competition. The last competitor still conscious wins 100 points for their team. Begin!”

What the flying fuck?

The crowd screamed, and Cobra plucked an icicle dagger out of the air in

front of my face.

A water fae had immediately chucked a weapon at me. Who did that? Was chivalry really *that* dead?

I'd been an inch away from being *stabbed* through my skull.

Yep, worst day of my life.

My breath became shallow as I hyperventilated all over again.

A lot was happening quickly.

I needed at least ten more minutes to emotionally prepare to be a girl boss.

Did she say the last one conscious? I prayed I'd misheard.

"Shift now!" Jax alpha-barked at all of us.

Then there was a loud rip as his clothes split, and he grew taller and wider until he was a monstrous bear with fangs.

Thick, shaggy black fur covered his entire body. Long, dagger-like claws decorated both his feet and hands, and massive black spines poked out from his back like armor.

Next, Ascher's clothes ripped, and he also grew taller.

His massive ram head thickened, and horns grew until an animal head sniffed the air aggressively through giant nostrils.

I went to flip on the numb.

Nothing happened.

WHAT THE FUCK? It should have been recharged by now.

I flipped and flipped and tugged at the switch in my brain where the numb resided. I could feel its heavy pressure in my brain, but it felt like it still needed time to recharge. It was just out of my use.

Fucking shit. My little coma had done more of a number on me than I'd realized.

"SHIFT, SADIE!" Cobra screamed. His snake eyes flickered on his face.

Time to be a girl boss in this bitch! I yelled at myself and pretended it was the numb speaking to me.

Cobra tugged at his jeweled collar desperately, and no shadow snakes slithered over his skin. For some reason, the fae queen wasn't letting him completely shift.

Still, Cobra's hands moved impossibly fast. He caught ice daggers as they flew in the air directly toward my face.

I searched for the telltale tingle of my shift.

Thankfully, my body responded, and my clothes ripped off as I

transformed from a woman into a saber-toothed tiger.

My spine popped deliciously as my bones cracked and expanded.

My body grew until my head reached higher than Cobra's.

The heat from the two suns was oppressive, and I panted in the hot, sticky air. I missed the comfortable, cool temperature of the shifter realm.

These conditions were unbearable.

My advanced eyesight took in the chaos of all the competitors fighting around me.

I might not be numb, but I was a *tiger*.

With a little too much glee, I tilted my head back, expanded my lungs, and roared. My massive fangs were heavy in my mouth, and I clashed my teeth together for dramatic effect.

I was also hungry, and suddenly, all the competitors were smelling a little too much like chicken.

Another ice spear flung toward me, and Cobra grabbed it out of the air before I could react.

Poor Cobra was small and defenseless in front of me. He was so little and handsome, I just wanted to eat him up.

He was also a member of my team, and he needed protection.

I shook my head and motioned at him to get behind my big, furry body.

Instead of running behind me because I was massive, with ridiculous canines hanging from my mouth that were bigger than Cobra's arms, he stood *in front* of me.

Like I needed his puny body's protection.

Jax and Ascher stood on either side of me. The three alphas surrounded me.

I tilted my head back and roared with annoyance. My large, shaggy body was projected across the massive screens at the top of the stadium.

For a second, I took a moment to admire myself.

My fur was pure white with black markings.

I squinted my glowing red eyes and tried to figure out why the black stripes looked familiar.

They covered the tops of my shoulders and my back in a crisscross pattern.

Then I realized why the black markings looked familiar: they mirrored the thick white scars that marred my flesh.

Oh, I sure as shit wasn't numb.

Anger coursed through my veins, and I roared even louder, the deep bellow starting in my gut and unfurling into a terrifying reverberation that echoed through the stadium.

The fae hushed in shock, then screamed even louder.

My meaty muscles rippled with anger.

Fucking Dick had scarred my human flesh *and* my tiger's fur.

I wanted to rip his face off.

Cobra caught another ice dagger chunked over from the water fae. I narrowed my eyes at the assailant—Ryak.

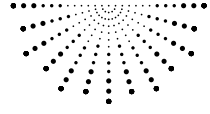
He wasn't Dick, but he was annoying as fuck.

He would do.

My thigh muscles bunched and released as I leaped over Cobra and charged directly at the water fae.

With my mouth open, fangs gleaming, it was time to fuck up some men.

SADIE



MORE CREEPY POEMS

REMEMBER when I was all hot and bothered and ready to fucking destroy the competition? Yeah, me neither.

I panted and sprinted across the stadium as the air fae threw gusts of wind at me.

It was like running in slow motion, and it took monumental effort to move through the resistance.

The air was oppressively hot and didn't help my winded state.

Still, I wasn't about to give up.

Reputation, I reminded myself. I wasn't about to get beaten by a bunch of *men*. A girl had to have some dignity.

With an enormous leap, I slammed my body weight into the air fae that had been throwing wind at me like a total ass.

My massive body rocked him into the sand with so much force that the entire platform shook. He passed out and slumped over.

I chuffed with relief.

Unconscious bodies were sprawled all across the slowly spinning platform.

To my left, a water fae slammed a sledgehammer of ice into the skull of an earth fae. It left a massive dent that was *not* pretty.

To my right, an earth fae took a chunk of sand out of the platform, molded it into a massive rock above his head, and completely crushed a water fae who tried to defend himself with an ice shield.

That was going to hurt in the morning.

I jumped out of the way as Ryak tossed another ice spear at me. He was still running around and doing his best to stab me like a total loser.

He needed to get a hobby, because he was *obsessed* with me.

I dodged his weapon, but got distracted by what was happening on the far side of the platform.

Demetre had shifted into a massive black dragon, and Jax's bear was on the dragon's back and trying to choke him out.

The dragon flapped desperately to escape Jax's long talons.

Behind Jax, Cobra was slumped over unconscious on the sand, and Ascher stood over him, fighting off water fae and earth fae on all sides.

My moment of distraction cost me.

I'd been focusing on dodging ice spears, not animals.

I howled in shock as two figures slammed against my side. With a flip of my long tail, I righted my legs beneath me and growled at my attackers.

Well, now I knew what the half warrior twins, Noah and Shane, shifted into.

Two massive orange tigers stalked toward me.

They were stocky and heavily muscled, but still smaller than me. I relished the fact that I was the bigger cat.

One walked to my right, the other to my left, as they tried to herd me to the edge of the platform.

They growled, and I laughed. Well, I tried to laugh—my maw made a rough hacking sound.

Their growl was scary, but it wasn't blood-curdling and terrifying.

Mine was.

Suddenly, their back legs tensed. That was the only warning I got.

Before I knew it, two tigers wrestled me to the ground.

I rolled onto my back and kicked my powerful hind legs up against them. One tiger went flying, while the other kept snapping at my underbelly.

The remaining tiger tried to pin me to the ground.

I growled as I lay on my back and we tussled.

Truthfully, I was having a great time.

Clearly, I needed more psychological help than I ever realized, because giddiness rushed through me as we wrestled. It was war, but it felt like playtime.

Adrenaline rushed through me.

I nipped with my fangs and lost myself in the fun.

Happiness was scarce these days, and I enjoyed the dopamine that was rushing through my brain.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize I was playing with a limp tiger.

My playful nips had ripped out a chunk of the tiger's chest, and my white fur was covered in blood.

The half warrior was definitely unconscious.

I tried to casually detangle myself from the limp tiger.

Nope, I hadn't been playing with his body like a freak. Who does that? Not me.

Unfortunately, as I stumbled to my feet, the world became engulfed in flames.

Instead of the queen's blue flames, bright-orange fire consumed me.

The tiger I had kicked off me prowled toward me, across the sands. Ice weapons and chunks of earth flew around him.

His green eyes glowed with menace, and it was clear he was pissed about what I had done to his twin.

It was also clear that one of the twins was part fire fae.

I growled and rolled around in the sand because his fire *burned*, and it was already unreasonably hot outside.

The rancid scent of my burning fur irritated my sensitive nose.

The tiger jumped through the wall of orange, and I leaped to meet him in midair.

Sure, my skin was burning with pain, but I'd been whipped with a belt for as long as I could remember.

Even without the numb, my pain tolerance was high.

Plus, I was having way too much fun fighting other tigers. Even though he was trying to burn me alive, I felt a kinship to him in this form.

His small, pathetic teeth gnawed at my thick, shaggy neck, and I slammed his head to the ground with my massive front paw.

The flames stopped, and he didn't move.

Damn it, I'd been looking forward to wrestling some more.

I turned away from the two unconscious tigers and directly into an ice spear.

A spear that was covered in small daggers. It wasn't meant to bludgeon. It was meant to kill.

To skewer.

Ryak grinned at the long end of the spear, which he had just stabbed through my torso and out my back.

For a split second, I noted that I looked like a shish kebab.

Then the intense stabbing pain burned my chest impossibly, and I howled in pain. Sure, I had a high pain tolerance, but *this* was agony.

A large ram head slammed its horns into the side of Ryak's skull.

I would have clapped with excitement if I weren't stumbling around with a fucking spear stabbing through my chest.

Ryak passed out on the ground, and my large form slumped next to him.

Ascher fell to his knees in front of my prone body, and a weird, grunting bleat burst from his mouth. He held an ice sword in his hands.

"Princess!" his freaky shifted head bleated down at me.

His kneeling form tipped to the side as a large fae slammed one of the limp tigers' bodies against Ascher like a battering ram.

During the collision, Ascher thrust the long sword and sliced the fae deep.

Both slumped onto the platform.

Jax and Demetre were the last warriors fighting.

The other seventeen competitors, including myself, were all sprawled out across the platform.

The fae crowd screamed as Demetre flapped up into the air, while Jax clung to his back with his claws.

I whined as it lifted Jax higher.

His monstrous bear's head turned to look at me like he had heard me whine.

Jax bellowed with rage.

Suddenly, he stood up on Demetre's back. Then he grabbed a wing in each paw, and with insane strength, he started to rip off Demetre's wings.

The dragon shrieked and bellowed fire as Jax rode the spiraling dragon headfirst into the platform.

My eyes slowly closed as Jax stomped on the dragon's skull and ran toward me on all fours.

The last thing I heard before losing consciousness was the crowd chanting, "Meat Grinder."

I was a PR god.



I moaned like a dying cow as harsh light stabbed my eyeballs.

“Dude, how could you lose? I bet five hundred gold pieces on you winning!” Aran’s bright-blue hair was long and luscious around her ethereal face.

Instantly, I wished I were still passed out.

Her voice was too loud, and it grated against my ears. Also, my chest burned awfully, and it was hard to breathe.

“I’m gonna kill you,” I gasped out with a rasp as my chest smarted.

“Sweetie, I just watched you try to kill people. I’m not worried.” Aran inspected her fingernails like a prissy princess, and I wondered how my life had come to this.

I was getting ridiculed by my friend, the fae princess, for my lack of competitive prowess in the bloodthirsty Fae Games.

To think that a few months ago I was serving beer and trying to inspire rats to rebel against Dick.

Life came at you fast.

“But seriously, I’m just busting your balls because you took ten years off my immortal life! Everyone’s talking about how you played with the limp tiger’s body for like ten minutes after he was passed out.”

I groaned and wished the ground would just swallow me up, because I’d been really hoping that no one had noticed my slight moment of insanity.

I couldn’t even blame it on the numb.

Aran seemed unconcerned. “The fae loved that shit, so now you’ve got a growing fan base. You’re also the face of the progressive movement to include women in battle. Thank the sun god, I’ve been trying for years to get these ignorant people to grow up.”

Satisfaction flowed through me as I thought about how much it was pissing Ryak off. I was accomplishing everything he didn’t want me to.

Honestly, I didn’t even want to lead a female movement to participate in the Fae Games.

Why the hell would women want to take part in this horseshit? Leave the mental unwellness to the men.

But, since it pissed Ryak off, I was about to embrace my role as the poster girl for the titties-and-fighting committee. An elite position that I was creating for myself.

Aran kept talking as I smirked on my pillows and struggled to breathe through my collapsed lungs.

“Also, my guards have located Dick and are going to apprehend him for you.”

I moved to get out of bed, but pain screamed through my torso as I moved.

Aran waved me off and gently pushed me back down. “Don’t stress yourself out. We’ll bring him in.”

Aran pulled out a purple crystal and tapped away at it. I assumed she was using it to communicate with someone.

Lightness coursed through my veins, and it took me a moment to identify the sensation.

I’d never felt it before.

It was hope.

All I wanted in life was to wipe the monster off the face of the realm so he could never hurt me or Lucinda ever again.

“Why does my chest hurt so badly?” I asked Aran.

“Your chest *hurts* because you’ve been freaking stabbed with a massive ice spear. I’m gonna kill that bastard.” Aran punched her fists in the air.

The events of the fight rushed back to me.

“So when can I leave?” I grunted.

Sure, my sternum felt like it had been cracked in two, but I didn’t like the sterile white-and-silver fixtures of the health clinic.

It freaked me out.

Aran shook her head, but helped me get to my feet.

A blue gown was draped over my body, and it fell open as I moved.

I accidentally flashed Aran my butt cheeks as the gown fell forward off my shoulders.

The dozens of scars on my back were exposed.

Thankfully, my friend didn’t comment. She just helped me shuffle toward the door.

Suddenly, a fae doctor from before burst into the room.

The good thing was I was moving so slow that I hadn’t made it to the door. Otherwise, he would have body-slammed me into the wall.

Aran and I both stared at him. He breathed heavily and glared down at me with disappointment.

Yes, my ass crack was still on display, and a nice breeze was blowing through my vagina.

Frankly, I was too emotionally drained to care that I was mooning a

doctor.

I'd been through *much* worse.

The doctor sputtered, "Don't you dare leave. Do you know how much enchantment we had to pump into you to turn you back? We packed your chest cavity with unicorn bones, and you're lucky your bones have regrown as quickly as they have."

I sighed heavily, but instantly regretted it when my chest burned with pain. "Stop killing unicorns. Also, move. I'm fine."

Aran looked back and forth between the doctor, who was turning purple, and my exposed ass.

"It's fine. Let us through," Aran said with authority as she chose the *correct* side in our standoff.

The doctor's eye twitched as he scolded us. "Do you know how many fae had t-t-t-t-t-to—"

He stopped speaking and hunched over. His body shook with convulsions.

We backed away from his shaking form.

It was creepy as hell.

Suddenly, the doctor's back snapped ramrod straight, and he spoke with a different voice. It was deep and harsh.

It was a voice we'd heard once before.

*"Blood burns red, through the air it's blown,
Blood pours bright, across the fated throne,
Blood draws truth, and rips apart the mind,
Blood creates pain, it kills the weak-spined."*

The doctor gasped dramatically, and his stiff shoulders relaxed. His eyeballs still bulged creepily out of his head.

He blinked and spoke in his normal voice like nothing had happened, "You shouldn't be out of bed!"

At some point, Aran and I had turned and held each other.

Tremors shook through all our arms.

The last poem had been creepy, but overall, the subject matter had been pretty tame and generic.

This poem was *really* heavy on the "blood" emphasis. I wasn't an expert on good or bad omens, but this seemed like the *latter* category.

For a second, the statue of the fae lying in its own blood in the village's entrance flashed through my brain.

Did this poem have something to do with that?

I looked over at my pretty friend.

Every time this creepy poem thing happened, I was with her.

She still had a crystal collar around her like Cobra—was the fae queen stifling her abilities? Was that what the poem was about?

“Get out of our way!” Aran said sharply, her voice ringing with the command and power that her mother possessed.

The doctor's eyes widened, and he moved to the side.

Aran still held me, and she basically just carried me out the door as I leaned on her. The agony in my chest was still intense, and it hurt to walk fast.

My naked butt quivered as we shuffled down the hall. My dozens of scars were on display for every doctor and nurse to see.

I didn't give a single shit.

I had already exposed my body on fae TV.

What were they going to do, read a creepy poem to me? Been there, done that.

Foreboding danced across my skin with little tingly pinpricks that made me yearn to run as fast as I could.

“We'll be fine,” Aran whispered quietly, and I didn't know who she was trying to reassure, herself or me.

Finally, we limped out of the cold white building, into the grassy world beneath the stadium.

It wasn't the same as walking out under a blue sky, but the air-conditioning hum was a pleasant reprieve from the brutal dual suns.

“Why the fuck is your ass out?” Cobra yelled across the yard, and I looked back to see three alphas, flanked by Xerxes, charging after me.

All the men had been slumped against the side of the building, waiting for me.

A small part of me was grateful they'd waited for me.

A larger part of me was overwhelmed by the creepy blood poem and pain that stabbed at my chest.

“Run!” I tugged on Aran's arms, and we limped away at what could only be described as a brisk walk.

My mind spun as my chest rattled harder, and panic spurned my legs

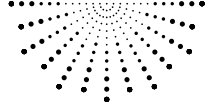
forward. I didn't even know where I was going or what I was running from.

One word ricocheted around my brain.

Blood.

Nothing good ever came from it.

SADIE



THE FUTURE IS NOT BRIGHT

“I DON’T HAVE time to deal with your mental health issues. I’m dealing with my own stuff right now!” I yelled as I hobbled across the yard, clinging to Aran’s arm.

“Cover up!” Cobra alpha-barked, and I fought the instinctual urge to obey him.

Sometimes, it was annoying as hell that I was the least dominant; by “sometimes,” I meant “all the freakin’ time.”

Physically, I was not well.

My chest hurt from where a dagger had been *stabbed* through it, my heart hurt because Cobra was probably disgusted by my scars, and my brain hurt because a creepy voice was attacking us with poems.

I also remembered the alphas’ agreement not to have sex with me, and my head throbbed with the beginning of a tension headache.

Cobra’s warm hand grabbed at my shoulder, and I whirled around. “Don’t touch me!”

A part of me knew I was being dramatic because I was freaked out by the blood prophecy.

“I will touch you. I own you, Kitten. Or do you not remember?” Cobra sneered.

Nope, I was not being dramatic at all. I was going to murder Cobra slowly and painfully.

The man was unreal.

“All I remember is you interrupting Jax and me like a possessive ass.” I pursed my lips like I was definitely *not* having a flashback to the closet.

Cobra stepped forward until his pale face and sparkly jewels

overwhelmed my vision.

He was so unnaturally gorgeous that it just wasn't fair.

Out of nowhere, I thought about the fact that the little snake would have been so happy about his proximity. My heart twisted with sadness.

"You don't remember what happened in the closet?" Cobra asked, his voice silky steel as he clenched his sharp jaw.

His body practically trembled with rage.

"Nope, not a thing."

"You don't remember my mouth on your pussy?" A low rattling hiss vibrated in his throat.

I inspected my cuticles like I'd seen Aran do and cocked my gown-clad hip. "Not particularly. Must not have been memorable."

"You don't remember my fingers in your ass?"

"Can't recall."

"You don't remember coming all over my face as you cried my name?"

"Nope," I said and popped the *p* aggressively.

"You don't recall when you agreed that I owned you? That you were my property? My possession?"

My vision glazed red with rage, and I fisted my hands at my side to control my anger.

I tried to picture something calm, like climbing to the top of a pine tree with Lucinda and relaxing under the red sun.

It didn't work.

"Go fuck yourself. I obviously didn't mean it. I just wanted to cum!" I shouted as I slammed my fist as hard as I could at his perfectly gorgeous, annoying fucking face.

There was a loud crack, and his nose burst.

Blood sprayed and dripped down his face.

I winced as my knuckles throbbed with pain.

I'd hit him *hard*.

Instead of Cobra yelling or getting angry, the biggest grin split across his face, and his jewels sparkled across his cheekbones.

His red tongue snaked out, and he licked the red blood off his mouth like it was delicious.

After I'd aggressively broken his nose in a fit of rage, Cobra thought it was appropriate to give me sex eyes.

"Anytime you want to spar, Kitten, let me know." He continued to lick

the blood off his lips, and I continued to wonder how I'd gotten into this situation.

"Is your hand okay?" Jax asked and gingerly grabbed my arm. He tsked with disapproval as he inspected my already swelling knuckles.

The warmth of Jax's callused fingers caressing my bloody hand made goose bumps erupt across my body.

I was just as messed up as Cobra.

My face heated with warmth, as I realized Cobra and I had an audience.

Ascher, Xerxes, and Aran all stared at us like we were on the news, and the broadcaster had just announced the shifter realm had been taken over by the fae.

Jax was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

"Well, I think the prophecy just came true," Aran said dryly as blood dripped down Cobra's face and he *kept* licking it like a freak.

A manic chuckle bubbled up my throat. That would be *too* easy.

"Princess, what is she talking about?" Ascher's tattoos bunched as he clenched his jaw and cracked his knuckles. His amber eyes burned with anger.

I showed him my teeth and let him see the violence in my eyes. "I don't really think *you're* in a position to demand anything. Also, don't call me Princess."

He could fight alongside me, cushion my fall, be my little bitch for all I cared.

But no matter what he did, he was the reason we were stuck in this realm, fighting for our lives.

He wasn't forgiven.

Ascher didn't respond, and his amber eyes stared back at me, expressionless; however, his onyx horns (a full horn and the broken horn) grew larger on his head.

It was his tell that he was pissed.

Ascher might have been exaggerating his hotheaded persona before, but you couldn't fake anger. I would bet my life that inside, he was churning with rage.

He was just a good actor.

Suddenly, I was overcome with the irrational urge to rile him up.

I wanted to poke at him until he broke, until he screamed in my face and showed his true colors.

“Got nothing to say? Just gonna stand there and let me boss you around?”
I pushed my chest against his.

My own chest smarted, but I ignored the pain. It was the least of my problems. Anger from Cobra’s words, and the sex pact, coursed through my veins.

“Settle down, little alpha,” Jax said as he grabbed me and pulled me away from Ascher.

What could I say? Getting *skewered* had really given me a new perspective on life.

I smirked patronizingly at Ascher. “Going to let everyone else fight your battles? You want more information so you can betray us again?”

Satisfaction spiked through my gut as the muscle in Ascher’s temple twitched.

Finally, his amber eyes flashed with anger, and his large onyx horns straightened further on his head.

Tattoos rippling, Ascher stalked toward me.

A warning growl rumbled through Jax’s chest. I stepped to the side as Jax tried to block my view of Ascher.

Unfortunately, Xerxes grabbed Ascher’s arm and held the alpha back.

Ascher stilled unnaturally as he looked over at the omega, and for a long second, I thought he was going to attack.

He breathed deeply and closed his amber eyes.

Then, in a complete turnaround, his broad shoulders relaxed, and the fire disappeared from his eyes.

He looked at Xerxes gratefully, and I knew the omega’s cinnamon-sugar scent had calmed Ascher’s rage.

“Well, this has been extremely entertaining, but we need to get Sadie covered and in a bed. She’s going to drop from exertion,” Aran said with a dramatic eye roll.

At the mention of my half-nude state, Ascher pulled his black hoodie off.

I was so stunned by his exposed deep V lines and the colorful tattoos that covered every inch of his muscles that I forgot to fight as he yanked his soft sweatshirt over my head.

The man was a living work of art.

His black hoodie fell to my knees in a warm hug, and I tried to not make it obvious that I was sniffing his delicious pine scent.

Warm conifers and pine wafted through my nose, and reminded me of the

towering mountains and sprawling forests of the shifter realm.

Ascher turned toward Aran. "What prophecy were you talking about?"

I opened my mouth to tell him that my friend would share nothing with his betraying ass.

Aran tugged at her aqua hair anxiously and said, "Another fae prophecy just took over our doctor and read itself to me and Sadie. This one said a lot about blood and sounded pretty dark."

I gave her the stink eye, but she avoided my gaze.

"Another one?" Jax asked, and the rumble in his chest grew louder. His gray eyes glowed, and his gold jewelry tinkled as he shifted forward.

Aran gulped, moved backward a little, and said nothing.

When Jax became angry, it was terrifying.

I decided to save my friend.

"Auntie got possessed at the compound during one of our therapy sessions and also read us a prophecy. It wasn't that big of a deal," I spoke quickly and tried to act casual about it.

Jax roared loudly.

The grass beneath my feet shook slightly at the deep tenor sound.

"Fae prophecies are *not* to be messed with." Xerxes arched a golden eyebrow at me like I was a dumbass.

Jax's, Cobra's, and Ascher's eyes glowed, and their chests heaved with anger.

"Okay, but Aran is the fae princess, and she says we're fine. It was probably just a random fluke. No big deal."

Everyone was being so dramatic.

Aran spoke softly, "Um, I thought the first time was a fluke. But two prophecies reading themselves to us, across two different realms, is a *big deal*."

"It's just a poem," I said forcefully.

Clearly, I was the only rational one in the group.

Xerxes shook his head. "Fae poems that take over a person and read themselves are no joke. Rumor has it's a long-lost species of fae speaking. A species that possessed the ability to control others."

His jaw was clenched tight, and his long blond hair billowed around his large body. His purple eyes were piercing.

My jaw dropped.

"A long-lost species of fae?" I squeaked. "Like what?"

Xerxes rubbed his hands across his face. “No one knows. Rumor is, the fae possessed a banned element—an element of death that was too dangerous to wield. And for some reason, one of them is interested in the two of you.”

I suffered a mini aneurysm and dropped to the ground, quaking. At least, in my mind, I pretended I did.

In reality, my eyeball twitched, and I passed gas.

Ever had a dangerous species of fae possess someone’s body and talk to you? *Same*.

“What did it say exactly?” Jax asked.

“Um, I think—”

Jax cut me off. “I was asking Aran.”

My eyebrows rose at his audacity. He didn’t have to be so rude.

“One line said, ‘Blood creates pain, it kills the weak-spined.’” Aran’s voice lilted as she mimicked the timbre of the creepy voice.

Ascher ran his tattooed knuckles over his horns with frustration. “What do those words mean?”

Aran opened her mouth to respond, and I cut her off.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It was pretty self-explanatory. Blood creates pain and kills the weak.”

“What?” Ascher stared at me funny.

Everyone was staring at me funny, even Cobra, who had blood still dripping down his face.

“How did you know that?” Xerxes asked.

“How, little alpha?” Jax alpha-barked at me.

The three alphas and Xerxes stepped closer until they blocked the fluorescent lights from the ceiling high above and crowded my space.

I looked around and wondered if I’d entered a portal to a different realm.

Was I talking gibberish?

Had I died in the battle and this was the afterworld?

“Know what? She just said it?” As much as I loved this little interrogation moment, I really wanted to find a hot tub of water and soak in it for twenty-four hours.

Cobra said softly, “She just spoke in ancient druid, a fae language.”

He licked his bloody lips and stared at me with a burning intensity, like he wanted to rip me open and pick apart my brain.

Everyone gaped at me.

Xerxes narrowed his purple eyes at me. “Only fae are born with the

ability to understand the language.”

A prickling sensation crawled up the back of my neck.

“Um, no, she spoke normally? It was definitely not in a different language. I think I would know.”

“No, it was in the ancient fae language.” Aran gaped at me like I was a freak.

My stomach dropped.

“But I talked to you about it last time?” I asked, with confusion.

Aran pulled at her teal-blue hair, her eyes unnaturally wide as she stared at me. “I must have been so surprised that I didn’t realize. It talked about a throne, and you didn’t know I was a princess. I was freaking out and definitely in shock.”

I talked quickly. “So say I believe you and I can speak fae. You speak it? It’s not a big deal.”

With a sharp tug, I pulled Ascher’s black hoodie up over my head and tied the strings tight, like somehow the big sweatshirt could protect me from the universe’s bullshit.

Aran spoke slowly, and carefully, like every word held importance. “We’re taught from a young age that only fae can understand the language.”

I shrugged. “Well, I’ve always been good at languages. At school, I quickly learned the dialects of the barren northern lands.”

Aran ignored me. “When you were younger, did fire ever shoot from your hands? Ever felt the air and controlled it? Ever made the earth move? Ever made an ice weapon? If fae have powers, they manifest young.” She spoke the last part quietly, and her eyes got a faraway expression.

“No, no, no, and no,” I snapped back.

Since Dick had *abused* me all my childhood, an elemental power would really have come in handy. I could confidently say I didn’t possess any.

“Are you sure?” Aran asked with a tone of disbelief.

I was 100 percent sure.

When I thought of my childhood, all I could think of was Dick’s belt slamming down against my flesh as blood pooled around me.

I’d fallen enough times while climbing high trees that a fae air ability would have come in handy.

I’d burned my fingers as I’d worked over the open flame in the kitchen.

I’d lived in a land surrounded by snow and water, and I’d never made a single ice weapon.

I'd shoveled the hard, frozen ground for hours with no assistance.

I knew in my bones—I wasn't a fae.

So why can you understand their language?

At a brisk pace, I limped away from the group. If everyone else wanted to panic, that was on them.

I was a cool, collected cucumber with fantastic mental health and an unwavering core of strength.

I limped toward the village, and the five others walked behind me.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, back in the shiny halls of the massive village compound, I hurried toward a single-use bathroom.

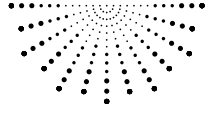
With shaking hands, I threw myself into the small room.

What was going on?

Every day, it felt like I understood less.

Like a mature, independent woman, I slid to the ground and hyperventilated.

SADIE



I HAVE TO SEDUCE WHAT?

CURRENTLY, all the teams in the Fae Games stood in one of the village's massive gyms.

The thing about mental breakdowns was, even though you were having one, the world didn't stop around you.

Nope, you had to keep trudging on. While inside, you were dying.

I cracked my neck back and forth.

Maybe if I twisted fast enough, my head would pop off, and I wouldn't have to deal with the billion problems that defined my life.

My neck cracked loudly as I yanked my head to the side with a swift tug.

Cobra looked over with narrowed eyes, like he knew what I was trying to do, and I fought the urge to stick my tongue out like a little kid.

It was weird to stand beside all the people we had aggressively attacked a day before. It was even weirder when we'd first walked in, and all the competitors had greeted one another.

A water fae had slapped an air fae on the back and said, and I quote, "Sorry for stabbing you."

Then the air fae had said, "No problem, bro."

No problem, bro?

I felt like if someone stabbed you, even in a competition, then you had a problem. *Bro.*

Of course, Ryak hadn't apologized for skewering me with his spear. He'd just smirked. It had taken all my willpower not to flip him off with both my hands.

Just kidding; I'd flipped him off, and he shook with rage.

Overly aggressive men in physical combat situations were just so

predictable. I thought about the betrayal of John, the first beta that had attacked me, and now Ryak.

Still, at least not every man wanted to kill me violently.

One of the half warrior twins looked over at me with a curious expression.

His blood-orange mohawk and emerald eyes were bright against his dark skin, and his cheekbones were stunningly prominent.

Beside him, his twin was busy talking to Demetre.

I didn't know if the twin staring at me was Noah or Shane. Was he the twin tiger that I'd played with, or the one that had set me on fire? Neither seemed good.

As a blood-orange mohawk turned toward me once again, my face heated as I made eye contact.

My gut told me it was the dude whose limp body I'd played with. Was he thinking about it?

Because I was.

I just wanted a sun-god-damn bubble bath and a good book.

Although, I'd used to enjoy reading about the half warriors battling and fighting monsters in the fae realm.

Now that I was living it, I was over it; the genre sucked.

I wanted a good smut book where the female lead was worshipped like a queen and dicked down by multiple men repeatedly.

All day. Every day. Constant dicking.

Also, the lead men needed to be super sweet and supportive.

No growling, posturing, sneering, or excessive alpha testosterone. Just excessive cuddling, hand-holding, complimenting, and kissing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I couldn't help but admire how Cobra's gorgeous face jewels sparkled, how Jax's strong features were highlighted by the pretty jewelry in his hair, and how Ascher's tattoos covered every inch of his skin.

Even Xerxes, who openly *loathed* me, was handsome in a soft, pretty way. Like a freaking prince charming.

Why were the toxic men the best-looking?

It just wasn't fair.

"Congratulations!" the fae instructor shouted as he walked into the room. The large man had bright-green hair and loved to shout his words instead of speaking like a normal, sane person.

Instantly, my head throbbed, and I fought the urge to tell him to shut up. I would have if his biceps weren't larger than my entire body.

"Congrats, Jax, for being the winner of the last competition!" he yelled again and clapped his hands loudly.

A bunch of female attendants ran into the room with hot towels and water bottles, and I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at them.

If the trainer said we were running, I was going to cause a *scene*.

My sternum was literally still healing from being speared. I couldn't run well under normal conditions, let alone post-stabbing ones.

My chest hurt for another reason as the attendants walked among us.

They giggled over Jax, and one even asked for the "Meat Grinder's" signature.

Jax blushed and mumbled nonsense, clearly overwhelmed and not used to the female attention.

When one attendant reached over to feel Jax's massive bicep, I fought the urge to chuck my water bottle at her like a dagger.

When another attendant gave Cobra a water bottle and got into his personal space to admire his jewels, I reminded myself that violence was not the answer.

Finally, when an attendant cooed over Ascher's horns and tattoos, my leg cramped from fighting the urge to slam my foot into her throat.

With deep breaths, I tried to remind myself that it was wrong to maim people.

The problem was everything I did lately was violent as hell. It was becoming second nature.

Just another issue I needed to bring up to my future therapist.

A different attendant handed me a towel and water, and she didn't coo over my beauty. Highly disappointing.

However, she shuffled closer.

"All hail the first female gladiator," she whispered under her breath, and winked at me. Then she put her forefingers up to her lips and pointed them down like they were fangs.

Holy sun god's tits.

I had a fan, and apparently, my fan base called me a gladiator. They even had a little symbolic hand gesture that represented me!

"Thanks for your support," I whispered back and tried not to burst into tears. It had been a really hard couple of months, and this random fae girl's

support meant everything to me.

She gave me a big smile but squinted with confusion, like she couldn't tell if I was about to cry or laugh.

Thankfully, before I could break down, the damn trainer started yelling again.

"As victor of the round, the alpha team now has 100 points and is in the lead. As you know, no one got any points after the opening ceremonies because of...complications."

He looked over at Jax and Cobra, and I remembered Aran telling me they had started a stadium-wide riot.

Frankly, it sounded kind of fun, and I was sad I'd missed it.

"As a reward for winning, Jax, you get a spa day of massages, and you get to choose one of your teammates to go with you," the trainer said.

I crossed my fingers behind my back and tried to act casual as I looked up.

Jax glanced down at me and grinned, and I practically vibrated with the urge to put my hand in the air and shout, "Pick me!"

He looked over at Cobra, and Cobra nodded at him with a smile.

I barely stopped myself from fist-bumping the air.

They had definitely shared a silent conversation, and Cobra had definitely given him permission to choose me.

Don't ask me how I knew, I just did.

"I'll take Sadie." Jax smiled at me.

My heart burst into a million sparkly bubbles of happiness, and I fought the urge to throw myself into his arms and give him a big, sloppy kiss.

"No, she doesn't have clearance to get a massage because her sternum is still healing. Pick someone else," the motherfucking fae doctor said as he leaned against the wall.

He always supervised our training sessions to make sure we were okay.

The bastard had said nothing the other day when they'd forced me to go for a run. I had clearly been hyperventilating and ten seconds from dying, but *now* he stepped up and said something.

The jerk wanted to stop me from getting a massage—a relaxing, rejuvenating experience?

I tried to remember why it was morally wrong to walk over and rip out his trachea with my teeth.

"I'm fine. I feel great. Let me go," I alpha-barked at him.

“No. You aren’t cleared.”

The bastard didn’t even flinch, as he literally ruined my life.

Also, apparently my alpha bark was weak as hell. I was less dominant than everyone, even a freaking fae doctor who was built like a string bean.

“Sorry, little alpha, but he’s right. Your body is still injured, and you need to recover. I’ll bring Cobra,” Jax said gently.

Cobra said sarcastically, “Yay, spa day.”

I flipped him off with both fingers.

The big, psycho bastard stuck his tongue out and wiggled it back and forth like he was eating me out.

I made an inappropriate gesture that involved my fist and my arm.

Jax sighed heavily and ran his hand through his long braids like he was done dealing with our bullshit.

Since he was about to get pampered all day, I felt zero percent bad for him.

“Now that we’ve settled that, let’s turn to today’s lessons,” the trainer said as he addressed the room and ignored our antics.

I crossed my fingers behind my back again and prayed to the moon goddess that we wouldn’t be running.

I promised her that if we didn’t run today, I would remain a pure virgin and devote my life to serving her.

“The next challenge is a little different. The queen has specifically requested this herself.”

My stomach tied in knots, and I prayed harder that the queen didn’t request a running challenge.

She hated me so much, and was so cruel and manipulative, I wouldn’t put it past the bitch.

The trainer said casually, “In one week’s time, you will each have to seduce a fae vampyre, a rare, ancient beast that has been told to murder you if you fail.”

My heavily concussed brain ached.

Fuck you moon goddess. I was going to be a raging whore and fuck so many men that I couldn’t walk from the strain on my vagina.

Then I was going to find a sex club, and I would invent positions so exotic and shocking that they would worship me for my creativity.

If the moon goddess wanted to treat me like this, no way was I devoting my life to her.

She was literally being so rude right now.

Alphas could die in one way: by losing all the blood in their bodies and then being decapitated.

A fae vampyre could easily suck all the blood from a person's body in a few minutes. In every book I'd read that mentioned vampyres, it described them as the scariest creatures to ever walk the realm.

I might as well just buy a shovel and dig my grave now.

There was zero percent chance I would survive this.

"Today, you will brainstorm with your team your plans to seduce the vampyre. Jax and Cobra, the attendants will take you to the spa." The trainer spoke like he was talking about something mundane, like the weather. Not having to seduce an *ancient beast*.

Holy tits. My stomach sank lower as I realized one very upsetting fact: I was going to have the sex talk with Ascher.

Suddenly, I understood why they'd given us towels as I dabbed aggressively at my sweaty pits and chugged the cold water.

Stress sweat was real, and I was afflicted.

Three giggling attendants asked Cobra and Jax to follow them, but the two men didn't move.

They both just stood still and stared at Ascher, who had shuffled closer to me.

I could practically hear their thoughts. They were definitely freaking out that I had to spend a day talking about seduction without them.

The trainer yelled from the doorway, "Jax, Cobra, the spa is on a tight schedule! Let's go!"

I mentally screamed at Jax to stay.

Unfortunately, he was shit at telepathy.

Jax sighed heavily and nodded. He followed the attendants, but stopped when he realized Cobra wasn't walking with him. He rolled his eyes and grabbed Cobra by the back of his pale neck.

Cobra's eyes flashed to snake eyes, and a rattling hiss shook his chest. "She's not talking about fucking seduction techniques with Ascher."

His eyes had been shifting a lot lately.

A thought struck me.

How could Cobra partially shift when the fae queen had reimplemented the shifting ban after the last competition?

I tried to push through the tingling wall that allowed me to become my

saber-toothed tiger, but nothing happened.

Cobra's diamond collar glinted across his pale throat. He never had explained why he was forced to wear it.

"Little alpha can take care of herself," Jax said and dragged Cobra away.

I was all for female empowerment, but frankly, this was not the time or the place.

"Don't leave me with this man!" I shouted at their retreating forms.

The man being Ascher, aka the great betrayer.

"You'll be fine," Jax called back casually as he walked out the door. Cobra fought in his grip, but the big man flexed his massive muscles and easily subdued him.

All the other teams were walking out of the gym, and I realized we weren't talking about seduction in the gym.

Apparently, this was a free day to brainstorm sex.

Not weird at all.

Ascher sauntered closer and got into my personal space.

"This should be fun, Princess," he smirked down at me.

I pretended not to notice that he was wearing a tank top that showed off all his tattooed muscles.

"It's going to be hard to teach you everything I know." I flipped my highlighted hair over my shoulder and sauntered away.

Ascher choked with laughter and followed behind.

"Did I hear that right?" Xerxes asked as he stepped away from the far wall he'd been leaning against.

I sighed heavily with the exhaustion of a twenty-year-old virgin who lived with three annoying alphas and an omega with ridiculously luscious hair. "Apparently, we need to come up with a plan to seduce a vampire."

Both men stared down at me with inscrutable expressions.

Unlike Cobra, who wore his mental unwellness on his face, and Jax, who projected caring leadership energy, Xerxes and Ascher were stone walls.

They might as well have been carved from marble because they said little, and their facial expressions gave nothing away.

It was creepy as hell.

I preferred Cobra's open antagonism to their blank expressions, because at least with Cobra, I always knew where I stood.

Although, I was sure I would take that back the next time Cobra started talking about how I was his possession.

“So, um, where should we talk about this?” I asked, as I tried to project confidence and not lame virgin energy.

Even if I played bad bitch, I was still inexperienced and covered in scars.

The sad truth—it was hard to seduce someone when your flesh was mangled and hideous. Yes, I was having a pity party.

Frankly, I deserved one.

“I have a plan,” Ascher said.

I didn’t like the glint in his amber eyes.

Xerxes and I followed behind him as Ascher led us through the massive village with no further explanation.

I couldn’t help but notice how good his ass looked in his shorts. How good he looked in a cutoff shirt, and how his large onyx horns gleamed atop his shaggy golden hair.

I also couldn’t help but notice how well pine and cinnamon went together.

Ascher’s alpha pheromones and Xerxes’s omega pheromones combined into a sugary, woodsy scent.

My mouth tingled with the urge to lick tattoos and shiny golden skin.

To taste.

Ascher stopped and opened the door to a private room. “We’ll start here, Princess.”

Nothing could have prepared me for what was inside.

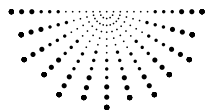
It was a large bathing room with a massive soaker tub in the middle, lit candles, and massage oils.

Flower petals were sprinkled across the floor.

Ascher stared down at me with an intensity that made my stomach hurt.

I was screwed.

JAX



MASSAGES & WICKED THOUGHTS

AFTER THREE HOURS of a strange lady rubbing oil all over my muscles, I was going to kill someone. I didn't like being touched by strangers.

The only good thing was that Cobra lay on the table next to me. His frosty scent wrapped around me in a calming embrace.

Unlike Cobra, who had a smug look of contentment as he lay sprawled on the massage table, I was not feeling relaxed.

Because of my large size, the masseuse had crawled all over me and whacked at my muscles painfully.

We had both requested male masseuses, but they'd only had one, so Cobra got him, while I got the fae lady that liked to hit.

I ground my teeth together and refrained from alpha-barking at her to stop touching me, because for the first time in my life, strangers weren't afraid of me, and I didn't want to ruin it.

Sure, it was a little annoying the way the fae crowded around and asked for the Meat Grinder's signature.

I reminded myself that it was still better than them staring at me with horror because of my gigantic size, which was my usual experience.

Finally, my masseuse stepped away from me and stopped touching my skin.

Cobra's man did the same, and the two fae mumbled random crap about energy alignment, healing crystals, and inner peace.

Then a chef brought in a rolling tray of fruit with a chocolate fountain and drinks.

I thanked them for their service, but Cobra looked away and said nothing. He still didn't talk to women, but the masseuses beamed with happiness and

didn't seem to care about or notice his hostility.

Finally, everyone left the spa room.

Cobra and I were alone.

A waterfall gurgled down one of the dark marble walls, and a dozen floating balls of enchanted fae fire lit the dim room.

We both lounged on velvet massage beds. Soft, tinkling music echoed around us.

For the first time since the stranger had started touching me, I relaxed and enjoyed the peaceful environment.

Cobra sauntered across the room in his towel and picked at the exotic, colorful fruit of the fae realm.

His jewels sparkled across his cut torso as he moved silently across the room.

Once again, I was blown away by how breathtaking he was.

Cobra bit into a lush piece of fruit, and juices leaked out of the corner of his mouth. His smirk told me he knew how gorgeous he was.

He loved to taunt me.

I sighed heavily and pulled at the knot of my braids.

The attendant had made me tie them up on top of my head. My shoulders relaxed as I freed the heavy mass of braids and they fell back around my shoulders.

I felt bare without my gold jewelry hanging around me.

My five little sisters loved jewelry.

Even the youngest, Jinx (who preferred intellectual pursuits over what she called "boring material distractions") braided a chain into her black hair to match mine.

Of course, she had chosen a chain with a skull symbol at the end and said something about Nietzsche respecting her choice.

I'd never seen her take it out.

Now, because of my sisters, my hair was covered in chains.

For most of my life, I'd worn a single gold chain in my hair. It matched the simple chain I'd given my mother.

About ten years ago, when my oldest sister, Jess, was ten years old, she'd complimented my jewelry.

The next time I'd visited, I'd brought her home a gold chain so we could match. She'd been so happy when I'd braided the chain into her hair.

Jess was full of energy and spirit. All I ever wanted to do was make her

smile.

My chest cramped as I thought about her running my deceased mother's florist shop all alone in the shifter realm. She'd be waiting for me to visit.

It made me sick.

At this rate, I wouldn't show up.

I took a deep breath and fingered the chains to calm myself. Touching the multitude of gold chains in my hair reminded me of why I kept fighting.

Who I was fighting for—five little girls who acted like I was the greatest big brother in the world.

They depended on me.

Six years ago, after I'd gained four new sisters under circumstances that I was still confused about, I started to collect jewelry for all of them.

Jala, the second youngest, who had just turned fourteen, loved jewelry the most.

She wore her bright-pink hair in many small braids like I did and braided them full of gold-and-silver chains.

Whenever I visited, she loved to brag to everyone that we matched.

Even Jen and Jan, who were sixteen and full of sass, had pierced their own ears and asked for matching earrings. All three of us wore golden frost-flower earrings.

Now, wherever I went, I looked for new jewelry to bring back to my sisters.

They were all energetic girls with beaming hearts, but the shifter realm was a cold, barren land, and its citizens were cruel and hard.

I was their rock and provider. I refused to let the realm hurt them.

In return, their love and support kept me going.

Six years ago, when my elderly null mother had passed away, my entire world had crumbled beneath me.

For over a century, it had just been the two of us. Growing up, I had no siblings or even a father.

It had just been me and my mother.

Now she walked peacefully in the valley of the sun god. Often, I felt her presence looking out for me.

Still, it hurt unbearably to have lost her.

I fingered the chain in my hair that matched my mother's, and bit down on my lower lip. My eyes misted over.

Every time I touched it, I liked to pretend she somehow felt my presence

reaching out into the afterworld. That she touched her chain back and smiled, and bragged to all her friends that her son loved her unconditionally.

Visiting and hanging out with my five younger sisters was the only thing that had gotten me through that dark time.

My mother had adopted them, so each one of them was part of her legacy. Just as I was.

I would provide for them and make my mother proud.

It was my purpose.

I rubbed at my aching chest and sighed heavily. Now I just needed to escape this fucked-up realm and get back to them.

A task that seemed impossible.

I pulled the towel tighter around my waist and joined Cobra at the buffet of food.

The prisoner in the fae dungeon had told us that all alphas in the shifter realm were kidnapped children from the beast realm.

That we were all orphans without families.

He was wrong.

I had a family—a loving mother and five perfect little sisters who meant everything to me.

Nothing anyone ever said would change that.

“Want some fruit, *Meat Grinder*?” Cobra joked as he punched me lightly on the shoulder.

His emerald eyes stared at me with intensity, and he shuffled closer, like he could feel my sadness.

He was too perceptive for his own good.

“Sadie was ridiculous with that name,” I said, and coughed slightly. My throat was still rough from thinking about my deceased mother and my sisters.

Cobra’s soft expression disappeared at the mention of Sadie, and the planes of his gorgeous face tightened with anger. “Sadie cannot be in proximity with a vampyre. We can’t let this happen.”

His frosty scent became colder and colder until it burned my nose.

Suddenly, the entire room smelled like a blizzard had blown through. It was so frigid. I was surprised I couldn’t see my breath in front of my face.

Just because Sadie was small didn’t mean we should underestimate her.

“I’m also worried,” I said softly and let Cobra hear the sincerity in my voice. “But she’s still an alpha, just like us. If you keep trying to coddle her,

you're just going to push her away. It's safer if we plan together as a group instead of trying to shield her."

I thought back to the last challenge when I'd ordered her to stand behind me.

Instead of obeying, the little alpha had transformed into her massive saber-toothed form and leaped over Cobra into the thick of battle.

By trying to control her, I'd pushed her to act rashly.

For the second time.

It was my fault.

When she'd thrown herself into the fray, my bear had gone mad with rage and fear.

Still, I'd quickly realized she could hold her own better than Cobra, who was shackled by the enchanted collar and basically defenseless.

A point that had become abundantly clear when Cobra had been knocked unconscious by an earth fae chucking a rock at him.

In contrast, I'd looked over and found the little alpha on her back, kicking the half warrior's limp form like a kitten with a ball of yarn.

She'd been coated in blood, and I swore that even from a distance, I could feel her unbridled happiness.

A saber-toothed beast was *not* an animal to be messed with.

Abruptly, a loud rattling hiss shook from Cobra's throat, and the jewels embedded in his skin flashed with menace.

His voice lashed out like a frosty whip. "We can't let her put herself in harm's way."

A part of me understood he'd been through intense trauma at the hands of women and that his trauma manifested in the need to protect Sadie from everything.

It wasn't a coincidence that she was the only woman he ever talked to.

He was deeply obsessed with her.

Still, it was becoming annoying.

If Cobra didn't figure out his shit, he was going to lose the little alpha before he even had her.

"We don't *let* her do anything. She's competent just like we are, and *you* need to stop calling her a possession." A low growl rumbled from my chest as I pressed against him.

"But she is mine." Cobra's tone was confused, like he couldn't even understand what I was saying.

Irritation spiked through my chest.

I grabbed Cobra around the back of his neck and pulled him close. Frosty ice burned my nose deliciously, and my beast roared in my skull.

His endless capacity for violence, the bizarre way he looked at the world, was as enticing as it was infuriating.

My chest vibrated, and a low growl worked out of my throat. “No. *You* belong to me. She doesn’t belong to either of us, and she won’t if you keep acting like this.”

I shoved my hips against his and wrapped my hands around his pale throat and diamond collar.

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and his hiss vibrated through my hand.

“She’s mine,” Cobra grunted out as I bucked my hips against him.

His eyes flickered to snake eyes and back.

“You’re mine,” I growled back, and Cobra relaxed further against me.

The gorgeous bastard was as dominant as he was submissive; he yearned for control as much as he yearned to let go.

I knew how to help him let go.

“On your knees,” I alpha-barked.

The corner of Cobra’s lush lips tilted upward because the handsome bastard loved to give head.

It did not surprise me that he’d gone down on Sadie. It was his favorite thing to do.

He reached forward with his long, jeweled fingers and tugged the towel off my hips.

My large, pierced cock sprung free and bobbed against my abs. My gold piercings glinted in the firelight.

I reached over to the table of food, dipped my fingers into the chocolate fountain, and coated my dick with the luscious, rich chocolate.

With my hands fisted in Cobra’s short, inky hair, I guided his gorgeous face forward until his sinful red lips touched my dick.

From this angle, his cheekbones were sharp as ice, his features perfect.

He smirked up at me, emerald eyes gleaming with mischievousness. Then he swallowed my entire dick.

I groaned and threw my head back as Cobra took me ridiculously deep.

In all my years, no one had ever been able to take my entire cock, no one until Cobra.

The handsome bastard didn’t have a gag reflex.

My knot swelled against his tongue, and his throat bulged where my massive cock speared him.

I groaned as he pulled his head back and brought both his hands up to the base of my thick shaft.

He twisted his hands back and forth and bobbed up and down aggressively.

Chocolate sauce coated his lips and fingers, and his icy scent wafted softer. Instead of a blizzard, it reminded me of ice thawing in springtime.

His jaw tightened as my knot continued to swell, and I shuddered as his tongue flickered over it.

With a low groan, I erupted.

Cobra swallowed my ecstasy and grinned up at me with cum-stained chocolate lips. He got to his feet, and his towel tented impressively.

“I still own her.” Cobra grinned and sauntered away to his clothes.

I sighed heavily and considered the merits of picking up the big bastard, slamming him against the wall, and fucking him until he agreed he didn’t own Sadie.

But my chest pinched as I thought about the little alpha and my agreement with Cobra. I’d only agreed to not touch her sexually because Cobra was clearly losing his mind over it.

I was sure the icy bastard would learn to share, if that was even what Sadie wanted.

I was also sure he was hanging on by a thread.

It wasn’t a coincidence that he was becoming more aggressive while stuck in the fae realm.

Cobra acted like he was tough, but I saw the way he shuddered and picked at his thumbs every time a fae woman screamed his name. They viewed him as a celebrity.

His trauma was their entertainment.

I wanted to scream at the women to leave him alone, and tear the fucking fae queen’s head off her shoulders for what she’d did to him.

Still, I could see the hurt in Sadie’s eyes when I’d agreed to Cobra’s demands.

I wanted to hold her. To reassure her, because holy fuck, I was interested.

Every night I lay awake and fantasized about taking Cobra and Sadie at the same time.

Cobra was so obsessed with her. It would be exhilarating to watch him

worship her as I worshipped him.

I wanted to fuck him hard while he slowly made sweet love to her.

I longed to take them both. To command both of them until they writhed with pleasure.

A rumble echoed through my chest, and I rubbed at my vibrating sternum.

Before we could make the little alpha ours, we needed to survive these damn Fae Games. A vampyre was nothing to mess with, and I didn't like how much the stakes were increasing.

Fighting was one thing, but a seduction contest?

Things were getting ridiculous.

My mind flashed to Ascher, and another growl ripped from my throat.

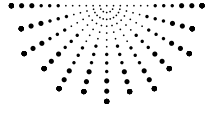
The tattooed bastard might act like he cared, he might pretend to be remorseful, but that didn't change the fact he'd betrayed us.

He was the reason Cobra was trapped in his personal hell and Sadie was fighting for her life.

Everyone was going to learn.

Cobra and I weren't alphas you fucked over.

SADIE



ASCHER THE PAMPER GOD

I MOANED LOUDLY and relaxed deeper into the bubble bath. Don't ask me how or why Ascher had reserved a bathing room. All I knew was it was divine, and I was not complaining.

Sure, Ascher might be the great betrayer. You know what else he was? A professional hair washer.

Yep, you heard that right.

Ascher was hunched over above me, and scrubbing floral-scented shampoo into my hair like massaging my head was his life's passion.

I sat in the frothy bubble bath, wearing Xerxes's oversize T-shirt because I'd refused to go in nude and give Ascher any ideas, with my head hanging out over the edge of the soaking tub.

The lights were dimmed, and about a hundred candles were lit in the small room.

Xerxes sat against the wall, shirtless, glaring at us. The omega was determined to hate us, and frankly, I didn't give a single shit.

Ascher kneaded his thumbs deep into my neck, and I almost came from sheer ecstasy.

I sunk deeper into the foamy bubbles and closed my eyes as lethargy set in.

Ascher had been massaging my scalp for over an hour, and low-key it was changing my life.

The one thing that confused me was how this was going to help us survive the vampyre?

Was I supposed to offer to wash the beast's hair? I didn't see that going over well.

It didn't matter; I was not about to bring it up to Ascher.

If he wanted to rub sweet, scented shampoos and oils into my hair for hours, I wasn't going to complain.

"Still don't forgive you," I mumbled groggily. My broken voice was scratchier and lower than usual as his fingers pushed into my scalp.

When he brought his hands to my temple and rubbed in large circles, I moaned long and low.

"I know," Ascher said softly and continued with his divine massage.

The scents of pine and cinnamon thickened in the room every time I moaned, which I was choosing not to notice.

I was also pretending not to notice that Ascher's amber eyes were glowing in the near dark and that his horns had grown larger on his head.

Xerxes's purple eyes also glowed in the dim candlelight.

"Where did you learn to do this?" Xerxes asked in his smooth British accent. He stared at Ascher with his eyes narrowed, like he couldn't figure him out.

Ascher didn't respond for a long moment, and the gurgle of the water jets was the only sound.

When he spoke, his voice was very soft, like he didn't want to ruin the ambiance.

"In the syndicate, there were certain...clubs that I was a part of. Aftercare was very important."

Shivers erupted over every inch of my warm, blissful body as I tried to imagine what he could be referencing.

Something told me it wasn't a knitting club.

"I've never met an alpha who truly knew how to pamper someone," Xerxes said softly and mostly to himself.

From the way his shoulders rounded, and the sudden spike of spice in his cinnamon scent, I knew he was speaking from his own experience.

I didn't know his story, but my heart hurt for the omega.

It didn't take a genius to figure out why he didn't like alphas. They must have hurt him in the past.

That was usually how it went.

The strangest urge overcame me. "I could pamper you," I said to Xerxes, my rough voice too loud in the quiet room.

Ascher's fingers stopped kneading my scalp as he held himself completely still above me.

Suddenly, an awkward tension cut through the room, and no one said anything.

Why did you just offer to pamper the dude who literally hates you? Cobra's insanity must be contagious.

I looked over at Xerxes and winced.

His purple eyes stared at me intensely. He tensed his body, and his exposed abs rippled.

Hands fisted and jaw clenched, he scowled at me.

Embarrassment coursed through me, and I sunk deeper into the frothy water. "I mean, obviously if you wouldn't want me to, I wouldn't. I was just offering in case maybe you wanted someone to, but I really didn't mean like you had to," I rambled and gnawed on my lower lip.

Frothy bubbles popped around me, and I stared at the top of the hot bath instead of making eye contact with either of the men.

Ascher rubbed his fingers into my scalp again, and Xerxes remained silent against the wall.

I closed my eyes tight and wondered what it would be like to not be so awkward and embarrassing.

If I were a seductress, I would have all these men under my thumb.

Instead, it felt like I was constantly making a fool of myself in front of them. And I was still a virgin.

My life was pathetic.

An hour later, I was pruned and dry, bundled up in Ascher's sweatshirt and a pair of his sweatpants.

Apparently, he had the foresight to have the clothes brought to the bathing room.

Now Ascher was sprawled on a large velvet chaise lounge against the far wall.

"Are you sure?" I asked for the hundredth time as he patted the space between his parted legs with his tattooed hand and stared at me expectantly.

"Princess, get over here," he ordered softly.

He didn't even alpha-bark, but I instinctively obeyed him and sat down between his legs. I blamed it on lethargy after the delicious bath.

Heat radiated off Ascher's large form, and I tried not to lean back against him like a pile of goo. I found myself relaxing against him, no matter how hard I tried not to.

Xerxes still sat across the room and stared at us.

The omega hadn't moved a muscle for hours and was still sinfully shirtless.

I might have been wrong, but I could swear his purple eyes were fixated on me with a new intensity. *Did I have food in my teeth?*

Suddenly, Ascher started dragging a brush slowly through my long, wet hair.

"Relax," he alpha-barked, and immediately, my body went limp.

Across the room, Xerxes clenched his jaw and fisted his hands. His biceps bulged like he was straining with tension.

However, I quickly forgot about Xerxes's weird energy as Ascher slowly brushed my wet hair until it was dry.

He ran the brush root to tip and applied pressure to my scalp that had me moaning all over again.

Every time I thought he would stop, he kept going. I prayed to the moon goddess that it would never end.

Once again, a part of me was confused how the hell this was going to help me seduce a vampyre. Was I supposed to ask him to let me brush his hair?

Didn't seem realistic.

But once again, I didn't point out this obviously flawed plan, because Ascher was making my body melt.

Who knew hair brushing was literally orgasmic? Not me.

After the longest and most amazing hair brushing of my entire life, Ascher began to softly knead his tattooed fingers into my shoulders.

He was super gentle and made sure to avoid my sternum while still loosening up my muscles until I was putty beneath his large hands.

The lights were turned low, and the candlelight softly put me to sleep.

"Wake up, Princess," Ascher whispered and gently shook my shoulder.

"Buttered rolls," I moaned, and wiped drool off my mouth as I blinked back into consciousness.

We were still sprawled on the chaise, except now I was lying on my side with my head resting on Ascher's lap like a pillow, and his fingers were casually playing with my hair.

For the first time in a while, I hadn't suffered from a nightmare. Well, kind of.

I'd still dreamed I was covered in my blood, but this time it had been warm and comforting. A glowing mass of heat that wrapped itself around me

like a hug.

Yes, I'd dreamed my *blood* was trying to comfort me.

Ever been desperate for human affection?

However, I quickly forgot about my bizarre dreams as pine and cinnamon filled my nose. I moaned softly as Ascher's fingers brushed against the sensitive skin on the side of my neck.

My entire body shivered.

Something hard leaped against my head, and it took me a disturbingly long amount of time to realize what it was.

I was lying on his lap.

In a blur of speed and agility, I stumbled off the chaise onto the floor.

Yep, Ascher's sweatpants-clothed tattooed dick had just pressed against my head. My ovaries smarted with desire, while my brain reminded me that dicks were gross and creepy.

I was conflicted.

"Don't hurt yourself, Princess," Ascher said as he gently picked me up like I weighed nothing.

Since I'd seen the man lift hundreds of pounds easily, I probably felt weightless to him.

"Um, you can put me down now," I said as Ascher cradled me against his chest.

"You need to recover, Princess," he said calmly and carried me out of the room into the massive village complex.

Fae bustled by, and some looked over at us.

"Just one alpha carrying another alpha, nothing to see here, folks," I said to onlookers as a stadium worker gave me the stink eye.

I should probably have fought harder to walk on my own, being a strong, independent alpha bitch and all that. But I was still tired, and it was easier to be carried.

Plus, it wasn't like Ascher hadn't traumatized me enough; it was the least he could do.

Xerxes walked beside us, and his long blond hair streamed around him like he was in a hair commercial.

"What's your hair routine?" I asked Xerxes, who was now upside down because my head was hanging over the side of Ascher's forearm.

I couldn't remember if I'd asked him about it before, but I was genuinely curious. My hair was a rat's nest half the time, while his hair looked like spun

silk.

Not that there was anything wrong with rat's nests; they did the best they could.

Xerxes didn't answer, just kept staring at me with his intense purple gaze. His sweet cinnamon wafted off him in delicious waves.

All the alphas smelled intoxicating, but Xerxes was downright yummy. He smelled like a gooey cinnamon roll covered in cream cheese frosting.

Okay, I was imagining the frosting part, but you get the idea.

Before Xerxes could respond—because he was still staring at me like a silent killer, which was very creepy—we entered a village shop.

Ascher put me gently on my feet and walked up to a fae lady at the front desk. "I have an appointment under Ascher."

"For two people?"

"Yes, could we add a third?" Ascher asked as the fae lady tapped and scrolled through the floating screen projected over her amethystine keyboard.

Finally, after intense typing, she said, "Sure, just this way."

That was how I found myself sitting in a chair with my feet in bubbling hot water as a lady scrubbed at them with a brush and another lady massaged my hands.

Next to me, Ascher sat with his eyes closed as he received the same treatment.

On my other side, Xerxes was also being attended to, but was way less relaxed. His back was ramrod straight, and he jumped every time the woman scrubbed at his foot.

If you had told me this morning that I would be getting my nails done with Xerxes and Ascher, I would have laughed at the absurdity.

Now I relaxed deeper into the plush chair as the fae lady painted my nails with a shiny red lacquer.

The color matched my highlights and contrasted prettily with my gold skin.

Next to me, Ascher was getting black lacquer applied to his nails, and the color looked dope against the bright design of his tattoos.

In contrast, Xerxes was just getting a clear coat, which was too bad because I thought he really missed out on an opportunity to do purple.

"Purple would really complement your tan skin and eyes," I reminded him.

He turned and gave me a death glare that held the hatred and intensity of

a thousand suns.

“Or not,” I mumbled under my breath.

I thought omegas were supposed to be subservient and chill compared to alphas. Xerxes really needed to work on coming across as less hostile.

Whatever. I shrugged and decided I would ignore him.

If he wanted to look dumb with a clear coat, it wasn't my problem. Some people had no taste.

Instead, I focused on the nail lady, who was scrubbing a disturbing amount of dead skin off my foot.

The nail lady grimaced as she popped another blood blister on my foot and glared at my three missing toenails.

“You can just paint the skin.” I smiled at her nicely.

She frowned and made a choking noise.

You would think she'd never seen a woman who had been forced to fight for her life barefoot over hot sand.

The lady squinted at me, like she was trying to decide if I was joking, and then a massive smile split across her face. “Wait, you're the female alpha. The big tiger that played with the little tiger's body for like ten minutes last challenge.”

I gave her a weak smile and tried to exude calm energy because, apparently, I now had a reputation for torturing people.

“That was so impressive. I'll give you a discount.” She winked at me.

The fae were unwell people.

Then a fae male came up to me and asked me if I wanted to add a facial to the appointment.

I said yes, just to mess with Ascher.

If he was paying for this, I was going to ensure it wasn't cheap.

Sure, I appreciated his pampering efforts; however, I also appreciated not being betrayed.

What I hadn't expected was for Ascher to request facials for him and Xerxes as well. Apparently, the horned, tattooed syndicate spy, six-foot-five alpha, was *really* into self-care.

An hour later, I could safely say that my chakras were realigned.

Inner peace flowed through me.

That was how Jax and Cobra found us, all three of us reclining with sparkly bubblegum-pink face masks on as attendants held enchanted steam machines above our heads.

“And you made fun of Jax for braiding Sadie’s hair?” Cobra sneered as he stared down at us with his eyebrows raised.

“No,” Ascher said and tilted his head up to the steam machine. “I was laughing at Sadie’s scent because she was clearly turned on by Jax braiding her hair.”

My chakras bent out of whack, and all inner peace left my body. “No, I was not.”

I refused to look over at Jax.

“So what’s your plan for the vampyre?” Jax asked me as he ignored Ascher and Cobra.

“Apparently, we’re going to give him a bubble bath, wash his hair, brush his hair, paint his nails, and give him a facial.” I inspected my pretty red nails.

The nail lady had added a little black cat print on my thumbs.

Once again, I almost burst into tears at her random act of kindness.

I was surrounded by so much masculine energy all the time that support from other women really hit different.

I needed it.

“That’s not what today was about,” Ascher said softly with his eyes still closed as his face was steamed.

“What?”

What else was the day about? The trainers told us to work on seduction techniques, and Ascher had us do all these relaxing, seductive things.

“Princess, this was about me groveling to you. I booked the appointments before the assignment. I wanted to pamper you and show you what you mean to me.”

My heart, which had been skewered a day before, beat differently inside my chest.

A weird, giddy warmth flushed through me, and I couldn’t stop the smile that curled my lips.

No one had ever pampered me before.

Never.

“Oh,” I said eloquently.

My heart and head were divided by how I felt about Ascher.

“Just treat me to about a hundred more days like this, and I will think about forgiving you,” I said honestly as I thought about the delicious feel of his fingers washing my hair.

Instead of getting mad at my words like I expected, Ascher grinned like all his dreams had come true. “You’ve got yourself a deal, Princess.”

“Wait?” Cobra asked with an icy tone. “You gave *my* kitten a bubble bath?”

“Yes, I gave the *princess* a bubble bath and massaged her for hours.” Ascher quirked his eyebrows in a clear insinuation that the bath had been way raunchier than it was.

Before I could clarify, Cobra launched himself at Ascher and the two men collided in a clash of fists.

Xerxes and I thanked the fae attendants and peeled off our face masks.

Then, with Jax following us, we left the dumbasses and went to get dinner.

It was starting to seem like alpha men had severe anger issues.

I was a fellow alpha, and they treated me like an object to fight over.

I couldn’t even imagine what Xerxes’s experience had been with alphas—no wonder he hated us all.

“Sadie,” Xerxes said quietly before we entered the cafeteria.

“Yeah?” I stopped in surprise because his hand was touching my arm, and he was leaning into my personal space.

Sugary cinnamon made my mouth water and my groin tremble. Usually, Xerxes always kept his distance from me.

He wasn’t keeping his distance now.

“Did you mean what you said about taking care of me?” He spoke so quietly I almost couldn’t understand him with his smooth accent.

“Uh, yeah. Just if you wanted.” I gnawed on my lower lip and tried to act like the scent of cinnamon wasn’t driving me crazy.

“But it doesn’t mean anything. I was just wondering,” Xerxes snapped at me, his classic scowl contorting his face.

“Yeah, for sure. No big deal. Once we survive the Fae Games, I’ll give you a pamper day.” I slapped him on the shoulder and tried to act like it didn’t feel like a big deal to me. “But I’m dirt poor. I have to warn you.”

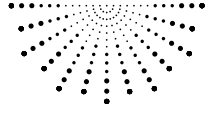
“Whatever,” Xerxes said dismissively. At the same time, Jax asked, “What are you talking about?”

“What?” I asked with confusion.

Jax stared down at me with an arched brow. “Little alpha, you’re filthy rich. Every time we fought the fae spiders, we received a hundred thousand credits.”

And that's how I went from dirt poor to rich in one minute.
Exhilarating.

SADIE



MAGIC RINGS

I WAS ALONE in the bedroom because the guys had gone for an afternoon run and I had complained my sternum hurt too badly.

Truthfully, Ascher had dumped the unicorn chips into the bath he'd given me, and my chest didn't hurt that badly anymore. I'd just needed some personal time.

Xerxes had accompanied the men and mumbled something about how they were more dangerous than I was, which was just rude.

As soon as the men left, I grabbed a book about the fae that I'd made Ascher buy me after the pamper day and snuggled into my bed to read.

Of course, just when I relaxed, there was a knock on the door.

I didn't expect to find Aran standing there with a crazy smile on her face. She said she needed some girl time and I gladly let her in.

One could only be around men for so long before they went a little crazy. Life needed a female perspective.

"I can't believe my mom is making you seduce a vampyre. Are you sure they said *seduce*? That just doesn't sound right." Aran flopped back onto my bed, her long turquoise hair streaming like silk around her breathtaking face.

However, from the way Aran grinned like a lunatic, she was more excited to talk about seduction than she was worried about my general well-being.

I jumped on the bed beside her and moaned, "I can't believe at any moment they might announce it's the day I'm going to get all the blood drained from my body by a terrifying vampyre. Also, why aren't you panicking?"

Aran smiled like a maniac. "It's fine. Alphas can lose all the blood in their body and still live as long as they aren't decapitated. Your men won't let

that happen.”

I narrowed my eyes at her like she was talking out of her ass, which she was. “Do you see how small my neck is? How weak I am? The vampyre could probably snap his fingers and my head would fall off.”

“Wow, that’s not very female gladiator of you. Your fan base is gonna be *pissed*.” Aran gaped at me like I had said something outrageous.

I launched myself at her annoyingly gorgeous form and tried to punch her in the throat.

Of course, she easily blocked me and flipped me onto the floor without breaking a sweat.

My back cracked in ten different places as it crunched against the floor.

Aran might be a fae princess and not a shifter like I’d first thought, but this was still the bitch who’d karate chopped beta men and was freaky flexible.

She was *not* someone you wanted to mess with.

“Ow, my chest!” I yelled as I gasped on the hard floor.

“Oh my sun god, are you okay? I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Aran’s blue eyes peered down at me with concern.

I punched her in the tit and scrambled away with an evil laugh.

She gave chase, and we tussled around the room for a while. Just two girlfriends hanging out without a care in the world.

Denial was a very effective coping mechanism.

Realistically, I had *many* cares, but the moon goddess was a bitch and not answering my prayers.

Finally, anxiety spiked in my gut, and I flopped back onto the bed instead of retaliating for the foot Aran had slammed into my kneecap.

“So, in all seriousness, do you have any ideas for how I seduce the most terrifying beast of all lore?” I asked with a heavy sigh and tried not to wallow in self-pity—it was difficult.

“Not exactly, but I had something made for you.” Aran dug a small gold band out of her dress pocket and handed it to me.

First, wow, a dress with pockets; that was revolutionary.

Second, I didn’t think of her *that* way, and didn’t know how to tell her I wasn’t ready for marriage.

“I have syphilis,” I blurted out and fell backward onto the bed like I was dead.

Truthfully, I didn’t know what the word meant, but I’d seen a commercial

for it on the television once back at the bar, and it didn't sound good.

Aran pursed her lips. "Okay, not relevant? Also, you should really go see a doctor. That's *not* healthy."

I nodded at the gravity of the situation. "So you understand why I can't marry you?"

There was a long, tense moment where Aran's heart broke into a million pieces, and I considered the merits of convulsing on the bed to sell the illness.

"Bitch, I don't want to marry you? I like dick." Aran stared at me like I was a dumbass. "And if you have syphilis, we really need to get you checked. *Still* not sanitary."

I sighed and hugged her from sheer relief.

I wasn't mentally prepared to lose my best friend because I refused to be her wife over an imaginary illness.

With a smile, I patted her on her pretty blue head. "I was joking about the syphilis. We're all good."

Aran narrowed her eyes like she couldn't decide if I was joking or not.

She shook her head, like she decided it didn't matter if I was riddled with exotic-sounding diseases, and pushed the ring into my hand. "It's a fae-enchanted ring. I had it specially made for you as soon as I got back to the realm, and it just so happens it might help with this challenge."

Now that I realized she was giving me a gold piece of jewelry, my brain oohed and cooed, *Shiny*, as I looked at the band.

No one had ever gifted me anything before, let alone something so fancy. Although, Ascher's day of pampering had felt like a gift.

"Also, you're an alpha. I've been studying up on the beast realm, and all I've heard is alphas forming packs. I've never read anything about marriage."

It was my turn to look at her with confusion. "What's a pack?"

She shrugged. "Beats me. I never learned about it in my princess studies."

"You sound so privileged right now. It's not even funny." I laughed at her and tried not to worry about what a pack was.

What were we going to do, uncover the secrets of other realms? We were just two women, and one of us was so short she looked scrawny and weak, and the other was so pretty that she looked like a painting.

Not the realm-wide heroes anyone asked for or needed.

Aran shook her head. "Princess studies were more torture than learning. Would you like the fae queen to be your mother?"

"Touché." I nodded.

I would rather have a rat as my mother than the fae queen.

Her energy was so toxic that someone needed to buy her a day at the nail salon; her chakras were bent at a forty-degree angle, and her cuticles were crusty.

It was *not* cute.

I admired my glossy nails.

Apparently, it had taken one day of pampering for me to become a self-centered, materialistic woman.

It was empowering, and I was enjoying my newfound self-confidence.

Who knew a color on your nails could be so life changing?

“Oh my sun god, just put the ring on already. I’m dying over here,” Aran moaned and motioned to the ring. She really was impatient.

“Fine, fine, cool your tits.” I slipped the ring on my finger and held my breath.

Nothing happened.

“Sorry, your ring’s a dud. How much did you pay for this?” I went to take it off.

“Look down at your chest,” Aran said quietly.

I stared underneath my sweatshirt. “Did you make my boobs bigger?”

The longer I stared at my chest, the more I was convinced my tits were looking plumper.

Either it was the ring or I’d recently gone through a second puberty. Maybe I was finally getting taller?

“You’re actually a dumbass!” Aran yelled and grabbed at the collar of my sweatshirt.

“No need to get so rough. Sun god, calm down.”

Her turquoise eyes burned with fire as she physically accosted me. Maybe she was hangry?

Aran yelled in my face, “You don’t have any scars anymore! The enchantment was for your scars!”

There was a long pause.

The silence stretched.

Then I burst into tears like a baby. Aran held me as I wailed and sobbed.

I knew I was repressing deep psychological trauma from Dick and not dealing with it but knowing it and experiencing it were two different things.

My chest, torso, and back were smooth golden skin, and my heart burst into a billion tiny sparkles of joy.

It was something I had wanted so badly that I'd been afraid to wish for it, or even think about it.

I sobbed and sobbed.

Aran petted my hair as I mumbled nonsense about the fae being the most kind, sweet, beautiful species in all the realms.

Tears tracked down my face like a waterfall as I whispered about enchantments being enchanting.

If this were a story, I would have been sad that my scars were gone because they'd been a piece of me and shown my struggle.

This was real life.

It was like when I was fifteen and had had a severe case of acne all year.

When my skin had finally cleared up, I'd danced around with joy and thanked the moon goddess every chance I got.

Sure, I lived with my scars and didn't absolutely hate myself. Your skin didn't define you.

The problem was, in the eyes of everyone else, my body was hideous and broken. I was tired of *everyone else* defining me.

Finally, after an embarrassingly long time of me blubbering and muttering nonsense, I sniffed and stopped strangling my friend.

What would the realm's first female gladiator do? Aka, WWTRFFGD?

I composed myself and tried to focus on important things, like surviving to my twenty-first birthday.

"So do we think I can appease the vampyre by dancing sexy?" I asked Aran, since I had zero other ideas about how one went about seducing a terrifying creature of lore.

Was he even into women?

It would be just my luck that the queen chose a vampyre only into men, just so I could die painfully in front of the realm.

"That's actually a good idea. Let me see what you got?" Aran motioned for me to dance in the small space.

I nodded and launched myself off the bed in a whirl.

For the next few moments, I lost myself to the sound of invisible music.

I pretended I was back at the Ianuarius celebration and let my body flow in rhythm to the beat of a heavy bass.

I spun, leaped, and embraced the freedom of expression. I danced like it would save my life.

For a moment, I was one with the music.

All my troubles melted away.

As I flowed, peace sparked in my heart.

Finally, chest heaving, I came to a stop in front of Aran.

I wiped sweat off my brow and smiled at her as my body still rocked slightly to the phantom beat.

Aran opened her pretty lips and closed them.

She was speechless.

Finally, after aggressively coughing, she said, “If you dance like that, you will one hundred percent, and I can’t emphasize this enough, be killed *immediately* by the vampyre.”

The bitch keeled with laughter and literally rolled on the floor. “That was the worst thing I have ever seen in my entire life.”

She gasped for air and laughed harder. “Were you having a seizure? I was genuinely concerned at one point and almost stepped in to help you.”

“It was not that bad!” I stomped my foot and pouted.

Sure, I wasn’t the most flexible and had never had a dance lesson, but I thought I was at least *okay*.

I tapped my foot as Aran asphyxiated with laughter on the floor.

Finally, she crawled back to her feet and wiped tears from her eyes. “If you do—whatever the sun god you just did—the vampyre will murder you so brutally and painfully they will talk about it for years. Are you okay? I didn’t even know a person could voluntarily twitch like that.”

“Do you have any other ideas?” I asked with exasperation as I shook my head at my friend.

Although, I was glad she’d told me this before I’d gone out there and gotten slaughtered.

She giggled with more laughter. “What else were you planning on doing?”

“Dancing. That was literally the only thing I could think of.”

Unfortunately, I had spent the day being pampered by Ascher and hadn’t brainstormed too intensely.

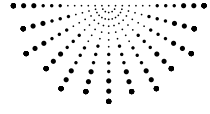
“Well, if we don’t come up with something soon, you will die in T-minus six days.”

Once again, I was stressed, not blessed.

Although, I was no longer covered in horrible scars and had found out I was actually rich from fighting as an alpha, so the future was looking a tiny bit brighter than before.

Tiny bit being the key terminology.

XERXES



REVELATIONS

“CONCENTRATE AND STOP BEING SO PATHETIC,” I snapped at Sadie as I jogged beside her.

We were moving at a turtle’s pace.

She didn’t even acknowledge my words. If anything, she started running *slower*.

I was still confused how she had survived as long as she had with her abysmal endurance. It didn’t make any sense.

She mumbled something about making the poem come true by stabbing me and flailed her small arms ridiculously as we did the morning jog.

We started running in a group, but Ascher, Jax, and Cobra had run ahead to talk to Demetre.

Demetre had actually asked to talk to all the alphas during the run, but the half warriors ran fast, and Sadie hadn’t tried to keep up.

I hung back to make sure she survived the one-mile run without dying. An actual concern I’d never thought I’d have for an alpha.

At the fae castle, I worked for the queen as a soldier and trained other guards in my free time.

My specialty was blade training, but I also helped with general fitness and stamina.

In my fifty years, I had never seen a female gasp and flail her arms like she was fighting an invisible assailant, while trying to execute a simple jog.

It was mind-boggling.

Sweet cranberries and sunshine wafted off Sadie as she gasped beside me, and I tried to concentrate on her abysmal form and not on how delicious she smelled.

Every time I was around the small alpha, my omega hormones went haywire.

I wanted to murder her for smelling so good and triggering my omega urges to help her.

As we jogged slower than I could walk, the alphas kept glancing back at us.

They ran a couple hundred yards in front of us but were getting further away as Sadie slowed with each step.

Through the thin fae trees, once again, Cobra and Ascher glanced back to glare at me.

Jax kept his attention on whatever Demetre was saying, but his back was ramrod straight.

It was obvious that the alphas hated being away from Sadie.

A part of me could understand.

I wanted her gorgeous ruby eyes to stare up at me and her ridiculously lush red lips to smile softly like they'd done after the day with Ascher.

My fists clenched as I thought about her delicate little face peeking out of the foamy bath bubbles as Ascher massaged her scalp.

Sadie had melted underneath Ascher's pampering, and I wanted her to melt underneath mine.

I also wanted to melt for her.

My entire life, I'd repressed my omega nature and ignored my instincts.

It was no use wasting energy on wanting to be pampered and cared for by alphas when they were aggressive, abusive, and overbearing by nature.

More often than not, omegas were heartbroken breeding machines.

Yet, back in the tub, when Sadie had looked at me with a slight flush across her golden skin and offered to pamper me, I'd had to swallow down an omega whine of agreement.

I wanted to be lavished in sweet cranberries and sunshine.

As soon as she'd made the offer, my mouth had watered. I'd been so overwhelmed by images of her rubbing soap over my muscles that it had rendered me speechless.

No. Concentrate. She's still an alpha.

I kept fucking forgetting that she was an alpha. And the more pathetic she acted, the harder it was to remember.

The problem was, for all intents and purposes, I was her jailer.

That's what made it so *bizarre* that she'd offered to pamper me.

She also had brought me extra pillows and blankets every night of the week, and I'd taken over the role of guarding the shower room while she was in it.

The worst part was that she kept patting my arm and saying thank you.

It was scrambling my fucking instincts and driving me crazy. My omega loved that I'd made an alpha proud. I fucking preened under attention.

It was awful.

In a short period, I'd begun to yearn for her approval.

Taking care of her, guarding her while she was vulnerable, made Sadie happy. As a result, it made me happy.

"Can we take a walking break?" Sadie gasped beside me and keeled over.

"No, stop being so weak," I snapped harshly and kept moving.

Of course, she bent over and stopped running.

I shook my head at her ridiculous lack of stamina, but gathered her long white ponytail off the back of her neck and held her hair in case she puked.

Before I met Sadie, I would have said it was impossible to vomit from running a slow mile.

Now I knew it was a miracle she had made it this far.

"You're almost done. Just finish it," I grumbled as I released her hair.

Whenever I spoke to Sadie, my accented voice dropped lower and smoother. Instinctually, I was trying to calm her with my voice.

"Fine, but if I die, it's on you." Sadie began to move at a pace that could only be described as a granny shuffle. Her voice was so rough her words were almost indiscernible.

Questions about her voice and scars popped into my brain as I stared down at her.

The last few days, I'd stayed up at night, trying to imagine battle situations that would scar her so horribly, but I couldn't think of anything.

I told myself that I didn't care, but I couldn't stop pondering it.

It was driving me crazy. *She* was driving me crazy.

At Sadie's current pace, it would still be a few minutes until we finished.

I cleared my throat and snapped, "Did you get your scars in battle?"

My heart beat too fast in my chest as I waited for her answer. I tried to act casual, like the question hadn't been eating me alive.

Sadie looked up at me, her gorgeous, tilted ruby eyes sparkling against golden skin.

For a second, I forgot to breathe.

She was stunning. Her features were a combination of ancestries I'd never seen before.

Her lush lips opened, and she closed them a few times like she didn't know what to say.

Finally, she took a deep breath and blurted, "I grew up as a servant in the shifter realm. My master whipped me with his belt for as long as I can remember."

I stopped running.

My legs locked beneath me, and my heart pounded hard against my chest as I fingered the sheathes of my blades for comfort.

A low omega whine traveled up my throat, and Sadie's eyes glowed red at the sound.

I hadn't omega-whined in over twenty years.

I had to clench my muscles to stop myself from gathering Sadie into my arms and holding her against me. I wanted to carry her to a nest and bury us in pillows and blankets until we both purred with comfort.

Because I wasn't comfortable now.

Sadie put her hands on her knees and heaved in the air as the thin trees of the fae forest rustled in the breeze from the industrial fans.

It didn't escape my notice that she was happy I was having a panic attack because she didn't want to keep running.

I reached down with my fingers and tilted her chin upward. "Is he dead?" I asked.

"Hopefully soon."

The fucker was still alive. Another omega whine escaped my throat.

"It's fine." Sadie waved her hand at me like it was no big deal. "Aran gave me an enchanted ring to hide the scars, so it doesn't matter anymore. It's all in the past."

It was a massive fucking deal, and it didn't matter if she enchanted the scars away or not.

My mind flashed back to the alphas hurting me in the beast realm, and I fought to keep myself in the present.

Some traumas never left you.

Then another awful thought hit me. My stomach twisted as I asked it. "Is that why your voice is so raspy?"

Sadie took a deep breath and wiped sweat off her brow with the sleeves of her oversize long-sleeved T-shirt.

She looked ridiculous in the male training clothes, and I made a mental note to look into her wardrobe situation.

“Yeah, it turns out it’s very hard to get whipped without screaming like a banshee.”

My chest ached.

Unthinking, I grabbed her biceps with both my hands and squeezed her.

I was so angry. I didn’t know what I needed to do.

Physical contact was the only thing that kept my omega from falling apart.

I pulled her forward and tucked her against my chest.

We stood in silence and hugged. Sweet cranberries and sunshine wafted off her and soothed my anxiety.

Ever so slowly, Sadie wrapped her arms around me and squeezed me back tightly.

Her heartbeat echoed against my abs, and I stroked my hand over her back slowly.

A low alpha purr emitted from her chest, and I melted against her.

It took every ounce of control I possessed to not pick her up and sprint to the bedroom. I wanted to bury her in a nest of blankets and pillows.

Sadie was tough as hell, stronger than I could have ever imagined.

“What the fuck are you doing!” Cobra yelled as he stalked toward us across the path.

Ascher and Jax walked behind him, and all three of them glared at me like they wanted my head on a pike.

For a split second, my anxiety ratcheted up at the sight of three pissed-off alphas coming toward me.

It wasn’t them. It was four other bastards in a luxurious town house in the beast realm.

Another omega whine escaped my throat.

Thirty years I’d spent training, fighting, and suppressing my instincts, and in fifteen minutes, I was back to being a weak, helpless omega.

Instead of pushing me away as the men stalked closer, Sadie tightened her arms around me like she could feel my stress.

I stared down at her upturned face as she smiled up at me softly.

At that moment, I realized something.

For the first time in my life, I’d found someone who understood what it was like to survive abuse. I wasn’t the only one struggling with my ABO

identity.

“I said, don’t fucking touch her.” Cobra grabbed my arm and ripped me away from Sadie.

Before I could palm my blades and attack the annoying bastard, Sadie moved in front of me and shoved at Cobra’s chest. “Don’t fucking touch him. We were just talking.”

“It didn’t look like talking to me,” Ascher said beside Cobra.

Sadie sighed heavily. “You’re right, Ascher, we were fucking doggy-style in the woods. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

A creepy rattling hiss shook through Cobra’s throat, and he lunged at me.

Once again, he was stopped by Sadie throwing herself in front of him.

The big, jeweled bastard shook with rage, but he did nothing now that the little alpha was blocking him.

Cobra was a psycho and unhinged, but anyone could see that he was obsessed with Sadie and didn’t know what to do about it.

“We were just talking. Calm your tits!” Sadie alpha-barked at Cobra as she held her ground.

For the first time in my life, my skin didn’t crawl at an alpha’s bark.

“What fucking conversation resulted in him plastered all over you!” Cobra yelled back.

His eyes were snake eyes. He tilted his handsome face down to stare at Sadie.

Anyone else would have crumbled under his terrifying glare, but Sadie just rolled her eyes and glared back.

The fact that Cobra was getting aggressive with Sadie, right after she had shared her trauma, made me want to stab him in the heart and run away with her to a cozy nest.

How could he treat her this way?

“We were talking about how she was fucking whipped growing up and how the screaming ruined her voice.” My words seemed too loud in the quiet forest.

Cobra’s snake eyes glowed, and the jewels that decorated his face seemed to move.

“That’s how you lost your voice?” he asked softly as the hiss in his throat rattled.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Ascher clenched his tattooed fists, and his onyx horns grew larger on his head.

Behind them, Jax said nothing as he stared at Cobra and Sadie, both pressed against each other, posturing for dominance.

Sadie inspected her cuticles like Aran. "I thought it was obvious. I mean, I told you guys I was whipped growing up. Did you think that *wouldn't* ruin my voice?"

The hiss in Cobra's throat got louder, and I pulled Sadie back away from him.

I pressed her flush against me, and my omega instincts calmed down now that she was touching me.

"You don't even fucking like her. She's *mine*!" Cobra bellowed at me, his slit pupils straining with rage.

"I've changed my mind," I snapped back at him.

Jax growled loudly but grabbed Cobra by the back of his neck when he tried to launch himself at me.

Sadie patted me on my hand and stepped to the side. "My scars and voice are old news. Can we please move on and act like we're not completely unhinged?" She stared at Cobra.

"No," Cobra said at the same time the three of us said, "Yes."

"Stop it," Jax alpha-barked at Cobra.

"Soooo, what were you guys talking to the half warrior squad about?" Sadie tried to change the topic and walked down the trail like everything was resolved.

It didn't escape my notice that she was walking instead of finishing the run like she was supposed to.

She was going to get herself killed.

"You're supposed to run," I snapped at her.

Sadie shot me a death glare that would make lesser men beg for forgiveness and continued to walk.

Jax kept his hand around Cobra's neck, and he restrained the handsome man as he walked after her. "The competitors are having a party in the village before the next challenge, and they invited us. Thought it would be good for morale before the vampyre."

Sadie rubbed her forehead and cracked her neck. "Feels right to celebrate before death."

"You aren't dying. We will come up with a plan," Jax growled.

Another omega whine escaped my throat, and Ascher's horns lengthened on his head.

Cobra scoffed. “You are not going to the party. I won’t allow—”

Jax slapped a hand over Cobra’s mouth and cut him off.

“We’ll go as a team and put on a united front. We’ll figure out how to deal with the vampyre together,” Jax said as he restrained Cobra and glared around. He dared anyone to disagree with him.

I nodded in agreement and then stopped when I realized what I was doing.

I was here to guard the alphas, not fight alongside them.

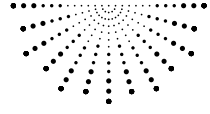
Something had just shifted inside me, and I didn’t like it. But no matter how hard I tried to remind myself that Sadie was an awful alpha, I couldn’t believe it.

The thought of the fucker whipping her golden skin made me nauseous.

I twirled my blades to calm myself.

The man was dead.

SADIE



LOW CUT DRESSES

“ARE you sure you want to come to the party?” I asked Aran as she used an enchanted wand to curl my hair.

My blue-haired bestie rolled her eyes as she continued to work magic on my straight locks.

Big, bouncy curls spiraled down my back in a beautiful waterfall as we sat in front of the mirror in the bedroom.

All the men were in the living area. Aran had locked the door so they would stop coming in and asking how much longer we needed to get ready.

“The queen is having foreign dignitaries over, and I refuse to be paraded about like a stuffed chicken. She won’t think to look for me here because she thinks I’ve been in my room all day. She doesn’t know I have a transport enchantment.” Aran flashed a sparkly bracelet on her wrist.

“How did you get one if they’re so rare?” I asked as I admired my pretty hair.

It had shocked me when my best friend had just poofed into my room this afternoon, holding a bagful of dresses and a box of beauty products.

Apparently, the bracelet allowed her to travel throughout the fae realm.

Aran brushed out my curls and added oil to them. “I just masqueraded as a dockworker at one of the fae ports. I slit the throat of an infamous fire fae that was wearing it. He was trafficking illicit stones through the realm and needed a way to transport them without getting caught. You should have seen him; he gurgled like a baby. So dramatic.” She rolled her big blue eyes like she wasn’t talking about *slitting* a man’s throat.

I gaped in the mirror at Aran and reminded myself that looks could be deceiving.

Just because Aran appeared to be an effervescent fae creature of light and softness, that didn't mean she was one.

She was low key terrifying and someone I aspired to be like.

Her grin turned devious, and suddenly she launched herself at my face in a flurry of limbs and powders. "Now we contour."

Finally, after what seemed like an hour of intensive manual labor, Aran stepped back and motioned at the mirror.

Once again, my mouth dropped. "Holy tits, what enchantment did you use?"

Usually, my cheekbones were a little too harsh and my nose too small.

Now all my harsh edges were softened, and I looked pretty and delicate, almost like Aran.

She grinned and showcased a row of white teeth. "No enchantments, just makeup. Now the fun part starts!" Aran clapped her hands and pulled out a couple of dresses.

She held a webbed black dress to the light and then put it in front of me. "What do you think about this one?"

I pursed my lips as I considered it. "It's more string than dress, and I don't know if I'm ready to commit to *that* much skin on display. If I'm going to have a successful ho phase, I need to slowly build into it. Otherwise, everyone will think it's a one-off moment and not a lifestyle."

Aran nodded and pursed her lips like we were figuring out how to seduce the fae vampyre—which I still did not know how to do—not choosing a dress for a party.

"This one screams 'I'm a freak' but in a classy way." Aran held up a white dress in front of me.

The dress was a classic silky sheath, but it only had thin straps and the cowl scooped super low.

I tried it on...and fell in love. Then, like mature, adult women, Aran and I held hands and jumped up and down while we squealed.

Unlike the Ianuarius celebration that had been stuffy and full of reporters, this was supposed to be a private celebration to get drunk and let off steam.

Two things I was looking forward to.

After the events of the last few weeks, it would take concerning little convincing, and I'd dabble with hard drugs.

I was usually a boss at repressing emotions and ignoring them, but I kept waking up in the middle of the night.

My most common nightmare—everyone screamed obscenities at me in the fae language. I screamed at them that I wasn't a fae, but they beat me with sticks until I was covered in blood.

Every time, I woke up convinced I was bleeding to death.

Instead of focusing on the terrifying reality that was my life, I focused on more important things.

"I'm saying yes to the dress," I wailed dramatically as I inspected my reflection in the mirror. I had heard someone say that on bootleg human TV and always wanted to repeat it.

Yes, I was highly skilled at dissociating from the traumas of my reality.

Therefore, I focused on my boobs, which were defying gravity so much they'd invented a new force. Enchanted fae boob tape was life changing.

No longer covered in scars, my perky gold tits pushed high on my chest and made me look like a million bucks.

"Here, finishing touches." Aran grabbed black stilettos with cute little red bows on the back, out of her box. She also sprayed my whole body with oil until my golden skin shimmered.

"What about you?" I asked with concern. She'd spent the last two hours transforming me into the baddest bitch, but hadn't gotten ready herself.

Aran sprayed oil into her long turquoise hair and laughed. "Sweetie, I came out of the womb getting ready for functions."

In under one minute, Aran pulled on a stunning gossamer baby doll dress that floated around her upper thighs in a puff of tulle.

She slipped on black stilettos, wiped lipstick and mascara on her face, and rubbed sparkles on her décolletage.

"Done." She beamed and blinked her stunning turquoise eyes up at me.

"Dude, you are so pretty. It's wild." I stared at her in awe.

The crystal collar around her neck, just like Cobra's, looked like a gorgeous accessory, and not a symbol of her mother's control.

I would rate myself a solid eight out of ten, all decked out in finery.

Aran, I would rate a freaking fifty out of ten.

She leaned forward and whispered like she was telling a grave secret, "Physically, I might be pretty, but mentally, I'm worse than Cobra."

I rolled my eyes at her antics. "Oooh, someone is going through a damaged phase."

She playfully slapped me on the arm.

My enchanted ring glowed on my pinky, and I grinned as I rubbed my

hands over my smooth gold skin.

It still shocked me how silky it felt now that it was no longer covered in raised scars.

With a deep breath, we nodded at each other, and Aran unlocked the door to the bedroom.

Cobra's gorgeous face and suit-clad body filled the doorway. "What took you so long?"

He'd clearly been standing there waiting for us the entire time.

Rationally, I knew he was acting like a stalker; irrationally, I liked that he was obsessed with me.

Just another thing to add to the long list of topics I needed to discuss with my future therapist.

Literally, I made a mental note to jot it down later.

Now that I wasn't dirt poor, I was hiring a professional ASAP because we had a *lot* to talk about. I'd started making a list on paper so I wouldn't forget anything during our first session. So far, the list said,

Therapy Topics

1. **running**—*Cruel and unusual punishment. Should it be classified as torture?*
2. **Dick**—*No explanation needed.*
3. **alpha men**—*No explanation needed.*
4. **fae queen**—*No explanation needed.*
5. **inability to dance**—*World turned upside down by the revelation that I have no rhythm. Feeling a lot of emotions about it.*

I checked to make sure my list was still on the bedroom dresser and turned to find Cobra still standing in the doorway like a statue.

He gaped at me with an open mouth. Jewels glinted as his sinful lips opened and closed, his sharp cheekbones and jaw vibrating with shock, as he ran a hand roughly through his inky hair.

"You can't wear that," Cobra finally said after a long tense moment.

Jax walked up beside Cobra and shoved him to the side. "You look beautiful, little alpha." He smiled down at me.

I grinned up at the big man. "Thanks, I'm entering a ho phase and wanted to get off on the right foot."

Jax raised his eyebrows as he stared down at me. "As you should, little

alpha.”

My heart burst into bubbles, and sparkles erupted in the air around Jax’s golden braids. Why was he *literally* the perfect male?

“What did you just say?” Cobra’s throat gave a rattling hiss.

He was *not* perfect.

Before Cobra could ruin my glow, Jax grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him against the wall.

“You look good.” Ascher sauntered forward, his gold hair slicked back and his tattoos mostly covered by a fitted black suit. Like the other alphas, he was so large and muscular that no one would ever mistake him for a simple businessman.

As if to punctuate my point, Jax and Cobra were decked in finery but wrestling like children.

“Thanks,” I said to Ascher as he stared at me intensely.

I picked at the edge of my dress. My emotions were all over the place when it came to Ascher, and I never knew how to act or feel.

“Whenever you want to be pampered, just let me know.” He leaned forward and pushed a piece of hair behind my ear with a tattooed finger.

Goose bumps erupted all over my body as I stumbled away from him.

Freakin’ Ascher and his freakin’ tattooed dick. He practically oozed sexuality and sin.

“What’s going on?” Xerxes asked as he walked out of the bedroom and fastened his wrist cuffs.

He tilted his head toward Jax, who had just slammed Cobra against the wall and was kissing him forcefully.

Xerxes’s luscious blond hair fell to his butt in a silky wave, and his purple eyes were shockingly bright against his olive-toned skin. His features were softer than all the alphas’, and he looked almost *pretty* in his fancy suit.

He radiated fairy-tale prince energy.

Xerxes turned toward me and did a double take. He clenched his jaw and said, “Wow.”

Suddenly, I was painfully aware that the room reeked of alpha and omega pheromones. I breathed in the mouthwatering scent.

Frost, chestnuts, conifer pine, and sweet cinnamon saturated the small space. It was intoxicating.

Aran marched out behind me in a huff and arched her perfect eyebrow. “Oh my sun god, do you all act like this all the time? How do you get

anything done? It's a miracle Sadie hasn't cut her losses and found normal men to be around."

At her words, four sets of male eyes began to glow, and low growls echoed through the small space.

"Literally my point." Aran inspected her cuticles.

No one said anything, and she sighed like we were hopeless.

Aran fluffed her gorgeous blue hair, unbothered by their aggression. "You can at least say that I look nice. That is the *normal* gentleman's response when you see a lady in a dress. Also, there is something you all have failed to say to Sadie."

"You look like shit," Cobra sneered at her.

I opened my mouth to yell at him, but Aran beat me to it.

Her turquoise eyes flashed, and she turned to Cobra with a smile. "I look better than your immature snake ass."

"Fae whore."

"Alpha skank."

"Blue-haired freak."

"Creepy rock-skin fucker."

Cobra opened his mouth, and Jax slammed his palm across Cobra's lips to muffle the sound.

I sighed heavily and, suddenly, understood why Jax was sighing all the time.

The good news was Cobra had talked to another woman.

The bad news was the interaction didn't feel like a step in the right direction.

"Um, you look nice, Aran," I said tentatively, unsure why my friend was fuming. She had been so happy and normal a few seconds ago.

"Sadie, that is not the point!" she snapped, and I narrowed my eyes.

I searched for the point but got nothing.

Fae women were crazy.

Aran fluffed her blue hair and rubbed at her temples, then she turned and yelled at everyone in the room, "You didn't even notice Sadie's scars were gone!"

Four heads swiveled toward me.

"How?" Jax asked with a scowl.

"An expensive fae enchantment. Don't worry, it's completely safe." Aran motioned toward the ring on my pinky finger.

Jax's scowl relaxed as he tilted his head at me. "Sorry, little alpha. I honestly have stopped noticing your scars. Either way, you look beautiful."

Smiling up at him, I patted his massive bicep and pretended not to notice that his body heat was radiating through his clothes. My mouth watered as I remembered the taste of roasted chestnuts on my tongue.

The other men nodded in agreement, and for once, Cobra didn't say anything.

Now we just needed Jax to speak more and Cobra to speak less. The group dynamic would be a *lot* more functional.

The tension in the room was slowly draining away, since both Aran and Cobra weren't acting murderous.

I put my hands in the air and shimmied with excitement. "Let's go party!"

All the men were staring at me with a creepy intensity, and I didn't know how to handle it.

"Was that dancing or twitching?" Aran asked.

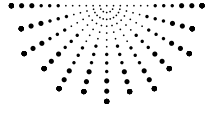
I glared at her, and finally, she nodded as she understood my unspoken communication.

Aran threw her hands in the air and bellowed, "Time to get drunk!"

We hooted and hollered and, before the men could say anything, danced our dress-clad asses out the door.

Stilettos clacking in unison, we clung onto each other's arms and went to get our party on.

SADIE



DANCE BATTLES & SPARKLES

MY MOUTH GAPPED as we entered the party. It was nothing like the Ianuarius celebration, which was the only party I'd ever attended.

The village event was basically just a dance club.

Dark, loud, and sexy.

Strobe lights flashed through the inky darkness, and the writhing mass of dancers glowed neon.

There weren't any tables. A massive dance floor took up the entire room.

The bass was low and heavy, and my bones shook in time to the reverberations.

Bodies writhed, and arms flailed.

I'd thought it was going to be an intimate party with a few fae competitors and had been worried about dealing with Ryak.

I'd been worried for nothing.

It looked like they'd invited the entire village. Hundreds of fae were packed together and grinding like their lives depended on it.

It was amazing.

Aran and I smiled at each other...and sprinted into the crush of flailing bodies.

It didn't take long before we both lost ourselves in the freedom of dancing to the heavy beat.

I was one more gladiator fight and nightmare away from suffering a catastrophic mental breakdown.

Now I closed my eyes and just *moved*.

The best part—even though fae danced around us, not a single person pulled out their dick or groped us.

It was *sensational*.

Either the fae were super respectful—which seemed improbable because they loved vulgar chants and violence—or there was some other reason they weren't touching us.

Everyone was packed tightly against each other, but every time we drifted near them, they scurried away like we were poisonous.

The only thing I could think of was they were avoiding us because Aran was the crown princess.

I shrugged and just had fun dancing with Aran.

The fae gave us an even wider berth as we dance battled each other aggressively.

Aran said I couldn't dance, and I understood why. She moved like a graceful swan, while I fist-bumped and vibrated with energy.

Compared to her, I was a twitching squirrel with zero rhythm.

Suddenly, Aran jumped up and landed on the ground in a *full* split.

I screamed, "Oh shit!"

My legs and vagina cramped as Aran held the split. Touching my fingers to my toes was still out of my range of physical abilities.

But I didn't let it hold me back.

After a while of running in place, pretending to go shopping at the store, and swirling around like a snowstorm, I heaved and stopped moving.

Sweat dripped down my brow as exhaustion set in. My thigh muscle cramped, and I barely hobbled to the beat.

Aran kept spinning and kicking like she was built to dance, but she stopped when she realized I was twitching, and not voluntarily.

"Thigh cramp!" I yelled over the loud music.

She yelled back, "I know how to fix it!"

A few seconds later, I was super glad the fae were giving us such a wide berth.

Aran had me lie on the dance floor and stretched my leg forward toward my hips. As she pushed, the debilitating cramp stopped stabbing my leg.

She pulled me to my feet with a laugh and dragged me off the dance floor. "Come on, let's get something to drink."

I followed behind her, confused where we were going to get a drink, because the entire room *was* a dance floor.

Once again, bodies parted quickly in front of us and moved out of the way so we could pass without a single person touching us. In the darkness, it

was impossible to discern who was who.

Finally, Aran stopped at the far wall of the room. There was nothing around, and bodies danced on the fringes.

Aran shouted to me above the loud music, “Watch this!” She grabbed a sparkly lever that stuck off the wall, and she put her face underneath it.

A bright-gold fluid poured out and filled her mouth. She leaned back and smiled, a warm flush traveled across her pale skin and her turquoise eyes twinkled.

She gestured to me. “Now you try it!”

I turned my head upside down, and Aran poured the golden liquid into my mouth.

As soon as it touched my lips, it fizzed and glided down my throat.

My mouth tingled as I dragged my tongue over my lips and tried to get every delicious drop.

It tasted like bubbly happiness.

Immediately, everything sparkled around me.

Unlike at the Ianuarius celebration, my thoughts didn’t boomerang, and the world didn’t spin on its axis.

I wasn’t drunk.

This was different.

I felt exactly the same, but my vision sparkled. Literally *sparkled*.

It was like someone had dumped glitter on the world.

I looked around in awe.

Everything gleamed with a glittery shine. “Whoa.”

The liquid was definitely enchanted.

Aran grinned at me. “Isn’t it awesome? I helped the palace mixologist invent it. I call it sparkle juice.”

I gaped at Aran; she could be so violent and aggressive it was hard to reckon the girly side of her personality that loved clothes and sparkles with the vicious side.

You know, the side that had slit a man’s throat to get a portal bracelet and escaped from her evil mother by disguising herself as a boy in the shifter realm.

I threw my arms around her. “You’re so cool.”

She hugged me back and flipped her turquoise hair over her shoulder. “I know.”

A great idea struck me. “We should drink the sparkly juice while in

bubble baths, reading smut books. In a white marble bathroom. Everything would sparkle around us, and it would be divine.”

“Girl, you’re a genius.” Aran put her hand up and we high-fived.

With the enchanted juice pumping through my system, sparkles burst around our hands and shimmered in the air as our palms touched.

I loved it.

Suddenly, the heavy bass music stopped and everyone in the room went still.

A large platform slowly lowered from the high ceiling. Earth and air fae must have controlled it.

The platform stopped and floated about an arm’s length above the crowd of dancers.

On the floating disk, one naked woman and two naked men sparkled and held microphones in their hands.

A small purple rock floated and spun in the air around them. Their naked bodies were being broadcast to the entire realm.

Golden spotlights illuminated them.

The naked woman was stunning, with heavy breasts, curvy hips, and dark skin. Her hair was bright purple and hung to the floor in a sparkly cloud.

Behind her stood two handsome pale men. They had sculpted bodies and matching long pink hair.

They were attractive, but I preferred my men taller and covered in bulging muscles.

The naked fae woman spoke, and her voice was a raspy croon, not much different from my own scratchy voice. “The fae queen wants to thank all the competitors for enjoying her hospitality, and she says to have fun at the party.”

The crowd whooped.

Aran shook her head. “Mother loves to take any chance she can to seem like a magnanimous non-psychotic leader. She has the best PR team in the entire realm.”

The queen really was a master manipulator. I was being forced to fight for my life in brutal, awful battles. Yet everything seemed staged and scripted.

It was weird.

A soft crooning sound filled the room, and the fae began to sing a slow melody.

All three of their naked bodies swayed erotically.

Under the influence of the sparkly juice, I stared at them, enraptured.

It was mesmerizing.

The crowd below the floating singers slowly gyrated to the beat.

I turned and asked Aran, "Where are the guys? I just realized I haven't seen them."

It was becoming a pattern, attending parties with Aran and forgetting about the other alphas and Xerxes. There was something about music that made me want to dance and not think about anything.

Aran pointed across the room and said, "They're right there."

They were shoving their way through the crowd, but fae women and men were throwing their bodies at them and grinding against them. They screamed Cobra's name and were creating a commotion.

Jax, Ascher, and Xerxes stood around Cobra. They pushed the fae away, who were desperately trying to touch him.

Even from afar, Cobra's jewels glinted extra sparkly, and his handsome face was beyond perfect as strobe lights glanced across his cut cheekbones and jaw.

He was so stunning there wasn't a word that described his beauty.

Still, his jaw was clenched tight, and his emerald eyes burned with anger.

My stomach pinched, and I fought the urge to march over and beat up every man and woman that touched him against his will.

Suddenly, I felt like shit for wanting to go to the party. I hadn't thought about what it would be like for the men.

With each challenge, each of the alphas had become more popular. Fae screamed their names and asked for signatures all the time in the village.

Even Xerxes had gained a following when the fae had realized one of the queen's personal guards was always with us.

Women and men tried to touch his hair and propositioned him all the time.

My stomach twisted, and I rubbed at my aching sternum.

The fae citizens were so amorous it was annoying as hell. I was glad Aran didn't act like them.

Before I could stalk through the crowd toward the men, a familiar blood-orange mohawk filled my vision.

He had dark skin, bright-green eyes, and was built wide and tall.

It was one of the half warrior twins.

“You look gorgeous tonight.”

My face flamed. Was he the tiger I’d played with? Or was he the one who had set me on fire?

Either way...awkward.

Also, he was also a childhood idol of mine. Demetre had always been my favorite, but the twins were a close second.

“Um, thanks,” I said awkwardly.

I was unsure how to respond to nice men; I was used to them trying to stab me aggressively and, sadly, not in a sexual way.

“What do you want, Noah?” Aran snapped and rolled her eyes.

Apparently, my best friend had no issue telling the twins apart and was on a first-name basis with them.

Noah sneered back, “Nothing to do with your spoiled ass, that’s for sure.”

Hostility radiated off the big man as he glared down at Aran.

Noah’s attack felt personal, and I didn’t like the way he looked down at Aran like she was scum.

Also, Aran didn’t immediately defend herself like she had against Cobra.

I moved in front of her. “Don’t talk to my friend that way.”

Beside Noah, another blood-orange mohawk appeared. Noah’s twin, Shane, sneered, “You shouldn’t defend a pampered princess. Arabella doesn’t deserve it.”

Aran bristled behind me, and it confused me when she said nothing to correct them.

Then Demetre appeared beside the twins.

His pink eyes were bright against his tan skin, and his tribal tattoos decorated his neck.

As usual, his black hair was a shiny, straight mass that hung to his butt.

All three of the half warriors sparkled like they had bathed in glitter, and I lost my train of thought as I admired my heroes.

Demetre sneered, “Arabella wouldn’t know hard work if it bit her in her privileged ass.”

Yep, all men sucked. “Are you guys kidding me? Aran is a badass. I’ve seen her take dow—”

Aran pulled me to the side to cut me off.

She flipped her turquoise hair over her shoulder. “It’s fine, Sadie. These men know nothing about me, and they never will. They’re just dumb gladiators, jealous of my mother’s power.”

Aran didn't sneer at her mother's name like she usually did, and I realized there was a lot going on between her and the half warriors that I had no clue about.

At the mention of the queen, their eyes began to glow. Bright-pink and bright-green eyes stared down at Aran with anger.

Demetre's alpha scent spiked until the space reeked of burning steel. Notes of leather and gunpowder wafted off the twins.

Aran's dark, frosty scent joined the maelstrom of aggressive smells.

I coughed at the awful smell.

Unlike the rich mouthwatering scents of my alphas and Xerxes, the half warriors' scents were a brutal warning.

They burned my throat.

Before I could remove myself to get some fresh air, Noah gently grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the dance floor.

I yanked away, but Aran shoved me forward and said, "I'll handle these overgrown babies."

Not what I would have called the famous half warriors, but I trusted her judgment.

"Let's dance," Noah whispered as he leaned closer to me.

At this point, I was just going to assume he wasn't the twin that had set me on fire.

I also sighed with relief when I realized he was the one that smelled of leather. His scent was almost tolerable.

Still, it was a little too smoky and rough for my liking, and I didn't enjoy the sensation of another male touching me.

I backed away and created space between us.

Thankfully, at that moment, the slow song ended, and the naked singers hovering on the platform above the crowd screamed into the mics.

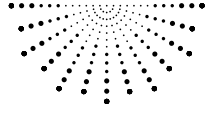
With the rest of the crowd, I put my hands up in the air and jumped.

Noah did the same and grinned down at me.

I closed my eyes; I was just a twenty-year-old bobbing her head to heavy metal music.

It was nice.

COBRA



HE'S A DEAD MAN

MY FISTS CLENCHED.

The void beckoned me closer as fae women and men threw themselves at me.

I was used to wearing hoodies pulled up over my head whenever I walked around the village, and like a dumbass, I'd forgotten how the fae acted when I wasn't concealed.

I'd been so concerned about looking good for my kitten that I'd forgotten how everyone else in this blasted realm treated me.

They threw themselves at all of us, but it was my name that they screamed as they tried to claw at my flesh.

It was my naked body, covered in jewels, that had been broadcasted thousands of times across the realm.

Jax growled and shoved at a fae man who was trying to claw at me with his fingernails. On my other side, Ascher's tattoo flames writhed as he growled at the crowd to stand back.

No one approached from behind because of Xerxes. He stood eerily still, with his suit jacket pulled open and his hands resting on his sheathed knives.

The crest of the queen was pinned to his lapel.

I should hate the omega. He was everything I despised—a minion of the fae queen.

Yet the longer I hung out with Xerxes, the more I liked him. He was strong, quiet, competent, and once again, quiet.

I liked that he wasn't annoying, and his sweet cinnamon scent was calming.

Plus, it hadn't escaped my notice that Kitten was comfortable around

Xerxes and gravitated toward him.

I trusted her judgment.

With a deep breath, I tried to focus on his calming cinnamon scent and not on the urge to unleash my snakes and bite all the fae.

Not that I could, because of the blasted crystal collar.

“Where is Sadie?” Ascher asked under his breath.

At Kitten’s name, a low rumble sounded from Jax’s chest, and a hiss rattled up my throat. Our guttural sounds joined in a menacing chorus.

Until recently, I’d never hissed before. It was a recent development that I didn’t hate.

It helped me express my emotions, aka, annoyance and anger.

We scanned our gazes across the crowd, looking for Sadie. It shouldn’t have been so hard to keep track of one alpha. With her white hair streaked with ruby red, she was impossible to miss.

The problem was, she was so damn short.

Next time we attended a party with her, I was putting a damn leash around her thin neck.

I didn’t care what she said about it—Sadie was getting restrained by my side.

It was where she belonged.

As a unit, Jax, Ascher, Xerxes, and I pushed further through the crowd, scanning heads as we looked for her. Jax’s chest rumbled as we moved, a constant manifestation of how we were all feeling inside.

She was *our* alpha.

No one else’s.

That meant no other man, fae, or beast, got to talk to her or look at her. Sun god forbid they try to fucking touch her.

We scanned the crowd for our little alpha.

When Demetre had invited us to the party, we’d initially refused.

Although it hadn’t really been an invitation.

The fae queen had mandated that every competitor attend the party—and she’d put Demetre in charge of ensuring everyone’s compliance. If they didn’t show, it would be Demetre’s head on the chopping block.

I hoped he’d get himself tortured by the queen.

None of us had forgiven Demetre for the way he’d attacked Sadie during the first trial.

Unfortunately, Jax had pointed out that Sadie had forgiven Demetre, and

it would probably be good for her morale to dance and let off steam.

We had all noticed how freaked out she'd been about the vampire seduction challenge.

She wasn't as quick to crack jokes, and the only time she truly relaxed was when she was hanging out with Aran. Otherwise, she was always on edge.

I slept in the bed across from her because I'd threatened to stab the other men if they made me sleep apart from her.

Good thing I did, because I'd had to comfort her every night.

Around three am, she always woke herself up shouting about blood.

She wasn't well, and we were all fucking crawling out of our skins with the urge to protect and comfort her.

As a result, we had all agreed to attend the party under one stipulation: no one else was to touch, look, or talk to Sadie.

We told Demetre that if they did, we would kill them.

Simple as that.

Demetre had promised to pass the word along, the big bastard's pink eyes flashing with mirth as he agreed with our stipulation.

Abruptly, Jax pushed a heavyset fae to the side, and Jax stilled as he stared across the dance floor.

I followed his gaze, and my chest rattled with a violent hiss.

My vision switched to red-and-orange heat signatures.

All four of us gaped.

Noah was dancing across from Kitten.

The motherfucking half warrior who watched Sadie a little too much for any of our liking—even Xerxes had made a comment about it the other day—was dancing across from *our* alpha.

He was a dead man.

Sadie danced at arm's length and didn't touch him. That was the only thing that stopped me from ripping out his trachea right then and there.

They held their fists in the air and jumped up and down to the screeching music.

It wasn't sexual. But that wouldn't save the fucker.

My eyes flickered back, and I noted how fucking gorgeous Kitten looked in her silky white dress.

Her small boobs were luscious mounds, and her golden skin glimmered like she'd been dipped in gloss.

She bobbed her head up and down, and her red highlights glowed against her white hair as the neon strobe lights flashed through the room.

Kitten was a bombshell.

Most importantly, she looked happy.

She reminded me of a painting I'd seen that was rumored to be from the god realm. A golden angel with bright-white wings and a perfect body glowing as she flew through the sky.

She was like an angel—but so much more.

Her delicate, upturned features were stunning, and her small form was curvy in all the right places.

However, unlike the sweet, blushing angel, there was a fire in Sadie's ruby eyes. She was a killing machine.

She was a blizzard of spunk and energy, and I wanted to bask in her rage forever.

The problem was, another alpha male was currently basking in her glow.

He knew the rules.

The other day, Noah had jogged beside Demetre when we'd told him that anyone who looked, touched, or danced with Sadie would be killed.

The orange-mohawk fucker knew exactly what he was doing.

He would pay with blood.

Ascher's voice was deeper than usual, and he said, "We can't let this slide."

I nodded in agreement.

I hadn't forgiven Ascher for his betrayal, but he trained silently and helped Sadie in the challenges. I'd decided if he kept groveling for the next century, I might eventually forgive him.

With a *shhhhhk*, Xerxes unsheathed his wicked twin blades and held them loosely in his hands.

Good; I liked that the omega would help us with Sadie, because keeping her safe was a full-time job.

Like I said, the purple-eyed bastard was growing on me.

I pushed forward, but walked into an immovable wall.

Jax didn't budge.

He stood ramrod straight, his massive frame towering above everyone else as he stared at Sadie.

A hiss rattled through my chest, and I fought the urge to attack the big man.

A part of me wanted to antagonize him to violence because I loved the way he threw me around.

My skin shivered as I thought about the way his body shuddered against me as he choked me. He owned me.

Another part of me wanted to sink my teeth into his throat until he agreed to stop acting so level-headed and rational all the time.

Jax was constantly thinking and worrying.

It wasn't healthy.

There were times to stress about how Sadie would react.

Then there were times to brutalize the men that dared to disobey our warnings, and bathe in their blood.

This was the latter situation.

Violence hummed through my veins as the inky void in my soul became an endless, swirling chasm.

I thought back to the fucker that had touched Kitten at the Ianuarius celebration.

Back when he'd kissed her, I hadn't yet tasted sweet cranberries on my tongue. I hadn't yet pinned her against the closet wall and made her mine.

Still, I'd planned on finding him after the party and castrating him. I would have, if the fucking fae queen hadn't kidnapped us all.

But now.

This was so much worse because I'd claimed Kitten as my own. Noah knew she was *mine*.

We would exact retribution.

I wouldn't make the same mistake again.

"We warned him," I said to Jax. My throat rattled with a hiss that was so aggressive my words were slurred and barely legible.

Jax looked at me, his gray eyes glowing against his handsome, dark face. "We wait until Sadie is not with him, then we'll drag him into the hall."

The void where my heart should have been burned with unfamiliar warmth.

Jax fucking got me.

He understood.

We all nodded at Jax's statement and held our spot on the dance floor.

It might have been the fact that Xerxes had his weapons drawn, that Ascher's horns had grown on his head, that my eyes were snake eyes, or that Jax's muscles had expanded. Either way, the fae stopped screaming and

pawing at us.

Everyone kept their distance.

We radiated malice.

Noah had disobeyed our strict orders and was dancing with *my* kitten. This meant war.

A few dances later, we saw our chance.

Sadie said something, then headed away from Noah, toward the wall. The half warrior began to follow behind her, but Jax lunged forward through the crowd and dragged him back, away from *our* alpha.

We each grabbed one of Noah's flailing limbs and shoved him through the crowd.

No one tried to stop us.

Finally, we tossed Noah out into the hallway.

I thought he would run. I hoped he would so I could chase him down and tear him apart. Swallow him whole.

Instead, the half warrior grinned at us as he ran his hands over his orange mohawk.

All four of us stepped forward and crowded him backward across the hall, into an empty multipurpose room.

White marble floors and stainless-steel walls glinted shiny and clean.

It was a large space with nothing and no one inside, and the walls were so thick you couldn't hear the loud music from the party across the hall.

It was perfect.

Jax spoke first. "You were dancing with Sadie?" His words hung in the air, gruffer than usual, as he half growled them out.

Noah smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I was."

I lunged and slammed my fist across Noah's face as hard as I could. I moved so quickly he didn't have any time to react.

Blood sprayed across the marble floor as his nose burst.

When his brain finally comprehended what had happened, he threw a punch back. But I'd already retreated across the room.

"Why?" Xerxes asked as he swirled his twin blades lazily in his fingers.

Noah's bright-green eyes tracked their movements. His muscles tensed as he prepared himself to fight.

For the most part, the half warrior seemed pretty sane. I didn't understand why he was messing with us, or why he wasn't using his fae elemental power.

He just stood and watched, like the outcome was inevitable.

Noah rubbed his hand across his mohawk and said, “Because I like Sadie and I’m going to pursue her. It’s rare to find an alpha woman, let alone one so gorgeous, vicious, and...sweet.”

The tension in the room escalated tenfold.

It took a second for his words to penetrate, then a buzzing started in my brain. It was the void screaming at me.

It beckoned me to maim my prey.

One thought echoed—he wanted to take my kitten from me. He wanted her for himself.

Everything erupted at once.

Ascher, Xerxes, and I threw our bodies forward and slammed into Noah.

For a few moments, Noah held his own against us as we traded brutal punches and kicks.

But Ascher wrapped his tattooed hands around Noah’s neck, kicked out with his leg, and flipped the bastard around in midair.

The half warrior slammed into the white marble floor with a loud clack, and more of his blood splattered.

Ascher’s skill would have impressed me, if I weren’t so worried about murdering Noah so he could never look at *my* kitten again.

He wanted to take her from me.

The thought echoed in my brain as I hammered my fist down across his handsome face.

Bones and cartilage snapped, and I slammed him repeatedly against the ground. His heat signature flickered an angry red as I beat him.

“Enough,” Jax alpha-barked from behind us.

I shook my head, and my vision returned to normal.

While I’d been punching, Xerxes had slammed his daggers through Noah’s palms and pinned him to the floor.

Xerxes’s blades were so sharp they penetrated the cold marble.

Ascher slammed his boot into Noah’s side one more time before stopping, and I wiped my bloody knuckles against my pant leg.

Pride stirred in my chest as I stared at my work.

Noah’s face was a bloody mess.

The white pristine room was now covered in the half warrior’s blood. It splattered across the white walls and floor in a macabre painting.

Jax walked forward until his large body towered over Noah. “Are you

going to stay away from Sadie?”

Noah opened his mouth and coughed up blood onto the floor. He tried to turn but winced because Xerxes’s blades were still skewering him.

It took him a couple of chokes.

“No,” Noah gurgled.

Jax slammed his muscular arm down and buried his fist into Noah’s bone.

There was a loud crack as Noah’s skull fractured under the force of the big man’s knuckles banging it back against the marble floor.

Noah slumped unconscious.

Jax stood up and brushed blood off his knuckles onto his dark suit jacket. His gold jewels tinkled as his long braids moved back and forth. His gray eyes were a hurricane of death.

The big bastard was fucking *perfection*.

I fought the urge to pull out my cock and beg him to fuck me in the pool of our enemy’s blood.

“We’ll leave him here as a warning. Let’s find our little alpha.” Jax stalked away from the slumped body.

“Can we cut out his eyes?” I asked.

Ascher cocked his head and smiled, like he liked the idea, and Xerxes cleaned his blades with a grin.

Jax growled, “Cobra.”

I pouted but followed behind and didn’t gouge out Noah’s eyes, like a good snake.

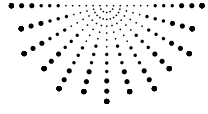
There was one constant in life.

You didn’t mess with Jax when he was angry.

Plus, I could always sneak into Noah’s room later and steal them while he was sleeping.

Then he couldn’t look at my kitten.

SADIE



SEX CLINICS

I PUSHED across the dance floor, toward my friend.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at some stuffy party with your mommy right now, Arabella?” Demetre asked Aran with a scowl. He drew out the syllables of her name like it was an insult.

Shane leaned on the wall next to him, his handsome features contorted into a sneer as he looked down at my best friend.

Watching them spew vitriol at my friend made my gut churn. Demetre’s apology was no longer accepted.

No one treated my friend like that.

Arabella might be tall, but she was still built lithe and delicate, like the rest of the fae. In contrast, the half warriors were brutes of muscles that took up all the space around Aran.

They were leaning on either side of her, and I didn’t like how they caged her in.

Her beautiful face was ice cold as she glared up at the men, but for a second, her turquoise eyes flashed with hurt as Demetre muttered something too quiet for me to hear.

I wasn’t sure what their history was, but it clearly wasn’t good.

Aran flipped her blue hair over her shoulder. “Focus on yourself. Don’t worry about me, little gladiator.”

Demetre bristled, and I could practically see the steam coming out of his ears. I wouldn’t call the almost seven-foot-tall warrior “little.”

He cracked his neck back and forth and scowled at Aran. “Then you won’t mind me telling your mommy that you attended this party? She wants to meet tomorrow to discuss the event. Maybe I’ll mention your

involvement.”

“Hey, don’t you dare,” I retorted as I stepped between them.

Aran laughed like she wasn’t terrified of her mother. “It’s fine, Sadie. I don’t care what the little bird does. He doesn’t concern me.”

Then Aran grabbed my arm and dragged me away from Demetre.

I could feel his pink eyes glaring into our backs as we sashayed away across the dance floor.

As we walked, it took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that Aran had been referring to his massive fucking dragon alpha form as a little bird.

Bold of her.

Once again, I loved her energy.

“Do you want to dance more?” Aran asked me as she pointed to the dance floor.

I wiped sweat off my forehead and grimaced; my feet hurt in my heels, and my lungs burned with exhaustion. “Not really.”

The world still sparkled around me with glitter, and it felt wrong to ruin the effects of the sparkle juice by going to bed early.

A crazy idea struck me.

“Aran,” I said with an evil grin.

She squinted at me. “Sadie?”

“I have a crazy idea, like completely wild, but I think we should do it.” I grinned uncontrollably.

“Oh my sun god, spit it out!” Aran jostled my arm. “I’m freaking stressed after dealing with Demetre’s shit, and I need some relief.”

I grinned even bigger. “Oh, I have some stress relief. We should go to a sex clinic tonight!” I yelled over the loud music.

Fae turned to look at us.

Aran arched her brow at me and tapped her lush lips with her perfectly manicured finger.

I mimicked her movements with my own fabulous nails. The paw print on my thumb was so cute, and I still teared up every time I thought about the nail lady’s generosity.

Yes, I was aware my mental health was hanging by a thread.

I punched Aran on the arm. “I checked when you mentioned it, and the village has one near the cafeteria. It says it’s open twenty-four seven and walk-ins are welcome.”

Aran pursed her lips and asked, “Wait, are you a...?”

“Yeah,” I quickly answered her unspoken question. “Are you?”

“Unfortunately.” She rolled her eyes.

I argued, “How are we ever going to have a successful hot-girl ho phase if we still have *it* intact?”

We were practically submitting to the patriarchy by *not* embracing our sexuality and shoving our vaginas in everyone’s faces.

Aran’s forehead wrinkled as she tried to process everything I was saying. Finally, she nodded.

I squealed like a lunatic and clapped my hands.

Five minutes later, we sat on plush red chairs as the receptionist clacked away on the purple crystal keyboard and chomped on gum.

Every few seconds, she blew a pink bubble and popped it loudly.

The only other noise was soft music, which crooned throughout the dimly lit room.

On the high ceiling, a massive crystal chandelier spun in a slow circle.

Aran and I paused every few seconds to stare up at it. With the sparkly juice pumping through our veins, the chandelier was magically shimmery.

We also held clipboards and pens.

I giggled with excitement as I flipped through the thick stack of pages on my lap.

We were at the sex clinic.

Thankfully, no one else was in the reception area, so I didn’t worry about someone calling us out or stopping us.

This was real. We were going to do it.

Operation Lose Our Virginity.

I didn’t think being a virgin was that big of a deal. Just because a dick hadn’t penetrated my vagina hole, that didn’t make me less of a woman or some bullshit.

However, I was stressed as hell and tasked with seducing an ancient vampyre of lore.

If I failed, I would be MURDERED.

Since my death was imminent, it seemed like a good time to have some sexual experiences.

Plus, it wasn’t as scary because Aran was also doing it tonight.

We were in this together and afterward could debrief our experiences and make fun of each other.

It was either get fucked down by a stranger or go back and fall asleep in my lonely bed because the alphas refused to touch me.

I pushed the thought of the handsome alphas and omega out of my mind and focused on myself.

It wasn't a big deal that they made the sex pact; they could do whatever they needed to mentally survive the Fae Games.

If they needed abstinence, that was fine.

Personally, I needed to get railed.

I sent a small prayer to the moon goddess and asked her not to slut shame me.

Sun god knew she was already being super rude with the life path she was putting me on.

Low key, she better be more supportive during my ho phase, because right now her attitude was not cute.

I finished filling out the form with all my abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.

For "power," I wrote, "alpha saber-toothed tiger"; for "strength," "mauling"; and for "weakness," "running."

For a second, I started to write about the homicidal voice in my head, aka the numb, but crossed it out because that might not be a desired trait in a bedroom partner.

Thinking about the numb reminded me I hadn't used it in a while, and I sent up a prayer that it activated during the next challenge.

If it didn't, like last time, I was going to lose my shit.

Literally, because I would probably die.

My eyes widened as I looked over the next few pages of questions, and Aran giggled next to me.

Wow, the fae were thorough.

The sheet had list after list of sexual preferences.

Flipping through quickly, I read "choking," "paddling," "butt plugs," "hot wax," "edging," "nipple clamps," "humiliation," "oral sex," "hair pulling," "foot fetish," and "elbow fetish."

"Who has an elbow fetish? What can you even do with an elbow?" I asked Aran as I stared down at my elbow. It was knobby and unattractive.

Aran shrugged. "Maybe suck on it?"

I flipped, and flipped, and flipped pages.

There were over twenty pages of checkboxes, and thousands of activities

listed in small font. If we filled out the clipboard, we would be here all night.

I was still tired and wanted to go to bed sometime soon.

“Um, is there any way to speed up the form process?” I asked the receptionist.

She clacked away on her crystal keyboard and popped her gum. “No.”

I sighed and started checking yes for everything without reading.

Since it was my first time, I literally had no idea what I was into, so I obviously couldn’t say no to anything.

Aran looked over at me and followed my lead. She shrugged and asked, “What’s the worst that can happen?”

I narrowed my eyes at her as I finished checking the yes box on the twentieth page. When she put it that way, it sounded very ominous.

I said, “Maybe we shouldn’t do thi—”

The receptionist cut me off. She grabbed the completed clipboards out of our hands and brought them back to her desk.

With a bored expression, she flipped through them.

“All right. Sadie, room 1. Aran, room 2. You will wait there and receive further instruction until we locate your perfect match.” She gestured down the hall.

Suddenly, I realized I hadn’t thought about the specifics of the encounter too much. I whispered to Aran, “How do they find people for us to do it with?”

Aran waved her hand like I was being crazy. “Almost every fae in the realm signs up for the clinic system. Everyone gets alerts on their crystals of possible sexual matches, and then they decide if they want to accept. They have a one hundred percent sexual satisfaction rate, so you don’t need to worry. Plus, the village is a massive complex, so I’m sure they’ll be able to find us good partners.”

I nodded and pretended I was not worrying, when inside I was screaming and running around with my hands in the air.

“I don’t know how it’s both of your first times with your...advanced ages,” the receptionist said as she popped another bubble loudly.

I fought the urge to rip the gum from her mouth.

Instead, I stood up like a calm, sexually confident woman, and walked down the hall to the door labeled room 1.

Aran’s door was next to mine, and she gave me a thumbs-up of encouragement. “Let’s do this shit.”

Then I, literally and metaphorically, walked into the next stage of my life. The room itself was dimly lit and sparsely furnished. There was nothing in it but a small wooden chair and a mirror on the wall.

After a long moment of me standing there and wondering if I was going to have sex in a chair, I sat down on it and tapped my heels.

I waited and waited.

Who knew a sex clinic could be so boring? I was not impressed.

Finally, after about fifteen minutes, the door opened, and a fae woman walked in.

She walked toward me, and I gnawed on my lower lip. I'd requested a guy, but I didn't want to make her feel bad by rejecting her.

"Your partner has asked that you wear this."

Then, with literally no warning, she pulled a black hood over my head. My vision went completely black.

The woman spoke, but her voice was deeper and different. "The hood is enchanted so you can't see or smell anything. It also distorts sounds."

"Um, what?" I asked and tugged at the cloth; however, no matter how hard I pulled, it wouldn't move.

"It is enchanted so only your partner can take it off."

Then the door squeaked as it was shut.

The bitch left.

She literally put an enchanted cloth over my head that I couldn't take off and had the audacity to leave me.

Who did that?

Yep, I was feeling way less confident about this whole sex clinic experience.

Apparently, my partner had a kidnapping fetish.

When you were about to lose your virginity to a strange fae in a violent realm, it was not the best sign that they wanted to put a *bag* over your head.

Upsetting.

I knew my features were a little too fierce, my red eyes startling, and my cheekbones harsher than most fae's, but I still didn't think that warranted a bag.

Silently, I cursed the receptionist.

She couldn't find one fae that didn't find my looks repulsive?

I twitched back and forth in my chair as nothing happened.

The longer I waited in the dark, the more I wished I had read through all

the different sexual kinks and not checked yes for everything.

If a dude came in and started pouring wax all over me, I might actually start crying.

Oh my sun god, maybe that was why he was making me wear a hood—so he didn't have to watch me cry.

I stared at the inky blackness of the hood and noted sadly that no sparkles appeared, no matter how much I squinted.

So much for my great idea to have sex while under the influence of sparkle juice.

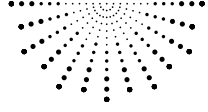
I sat in my little wooden chair and felt sorry for myself that I was about to lose my virginity to a kidnapping role-play fae who couldn't stomach my face.

Finally, there was a distorted creaking noise, like a door opening.

Footsteps echoed.

It was time.

SADIE



HOODS & OTHER CONCERNS

“HELLO, MY NAME IS SADIE,” I said through my hood as I squirmed on the wooden chair. It seemed rude to have sex with someone without first introducing yourself.

Silence.

My breath was too loud under the dark cloth as I waited for my fae lover to take it off and make sweet love to me.

I tapped my foot as the silence continued.

My heartbeat was heavy in my chest, and I bit down on my lip as my skin crawled.

I was defenseless in a random room with a random fae man, and he was just standing there saying nothing.

This was not how I’d imagined losing my virginity.

I honestly hadn’t really thought about the moment, but if I had, sitting in a wooden chair with a bag over my head while my random fae partner said nothing would not be the vibe I would choose for myself.

Impatience set in. “Um, I hate to rush things, but I am getting tired, so could we get on with it?” I clapped my hands to punctuate my point, and the loud noise echoed weirdly through the hood.

I did not just clap my hands about hurrying up sex.

Thank the sun god my face was covered, because my cheeks burned with heat.

Why was I like this?

Suddenly, I shivered as something cold and hard dragged across my collarbone.

Cool air pricked my chest, and my nipples hardened.

A breeze blew against my exposed torso.

The fae had just cut the thin straps off my dress.

I reached forward to cover my breasts, but hands grabbed my wrists. Before I could process what was happening, there was a loud clack, and I couldn't move my hands.

The bastard had trapped both my wrists behind my back.

He'd cuffed me to the chair.

The cold metal bit into my wrists, but it didn't budge an inch, no matter how hard I pulled.

"Are you going to kill me?" I blurted out as I reached for the numb. No way in hell was I fucking dying by some sick pervert's hand.

"No," a distorted voice said through my hood.

I pursed my lips, stopped struggling, and debated whether I should believe him or fight for my life.

If I spun, I could slam the legs of the chair into his body.

I forced myself to relax—which was hard because my breasts were fully on display, with cool air blowing against my sensitive nipples—and decided to give the fae the benefit of the doubt.

Also, I wasn't going to lie: a tiny part of me was kind of into the whole tie-'em-up experience.

Even though I would *never* admit it aloud, I was a sucker for a man in charge. Once again, mental health was *not* my strength.

"Open your legs."

Before I could think about talking back or fighting him, my legs parted as if of their own accord.

With my dress cut, breasts exposed, hands tied behind my back, and a hood over my head, I waited to see what the fae man would do.

Warm, callused fingers softly grazed across both my nipples.

In the complete darkness, the sensation was heightened tenfold, and I bucked against his touch. I didn't know if I wanted more or less.

My pussy spasmed.

Suddenly, the fingers pinched down, and a spike of pure pleasure shot through my core.

I moaned loudly as sparks flashed in my eyes, and I panted under the hood.

Ever so slowly, the fingers trailed down my breasts, across my stomach, to the apex of my thighs.

I parted my legs wider and leaned back, silently begging the fae to do something about the arousal pooling between my legs.

“I’m going to fuck you,” the fae said casually.

It wasn’t a question.

More arousal pooled, and I lifted my hips slightly as the cold wood of the chair bit into my exposed flesh.

Every cell in my body was hypersensitive with arousal.

Suddenly, he pushed a hard object against my clit. It was smooth as he ground it against my core.

“You don’t get my cock. You’ll get a toy.”

My lust-filled brain stuttered, and I opened my mouth to protest, because what the hell?

I was literally at a sex clinic.

I thought his dick was the point?

However, before I could voice my opinions, the hard object against my legs began to burn hot, then flash ice-cold.

My brain stuttered as the changing temperatures overstimulated my clit.

Then his callused fingertips pulled at my nipples at the same time the object flashed cold against my clit.

Holy tits—between the sparkly juice and whatever object was between my legs, the fae were really getting creative with their enchantments.

Good for them.

My body flushed as the fae pushed the object harder against my core and pulled at my sensitive nipples.

Sensations escalated, and I tipped my hooded head back against the edge of the chair.

My legs trembled, and I spread them wider.

Three things happened at once: (1) the fingers around my nipple tugged hard, (2) soft lips pressed against my neck before hard teeth dragged across the sensitive skin, and (3) the object between my legs began to vibrate.

It didn’t just vibrate.

The toy *sucked* on my clit while vibrating at the same time.

Holy sun god. It was *everything*.

I moaned as the fae pressed the toy harder against my clit. At the same time, he slowly scraped his teeth down the delicate skin of my neck.

Sparks flashed behind my eyes, and my hips bucked.

I moaned loudly as I got closer to the edge, the overstimulation throwing

my body toward an orgasm.

My vagina clenched, and I leaned back further. The cold metal kept me bound to the chair.

I started to hurtle off the cliff.

The fae stopped.

All the tension that had been building through my body suddenly dissipated in a languished puff.

“What the actual fuck?” My voice sounded too loud in my ears as both of us panted heavily.

I waited for his response as my arousal wet the inside of my thighs.

Before I could scream with frustration or kick the chair beneath me and murder the fae fucker, the sucking vibration started up again.

My heart beat heavy in my chest with excitement.

I tilted my head back and lost myself to the sensations, ready to hurtle over the edge.

A few moments later, I was one second away from orgasm, and the buzzing stopped. The mouth that had been sucking on my nipples also stopped.

“Oh, you motherfuck—”

A moan escaped my throat as the vibrations started up again.

I was not proud of what happened over the course of the next *hour*.

The absolute asshole of a fae brought me to the edge of orgasm over, and over, and over, and over again.

Only to stop.

I held myself completely still and tried to mask my reactions.

Somehow, he recognized every time and stopped when I was one second from hurtling over the edge.

In my desperation to come, I called the fae every name in the book and threatened him with bodily harm.

“I’m gonna strangle you with your intestines if you don’t finish me right now, you bastard—”

Once again, I was cut off by the pulsating temperatures and vibrations that rocked my clit into another dimension.

After what felt like a lifetime of pain, I was panting heavily, and my arousal dripped down my calves onto the floor.

I vibrated with tension.

“Please stop,” I whispered as I lolled my head back and debated the

merits of bursting into tears.

My vagina began to vibrate, and I sobbed loudly.

Then, unlike the times before where the fae had tortured me mercilessly, there was a loud smack, and the vibrations stopped.

“I was going to let her come this time,” a distorted voice said.

A second distorted voice responded, “I didn’t know that she was fucking crying. What was I supposed to do?”

I whipped my cloaked head back and forth as I desperately tried to kick my heels out and free my hands.

I wasn’t alone with just one fae.

There were two men in the room. This was not what I had signed up for.

I screamed, “Please don’t suck my elbow; I don’t want it.”

Admittedly, I was feeling a tad overwhelmed after almost orgasming fifty times, so that explained my momentary elbow panic.

Tears streamed down my face, and I struggled to free myself from my chair. This was the worst ho phase ever. I was not feeling hot, sexy, or empoweringly slutty.

I felt sad, overwhelmed, and horny.

Not in a good way.

Abruptly, the hood was pulled off my head and my hideous, sobbing face was exposed to the fresh air.

For a long moment, my brain refused to process what I was seeing because it was shocking.

It didn’t help that the world still sparkled with glitter.

I almost asked for the hood back.

Everyone in the room stood frozen.

Plural.

All *four* men stared at me.

The four men I knew very well because I lived and fought alongside them every day.

Jax was standing in front of me, holding a vibrating oval in his large, callused hand.

Ascher was reaching for it, his flame-and-rose tattoos bunched as he was shoving Jax away from me.

Cobra stood beside me—with his thick jeweled dick in his hand.

He was the only one moving, his fist stroking up and down and covered in his own precum. Unbothered by the tension that had just ratcheted up in

the room.

Xerxes stood next to me, his purple eyes flashing with tenderness as he held the hood in his hands.

“I told the alphas not to do it,” Xerxes whispered down to me as he gripped the hood in his hands and glared at the alphas. “Do you need anything?” he asked.

My mouth gaped open as I stared at his purple eyes.

Did I need anything?

I needed to (1) orgasm, (2) kill all the men, and (3) relax in a bubble bath with a book for the next two years of my life.

There were so many things wrong with this situation, my brain stuttered as it struggled to process what was happening.

It didn’t help that without the cloth over my head, the scents in the room smacked me in the face like an avalanche.

I drowned in them.

Frosty ice made my tongue prickle like I was catching snowflakes.

The cold contrasted with the heady scent of warm chestnuts mixed with sugary cinnamon. Wrapped up in it all, balsam and coniferous pines added musky notes.

I breathed in the rich scent, and my mouth watered with need.

The good thing—the sparkly juice still worked, and the men shimmered with a gorgeous glitter.

The bad thing—Jax, my sweet, kind alpha, had just brought me to the edge of orgasm a million times with the other three men watching, and he hadn’t let me come.

Suddenly, I became hyperconscious of the fact that my dress was cut and hanging off my body.

I opened my mouth to speak, but coughed a few times to clear my rough throat.

“Give me the vibrator,” I said to Jax. I death glared at him.

“No,” he had the audacity to say as he glared back. He tugged at his braids, and his eyes flashed like he couldn’t decide if he was remorseful or angry.

Beside him, Ascher ran his tattooed hand roughly over his horns, and a small omega whine escaped Xerxes’s throat.

I held my hand out to Jax and alpha-barked, “Give it to me!”

If I didn’t get that vibrator on my clit in the next five seconds, I was going

to murder the men. They were lucky the queen had reinstated the shifting ban; otherwise, they would already be saber-toothed tiger food.

Jax's gray eyes sparked with flames, and his chest rumbled. "You got what you deserved, little alpha."

I sputtered.

He'd just *tortured* me sexually for an hour and thought, somehow, I deserved it?

Someone needed to call the fae queen and light my overly stimulated clit on fire because he was talking out of the sun god's ass.

My ass was still sitting in a puddle of my arousal with my wrists handcuffed to the chair behind me.

Jax's face was tight. He clenched his jaw and glared at me.

I tried a different tactic.

My bottom lip quivered as tears gathered in my eyes, and I hunched my shoulders forward dejectedly. I was so frustrated that it was easy to make myself cry.

I asked in a quiet, sad voice, "How could you do this to me?"

The fire in Jax's gray eyes immediately disappeared, and panic contorted his features. He took a step forward, like he was going to help me.

Next to Jax, Ascher also stepped forward, with his hands clenched into fists and worry in his amber eyes.

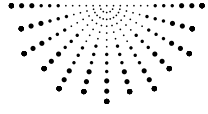
The flames tattooed across his jaw rippled as his muscle ticked, and his horns straightened.

Xerxes reached forward and gently dragged his hand across my hair as he omega-whined. His sugary cinnamon scent spiked with sweetness like his pheromones were trying to comfort me.

"Oh, fucking please, I know you're faking it, Kitten," Cobra said as he continued to jack off.

I was going to murder the bastard.

SADIE



HIDDEN BRANDS

COBRA CHUCKLED. “You’ve been punished for a reason, Kitten. Don’t test me with your bullshit tears. Jax went fucking easy on you. I wanted to do much worse.”

Instead of looking remorseful, the gorgeous, sparkly bastard continued to stroke his jeweled cock as he stared at me.

My hackles rose, and the feminine urge to beat his ass overwhelmed me.

I stopped pretending to cry and tugged at my handcuffs.

“Release me,” I alpha-barked.

Cobra smirked. “No.”

He pulled a silver key from his pocket as his other hand continued to stroke his jeweled erection.

He dangled the key off his finger as his perfect lips smirked at me.

If he wanted to trigger me, he succeeded.

I was so angry my voice came out in a rough growl. “Why the hell would you guys do this to me? If you think I want to be around a bunch of psycho-ass unwell men, then you got another—”

Cobra cut me off by pressing a finger to my lips like a condescending asshole.

I bit his finger.

Hard.

Instead of reacting like a rational, functioning adult, Cobra smiled as blood dripped down his finger, and he smeared the red substance across my lips.

I really needed to stop biting him. I kept forgetting how much he liked it.

My mouth tingled where he smeared it, and I fought the irrational urge to

lick my lips.

Apparently, being a freak was contagious.

I opened my mouth to continue yelling, but Cobra clamped his palm over my lips. Hard.

It would be a lie if I said I wasn't a tiny bit turned on by how he grabbed me. It didn't help that my small breasts were exposed.

Cobra leaned forward, the front of his suit jacket grazing against my overly stimulated nipples.

He whispered in my ear, "You think you can go to a fucking sex clinic and offer yourself up to a fucking random fae man without consequences?" When he said "random fae man," his emerald eyes flickered to snake eyes and back.

I nodded. "Hard yes."

I was an alpha that shifted into a saber-toothed tiger, and the figurehead of the highly controversial movement to include women in the Fae Games. I could do *anything* I wanted.

If I wanted to have an orgy with strangers, I could. If I wanted to fuck no one ever, I could.

That was the beauty of being a twenty-year-old woman.

Cobra, like usual, completely missed the point. "Kitten, you will never touch another man outside this group. If you do, they will die, and you will be punished. Tonight was your warning. We let you off easy."

Cobra pulled his hand away from my mouth.

I looked away from his burning emerald gaze and focused on Jax, the seven-foot-tall, sparkly man.

Arguing with Cobra was pointless.

"How could you?" I asked Jax.

Jax's face was still crestfallen from when I'd started crying, but his gray eyes hardened like chips as he spoke. "There are consequences to your actions, and I'm the leader of this group. You don't fuck other men, little alpha. That's a rule."

He gripped the magical sucking vibrator thing as he spoke, like he was reliving bringing me to the edge repeatedly.

His muscles expanded like he was ready to beat up some imaginary fae assailant.

Actually, as I looked around, I realized all the men had bloody knuckles and blood was splattered across their white shirts.

Had they beaten up the fae guy I was supposed to be hooking up with?

“What rules?” I asked Jax, genuinely confused. “As far as I’m concerned, I hooked up with Cobra once. I’ve only seen Ascher almost fuck the twins, and we were stopped during our hookup. Then you came up with a pact *not* to touch me. What about that means I can’t touch other men?”

Ascher asked, “You saw what?”

A growl ripped through Jax’s throat and shook through the room. “You’re fucking ours. The Fae Games is extenuating circumstances! But you are still our little alpha. I thought you understood that?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but shut it.

Jax was in badass, aggressive mode, and I knew better than to mess with an angry bear.

Instead, I tilted my head back and prayed to the sun god that he would deliver me from ornery alpha men who couldn’t express their emotions if their lives depended on it.

How was I supposed to know that they viewed me as theirs? They’d literally never said anything.

Communication was a two-way street, and right now, I had a better chance of talking about my feelings with a rock.

I tilted my head in confusion. “How did you guys know where I was?”

No one said anything.

In fact, the men looked around at each other like they weren’t sure themselves.

One alpha just smirked.

“Kitten, I know where you are at all times.” Cobra laughed.

Crickets.

My brain exploded, and I wasn’t the only one. All three men turned to gape at Cobra.

“How?” I was afraid to know the answer.

Cobra chuckled like this was all good fun and not creepy as hell. “I’ve branded you with my shadow snake. It’s in the center of your lower back.”

“Um, I think I would know if something was on my body.” He’d officially lost what was left of his sanity.

There was a long pause as everyone in the room looked back and forth between me and Cobra.

The snake bastard arched an eyebrow at me, and my chest squeezed with doubt.

I would know if I was branded—right?

Instead of saying “just kidding,” Cobra sauntered forward and unhooked my hands from the handcuffs.

My arms fell forward, and I rubbed my tingling wrists to bring circulation back while trying to cover my exposed chest with my forearm.

I launched out of the chair and tried to kick Cobra in the balls. He grabbed me around my neck, spun me around, and pulled down my already falling-off dress.

Jax gasped.

I twisted my neck but couldn't see anything with Cobra's hand around my throat. The pressure tightened as Cobra dragged me across the dimly lit room.

He stopped in front of the mirror.

Cobra's fingers squeezed my jaw and forced me to look over my shoulder at my exposed back.

My mouth dropped open.

On my lower back, between my two butt dimples, emeralds were embedded in my skin.

They formed a heart about the size of my palm.

Immediately, I was enraptured by the way the jewels sparkled against my golden skin.

The sparkly juice made them extra shimmery.

“See, Kitten?” Cobra whispered against my ear. His hot breath made me shiver. “I told you. I own you.”

For a moment, I melted into his frosty embrace.

Cobra's large body pressed against me. I wanted to acquiesce and let the gorgeous man take care of me. Own me.

Sanity returned.

I slammed my high heel down on his instep and dug my thumbnail into the fleshy part of his hand.

The bastard laughed at the pain but released me.

On shaky legs, I stumbled back to the chair and sat down before my legs could give out beneath me, my hands tight across my chest.

“How?” I asked with confusion. My raspy voice was too loud in the quiet room.

The beginning of a tension headache throbbed through my skull.

The other men stepped closer, Jax staring at Cobra with burning gray

eyes, and Ascher and Xerxes staring at him with distrust.

The jeweled bastard sauntered over to where I was sitting and grinned like he hadn't branded me without my permission.

Cobra chuckled. "Because I gave you one of my shadow snakes to watch over you."

If I weren't sitting, I would have fallen over in shock.

"You knew about the little snake?"

I'd gotten the snake after Cobra had touched me in the first battle where I'd transformed. I'd thought the snake transfer had been an accident because it had happened when he'd barely tolerated me.

Cobra rolled his eyes like I was being ridiculous. "I control all my snakes, always. I *am* my shadow snakes."

This time, I fell over.

Xerxes lunged and grabbed me before I hit the floor.

My breath was shaky, and it felt like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room.

My mouth flapped open and closed as I struggled to enunciate anything rational, but weird, breathless, gasping noises were all I could manage.

"Every time you were sad, or lonely, I tried to comfort you," Cobra said quietly.

For the last month, he'd been my emotional support animal.

Memories came back to me.

Every time I'd cried under the covers, the snake had comforted me. Every time I'd worried, it had sent me happy thoughts. Every time I'd wanted to die while running, it had given me sparks of encouragement. Every time I'd fought with Cobra...

That whole time...

Cobra had been comforting me.

Jax ran his hands through his braids roughly. "How is the snake related to the jewels in her skin?"

He clenched his jaw and balled his fists. Cobra had kept secrets from him.

Cobra, who didn't seem concerned by Jax's anger, just shrugged. "Not sure, but I gave it some of my life force when you were falling, so maybe it became like mine?"

Cobra gestured to the hundreds of jewels embedded throughout his body.

We all gaped at him.

Was he saying his jewels were actually his snakes?

Cobra ran his fingertips over the crystals that dusted his cheekbones. "These are my snakes. They're sleeping."

Yes, that was exactly what he was saying.

Jax stumbled like his legs were also giving out, Ascher's mouth dropped open, Xerxes backed away, and I considered the merits of breaking off a leg of the chair and stabbing myself through my cranium.

There was only so much a saber-toothed, shifting, virgin, alpha girl could take.

"What?" Jax asked.

I realized with a start that I'd sworn it seemed his jewels were moving across his skin.

Holy sun god.

I had thought Cobra's jewels were moving because they *were*.

He was covered in snake diamonds.

Now I had some snake diamonds too.

Thoughts boomeranged around my head, and I struggled to put the pieces together.

It was in moments like this that I felt like I understood nothing about the universe.

Everyone had their secrets.

I shook my head. "But you weren't shifted when the shadow snake was on my skin?"

The little snake had zinged across my skin when Cobra wasn't shifted, and we could only control our animals when we were in our alpha forms.

I'd thought the snake had somehow escaped his control. No part of me had ever thought Cobra could still be in charge of the snake.

That didn't make any sense.

The room became deathly silent as we all held our breath and waited for Cobra's answer.

Cobra shrugged, his perfect face glinting with mirth and other emotions.

"I don't have a shifted form. My snakes are always on my skin. I'm always a beast. I've just learned to disguise them from others."

The silence was deafening.

He doesn't have a shifted form?

Cobra tugged at the crystal collar he had to wear, the collar that was also around Aran's neck.

It hit me.

The fae queen had put it on him to control his powers because the anti-shifting enchantment wouldn't work on him.

Cobra didn't shift.

He *was* the snake monster all the time.

I thought about how Cobra acted, constantly flipping on a dime, raging, and generally acting psychotic.

Suddenly, things made a lot more sense.

Cobra was a snake beast...always.

He didn't shift into a beast of lore like the rest of us; he *was* a beast of lore.

"Are you still an alpha or something else?" Jax stared at Cobra with burning gray eyes.

Cobra rolled his eyes and licked his bloody finger. "The sacred lake said I was. I honestly don't know anything else. Just that the queen freaked out and released me from the realm the first time I revealed I didn't have a shifted form."

We all tried to process whatever in the sun god's hell was going on.

Personally, I was still horny after being tortured for an hour and was pissed that the men were not at my feet, groveling for my forgiveness.

Cobra had stolen my thunder.

Jax was the first to speak, his muscles expanding with anger and a low growl ripping through the room as he glared at Cobra. "Anyone else have any massive secrets they want to share?"

I pursed my lips.

Since everyone was spilling their deep, dark secrets, it seemed like as good a time as any.

"I have a homicidal voice in my head that takes over, and I become a killing machine without emotions. But it needs time to recharge, so that's why sometimes I'm super badass in battle and other times I suck."

Jax suffered an aneurysm.

Ascher's mouth dropped open.

Xerxes sighed and mumbled under his breath about how he'd known something was up when he'd seen me run.

Cobra tilted his head and smiled at me like he was even more obsessed with me.

My gut twisted at the intensity of Cobra's gaze, and I couldn't decide if I liked it or was worried about the fact that he was literally a gorgeous snake

beast twenty-four seven.

A predator was smiling at me.

“That seems like something you should have shared.” Jax’s eyes were blizzards, and his scent spiked.

He smelled like chestnuts on fire.

“It never came up,” I said honestly as I gave a small shrug and tried to act like it wasn’t a big deal.

I stood up and took control of the situation.

“Give me the vibrator,” I alpha-barked at Jax.

The big man glared down at me, muscles tensed like he was going to attack.

After a long moment, he put the vibrator into my outstretched hand.

It was covered in my arousal, and I made a grossed-out expression as I grabbed it.

“We are going to talk about this later,” Jax growled.

With one hand clutched across my bare chest and the other hand gripping my vibrator, I didn’t answer him, just turned and stomped out of the clinic on shaky heels.

The receptionist was at the front desk as I marched past with four pissed-off men following behind me.

Well, three men and one snake beast thing.

“Have a nice night. Come back soon.” The receptionist popped her gum and clacked on her crystal keyboard.

“Fuck you.” I flipped her off with two fingers. As I held up my hands, my dress fell to punctuate my statement.

A thought struck me, and I whirled around, boobs flying. “Did you also let strange men into Aran’s room?”

She tapped away and rolled her eyes. “The half warriors physically removed the princess from the room. They said they were acting on the queen’s directive.”

I lunged forward to claw off her face.

Jax grabbed me by my arms and pulled me away. “Calm down, little alpha. I’m sure Aran can handle herself.”

Before I could freak out at Jax for stopping me, Cobra reached forward and slapped the receptionist across the face.

We all gaped at him as he grinned and casually sauntered away from the shocked woman.

Her face wasn't bloody, and she was still conscious; he hadn't hit her hard.

"Cobra," Jax growled in warning.

The snake man turned to me. "She let us into your room with minimal fuss. The cunt deserved it."

My mouth gaped open.

Jax grabbed both Cobra and me by the backs of the necks and shoved us out of the room. Ascher and Xerxes followed.

Shifters, ABOs, beast men, whatever you wanted to call them, were definitely psychotic.

The only problem was Jax's growl turned me on as he dragged us back to the room.

It also didn't escape my notice that Xerxes still had the hood in his hand, and Ascher kept glancing down at my exposed breasts.

Jax squeezed us flush against him.

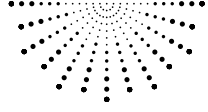
Cobra winked at me, his jewels moving across his face.

I shivered with arousal.

The shifter men were unwell.

The problem was, so was I.

SADIE



MONSTERS

THE FAE CROWD SCREAMED, their voices a symphony of bloodthirsty excitement.

My ears burned from the overwhelming noise, but for the first time, I didn't want to cover my ears and hide.

I welcomed the vibrations as they coursed through my bones and shook my body.

It was a pleasant distraction from the pain in my gut and the burning hole of anxiety in my chest.

Stress sweat poured down my forehead, and I wiped it away with my chained hands.

Once again, in the early hours of the morning, a fae had knocked on our door and told us it was time for the next competition.

We had all fallen deathly silent.

It had been a few days since the sex clinic. Ever since, there had been a tension in our group.

Secrets had been revealed, and no one knew what to do about it.

Everyone was too stressed and worried about the vampyre to fight over the facts that Cobra was perpetually a snake beast and I had a homicidal voice in my head.

Never mind the big elephant in the room, the fact that Jax had brought me to the edge of arousal for over an hour and hadn't let me come, while the men had watched because I'd wanted to lose my virginity at a fae sex clinic.

Tension strummed, a reminder of why we had left things unsaid.

First, we had to survive.

Then we could worry about the lack of communication and concerning

emotional dynamics in the group.

We also had to deal with the fact that Xerxes was an omega soldier of the fae queen who was supposed to be keeping us in line, and Ascher had betrayed our asses.

In terms of the group dynamic, we didn't have problems.

We were the problem.

Strong alpha personalities that wanted to control, a lot of homicidal energy, and an omega with a knife fixation who hated alphas.

I sighed heavily, stopped worrying about the dumpster fire that was my life, and tried to focus on the imminent threat.

My wrists were cuffed in front of me and attached to a chain that connected me to my alphas.

The chain reminded me of the queen's dungeon, and the memory of that wretched hole sent shivers down my back.

It seemed like eons ago that Legolas had told us we had all been trafficked from the beast realm. How he'd wrongly thought we were his salvation.

The revelation should have been the most traumatic thing to happen.

Now I stood at the entrance of a gladiator stadium, ready to fight one of the most terrifying monsters to ever live while I was cuffed.

And it wasn't just the chains.

The energy of the Fae Games was different today.

All the competitors waited in one wing of the stadium. They didn't separate us like usual.

And terrifyingly, our group was in the front.

My lip burned with pain as I gnawed on it.

The air strummed with tension, and my intuition screamed at me to shift into my alpha form and fight. I pushed through the tingling sensation, but like usual, nothing happened.

The shifting ban was still in place.

I looked over toward the screens projected over the stands and bit down harder on my lip.

The fae queen was massive on the screen. She sat front and center, in the first row.

She wasn't what made me sick.

It was the turquoise-haired beauty that sat next to her.

Aran.

My best friend wasn't glowing with health like usual. She wasn't bristling with fire and rage.

No, she was the opposite.

The diamond collar around her neck seemed larger and heavier, and her head fell forward like she couldn't support the weight.

Aran shifted, exposing her profile, and I gasped.

She sported two wicked-bruised black eyes.

That wasn't all.

The side of Aran's pale face was a patchwork of hideous green-and-blue bruises. They traveled down her neck, under the collar, and disappeared beneath her black dress.

Aran shifted like she was uncomfortable, like it hurt to sit, and she stared down at her lap.

She didn't look at anyone.

Beside her, the fae queen smirked with satisfaction. Every few seconds, she looked over at her daughter's abused form and smiled.

The cunt had attacked my friend.

In the dark entrance to the stadium, I turned my head to glare back at the half warriors.

It had been two days since the sex clinic disaster, and I hadn't seen or heard from my best friend since.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together.

Those half warrior fuckers had tattled to the queen that Aran had been at the sex clinic, and not the stupid elite-fae party she was supposed to attend.

It was their fault.

The queen never would have known about the sex clinic if the half warriors hadn't tattled.

Xerxes leaned against the wall next to us as he sharpened his blades, and I wished I was unchained, holding the weapons.

Demetre and the twins didn't look back at me as I glared at them. All three of them stared at the big screen with expressions of horror.

Their gazes were on Aran, who was covered in fucking bruises because of their actions. They looked sick.

Good, I hoped they felt like utter shit.

I hacked as their alpha scents grew harsher and clouded over the sweeter scents of my men.

Demetre's scent was usually burning steel, but now it smelled like an

explosion in a foundry.

Shane's gunpowder scent gave the impression of a machine gun that had been fired repeatedly.

Even Noah's leathery scent was deep and harsh, less like cooked leather and more like burning flesh.

Their scents were caustic.

The half warriors were freaking the fuck out.

It didn't take away the fact that Aran was covered in bruises. They were still going to pay for what they'd done to my friend.

I would ensure it.

Noah's face was also bruised, and I wondered unsympathetically what had happened to him.

He was almost healed. Aran wasn't.

She sat hunched over with a collar around her neck, next to her abuser.

I remembered the way the half warriors had taunted her, how much hatred had been in their eyes, and I couldn't help but think a part of them had wanted to hurt her.

They might look remorseful, but I'd seen the angry way they snapped at my best friend.

A sharp tug on my chained hands had me drawing my attention away from the half warriors.

Jax said, "Focus."

With a deep breath, I swallowed down the urge to kill the half warriors.

Instead, I gnawed on my lip and concentrated on the figure seated in the center of the sandy fighting pit.

In the middle of the sandy arena, he sat on a shiny golden throne.

The vampyre.

Black hair was atop his head in a braided ponytail that was so long it dragged through the sand.

It should have looked feminine. It didn't.

A massive scar was jagged across his face. It ran through his right eyebrow and slashed downward across his lips.

He was also missing his right eye, and a single pure-white eye glinted underneath the two suns of the fae realm.

Instead of wearing white pants and a white shirt like the rest of us, he wore a perfectly tailored black business suit.

It should have made him look stuffy and out of place in the middle of the

gladiator event; once again, it didn't.

He stared at us.

Among the scar, his harsh jaw, and the deeply tanned muscles that covered his massive frame, he was the scariest man I'd ever seen.

Tension and malice radiated off him.

It made sense. He was a beast of lore so rare and dangerous they were more rumor than real.

Insanely powerful with unimaginable strength, they survived off of blood.

Although, Jax explained to us that they couldn't live on just any blood.

Vampyres were so mighty that only the blood of powerful creatures could sustain them.

The older they got, the more powerful they became, and the harder it was to find sustenance.

That was why they were more rumor than real. Most of them died out because they couldn't find powerful enough blood donors.

My stomach clenched as the fae queen smiled fondly at the vampyre.

She was dressed more seductively than usual. Her gossamer gown was cut low to show extensive cleavage, and her turquoise eyes were heavily lined with kohl.

The fae queen spoke, and the sound echoed loudly through the stadium.

Immediately, the crowd went silent.

"Today, I have a special treat for the realm. Lothaire, the most powerful vampyre in existence, has agreed to play a little game for us today."

She paused, and the stadium screamed with excitement.

The queen smirked and licked her lips.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was keeping him alive.

Also, of course we had to seduce an ancient vampyre. Sun god knew even a young one would have been impossible to defeat.

We were screwed.

The men bristled beside me, and I tapped my foot faster.

Lothaire was a fitting name for the hard-looking man sitting on the gold throne.

The queen smiled. "Lothaire is a vampyre of refined tastes. One could say that he is only seduced by power. Any blood that isn't sufficiently full of it disgusts him. So today, he will drain every competitor that he deems unworthy. He has agreed to participate in order to test people for his academy. He searches the realm for the elite."

The crowd gasped.

My heart stopped in my chest.

What the fuck was an elite?

Also, she was telling me this monster of a vampyre ran an academy? I shuddered just thinking about such an awful place. My gut told me it was even worse than I imagined.

Mentally I scolded myself.

I had assumed we had to do a striptease or something to seduce the vampyre. Why was I actually an idiot?

They hadn't told us before that he was only turned on by power. That seemed like pertinent information that needed to be shared.

Chains clacked together as all the competitors shifted on their feet back and forth. The game wasn't what we had thought it was.

The tension in the entrance ratcheted up, like the air itself was thick with our anxiety.

We had no control over our fates.

There was nothing we could do. Lothaire would decide it for us.

We were all dead.

This wasn't a normal battle; this was something different, something so much worse.

It was an execution.

Aran shifted to glare at her mom with disgust.

At once, the crowd screamed with excitement, like they had finally processed what was happening and they loved it.

I bit down on my tongue with so much force that I tasted blood. The coppery tang calmed me.

It also reminded me of the vampyre that sat before us and smirked.

With his figure blown up on one of the stadium's big screens, his nostrils flared like he smelled my blood, even from far away.

Jax turned and took a moment to stare at Cobra, Ascher, and me. We all shifted closer, like we could draw strength from mere proximity.

Jax's gray eyes were stormy. "We must remain calm. Just draining our blood won't kill us, but if we're decapitated while drained, it will. We can't shift to save ourselves, so it is imperative that we remain calm and protect each other."

My stomach writhed with maggots as I stared up at Jax.

This was really happening.

I wiped my sweaty palms across my trousers as I tried to mimic Jax's strong stance.

"Harbingers of fae death. Death to the queen," Jax whispered.

We all whisper-chanted it back.

I remembered the first time I'd heard the chant in the shifter realm. It seemed so long ago that my biggest worry was fighting off fae beasts at the portal.

"Alpha team goes first," the moderator said in her singsong voice. The fae guards shoved our shackled forms forward onto the hot sand.

Xerxes omega-whined and stepped forward like he was going to follow.

He caught himself at the last minute and stayed back in the shadows of the entrance.

For a second, I couldn't see anything as the twin suns reflected off the white sand and blinded my vision.

My feet burned as I walked barefoot out onto the hot sand, and sweat dripped down my brow.

At the bottom of the stadium, the air was oppressive. There was no breeze to cut through the humidity.

Instead of collapsing, I took a deep breath and widened my legs into a power stance.

Ascher was chained beside me. He shifted closer as if, somehow, he could protect me from the vampyre.

In slow motion, Lothaire stood up from his throne and sauntered across the hot sand. His business suit was immaculate and was tailored to fit perfectly over his bulging muscles.

My heart beat faster as he walked closer.

The man was a monster.

He was as tall as Jax, but he was thicker and wider. Something I hadn't thought was possible.

As Lothaire walked forward slowly, his long braid trailed through the sand behind him.

His tanned features were harsh, and the air around him shimmered black.

Death clung to him.

He reminded me of a painting I'd seen in a library book that was called *The Grim Reaper*. A mythical beast of frosty death from the rumored god realm.

The powerful creature that sauntered toward us didn't seem like he was

from this realm.

Lothaire opened his mouth, and massive white fangs descended. They weren't curved like my tiger's or long and jagged like Jax's bear's. They were thin white blades that hung halfway down his chin.

Twin points glinted like needles.

He smiled at us, and the scar across his lips pulled tight.

I fought the urge to take a step back.

The stadium was dead silent. A million fae held their breath as the monster of lore approached.

We were four alpha shifters that couldn't shift. He was the hunter, and we were the prey.

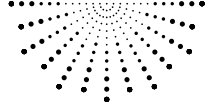
I searched for the lever in my brain, and sheer relief coursed through my bones.

The lever flipped with a satisfying click.

Break his teeth, and stab him with them.

The numb had recharged.

SADIE



BLOODY REALIZATIONS

THE FOUR OF us stood in a line, and our chains clacked as we shifted back and forth.

As Lothaire came closer, Jax moved in front, like he would protect us all. His large muscles flexed as he stared at the vampyre.

They were two massive men coming head-to-head.

Where Jax was handsome and covered in pretty chains, Lothaire was harsh and menacing. There was nothing soft about him.

Don't move. Hold yourself still.

The realm's two suns were hot and heavy above our heads. It reflected off the steel of the stadium.

Sweat burned my eyes, but I didn't blink. Sand boiled beneath my feet, but I didn't shift back and forth.

I was numb.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, and my muscles tensed with anticipation.

It didn't matter that I was probably about to get savaged by a vampyre; there was something exciting about the impending conflict.

The uncertainty of who would win.

The heat of battle was when the numb felt most alive, when it felt the most of...anything.

Life, death, blood, violence, that was all I was. All I would ever be. All I wanted to be.

Hold still. Let him focus on the men. Then you attack.

Lothaire's single white eye flashed as he smirked at Jax.

As the vampyre spoke, his voice was a gritty, raspy drawl that projected

loudly through the stadium. “Ah, classic, the big alpha steps forward to protect the pack. I’ve done this standoff with beast packs thousands of times. It bores me. You have no idea the manner of creatures I deal with daily. You cannot fathom the power they possess.”

A low rumble shook through Jax’s chest, and Lothaire arched his brow at the sound.

For a second, something close to confusion flashed across his face, but then the bored expression returned.

He knows you can’t shift. He isn’t expecting resistance.

“Let’s get this over with,” Lothaire drawled.

Then, before any of us could react, he moved impossibly quick and slammed his fangs down across Jax’s jugular.

Hold still. Do not give yourself away.

Cobra and Ascher lunged forward as Lothaire savaged Jax’s neck with his teeth.

The vampyre casually flicked one of his hands toward them, and a black shield shimmered into existence.

Cobra and Ascher bounced against it and back.

Jax’s gray eyes clouded white, and his head lolled back as if he’d been immediately entranced by the vampyre’s bite.

Lothaire’s scarred face rippled as he drank from Jax’s neck, and the already massive vampyre seemed to expand in size as Jax’s legs gave out.

The vampyre’s hand around Jax’s neck was the only thing that kept the alpha upright.

My heart beat erratically in my chest as the life was drained from Jax’s body.

As long as he isn’t decapitated, he will survive. Focus on the threat.

I scanned the stadium and noted that in the front row, the fae queen was grinning like she’d won a war.

Aran was pale beside her, her mouth parted in horror.

For a split second, we made eye contact.

As if she could sense the numb, the coldness in my eyes, Aran shook her head slightly.

She was trying to warn me not to do anything, to let it unfold and not interfere.

I looked away from her.

When it is time, attack.

Finally, Lothaire released Jax and dropped the big man onto the sand.

Lothaire wiped Jax's blood off his lips and smiled. His voice projected loudly through the stadium, "Give him three hundred years, and he might be powerful enough to slake my beast. But he is too young and, most importantly, too undamaged to fulfill my needs. His soul is...kind. He isn't an elite."

The vampyre shuddered as he said "kind," like it was the greatest weakness.

I had no idea what an elite was, but if Jax wasn't one, then none of us were. We were screwed.

Remain calm and alert. Play weak, then attack.

Jax's large body lay slumped facedown in the sand.

Next, Lothaire dropped the black shield and sauntered up to Ascher.

With no preamble, he slammed his fangs into Ascher's tattooed neck.

Again, Cobra lunged forward. The black shield shimmered into existence and stopped him.

Stay still. Do not exert energy until you have to.

Quicker than with Jax, Lothaire threw Ascher's limp body onto the sand and licked his bloody lips.

The vampyre's muscles expanded, and his tan skin practically glowing with vitality as the alpha blood coursed through him.

Lothaire shrugged and said to the stadium, "He has rage and control issues, a little trauma, but he is even younger than the first. Even weaker. In hundreds of years, he might be strong enough, or he might be the same. Not an elite."

The vampyre stepped over Ascher's prone body and smiled at Cobra.

This time, when the vampyre lunged, Cobra expected it and slammed his fist forward.

Lothaire smiled as Cobra's fist cracked against his jaw. The vampyre slammed his leg into Cobra's side.

With a laugh, like he enjoyed the violence, Lothaire barreled his fist into Cobra's face with impossible force.

Tense your legs. Lean forward.

At the vampyre's powerful punch, Cobra's large body flew backward.

I leaned forward and halted his progress. Instead of taking us both to the ground, I angled my smaller body to absorb Cobra's momentum.

My feet slid backward through the sand, chains dangling, but I kept us

both upright.

A thought struck my numb brain, something I hadn't considered before. I whispered quietly into Cobra's ear as I pretended to help him gain his balance, "How do you activate your snakes?"

His eyes flickered to snake eyes as he immediately understood what I was asking. "The snake is now a part of you. Focus on the rage and let it—"

Cobra was cut off as Lothaire wrenched the chain attached to his wrist.

His body flew forward, away from me, yanked by the ridiculous force of the vampyre's strength.

Lothaire caught Cobra easily around his neck with one hand and slammed his fangs into Cobra's jugular above the diamond collar.

Unlike the other two men, Cobra kicked and fought as his life force was sucked from his body; however, eventually, his body stilled. His head lolled backward as he went limp in the monster's grasp.

Stay calm. Reveal nothing.

But Cobra's eyes were still open, snake eyes staring directly at me.

Lothaire dropped the third limp body to the ground. He licked his lips slowly and reached down to pick the jeweled man up one last time.

His long red tongue snaked out as he licked all the blood off Cobra's neck.

"This one is delicious and almost powerful enough. With time, he could be an elite. He tastes like violence and power. Unbridled strength." He paused and stared down at Cobra's limp body. "But he's too young and weak. Too caring. He doesn't have the edge of brutality necessary for true power. His blood doesn't burn." He shook his head. "A shame."

Use Cobra's snake. He said you can control it.

At last, Lothaire turned his full attention to me.

His singular eye was startlingly white against his tan skin. Up close, I realized his eye wasn't one-dimensional, like I'd thought. It sparkled with colors like a prism. A crystal.

He glanced at the stands, then back at me.

If I weren't numb, I wouldn't have seen the subtle, quick movement.

He made a deal with the queen to test elites. This is more than a challenge. He is waiting for her.

Lothaire smiled as he focused back on me. His harsh jaw bunched, and his muscles expanded impossibly large. His scar was stark against his tan skin.

The enchanted ring hid my scars.

If I weren't numb, I would have laughed at the thought of seducing this beast with something as shallow as good looks.

Keep your body relaxed. Do not waste your energy.

"How are you an alpha?" Lothaire asked as he took in my short, scrawny figure. I was still wearing the oversized fighting clothes that didn't fit me.

Stare him down.

He stepped over the three alphas.

Behind him, Cobra's snake eyes blinked, like he was hanging on to consciousness.

Jax and Ascher were sightless and completely limp.

When Lothaire was an arm's length away, he stared down at me and chuckled.

Unlike the other three, he didn't throw himself at me and slam his fangs against my jugular.

He slowly bent forward, fangs flashing menacingly as the anticipation wound around us like a noose.

The stadium was silent. No one breathed.

A girl met a monster underneath the twin suns of a brutal realm.

If this was a poem, the stillness might have felt like fate.

I was numb—it felt like the moment before death. The calm before the storm.

My purpose for existing.

Focus on the jewels in your lower back.

I held myself still and concentrated on the heart of jewels embedded in my spine.

The vampyre's massive hand snaked out, and he wrapped it around my neck.

His fingers overlapped, and he lifted me until my feet dangled.

I didn't kick; I didn't fight.

Concentrate.

With every cell in my body, I focused on the snake that I knew was sleeping in my flesh.

It was like reaching for the numb, but different.

The more I concentrated on the snake, the more I could feel its presence. It was a piece of Cobra, and unlike him, an enchanted collar did not shackle me.

The snake was just out of my reach. I pulled against an invisible thread in my lower back, desperate to wake it up.

Pull harder.

Lothaire's fangs were inches from my neck. He smiled as he went in for the kill.

I wrenched on the thread with all my might.

Fangs slammed into my jugular.

My subconscious froze, unable to tug the thread and wake the snake. So close.

There was a tingling down my neck and a sucking sensation.

I was too late.

My vision blurred.

Suddenly, the fangs removed from my neck with a pop.

For a long moment, disbelief, shock, and exhaustion clouded my brain.

PULL.

With all my subconscious might, I visualized the thread that tethered me to the snake.

Above me, Lothaire's face wavered in and out of focus as he spoke, "This one is different. I haven't tasted blood like this in a long time. This one might be elite."

His prism eye focused on me as he brought me closer. We were face-to-face. Inches apart.

Lothaire's heavy breathing projected around the silent stadium.

My nose wrinkled.

He reeked of despair, darkness, and death.

It hung around him in a cloud that rubbed my alpha senses the wrong way.

"Why do you taste like *the song of the hunt*?" Lothaire asked.

Four things happened in one blink of the vampyre's eye:

1. I yanked the thread with all my will, and the little snake zinged as it woke from its slumber.
2. *JUMP!* I internally screamed at the snake. It leaped off my skin in a jeweled glimmer. Its fangs slammed into Lothaire's chest.
3. Twin knives embedded themselves, dead center, in the middle of Lothaire's forehead.
4. The numb said, *I am the song of the hunt.*

The silent crowd screamed as Lothaire stumbled backward, two knives buried in the front of his skull, all the way to the hilts.

They had the crest of the queen engraved on them.

Xerxes's blades.

Lothaire continued to stumble as the shadow snake reared its head back and slammed inky fangs into his flesh repeatedly.

The vampyre froze as the snake's poison coursed through him, two blades sticking out of his forehead.

But Lothaire still didn't release me.

His left hand tightened around my neck, and I clawed at it with all my might.

Free yourself. Twist his thumb back.

I did as the numb said, but his grip didn't lessen. His hand tightened further.

With poison coursing through his veins, and two blades spearing his brain, Lothaire should have fallen to the ground.

He stood ramrod straight.

I fought harder.

The air around Lothaire glimmered black. "You dare disrespect me. Do you know who I am?"

Suddenly, his mouth lunged at me.

Move your head.

His fangs slammed into the side of my throat, and he ripped out chunks of my skin. Warm blood flowed across my chest.

He didn't bite. He mauled.

If I hadn't moved quick enough, he would have ripped out my trachea with his teeth.

Pain coursed through me, and the numb shoved it aside.

Gouge out his eye.

I reached forward, but my muscles were weak from blood loss, so I barely twitched.

Lothaire slammed my body into the sand.

My back cracked, and my head slammed against the ground.

Above me, he snarled like a rabid beast as he flashed his fangs and roared.

From far away, Xerxes screamed my name.

I twisted my head. The omega was fighting about a dozen fae guards.

Even if he got past them, he was too far away to do anything.

Vibrations shook the ground, and I twisted my head in the other direction.

Three fae guards stalked forward with machetes in their hands. The silver glinted brightly in the sun.

Three guards, three weapons, three unconscious alphas.

This was the queen's plan all along.

On Lothaire's neck, a shadow snake writhed and bit him over and over again.

Holes from the snakebites dripped blood down his tan skin, but the vampyre just snarled and slapped at it like it was a nuisance.

He looked down at me, and his nostrils flared.

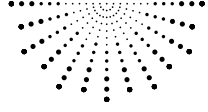
This was the end.

I am the song of the hunt.

For a long moment, I lay on the hot sand, bleeding out as the world went to hell around me.

Suddenly, I understood.

SADIE



THE FIFTH FAE ELEMENT

MY MIND RACED as Lothaire leaned forward, and the guards stalked closer.

It all made sense.

The carving on the walls of the fae palace showed a person lying prone in a pile of blood.

A statue depicted the same scene in the entrance to the village.

The poems that took people over and read themselves to Aran and I, were in an ancient fae language.

A language that had repeatedly spoken to me about blood. A language only fae could understand.

When he'd apologized to me, Demetre had said *the song of the hunt* overwhelmed him, and that it was louder in the most powerful half warriors.

When I'd bled into the sacred lake, it had turned black, then red. Black corresponded with an alpha's power, but red wasn't one of the ABO colors.

I'd thought it was a fluke, a trick of my mind.

It wasn't.

Fae developed their powers at a young age.

The numb had first appeared during a beating, when Dick had slammed his belt across my back until I bled.

The first time Dick had beaten me, he'd said, "I'll beat the bloody devil out of you. I have to do it. Someday, you'll understand."

It had always confused me why he'd beaten me senseless. It had always been so random. Something he'd done mercilessly and constantly, like a chore he'd had to complete.

Now, I understood.

The lake had turned red because I wasn't just an alpha shifter; I was

something more.

I was a half warrior; I was part fae.

But my fae element wasn't one of the main four. The village guide had talked about a fifth element that the queen had destroyed.

It all made sense.

The nightmares that plagued me, Dick's beating, the numb appearing, the statues in the village, the painting on the palace walls, the lake, they all had one thing in common.

Blood.

The fifth element—I was part blood fae.

Lothaire snarled as he leaned forward toward my neck with his fangs descended.

The hilts of the twin blades were still sticking out of his skull.

Behind him, the guards were getting closer to my alphas, holding weapons that could decapitate. That could kill a drained alpha.

Repeat the words aloud, the numb demanded.

The voice in my head spoke the same words, in the lilting language, that had read themselves to Aran and me:

*“Blood burns red, through the air it's blown,
Blood pours bright, across the fated throne,
Blood draws truth, and rips apart the mind,
Blood creates pain, it kills the weak-spined.”*

I repeated the words aloud, my voice raspy and harsh.

Lothaire stopped inches away from my face. Fangs descended. He listened to me sing.

He looked down at me with confusion. “Who taught you that song?”

Snap. A sensation coursed through me.

Everything changed.

The numb was no longer a lever to flick; it was a sledgehammer that smashed through my subconscious and remade the world anew.

Instantly, I could sense every ounce of blood in my body.

The blood that coursed through my veins, and the drops that coated the sand around my savaged neck, all of it strummed with power.

It sang to me.

Unleash your power at the beast.

I did.

With all my willpower, I sent my blood up into the air and threw it at my foe.

It slammed into them, and I sunk it deep through the pores of their skin, through the layers of their flesh, into their veins.

Command them.

I willed my blood to control.

To take over.

To command.

Everything inside me burned as I accessed a power that I hadn't known I possessed.

It was the darkness inside of me.

The part of my brain that I shoved pain into.

Where I folded my trauma away.

It wasn't a dark cavern that hid my pain like I thought. It was a living entity of churning power.

All along, it had lived within me, more powerful whenever I accessed the numb.

Suddenly, there was a loud piercing scream as my power coursed through the beast, and we battled for control.

The real beast was the queen.

She shouted in agony.

I had flung my blood at her. It sailed through the air in a churning mass and slammed against her chest.

The queen bellowed as my blood soaked into her, as I sunk my power deeper into her bloodstream.

My world burst into blue flames as she set me on fire.

Fight back. Control your power.

My head throbbed with agony as I forced my blood through her veins. I ignored the sensation of her power stabbing every inch of my skin.

Unlike before, the queen didn't hold back. It felt like thousands of nails were hammered into every inch of my body.

Push forward.

I screamed breathlessly as pain overwhelmed me.

The queen screamed loudly as I shoved my blood deeper and deeper through her veins. I traveled inside her toward the source of her blue flames.

We fought.

“You can’t do this!” the fae queen screamed at me, her voice projected across the stadium.

Her blue flames burned brighter, and I convulsed, but I focused on the churning power in my mind.

The fae queen screamed, “YOU FOOL! BRING THE PRISONERS! I HAVE COLLATERAL! YOU CAN’T TOUCH ME!”

With my blood inside her, I could feel her terror. I could feel the moment her limbs convulsed as she started to lose control over herself.

Above me, Lothaire stood motionless, with the daggers in his skull. He watched silently as I battled against the queen.

He didn’t do anything to help.

He looked bored. I didn’t want to know who the elites were that he was looking for. Something told me he was used to battles more impressive than ours.

Get to your feet. Fight her.

I dragged myself to my shaky knees and braced my hands on the sand in front of me. I stared up at the queen twitching in the stands.

Her blue flames leaped around me. My head screamed with agony as my blood battled inside her.

Abruptly, her blue flames stopped torturing me. The nails stopped hammering into my flesh.

I vomited.

For a split second, my concentration broke.

The queen collapsed back against her seat.

My blood was still coursing through her veins. I was close to finding the source of her power.

The queen sneered at me as five prisoners were brought next to her. Their faces projected across the massive screens of the stadium.

Four girls and one man.

I recognized all of them. It was my sister Lucinda, and from Jax’s descriptions, three of his sisters.

The worst part, Dick stood next to them.

All of them were shackled together, and fae guards held blades to their throats.

For a second, the pressure in my mind slipped, and I almost released my hold on my power.

Concentrate! the numb, *the song of the hunt* screamed.

Tears poured down my face.

Lucinda and Jax's sisters shook with fear.

Beside them, Dick was as hideous and gross as ever. His ruddy skin was flushed with anger.

The fae queen grinned at me even as she spasmed. "Release me from your power, or the guards will kill your family and Jax's. You think he'll ever forgive you if they die? It will be all your fault."

Concentrate. Hold your control.

I gagged.

She could kill Dick, but not the girls.

Focus.

Behind Lucinda, Aran's face went pale, and the queen laughed as she turned to her daughter. "You think your guards didn't tell me about your plan to bring this man back for your pathetic alpha friend? I had them lie to you. I am the one who controls the players. Not you."

The queen was a master manipulator. We were always too far behind and not powerful enough to catch up.

I dragged my eyes away from the disaster in the stands.

Behind Lothaire, three fae guards walked closer to my alphas. Their weapons glinted menacingly.

Kill the queen.

Scenarios flashed through my brain. The girls were held by blades. The guards were getting closer to my men.

Sweat dripped down my forehead as I clenched the hot sand beneath my fingers.

My head ached.

Use your blood! the numb screamed at me.

I couldn't; the girls' lives were at stake. I sent a prayer for help to the moon goddess.

Then it happened, the opening I needed.

A solution.

All four girls looked at each other, then slammed their chained wrists up into their guards' faces. The guards stumbled with surprise, and Dick threw himself at them.

NOW!

"RELEASE THE CHAINS YOU BIND US IN!" I rasp-screamed in my broken voice.

I slammed my blood deeper through the queen's body.

Toward the blue flames of her core. The source of her power.

My head throbbed like it had cracked open at the force of my command.

In the stadium, the queen fell to her knees.

On the sand, the three guards sprinted straight for my alphas with weapons lifted above their heads.

Cobra's collar fell off his neck as my words overcame the queen's will, releasing the enchantment that bound him.

"COBRA, attack!" I screamed at him.

Cobra's body was completely limp, but his snake eyes blinked at me.

He was more than his physical form. His snake eyes glowed, and the thousands of jewels embedded in his skin turned into writhing black snakes.

The shadows launched off his skin in a terrifying mass.

They flew across the sand and quickly overwhelmed all three fae guards. The guards screamed and fell to their knees, and they dropped their weapons.

My alphas were still alive.

With a squish, Lothaire pulled the twin daggers out of his forehead. Blood poured over his face, but the wounds quickly knit themselves back together.

I looked up.

If I weren't slowly bleeding out and woozy, my jaw would have dropped.

Lothaire's did.

Aran's bruised arm was buried in the fae queen's immobilized body. Her blue eyes glowed black against her pale skin.

Daggers protruded from her nails and stabbed through her mother's body.

She wasn't pretty anymore.

Aran was terrifying.

My best friend pulled her arm back and wrenched out the fae queen's bloody heart. She shoved the beating organ into her mouth.

She consumed it.

Blood trickled down her bruised throat, and her swollen eyes flashed with satisfaction as she ate her mother's heart.

Abruptly, there was a loud crash as a million fae knees slammed against the metal floor of the stadium.

They bowed to Aran.

Lothaire fell to his knees.

Aran had eaten her mother's heart. Per tradition, she was the new fae

queen.

My head throbbed one last time as the life force of the queen dissolved into nothingness.

Take your blood back. Your power cannot be left in her body.

I focused on the throbbing pain in my skull.

With every ounce of will, I drew my blood from the queen's body.

It sifted through her flesh and out of her pores.

A sphere of churning blood flew back toward me. It splattered against my outstretched palm, and I absorbed it back into my bloodstream.

The vise-like pressure in my head released, and I face-planted into the sand.

"Everyone stand down. The Fae Games are done for today. All medics are required to attend to the downed competitors!" Aran yelled, her voice projected loudly through the stadium.

I rolled over onto my back and looked up at Lothaire.

He stared up at Aran with something close to fascination. "An elite," he whispered.

Then Lothaire straightened his business suit over his massive frame and wiped the blood off his mouth like he was trying to look presentable.

If I weren't still numb, I would have laughed.

Aran was covered in juices from eating her mother's beating heart.

Don't move. Press your hand over your neck to stop the bleeding.

I positioned my hands over my bloody wound and wondered how I had the power to fling my blood out of my body and infect another person, but I couldn't make it stop flowing out of me.

Because you are weak.

Maybe it was because I now knew the numb was *the song of the hunt*, but it seemed snarkier than usual.

Sassier.

I thought back, *I'm very strong.*

You are pathetic.

I then proceeded to get into a heated argument with the voice inside my head about how powerful I was.

We argued even as I was levitated, alongside the alphas, off the field by air fae medics and brought back to the health clinic beneath the stadium.

Xerxes yelled and chased after my floating body, which my blood-deficient brain thought was hilarious.

I kept arguing with the voice in my head as the doctors gave me blood transfusions and made me drink weird, enchanted juice.

Even as my body went limp with exhaustion, I forced myself to keep my eyes open.

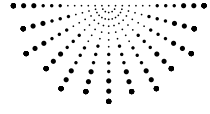
Finally, Aran, Lucinda, and Jax's three sisters burst into the room.

They were okay.

Relief coursed through my body.

I passed out.

SADIE



IF ONE MORE PERSON IS ROYALTY...

“MOMMY?” I asked as I snuggled deeper against the warmth.

“Not your mother, Kitten,” a sinful masculine voice said with a chuckle. A voice that sounded an awful lot like Cobra’s.

I blinked open my crusty eyes and looked up into Cobra’s gorgeous face. “Are you not going to let me come again?”

“Ew, can you not?” Aran’s voice said from nearby.

Another soft female voice said, “I’m going to be sick.” They retched dramatically.

After a long moment of rubbing sand and grit out of my eyes, I focused on my surroundings.

The first thing I noticed—Cobra was carrying me against his chest.

The second thing I noticed—he was standing in a field of flowers, and gorgeous yellow-and-pink petals floated on the soft breeze around us.

Twin suns kissed my face with sunshine.

It was almost...romantic.

The third thing I noticed—Ascher, Jax, Xerxes, and Aran were all standing in the flower patch with us.

I squinted as four sets of eyes turned to stare at me. “Am I dead?”

“You wish, bitch.” Aran slapped me on the arm and proceeded to march forward through the field of flowers.

Pink-and-yellow petals danced around my best friend’s short turquoise hair.

She turned around and beckoned us forward. The bruises that mottled her face made me wince.

Also, dried blood coated her chin and her chest.

“You’re a boy again?” I asked Aran with confusion.

She rubbed at the enchanted ring on her finger and nodded distractedly as she walked toward massive flowers. “Fabulous observation skills.”

“I’m glad you’re awake, sis.” It was the soft female voice from before. A white-haired figure walked up from behind Cobra.

With a kick and a loud grunt, I extracted myself from the snake man’s hold and launched myself at Lucinda.

Then, like a powerful, grown woman who could transform into a saber-toothed tiger and force my blood into others to make them obey my will, I burst into hideous sobs.

Lucinda grinned and hugged me back, her eyes misting over as she gripped me tight.

“This is super touching, but we need to move. Stop diddle-dallying!” Aran shouted up ahead.

“‘Diddle-dallying’ is not a word.” A small pale girl with black hair rolled her eyes. Her tone insinuated Aran was an idiot.

I loved her.

“Jinx, we talked about this.” A stunning, tall girl with electric-green-streaked hair stomped forward through the flowers.

Lucinda grinned at the girls like they were good friends. “These are Jax’s sisters, Jinx, Jess, and Jala. They came home from school for break and were kidnapped by the queen’s guards. I was out in the woods around the school exploring when they nabbed me.”

A pretty pink-haired girl ran out from behind a flower. “I’m Jala. Our sisters Jen and Jan were in school with their boyfriends, so they didn’t get kidnapped.”

Jala skipped through the flowers like she felt bad her other two sisters *hadn’t* been kidnapped.

My head throbbed from dehydration.

I had a lot of problems in my life, but at least the feminine energy finally outmatched the masculine energy in the group.

It was nice.

Jax grumbled and sighed, but he gently grabbed Jala’s hand in his and smiled at her. “Stop running off. It’s stressing me out.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m fourteen now. You don’t need to baby me.”

“You literally were just kidnapped. Clearly, I do.”

Jess and Jinx chimed into the argument, and Jax bantered back and forth

with his sisters.

I pulled Lucinda into my arms.

My sister was lithe and more beautiful than ever, but her shoulders were a little too bony for my liking.

She was fragile in my arms, which was saying something, because I was commonly described as frail.

“So, what are we doing?” I asked the important question as Aran poked at a flower almost as tall as Jax.

“We’re fleeing this realm.”

I nodded at her. “Seems like a good plan, seeing as you just *ate* your mother’s heart.”

“Oh please, you started it.”

“So, should I call you queen?”

Aran whipped around. “There is no way in the sun god that I’m subjecting myself to that hell. If we don’t escape, I’ll be forced into the coronation against my will. We’re leaving the realm. From this moment forward, I’m a boy.”

I held my palms up in front of my face. “I get it, I get it.”

Did I get it? Not completely.

But I understood the panicky vibes that were flowing off her.

I stared at my bruised best friend. There were big problems, then there were *big* problems, and this was definitely the latter.

Aran continued speaking. “I used the bracelet to transport us all to the nearest portal. I learned about it back when I was trying to escape.”

My stomach plummeted, and I didn’t let my sadness show on my face.

Sure, the fae realm was terrifying, but I’d gotten used to the warmth and was not emotionally prepared for the negative temperatures of the shifter realm.

Aran nodded at a massive flower. “This is it. Let’s go.”

Then she threw herself face-first at the flower.

I winced.

Clearly, the stress of ripping her mother’s beating heart out of her chest and eating it had gotten to her. She was acting like a maniac.

Before I could gently remind her that therapy was a healthy option, Aran’s lithe body disappeared, and the surface of the massive flower rippled black.

For a second, a swirling, inky abyss replaced the flower. It was a portal.

“Do you want me to carry you through?” Ascher asked as he motioned toward the portal.

“I’ll go last to make sure everyone gets through safely,” Jax said behind me.

Cobra snapped at Ascher, “If Kitten needs to be carried, I’ll do it.”

Xerxes pulled out his twin knives, scanned the clearing like he was looking for threats, and scooted closer to me.

With a heavy sigh, I grabbed Lucinda and Jax’s sisters and marched through the portal.

Sun god forbid the men not take every chance they could to act like I was completely incompetent.

I stumbled in surprise on the other side of the portal.

Icy wind didn’t stab at me.

The temperature was moderate, and everything had a slightly greenish tint to it. Fluorescent lights flickered above my head.

The men joined us.

I stood in shock for a long moment, then the concrete platform beneath our feet started to shake.

A high-pitched rattling noise grew louder and louder.

Air whooshed as a massive chrome machine screeched to a halt in front of us.

Glass doors slid open.

A British-accented voice, which sounded a lot like Xerxes’s, said, “Welcome to the beast realm. Please take the subway to the next customs checkpoint.”

I looked over at Aran in shock.

Before I could have a mental breakdown, my best friend shoved me onto the train and pushed me into a plush seat.

The interior of the train was sleek, with flashy fixtures and neon lights. We were the only passengers in the car.

Aran sat across from me. “Xerxes says he has a large enough place to house us in the beast realm. The fae will know to look for me in the shifter realm. They don’t even know that I know the beast realm exists.”

I nodded while my brain short-circuited.

Once again, a lot was happening.

Ascher nodded beside Aran, his flame tattoos rippling as he rocked back and forth. “My original mission was to return you to this realm. This makes

sense. You might be able to find your biological families. If you're interested."

Jax shook his head and placed a long arm across Jess, Jala, and Jinx's seat. "I have my family."

"Don't care." Cobra rolled his eyes.

I shrugged. "I already have Lucinda. That's enough for me."

My little sister flashed me a smile, and we tucked our arms around each other.

No one said anything about the elephant in the room. That I was the human equivalent of a blood parasite and Aran had the forbidden snack.

The train car vibrated beneath us as it moved forward.

Aran shrugged. "Yeah, as long as we have a place to hide out, I don't care what we do. I just need to shower and brush my teeth." She gagged and shivered as she scratched at the blood on her neck.

I nodded in agreement because I was also coated in dried blood and sand.

We were all covered in bruises and exhausted.

"Exit for customs into the beast realm." The train came to a halt, and the doors opened.

A big silver machine with two men standing next to it greeted us. They wore black outfits and gestured us forward with bored expressions.

Apparently, they were used to haggard passengers coming off the train.

From the knives and guns hanging around their waists, they were some type of guards. Their burnt scents identified them as betas.

"State your species and your abilities, then walk through the detector," one guard said as the other positioned us so we stood in a straight line.

Aran went first. "Fae, no elemental ability."

The machine beeped green and printed out a small card.

"Entrance granted. Enjoy your stay in the beast realm. Keep this card on you at all times for identification."

Then he motioned for Lucinda to step forward.

Lucinda said, "Shifter. I'm only sixteen, so my ability is unknown."

The guard nodded, but his hand lingered on her palm as he gave her the card, and I didn't like the way he glared at her.

Behind me, Cobra hissed with annoyance. I wasn't the only one who noticed the guards' attention.

Then Xerxes went.

When he stated that he was an omega, both guards nodded at him in

recognition. “Xerxes, welcome back. The realm missed you.”

Xerxes’s face was a stony mask that gave nothing away, but his shoulders were tense.

Ascher went next, with no fuss.

Jax refused to walk through by himself and demanded he stay with his sisters. The guards gulped at his glare and looked away from his sisters.

His warning was clear.

Next, it was my turn. I said, “Alpha, tiger,” and tried to act natural, like I didn’t secretly have a terrifying blood power.

The guards raised their eyebrows, and one of them muttered, “What are the odds?”

Still, I made it through with no issues.

I relaxed beside Lucinda and put my arm around her. We had spent so long apart that the thought of being separated again was terrifying.

Finally, Cobra sauntered forward through the machine. “Alpha, snake.”

Immediately, the machine beeped red, and a siren wailed loudly.

Everyone jumped at the unexpected noise.

The guards instantly went unnaturally still, and they stared at Cobra with a terrifying intensity.

Jax, Ascher, and I stepped forward to help him.

One guard reached for his gun.

The other grabbed his sword. “How old are you? How many forms do you have?”

Cobra shrugged. “About a hundred years old. One form.”

Both guards paled and stepped away from him. “Prove it.”

Cobra rolled his eyes and muttered expletives under his breath.

Abruptly, all the diamonds on Cobra’s skin transformed into writhing shadow snakes.

Both guards fell to their knees.

They bowed their foreheads to the ground.

Xerxes swore, “Shit, he said the queen let him go when she found out he didn’t have a second form. I should have realized.”

I whipped my head back and forth between the pale omega and the guards who were still prostrate in front of Cobra.

After a long, awkward moment, the guards straightened. “Do you know who you are?”

“What?” Cobra looked at them in confusion.

The guard stuttered, “This is Serpentes City. The Mafia rules. Our leader, the Don, is a snake shifter.”

Cobra stared at them, unimpressed. “So?”

“His son was kidnapped a hundred years ago by the skin traders. He is the only alpha lineage to have one form.”

Everyone gaped at Cobra.

“You are the Don’s lost son, the heir to Serpentes City.”

To be continued

If you enjoyed Sadie’s story you can read preorder the next book Psycho Beasts on Amazon. You can also get the first chapter of Psycho Beasts at blog.jasminemasbooks.com.

Also, please leave a review on Amazon! It allows me to keep writing books.

See you in the beast realm ;)

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Jasmine Mas loves writing about Alphaholes and the feisty girls that bring them to their knees.

She attended Georgetown University for undergraduate and just finished her law degree. She lives with her husband and fluffy cat Boo and loves hanging out with her readers.

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