

A
Touch
Of



Savagery

Julie Mannino

A Touch of Savagery

A Demisexual MMM Fairy Romance

Julie Mannino

OceanofPDF.com

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Author's Note

This novel contains mature material and is only intended for adults. A list of cw is on the pinned post in Castle Village fb group (pinned post with the yellow sign) and on the gr page. Heed the list because while this has a HEA, the road to get there is quite hard and dark.

Oriel is a demisexual Prince with biromantic attraction. Even though he develops attraction to others after a bond, he is still a demisexual and not an allosexual. This story does not speak for all demisexuals or anyone under the ace umbrella since they come from all walks of life with varying viewpoints and experiences.

Valentine, An Asexual M/M Romance, and the Pied Piper, An M/X Romance are not required reading for A Touch of Savagery, but those are the novels to read in case you're interested in certain characters that play a part here.

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Chapter One

Aspen quickly put on a smile as the lord snatched his arm and yanked him across his lap.

“With the way you move those hips, I’d bet you’d be fun. You got any tricks?”

“That depends on what you like,” Aspen purred as the guard held him down and lifted the little flap of silk that barely covered his ass. Underneath, his sheer lace drawers, if they could be called that, covered even less.

“You'd need a good hard caning across your ass first," said the man.

Aspen would rather the youngest Prince do that, not that he had a say. With his head upside down, all he could see beyond the chair were trousered legs and skirts swishing in the grand Hall of King Leneer.

Anyone of them could use him as they saw fit.

“Then again, I’d probably break your ass.” The lord pushed Aspen onto the floor like he was trash. “You’re too skinny for my tastes.”

If he only knew what the Princes and the King did to him. He wasn’t so easy to break. His smile remained as he stood and straightened his clothes. He was supposed to keep himself looking nice for as long as possible although he was pretty sure he’d end up entirely naked at some point.

He’d barely gone ten feet when an older lady at one of the round tables cooed and motioned at him, so he immediately rushed to get into her lap. He could tell she was the sort who’d stroke his head and make him feel like a treasured pet rather in the way that King Leneer did.

“Such a sweet thing,” she murmured as he sat in her lap and leaned into her bosom. “Do you like this job?”

“I love it because I get to see pretty ladies like you,” fibbed Aspen. Even if he liked women, she certainly wouldn’t be to his tastes. She giggled as she stroked his loose, black hair.

Her husband huffed and slammed his glass on the table hard enough to make a little of the blue liquid slosh out. "Put him down."

"I'm just having a look. Your eyes have a look at far more every day. Maybe I should get a pleasure slave so someone will tell me I'm pretty."

The man glared at Aspen who quickly flicked his eyes down. Anyone could use him, but that didn't mean her husband couldn't tell his wife no. He said nothing when his wife's hand slipped inside Aspen's loincloth and under the lace to fondle him while she stroked his loose black hair and kissed his forehead.

Even though he had no interest in women, if she asked him to go down on her, he could manage it. Thankfully, he had a feeling she didn't want to go that far because her husband would have a fit. A good feel and a cuddle was enough. She probably didn't get anything from her husband anymore, and while Aspen preferred men, he loved any kind of touch.

The woman helped him off before she patted his bottom. "If only I was twenty years younger. Run along, you sweet thing. I'm sure someone will enjoy your charms to their fullest."

Oh, they would.

The bright Hall was lit with magic light, so the source came from nowhere, although it had been made warmer tonight. Despite that illumination, floating candles also adorned the space above their head, and beyond that, the carved ceiling had swathes of gold cloth hanging down. Diamonds twinkled at regular intervals on the edges.

The fireplaces on either side were ablaze. Everything from the gold embroidery on the tablecloths to the silver trim on the musician's coats gleamed. Sometimes, Aspen almost couldn't believe that he'd gone from working the streets to living here and serving the King along with whoever he was shared with.

Most of the people were nearly finished eating, although dessert wouldn't come out just yet. The dancing would go on for longer. Courtiers who didn't wish to dance moved about the Hall to sit and speak with the guests.

The visiting ruler of the Meadow Kingdom, King Taven, didn't look very impressed as he sat next to King Leneer and Queen Rasha at the High Table. The two Kings were supposed to discuss some deal involving the mines and sea trade so they could both profit and keep up peaceful

relations, but Aspen couldn't think much about that when a man pointed to the floor by his feet. Aspen went over, dropped to his knees, and studied the lord's face with a smile.

"So you're the pleasure slave, hm?" The man must have been a lord under King Taven since Aspen had never seen him before.

"Yes, m'lord," Aspen purred. Across the table, another lord with orange eyes glanced at him but seemed to lose interest.

"The King likes to share his toy?" asked the first man.

"He loves sharing me, m'lord."

One of the lord's friends leaned down. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty, m'lord."

"How long have you done this?"

"Two years."

The man shook his head. "That's just wrong."

"What?" The lord looked at his friend. "He's old enough to consent."

"They shouldn't hire eighteen-year-olds as pleasure slaves even though it's legal. That's too young to sign a contract like that. An eighteen-year-old barely knows anything."

"Who cares? If he can consent, he can read a contract and bend over. It's not that hard to figure it out. Besides, he's twenty now, and he's clearly fine." The lord pushed his chair back a little. "King Taven needs a couple of these back home to make dinners more interesting, but his wife would likely bitch and throw a jealous fit even though she barely leaves her rooms."

"She's sick, and he barely spends time with her now. No wonder she'd be jealous."

The lord snapped his fingers at Aspen. "Undo my trousers and get to work."

Aspen immediately got between his legs and did as he was told. The lord was rough with him as he held Aspen by his hair and guided the pace while he continued his conversation.

Not that Aspen minded. King Leneer and two of his sons had trained him well, and he'd been a street whore before. Being a paid pet was much better.

He noticed King Leneer watching with a pleased expression from the High Table right as the lord blew in his throat. It was the fifth Aspen had swallowed that night, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

“Good boy.” The lord withdrew from Aspen’s mouth. “Go play with someone else, but if you want a real man later, come find me.”

Like he’d ever be better than the King and the Princes.

Aspen pattered around the High Table and went to the Queen to kiss her cheek. She beamed at him and patted his hand. Even though having a pleasure slave was a thing here, she could have been jealous of him, but she wasn’t. Having triplets had been tremendously hard on her health, and she was happy that her husband could find release elsewhere. Aspen liked to see her smile too which meant she probably wasn’t in pain now, or at least, it wasn’t too severe.

King Leneer was speaking with King Taven, but he gave Aspen a one-armed hug. Aspen leaned on him and breathed his familiar scent of lilacs.

The whiff of magnolia tightened his stomach a little, but he didn’t dare look behind him. King Leneer rubbed his arm, and Aspen held back a sigh of pleasure so he wouldn’t interrupt the conversation. The King could be quite hard on him in bed, but he always balanced it with praise and all of the touches Aspen could want.

King Taven didn’t look mean, but he didn’t seem like the cuddly sort. Aspen was glad he wasn’t his pleasure slave, although they weren’t as common in the Meadow Kingdom which was south of the West Bay Kingdom.

“Run along,” muttered King Leneer.

Aspen went around the oldest Prince who ignored him like usual. Aspen would have damn near killed to get a single hug from him. The younger two of the triplets immediately focused their attention on him.

“I think I’d rather have this for dessert.” Zale, the youngest, bent Aspen over and didn’t hesitate to rip off the loin cloth. The scrap of lace that barely counted as drawers followed. “You’ll stay naked for the rest of the night. It’s practically a sin to hide any part of your body.”

Aspen let out a delighted noise as the Prince’s hand smacked his bare bottom. Kard, the middle Prince, started toying with the plug in his ass.

In a second, it was out, and Kard had him in his lap as he slipped two fingers in Aspen’s ass. With their hands all over him, he practically purred in delight. King Leneer had forbidden his sons from touching him for the past week. All of the pent-up desire certainly made him eager for anyone tonight, but the two Princes and the King would always be his favorite.

“Who fucked you earlier?” asked Kard. “He left a big load in you.”

“The one with the green hair,” gasped Aspen. “I can’t remember his name.”

“Oh, the abundant male,” said Zale. “I forgot too.”

He was prepared, and he wasted no time in tying Aspen’s hands behind his back with a scarf and positioning him on his lap.

“Sit up like a good boy and lift your legs.” Zale had Aspen lean against his chest while his legs were held up, completely exposing him to Kard who was oiling a fake phallus.

Aspen couldn’t help but blush when King Taven looked on with raised eyebrows.

“Dear Elira, you fuck him at the High Table?”

“He’s for pleasure, and I picked court members who are fine with this sort of thing,” said King Leneer. “It’s only at celebrations anyway. If it bothers you, my sons can take him elsewhere.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I’m just not used to it at *dinner*, but with a sweet thing like that, I might enjoy watching.”

Aspen flushed with pleasure and desire as the middle son worked two fingers into his ass. There was nothing like being King Leneer’s pleasure slave. Two of the Princes used him, and the court made good use of him too during special occasions. Everyone petted him, told him how sweet he was, and made him feel good in every possible way. He craved touch and affection like food.

It was almost enough.

Aspen wished the Crown Prince, Oriel, would at least talk to him, but the oldest hated him now and wouldn’t even look at him. After that one day nearly two years ago, it was like he’d ceased to exist.

Oriel stood with a sour expression. “I don’t feel well, Father. I’m going to my room.”

“We haven’t even had dessert yet.” King Leneer looked up at his son.

Oriel leaned toward his Father to speak in a low voice, but Aspen caught his words. “Dinner isn’t sitting well with me, and I won’t be able to stomach dessert.”

Aspen was pretty sure that was a lie, but it was rather hard to focus with the phallus sliding in. Whatever else was said was lost to him, and Oriel left. It was Aspen he couldn’t stomach.

King Leneer watched as Aspen took the phallus all the way in. He twitched his legs in reaction, but the Zale tightened his grip and forced his legs up a little further.

“Be still, or I’ll whip you.”

The threat made Aspen’s breathing pick up. Even if he behaved, he’d probably still get the whip later once the celebration was done, not that he’d complain. The two younger ones had a sadistic streak just like their Father, and they’d likely make him beg for it.

He tipped his head back onto Zale's shoulder while Kard added more oil to the phallus. The youngest started stroking him.

“You’re such a little slut. You’re going to spend the night in my room while I-”

Aspen, lost in a haze of pleasure, didn’t comprehend the slight gasp. A scream made him snap open his eyes.

The Queen stood and stumbled back as her husband bled from his neck. His whole body had tensed as if his muscles were locked in a spasm, and a few remnants of red lightning sparked around King Taven’s fingers.

The noisy Hall seemed to explode with panic. Talk and laughter turned to screams and yells, glass shattered, and the Hall was made brighter with flashes of magic as King Leneer slumped from his throne.

For a moment, Aspen couldn’t think or move, and neither did the Zale. The middle Prince collapsed thanks to the dagger in his back that must have pierced his heart and shocked him too. Men rushed the High Table as Aspen was dropped on the floor. He immediately moved to roll under the table and get out of the way, and moments later, the youngest Prince collapsed dead on the floor with his sword only half-drawn.

Terror had taken Aspen’s voice, but he let out a choked sob at the sight. The tablecloth allowed him a few inches to see, and boots stomped around as King Taven snapped something. The Queen screamed something about her sons, and her slippered feet kicked as someone hauled her off.

King Taven reached under and grabbed Aspen’s ankle. He shrieked and tried to pull away, but the much bigger fairy easily dragged him out.

“How convenient. The little slut’s already tied up.”

“P-please-” Aspen eyed King Leneer who he’d viewed as a protector and lover. He couldn’t protect anyone now.

"Get up here."

“We didn’t do anything wr-wrong.”

“You’re so innocent, aren’t you?”

King Taven planted Aspen on his lap and locked an arm around him. The Hall was a mass of panic as his lords and men fought and slaughtered King Leneer’s court. Nobody had expected such betrayal, and their lack of quick thinking was costing them.

“You see, this isn’t because King Leneer or his family did anything wrong. He simply has things I want, and I’ve decided to take them. It’ll better my Kingdom and my people. Maybe in your mind, war is only because one side does true wrong, but that’s not how life works. If you want something, you must be willing to take it. You’re young, so I’ll excuse your ignorance.”

The sight blurred as Aspen’s eyes filled with more tears. King Taven’s erection was pressing through his trousers, and he had a feeling his death wouldn’t quite be so quick. The screams continued as King Taven forced him over the table and undid his trousers with one hand.

“No! Please, no!” Aspen tried to twist away, but the King held him down with ease.

“Be still.”

Aspen shouted into the tablecloth as the King rammed himself in. The glassware and crockery on the High Table clinked with every thrust, and the edge dug into Aspen’s thin hips.

“Please-it hurts!”

King Taven clamped his hand over Aspen’s mouth. “You’re a pleasure slave, so shut up and take it. It’s your job.”

Nobody had ever been so harsh with him. Even when the brothers or their Father sought to hurt Aspen, it was always in the way he liked. This was pure brutality, and King Taven finally grunted as he seemed to grow close.

Aspen could barely breathe from the pain and the way he was being pushed into the table. A last thrust made him try to scream through the hand over his mouth.

King Taven stilled as he breathed heavily before pulling out. The pain didn’t go away. The Hall had gone mostly silent. Aspen struggled not to cry as he let his eyes flick around, hoping that somehow, King Leneer’s court had killed the other side. But no.

Many lay dead. A woman sobbed in a corner as a lord held her down and violated her. An injured man was being dragged out by two of King Taven's men. Moments later, he started screaming in the entrance hall. A man on the floor, probably his husband, shouted for him, but a soldier rammed his sword into the fairy's back to shut him up.

The abundant male lay dead by another table with his gory sword beside him. He'd managed to take someone out with him, but it hadn't been enough. The musicians had all been slaughtered. Fire and other magic had hit the walls and marred them, and more than one tablecloth was smoking. Plates and glasses lay shattered on the blood-streaked floor.

A few of King Taven's men lay dead, but King Leneer's side had lost. It was over. Aspen expected to feel a blade slide across his neck, but King Taven tossed him on the floor and fixed his trousers before he walked around the High Table. The woman in the corner stopped screaming.

"You. Take your men outside, help the rest kill what's left of the guards, and start on the city afterward. The rest will join you."

Aspen blocked out everything as he scooted over to King Leneer, buried his face in the dead man's sleeve, and sobbed. He didn't know how long passed while he stayed like that, hardly able to believe he was dead. The younger ones. The Queen. Oriel.

They'd surely go upstairs and kill Oriel too. Everyone Aspen loved would be dead.

He gasped when someone grabbed his ankle for the second time that night and yanked on him. Several men had come behind the High Table, and the one holding Aspen had a vivid scar running down the side of his face. He smirked as he spoke to his buddies.

"Before we deal with the bodies, how about some fun?"

Chapter Two

Oriel leaned his head back on the edge of the tub as he soaked in the hot water and tried to let it ease the hurt. Just four more years of seeing Aspen being railed by everyone else. Four more years of the man he still loved being the family pleasure slave.

Once in a while, he thought about at least speaking to Aspen, but any friendship would just be a shadow of before.

He sighed as he heard boots clomping through his bedroom. It was probably Kard and Zale ready to pester him about leaving earlier. They'd tried to talk him into easing up on Aspen, but they didn't get it. Oriel had given his love over and gotten hurt for it.

The privy room door opened.

He didn't bother to open his eyes. "I'm not going back dow-"

He didn't get to finish. Someone grabbed him by the throat, and another hand clamped on the back of his neck. His head was shoved under the water, and he struggled, but the grips were too tight. He tried to summon his fire, but the water stopped that.

Something thin and cold was placed around his neck despite his trying to twist. A collar. Underwater, he swore he heard the faint click as it was secured. His chest felt ready to burst as his head was jerked back up. He threw a wild punch in his panic, but with no fire, all he succeeded in was bloodying someone's nose. A punch to his gut winded him, not that he had much air, and he was tugged out of the tub.

King Taven's four men wrestled Oriel to the floor as he shouted and hoped someone heard, but his attackers had likely taken care of anyone nearby. Oriel took another hit to the ribs before he was pinned down.

His wrists were wrenched behind his back and tied with rough rope. He tried to summon his fire again out of desperation, but nothing happened. Lirek. The collar they'd put around him was for prisoners, and it was made with the one thing that would put a stop to any magic.

"If you want your family to live, you'll behave," one of the men barked before Oriel was roughly dragged from the privy room. They tossed him on the rug in front of the fireplace in his bedroom, and he stiffly rolled onto his side as his heart pounded.

He started to say something, but the one with a bloody nose yelled at him to shut up.

Oriel already knew it was too late, and his chest felt like it was being squeezed from panic. King Taven had betrayed them. He should have stayed downstairs. What had happened to his parents and brothers? Aspen? The courtiers?

"You'll do whatever you're told, or we'll slit your Father's throat while your Mother watches." The speaker stalked toward the door.

The other three didn't waste time as they came toward him. One was already loosening his belt which made his intentions quite clear.

"Get away from me!" Oriel tried to scoot away, and the other two grabbed him. He thrashed, but they pinned him on his stomach. The third straddled him, and for a moment, Oriel thought would throw up. This couldn't be happening.

"Please-"

"Shut up."

"Get off me!"

Oriel wasn't a total stranger to pain. He'd been punched, bruised, kicked, and even accidentally knocked out once in training. He'd fallen off of horses and suffered scrapes and bloody noses.

Even if he was more on the slim side, he was tough, strong, and not easy to beat in a fair fight. Still, nothing could have prepared him for such agony. The man groaned as he rutted away and pushed Oriel's face into the rug.

It felt like an eternity before the enemy finished in his ass. Oriel nearly threw up again with fear as he realized the other two would probably want a turn, but the door opened and someone snapped to bring the Crown Prince.

One grabbed Oriel's hair and sent lightning through him. He finally screamed as every muscle in his body tensed and spasmed.

"If you fight, you'll get worse," the guard snarled.

The pain was so horrendous, Oriel was sure he'd been torn, but they didn't care. They were marching him down the hall when two men came from the stairs while hauling Aspen who couldn't seem to walk or stop

shaking. Pure terror filled Oriel as he saw the blood running down Aspen's thighs. He must have been raped in the Hall, and since one of the other Princes had tied his hands earlier, not suspecting this would happen, he'd been left helpless.

A lord with orange eyes followed, and he came around the two men who paused. "Oriel, this is your family's pleasure slave, right? Don't bother denying it."

Had he seen anything in Oriel's face? If they suspected he had any feelings, they'd probably torture Aspen as leverage. Pleasure slaves were often treasured by whoever owned them.

Oriel didn't dare look at Aspen who kept his head ducked either in shame or fear. "He's just a whore."

"But he's the family whore, right?"

"Yes, but only Father and my brothers used him."

"I never much liked the idea of sharing a slave with the family. It's a bit disgusting." The lord nodded at the men holding Oriel. "Take him to the office."

Oriel was forced to his knees in the office before Father's desk. He could barely believe he'd been in here this morning while Father made a quick note in the ledger. They'd spoken of going with King Taven in a big group to show him the area outside of Lork tomorrow.

As always, they'd assumed there would be a tomorrow, and it would mostly be like any other day.

Everything on the desk was now messed up, and items on the shelves were askew. Someone had already been searching for something.

There had to be a way out of this somehow. Maybe they would let Aspen go since he was just a pleasure slave and basically an employee. He wanted to scream because the bastards had hurt Aspen, and if they'd raped Oriel, his brothers were probably fair game too.

At that thought, he tested the ropes on his chafed wrists, but one of the soldiers came around and drew back his fist. "Don't move."

Oriel forced himself to stare at the front of Father's desk while his heart thudded. Revulsion twisted his guts as he felt cum drip down his thigh. He didn't look, but there was probably blood too.

The lord strolled in. "Where's your Father's seal? Someone said they couldn't find it."

“I-I don’t know,” Oriel said automatically.

The lord sighed and leaned on the edge of the desk as he faced Oriel. “This will be a lot easier if you cut the lies and tell me. I don’t like liars.”

“I don’t know where it is. He never told me or my brothers.” It was a half-truth.

If the enemy had the seal, they could easily take over the rest of West Bay with less bloodshed. They could say the King had surrendered to spare his people. The people wouldn’t be happy with it, but they’d likely accept their new ruler with little or no fight out of respect for the old King and to save themselves. In turn, King Taven would save many of his own men and soldiers.

The people would learn of the falsehood later, but at that point, it would be too late with a new ruler already firmly in place.

The lord quietly regarded him for a minute as if he could see through Oriel’s skull and find the info in his brain. “Your family is alive, but I could lessen the number by one. If you still refuse to talk...well, you have more than one brother. And there’s your Mother and Father.”

Oriel opened his mouth and thought of his people too. Without a signed and sealed notice, nobody would believe it if King Taven’s men simply entered a city and said the King had surrendered. Lords in the Kingdom would rally their men and fight. His people would die. Father had said to never tell where it was.

But his family could die right now.

“I’m sorry that you’re the oldest even if it’s only by a few minutes,” said the lord. “Such a decision must be hard, yes? Your family, or the lives of many West Bay fairies trying to fight back in the hopes that their King is alive and rallying forces somewhere. They won’t know what happened here right away. They’ll think King Taven has simply sent men in, they’ll fight, and many will die. The seal will not only save many of King Taven’s men, but yours. I’m sure your Father said to keep it a secret, but I’m sure he’d rather live too.”

Oriel tried not to shake. If the people in Lork could fight back right now, this might not be hopeless. There were guards too. What if there was some way to get out of this tonight?

“I don’t know where the seal is,” said Oriel. If he could hold out until the threat came too close...Once they had the seal, they might kill his family

anyway. Imprisonment was an option too since they could be ransomed, but death was a lot quicker. If he asked, the lord would lie and say whatever he thought would make Oriel talk.

What the fuck was he supposed to do when he didn't know what King Taven planned overall?

He heard Aspen scream from a room not far down the hall. "ORIEL!"

Oriel couldn't hold back his flinch as terror spiked in him. Not Aspen. Not Aspen.

"A hot poker hurts a lot," said the lord. "If he knows, I'm sure it'll just take a few burns on his tender spots to make him talk."

"He doesn't know where it is," Oriel said, unable to stop his shaking. Aspen let out another shriek. "My Father never would have dared to tell a whore the location of something like that, especially when he didn't even tell his own sons."

"True, but you never know, and it's better to be safe than sorry. A man's mouth might grow loose with his pet when they're laying in bed and sated."

"He never-

Aspen's next scream was longer, and Oriel imagined some faceless guard pressing a hot poker to his bare flesh without a care. The image was like a dagger to his gut. He wanted to kill whoever was torturing him, gather Aspen in his arms like he used to, and somehow make the hurt go away.

"He has nothing to do with this! Let him go!"

The lord smirked. "You look so bothered. I thought he was just a whore? One that you don't even touch."

"He's just a slave, but he doesn't need to be tortured," Oriel said as he tried to smooth his expression and make his voice firm. "He's employed here, and none of this has anything to do with him or any of the servants either. They know nothing, and hurting the employees solves nothing."

The lord tilted his head and narrowed his orange eyes as he brushed back several strands of his blonde hair. "Tell me where the seal is, or I'll have them bring Aspen in here. You can watch while we find new, creative ways to torture him. Do you know what we could do for hours while keeping him alive? Especially with a healer to make sure he doesn't croak."

The thought of what they'd do to him made Oriel's insides go cold.

“Then we’ll get started on your family,” the lord added. “We can drag this out all night.”

“If you hurt my family, you can’t ransom them back. Queen Asara will pay-even for the emplo-”

The lord laughed. “Is that what you’re hoping for? Your cousin is in the Windswept Isles, and she won’t know of this for ages. King Taven doesn’t care to ransom you back, and if she’s foolish enough to go against him, he’ll slaughter her and the rest. The most you can hope for is life imprisonment, and the harder you fight, the less comfortable it’ll be.” He looked at one of the men. “Bring Aspen in here, and send someone to find lengths of chain. I have an interesting idea before we get started on the brothers.”

Those words broke Oriel. “The seal’s hidden in the statue at the end of the hall. The naked lady-if you push on her throat, her mouth opens a little. It’s there. I swear.”

The lord raised an eyebrow as Aspen screamed again. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

He sent a man to check, but before they returned, Oriel heard Aspen shriek in agony again. “I told you where it was! Let him go!”

“Once I have it in my hand, I’ll decide what to do,” the lord said in a slow, cold voice. “You have no power. Shut up.”

The guard returned with the gold ring inlaid with the four feathers around a K. The lord examined it while he leaned on the desk. Aspen screamed again as Oriel sweated.

“Your brothers are dead,” the lord said suddenly. “They never made it out of the Hall, and neither did your Father. I saw your Mother dead downstairs. They raped her and hung her from the chandelier in the sitting room in the back. You’re the only one left, and you broke for a pleasure slave. You poor thing. King Taven didn’t feel like dealing with imprisoning them, but you’ll get lucky.”

The world seemed to tilt for a moment as Oriel struggled to comprehend that. They couldn’t all be dead.

The lord tossed the seal up and caught it. “I think you’ll make a pretty slave. Since you lied to me, you can watch Aspen suffer too.”

Chapter Three

Aspen lost count of how many times the men burned his lower stomach and inner thighs with the searing hot poker while they taunted him. Out of sheer desperation, he had screamed Oriel's name once, and the one holding down his shoulders had laughed and spat on his face.

The one holding the poker summoned fire in his hand and held it to the tip after a few more burns. "If you happen to know where the seal is, we'll stop."

Aspen sweated as the newest mark on his inner thigh burned. King Leneer had never told him such a thing, and he couldn't even begin to guess where the royal seal was. "I d-I don't know. I swear. P-please-I c-can't. I can't take it."

"They always say they can't take it, but they do because they have no choice. Either you or Oriel will tell first. He knows his family is already dead, but you're good enough leverage." The fairy pulled the tip of the poker from the fire in his hand and studied the glowing end as he came closer. "Where is it?"

Aspen clenched his eyes shut as he felt the heat near his lower right hip. "I don't know. Please-I'm begging you!"

The heat increased although the poker wasn't quite touching him yet. The one holding his ankles tightened his grip as Aspen tried to push himself into the floor and away from the heat.

Why hadn't Oriel said where the seal was? Surely he knew there was no point in hiding its location. They'd already lost. If his family was dead, he gained nothing by refusing to reveal it, and as the Crown Prince, he had to know where it was.

"I bet you're a sweet little thing when you beg on your knees." The fairy pressed the poker to his bare skin.

Aspen was sure he'd go mad with the pain when two other fairies finally came in, and the poker was lifted. The men said something while he gasped for air. The other new fairy approached to heal the burns, but he was sure it

was just so they could continue torturing him. The pain faded and vanished from each spot as the healer touched it with his finger, and his face held no remorse.

The lord from earlier entered and came to stand over Aspen. “Let go of him. He’s not going anywhere.”

The ones holding down his shoulders and ankles stood and moved away with the healer. Aspen’s wrists were still tied behind him, and if he got to his feet, he’d never make it to the door. Even with the burns gone, he couldn’t stop shaking because it could all start again with a word.

“Oriel wouldn’t say a word to save you. In fact, he seemed to hate you.” The lord knelt to peer at Aspen’s face. “I was a bit surprised because even if he didn’t fuck you, he should have some care for his servants, but that’s royal brats for you. He heard you screaming and still refused to say anything even though he’s lost. He couldn’t even save an employee from suffering. But royalty often tries to hold onto their Kingdom down to the last second.”

Aspen’s heart thudded as the lord made a tsk noise. Dear Elira, no. He’d thought Oriel would at least spare him.

“I grew impatient, so I threatened to cut off his cock, and that finally made him break,” said the lord. “Men will usually say anything when they feel the edge of a dagger against it. I’m sorry you had to suffer for a war that’s already lost on your side, but it happens. His stubbornness has irked me, so he’ll suffer too. He’ll also see what refusal can cost since the living ones here will be taken and as sold as slaves. He can watch them suffer on the ships and join them.” The lord peered at Aspen’s body. “Since you were a pleasure slave, you can continue your job on the boat. I’m sure rough sailors aren’t what you’re used to after living at court, but they’ll enjoy you.”

Aspen wanted to scream again. This was Oriel’s fault. He hadn’t even been able to find one shred of feeling despite their past to save Aspen from further suffering. He’d still tried to keep the seal hidden for a crown he’d already lost.

“Please just let me go! Please!”

“I think I’ll try you out before the sailors get their hands on you.”

Aspen didn’t think at that point. He spat right in the lord’s face and felt savage satisfaction for a moment at his disgusted noise. It was short-lived

since the lord's punch made everything fade away.

Something creaked when he came to, and he jerked in fright, but rough shackles held his wrists. Someone was crying, and when he forced his eyes open, the light made him close them again as pain spiked through his head.

Why was the floor swaying? His ass had been torn when the men gang-raped him in the Hall, but that pain was now gone along with the burns. The healer must have done that, but his left eye and cheek were swollen. The events came rushing back as he forced himself to peek.

A wooden floor and slanted walls greeted him. He was in the hold of a ship. Lork was a port city, and King Taven must have brought his fleets. He'd likely taken any other ships in the area too.

Either way, Aspen was in one, and several dozen others were down here too. All were nude and had collars around their necks like Aspen. He knew his magic would be useless from the lirek worked into it.

Chains ran from the captive's collars to various rings in the walls or the floor, so none could move very far at all. Some were unconscious and bore wounds like they'd been punched and beaten down. Nobody had bothered to heal them. Some were sitting up and weeping. Others wore dead expressions.

Aspen recognized a few servants from the Castle, but most were townspeople, so King Taven must have taken prisoners from the simple citizens too.

Aspen was also naked, and his wrists were chained to metal rings stuck in the wood a couple of feet away from his hands. He was the only one chained like this, and he remembered what the lord had said.

He tried to yank himself free and only succeeded in scraping his wrists. His heart sped up when a sailor came down the ladder to one side and eyed him.

A moment later, someone was thrown through the hatch like trash. Oriel cried out as he hit the wood with a thud. A few of the other fairies jumped, but no one dared to stay a word.

Just a whore.

Aspen's face burned as the Crown Prince, who didn't look so princely now, was kicked in his side by the sailor. He moaned and tried to roll out of the way as the sailor drew back his boot and snickered. Two guards came

down the ladder and manhandled Oriel away from the group of people. One side of the hold was empty, and they attached a chain to his collar.

The sailor peered at the rest. “Your Prince is one of you now.” He turned to Oriel. “Enjoy your stay, Your Majesty. We’ll arrive in a week or so. Please let me know if there’s anything you need. Your whore is chained up over here, but he might be a bit busy and unavailable for your pleasure.”

The guards laughed as they locked his chain to a ring in the wall and left the once-Crown Prince curled up on the sloped slide. He made a noise like he was trying to hold back a sob.

“Aw, he misses his Mummy. Poor thing. I bet her snatch was tight. They should have kept her for us instead of hanging her.”

The guards and the sailor chuckled before they headed up. The rest of the fairies said nothing as they huddled on the floor, and one sniffled.

The lantern hanging on the hook was left there, and it threw shadows around as it slowly swung in time with the faint rocking of the ship.

Aspen stared at the ceiling, too exhausted to cry. They should have killed him too. He kept seeing King Leneer dead on the floor with the two younger sons, and the poor Queen dying in another room.

In his daze, he wasn’t sure how much time passed. The ship got underway at some point in the night, and the rocking grew worse. Some of the people sobbed as if that made it real. They were being ripped from their homes, their families, and their lives as they knew it. Nothing good awaited them.

Aspen didn’t have anyone now.

He closed his eyes when the first sailor came down after a few hours.

“Get away from him,” Oriel snarled. It was the first thing he’d said since he’d been brought down.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Don’t you fucking touch him.” Oriel’s chain rattled.

“What are you going to do like that? Huh? One more word, and I’ll fucking cut off his balls.”

Aspen wanted to scream at Oriel. How dare he pretend like he gave a fuck now? He’d tried to hold onto his lost Kingdom and hadn’t given a fuck about anyone but himself. He had refused to say a word until they threatened his cock.

Even for Aspen, who he had once said he loved, he hadn't revealed where the seal was. It had all been fake. He kept his eyes shut and tried to pretend he was elsewhere as he ignored whatever else Oriel said.

The sailor used oil, but it wasn't enough, and he didn't bother to properly stretch Aspen. He tried to keep himself locked away in his head, but he felt everything and heard every grunt. He started to sob only when the sailor went back up even though he tried to hold it back.

"I'm sorry," whispered Oriel. "Elira, help us."

Aspen begged the Goddess Elira for help for two days. The sailors only came down to feed and water the prisoners, rape him, clean up the piss and shit, and to dribble water and broth into his mouth to keep him alive.

He stopped praying. Elira wasn't listening to him.

"Aspen," Oriel said on the third night in a cracked voice. "I'm sorry."

Aspen stared at the ceiling. No, he wasn't. He was only sorry that he was here and that he'd lost everything. He didn't give a fuck about Aspen, and he never had.

Aspen kept his head turned away and refused to listen when Oriel tried again on the fourth day.

Being chained down became agony since he couldn't shift his arms much or even lay on his side. That didn't matter to the sailors.

When they tried to give him water and broth on the fourth day, he clamped his lips and teeth shut. They forced his mouth open anyway and poured it in, not concerned if he choked. As long as the liquid was in him, that's all they cared about. He almost wanted to sob since they wouldn't even let him die, but he didn't have the strength left to cry.

By the sixth day, he didn't feel it anymore when the sailors raped him.

Chapter Four

King Taven hadn't spared Lork. Fires raged on one side of the city, and dead fairies lay in the street when Oriel was taken to the docks. Ships lit with lanterns were coming in the distance, and Lork's fleets were under his control.

Oriel imagined all the preparation that had gone into this and felt sick. They'd never suspected such a thing. King Taven had always been pleasant, but wealth mattered more to him.

In the hold, he recognized some citizens and servants. They didn't look to him for help and knew he was just as helpless as them now. The sight of Aspen chained to one side and clearly spread out to be used tore at his guts.

When Oriel snarled at a sailor to stay away from him, the sailor threatened to cut off Aspen's balls and drew his knife. The look in his eyes said the threat wasn't empty. Oriel offered himself, but the sailor said no and that he better shut up or the "whore" would get it.

Oriel had only backed off because he was desperate to spare Aspen even more suffering.

It wasn't like he could stop the sailors anyway. He didn't have much slack in his chain and couldn't hope to reach them. With the collar, he had no magic, and they'd probably do worse things to Aspen for the whole trip if Oriel kept making useless threats.

When he sobbed and tried to apologize to the one he still loved, Aspen ignored him.

Not once had he looked at Oriel so far during the trip.

Aspen tried to refuse water on the fourth day, and Oriel knew that meant he'd given up. He wanted to die. The sailors didn't care about Aspen's wants, and they pried open his mouth. When he choked, they didn't care. Bit by bit, they got enough water and broth into him to keep him alive.

Oriel was given dry bread and a skin of water like the rest. The bread wouldn't have fed a child, and hunger soon became everyone's companion.

The water was never enough either since the heat was smothering down here, and that didn't help the odor.

The hold smelled like piss, shit, sweat, and blood. When the sailors tried to clean up a bit, they didn't do a good job. Nobody had a choice except to do their business on the floor. Aspen did it where he was, and the five dozen or so fairies on the other side tried their best to do it in certain spots so nobody would lay in it, but that wasn't working too well. They couldn't move very far, and the pitching of the ship didn't help.

It also made some vomit since not all were used to being on the water even if they did live in a port city. Oriel wasn't seasick, but the constant odor and hearing the sailors grunt away over Aspen made him nauseous. The men also didn't care if he was bleeding from being roughly used by so many.

The other fairies sobbed and prayed. Oriel didn't bother. Elira probably despised him because he'd both loved and hated Aspen. If he hadn't said a word years ago, Aspen would have still been in the street, but he might have survived that night.

He wouldn't be chained up in here.

Oriel ran out of tears and barely moved as he stayed on the slanted side. His thirst was constant as he sweated on the fifth day, and the headache he'd developed never eased. He imagined the sun outside must be blazing, and he wished he and Aspen could have five minutes above deck. Just five minutes to breathe in fresh air and let the breeze cool their bodies.

He glanced at Aspen who hadn't moved in hours unless the slight rising of his chest counted. With the way he looked, he might not last much longer, and Oriel's dry throat tightened.

This was his fault. If the lord hadn't guessed his feelings, maybe they would have simply killed Aspen if they hadn't let him go. He wouldn't be suffering like this now and possibly inching toward death in such a painful way. Elira would have already taken him into her rest and healed him.

A fairy sobbed in the corner over her sick brother. Oriel couldn't do anything for them either. Someone else had died in the night, and considering how seasick that man had been, it might have been dehydration. His body had been dragged out like trash, and they had probably tossed him overboard. He wouldn't even get to properly rest in Ymir's Earth.

He curled into a tighter ball and tried to lose himself in the past back when he and Aspen used to play on the beach. He'd never felt sexual attraction to anyone else before. The few he'd been with had been for the orgasm, and the act of sex felt good, but Aspen had been different. Oriel hadn't felt sexual attraction to anyone since even though he'd fucked others in the past two years simply for the physical pleasure.

Oriel craved touch, and nobody had matched up to Aspen in that respect either. When they'd started making love in the woods, Oriel had never felt so whole as he did with his lover against him. The kisses, the touches, his smell. He had said they would get married despite the difference in station.

And he still loved him even though he knew now that Aspen hadn't felt the same.

He still tried to lose himself in that time when he believed Aspen loved him with all of his heart and soul.

On the sixth day, the sick fairy had a cough. Their waterskins had to last them all day, and he saw the woman giving her brother her portion to ease his thirst. Aspen didn't move when the sailors trickled water and broth down his throat. He didn't even seem to feel it when he was occasionally raped throughout the day.

Oriel imagined slitting each rapist's throat and watching the light leave their eyes.

On the seventh day, the sick fairy could barely control his hacking. In the few minutes between attacks, he begged for water and seemed delirious. The woman had already given him his share plus hers before evening, and they only received one meal a day if it could be called that. She'd even given him her bread in small bites, and he could see her desperation as he begged for more water.

She started asking the others around her to let him have a sip or two. The fairies held their precious rations closer and tried to ignore her.

Oriel had been struggling to save most of his water to drink at night. His sleep was shitty anyway, but thirst made it worse and harder to block everything out for a little bit. When the sun went down, the heat didn't fully dissipate, and having a few real gulps before he tried to slip away in his head was a tiny relief.

"Please, just a little," the woman begged.

"Shut up, bitch," one snarled as his tail swished.

“If your tail hits me one more time, I’ll fucking rip it off,” snapped another.

“He’s already dead,” said one. “We’re not giving our water to a dead man.”

The woman started to cry. “I don’t want him to die like this. A man shouldn’t die thirsty. Elira wouldn’t say no.”

“It’d be a mercy if you put your hand over his mouth and nose,” said another woman. “Let him go.”

“He’s all I have left!”

And he’d still die thirsty.

Oriel took his water skin and sat up. “Here. Catch it. None of you better touch it.”

A few of the fairies cast him shamed glances. The woman’s face lit up as she caught the tossed waterskin. One of the men looked at her like he wanted to snatch it and drink every last drop.

"Don't even fucking think about it," snarled Oriel.

Even though he couldn’t reach anyone, some of the fairies must have still thought of their Prince as someone they had to listen to. The man kept his hands to himself.

The woman gave her brother sips when he could stop coughing, and she patted a little on his face with her hand, trying to cool him down. Oriel’s thirst grew worse as the hours passed, and the headache that constantly lurked from dehydration turned into pounding pain, but he didn’t regret it. Maybe the man would live. He had no idea what awaited later, but perhaps the civilians would be ransomed back to their families.

Or maybe they’d all be imprisoned where they’d slowly rot and die in a cell.

The water wasn’t enough. The man died in the night while the lantern burned low, and his sister buried her face in his chest as she cried.

“Prince,” someone whispered.

Oriel’s mouth and throat were so dry, he didn’t even want to speak. “I’m not a Prince anymore.”

“Still, take it.”

He opened his eyes to see a pale man holding out his water skin like he wanted to toss it across the hold. Tortured by thirst, the small bulge in the

leather appeared beyond tempting, but he shook his head. He didn't deserve relief at their expense.

"I don't want it. Keep it."

The dead fairy was taken away in the morning. His sister screamed and clutched at his body, but the sailors pried off her weak fingers and ignored her shrieks. Aspen didn't twitch at the noise, and Oriel was afraid he was dead too. They gave him water and broth, so he must have been alive.

They must have been close because sailors came down after a few hours with a healer.

"He's not to be touched again," said the healer. She didn't hesitate to stick a finger up Aspen's ass to heal the no doubt countless tears he'd suffered. It was a wonder he hadn't already succumbed to infection considering their conditions.

"I don't see why," grumbled a sailor.

"He was a pleasure slave before, so he'll be worth a lot. He already knows how to please someone. He won't need much training unless he fights."

"He looks dead."

"He's in shock," said the healer. "I've seen people like this. They can come back."

But in what state? She didn't mention that or how deep the cracks ran in their mind, and can didn't mean he definitely would. Oriel hoped that wherever Aspen had gone in his head, he wasn't suffering there. The sailors unchained him, and the healer said to put him on his stomach. Aspen lay like he was dead while she touched the sores on his back from where the wood had scraped him since he'd been stuck like that for a whole week.

"Leave him free," she said. "If he comes around, he'll need to move his arms and legs, and it's not like he can escape from here anyway. Everyone's to be sold quite quickly, right?"

A sailor grunted. "I reckon so."

What the fuck. Sold? The lord had said Oriel would make a pretty slave, and he imagined the King or some special lord would keep him as a secret one. True slavery in general wasn't done, but it didn't mean it was impossible for one to be kept in secret. He thought the lord had just intended special punishment for Oriel and Aspen, and everyone else would be dumped in a prison.

The healer nodded. "Check on him later, and if he's up, give him soup with a little bread in it. Force it into him if you need to."

She left, and the three sailors finally turned their attention to the other fairies. A couple shrunk back, but some were pretty dead-eyed now and didn't seem to notice. One balled up his fists.

"That one looks to be the cleanest." A sailor pointed at a woman near one side who started to sob as she shrunk back.

It hadn't worked before with Aspen, but Oriel sat up as his stomach clenched. "You can have me instead."

"Maybe I don't want you."

"But she's sick."

The woman let out a pretty convincing cough at that moment. The healer must not have had the ability to heal sickness since she hadn't come down for the dying guy. Many illnesses required medicines too.

Oriel couldn't bear to see someone else be raped. Aspen might not ever come back from wherever he'd gone in his mind, but he might be able to save that woman. He leaned back on the slanted side and spread his legs as the sailors looked at him.

"I don't have anything," he managed to get out through gritted teeth. "And I won't fight."

"You think you're in a condition to fight?" one asked as the trio drew nearer. Terror clawed at Oriel's empty gut, but at least they were away from the woman.

"The others will fight," he whispered.

The sailors paused as they seemed to consider that. With the fairies all chained together so close, the sailors would have no choice but to risk other nearby ones possibly attacking them if they went for the woman. If they killed what was supposed to be merchandise, they might get in trouble. A couple of the people had horns too, and those could do some damage.

It was much easier to fuck Oriel.

"Don't tear his arse up," said one. "The healer might tell if we have to call her down. We're too close to port now. We'll be there tomorrow morning, and he won't heal on his own that fast."

They must have wanted him to remain in decent condition for whoever would buy him. Oriel clenched his eyes shut as the sailors moved toward him.

They didn't rip him, but they weren't gentle, and it seemed to last forever. After they all finished in him and went back up, no one spoke, and he felt even more disgusting than when the soldier had used him in his room. He couldn't make the vile sensation of their hands go away.

He remained curled up on his side for a long time as he stared at Aspen's limp body. If only he could reach him. The ship's pitching, and after he heard yells topside, he figured a storm was coming.

Some of the fairies held onto the rings as the motion grew worse. One threw up on the floor as a couple begged Elira for mercy. Maybe it'd be better if they all went down and died.

Aspen rolled a little since he wasn't chained, but it was only from the motion. Oriel hastened to reach for his flung-out arm, but his chain stopped him. He bit back a swear as he strained even though the collar cut off his air. His fingers brushed Aspen's, and he tried to stretch a little more. He choked, but he managed to get a hold of his hand.

He gasped as he tugged Aspen toward him. He'd lost weight in the past week, but Oriel had too, and he was weak. He managed to get Aspen sitting up against him as he huddled on the wood and tried to brace himself.

The fairy didn't move as Oriel brushed back his matted, black hair and checked his pulse. It was there, but it fluttered. Even with the healer, he might die. A week of only broth and water once a day, constant sweating, and being abused could take its toll.

Oriel took his water skin and supported Aspen's head as he dripped some in. Aspen's half-closed eyes were completely blank and unseeing. Wherever he was, he had no idea Oriel was holding him or what was happening.

"Don't waste your water, Prince," someone muttered.

"Shut up!" Oriel roared, and a few flinched. "I'm not letting him die."

Everyone quieted down after that. Honestly, it would be a mercy to pinch Aspen's nose shut, cover his mouth, and let him slip away entirely. He wouldn't even feel it. Elira could have him, and she'd fix everything that Oriel had fucked up. Aspen's suffering would be finished.

Oriel's hand twitched, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. How could he kill the only man he'd ever loved? How could he suffocate and erase every last bit of the only one who'd made him feel whole two years ago?

Aspen's face blurred as Oriel sobbed. He was too weak to do it. He gathered the limp fairy closer and cried into his shoulder instead.

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Chapter Five

Oriel held Aspen even after the storm was over. Elira hadn't listened to their prayers to be saved, but she must have heard the ones to keep the boat from sinking. The hold stunk of piss and shit like usual, and vomit tinged the air too. His muscles protested since he'd held onto Aspen for hours and tried to keep the sway from pitching them about like ragdolls.

"I remember when you jumped on me in the ocean," Oriel whispered so the others wouldn't hear. "You were scared at first for being so forward, but I didn't care. I just wanted to be someone simple with you. I never should have mentioned you to Father. He thought I wanted you as a pleasure slave, but I just wanted us to be together. I still love you. I'm sorry I said those words two years ago. I never hated you. I meant it when I said I would have married you."

If Aspen heard him, he gave no indication. Oriel could suffocate him at any time, but he still couldn't bear to do it. He hoped Aspen thought he was on the beach, playing in the sand and surf, and thinking all was well. Maybe he'd slip off on his own if his body gave out.

Nobody came to check on them after the storm, so he kept Aspen to himself. Maybe the sailors forgot them, or they just didn't give a fuck. Dead or alive, everyone would still be down here.

Oriel didn't remember falling asleep, but his eyes snapped open as sunlight poured in, and someone snatched away Aspen. At first, he thought the fairy was dead, but the hold was full of men undoing the chains.

"Give him back!" Oriel screamed as someone carried Aspen toward the ladder.

A punch to the gut took away his air and words.

"Get up the ladder," an unfamiliar sailor snapped as his chain was unlocked from the ring. "Any funny business and I'll fucking choke you with your intestines."

Oriel was shoved into the ladder, and he held onto the rungs as he struggled to stand. His legs shook, and he wasn't sure if he could do it, but

the sailor drew his fist back.

"I'm going," he muttered as his gut ached.

Every step was a struggle, and he thought he'd slip and fall as his muscles trembled. Somehow, he made it to the top, and as his head came above the edge, he saw Aspen had been flung on the floor like a doll.

"Get the fucking twig," snapped another new face. The sailor's cat ears were pulled back, and his fluffy grey tail swished. "Hurry the fuck up."

Oriel scrambled to gather Aspen in his arms, and the sailor shoved him in the back so hard, he nearly fell again. Beyond the blinding doorway, someone grabbed the chain hanging from his collar and yanked on it.

The other prisoners were shoved and pulled onto the deck. The sun was too bright, and Oriel could barely see as someone led him toward the railing.

"Sit," the sailor snapped before he wound the chain around the railing and locked it.

Oriel clutched onto Aspen as he huddled in the glare and tried to control his trembling. A limp fairy was dragged over and dumped by the railing, but nobody chained him. They must have thought it wasn't worth the trouble. The fairies chest still rose with breath, so he wasn't dead.

Despite being free of the hot, stinking hold, some of the other prisoners started to cry. A couple prayed in low voices. Whatever came next might be far worse. Oriel squinted at the docks and wondered if this was Juniper, the capital of the Meadow Kingdom.

He could make out a Castle in the distance to one side. Shouldn't it be bigger for King Taven? Maybe this was a different city, but why stop here?

The hustle and bustle of the city seemed beyond strange. While they'd spent days suffering savage conditions, these people had gone about their lives like always with nothing more than their typical daily worries to plague them. The fish market was full of fairies buying and selling, uncaring of the prisoners on the ships.

He glanced around at the dozens of other ships that were being moored. They likely also contained more people taken from Lork. One ship a few hundred yards away had the largest flag of all with a blazing spear crest, and he wondered if the King was really on it. He probably had plenty of lackeys more than willing to stay in West Bay and finish his dirty work so he could return home even if it was only for a short time.

A shirtless sailor with moving tattoos walked by with a fermon as he chewed. The sweet smell made Oriel's mouth water as he eyed the blue, furry skin of the fruit and its paler flesh. He wasn't the only one staring at it. The twisting snake tattoo on the man's back flicked its tongue out as if mocking the prisoners. Once the sailor was past them, the supposedly fainted fairy suddenly jumped up and made a dash for the railing on the starboard side.

Shouts rose, and someone tried to grab him, but utter fear must have given the man strength. He vaulted over the railing, clearly having decided potential drowning was a better fate.

Two sailors dove after him. Oriel couldn't even think about his fate since he saw the orange-eyed lord from earlier clomping across the deck in his boots with his hair tied back. His green and blue embroidered coat was immaculate, and it was clear he'd enjoyed the trip in better conditions. Oriel turned away and hunched over Aspen while he waited for something to happen.

The fairy that tried to run didn't get his wish to either escape or drown. He was dragged up the main gangplank by the two wet and pissed sailors who had gone after him. Oriel didn't dare turn his head, but he could guess the poor fairy had been tied to the mast. The sound of the whip cracking and his screams were impossible to ignore.

While that went on, sailors went around with buckets of salt water to dump on everyone. Once the worst of the grime was gone, they used buckets of fresh water to clean off the salt.

"Now you'll look nice and pretty for later," one said with a leer.

Aspen twitched in Oriel's embrace. Maybe it was the cold water combined with fresh air, or maybe the screams of the tortured fairy had pierced his consciousness. Whatever it was, Oriel whispered in his ear.

"I got you. I got you. I love you too. I never stopped, and I never hated you."

He didn't know if Aspen truly heard him since he didn't move again. Oriel's throat tightened as he realized he didn't really have Aspen. This was temporary. They'd be torn apart soon, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The screams stopped, but the whip cracked a few more times.

“If anybody else tries to run again or refuses to obey, this is what will happen while you're in our care,” the lord yelled once it stopped. Oriel dared to peek over his shoulder at the lord who stood by the mast where the runaway's back was shredded. Two sailors untied him, dragged his bloody body to the side, and dumped him in the ocean.

He finally received his wish.

The “bath” hadn't done a lot, but Oriel buried his nose in Aspen's neck and tried to memorize his rose scent. For a few moments, he was almost able to forget about everything around him until someone grabbed his chain and started undoing it.

“King Taven has something special planned for you,” said the lord who had come up without Oriel hearing his boots.

Oriel tightened his grip on Aspen as three sailors started to pry them apart. He tried to hold on, but he felt his fingers slipping.

“Let go of me!” he screamed. “LET GO!”

Aspen was left to drop on the deck as Oriel was pulled to his feet. The fight drained from him as he sobbed. He'd probably never see him again.

They dragged him to the mast, but he didn't care if they whipped him. He just wanted Aspen back and in his arms. The sailors shoved him down and chained him there like a dog on a lead left to await his owner's return. The lord stood over him.

“I knew you lied about him not being special. Aspen will be sold. I don't know who will buy him, and I don't care what happens to him now. King Taven needs you for something, and you'll never see Aspen again.”

Oriel hunched against the mast as the lord leaned down.

“I suggest you behave because your new Master won't be very pleasant. King Taven has recently allowed slavery for criminals, and that goes for war prisoners too, so it's not against the law for someone to buy and use you as they see fit. No one will care what's done to you or save you. Your new Master could hang you right in the street as soon as he owns you. Your past as the Crown Prince means nothing now. Traitor.” He spat on Oriel who flinched.

Traitor?

Dear Elira, if King Taven permitted criminals and prisoners to be turned into slaves now, the nastiest people could end up buying the citizens brought here. In general, slavery was considered quite wrong in most

Kingdoms, but with something made legal, the worst side of others could come out.

He'd rather his new Master hang him and be done with it.

He kept his gaze on Aspen. Nobody bothered him, but nobody checked on him either. Oriel refused to tear his eyes from the fragile form even as someone started undoing his chain.

"Up, fancy boy," a soldier snarled as he stepped over and blocked Oriel's view.

So lost, he hadn't even noticed the noises had changed beyond the docks. People were gathered to one side, and the crowd spilled into the city proper. King Taven stood on a wooden platform as he spoke.

What the fuck was going on? The soldiers manhandled Oriel to his feet, shackled his wrists behind his back, and marched him down the gangplank. His legs shook from the short walk, and he wondered if King Taven was his new Master now. Maybe he'd execute Oriel in front of everyone to send a message.

"...expected peace, but King Leneer and his traitorous family sought to stab me in the back and attack at dinner!" King Taven roared out in an impressive voice. "It was only because of the quick thinking and swords of my men that we survived, and we had no choice but to kill most of the court. The only one to survive is the traitor's son, Oriel!"

Oriel almost gaped at the blatant lie. King Taven could have simply let his people believe that he'd gone to war for land, conquered West Bay, and leave it at that, but he was twisting everything around.

The people seemed to believe it. They hadn't been there, so what would they know? They shouted and snarled as Oriel was taken past the King on his platform. Guards kept the crowd from getting too close to the King, and Oriel was thrown to the cobblestones in the cleared space. All around him, fairies threw insults and shook their fist at him, thinking he and his dead family were all backstabbers.

No one would care what happened to him if they thought his family was traitorous enough to invite a man to dinner and attempt to kill him.

"Scum!" shouted an old woman with rotted teeth.

"Traitor's son!"

"Trash!"

Oriel wanted to scream that he wasn't the son of a traitor. His family hadn't been like King Taven. Shame made him shrink down on the cobblestones. A rotten tomato splattered on his legs a second later, and he ducked his head as more food and trash was hurled at him along with insults.

He could feel King Taven's eyes on his back and knew the man was satisfied to have humiliated King Leneer's only surviving son. Tears pricked Oriel's eyes as everyone flung whatever they could get their hands on. A stinking fish slapped him in the face, and he finally broke down in sobs. Why would Elira let him live to lose his whole family, the one he loved, and be labeled as a traitor? Why did he have to survive only to suffer rape and humiliation?

A rock winged him in the head a second later, and he collapsed sideways as he felt something wet in his hair. All coherent thought left him as the roars of the crowd faded. Something was bright, and he wondered if Elira was finally going to release him so he could be with his family.

A shadow blocked out the bright thing, and it spoke, although the voice sounded far away. "He's alive."

"Get a healer. His head's bleeding."

Oriel didn't remember being put in a cart, but he woke up in one with a healer touching his head to heal the gash on his temple. The thumping in his head receded, and as soon as she left, the tailboard was closed. He remained on his side as the cart started moving. Beyond the high sides, he heard people following so they could toss more insults, and soldiers snarled to get back. The racket finally lessened, but Oriel didn't care anymore.

The King must have allowed slavery shortly before he left because Oriel hadn't heard a thing about it. When he was dragged out of the cart some time later, the wooden building he was brought into smelled fresh, and it was plain as if it had been built in haste so slaves could be held and bought. It didn't need to be fancy.

He had to stand on a grate in the corner while more water was tossed on him to wash off the sweat and filth. The large room had a desk to one side, and a fairy with horns and spectacles was writing something.

"Full name?"

"It's Oriel Keeper," snapped a soldier leaning against the desk. Oriel eyed the door as he dripped, but another guard stood there too. He was still

cuffed, and he wouldn't get far.

The fairy behind the desk widened her eyes as she glanced at Oriel shivering in the corner. "Oh. Did the others survive?"

"They're dead."

Once the fairy was done making a record, Oriel was brought back out front and to the side. Other fairies kneeled or crouched by a wooden railing on a patio with stone flooring and a wooden roof to keep the sun off of them. He was surprised they even got that.

A short chain was attached to Oriel's collar and the railing. He only had about a foot of slack, and his wrists were undone. The fairy who brought him there had feathers sticking out of the side of his head, and he tilted his head as his cat-like eyes focused on Oriel.

"Behave. We have a post outback for troublemakers."

"Your new Master will be by soon enough," said of the soldiers who had accompanied them before they started to walk away. "Be a good boy."

Oriel couldn't do shit despite his hands being free, and he couldn't fully stand since the chain was so short. He wanted to ask who would be buying him, but he figured bird fairy wouldn't answer any questions.

"Psst. What did you do?" asked the guy next to him. Oriel just stared at him. "You're lucky you don't have wings. Slaves get them cut off here."

He nodded to someone farther down, and Oriel glanced over. A fairy had tiny stumps coming from his back.

"They don't want slaves flying off," said the man. "Too much of an advantage over non-winged Masters."

Like Oriel couldn't figure that out. He was pretty sure someone specific had already been picked by the King to buy him. They were probably cruel and would delight in torturing the "traitor's son."

Who would buy Aspen? At most, Oriel could hope that someone kind would purchase him. Maybe they'd let him go free. Just because slavery was allowed didn't mean that every citizen approved of it.

Or maybe someone cruel would buy Aspen, and he would suffer more. Oriel's throat tightened, and he turned his head away when the fairy next to him tried speaking.

It was hot even with the covering. The bird fairy gave them cups of water, and Oriel drank his. The coolness on his throat was a relief, but it

didn't last long, and the small cup hadn't nearly been enough after so many days of heat and dehydration.

"A word of advice," the fairy said before he walked away. "Your sort isn't good at taking orders or being obedient, but you better remember that you're not royalty anymore. That means you suck it up and do what you're told. Your life will probably be less painful that way."

Others talked in low voices which seemed to be allowed. A snooty-looking man came to look at the selection with the bird fairy, and he paused in front of Oriel.

"How much is this one? He'd like the purple highlights."

"He's taken already."

"Ah."

The guy, who must have been shopping for someone else, finally picked a fairy and checked him all over like one would a horse. The customer must have been satisfied since he disappeared up front with the bird fairy. Finally, the selected slave was cuffed and led away. Oriel stared into space until he heard a new voice.

Something familiar about it made his blood run cold, and his eyes flicked over to his right.

The worst person to buy him stood there, and he knew this wasn't Juniper City. This must have been in Calatan because how else would Lord Delwin get here so fast? Oriel had never been to Calatan either, but he knew it was a coastal city like Juniper. Both weren't that far from each other by ship.

King Taven must have rushed a message out, and this bastard had hurried here.

"Ah, there he is." Lord Delwin paused in front of Oriel and brushed back a piece of his rusty red hair that had come loose from its tie. "The traitor's son. King Taven said he'd try to get you for me, and he did."

Oriel dug his fingers into the floor as he tried not to shake. Dear Elira, no. This couldn't be happening. Lord Delwin must have told King Taven everything.

Lord Delwin walked away, probably to deal with the formalities of purchasing a slave inside. Oriel closed his eyes as he clenched his fists.

Five years ago, Lord Delwin's distant cousin, Sam, had been arrested for the rape and murder of a woman near Lork. Sam had sworn it wasn't him

and used his last name, hoping to get out of it or be sent back to Meadow, but King Leneer had refused.

If someone committed such a foul crime in his Kingdom they'd be hanged in his Kingdom. Anyone would find that fair in most cases. While Sam was related to a lord, he wasn't particularly special in any other way, and blood relations didn't give anyone the right to commit rape and murder.

Sam begged to be able to speak to Lord Delwin one last time to arrange certain affairs, and King Leneer had agreed to that request.

Lord Delwin had come and begged for his cousin's life. Of course, King Leneer had said no. Lord Delwin said his cousin would never do such a thing, but the evidence was undeniable. The lord had spat bitter curses at King Leneer and was nearly hauled out by guards. Sam was hung three days later for rape and murder.

Oriel, not quite thirteen at the time, hadn't thought too much about it beyond the basics. If someone committed a crime like that, they deserved death. He figured they'd never see Lord Delwin again, and he couldn't do anything against King Leneer or his family. Of course, Oriel had always imagined himself as being completely safe at that age.

Apparently, Lord Delwin had quite a grudge.

Oriel tried to yank the chain from the railing. The slave next to him whispered to stop, and a few cast bored expressions at him. The rail was solid, and no one was going anywhere. Panic was making it hard to think, but someone hissed something, and Oriel dropped his hands just in time as the employee, Lord Delwin, and a guard came around the corner.

Thank Elira they hadn't seen anything because trying to escape would definitely earn him punishment. He thought about trying to run once he was loose, but his hands were cuffed behind his back first. A new lead of shiny silver was attached, and only then was the chain connecting him to the rail taken off. Nobody was taking chances.

The guard took the lead since the lord didn't seem to want to sully himself by leading his new slave out. Lord Delwin walked ahead toward his horseless carriage that had been left up front, and his rusty red tail kept swishing. Citizens walking or riding by in the street glanced at them with little interest, and Oriel wanted to beg someone for help.

No one would do anything, and he kept his mouth shut. The lord opened the door to the carriage himself and got in. Oriel hesitated, not wanting to

enter a confined space with someone that hated him. The guard shoved him.

“Get in, stupid.”

It was hard to step up and keep his balance with his hands bound behind him, but he managed it. Out of habit, he went to sit on the opposite side and away from the lord, but the guard grabbed him by the upper arm and pushed him to the floor.

“Slaves don’t get to sit,” he snarled. “They get the floor. Don’t you dare think for a second that you’re equal in any way.”

“Stay on your knees and hunch over.” Lord Delwin whistled like Oriel was a dog. “Do it.”

Oriel forced himself to assume the position even though he felt nausea rise in his gut. He thought the guard would attack and fuck him right there, but the fairy merely sat opposite his lord who snapped his fingers.

“Back up a bit.”

Maybe he would fuck him. Oriel pressed his lips together as he backed up a little and tried not to let his fear show. Lord Delwin propped up his boots on Oriel’s back as though he was a footstool who happened to be alive.

Oriel waited for his heart to calm since it seemed neither would rape him, but rage formed in his chest. He wasn’t a fucking piece of furniture, and while the position seemed simple, he was beyond worn out after a week of near starvation and not enough water. The heels of the lord’s boots dug into his back, and he simply wanted to sit or lie down.

Pulling away would probably earn him a fist to the face. Maybe if he just collapsed...He was pretty sure he would soon. The small cup of water earlier hadn’t done much.

“Get up,” Lord Delwin snarled when Oriel let himself fall forward.

“I need water. The ship-”

The guard suddenly straddled him, and Oriel screamed as he remembered the guards in his room plus the sailors. The guard pinned him and tied a rope above his left elbow before forcing both sides together.

“Wait-I’m sorry-” started Oriel, feeling the strain in his shoulders.

“I bet you are,” Lord Delwin said as the guard made a knot and checked that it was secure. He sat back down. “Back on your knees.”

Why did Oriel think he’d even receive a sliver of mercy from this man? It was a struggle to get himself back up on his knees and into position

again, and Lord Delwin propped his boots on Oriel's back once more.

The carriage rattled on as the position grew worse. Oriel knew elbow binding could be done as a kink for those that liked it, but it was too tight, and after a good thirty minutes, he was desperate for the rope to be taken off.

"I have a special treatment for you," Lord Delwin said, apparently tired of making small talk with his guard. "You'll be my son's toy as a birthday present, but that's after I've punished you. I can assure you my son won't be kind to you either, so you better behave or it'll be worse. Does this hurt?"

Oriel licked his dry lips, but it didn't help.

"I asked you a question, and I better receive an answer."

"Yes," whispered Oriel.

"Louder."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Lord Delwin."

The lord removed his boots so he could lean forward, grab Oriel's hair, and yank his head back. He winced at the pain in his neck and shoulders as he met Lord Delwin's slitted pupils.

"That's Master to you until my son gets you. You're not a Crown Prince, you're not my equal, and you're barely good enough to be a hole for my son to dump his cum into. Now, does it hurt?"

"Yes, Master," Oriel managed to get out through gritted teeth.

"Good." Lord Delwin sneered and showed his fangs. "It's only going to get worse. Lay down."

Oriel was shoved down onto his stomach and ignored for the rest of the trip. When the carriage finally stopped, Lord Delwin got out and left without a backward glance, leaving the guard to deal with Oriel. His shoulders protested, but he was forced out and around the back of the large Castle.

He'd probably never leave this place unless it was so that his corpse could be dumped somewhere. He focused on the ground as they walked until they stopped.

The door the guard opened didn't lead into the pristine halls of the Castle, but into a short, dank hallway with steps going down. Oriel's heart pounded faster.

The guard gripped him by the back of the neck to push him ahead.
"Come on."

Oriel wasn't expecting to be shoved when they were a few steps from the bottom of the stairs. He landed on the stone floor and couldn't bite back a cry of pain.

"I'll give you something to whine about, traitor's son."

"King Taven's lying-and I'm not my Father either. I didn't kill Sam! Please! I-"

The backhand across his face came so fast, he had no hope of avoiding it. Oriel tasted blood as the guard dragged him down the hallway by one arm.

The large room at the end looked like it was for storage since a bunch of crates were on one side, but it had been hastily turned into a place to torture him. A hook in the ceiling had a chain hanging from it, and a small cage was to one side. Oriel wondered if he'd ever leave this room again. Maybe the lord's son would use him down here when he felt like it.

The guard undid the elbow binding but left the cuffs on, and he attached the chain to them. He turned a wheel on the wall and drew up the chain so that Oriel's arms were lifted high, forcing him to bend over. The new strain on his shoulders nearly broke him down to tears.

He knew this was only the start.

"Strappado usually helps with defiance," said the guard.

He went to a crate and pulled out something. Oriel started to breathe heavier as the whip unfurled, and the thin tip hit the floor. Elira, why couldn't he have just died with his family?

"If you say a word, I'll crank the wheel again and start over with the lashes." The guard advanced with the whip.

Chapter Six

Aspen had no memory of getting to the room where a bunch of other people were chained to a railing. The heat was stifling, the floor was filthy, and flies buzzed around. The chain connecting his collar to the railing barely had enough length to let him lie on the floor.

He thought he remembered someone hugging him and saying they loved him, but it couldn't have been real. It certainly wasn't any of the others sitting on the floor and spaced along the railing. He didn't even feel real at that moment, and he stared ahead, not caring about where he was or why. Someone would probably come to rape him again.

Just like on the ship. That's all his life consisted of now.

Two others talked in hushed voices about Oriel and how he'd been publicly shamed and named as a traitor's son. Then they argued over whether that was a lie or not. Aspen didn't care. Why couldn't have just died on the ship?

"Hey." Someone kicked his leg. "Drink this."

A wooden mug of water was placed in front of him on the floor. Or he assumed that's what it held. It wasn't like he looked or cared to see the contents.

"Drink." Someone kicked his leg again.

Aspen didn't care that his mouth was dry, and his throat hurt from it.

"If you don't start acting right and drink, we'll put you down tomorrow."

Good. He closed his eyes.

He didn't feel pain if he went to that quiet spot like he did on the sixth day on the ship when he stopped feeling everything else. Maybe he could stay there forever if they killed him soon. It seemed like only seconds had gone by before someone was tapping his face.

"Sit up," said a woman's voice.

"I don't think you want that one. He's useless. He won't even sit up."

"Because you don't know how to take care of him. You just dumped him on the floor."

"I'm not here to baby anyone."

"This place is disgusting too."

"Then go to one of the fancier slave markets."

Hands touched his face and turned it. He didn't bother to open his eyes. "If you expect to make money, you should keep the slaves in good condition."

"Pfft. He's all used up. You can tell by his eyes, and he won't drink now. They should have pitched him off the side. He's lucky he's getting a chance at all because we'll kill him tomorrow if he doesn't straighten out. The soldiers who brought him said he used to be a pleasure slave, but who wants a half-dead rag doll?"

"I'll take him. He just needs food and sleep."

Aspen blocked them out again. Too soon, the chain clanking dragged him to the horrible present again, and a man's voice rumbled as he was pulled to his feet by someone. His legs buckled, and his knees hit the floor.

"Can he walk? Hey, look at me. What's his name?"

"Aspen," a different voice said.

The woman holding him upright had to be at least fifty. He was supposed to be Aspen, but if he didn't feel real, was he still Aspen? The dingy room was tilting, and he couldn't make out the features of the other slaves. The man said something, and he started to cry as he shook. He couldn't take it again, but he also couldn't fight when the guy slung him over his shoulder like a toy.

Outside was so blinding, he couldn't open his eyes, and the carriage wasn't much better. He figured the guy would get straight to the fucking when he placed Aspen on the cushy seat. He slumped over, too weak to hold himself up, and the guy retreated to the opposite seat. The woman hurried to get next to Aspen and cover him with her shawl.

"I can't believe I didn't think to bring clothes. Sit up and lean against me. It'll be alright. What happened to you?"

Aspen could only get out three words. "They hurt me."

"Who hurt you?"

"Sira, what do you think happened?" asked the man. "If he was a pleasure slave, he was probably King Leneer's, and I'm sure he was used on the boat."

Aspen was too weak to do anything except let the woman hold him and pat his back. She smelled soft and delicate like a Grandma who baked cookies and knitted all day. The guy had to be in his fifties too, and he had a set of feathery wings that he kept folded close.

Since he didn't seem ready to attack, or at least not yet, Aspen focused on the floor and drifted into a haze while the carriage went on. He had no idea how much time had passed when the carriage stopped.

The man carried him like a baby into the large, fine house. Aspen started to cry again as he was taken into a bedroom. This man would be on him every day, and he'd never be able to fight him off. He'd probably end up chained to a headboard and never allowed up just like on the ship. They'd force water into him and keep him alive forever so they could make him suffer.

But the man laid him on the bed and backed off as Sira tucked the blankets around Aspen. She petted his head. "No one is going to hurt you. In fact, you'll have a lovely life here, and you can recover."

Lies. All lies. He was only good for sex. His past had proved that by now. His eyes started to close on their own.

"Get some sleep, and I'll bring you soup."

Time seemed jagged. The woman had to feed him, although he only remembered snatches of that. He vaguely realized he had pissed himself at one point too. She moved him to change the sheets and didn't seem angry that he'd peed the bed like a child because he was too weak and couldn't comprehend how to get up and walk to find a privy.

She gave him bread soaked in goat's milk, and he could tell she'd added in loads of sugar. She said that would get his strength up. He didn't know many times he'd eaten and slept or if he'd pissed himself again or not when she helped him up.

"Come on, you have to walk sometime."

"I can't." His legs shook like jellied fruit.

"You need to. You've got work to do soon so you have to get your strength up. You can't do that by staying in bed forever."

Work? The room tilted as his eyes pricked with tears. No, he couldn't do that again. He'd rather jump from a cliff than let that big man touch him and use him day in and day out.

"I can't! I w-won't."

He tried to drop to the floor. He wouldn't do anything. He'd find something sharp and kill himself. Sira didn't have much trouble keeping him up, and she tugged him into the privy.

"Nobody is going to hurt you like that here," she whispered against his hair as she paused and hugged him to her chest. "You'll have a nice Father now, and nobody will make you do anything you don't want. Except for eating and getting better. You have to do that."

A Father? His Father had been dead for ages. Sira stood him in front of the privy. Instead of simple planks that have been smoothed so nobody ended up with a splinter in their arsecheeks when they sat, it had been stained and painted with some kind of shiny glaze. He vaguely remembered that the house did seem rich from what little he'd been able to comprehend earlier. The bedroom was plain like a guest room but still nicer than some random commoner's bedroom.

"Piss," she said, snapping him out of his stupor. "You can hold your own dick."

He did have to go. Once he finished, she asked if he needed to sit, but he shook his head. With mostly liquid lately, he wouldn't be surprised if he never shit again. His insides felt concave, and he'd never seen his legs this skinny before or been able to count his ribs so easily, not that he'd ever been podgy to begin with.

Sira helped him to wash his hands, and she sat him on a stool while she gave him a sponge bath. He leaned against the wall and let her do whatever to him.

"You haven't got any freckles," she tutted while washing his face as if being devoid of freckles was terrible. "At least your hair is the right color. I guess the length is fine too. Anybody can grow it out." She dropped the sponge in the basin. "Come on. You can take another nap and some more goat's milk and sugar. I put some things in it to help you get stronger. I've got some good herbs since the lady in town always has the best stuff."

He'd never be strong again.

She dressed him in a loose shirt and baggy sleep pants before tucking him back into bed.

"If you need me, you pull this rope here." She pointed toward the wall near the headboard. "I'll hear the bell and come. Don't be afraid to call me. I got you."

Where had he heard that before? Nobody had him. The only ones that had appreciated him at all were dead now. The sight of her wrinkled face blurred as he started to cry. The one that he'd really loved had let him be tortured in that room. The apology on the boat had been a lie. A fucking seal for a lost Kingdom had been more important than Aspen.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "It'll get better. I promise. People just have to get up and move forward. Do you know where you are?"

"No." He sniffled. It didn't matter when he couldn't get away from everything in his head.

"Before King Taven left, he allowed prisoners to be used as slaves. They have to be serving a certain amount of time, and most murderers and rapists aren't permitted. The lords in their holds can decide whether or not to put prisoners in slave houses. The slaves from West Bay were all brought to Calatan. Me and my husband bought you, but you're not really a slave. That's why we took your collar."

He hadn't even realized it was gone until she said something.

"We brought you here to Cardinal's Brook, but where the lord lives. The actual town is that way-" She pointed like that would tell him anything. "He always liked living a bit away from the people, and it's peaceful out here. You won't be awoken by neighbors shouting or anything of the sort."

She smiled, but he didn't care about this new town or anything. His eyes were trying to close. "Can you put something...in water?"

"Like what, dearie?"

"So I won't wake up again."

"N-no. It'll get better, Aspen. You don't really want that."

Yes, he did.

When he awoke again, unfortunately, it was because Sira was tugging on him.

"You have to come quickly. Get up!"

"Wh-wha?"

"Hurry! He doesn't have much time left. Lan thinks he won't make it for another hour." Sira held Aspen up and guided him toward the door. "I thought we had more time, but Lord Mather is weakening."

Why did he care if his new Master was dying? Wait, didn't she say he wasn't a slave? Had he imagined that? Why would the other two, who must have been his servants considering their dress, buy someone who used to be

a pleasure slave for a man who probably couldn't even get it up and was about to croak?

Sira had several inches on him and was much stronger, so she got him down the hall while he struggled to make his legs work properly. They passed a portrait of some black-haired boy and entered a room that was all done in soft blues, beige, and a little green. Everything was quite fine, and the bedroom was probably the same, although it was a bit dark.

Candles flickered on a few surfaces, and Lan, the big fairy, was on the opposite side of the bed. Aspen squinted against the dark and noticed a jewelry box on the chest of drawers with gold swirls painted on the front. What caught his attention more than the glint was the thin body under the blankets on the bed.

"Lord Mather, he's back," said Sira. "Your son has returned."

Aspen was pushed to sit on the edge of the bed. He couldn't help his fear even though the skinny man had to be nearly sixty, and his eyes had a whitish film, although the pink of his pupils was just noticeable.

"Philre?" The old man reached for his arm as his lips trembled. "Son. You came back. I knew you would."

Sira took Aspen's shoulders and whispered in his ear. "Say you love him."

"I-I-" Why would he? He didn't know this man, and he wanted to go back to bed.

"Do it. Call him Father."

"I-I love you, Father," Aspen managed to get out.

The old man's eyes filled with tears. "I love you too, son. I'm sorry for everything. I just wanted to see you...one last time. I'm not mad. I shouldn't have..."

"I'm not mad," said Aspen, struggling for something to say as he let the man take his hand. Despite the fog in his head, the pieces fell into place.

"This is all I wanted-to see you again." Lord Mather sounded like he was having trouble catching his breath. "You're everything."

Aspen glanced at Sira who looked a bit guilty as her eyes watered. They'd bought him to trick an old man into thinking he had his son back.

"Elira brought you-back-my only son."

Lord Mather's chest rattled. Aspen's Father had simply dropped from a heart attack, and there had been no chance for goodbyes or last words.

“I’m here, Father, and I love you.”

Lord Mather’s lips twitched with a smile, but his eyes dulled, and the papery, cold hand in Aspen’s started to lose its strength. The lord made a strange noise like he’d tried to breathe again but failed, and his hand went entirely slack. Sira started to cry, and Lan made a faint, choked sound.

“May Elira rest his soul,” she whispered, and Lan murmured the words.

Aspen stared at the man’s face which bore many stress lines around the eyes but still somehow seemed relaxed in death.

“You did a good thing,” said Sira. “We knew his son wouldn’t be coming home, but he kept hoping. They had a fight, and Philre ran away. He was only fourteen, and no one saw or heard a word of him since. You’re about the right age, and you look close enough.”

Aspen let his eyes travel to another portrait on the wall of the same black-haired boy. He was probably twelve or thirteen in the painting. He imagined Lord Mather waking up and going to bed every day with the image of his son being the first and last thing he saw.

And hoping. Always hoping he’d have his son in real life once more. He’d been soothed in his final moments, thinking he wasn’t forgotten or unloved.

Aspen released the limp hand, slid off the bed, and crawled onto the floor. He wanted to curl up and never wake up again either. Nobody would come back for him because he was forgotten and unloved. “Sira...”

She pulled the blanket over Lord Mather’s head. “You’ll stay here now.”

“I can’t...” He’d served their purpose. Wasn’t that enough?

Sira knelt next to him as he curled up on the cloth carpeting. “Aspen, don’t you see? Philre might be dead, but even if he’s not, he isn’t returning, so he can’t be the lord. Everyone will think you’re him, so you’re now the new lord of Cardinal’s Brook.”

Chapter Seven

Oriel clenched his teeth on the bit gag as he screamed through it. The scent of cooking meat filled the air as the brand seared the flesh on his left shoulder. He pulled at the ropes keeping him bent over and tied in place on the wooden horse, but they were too tight.

The guard pulled away the brand, and Lord Delwin made a noise of approval as he sat on a crate.

Oriel's chest heaved as he struggled to breathe. Even with the brand gone, the burning remained. His muscles quaked with tremors that he couldn't seem to stop, and sweat poured down his body. Welts from the earlier whipping stung, and he'd thought they'd meant to whip him again when another guard had come with the horse and helped tie Oriel to it.

Then they'd brought in the brazier, and he'd seen the D-shaped brand when they placed it in the fire.

"Start getting the S hot," said Lord Delwin, and Oriel made a noise through the bit gag that he couldn't help. "Yes, another one, Oriel. I'd brand the word traitor's son on your back, letter by letter, and stretch it out all night just to watch you suffer, but I don't think my son wants someone that burned and permanently marked up."

Oriel wanted to beg and plead, but it would probably please Lord Delwin more to hear the evidence of his suffering, and he couldn't talk with the bit gag strapped in so tightly. He moved his head a little and saw one of the guards place another brand in the flames.

The other guard came around and grasped Oriel's balls which made sickness rise in his gut. "You should cut his balls off. I could heat my knife right now. I know how to do it so he won't bleed out and die. You don't want these, right?"

The guard squeezed hard enough for them to hurt, and Oriel made a panicked noise.

"Keeping him pent up might be a good tactic if my son wants to torment him with that," said Lord Delwin, and Oriel's balls were released. "With his

balls gone, that's rather hard. I don't really care how Roth fucks him, but it's best not to be removing body parts."

Oriel shook and sweated as the top edge of the horse dug into his hip bones. He was tied so tightly he couldn't even try to adjust himself and ease the painful pressure.

And the next burn would hurt so much worse. He choked on a sob when the guard picked up the brand, and he saw the glowing orange end.

"I wish your Father was alive and able to watch as you're tortured," said Lord Delwin. "He'd probably be ashamed of your tears. Didn't he raise the Crown Prince to be stronger?"

The heat came close to Oriel's right shoulder, and his shaking renewed. Dear Elira, he couldn't take it. He screamed through the gag again as the brand pressed into his flesh.

"I guess not."

Oriel's entire body tensed as he pulled on the ropes which still didn't give an inch. The upside-down room blurred, but he didn't pass out. Every moment was an eternity as he shook, unable to bear another it but forced to endure every single second. Nothing else existed as his entire being focused on that one point of agony.

The brand was finally pulled away, and he thought he'd throw up, but his stomach was empty. The tension didn't leave his body as he quivered and sobbed.

Maybe they'd be done for today at least. He couldn't handle anymore. He just couldn't. He jerked when he felt a guard's hand on his ass.

"Leave that. That's for Roth."

"He was probably raped on the boat. You know how some of those sailors are. I can guarantee he's not a virgin."

"I don't care. I'm not handing over my son's present after it was fucked so recently. If it wasn't for Roth, I'd let you both have his ass. Put that cream on so he doesn't get an infection."

The cream seemed to make it hurt worse. Oriel knew the outer layers of skin on both spots had to be dead now, but the pain went deep in, and he still couldn't stop the tremors in his body. The wood digging into his hips didn't help. One of the guards finally started undoing the ropes, and he was forced to kneel on the floor with his hands on the top piece of the horse.

Moving his arms pulled on the skin around the brands, but he didn't dare disobey. They could put him right back over the horse and heat the brands again or get the whip. He tried not to think of how his back looked with the D on his left and the S on his right.

If a good healer was right there, they could make it like it never happened with a couple of healing sessions. After a bit, such marks could never be made to go away, and he'd have them for life.

Nobody would be coming to heal him.

Oriel stayed on his knees as he drooled with the bit gag still strapped in since he couldn't close his mouth. With spit, tears, and sweat smeared all over his face, he'd never felt less like a Prince.

He didn't even feel like a fairy anymore. He focused on the wood as he shook while one guard took away the brazier. The one from earlier remained, and he smacked the D on Oriel's shoulder. He cried out but didn't move.

"Let him drink from the cup," said Lord Delwin.

The bit gag was finally removed. The cup only contained about two mouthfuls of water, and it wasn't nearly enough. In fact, Oriel was sure he was thirstier once the guard pulled the cup away.

Lord Delwin stood from the crate and went to pick up the S brand that had been left against the wall. The end no longer glowed, but it was still hot, and he could be hit with it.

"You have no idea who Sam is, do you?" asked Lord Delwin.

Oriel wasn't sure if he was supposed to answer or not. Speaking out of turn would definitely earn him more pain. His head throbbed as he shivered and looked at the wood. Lord Delwin slowly walked around, and the guard backed up. Oriel flinched as he felt the hot metal graze his lower back.

"Sam wasn't my cousin," said Lord Delwin. "That's what everyone was told. I'm sorry, let me rephrase that."

The metal slid down to Oriel's ass. It wouldn't mark him for life, but it was hot enough to hurt, and he clenched the wood piece so hard, his knuckles whitened.

"Sam was a distant cousin of the family, but my Mother cheated on the last lord so I wasn't his real son. It was my Father that your Father killed. I couldn't say the truth, and I doubt King Leneer would have cared. He was so adamant that Sam hang for his crime. I don't even believe he raped that

woman. He might have been a drinker and a loser in general, but he wasn't that sort. Of course, if you dare to blab that I'm a bastard child, no one will believe a slave."

Oriel could barely absorb that. His Father had killed Lord Delwin's Father. Now, son would punish son.

"When I learned that King Taven was going after West Bay, he owed me a favor, and I asked for you. You'll spend the rest of your pathetic life as my son's sex slave and pet. Whatever he commands you to do, even if it means bringing you into public naked, you'll do it, or else. My son can punish you just fine, but if you continue to defy him, and it's decided that you're not worth it, I'll bring you right back into this room."

The wood blurred before Oriel's eyes. Elira, no.

"You'll spend weeks dying a slow death." The Lord yanked the once-Crown Prince's head back, but Oriel kept his gaze lowered, not daring to look him in the eye. "Do. You. Understand. Me?"

"Yes, M-master."

"Prepare him for the night in the cage."

Instead of being allowed to curl up in the cage which wasn't big enough to stand or stretch out in, he had to remain on his knees. His wrists were tied to the bars above him. The guard locked the door, smacked the top, and told him to sleep well with a smirk.

Oriel realized he was being left like this all night. It was impossible to lie down, and he couldn't stretch out or lower his arms. He almost wanted to cry again because he'd never be able to rest like this, and the burns throbbed with constant pain as they tightened and further pulled on the good skin around them.

He hadn't been fed, and the savage welts all over his body stung with every movement. The guard hadn't restricted the lashes to his back and ass.

He sagged against the side and prayed that somehow, Aspen was all right. Oriel was fucked, but maybe Elira could help Aspen.

He noticed thin cobwebs in the corner and dust on some of the bars. Maybe this room hadn't been prepared just for him, and someone else that had made an enemy of the lord had been in here a while ago. Lord Delwin clearly had no problem with torture.

As the night wore on, he tried to shift to get comfortable, but it was impossible. His thirst worsened, and he started to get cramps in his legs. By

the time the guard and Lord Delwin returned the next morning, looking refreshed after sleep and breakfast, he was sobbing.

“Your Father would be ashamed. Wouldn’t he?” Lord Delwin kicked the cage. “Wouldn’t he?”

“Y-yes, Master.” There was no other suitable answer. It didn’t matter how mentally and physically worn down he was from the ship and everything that happened before the lord got a hold of him.

“I bet even a human would last longer than you before they started crying, and their bodies are weaker in some ways, or so I heard. Let him out.”

Oriel was allowed a tiny amount of water. Breakfast was a piece of bread that he had to eat directly off the floor like a dog. The guard held a cane and seemed to enjoy watching his humiliation.

Lord Delwin said he’d be busy, and Oriel was left to stand with his wrists chained above his head. He was terrified the guard would whip him again, but he left too. Being made to stand like that stretched the skin around the burns as he remained like that for hours while his shoulders ached.

Exhaustion tried to pull him down, but every time his head started to droop, he would snap awake. He couldn’t stop shaking and fearing that guard would return with a new way to torture him even though Lord Delwin was elsewhere.

When the guard finally came to let him down, Oriel fell to the floor, unable to stand anymore. He could barely keep his eyes open to eat the bread and drink the water he was given. At least there was more water this time, but he was still thirsty.

Only then was he allowed to curl up on the cold, hard bars that made the floor of the tiny cage. At that point, he couldn’t have cared how it felt. He knew nothing until the next day when the guard yanked him out by his ankle. He screamed in terror as the rough bars jabbed and scraped his hip and ribs.

“Quit your fucking whining.” The guard slapped him and planted a hand on his chest to pin his shoulders to the floor. The burns instantly protested as they were pushed into the stone. “He’s tired of you, and he’s busy, so his son can take you now. His birthday was yesterday, but you were a bit too fucked up to be handed over to him.”

If Lord Delwin acted like this, his son was probably worse. King Leneer had killed his grandfather, although maybe Roth didn't know the dirty family secret.

"You better behave because he's not afraid to hurt you," said the guard. "Maybe he'll want his first initial branded on your back too. If so, I'll see you again."

That image made Oriel start shaking again as the guard manhandled him toward the chains to shackle him once more. He was left to stand there for a good half-hour before he heard footsteps. Lord Delwin entered with his son.

Unlike his Father who had a rust-colored tail and hair, Roth's long hair and fluffy tail were a vibrant red, and his pointy cat ears matched. He must have gotten those from his Mother. His eyes were also red, and the pupils were slitted like a cat's.

Oriel would have thought him to be quite aesthetically pleasing if the situation was different. All he could think now was that he'd be this cat fairy's toy.

"You could have cleaned him up," was the first thing Roth said as looked Oriel up and down with a sneer that showed his fangs. "It stinks in here too."

"He wasn't meant to be comfortable," snapped Lord Delwin. "He can be bathed anytime."

"So you're done torturing him, and I can have him now?"

"Yes. He'll be all yours."

Oriel kept his eyes lowered as Roth appraised him. He wouldn't be a pretend sex slave like Aspen who could have left King Leneer if he wanted. Oriel would have to do whatever Roth said and service him as requested. There wouldn't be any safewords, and he could forget escaping.

He had a feeling the son was deciding whether to keep him. If he said no, then Oriel would live in this room until Lord Delwin finished torturing him to death.

He'd leave as a corpse.

"Once he's cleaned up, he'll be quite pretty," Roth said as he walked around Oriel and let his fingertips skim across his ribs. It took all of his willpower not to flinch, especially when he felt a pinch on one of the welts. "I want him taken to my rooms. But first..."

He came around Oriel who didn't dare lift his eyes. Roth's red, fluffy tail twitched as he peered at Oriel's face and brushed back a bit of his matted hair. He smelled like blackberries, although there was a hint of something else that was probably from bath oils.

"I intend to take you around on a leash like the pretty little pet you are." Roth tapped Oriel's chin and gave him a quick little stroke on the underside in the way one might do to a cat. "You'll be a good boy, won't you? Even though you're a traitor's son."

"Yes, Master." This was Oriel's life now. Fighting was useless.

"Good boy." Roth made a faint purring noise as he reached down to flick Oriel's cock, and he flinched that time. "If you behave, I won't have a reason to hurt you too badly. If you disobey, I can have you begging for mercy. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Master."

"Maybe I'll make you beg for mercy anyway. I'm sure I'll have plenty of fun with you." Roth smirked and turned to the guard. "I want him cleaned up in my privy room. Make sure he uses soap and oils in the water so he doesn't stink. Chain him in the sitting room afterward."

Oriel soon found himself in Roth's bathing room off his bedroom. The sunken tub was full of hot water, and an open cupboard to the left held soaps, oils, and drying sheets. There was a basin and a stool in front of a looking glass.

It almost reminded him of life before everything was destroyed. The guard watched, but there wasn't anything Oriel could use as a weapon, and he was too weak. He hadn't been given any water or food yet. The water in the tub was tempting, but the guard would probably punish him for drinking without permission.

He had to be careful with his back, and the skin around the burns pulled on them every time he moved. His body was sore, and even though he'd slept last night, he wanted to curl up somewhere and pass out again.

The guard watched him as he dried off. Afterward, Oriel was put on a lead again and told to crawl. He guessed he'd rarely be permitted to walk like a fairy now that he belonged to Roth. Several rings were in various places around, so he could be chained wherever.

The sitting room had a cage not far from the bedroom door. It wasn't big enough for him to stand in, so he'd be on his knees like a pet. At least it was

long enough to stretch out, and it had a cushion, a pillow, and blankets.

Instead of caging him so he could lie down and try to forget what was coming, the guard led him to one side where a ring was mounted on the floor by the wall. Oriel was chained to it with about three links worth of slack. This way, he was forced to keep his head close to the floor. The nearest shelf was out of his reach.

“Keep that ass up. No laying down, or he’ll cane you.” The guard smacked Oriel’s left asscheek. “Have fun. I wouldn’t mind sucking off Roth myself and playing with that pretty tail. I bet he’s a biter.”

Oriel was left alone. The position was more degrading than physically uncomfortable, not that he’d dare complain. The sitting room held two couches with a low table between them, and a couple of armchairs. The fireplace was cold and clean since it was warm enough, and a couple of portraits decorated the walls.

Roth took after his Mother. Oriel had heard through later gossip that Lord Delwin’s wife had died along with a few others thanks to food poisoning from bad fish.

Lord Delwin and Roth seemed so nice in the portrait. No one would think they were shitty people by looking at it. He dared to wonder if Roth would ever let him read one of the books on the many shelves or if he’d be expected to sit and stare into space when he didn’t have his new Master’s cock stuffed in his ass or mouth.

Roth finally sauntered in and barely looked at him as he headed to his bedroom. After a bit, Oriel heard water splashing. Roth took his time since it wasn’t like he had to rush on his slave’s account. He finally returned in a pair of green trousers, no vest, and a loose linen shirt. He’d combed out his long hair and left it loose.

Oriel noticed the cane in his hand and quickly stared at the floor. He’d been with a couple of people after Aspen who had liked that sort of thing, and he didn’t mind it. Pain and sex could feel good together, although he usually preferred doing the tying and whipping. None of it would feel good now, but he had no idea if Roth would brutalize him every day or if he’d be satisfied with less.

Roth poured himself a small glass of wine from the sideboard before he approached. His tail swished, and Oriel tensed as he felt the cane tap along his back, and he sucked in a slight breath when it touched the D brand.

“Does that hurt?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I figured. If you’re good, maybe I’ll put some balm on it later.”

That was probably a lie. Oriel tried not to eye the glass pitcher on the sideboard that contained water.

“What are you looking at? Hmm?” Roth let his tail brush Oriel’s hip.

“The water, Master.”

Dear Elira, maybe he’d kept dehydrated and starved enough to make him constantly weak.

Roth laid the end of the cane across his ass and kept it there. “I’m going to let you loose, and you’ll stay on your hands and knees. If you stand without permission, run, attack, or do any of that shit, you’ll regret it. There’s a guard outside of my door now, so even if you somehow got the upper hand in your state, he’d help take care of you even though I hardly need him. Do you understand me?”

The cane tapped Oriel’s ass. “Yes, Master.”

Roth removed the lead and coiled it in his pocket. “Crawl after me.”

Oriel followed until Roth stopped by the sideboard. He poured water into a wooden cup and handed it down. Oriel supposed no one was going to be giving him anything made of glass which could be broken and used as a weapon. For all he knew, Roth might have been teasing him with the water, so Oriel hastily gulped it down as he remained on the floor.

“Slow down. I don’t need you throwing up all over the floor, and I doubt the servants feel like cleaning that.”

Oriel’s mouth and throat felt a lot better once he’d finished it. Roth took the cup and refilled it, but he placed it on the sideboard and snapped his fingers.

“Stand.”

Oriel cast him a wary glance, but he slowly stood.

Roth took his arm and turned him. “My Father could have just branded you with an S for slave. If any slave manages to run and find clothes, it still marks them. A healer wouldn’t even be able to fade that now.” He turned Oriel again and held up his forefinger and thumb about an inch apart with a nasty smile. “I figured the brand would be like that since there’s no need for a big one. Those are three inches high and must’ve hurt quite a bit, but that’s

fitting for a traitor's son, especially considering your Father hanged my Grandfather."

So he did know. Oriel hadn't seen the victim's body, but he'd heard enough from others to know it hadn't been pretty. Three fairies had seen the end of the incident, although they'd been too late to stop Sam and save the woman. They'd said her wings had been battered and torn. Sam had certainly done his best to make sure she couldn't get away.

"He deserved it," Oriel muttered before he could think twice, and the cane cracked against his ass and the welts from the whipping, and he sucked in a breath.

"My Grandfather was innocent," snapped Roth.

Fuck. Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? Oriel kept quiet as he focused his eyes on the floor, although he could feel Roth's gaze burning into his. "How is it fair that Grandfather died all because someone woman gladly fucked him and then cried rape? Hmm?"

That wasn't what happened. She was dead and couldn't have said anything. Lord Delwin must have heard the details from King Leneer, but he and his son refused to believe it.

"Well?" Roth grabbed his hair.

"That isn't fair, Master," said Oriel.

Roth made a faint noise at the words. "Stand there and drink your water. I'll feed you when we go outside. You can walk now because I don't feel like waiting for you to crawl after me."

Oriel snatched the cup as soon as Roth turned away just in case he changed his mind about it. Go outside? He was fucking naked, but no one gave a shit about that, of course. His belly felt off after he finished the drink since it was empty besides the liquid.

He didn't dare move from the sideboard even after he set down the cup. The glass jug was beyond tempting, and he imagined shattering that over Roth's head. How satisfying that would be. Then he remembered the guard outside the door.

Roth returned in a vest and was doing the buttons on his green coat. The cane was tucked under his arm, and Oriel knew he wouldn't hesitate to use that in public. He couldn't slip up again.

"Come on." Roth attached the lead to his collar. "Stay two steps behind me, and remember your place, traitor's son."

Anger sparked in Oriel's chest at those words. How many times would he hear that title and know that whoever looked at him thought he and his dead family were scum? How far would that lie spread? Probably far beyond Meadow Kingdom.

"I wish my Father had gone with King Taven," Roth said as he led Oriel into the hallway. "Maybe if he'd fought alongside him, he would have acquired another chunk of land."

Lords always wanted more. Oriel felt his face burning with pure shame when they passed other people. He didn't stare, but a few others had red hair too and seemed faintly similar, although nobody had hair as vivid as Roth's. Red was a bit rare among fairies, but it seemed this family kept passing it down.

Oriel had heard that the Delwin family was quite large, although most of them had no real power. While many probably had their own businesses and such, these were probably like leeches to the lord too since he made much income from Calatan. Earls always had other places too.

Most seemed quite interested in Oriel as if Roth was walking some exotic creature from a faraway land. He didn't stop to talk to anyone and strode like he had somewhere important to be. Oriel kept up even though he was tired, and he wished he could eat something.

The warm sun outside didn't give him any joy as Roth led him through a garden on a neat stone pathway. The manicured bushes and neat flower beds were bright with color, and a few birds twittered here and there. A chuckle chickie giggled as it flew by.

He dared to glance over his shoulder at the Castle itself which was made from stones with a faint silver hue. He imagined his own home which was probably horribly trashed.

Where were the bodies of his family? He pictured his parents and two brothers tossed in a common grave or left out like trash to rot, and his throat tightened.

Roth took him to a gazebo that had been set up for lunch. Little white clothes covered the glasses, and silver domes protected the plates and platters.

"On your knees." Roth snapped his fingers like his new slave was a dog. "Good boy." He sat at the table and reached over. Something clinked while

Oriel stared at the smooth floorboards and tried not to think of his family. "Eat, you skinny thing."

The triangle of bread smeared with norben looked like a four-course meal after over a week of nothing but water, dry bread, and sometimes nothing. His last decent meal, which had been on the night King Taven betrayed them, felt like a century ago. Oriel reached for it, but Roth held it higher.

"Keep your hands down. I bet if I give you this, you'll stuff it down in a second, and I'm not having my new pet barf all over because you upset your stomach. You'll take small bites or get nothing."

He thought Roth would drop it on the ground and make him eat it like that. It would be slower if he couldn't use his hands. Instead, Roth held the bread in front of his face and stroked his hair.

"Eat up, pet. Chew it well."

Somehow, eating from his hand seemed even worse, but the food could be taken away quite quickly. Oriel glanced at the end of the cane sticking out from the table's edge and leaned forward a little to take a bite even though his face burned.

"Good boy," Roth murmured.

The rich norben was far better than butter and so delicious, Oriel almost forgot his shame for a moment, although he forced himself to chew slowly. Roth was right about one thing since he didn't want to throw up after being half-starved. Maybe if he obeyed, he'd get a little more food too.

The tip of Roth's tail kept flicking on his back, although it didn't go near the brands. Oriel always wanted touch before and craved it more than sex even, but Roth's touch disgusted him even when another triangle of bread was held out.

Roth had to be sick in his head if he was fine with having a slave to abuse, especially after it being such a new thing.

Roth gave him a few pieces of grilled chicken too. Oriel's stomach was already strangely full by the time he heard voices coming. He would have eaten three times that amount before and not thought twice about it.

"Behave, and do whatever you're told," hissed Roth. "Or I'll call a guard and our mealtime entertainment will be watching as you're whipped."

Boots thumped on the wood. "Wow, your Father really did get you a slave like he said."

“Oh, shit, he’s branded too.”

Oriel tried to lean away from the people crowding too close. He bumped his Master’s leg, and Roth immediately grabbed his hair to tilt his head back, forcing him to face the four newcomers.

“Can you guess who he is?” asked Roth. “Look at his hair and eyes.”

A couple appeared clueless, but the other two who shared a faint similarity to Roth seemed to know. One with cat ears but no tail spoke.

“The Crown Prince?” He touched a strand of Oriel’s black hair. “The purple sheen and eyes give it away.”

Roth’s tone was gloating. “Exactly, but he’s certainly not the Crown Prince anymore.”

“Father says you’re a traitor’s son,” said one. “He told me what your Father did.”

The whole damn Kingdom probably knew by now. Of course, Oriel’s humiliation in front of the King had spread like wildfire.

“How does it feel to know that you’re the son of a piece of shit?” one asked with a laugh before he looked at Roth. “I’m surprised your Father didn’t kill him. King Leneer let your cousin hang for nothing.”

“He was satisfied with some torture and to let me have him. Put your hands flat and your forehead to the ground. Stick your ass up. You’ll stay like that until I say so.”

Oriel must have been a bit too slow since the cane whacked his ass. Someone, although he couldn’t tell if it was Roth or the nearby friend, pinched one of the welts on his ass, and he flinched.

He was ignored after that while the rest ate and talked. Oriel couldn’t really follow the conversation, and they brought up others that he didn’t know or care to know.

A month ago, he never would have imagined for a second that he’d be a naked, collared slave and forced to wait like this because a lord’s son said so.

A servant came at some point to ask if they needed anything. One said to bring more wine.

“Water it down with more of the mango juice,” said Roth.

The servant returned with more, and dishes clanked. Once she left again, one of the guests said that the mangoes didn’t seem quite as sweet this year. The flippant complaint sparked fury in Oriel’s chest, and he struggled to not

clench his fists. He'd spend his life being raped and treated like a dog, but boohoo, the mangoes weren't as sweet this year.

Roth's boots shifted as he reached down to stroke his pet while they kept talking for a minute.

"Have you used his ass yet?"

"I just got him," said Roth. "I've barely had time to do anything with him."

"Have him suck you off. Let's see if the traitor's son can take a dick properly."

"What's your preference, slave?" asked Roth. "I'm curious, not that it matters for you. Men or women?"

Oriel barely had time to say anything, and a smack on his asscheek made him jerk slightly. "Answer," snapped another.

"Men," said Oriel.

Roth slapped his other ass cheek. "Try that again, and answer properly. When someone else asks you a question, it's Sir, but when you address me, it's Master."

"Men, Master," said Oriel.

"Have you ever been with a woman?" asked the friend.

"Yes, Sir."

"Make him suck you off. King Leneer's corpse would roll over if he knew his son was swallowing your cum."

"He's almost not even worthy of it," said Roth, and the others snorted. "But that's what he's for, so he might as well do something productive. It's not like a traitor's son has any other uses."

Oriel pictured his Father dead in the Hall along with his brothers while King Taven's men continued their killing spree. He should have stayed that night instead of leaving. Maybe he could have somehow protected his family, or at least Aspen. Or maybe he would have died. That would have been better than this.

"Up." Roth's tap with the cane didn't hurt, but it was a warning. "Get between my legs."

Oriel knew how to do this. He'd sucked cocks before, it wasn't that hard, and he just had to get through it. Maybe he could go somewhere else in his head like Aspen. And there, he'd be with Aspen, and everything else would cease to matter for a few minutes.

Roth pushed back his chair, undid his trousers, and pulled out his cock. It was already hard as Oriel got between his knees and tried not to look at it.

Roth took him by the hair to pull his head down. The tip, wet with pre-cum, brushed Oriel's lips, and he forced himself to open his mouth.

"You can eat something else now, pet. See? I'll keep you well-fed."

Someone snorted at that, and Oriel squeezed his eyes shut as he tasted the warm, thick length. He wasn't here. He wasn't here. He was with Aspen, and nothing in the past two years had happened.

The cock in his mouth was too hard to ignore, so he tried to pretend he was sucking off Aspen in the woods like he'd done so many times before when they were together.

Roth's touch was all wrong. He didn't smell like roses either. Maybe it was better to pretend nothing at all existed.

"I've never had anyone that smelled like magnolias." Roth cupped the sides of his head. "At least you know not to use your hands, but you need to open your eyes. Look at me."

The last three words had such a warning note, Oriel didn't dare do anything but obey. It was hard to be elsewhere when Roth's red eyes with the slitted pupils focused on him, and the smell of blackberries filled his nose. He didn't want to be present while his mouth was raped, but Roth wasn't giving him a choice.

"It's a privilege to suck my cock, and you better be grateful, so do a good job."

If Oriel tried to pull away or fought, he might end up back in that room. He bobbed his head as he tongued the underside like he wanted to do this. Anything to avoid that room. Roth forced him to take it all in his throat and held down his head.

"Good pet."

Chapter Eight

Aspen didn't feel like he was in any state to step up as the lord right then. He could barely comprehend the fact that he was one because Lord Mather's two servants had come up with a genius plan.

Sira said that Lan could handle the paperwork and such for a few more days. He'd been the lord's Steward for so many years, he could probably do the accounts in his sleep. With the lord's declining health due to his heart in the past years, people had grown used to seeing Lan when they paid rents or had some issue to settle.

Lan would pass around the info that the lord's son was back but dealing with his grief.

The day after Lord Mather's death, Sira woke him and made him sit up to eat more soup and goat's milk with bread floating in it. Then she gave him a tray with a quill, ink, and vellum.

"Since Lord Mather is passed, you have to write to the King to say you're taking over as his heir. It's just a formality."

Aspen stared at the parchment for a few seconds before he looked at Sira's eyes which were red from crying. Even if they had been servants, they must have quite liked the last one. "I can't be the lord."

"Yes, you can," said Sira. "Don't you know what could have happened to you if someone else bought you?"

"The same thing that happened to me every day on the boat," he replied in a wooden tone.

She glanced away. "Nobody can touch you now. One of the men at the slave house said to brand you with an S, but of course, we're not doing that, and we took off the collar. You're a free man."

"The King saw me. He knows what I look like." He'd fucked Aspen too, and the words froze in his throat for a moment before they tumbled out. "He raped me in the Hall."

She avoided his eyes. "If you were a pleasure slave then, I doubt he remembers your face that well. It's not like you were someone with power.

Do you always keep your hair down?"

"Yeah. Usually."

"Then you'll start wearing it up, or you can cut it short. I'm assuming you were half-naked then, and you'd be surprised at how different a man can look when he puts on some good trousers and a fancy coat. Besides, do you think he'll specifically look to see where you've gone? And you don't have to go to his home for any reason since you're just a Baron. The King likely won't call for some minor lord to come to dinner, and you don't have to go to court. Even if you cross paths in the future, time will mar his memory. He won't suspect that a slave has somehow become a lord."

"I don't want to see him again."

"I doubt you will. As for everyone else, you look close enough to Philre. He left at fourteen, and a man can change a lot as he grows up. He was a bit thin too, and not everyone fills out a lot. Say you're twenty-one, and I'll make a list of things you should remember."

He hadn't even started on anything, and he was already overwhelmed. He'd been middle class before he was a street whore, but he didn't know how to take care of a holding or anything like that. "I don't know what to write."

"Here. I'll do it, but you do need to sign. Likely, someone under the King will scan this, make sure it's noted, and forget about it. Lord Mather never did anything to annoy the King, so they have no reason to reject you."

He vaguely watched her write on the vellum in her neat script before she put the quill in his hand. "Sign it. Philre Mather."

He scrawled the name. This was it. He was a damn Baron now, and he'd rather be dead.

"You were there so tell me something." She sat on the edge of the bed. "The day we got you from Calatan, everyone was saying King Leneer betrayed ours, and the court attacked during dinner. The triplets and everyone else tried to slaughter King Taven and his guests. Is it true?"

Aspen shook his head. "No. King Taven betrayed us."

She pursed her lips for a moment. "Everyone seems to believe King Taven from what I've heard so far. He's always been a decent King, but I guess..." She took a deep breath. "I guess those goldmines were tempting, and his income from taxes and trade will have doubled. People have done worse for less money. I never thought he'd be a King who would allow

prisoners to be taken and sold as slaves either. He's also saved his reputation enough if everyone thinks King Leneer attempted to stab him in the back. The thing about slaves is that when one fairy is allowed to own another, the worst can come out in certain people."

That meant that if Oriel was still alive, and he probably was, he'd be sold as a slave. His new Master might delight in being cruel to him.

Oriel deserved every damn thing. He'd tried to hold onto the seal even though he'd already lost while Aspen was burned with a damn poker. He'd only broken when that lord threatened to cut off his cock, and it proved he'd never loved Aspen. That had all been a lie two years ago. He'd never seen Aspen as more than something to use.

Now, he'd be a lord, and Oriel could see what it was like to be a real slave. The problem with that was that Aspen didn't know what he was doing.

"I know bad things happened before, but you can look forward now." She patted his arm. "Nobody can hurt you now."

He'd already been hurt too much.

She tried to stuff as much food as possible into him when she brought meals. He mostly slept, but she finally dragged him from bed and made him take a proper bath after she trimmed his hair shorter. That one lord, the one with orange eyes who'd revealed Oriel's treachery, hopefully didn't live around here. Sira chattered on and said he needed to remember stuff in case people probed.

Most of it flew out of his head. He let her treat him like a doll and bring him outside.

"You don't have to talk to anybody too much," she murmured.

He saw the waiting carriage, and the grey horses stamped their hooves. "Where are we going?"

"Lord Mather is being buried. It's the third day."

Oh. The funeral for his not-Father. He hadn't even considered that, and it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I want to go back to bed."

"You have to go. Everyone will think you're a good boy for coming back to see your Father before he passed."

"Who was in the wrong?" he asked once he settled in the carriage. Maybe everyone in Cardinal's Brook would hate him.

She bit her lip. "I don't know what they really argued about. They kept that more private. I think they both might have been wrong. There were a few rumors that Lord Mather beat his son or something silly like that, but I can assure you, that never happened. He wasn't that type. He and his wife thought they'd never have a baby, and Philre came along...it killed her. She was too old and delicate to be having babies, and Lord Mather treasured his son since he was all he had left. There's no one else."

If she thought he was going to keep the line going, she was dead wrong. He stared out of the window for an hour until the carriage stopped, and Sira made him get out.

Not many came to the funeral. Lan was already there with a Mage, and candles had been lit around the mausoleum where he'd be laid to rest. Aspen wished he could join him there.

He had no clue who the others were, but they must have been "friends" who came out of the barest duty. They murmured condolences that didn't sound too convincing. He focused on the casket while the Mage prayed to Elira. He couldn't even feel sad about the poor guy. Numbness was all he felt. Maybe he could jump off the balcony when Sira wasn't around. Or slit his wrists.

Or he could stick around and be happy that the bastard was suffering. But he couldn't remember how to be happy either.

A couple of men who were likely in charge of the graveyard carried the casket inside. Lan said he'd make sure it was all done before he returned. Sira told the others there wouldn't be a dinner since "Philre" wanted to grieve in peace. The others seemed to accept that and hastily left to forget about Lord Mather and get on with their own lives.

Aspen sat in the carriage again and curled up on the seat, not caring if he wrinkled his fancy coat.

She sighed. "You need to be getting up in the mornings for a little exercise. You also should make some friends. Lord Delwin has a son about your age named Roth. I never met him, but I heard he's a nice boy."

Blah, blah, blah. He tuned her out and stared at the floor. For a few moments, the motion of the carriage reminded him of the boat. One of the sailors grunted on top of him as he worked the head of his cock in, not caring that it hurt or how his bulk crushed Aspen. Hands were on him, and he couldn't breathe.

“What are you doing?!”

He suddenly found himself on the road as pain shot through his knees, and his palms scraped on rough little pebbles. His stomach lurched as breakfast came back up in a disgusting mixture of soup, goat’s milk, and stomach acid. The carriage clattered as she screeched something in her panic, but it must have stopped.

“If you felt sick, why didn’t you say something?!” She climbed down as he gave another heave. Vomit splattered his trousers and the sleeves of his coat.

“Is he all right, miss?” called the carriage driver. “For Elira’s sake, he’s lucky he didn’t get run over by the wheels.”

“It’s just stress from his Father dying.” She lifted her skirts as she hurried over.

“Don’t touch me!” he snarled as he tried to scramble back on his ass.

The carriage driver remained leaning around to stare as Sira paused. Some lord Aspen was, splattered with puke, smeared with dirt, and grit stuck in his palms.

“Get up,” she muttered. “We can’t stay out here.”

Thankfully, she was stronger than she looked and was able to haul him up. Aspen felt like he’d escaped some great danger or was about to head into it. His legs shook, and he almost tripped getting back in. She followed, slammed the door shut, and thumped the inside of the carriage. Aspen flinched at the sound, and she pulled him to lean against her on the seat.

“You can’t do that.”

“They hurt me,” he whimpered. He’d just wanted to get away.

“No one can hurt now. It’s okay.” She pulled out her hanky to wipe his chin before she started plucking at bits of grit on his palm.

He sobbed as she tried to clean him up, although she could never get rid of the other filth ground into him. Finally, she stroked his hair, and he managed to quiet down. The Mother he had no memory of might have done this if she was still alive. Maybe he wouldn’t have had to sell his ass on the street and start a line of events that brought him here.

He should have listened to Vima too. The weathered street whore had told him to never get feelings. He should have stopped seeing Oriel, and he shouldn’t have signed the contract either.

The rest of the trip was a blur, and he barely remembered trying to lie down in bed despite the dried puke on him. Sira managed to convince him to remove his trousers and coat before he buried himself under the blanket. Blissful nothing was all he wanted now.

“You should eat something.”

He ignored her. There was a lot of stuff he should have done.

He still felt like a doll the next day as Sira made him do things that normal people did like getting dressed and eating breakfast in the dining room. She said they’d have to hire a cook soon because she was getting too old to do everything, and Lan would burn down the place if he tried to make a meal.

Lan seemed to realize that his bulk and presence terrified Aspen, and he had been scarce. Aspen figured he should be grateful to the both of them, but he knew they had a secret agenda too.

They would have picked anyone that looked close enough to fake being Philre, and it wasn’t like Aspen was special. They also could have let things play out naturally, but they must not have wanted to lose their home and position here. Aspen had enabled them to stay, and he figured he shouldn’t begrudge them. Everyone wanted stability.

He felt anything but stable when Sira made him sit in the office after breakfast.

“Lan needs a break, and you need to familiarize yourself with stuff.”

He could do math just fine, so the ledger wouldn’t be impossible to figure out. When he was King Leneer’s pleasure slave, he’d spent a lot of time horizontal since either the King was using him, or the younger triplets were railing him, but sometimes he’d sat with King Leneer in the office, rather like a pet. A few times, he’d gotten to look at stuff.

The King had said it was better to rule with a lighter hand. Strictness was required at times, and he’d certainly been strict in the bedroom, but terrifying his subjects and grinding them into the dirt wasn’t a good idea. If someone needed rent relief or had some trouble, mercy went a long way. Happier people thrived better in the long run.

A list of criminals at the jail in Cardinal’s Brook was placed in front of him by Sira. Three were serving sentences for minor theft, and a murderer was to be hanged next week. They also had a rapist sentenced to the rope.

Of course, rape wasn't a crime when a soldier did it to an "enemy" or when a sailor fucked someone chained down in the hold of a ship.

"Lan took care of these, but you need to pick what to sentence this man. He's a traveler, and he filched a coin purse from another at the tavern. A guard sent the note this morning."

"Give him a week."

"For that amount, it's longer-"

"Give him a week, and make him leave afterward," said Aspen. The rapist was sentenced to the long rope so his neck would snap. He crossed that out and wrote "short rope." "Send a note to the jail to change that. What kind of fairy is he?"

"Erm, I heard he's got wings."

"Cut them off too."

She fidgeted. "We usually do things quick here and don't brutalize-"

"I want his fucking wings cut off," snapped Aspen. "I want his cock cut off too."

She hesitated. "He's scum, and I see why, but you can't get back at others by hurting this one."

"I want his wings sawed off his damn back, and I want him to slowly choke to death." Aspen slammed his fist on the desk and instantly regretted it. The desk was fine, but his hand throbbed, and it only fueled his anger.

"Fine. I'll send the stableboy. He runs notes too when needed."

"What happened with the murderer?"

"He-he beat his wife."

"Hang him with a short rope too."

He could tell by her face that she was thinking this might have been a mistake. A lord might sentence murderers and rapists to harsh deaths and be good to everyone else. Or he might treat everyone just as bad.

"Release the thieves too." He pushed away the list. "I want to go to bed."

"Aspen, please. We need you to take this seriously. Staying in bed and stewing in...whatever happened before won't help. You need to distract yourself and do productive things."

He stared at her for a moment. Did she truly think this would all get better like a simple wound? "You expect me to distract myself? You think I can do some paperwork and forget about being gang-raped in the Hall or-"

“You’re not the only one that’s ever suffered, but it doesn’t mean life is over. I-”

“You actually think I won’t remember anything just because I’m doing a damn ledger?”

She huffed as she pulled over a pile of parchment. “You have to at least try. We got you out of there, and we can’t do everything all of the time. My husband needs a break from playing lord, and I still need to find and hire a cook.” She planted a firm kiss on his temple. “Try.”

She bustled out as guilt crept into his gut. She didn’t owe him shit, but she had saved him even though he’d have rather died that first night. For Elira’s sake, she’d cleaned up his piss and hadn’t even complained or scolded him. He reached for one of the parchment packets.

He went through them and had no idea what to write back. The bridge still needed fixing, and the lord there had gambled away his money. Could he help?

What bridge? What lord? Aspen flung that one aside. He wrote a reply to a property dispute involving some farmland. Everyone got exactly half. One person would probably be pissed to lose space, and the other would be elated.

A letter from a farmer on the edge said a fire had gotten out of control, and he had no crop to sell now. He’d also lost his barn and livestock. Aspen granted him rent relief for a whole year. Why not? The poor fairy needed a break. At least someone could know what relief felt like.

As he set down the quill, the bottles on the shelf in the corner by the window caught his attention.

The whiskey burned his throat a couple of minutes later as he lounged in the chair by the open window with his coat partly undone. He wasn’t used to such layers except in winter. The second gulp almost made him puke when it hit his stomach, but it seemed easier after that. He held the bottle by the neck and stared at the sky after the fifth as the warmth settled through him, and his head grew light.

He’d never particularly liked getting drunk before. Some whores drank most of what they made, and he could see why now. The warm feeling was better than numbness. The sharpness of the memories wasn’t quite so bad either.

Vima had said to avoid the bottle. It aged a fairy, and some whores would choose alcohol over food. They could even drink themselves to death.

But he hadn't been violated, cracked beyond repair, and then thrust into a position of power and expected to be fine.

Sira came in after a bit and noticed the bottle. "Don't get hooked on that."

"I did your damn letters," he snapped. Guilt immediately returned, but he couldn't seem to pull back the anger. "If I want a fucking drink, I'll have a fucking drink."

"It's not my letters. It's work that needs to be done. You won't even have stuff all of the time. Cardinal's Brook is usually pretty peaceful. The income isn't bad either since travelers come through too, so everyone is doing pretty decent."

Good. He could afford more whiskey to hide himself while he pretended to be something he wasn't. He'd been a piece of ass for ages, and he still wasn't shit. He pressed the cool glass of the bottle to his forehead.

"You didn't do this one with the bridge."

Aspen took another swig. "I don't know about any bridges."

She paused. "Oh. Of course. I'm sorry. That was silly. It's by the boundary and way down. Technically, that's Lord Smith's lands, but with the way he gambles, I'm surprised he's not eating his shoes for dinner. Do you want to pitch in to fix the bridge? It's in bad shape, and it's a danger to our people too."

"Pay for it all."

Her tone brightened. "The people will like you for that."

They wouldn't if they knew the truth about him.

"See, if you put some effort in, we'll help you," she continued. "Then nobody is doing everything, and it's fair."

"Life's not fair."

"It's what you make it."

She just didn't get it.

Chapter Nine

Oriel barely managed to hold eye contact as his Master's cum filled his mouth. He flinched as Roth bared his little fangs and thrust his hips up.

"Hold it in your mouth. Fuuuck."

Elira, why? The taste demanded all of his attention as he was pulled off, and Roth tucked himself away.

"I want to try his mouth." One reached for Oriel's arm, but Roth swatted away the offending hand.

"I haven't even had his ass yet."

"You said you'd share."

"Maybe after I fuck him."

"Not maybe. Definitely."

"If I haven't had his ass yet, you definitely won't get either hole," Roth snapped with his ears pulled back. "Keep your fucking hands off of him." His tail lashed by the side of a chair.

Oriel couldn't feel thankful. Roth just wanted to fuck him first, and it would probably be a free-for-all after that.

Someone muttered that they needed to go do something, but it was probably just to separate the touchy idiot from Roth. After goodbyes, they left, and Roth turned his attention to his slave.

"Get up here. Straddle my lap."

Elira, no, not right here where anyone could see if they came by. The last thing he wanted was more contact. Roth pulled on the lead and wrapped it around his fist as Oriel forced himself to straddle Roth in the chair.

"Look at me." Roth grabbed his chin. "You're such a sweet-looking thing. Give me the cum."

Oriel's eyes widened as Roth grabbed the back of his head and forced his lips to his. His tongue slipped in, and Oriel let him have his cum. He hadn't expected that, but at least he wouldn't have to swallow it this time. Let the bastard taste his own slime.

Roth nipped at his lower lip with his teeth. "Back on the floor, slave. I want to finish my wine."

Once he was done, Oriel was permitted to walk as they returned to the rooms. He hoped Roth would leave him be and go find something else to occupy his worthless life with, but he ordered Oriel to bend over his cage. Once he was in place, his wrists were cuffed to the bars.

The cane struck his ass without warning, and Oriel jumped at the deep pain that bit into his ass.

"Keep your feet flat," snapped Roth.

The cane hit him again, and Oriel pulled at the cuffs. "I didn't do anything..."

"You don't have to do anything," said Roth. "I can do whatever to you, but you did speak out of turn earlier, and you just spoke out of turn now. Also, you forgot to use Master again, so there'll be extra strikes."

Oriel gritted his teeth as the cane struck. He shouted by the eighth stroke, unable to hold it back anymore as Roth kept crossing the lines on his ass. He was going to feel this for days. After the fifteenth, he heard Roth's belt clinking and a cork popped. Oriel panicked and yanked on the cuffs, but they held.

"Legs together. Marking you is nothing." Roth was on his back in an instant, and he bit the back of Oriel's neck. His sharp little fangs dug in as he tucked his slick cock between Oriel's thighs and started to fuck him.

Oriel managed to choke back a noise. He'd expected Roth to shove it in his ass, but maybe he wanted to draw things out and save it for later. He probably enjoyed his slave's terror more than the actual sex so intercrural would do for now.

The teeth in his scruff hurt, and he knew he should have expected this. Male cat fairies often enjoyed biting the other's neck to hold them in place unless the other said no. It was a way of marking them.

Oriel's no wouldn't mean shit even if he dared to utter that word. He remained rigid as Roth pumped his cock between his legs. After a couple of minutes, he tensed, dug his fangs in further, and muttered something as he came. Oriel clenched his jaw as he squeezed his eyes shut. It was almost over.

Roth withdrew his fangs as he gasped. "Legs apart."

Oriel remained tense against the bars as Roth's weight vanished. It was done. Maybe he'd be left alone now. He cringed at the wetness on his legs.

He forgot about that and screamed as something struck his balls. The cane. Everything else vanished as he jerked his whole body so hard, the cage rattled. Every bit of his being focused on that spot like he had with the burn even though the two pains were so different. He sucked in a gasp as he went limp and finally started crying.

"Please...please...please..." he babbled as he shook. "No more."

"You take what I give, and you don't ask me to stop," Roth hissed. "Do you understand?"

The next strike on his balls ripped another scream from Oriel.

"Also, what did I say about calling me, Master?" demanded Roth

"I-I'm sorry, Master," Oriel managed to get out.

"If I command you to do something, I better not hear a single complaint. There better not be any snide looks, backtalk, or refusal. You are not to ask for mercy in any way, shape, or form. You will accept whatever is done to you. If you think this hurts, I can do far worse."

The pain hadn't even passed before Roth undid the cuffs and let Oriel collapse to his knees by the side of the cage.

"Are you going to behave?"

"Y-yes, Master," sobbed Oriel.

"Or should I have Father brand the words traitor's son on you? Maybe he should brand your balls. I know he'd enjoy it." Oriel clutched at the bars as Roth knelt by him. "I'm not going to get rid of you, but you better watch how you act. I know what he did to you in that room. Do you want to go back and know what it's like to have a hot poker applied to your body over and over again?"

Oriel shuddered as he thought of Aspen. "No, Master."

"You better be grateful for the pain that I give you because at least I'll never brand you," whispered Roth. "That means you stay still and take whatever I dole out to you. If you've been an angel, and I decide to hurt you, you'll take it. Now get back up, and bend over the cage. You can cry all you want, but hold yourself still."

He stood and tapped the cane on the bars as Oriel's mind reeled.

"That'll be an extra two. When I command, you obey instantly. You're not a Crown Prince or anyone of importance. You're a slave. I don't care

what you've been through lately. You have to obey now."

Oriel had to use the bars for support as he pulled himself up. His legs shook as he bent back over the cage, and his breath came in ragged gasps. The bite on his neck stung.

The bastard probably loved this. Oriel bit his tongue hard enough to taste blood as he struggled to keep quiet for the first ten strikes. He couldn't help but yell on the eleventh. This was too much. He wanted to wake up in his old bed and find it had all been a bad dream. This couldn't be his life anymore.

His knuckles were white from holding onto the bars by the time Roth was done after another ten strikes. His whole ass throbbed and burned, and his balls still ached from earlier.

"Crawl into your cage," Roth snapped before whacking the back of Oriel's calf with the cane. He walked around to open the door.

Oriel practically fell to the floor as he hastened to obey. Roth closed the door and locked it. Oriel only felt a little safer with the bars between them.

"Reach your hands up here." He tapped the spot, and Oriel held onto the bars. "You'll stay like that and remain quiet until I let you out. Keep your eyes down, and if I catch you fidgeting or looking around, you'll really be screaming after I hit the back of your fingers. If you pull your hands in, I'll take you out, and you'll wish you'd obeyed. Do I make myself clear?"

Oriel sniffled as he aimed his eyes down. "Yes, Master."

Roth brushed the cane over his fingers as a reminder. "You might think I'm cruel, but what Father did was nothing."

He was fucked with either. Roth spoke like he was saving Oriel from worse, and maybe he technically was at the moment, but if he was this cruel after only a few hours together, what would happen later? He might grow bored and end up breaking Oriel after a few months.

He tried to imagine himself in a year or two. Maybe he'd be shattered to the point where he didn't care or feel anything anymore.

Roth read on his couch for most of the afternoon while Oriel kept still and stared at the floor until it blurred and everything in his peripheral was indistinguishable. Roth only spoke to him to let him out later for a bath. When he snapped, Oriel knew to get on his knees on the hard tile in the privy room. He waited there until the lead was attached to his collar.

He had to crawl as Roth led him downstairs. He was allowed to stand for the stairs so he wouldn't fall, break his neck, and be worthless after less than twenty-four hours. Anger sparked in his chest as he was led into the Hall like a damn dog. People stared as they sat at the round tables or milled around.

"They're probably all jealous that they don't have a purple-eyed traitor's son for a pet," Roth murmured to him as they went around the High Table.

Oriel kept his face placid as he kneeled by Roth's feet on the floor. The tablecloth hid him from view so the courtiers couldn't stare at him, and he kept his head down. The last thing he wanted was another beating or worse. His whole ass still ached with every movement.

He'd made his decision in the bath. One day, Roth would fuck up, and Oriel would give him a taste of pain. He'd have to be smart about when and how, and he'd have to kill himself afterward to avoid the room, but he'd be as good as dead in a few years with this savage monster beating and rutting him night after night.

He didn't truly want to die, but death was better than letting himself get to that point.

Boots clomped behind him, and the lord's voice made his heart race. "How he's been acting?"

"Decent," replied Roth. "He's obedient, but I thrashed his ass in case he gets ideas later."

"Good." Oriel kept his posture and expression meek even when Lord Delwin bent over to grab him by the hair and tilt his head back. "Pain always works. Make sure those burns don't get infected or your toy won't last for long."

Pain could also make people angry. Oriel wasn't a crying mess now, and anger steadily burned in his chest. It flared when Roth dropped bits on the floor and told him to eat it like that.

Oriel ate the pieces of meat like a dog and pictured choking Roth or cutting his throat. Better yet, he'd tie Roth down, and he could see what the cane felt like before Oriel raped him. Let him suffer a fraction of what he'd been through since that night King Taven betrayed them. It still wouldn't be enough, but it would be something. He could at least get back at one person that hurt him.

Roth didn't seem interested in staying for dessert, and he led Oriel out.

“Crawling upstairs is easier, so stay down like a good doggy,” he said with a hint of laughter in his voice.

Oriel said nothing. After he pissed in the bathing room, he was put in his cage where a bowl of food and another of water awaited him. He hadn't noticed the tiny flap at the back, and it was far too small to fit through. A little bucket was in the corner for pissing.

“You’ll eat and drink on your hands and knees.” Roth locked the cage. “Sleep well.”

He left. Maybe he wanted to rejoin the Hall, mingle, and not worry about his slave. Oriel ate appropriately even though he was alone. He didn’t want to take risks now that he finally had time to rest. He forced the small meal down, drank his water, and finally curled up on his side on the blanket to spare his brutalized ass. He stared at the shiny wood floors and tried not to cry again.

This would be over one day on his terms. He just had to last a while, but he had no idea how long. He pulled one side of the blanket over himself and tried to pretend it was Aspen’s arms as he fell asleep.

He was mostly left in the cage for the next few days. Whatever Roth was busy with, he didn’t have time to play with his slave. Oriel got a bath in the morning, time to sit on the privy, and the brands were checked to make sure nothing was infected.

He didn’t get balm like Roth had possibly mentioned, and his caned ass didn’t get any soothing ointment either. He mostly remained on his side to avoid pressure on his bruised rear.

The servants said nothing when they brought him food and water and came to clean up until the third day. One finally paused by the cage with a faintly disgusted look. He wasn’t sure if it was him in particular or because Roth had another fairy locked up like an animal.

“Are you the traitor’s son?” she asked. “Oriel?”

“My Father didn’t betray King Taven,” Oriel spat without thinking as lay on his side. His stomach instantly clenched because if she said anything, he’d end up back over the cage or worse.

She blinked and bit her lip as she brushed back a few strands of her blue hair that had gotten caught on her tiny horns. “Everyone says your Father did.”

Oriel quickly looked away before his foolish mouth got him in more trouble. The servant hurried off to join the others in the bedroom.

Fuck. Three days, and he'd get a brutal whipping if she tattled.

His Master didn't return until after dinner. Oriel had burrowed under his blanket and hoped to be left alone as noises came from the bedroom, but no such luck. He heard the lock being undone after a couple of minutes, and the door squeaked open.

"You should already be on your knees and waiting for my command if you see me unlocking the door," said Roth.

Oriel hurried to get on his knees as his heart thudded. Roth snapped his fingers and pointed, so he crawled out. Roth forced him to his stomach and yanked his hands behind his back so he could cuff them.

"If you're a good boy, and you cum, I'll give you balm."

Helpless with the leather cuffs buckled and attached, Oriel couldn't help but stiffen as he was pulled up to his knees. Maybe the servant hadn't said anything, but Roth didn't need a specific reason to do whatever to him.

"Follow me." He walked backward into the bedroom as he started loosening his clothes. His coat went first and landed on the floor, then his vest, and he finally started undoing his shirt buttons. The sliver of his chest widened as each one was undone.

Oriel's mouth went dry as he inched forward on his knees. He'd known this would happen at some point, but it didn't make it easier.

"If things were different, and I'd been at your court, I bet you would have been all over me, and I would have let you do whatever you want to me." Roth's tail fluffed out as he slipped off his shirt and let it drop.

What the fuck? Roth didn't seem like he'd let anyone top him. He was also one of those who enjoyed kink that went to the point of torture. Oriel's desires had never gone that far.

"Anything," hissed Roth. "Get on the bed and await my pleasure. Or displeasure if you decide to be a brat. I'll tie you up and make you hold a stress position all night."

Oriel's stomach twisted as he stood by the bed so he could get on it. He fell forward amongst the thick bedding since he couldn't use his hands.

"Stay."

Oriel tried to calm his breathing and go elsewhere in mind, but he heard and felt everything: the way the bed dipped and creaked, the cork on the oil

bottle, a leg against his, and Roth's slick fingers pouring oil down his crack.

"I'm going to keep you marked at all times." He flipped Oriel onto his back and started oiling his own cock. "Uh-uh. Eyes open or else."

Oriel forced himself to look at him. This wasn't fair. Roth even got to control his mind. He couldn't leave if he had to look and see the red hair and ears. Roth's cat-like pupils had widened with lust, and he leaned down to kiss Oriel.

The gentleness of his lips and the prodding of his tongue was so foreign, Oriel stiffened further. It had to be a trap. Something painful would happen at any second. Roth reached between them to grip both of their cocks together, and he started stroking them.

"If I'd been at your court, I would have let you hold me down and fuck my brains out," Roth whispered against his ear. "Anything you wanted."

To Oriel's shame, his cock started to harden from the vigorous stroking. He pulled at the cuffs for a moment, wanting to push away Roth's hands out of pure shame. He hadn't grown hard when he'd been raped in his room or on the ship, but the time in his room had been too painful and shocking. On the ship, he'd been too weak to do much of anything after the heat, trauma, and so little water.

Now he'd had food, water, and more sleep, so his body simply responded to the touch. Roth probably thought he secretly loved this.

Roth switched to his left hand, and he reached lower with his other to touch Oriel's hole.

"Shh," he whispered when Oriel made a faint noise. His finger was surprisingly gentle as it slid in. "Good pets get rewards. There's enough oil there for a finger, all right? Just one."

Oriel moaned when Roth found his prostate and started directly massaging it. Fuck. Oriel would never be able to stop himself from cumming.

"If you don't cum, I'll punish you," Roth whispered before he sank his teeth into Oriel's shoulder with a growl.

The vigorous strokes and the little pricks of pain made him jerk. He almost wanted to shrivel in shame when he opened his legs wider and bucked. Roth kept stroking his prostate while he jerked their cocks. The double stimulation had Oriel flexing his hips as he pictured Aspen on him.

It was Aspen's finger in him, and his cock rubbing on Oriel's. It was Aspen's breath, tongue, and teeth hot on his shoulder.

The orgasm exploded. Aspen grunted against his shoulder as Oriel shook and tried to thrust in the grip.

"Fuck!" he shouted.

Warm cum slicked over their cocks and made them wetter. The orgasm started to ebb, and the finger against his prostate was almost too much.

"Fuuuuck," Roth managed to get out, which ruined the fantasy since he sounded nothing like Aspen.

He stilled against Oriel who took advantage of the moment to clench his eyes shut. Shit. He'd come like a damn whore for Roth and even welcomed it. He wondered if the threat of punishment had been real. Probably. Roth was a sick bastard, and he probably loved making his slave squirm just to shame him for cumming.

Roth pulled his fangs out and rubbed the side of his face on Oriel's. "Good boy. What do you say?"

"Thank you, Master," Oriel replied in a dull tone.

Roth used part of the blanket to wipe off the excess cum from both of them. "Go wash up."

The cuffs were undone, and he crawled off to the bathing room. At least he could wash off the other fairy's cum too, although he still felt dirty. When he came out, Roth was still naked as he smoked a cig on the bed, and he gestured. Oriel crawled back up onto the bed and prayed the cig wasn't about to be put out on him.

"Lay on your stomach." Roth held the cig in the corner of his mouth as he reached for a jar Oriel hadn't noticed in the sheets. "We made a big mess on the bedding. Good job."

What the fuck was wrong with him? Also, Oriel could have used this balm a few days ago, but he didn't complain as it was applied to his bruised ass. Roth replaced the cap, flicked his cig in the ashtray next to him, and sighed as Oriel stared at the sheet.

"You must have been bright and happy once," Roth muttered as he drew invisible circles on Oriel's lower back with a finger.

What? Was he mad he didn't get to do the initial breaking from day one?

"You can speak to me in private, you know?" added Roth. "I didn't forbid that."

"Okay, Master," said Oriel. Was he supposed to say something else? It wasn't like he wanted to chat with him anyway. What on fucking Ymir's dirt could they possibly have in common or talk about?

Oriel dared to look at him. Roth took a drag from the cig as he stared into space with an irritated expression and his ears partially drawn back.

Oriel's mind scrambled as he tried to figure out if he better find something to say or keep quiet at the moment.

"You can go to bed," Roth said in a stiff tone as his tail lashed.

Oriel might have been a little too eager as he got on the floor, but his Master didn't comment. As soon as Oriel was in the cage, and the door was locked, a sense of relief washed over him. This was his space, and so far, no one had hurt him while he was *in* the cage. Roth was done with him for the night, so he was likely safe for a bit.

He curled up under his blanket as Roth put out the lanterns in the sitting room and went to bathe. The little splashes of water didn't bother Oriel as he closed his eyes and tried to ignore this shame and the fact that Roth would probably be fully up his ass in another day or two.

One day, Oriel would make that fucker pay.

He later awoke to the main door closing, and he jumped. A little light came from the bedroom, and he made out Roth's form as he approached. Oriel hadn't even heard him leave, and he wondered what time it was.

His Master paused as he braced a hand on the wall. His breathing sounded heavy, and Oriel remained as still as possible as he closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

After Oriel fell asleep, Roth must have left to see his friends and head out into the city. If he was drunk, what would he do if he remembered his slave? Oriel's heart thudded as Roth's footsteps made it into the bedroom.

"Fuck."

The bed squeaked, and Oriel smirked to himself. He hoped Roth woke up with a raging hangover. Served him right. He turned over, stretched out more, made sure he was covered, and went back to sleep.

The servants woke him when they came in. One had food and water, and she opened the tiny flap for the bowls at the back. Another entered the bedroom, and something hit the wall.

"Get the fuck out!"

“I’m sorry, m’lord,” she squeaked as she bolted for the main door. The other hastily took the empty bowls and went after her. Oriel ate on his hands and knees like usual just in case Roth popped out. The bastard probably had a wicked hangover, and that would likely equal rage if his slave misbehaved.

He had finished eating when he heard water. After several minutes, Roth came out to lean against the doorway with his shirt off. On his left side, a huge bruise had blossomed on his ribs. It looked painful, and Oriel felt nothing but pure glee since someone must have kicked his rotten little ass last night.

He kept his expression dull as he turned his head back to stare at the wall. Absolute subservience would serve him best today since Roth looked like was in a foul mood. When he approached the door, Oriel got on his hands and knees as expected.

“You’ll bathe me. Crawl.”

Oriel was let out to crawl after him. Roth had another bruise on his lower back and one on his right shoulder blade. It was hard to tell if they came from punches or if he’d been slammed into something.

Whoever it did, Oriel wanted to kiss them. Maybe they’d do it again, and next time, they’d crack open Roth’s skull and splatter his damn brains everywhere in a tavern or wherever. It didn’t matter. The fucker who’d made Oriel shout like a damn slut last night would be dead.

Except...without Roth, Lord Delwin would lock Oriel back in that room and spend weeks torturing him to death. The fact that he truly needed Roth for now at least grated on his nerves as his stomach twisted.

Roth undid the ties on his sleep pants and let them drop to reveal another bruise on his lower right hip.

Oriel said nothing as he waited until Roth was in the water before he slipped in too. Roth sighed at the warmth before he ducked his head under to wet his hair. To jump on him and hold his head under...Afterward, Oriel could use his dagger to slit his own throat and be done with this.

Roth lifted his head. Too soon.

“Wash my hair.”

Great. If anybody kicked the lord’s ass again, Oriel would have to wash him like a damn baby. He rubbed scented, creamy soap into the vivid red

hair, and Roth let out a faint noise as Oriel got close to his ears, making him pause.

“I didn’t say to stop.”

Oriel rubbed the soap around, and Roth stepped back with a throaty growl. He’d never been to bed with one of these cat fairies, but he should have been expecting this type of response.

“Keep rubbing around the base,” said Roth.

Oriel rolled his eyes since his Master couldn’t see. Cats were great, and Elira had loved them and birds. She had made some fairies with her favorite things, but why did she have to give some of her children these kinds of characteristics? Wasn’t the appearance enough?

Roth leaned back against Oriel entirely and snatched one of his hands. “Rub and scratch gently riiiiight here.”

Oriel stroked under his chin and scratched it. Roth practically purred like a damn cat too. He wouldn’t have minded if these were completely different circumstances, but the urge to grab Roth by the throat and push him under was strong. He’d go back, lose his footing, and Oriel would hold him down with both hands. Bubbles would escape to the surface, and the damn bastard would kick and flail, but eventually, he’d weaken and go still.

Oriel would have to end himself so he didn’t have to go back to that room. It was the only option because he was sure he wouldn’t be able to get out on his own. Maybe he could wear Roth’s clothes and get into the city, but that wasn’t guaranteed. And if he did, someone would be after him pretty soon, and an escaped slave guilty of murdering his Master wouldn’t be treated well.

He didn’t even want to imagine what tortures Lord Delwin would subject him to for the death of his son. Killing himself was the only way to avoid that.

Roth tipped his head back on Oriel’s shoulder. He could do it, right? He’d been eating, and they’d made his meals larger since they knew he wouldn’t throw up now. What if he still wasn’t strong enough to hold him down since he’d lost muscle and weight? Roth wasn’t much bigger with his lean and wiry physique, but he’d probably fight like a bitch.

Another problem was that Oriel had no idea what sort of magic his Master had. Energy? Lightning? Fire? Water would put out the fire in a second, energy depended, and lightning could shock them both.

Oriel wanted out now. What if Roth got bored of him in a few years and wanted a new slave? In a few decades, if Oriel's mind didn't crack before then, he wouldn't look so young and fresh. He might end up in that room anyway to live out his final days.

It might happen in a few months.

He flexed his fingers for a split second and was ready to do it, but Roth suddenly turned, pushed him against the side, and kissed him. Oriel scrambled for the sides to brace himself as Roth's tongue entered his mouth. He almost wanted to scream at the lost chance but remained still. Whatever mind game this was, he wasn't playing or kissing back.

Roth kept his lips pressed to Oriel's as he pulled him forward enough to loop his legs around his waist. Oriel suddenly remembered Aspen doing this to him in the ocean back home. It had been hugs at first. The kisses in the water came later, and Oriel, always feeling like he could never get enough touch and feel from him, had relished each one. That was the only person he'd ever felt sexual attraction to, and the pain of missing him was still like a dagger.

If he could just have one more kiss with him.

Roth broke the moment by pulling his mouth away to bite Oriel's shoulder where it met his neck which sent a strange jolt right to his dick.

Roth pulled out his fangs. "If I had the energy..." He unlooped his legs from Oriel's waist, and his arousal was hard to miss. "Get the scoop there, and rinse my hair."

Fucking bastard. Oriel's cock was half-hard from all of the sensation. Roth must have gotten a huge kick by going from nasty to nice. Nasty had to be right around the corner again.

He rinsed Roth's hair, and once the fairy was on the seat in the bath, he washed him everywhere. He was only gentle on the bruises so he didn't get punished, but he wished he could give him a few rib punches too. And maybe smash his pretty face into the edge of the tub. Oriel had to dry him off too once they got out.

"Get the balm from the top drawer by my bed, and put it on the bruises," Roth said as he stood in front of the looking glass to comb his hair. "Use gentle fingers like I did to you. Walk."

Oriel fetched the jar, dabbed on the balm, and gently rubbed it in. Once Roth was satisfied, he locked Oriel in his cage. Servants brought him

breakfast while Oriel stared at the wall. The cruelty had to be coming soon. He just had to get through it and wait for his next chance.

Would Roth ever be stupid enough to fuck him and fall asleep afterward without locking up his slave again?

Probably not, but if he ever grew that lax, Oriel would have time to make him suffer before he died.

Roth left for a good hour and returned to fetch him. Oriel had hoped to be left alone all day, but no such luck.

“Crawl like a good boy. I’ve got a guest. Lord Mather of Cardinal’s Brook died, but his son, Philre, returned and took over. He’s coming by to say hello.”

Like Oriel cared who the fuck died or took over where. None of that shit mattered anymore. He fantasized about drowning Roth in the tub as they went outside. Or better yet, gagging the bastard and making him suffer the cane.

All of that kissing earlier was to fuck with him. He was sure of it now. Oriel did need him now, and Roth knew it.

A shady spot in the garden had a little table with wine and a couple of glasses. Oriel had to lean against his Master’s legs. While he focused on the little ball of anger in his chest, Roth stroked his hair.

“I bought this book on humans a few weeks ago,” said Roth. “They’re rather fascinating in some ways. Do you know they actually seem to separate themselves by what kind they are at times? They even have names for their types or races. It’s ridiculous.”

Who cared what humans did?

Roth didn't wait for Oriel to say anything. “I almost want to find a rifter and go visit to see their realm for myself, but I’m sure they’d all run and scream once they saw a man with cat ears and a tail. You’d pass for human even with your purple eyes, but my red ones would likely terrify them.”

The human men would probably try to gut him because they’d think he was some sort of devil.

“Ah, here’s our guest. Remember, be a good boy.”

Oriel glanced toward the sound of the footsteps on the path, and he froze when he saw who this new Lord Mather was. What the fuck? This was impossible. Someone would shout that he was an imposter, grab him, and haul him away.

But nothing happened. Aspen looked strange in trousers with a silk strip up each side and a yellow coat embroidered with shiny green thread and silk cuffs that were turned back. He was pale and still skinnier than normal, but he seemed almost all right considering his state when Oriel had last seen him.

Pure relief filled him until he saw the hate in Aspen's eyes.

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Chapter Ten

“Hello.” Roth stood to greet Aspen as he approached. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Aspen didn’t actually give a shit, and he was only here because Sira said he should meet this other lord’s adult son. He completely ignored Oriel, and barely managed the arm clasp with Roth.

It almost seemed too strange to be true, but maybe he should have expected that an Earl’s son would end up with a fancy pet. Oriel was the only slave to once be a Crown Prince. He just hadn’t expected it to be this lord’s kid.

“I’m sorry about your Father,” said Roth, although the sympathy was probably all fake. “I only met Lord Mather a couple of times before, but he was quite pleasant.”

“Thanks,” Aspen grunted before his gaze slid to Oriel who flinched when he made a face. “Oh, you bought one of them slaves?”

“This is Oriel. The traitor’s son.”

“I heard about that from the servants. Why would you buy a traitor’s son? He’s shit.”

Pure hurt flashed in Oriel’s eyes. Aspen knew damn well Oriel wasn’t a traitor’s son, but it was best to go along with what he’d heard. Besides, Oriel was a traitor in a different way.

“He’s good for sex, and at least he’s not ugly,” said Roth. “Oriel, crawl to those bushes over there and back.”

Oriel’s cheeks reddened, but instead of telling Roth to go fuck himself, fall in a ditch, and die, he started crawling. Aspen noticed bruises on his ass like he’d received the caning of his life. On his shoulders, he had two large brands. No wonder he didn’t dare disobey.

For a moment, guilt, grief, and a bunch of other shit Aspen couldn’t name clawed at his insides while the man he once loved crawled. Then he remembered how Oriel clung to his Kingdom while Aspen was burned with a poker.

Oriel deserved this, but he didn't see the once Crown Prince putting up with this for too long.

"He's very well-behaved," said Roth, clearly delighted with his control.

Aspen raised an eyebrow. "I don't think Princes make good slaves. Too uppity. Just wait until you turn your back, and he decides he's tired of crawling around."

"Watch," Roth whispered.

Aspen tacked on a faint sneer for Oriel to see as he crawled back to kneel at his Master's feet.

Aspen flinched at the movement when Roth suddenly jerked Oriel's head back and made him gasp. Roth put his dagger to his neck just hard enough to indent the skin but not break it.

"See?" Roth raised his eyebrows. "He doesn't fight even though I could end his life. He knows he'll suffer if he doesn't obey. Even a Crown Prince can be broken and made into a useful little toy."

His tone held something dangerously close to lust as Oriel met Aspen's dark eyes. A faint plea crossed his face.

"I won't kill him." Roth released Oriel. "He can swallow my cum since someone has to, and besides, I can do whatever I like to him. Things even a whore might not allow."

"I suppose." Aspen brushed by and went to sit in the other chair. Let the once Crown Prince suffer.

"So you were...traveling?" Roth's tone held an odd note as he nudged Oriel to face Aspen's direction. "Hands and knees. Head down. Ass up."

Oriel assumed the position as Aspen snorted. "Nah, I ran off. Everyone knows. Why lie? I was a shit son, and I'm still a shit person."

Roth let out a faint chuckle. "I'm sure you're not that bad. Is it hard getting into the swing of things?"

"The Steward and his wife help. Sira said I should get out and talk to a few people, and she mentioned you since you're my age."

Oriel peeked up, but Aspen ignored him as he fiddled with his coat button. Guilt nagged and warred with the glee. He should only be happy that Oriel was suffering for what he'd done. For being such a selfish prick. For lying. Everything. It was all fucking Oriel's fault.

But he still wanted what he thought they had two years ago. For a moment, he remembered the way Oriel used to hug him and make him feel

like he mattered. He'd given Aspen a white rose once, and nobody ever gave flowers to street whores.

He'd even scraped off the thorns for Aspen.

"So what did you see while you traveled?" asked Roth, pulling him from his thoughts.

"It's not really a big deal." Sira had given Aspen some shit to say, but it was too much trouble to lay that out. He took a good swig from the wineglass closest to him. "Everyone acts like traveling is grand, but when you get to a city, it's just different faces and a different layout. Everything else is the same."

"I've been to a couple of places and thought it was interesting," said Roth.

"A tree here isn't much different from a tree three Kingdoms over. A brick or stone for a building isn't either."

Aspen cast him a derisive look. Fucking soft prick. Roth didn't know shit about real life. Everything must have been grand for such a pretty boy who had grown up in luxury his whole life, and he certainly never had to sell his ass on the street to survive. He'd certainly never been held down by grunting men.

"Mm." Roth cocked one of his ears. "What do you like to do?"

"Sleep," Aspen replied without thinking. At least then, he didn't have to think unless he had a nightmare like yesterday when he'd woken up in a cold sweat and thought someone was on top of him in the bed.

Roth snorted like he thought that was a joke, and Aspen broke out in a sweat under his fancy coat. He couldn't do this. There was no point in pretending that he wanted a friend. These people couldn't understand him, and they wouldn't care either. They wouldn't give him any respect if they knew his past. He'd never have anything in common with Roth or any of them.

"Do you like to practice sword-"

Aspen downed the last of the wine in his glass and stood. "You know what? I feel like going home and going to sleep, and I don't think you really give a fuck. So...bye."

He caught Roth's faintly stunned expression before he walked away.

"Erm, bye."

Aspen ignored him. What a waste of time. He'd only agreed to this because Sira nagged him, and she had been so happy that he was "going to make a friend." Like he was five. She seemed to think he'd be all better with a couple of pals.

He should throw himself off the docks.

He paused outside of the Castle where the carriage waited. The only thing stopping him was that he could live and do better than Oriel. The Crown Prince could have a turn to suffer. Aspen wouldn't actually get better in his head, but he could have a tiny bit of revenge for a while.

As the carriage rattled back, he sweated and tried to push away the things raking at his brain. Once he was back home and in his upstairs sitting room, he broke and kicked the small table in front of the couch before he let out a scream.

It was too much and not enough. Part of him wanted to go back, choke Roth until his red eyes bugged out of his skull, rip off his fuzzy little ears, throw him from the rooftop, hug Oriel, and take him away.

The other part of him wanted to kill Oriel and throw him from the rooftop too. The entire time that Aspen had lived as King Leneer's pleasure slave, he'd missed Oriel's touch and the time they'd shared even though he knew things couldn't have worked out in the long run.

He'd thought some shred of affection would have remained once everything had gone to shit. He didn't want the Oriel who betrayed him. He wanted the one he shared afternoons on the beach with. The one who'd once bought Aspen a beautiful white rose and scraped off every single thorn so he wouldn't prick his fingers.

Even now, he couldn't get rid of the love or the hate.

He was about five seconds from punching a window so he could feel something else instead when Sira hesitantly walked in.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he said as he paced.

She eyed the cracked table. "I thought you went to-"

"Yeah, I saw Roth. I don't give a shit about him. Stupid prick. He's lived a soft life, and I can guarantee you, no one has ever laid a finger on him. If he knew what I was, he'd look down his fine nose at me and put his ears back in disgust."

Sira looked down. "Well...you could find other friends."

“You. Don’t. Fucking. Get. It.” He marched up to her. “I was a fucking whore on the street after my Father dropped from a heart attack. After that, I was King Leneer’s pleasure slave, and I got gang-raped on the night King Taven betrayed Leneer. I was raped every fucking day as far as I can remember on the ship. A couple of friends isn’t going to fix me and make me into some perfect little lord like you think!”

She looked away as if hearing details made her ashamed and disgusted. “I said life is what you make it.”

“Everyone else made me into this!” he screamed as he backed up. “I didn’t get a fucking choice! Shit just happened. The only thing keeping me alive now is the fact that someone who betrayed me is suffering, and I can spite them because they didn’t give a fuck before.”

Sira’s eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“Roth bought the Crown Prince.” Aspen vaguely gestured. “King Taven is a fucking liar, but Oriel could have told them where the seal was that night. He didn’t even though I was fucking screaming two rooms down while they burned me with a hot poker. He held onto nothing at my expense. His whole family was dead, and he knew he had lost, but he still let me be tortured. He only gave up when they threatened to cut off his cock. I meant absolutely nothing to him!”

She rubbed her lined face. “Aspen, I’m sorry for what happened to you. I’m just trying to make things better. I’m much older than you, and I’ve known people who have been through terrible things. Some are able to get by later.”

Maybe they were good at faking it in public. He didn’t know and didn’t see how he was supposed to fake it. How was he ever supposed to be normal again when he kept feeling the men on him and hearing their grunts and laughs?

He stepped back from her. “I still love Oriel. We had...something before. It wouldn’t have gone anywhere, but I did love him, and I’m still fucking stupid enough to love the old him that I thought I had. Now, I’m also glad he’s suffering because it’s the only way I can get back at him, and that makes me just as bad as him.”

She started to say something, but he didn’t care. He went to his bedroom and slammed the door. It was pointless talking to her too.

Later that evening after Sira and Lan were in bed, he sat in the downstairs sitting room by an open window with a bottle of whiskey. Maybe he should gather some money and offer to buy Oriel. He could tie him up on the floor, burn him with a poker on his thighs and stomach, and let him see how that felt. Let him scream and beg for forgiveness. Let him say how he couldn't take it anymore while Aspen forced him to anyway.

Sickness at himself tried to climb his throat, and he hunched in his chair while he struggled not to throw up. Father, his real one, would be ashamed if he knew what his son had become. He could just imagine the look if he knew Aspen had thought about torturing someone like that.

"That's not how I raised you," is what he used to say when Aspen would fuck up. But back then, it was always stupid shit like shoving a girl, or that one time he bloodied a boy's nose because he called Aspen a name.

He'd likely turn away and not even speak to him now. And Mother... Aspen couldn't put a voice to her, but she'd be ashamed to.

He just wanted to go back to those beach days. It was much simpler then, and he'd still owned an ounce of pride even though he'd been a street whore.

He never should have signed that contract. He thought of how King Leneer and the younger triplets had treated him like a treasured pet, and his throat ached with missing them. Maybe they'd hate him too if they knew that he'd been capable of such thoughts about Oriel.

He let the whiskey burn through him since the nausea had retreated. After another twenty minutes and several sips, shit didn't hurt so bad. Maybe he could sleep and not dream or feel. Alcohol seemed to wipe away his dreams or at least turn them into incomprehensible smears that he couldn't remember after.

It was fucking hot, so he went outside with the bottle to sit on the steps, although the breeze wasn't enough. Maybe he should just sleep out here. He took another mouthful. Gutter rats didn't deserve beds, and if he downed enough liquor, he wouldn't feel the ground either.

Maybe he could stay in the haze forever and dream of the old Oriel. Perhaps Elira would let him live in a fantasy world of the days on the beach and in the forest, and they'd never end.

Reality hurt too much.

"What the fuck are you doing in my front yard. Shoo!"

Something pointy poked Aspen's face. Actually, it was a lot of pointy things, and he swiped at them. The light was like a knife in his eyeballs as he moaned.

"What is it?" came a woman's voice.

"There's a fucking drunk in the yard!"

Oh Elira, where was he? Not that she gave a fuck about him. He rolled onto his side and felt for the bottle, but it was gone. Someone on the opposite side of the fence stared at him.

"Fuck you looking at?" he snarled as he tried to stand. His head threatened to split as the grass wobbled. Shit. He had absolutely no memory of getting up from the steps. Why the fuck had he wandered off?

"Is that-"

"Get the fuck outta my yard!" The fairy with the broom jabbed him in the ribs.

"Get that away from me before I shove it up your ass."

"Oh, Elira, that's the lord." The fairy in the street gasped. "You can't poke him."

"What-?" The guy gaped at Aspen as he stumbled toward the gate. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry, m'lord. I didn't realize it was you. What happened? I'll help you home."

"Now you're all nice," mumbled Aspen.

"I thought you were a drunk."

"I am drunk." Aspen tripped.

"Here, let me help you up." The fairy grabbed his arm.

"Don't fucking touch me!" Aspen screamed at him even though his own voice was like a mallet on his skull. The fairy jerked back like he'd been burned. "Everybody thinks they can touch me and do whatever they want..." He huddled against the gate as others gathered in the street. A few mouths hung open. "GO AWAY!"

The first woman darted off as he sobbed. Everyone knew he was a fucking sham and a piece of shit. He curled up against the gate as he covered his face, trying to block out the light and eyes pasted to him.

"-Father died-"

"Poor thing."

"I was a mess too after my Mum died."

"-not taking it very well."

Aspen couldn't stay here and hear all of that shit. He struggled to his feet and fumbled to get the latch undone so he could stumble out into the street. Several fairies backed up like they were afraid. Maybe they knew what he'd thought last night about Oriel and how he was a monster too.

"I wouldn't do it," he mumbled. "I just want to go back to before when it didn't hurt."

"I'm sure he's not mad at you," said an older woman. "Lord Mather was-"

"Fuck Lord Mather!" screamed Aspen.

He wobbled down the road, and the voices grew faint behind him. Home, or more like the place where he subsisted as a leech, was this way. Or he hoped so. He only wanted to get into bed and never wake up. Everyone seemed too scared to follow him or try to help. Even they knew he wasn't worth it.

He made it to the gate where the guard who kept out lowlifes sat during the day.

"M'lord?" He stood and stared at Aspen in his wrinkled clothes. "Are you okay?"

"Like you fucking care."

"M'lord?"

"Shut up."

Aspen, the worst lowlife in Cardinal's Brook, entered and made it up the steps without tripping and killing himself. As soon as he got in, he heard Sira scream, and she came running down the stairs.

"Where were you?! I woke up, and you were gone! Lan's up in the attic and looking for you."

He leaned against the door after he shut it. "Fuck would I go up there for?"

"We thought you were dead! He was about to go out and look for you. We didn't tell the guard up front yet because..."

"Because you know I'm an embarrassment?"

"No-"

"I just woke up in some guy's yard and shamed myself in front of the whole town. I'm sure you'll hear about that."

Sira's mouth dropped open. "You can't drink anymore. I should have taken away the bottles to begin with."

“If I want to fucking drink, I will.”

She stiffened. “No, you won’t. I won’t let you.”

“Who’s the fucking lord?”

“Oh, now you’re ready to be the lord. I’ll throw out the whiskey and the wine. I won’t let you drink yourself to death.”

He headed for the stairs. “Elira forbid I shame myself again, right?”

“I’m trying to keep you alive.”

He held onto the railing as he looked at her. “I know why you brought me here. You didn’t give a shit about saving some poor slave. Maybe you cared about Lord Mather a bit. I’m sure you did if he was a kind lord and you spent so long working for him, but overall, you just wanted to stay here, keep your wages, and not worry about leaving or finding new work.”

Her eyes widened. “How dare you!”

“Don’t be ashamed,” he said as he started making his way up the stairs again. “At least you’re not selling your asshole on the street like I used to.”

He ignored whatever else she said as he went to his room, locked the door, and grabbed a whiskey bottle from a cupboard over the sideboard.

He needed to not feel ever again. He’d never live down what he’d done. Everyone in Cardinal’s Brook would remember this for the next century. They’d always bring up “that time the lord woke up drunk in some guy’s yard and bawled his eyes out in the dirt.” He couldn’t be what Sira and Lan or anyone expected.

The whiskey blurred it as he drank, but he knew it would come back just like everything else did. If that was the case, he’d drink again and make it go away. If he couldn’t dream of the old Oriel, he didn’t want to dream or feel anything.

The last thing he remembered was the smell of puke.

“He’s not dead. I think he puked up most of it, so he’ll probably be fine, but the charcoal will help.”

Some sort of nasty fluid was forced into Aspen’s mouth, and he panicked, but someone held him down as he choked. The sailors wouldn’t let him die like he’d wanted. They’d keep forcing water and broth into him so they could continue fucking him as they pleased.

“Just drink it,” came Lan’s voice as his mouth was forced open again.

The liquid made him choke. He couldn’t breathe. Why couldn’t they just let him go? Maybe because Elira didn’t want him either. Even the forgiving

Goddess was so disgusted with him, she wouldn't take him. Where was Oriel? Why wouldn't he save him?

The next time he became aware, he was in bed. The sheets were clean and so were his sleep clothes. Sira sat in a rocking chair with a face like stone.

"Welcome back to the living," she snapped.

Oh, great.

"Lan had to bust in here because it had been hours, you weren't responding, and I was terrified you'd done something to yourself. We found you in a puddle of your own puke. You kept drinking even with a hangover?"

He didn't feel good now, but it wasn't quite as bad as he'd expect after such a bender. Who knew how much time had passed?

Sira threw aside her knitting. "We had to call a physician, and she said you probably puked most of it up, but some charcoal and a couple of things would help. Lan had to hold you down because you panicked. I've spent hours dribbling water in your mouth to keep you hydrated. I also had to change the sheets because you spewed the charcoal water all over."

The look she gave him made him feel smaller and shittier than ever while he tried to get a grip on his muddled thoughts. "I'm sorry," he said in a small voice.

Even if they'd used him in some way, they didn't deserve this. They shouldn't be running around after some shell of a man who couldn't take care of himself.

"We're going," she said. "I'm done, and so is Lan. He can tell you can't stand to be around him, and he's done nothing to you."

It was only because he was so big. He *could* hold Aspen down and hurt him. He opened his mouth while trying to think of how to articulate that.

"If you want to slowly kill yourself, go ahead." She stood and snatched her knitting from the floor before he could get his head further organized. "We're not watching, and I'm not spending years trying to keep you alive and cleaning up your puke because you drank too much. I cared for Lord Mather through his decline, and Lan kept everything going the best he could, but Lord Mather would have gotten better in a second if he could. You-I don't know about you."

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again even though it was so inadequate. “I-it hurts. Everything.” Words couldn’t even begin to describe it.

She hesitated by the door. “I thought you’d get better with some care and would be able to cope. You’re also safe here, but Lan thinks you won’t get better, and after this, I’m starting to believe him. Neither of us want to stick around and see. I’m too old to wake up and find you dead one morning in a puddle of vomit. Lan is too. We’re leaving.”

“Wait.” His eyes pricked with tears.

She closed the door.

“Sira, please!” he begged, but the sitting room door slammed shut.

He had no energy to get up and go after her, and he could barely drink from the water glass she’d left on the bedside table. She was probably only threatening him. When he got up, they’d still be here. She’d be miffed, but he’d beg her forgiveness and try to do better. Somehow, he’d try. He had just wanted to stop feeling, not scare her half to death.

When he finally struggled out of bed a few hours later, they were gone, and they had robbed him. All of the money in the office lock box was gone, and he noticed certain trinkets and knick-knacks that could be sold had vanished. The jewelry box from Lord Mather’s room wasn’t there, and the room looked sparse. They’d taken whatever they could and abandoned him.

He sat on the bottom step of the stairs as he stared into space, realizing how truly alone he was now. He’d even managed to chase off two older people. Then again, since they robbed him, they couldn’t have cared that much.

He shouldn’t have expected anything different. With King Leneer and the younger two triplets dead, no one would ever really care about him again. Nobody wanted someone so broken and unfixable.

The bottles in the office and kitchen were all gone, so Aspen checked the cellar. She must have forgotten or not bothered to clean this out since there was so much. Rows of wine would have to do. He could kill himself this way instead and not feel the pain of a weapon or risk living if he jumped off of the balcony.

If he finally managed to slip away, would he be allowed to have King Leneer, Kard, or Zale at least? Or would he be left alone and forgotten in the afterlife too?

A shelf in a corner held dusty bottles, and when he brushed off the label, he saw it was some old whiskey from a century ago. Lord Mather had probably been saving it for better times that never came.

It was too late now.

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Chapter Eleven

Oriel kept his face blank as Aspen walked away.

"He seems a bit tapped." Roth made a slight face, and one of his ears twitched as a chuckle chickie giggled in the garden somewhere. "I rather hope he doesn't come back."

Like Roth wasn't tapped. He'd just held a dagger to Oriel's throat not too long ago.

"You were a good boy," Roth said as if that had all been a simple game.

Pure hate burned so brightly in Oriel's chest, he almost got up to fly at Roth and choke the shit from him.

Roth leaned down to look at him, and too late, Oriel realized his expression might not have been so placid. Internally, he braced for a hit as he made sure his features were smooth like nothing had happened.

Roth seemed to study him for a long moment. "We're going in."

Oriel's stomach twisted the whole way back. Outside of the sitting room door, a guard stood with a faintly bored expression as usual.

"You can go," said Roth. "I don't need you around."

"But, m'lord, I was told to-"

"I don't need you," snapped Roth. "I feel like I'm being babysat all day. My slave couldn't even set a toothpick on fire, and if he misbehaves, I'm quite capable of dealing with him myself."

The guard finally retreated.

Roth didn't punish Oriel once they were inside. Maybe he hadn't noticed anything. Or maybe he wanted to wait. Either way, it didn't matter anyway since Oriel was sure it wouldn't be long before Roth felt like torturing him again.

Oriel sat in the cage for the rest of the day while Roth went off and lived like a normal person. At least he didn't have to sit in the Hall and be in Lord Delwin's presence. He ate in his cage when the servant brought food, drank, pissed in the bucket, and prayed that he was left alone tonight.

Roth came in around ten or so by Oriel's estimate and went to his room. Innocent little noises including splashing water reached him, and he hoped Roth would go to bed. A lantern burned on the table between the couches.

After a bit, Roth came out in sleep clothes and knelt by the cage with his damp hair loose. Oriel remained frozen under his blanket, unsure if he should get to his knees since Roth didn't have the key. In the light of the lantern, he could see the fairy's pupils had expanded.

"You have no idea how lucky you are."

Lucky? Oriel almost laughed in his face at the unexpected comment. Fury also filled him. How lucky he was to lose everyone he cared about. While Roth had sat in his home, Oriel's entire life had been ripped apart in one night, and the pieces had been stomped on in the days since.

"Darling pampered little Prince," Roth whispered. "Come here."

Oriel bit back the fifty things he'd like to tell Roth to do as he approached the door on his hands and knees.

"Growing up so pampered makes some weak." Roth's ears twitched. "I can tell you're weak in some ways. You're still beyond lucky." He put his face close to the bars.

"Lucky?" Oriel snapped before he could stop himself.

"Oh, it speaks." Roth's tail flicked. "I bet you've never killed a man before. Tell me, did you kill anyone that night? Be honest."

Oriel knew he'd fucked up. "No, Master."

"Like I said. Weak."

Something snapped in Oriel as he lunged to get his hands through the bars and managed to snag Roth's shirt collar. He tried to pull away, but Oriel jerked him so his face was against the bars.

"How about if you open this cage, and I'll show you who's weak?" Oriel said through gritted teeth. "Men attacked me in the bath, so I didn't get a chance to kill anyone. But what would you know? You're weak for torturing a collared man that your Daddy handed over to you. You wouldn't have the guts to face me in a fair fight."

He was pretty sure he looked crazed, but Roth smiled. "I knew I didn't beat the fight out of you. I could tell, and--"

"Damn right, you didn't!"

"-people like you pack things down into anger until it's ready to burst. What would you do if I let you out?"

"I'd rape your ass and let you feel everything that's been done to me. Then I'd carve your fucking heart out if you've even got one. We'll see who's weak then, you cocksucking piece of shit!"

Oriel knew he should let go, shut his damn mouth, and start groveling. He was probably already headed for the room, or at least a terrible punishment from Roth. Every second he held onto his Master and spat threats that he ached to fulfill were probably earning him another lash, cut, bruise, or burn, but he couldn't make his fingers let go.

Pure rage burned through his veins, and he knew if it wasn't for the damn collar suppressing his magic, he would have already set Roth on fire and gleefully watched him burn. His Master's eyes held his, and he licked his lips like this was some exciting game that was getting up his lust.

"You're too scared because you're fucking weak and only want to harm anyone you think is weaker," said Oriel.

Roth suddenly lurched back. Oriel tried to hold on, but his fingers slipped, and Roth scooted back on his ass to escape his slave's reach. Instead of threatening punishment, he gave a delighted smile as he stood. "That's what I want. Show me your anger, traitor's son."

"My Father isn't a fucking traitor, you piece of shit!" Oriel rattled the bars.

Roth took the key from his pocket and walked around to the side of the cage although he kept out of reach. It glinted as it dangled on the leather cord. Oriel's chest heaved as he tensed. Whatever happened, he'd fight now even if he ended up in that room. His fists itched with the urge to hurt Roth and make him pay.

Roth's tail swished faster as he leaned forward and dangled the keys above the bars so the metal clinked. His ears cocked at the sound.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," snarled Oriel. "Except the cat's a damn tease and a bitch. You need to be put down."

"Do you want to make me suffer?" Roth straightened up. "Do you want to punish me for what everyone's done to you, and for what I've done to you?"

"Yes, yes, and yes," Oriel spat, too far gone to have any chance of reeling himself back and cramming himself into the meek slave role.

No one had come in despite the yelling, so that meant no other guard had been posted outside the door in the meantime. If this little shit thought that

he could let Oriel out and deal with him on his own, that'd be the last mistake he ever made.

Roth pulled a knife from his sleeve before he leaned forward again. He slipped off its leather sheaf, let it fall, and dropped the blade through the top with no warning. It landed with a soft thump on the blanket, and Oriel hardly thought before he snatched it.

"Come a little bit closer, shit sack," he said. "I'll cut off your precious ears."

Roth smirked as he wiggled them. "I don't think you will." He let the key tink on the bars as though Oriel was a cat to be teased with a string. He resisted the urge to try and grab it since it would probably be snatched back.

Roth went very still for a moment although his breathing quickened before he dropped the key in.

Oriel snatched it as Roth backed away toward his bedroom door and tensed like a cat preparing to fight. The pupils of his eyes were blown wide, and his tail had fluffed out. Oriel nearly dropped the key, but he rammed it into the lock. Everything he'd promised himself he'd do it now. This bitch would suffer for his foolishness.

As soon as Oriel was out of the cage, Roth's ears flattened as he darted through his bedroom doorway. Gripping the knife, Oriel almost slipped on the shiny floor, but he followed. Roth barely got six steps before Oriel grabbed a good handful of his long red hair, and he grunted as it was yanked.

In a second, Oriel had slammed him face-first against the wall. Roth shuddered as the blade touched his jugular.

"I already caught you, you fucking asshole," Oriel snapped as he pressed his chest against Roth's back. "You're fucking pathetic."

Roth scrambled at the wall and tried to push away from it, but Oriel shoved him against it with his whole body.

"Okay, you caught me. Punish me like I deserve. I know you want to pin me down, so use some of that anger. I want it."

Did this piece of shit think he still had the upper hand in some way or that Oriel would suddenly back off and beg for mercy?

"No one wants to get raped," Oriel managed to get through gritted teeth.

Roth ground his ass against Oriel's crotch. He was almost ashamed that he started to respond to the simple friction, but he had promised himself

that he'd rape this bastard and make him feel what Oriel had even if it was just a tiny bit. He couldn't get back at those men in his room, the sailors, or any of those who had hurt Aspen, but he could make this one pay. Didn't he at least deserve revenge on one?

Roth probably thought he didn't have the guts to do it and that he'd give up out of fear.

"Even with a knife to my throat, you're still a bitch like I thought," Roth growled. "You don't have even the guts to rape me. You're weak."

Oriel jerked down his sleep pants and yanked him toward the bed. Even with a blade to his throat, Roth struggled, and he almost tripped on his loose sleep pants as they pooled around his ankles. Oriel got him onto the bed and held his shoulders down as he straddled him. His Master tried to twist away, but Oriel pushed his face into the sheets.

"Fuck," Roth managed to get out through the fabric as Oriel tightened his grip on his hair.

Oriel stroked himself with one hand to make his cock hard enough. "It doesn't feel so good when someone else does it to you, huh? How do you like being held down and threatened with a knife, you fucking piece of shit? Did you think this was a game?"

He guided the head of his cock to Roth's hole and rammed himself in.

Right away, it felt all wrong. He'd expected to feel resistance around the rim and for everything to be dry. Maybe it'd even hurt Oriel's cock, although he wasn't sure about that since he'd never forced anyone or gone in dry. Either way, Roth's ass had already been stretched and oiled.

Also, his moans weren't ones of pain. Had he riled up Oriel in the hopes of this?

"You're a fucking bitch, you know that?" Oriel leaned down to brace his elbow on the bed before he grabbed Roth's chin and pulled his head up. Roth let out a faint whimper as he felt the knife again, but he moved his hips like he was desperately trying to meet each thrust. "You're a sadistic fuck, but you have no idea what I might do once I dump my load in you."

Roth fisted the blankets as he moaned again. Dear Elira, he really was enjoying this. He must have taken good care of himself beforehand. Oriel knew he should pull back and hurt Roth in a different way by not giving him what he wanted. He should kill him. He still had the knife.

Or maybe he should just hatefuck this bastard.

Roth stiffened as the edge of the knife bit into his neck enough to make blood bead. The sensation seemed to be enough to make him claw at the bed.

“Fuck, yes!” he shouted.

He already sounded like was close to finishing. Oriel could feel himself nearing the end point too as he kept pounding while rage burned through him. He didn’t give a shit if the fucker came or not, but once he did, he’d use the knife and end this for good.

Roth swore again as he came and gripped the bed sheets so hard, his knuckles whitened. He clenched and stiffened his legs, and the tightness around Oriel’s cock drove him over the edge. For a moment, he forgot if the knife was pressed too hard against Roth’s throat or anything else as he filled his bowels with cum.

Roth clenched around him one last time as he gasped. Oriel jerked his hips as the last of the cum was milked from his cock.

Dear Elira, he had to kill him now. He couldn’t wait another second. But as the haze cleared from his brain and took some of the fury with it, he remained frozen. What had he just done? He’d never raped or hatefucked anyone before. He’d never even thought about such a thing back home.

Roth breathed into the bed sheets although he remained still as the knife stayed at his throat. “If you try to kill me now, which I don’t think you want, you’ll be in deep shit. I have lightning magic and can jolt your ass into next week. It tracks my target, so you couldn’t dodge it either.”

“You think I won’t kill myself to escape your Father’s wrath?”

“I don’t think you want to die. I don’t really want to hurt you either-”

“You beat my ass with a cane! You-”

“Imagine if you misbehaved in public under my Father’s eye. Princes don’t make good slaves. If you slipped up, and he heard or saw one thing... Besides, if I had actually wanted to torture you, I’d get more creative than a cane.

“You fucking raped me!”

Roth took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t have made you suck my cock if I didn’t have to show my so-called friends my new slave.”

Oriel pulled out of him, flipped him over, and put the knife to his throat again. “Oh, that makes it okay? Do you lay in bed at night and think of ways to justify what a piece of shit you are?”

Roth kept his hands on the bed by his head. "Oriel, listen to-"

"Your finger fucked me and rubbed our cocks together so you could make me cum. I bet you got a big thrill out of that."

"You don't know what my Father is really like-"

"Oh, I think I know very well now after what he did to me in that room."

"No, you don't." Roth's ears flattened. "Do you think he's all brutality and no brains? He's not stupid. I can guarantee he'll ask the servants if there are marks on the bed because he'll want to know if I'm fucking you. He'll look at your body when he does see you because he'll want to check that there's bruising or bites on you. He'll always be on the lookout to make sure I'm using and hurting you instead of just keeping you like a pretty, spoiled lapdog."

Oriel didn't say anything, but he also didn't take away the knife.

"The bedding had to look real with oil marks, wrinkles, and plenty of cum smeared on it. If he asks the servants who clean my rooms, they'd say I'd definitely been fucking you, and it didn't look like I simply jerked myself off. If he's suspicious and thinks I'm treating you too nicely, he'll take you away. If that happens, I can't save you. I've tried to spare you dinner in the Hall too, and that's why you've been kept caged a lot, but I can't always do that."

Oriel lightened the pressure slightly. He had cut Roth's neck earlier, although not enough to do real damage. A little blood was smeared on his skin. "You still raped me. He wasn't around to see me sucking your damn dick."

"My friends were." Roth's voice sounded bitter on the word "friends." "Father told everyone I was getting a slave, and they wanted to see whoever I got. If I said no or was too pleasant to you, they'd wonder why or they might talk. In their eyes, you're just a toy to be rough with. If they thought I was too soft, it could get back to Father. We've also been to the whorehouse in groups. If I was suddenly shy about getting my cock sucked with others around, they'd question why. They know who you are and what happened between our Fathers. Partially, anyway."

Oriel remembered when the other guy had wanted a turn, Roth had refused in the way of a nasty person who doesn't like sharing. "Is that-is that why you didn't let the other guy have me?"

“Yes, and I took my cum back so you didn’t have to swallow me, and I could at least spare you that shame. I didn’t even want you, but you were forced on me. Father isn’t interested in screwing a man or keeping a slave to torment for years. He foisted you on me, but if I decided I truly didn’t want you, he’d torture you to death in that room down below. He was so gleeful when he had you down there, I knew I couldn’t refuse and let you die like that.”

Oriel took away the knife and straightened up. “Then what was all of this? Do you have any idea what I’ve been thinking about doing to you? I wanted to drown you in the tub. I was about a second away from doing it.”

Roth didn’t get up or try to move. “I’ve always had a rape fantasy.”

Oriel shook his head. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I don’t want to actually be raped. If someone truly attacked me, I wouldn’t enjoy it. But as a fantasy, it’s the loss of control and the rough fucking. The other person’s just using me for their pleasure, and I get off on that. I’m not the only one that likes it, and there are those more than willing to do it. I’ve paid for it before. Some people use it to work through past trauma to have control depending on which side they play, and others like their control to be wrestled away.”

Oriel squinted at him. “You said to punish you.”

Roth looked away. “I didn’t have much choice, but I’ve done bad things to you. I know you hate me. I saw your face earlier after Lord Mather. I hadn’t beaten away all your fight, and you probably wished for some way to get back at me.”

Oriel grabbed his throat. “So you fucking used me?”

“Yes, but even if I enjoyed what you did, I gave you some choice back-”

Roth’s speech cut off as Oriel tightened his grasp and pulled his upper body off the bed. Fear flashed in Roth’s eyes for a moment, but guilt did too. Even though he’d earlier mentioned that he had lightning magic, he didn’t do anything or even try to push Oriel away.

Oriel could kill him, but if this had been forced on Roth by his damn Father, then even the caning had been to protect him. Roth hadn’t simply beaten him and shoved him in his cage. He’d been adamant that Oriel take whatever was done, keep his mouth shut, properly address his Master, and show no defiance or anger. He’d been forcing Oriel to behave in the way Lord Delwin would want to keep him out of trouble.

Oriel released Roth who fell back as he gasped. “Do you want to die, or do you think you just deserved to be punished?”

“I don’t want to die, but I can’t do this either. Father will punish me later anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m letting you go. He’ll be furious.”

Oriel squinted. “How do I know if you’re not tricking me?”

Roth spread his hands slightly. “All of this time, I could have shocked you. Have I? I could have beaten you bloody to the point where you couldn’t even move when I had you cuffed to the cage. I also could have been fucking you senseless these past few days, but have I done any of that?”

“No...”

“I don’t think you want to die either.”

Oriel was the only one left in his family except for distant members. He had thought it would have been better if he died with the rest, but truly, he didn’t want that or to kill himself. His parents wouldn’t have wanted him to give up so easily either. Father didn’t raise his sons to lay down and die. In fact, if they had time to spare a thought for him when everything went to shit, they were probably glad he’d left the Hall earlier because that had given him a chance to live.

“No...I don’t want to die, but if I killed you, I’d never get out of here. I can’t get the collar off here in the city, I have nowhere safe to go, and they’d come after me. Even if I was able to hide your body in here somewhere, they’d know you’re missing pretty soon. I’d rather die by my own hand than in that room. Your Father’s insane. I could put on your clothes and wear a hood, but someone might realize who I am before I even get out. I can’t take that chance.” Oriel pulled back to lay beside him on the bed. “Who kicked your ass the other day?”

Roth was quiet for a moment. “Father did that.”

Oriel slowly turned his head. “Why the fuck would your Father do that? Does he suspect you’re not cruel enough?”

“Sometimes he gets drunk, and he calls me to his rooms to rant at me for the transgression of living, and if I don’t go, it’ll be worse later. He always hits me in places where it can be hidden so nobody sees it. If a bruise or

something was spotted by accident, I'm supposed to say I got it in training or fell off my horse if asked. Something like that. Nobody asks."

Oriel narrowed his eyes. "What the fuck? He bought you another fairy which I guess is a pretty grand present--"

"I'm not his son," Roth said suddenly. "Sam wasn't my grandfather either. He was *my* Father."

Oriel froze on the bed. "What the fuck are you talking about? I thought he was a cousin then, but Lord Delwin said that was his Father. You even said--"

Roth shook his head before he turned to look at Oriel. "The main story is that Sam was simply a cousin. The family and general public are meant to think that, and it is true. We have more cousins than we know what to do with. Lord Delwin told you Sam was his Father so you'd *partly* understand his hate for King Leneer and you, and Sam was old enough to be his Father so it fit. But even if you blabbed what he said, no one would believe it because it would sound like you made up a terrible lie and are trying to make people believe he's a bastard. *I'm* the bastard child."

"What happened?"

"My Mother fucked Sam shortly after marriage even though he was older. My parents married young, and I don't think they were ready or even a good match. She didn't get much choice. Father went away on business for a couple of months, and when he returned, she was pregnant, so it was pretty obvious she'd cheated."

"Oh. Fuck." Oriel could just imagine the lord's shame. Cat fairies had a tendency to feel possessive of their spouses or lovers. Clearly, Roth's Mother hadn't felt the same about her husband.

"Father and Sam used to be close. I only call Lord Delwin Father because he was the one that raised me. Anyway, Father was ashamed and afraid of being called a cuck, so he claimed me and pretended it didn't happen to the general public and the rest of the family. Babies can sometimes come a little 'early' with no issue, so nobody seemed to suspect."

"Then why did he come to beg for Sam's life in West Bay?" asked Oriel. "He should have hated Sam, or did he want to kill him personally?"

Roth shook his head. "After I came along, Mother was more careful, but she didn't stop her affair. They broke it off much later, and Sam went

traveling. When they heard he'd been arrested, Mother refused to believe that Sam had committed such a crime. She said if Father didn't get Sam back, she'd tell everyone the truth about me. They had a huge fight about it. As you know, Father failed to have Sam freed."

"I'm sure Sam was guilty," said Oriel. "There were witnesses. They were too late, but it was...vicious. They saw him on her, and I doubt they had any reason to lie."

"I know. Honestly, Sam was mostly a bum while here. He never seemed to be that sort, but some people are good at hiding their darkness. And just because he never treated Mother badly doesn't mean much. Still, I don't know what she saw in him or why she loved him so much. I knew he was my Father, but he didn't even have that much interest in *me*. Lord Delwin seemed more like a Father since he was around even though I was a blight in his life. Sam was more interested in Mother's snatch."

"And then...she died from food poisoning, so Lord Delwin didn't have to worry about her blabbing?"

Roth shrugged. "She seemed to be getting better. I truly think he put a pillow over her face to suffocate her. That wouldn't leave a mark, and the physicians said her body gave out from throwing up and dehydration." He gave a bitter chuckle. "Like she was that delicate. Mother had the constitution of an ox, but a few other court members died from the fish too, so nobody thought twice."

Oriel stared at the ceiling. Holy shit.

"Lord Delwin seems to miss her, and I think he did love her to some extent, but I also think everything has messed him up over the years. He wanted Mother to fully love him, and he kept chasing that in the hopes that she'd be entirely his. He bought her gifts and did all sorts of things, but he knew she didn't feel the same because she kept fucking Sam in secret. With her about to tell, he would have been hugely shamed to have spent so many years raising another man's offspring while his wife fucked another. He asked King Leneer to pardon Sam and was refused. In Father's eyes, it's King Leneer's fault that Mother would have told. In turn, that means it's also King Leneer's fault that he had to kill the woman that he loved and wanted to be loved by. By chance, we had bad fish the night he returned, and he took the opportunity to silence her. He made the choice to put a

pillow over her face, but he justifies it by blaming King Leneer. In turn, he tortured you to punish your Father.”

Two people stuck together by their parents might not have a happy marriage. Some could manage to coexist in peace and raise a family even if passion was lacking. A man that actually wanted to gain his wife's love would feel like salt was being rubbed in the wound if she was fucking others. He must have felt possessive about her and expected the same in return.

To top it off, Roth was a living, constant reminder. Lord Delwin didn't even have another kid to dote on, so maybe he couldn't produce children of his own. Years of failure and shame must have worn on him, and he kept looking for others to blame.

Oriel knew fucked up people existed in the world, but he hadn't expected he'd be at the mercy of one.

“How come he doesn't make sure you have an accident?” he asked.

“I'm his only heir. My parents never had a child together.”

“But if you died, everyone would say boohoo, he'd move on by getting another wife at some point, and he could have a kid if he's able.”

“If. I wonder if he can.”

“So he's kind of stuck with you if he doesn't want some cousin in the position later,” said Oriel.

“Yes, and I'm still a Delwin by blood. We share enough features for me to pass. Sometimes, he seemed to love me as a kid, but I think it was because he wanted so badly for me to be his child. He still hates where I come from and blames me for the affair like I asked to be born.” Roth turned away on his side. “I don't think Mother truly wanted me either. She probably wanted to keep the affair a secret, but I ruined that. She never threatened to tell when she knew Father had beaten me. She only did that when Sam was in trouble. It's clear who mattered more.”

Oriel was quiet for a moment as he imagined him trapped in this house with his not-Father while both kept up a lie to preserve the family image at all times. No wonder Roth said he was lucky because not counting recent events, Oriel had lived a good life with his parents. There was no doubt where his blood came from, and Father had never raised a hand to his sons. Both of his parents had loved their triplets. Mother had never blamed them for the rough birth ruining her health.

With their barriers broken down, Roth didn't seem like such a maniac or a bastard.

"Why didn't you tell me anything?" asked Oriel. "You could have tried-"

"I needed you to look beaten down enough." Roth lifted his head. "You needed to look truly meek and afraid. I couldn't risk you doing or saying something in front of those idiots I call my friends, and I wasn't taking the chance of you fucking up. I don't know if you can act for shit, and I needed you to be truly afraid and obedient to me so that there wouldn't be one, single mistake. If my Father came in my room, and you gave one wrong look-"

"Am I supposed to let you beat my ass now so I look bruised up?"

"No. You'll be gone by tomorrow night. Father mentioned bringing someone over so I can meet their son in three or four months. He wants me to get married, and he mentioned that if that happens, the son won't like me having a slave because he's too mild-mannered and gentle to approve of such things."

Oriel went cold. That meant his lifespan had grown much shorter. To get him out of the way and avoid offending the potential future husband, Oriel would be taken away in a few months and tortured to death in the room down below. Lord Delwin would pretend he'd simply sold the slave and threaten Roth to keep his mouth shut.

"It's not like I could keep this up for long anyway," continued Roth. "I have an idea to get you out. As for letting you see the bruises, I just...I don't care anymore. I'm tired of hiding everything from everyone. I'm sorry about tonight too."

Guilt raked Oriel's insides as he went over the past few days. If the so-called friends didn't exist, he wouldn't have had to suck off Roth. Oriel hadn't had to do it again despite plenty of time with him. Roth had even chosen a sexual activity where he wouldn't have to penetrate Oriel with his cock. That was why he'd threatened to punish Oriel if he didn't cum. There had certainly been enough mess to make it look like two people had fucked on the bed.

He remembered Roth's expression afterward. He hadn't been displeased with his slave's behavior. He'd been disgusted at forcing himself on Oriel with his hands, and while he had a rape fantasy too, it didn't mean he

wanted to do that to another person. He'd also handed some control back to Oriel and let him do what he wanted to vent some anger.

If Roth had simply said he was freeing Oriel earlier, he might not have believed that either.

"I'm sorry," said Oriel. "I've never hatefucked anyone before or thought about raping someone. I swear I've never been like that. Is this how you deal with Father treating you like this? Do you feel like you need to be punished for shit that isn't your fault?"

"I guess, but with others, I'm safer. No whore has ever beaten the daylights out of me. By the way, the other night was tame. I've suffered much worse beatings from Father. Anyway, I can sneak you out tomorrow night. You'll be free of this shit."

"I'm not meant to be a slave."

"No one is meant to be one or thinks they are," Roth said with a bitter laugh. "You're such a Prince. Besides, even if I did what he wanted to perfection, you don't have long. It doesn't matter how well I beat you or leave cum on the sheets from us. You'll die in that room if you stay."

It almost felt unreal. Now that he knew what Roth was really like, he didn't want to leave him here. What else would he go through?

"You need to hide your neck tomorrow. I cut it."

"I already healed it." Oriel sat up to look. Roth side-eyed him and smiled. "I can't heal bruises, but a cut where the flesh is exposed is something I can do."

"Oh."

"Figures I only get half that ability when I'm stuck living with some bastard who beats me. My lightning can track its target and is quite powerful, but if I dare to defend myself...If I killed him, nobody would ever believe the truth, so I'd hang."

Oriel flopped down. "What do we do now?"

"I guess you can go to bed. It has to be in the cage because of the servants. I can't risk us being asleep together, although...I wouldn't mind you being in the bed."

Roth had mentioned that he'd let Oriel do whatever he wanted if they'd met at his court. If they'd met before, they probably would have gotten along quite well. Even though Oriel wasn't sexually attracted to him, there

was a possibility they would have fucked. Sex felt good, and aesthetically, Roth was quite pleasing to look at.

“Do I have to go to bed right now?” asked Oriel.

“No. I'm not actually your Master.”

Oriel rolled toward Roth and put the knife to his neck again. Instead of resisting, Roth leaned back into him. Oriel kept the edge at the soft skin of his throat and purposefully made another nick. Roth's breathing immediately picked up.

“You do like some sweetness, don't you?” asked Oriel. “You wanted me to scratch your ears just like a little kitty.”

“Yes, but I'll let you do what you want,” Roth breathed.

Oriel had never played with anyone who liked this kind of treatment. He'd spanked, caned, and flogged a few partners before, but he'd never drawn blood. If they were equal now, he could give Roth something he wanted before they split. He was also rather curious now that he could think straight and wasn't consumed with rage.

He slid the knife down. Roth's erection brushed the back of his hand, and he put the blade against the shaft to test his reaction, although he wouldn't dare make a slice anywhere near there.

“Fuuuck,” groaned Roth.

Oriel moved the knife, pinned him facedown, and straddled him. “I better not hear another word out of your mouth, slut.”

Chapter Twelve

Even though Roth could heal himself, he couldn't make the few blood spots on the sheets go away. The servants would certainly notice that, so Oriel held still as Roth gave him a good bite and went deeper than normal too.

"Fuck," he swore now that he wouldn't be punished.

Roth wrapped his arms around Oriel's bare chest as he growled into his neck.

Oriel grunted as he felt the skin tear a bit. The servants would see that tomorrow and think he'd bled a little on the sheets, so he didn't complain. Strangely, it was also rather erotic, and a strange feeling shot down to his dick. "For someone that enjoys pretending to be attacked, you're also like a fucking animal."

Roth withdrew his fangs and let out a rough laugh against the back of Oriel's hair. "It's like an instinct to mark you and hold you still. The neck is such a sensitive area too."

"I know, but still...I've never been with a cat fairy."

It was similar to bird fairies who started preening the feathers on their head and letting them out more to impress a potential life mate. They'd also start looking for shiny gifts to give. Instinct partly guided them.

Oriel reached up to scratch Roth's ears which made him twitch and practically shiver. "All of your type was interested in someone else back home, so it's not something I have actual experience with."

"If you keep doing that..."

"I'm tired. My dick needs a rest."

Roth managed to peel off his limbs to sit by him on the edge of the bed. "I know you'll be gone tomorrow night, but remember, I'm still the Master, you're the slave, and you wouldn't raise a hand to me if I was about to stick you with my sword. When the servants come in, act meek."

"I know. I did say something once."

Roth tilted his head. "What?"

Oriel recounted that little incident with the woman who had been looking at him, and Roth huffed as he cocked his ears. "You're lucky she said nothing. Maybe Father hasn't asked them about your attitude, or she feels sorry for you, but still..."

"What about you?"

"Hm?"

"When I'm gone, you said he'll punish you."

Roth shrugged and looked away. "I'll get through it."

Oriel side-eyed him. "That's not-"

"You don't have to worry about it. You've got your own problems coming up. If I can't find the key to your collar tomorrow, that's another issue added. I don't have any way to remove it, and you won't have your magic."

"But you're not what I thought you were. I don't want to leave you to him and..." Something occurred to Oriel as he remembered the cobwebs on the cage like it had sat there for ages. He'd vaguely thought that someone else had been in there before, although he'd been far more concerned about his own suffering at the moment. "Has he ever taken you to that room before?" Roth's jaw tightened. "Answer me."

Roth kept his face turned away as his ears flattened. "Once."

Oriel turned to face him fully. "What the fuck?!"

"I shocked him once after Mother passed when he started beating me one night, so he punished me for attacking him. It's not a big deal since I'm clearly still alive."

"It is a big fucking deal! What if he does that again afterward to punish you for losing me? He's not going to shrug and forget it. Roth, look at me." Oriel gently took his chin. "Come with me."

Roth squinted at him. "I can't just leave my home."

"Why not?"

"This is all I know."

"You don't seem to have anyone here."

"I won't have anyone out there either," said Roth. "He'd send people to look for me, and if they found me, it'd be much worse after I was brought back. If I got a job and settled somewhere, I'll always stick out with looks. If word got back to him...I don't want to live my whole life looking over

my shoulder. Father isn't the sort to give up so easily, and I think you proved that. He'll always hold a grudge if I run off with you."

It was like a cowed dog that was too afraid to leave its cage even though the door was wide open. Oriel was ready to take freedom when it was offered, but he hadn't grown up with an abusive Father either.

"Come with me," Oriel said in a firm voice. "I'm not going to live on the streets when I go. I'm going to my cousin, Queen Asara. I'm not entirely sure what I'll do after, but she will help us."

"She owes me nothing."

"She'd owe you for helping me. Do you really want to go in that room? I sure don't want you to." Lord Delwin would probably do things that would heal later like whipping Roth, and the idea of that or locking him in the cage turned Oriel's guts. "You don't need to be punished anymore. Come with me. We won't have to spend our lives hiding from him."

Roth hesitated for a long moment. "All right."

Oriel hugged him. He probably needed one. "Queen Asara will help us, and nobody will ever punish you again."

Roth rested his chin on Oriel's shoulder. "But what if I want to be punished in some way? I don't think that will go away."

Just like the things that had happened to Oriel wouldn't disappear. They'd used each other to vent out feelings and their own varying forms of past trauma, but the past didn't vanish or grow easier.

"You can do what you want as long as it's safe, but if you're going to come with me, you need to know I'm not leaving without someone." Oriel drew back to look at Roth. "Lord Mather is Aspen. A slave."

Roth blinked. "What?"

Oriel gave him a quick version of things. "I'm not sure how he became Lord Mather."

"The last one was sickly, and his son ran away years ago at the age of fourteen. I never got to meet the son, but Lord Mather had black hair. I imagine his son did too." Roth squinted as he stared into space for a moment. "His servants must have bought Aspen and used him."

"He's been abused, and I don't think he's doing well. You saw how he acted, and if he gets caught..."

"The servants wouldn't know his past, and they probably wanted someone they could control. They could stay there, give themselves a raise,

that sort of thing.”

Oriel flopped back on the bed. “They’re using him. Great.”

“They probably won’t hurt him,” said Roth. “He had no collar, I doubt he’s been branded, and he’ll have it better there than with someone else. Technically, he’s a free man, but you’re right. He’s not entirely safe because he’s committing low treason. I know where Lord Mather’s house is, so we can get to Aspen.”

“All right.” Oriel’s stomach twisted at seeing him again. “He hates me. There’s reasons I don’t want to get into right now. We had something before, and it was all fucked up, but I’m not leaving without him. If someone realizes who he is, he’ll be punished.”

“We’ll get him. We should go to bed now.”

The next morning, Oriel had eaten and was sitting in his cage like a meek slave when Lord Delwin came in with one of Roth’s “buddies.” Oriel kept his head down as they both ignored him and headed to the bedroom.

“Roth, when’s the last time you spoke to Derra?” asked Lord Delwin.

“A few days ago when we had lunch,” replied Roth.

“That’s it?”

“I haven’t seen him around much. Why?”

The friend spoke. “He’s been gone since yesterday afternoon.”

Roth was quiet for a moment. “Ah.”

“Do you know where he is?” pressed Lord Delwin.

“No, I don’t know where he is, but I can guarantee he ran off with that slut he’s been seeing.”

“Derra’s parents are yelling at me like I helped him to run off,” snapped the friend.

“I sent men to look for him,” said Lord Delwin. “I might go myself. He didn’t say anything to you about where he might go?”

“He said nothing to me,” said Roth. “If you wanted to run away, would you announce it?”

“He’s eighteen and stupid,”

“I don’t think he’s quite that stupid,” said Roth. “But trust me, that man he’s besotted with probably won’t seem so great after a few days.”

Oriel assumed Derra might have been one of the “friends” who seemed similar to Roth. This cousin must have been hooked on someone his parents didn’t approve of.

“I swear, some teenagers act like they have it all figured out. He’s never done a day’s work in his life, and I can’t imagine him getting a job. He’s lived soft.” Lord Delwin stalked back into the sitting room, rubbed his chin, and glanced behind him. “Go tell his parents that Roth doesn’t know where he is.”

The friend huffed as he came out. “And get yelled at again?”

“They can’t really do anything to you if you didn’t help him. Just do it.”

“Fine.”

Lord Delwin waited until the door slammed. “Every time I turn around, someone is doing something stupid.”

“Then kick some out,” Roth called. “We’ve got more cousins than we know what to do with.”

“Family has uses.”

Oriel stared at his knees. Roth’s only use was to preserve Lord Delwin’s image and torture the son of his enemy. He couldn’t believe that Roth was capable of even looking and speaking to his "Father" as if nothing bad ever happened.

Lord Delwin stalked back into the bedroom. “Are you sure he said nothing? He must have been thinking about this for a while.”

“He said nothing,” replied Roth. “With the impulsive way he sometimes acts, the idea probably popped into his head yesterday morning, and he was gone by the afternoon. Like you said, he’s not the type to get a job, and he’ll probably come crawling back in a bit.”

“He still needs to be found. Something could happen to him, and his parents will be all over me like it’s my fault when they should have raised their damn kid better.” Lord Delwin made a frustrated noise. “How’s the slave behaving?”

“Like he was born with no thoughts except for pleasing me.” Roth’s snide tone, like that pleased him beyond measure, was quite convincing.

“Bring him out.”

Damn it. Why couldn’t he screw off somewhere?

Roth came out after a minute with his hair tied back, and he snapped his fingers while he twirled the cane in his other hand. Oriel immediately got on his hands and knees by the door with his head down. Once it was unlocked, he crawled out to settle by Roth’s feet. He hoped there would only be a few insults or whatever, and Lord Delwin would fuck off.

Roth tapped his ass with the cane, and he ducked his head before raising his ass. The sharp strike hurt like a bitch and surely left a line, but he took it like that was his only purpose.

“Are you sure he’s behaving?” asked Lord Delwin.

“You gave him to me already broken,” said Roth. “I do what I want to him now, and he obeys. I put a dagger to his throat the other day in the garden when the new Lord Mather came, and he didn’t do anything. It’s like having a doll, except it’s so much better.”

Lord Delwin bent down and grabbed Oriel’s chin to force his face up. Oriel kept his expression blank and his eyes lowered. Please go away. Just fucking go.

“Fine. Remember, if there’s any defiance, beat it out.”

“Oh, I will.”

"Always be wary and careful of a traitor’s son."

"Back in your cage, slave," said Roth. "I'll play with you later."

A sharp strike drove him back in. Roth put the cane away and left with his Father without a backward glance. Oriel finally relaxed. He couldn’t imagine living with a family like that.

He just had to play meek for a little longer, and then he’d never have to see Lord Delwin again. Roth could stop faking it around his Father too.

He figured once Roth had breakfast, he’d know what his Father was doing. He had mentioned that he needed the key to Oriel’s collar. It marked him, and without his magic, he was vulnerable. Once they had Aspen and ran away, they didn’t have to only worry about Lord Delwin sending men to look for them. Outlaws existed in the world, and Oriel would feel far better if he had his magic to fight with too.

Dear Elira, he couldn't wait to get the collar off. The weight and feel was a constant reminder of everything.

After a couple of hours, the door opened, and Oriel perked up since he’d been bored out of his mind. Instead, Lord Delwin came in with the friend from earlier. Or more like the fake friend.

“What are we doing here?” asked Fake.

“You know where Derra is.”

Fake perched on the arm of the couch and folded his arms. “No, I don’t. You brought me in here to ask that?”

Lord Delwin disappeared in the bedroom, came out with the key on its cord, approached the cage, and snapped. Oriel got into position as his heart pounded. Fuck. Where was Roth?

“I’ve known you your whole life,” said Lord Delwin.

Fake shrugged. “Okay.”

“You’re a terrible liar. You can’t look anyone in the eye, and you always get this expression.”

“I don’t know!”

“You still can’t quite look at me despite what I just said.”

“If he wants to run off, who cares? He’ll come back soon enough. That damn idiot he went off with isn’t even worth a free fuck.”

“That doesn’t matter. His parents are worried sick.”

Lord Delwin unlocked the cage. Oriel had to force himself to crawl out and kneel. Lord Delwin kicked him in the ribs and knocked him onto his side. Oriel hunched around the pain and cowered as he moved closer.

The lord pointed. “Get to that ring over here.”

Oriel hurried to obey despite the throbbing in his side. As soon as he was close enough to the ring in the floor on the other side of the room, Lord Delwin shoved his head down, and the lead clinked as he pulled it out of his pocket.

“Ass up.”

Once Oriel was chained in place, he remained still as he rested on his forearms. Being so helpless with Fake somewhere behind him made his guts churn.

“Tell me where he is,” said Lord Delwin. “I won’t tell your parents or his that you lied. You can fuck the slave as a reward.”

Oriel’s heart damn near stopped.

After a pause, Fake’s footsteps slowly approached. “You won’t tell anyone that I knew?”

“No one,” promised Lord Delwin. “I know he’s your cousin and friend too, and snitching probably feels wrong, but we need to know.”

“He said the slut’s got a friend in Three Cross. They’d probably hide out there.”

Lord Delwin seemed to be considering that. “That’s not a good place.”

“But who’d look there? It’s a roof over their head for now.”

“True. You can have the slave’s ass. Roth’s probably got oil in his bedroom.”

“I’ll look.”

Lord Delwin stepped back and seemed to intend to watch as Fake went to the room.

Where the hell was Roth? He was the only one that could stop this now. Oriel went rigid as Fake returned, and he could feel Lord Delwin’s eyes on him, pleased to watch further torture. He broke out into a cold sweat as Fake got on the floor behind him. He just had to be still and get through it like on the ship. He couldn’t fuck anything up when freedom was so close. He only had to act a little longer.

Fake touched his hip.

Oriel’s panic snapped as he dropped his body to the floor, twisted, and kicked to catch Fake in the leg. Lord Delwin shouted something, and they were both on him in a second. The collar tightened on his airway, and something, probably Fake’s fist, slammed into his gut.

“The fucking bitch got my knee!” snarled Fake.

Oriel struggled to breathe through the pain in his gut as he jerked against Lord Delwin’s grasp. Fake went to force his stiff legs apart, but the door opened.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Teaching your damn slave a lesson,” said Lord Delwin.

As Roth came into view, his livid eyes focused on Fake, and his ears went back. “I never said you could fuck my slave!”

Shame and defiance crossed Fake’s face as Oriel attempted to not tremble. “Lord Delwin said I could have him. I know where Derra is-”

Roth turned to Lord Delwin. “Oriel is mine to use.”

“He’s a slave, and he fought. He’s not obedient like you said.”

“He is obedient because I said he’s only mine, and his ass isn’t for anyone else. Of course, he fought. If he won’t verbally refuse, he still knows what *my* wishes are, and he won’t disobey me.”

“He doesn’t get to refuse anyone, especially me,” Lord Delwin said in a deadly quiet voice.

“I’m his Master.”

“I bought him and broke him. Although it seems it wasn’t enough.”

“Get out.” Roth waved a hand at Fake.

“You said you’d share before-”

“Guess what? I don’t feel like having sloppy seconds.”

Fake stood. “Selfish.”

Roth’s hand cracked against his face “Get your own slave to fuck or find a whorehouse in the city. Your parents are just leeches on our court, and so are you.”

Fake’s whole face turned as red as his slapped cheek before he hurried away. The door slammed as Lord Delwin stopped pinning Oriel down and stood.

“He should know not to fight.”

“He’s following my wishes.”

“You’re the heir, but don’t forget who the lord is.” Lord Delwin stepped closer to his son who kept his chin up, but his posture stiffened for a moment as if he was expecting a slug. “If I say someone can fuck him, then they will. He was your gift, but I can take him away at any time you ungrateful brat.”

“Maybe I’ll bring someone to your room and let them have whatever they want.” Roth snapped as Oriel hurried to get back on his forearms and knees.

“That’s not the same. This is King Leneer’s son-”

“And I’d rather his ass not be all stretched out.” Roth brushed past Father to kneel. “Some present it is if anybody can stick their cock in it.”

“You’ll bring him to dinner tonight, and the court can use him as they see fit. We’ll see if he fights back then.”

The words almost made Oriel throw up as Roth paused for a second with his hand on the chain. “I’m not sharing my present like that. You said he’s mine.”

The chain came undone just as Lord Delwin snatched his son’s left arm and jerked him up. “What I say in this city and under this roof goes! You’re not the lord yet, and maybe he is your present, but that’s because I said so.”

Oriel kept his head close to the floor as Lord Delwin yanked his son across the room.

“Let go of me!”

“I guess I should take away your slave right now to teach you a lesson.” Lord Delwin hauled Roth into his bedroom.

The chain was unhooked.

Roth grunted like he'd been hit as Lord Delwin snarled at him. "I've spent years taking care of you, and you wouldn't have shit if it wasn't for me. I could have put you and your Mother on the street."

Something crashed in Roth's bedroom as Oriel stood. "Get off!"

"Don't you dare ever raise a hand to me!"

Like hell Oriel was going to let him beat Roth again. Glass shattered as he snatched a heavy-looking figurine from one of the bookshelves. He raced into the bedroom to find Lord Delwin had pinned Roth against a half-shattered looking glass on the wall, and he rammed his flaming fist right into his gut.

Roth cried out but grabbed the lord's throat. Purple energy crackled as lightning raced through the lord who tensed with his fist still against his bastard son's torso.

Oriel swung the figurine. It cracked, but it still made a pleasing sound as the marble connected with the lord's skull. Lord Delwin staggered back and sank to his knees as more fire formed around his fists, but Roth threw his hand out. Oriel jerked back before remembering that Roth's lightning tracked its target.

The purple ball of electricity hit Lord Delwin who stiffened as his body spasmed, and he made a strange noise before he tipped forward and lay motionless. With his pulse racing, Oriel lunged forward and smashed what was left of the figurine into the back of his already bloodied skull.

It cracked further, and little pricks of pain blossomed on Oriel's hand, but he didn't give a shit as he stepped back and breathed heavily. Blood marred the lord's rusty red hair, his tail was limp, and he didn't move. Roth sagged against the wall and sank to his rear amongst the broken glass as he clutched at his midsection.

"Check-check his pulse."

Oriel crouched and put his fingers to the lord's neck. Nothing. "He's dead. I-oh, fuck." Killing Lord Delwin on the way out hadn't been a part of their plan. Now, they'd be wanted for murder.

Oriel ran into the sitting room and locked the door before he returned and shut the bedroom door. "What the fuck do we do?"

Roth glared at the body and wrapped an arm around his middle. Luckily, his coat wasn't burning, although a hole had formed in his clothes, and the

edges were charred. "Put him in my closet room. We can't just leave him laying out."

"Wait." Oriel tried to watch his footing as he drew closer. "You're sitting in glass."

"Most of it's in my damn back now."

Oriel struggled to get to him and not step in sharp bits himself. Glass tinkled, and in the light, he noticed the jagged edges had a faint pinkish-orange tint. Lorven-made looking glasses from the Glasswood Kingdom were usually quite sturdy, so Roth must have been shoved pretty hard. Oriel got him up and led him to sit away from the glass.

He paused to pick out a damn shard that pricked his heel and swore. He grabbed the lord's boots and dragged him across the floor to the closet room. It wasn't the best plan, but they didn't have many options.

"We have to get out of here now, but you're hurt." Oriel dropped to his knees by Roth. "Fuck!"

"We have a little time," said Roth. "If anybody wonder's where he is, they'll think he's gone looking for Derra. They won't question anything right now so we don't have to run away at this moment."

Oriel took a deep breath. "Okay, but you need to get your clothes off."

"Wait-you've got blood on your hand."

Roth touched the few little spots where the sharp edges of the statue had nicked Oriel's hand. Each one vanished with a quick glow of warmth.

Afterward, Oriel helped him to strip off his coat, vest, and shirt. A nasty burn had formed on Roth's stomach, and blood ran from a few spots on his back where bits of glass had stabbed his skin. Oriel picked out a few bits with tweezers so Roth could heal it. He couldn't do anything about the burn.

"It's fucking bullshit I can't heal this," Roth mumbled under his breath.

"Do you have something for burns?" asked Oriel.

"In the bathing room cupboard. Top shelf."

"Has he ever done that before?" Oriel asked as he stood.

"No. Fists don't usually leave scars."

Oriel found an old jar of burn cream, and he dotted it on while trying to be careful. The skin was nearly blackened in some parts, and the red was vicious. After he put the lid on and sat next to him, Roth leaned against him.

“Do you need something else? I know it hurts but-”

“Nobody’s ever done anything. Not even Mother.” Roth wrapped an arm around Oriel and sounded like he was trying not to cry.

“I didn’t do much. I just put cream on and plucked out some glass. You healed your own cuts.”

“It’s still more than anyone else. I’m used to taking care of myself.” Oriel put an arm around Roth who continued. “I didn’t want him to take you, and I’m so fucking tired of being his punching sack.”

“You don’t have to justify it to me. He deserved it.”

“But I shouldn’t have dragged you into this too. You’re here with me. They’ll say my slave is an accomplice.”

“Both of us will go. We’ll get so far ahead, that won’t matter. All right?”

“All right. Thanks for hitting that bastard on the head.”

They stood in the entrance of the closet room to look at the lord’s body.

Roth took a deep breath as he leaned against the doorway while slightly hunched. “I should feel more guilty.” He lifted his red eyes to Oriel’s purple ones. “I don’t.”

“Why should you? He fucking you put in that room once.”

“He fed and clothed me.”

“Who the fuck cares? He doesn’t get a pass for that!” Oriel took a deep breath as Roth stared at the body. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to yell, but whatever he’s said or whatever good things he has given you, he had no right to hit you like that. It was sick that he also gave you a slave and expected you to fuck and torture me. He used you, and he only did typical Father stuff so no one would suspect the truth.”

“I need a minute.”

Oriel rubbed the bridge of his nose. This whole thing was beyond fucked up. Roth appeared like was still faintly in shock, but he couldn’t even get his thoughts in order and deal with things in his own time. Neither could Oriel. They both needed far more than a minute.

He guessed he could see why Roth still had a tiny bit of guilt. It would be hard to grow up with a parental figure and later kill them. Oriel couldn’t imagine killing his Father, but then again, King Leneer never would have harmed his children. Roth had experienced something that Oriel didn’t, so it made sense if they processed things differently.

“We can’t take the body out,” Roth said from the bed where he was sitting. “There’s no way to avoid everyone. I checked his rooms after breakfast, and I couldn’t find the key. I even looked in his office, and I checked the lock box too. I have no idea where he’s hiding it.”

Oriel tugged on the collar before he knelt to check the lord’s pockets, but he only found a little money. “He doesn’t have it on him, so he must have hidden it somewhere clever.”

“I wonder if he was suspicious that I’d grown soft with you. Or that I would after a bit.” Roth made a frustrated noise. “Take his sword and dagger, and tuck them under my bed. When we leave, you can have his weapons. As for him, we’ll hide him under the bed too.”

They rolled the bastard up in cloaks and used a couple of belts to strap them on. Afterward, they slid Lord Delwin under the bed, and Oriel walked around to make sure nothing was visible. The servants wouldn’t see anything odd unless they got down on the floor to peer under. It wasn’t the best hiding place, but it would work for a while.

Once he started to rot, someone would realize where the smell was coming from, and they’d look. For now, they’d think the lord was out and searching for the stupid cousin who ran away with his fuck buddy. With Roth gone, perhaps they’d suspect the same. That would likely buy them at least a couple of days.

Roth picked some clothes for them to wear and had an idea to give a guard the slip. He wasn’t supposed to go anywhere at night without a guard, although he knew someone that would help them.

Oriel didn’t like anyone seeing them later that night, but Roth’s plan would work to get them away for now. A servant couldn’t be called to clean up the glass, so Oriel used a balled-up shirt to protect his hands and sweep the shards into a pile. He pushed those under the bed too. The frame of the broken looking glass itself was tucked in the closet room behind some cloaks.

For the rest of the day, they stayed in the bedroom, and the doors remained locked.

Besides escaping that night, getting to Aspen was Oriel’s next biggest goal. Considering the state of his once-lover the last time he saw him, he didn’t know what to expect later.

Oriel only went into his cage for a little bit later so a servant could bring dinner for both of them. Roth said he didn't want to be bothered again, so the servant could collect his tray tomorrow. Once they were alone, and the door was locked, Oriel was let out. Neither had much appetite.

After he dressed later, he stood in the privy room and peered at himself in the smaller looking glass. Even with Roth's nice clothes on, he didn't look quite like his old self. His eyes had hardened, and he was thinner.

Once the last of the bruising and marks faded from his rear after that caning, he'd be stuck with the brands for the rest of his life. Even the best healer couldn't do anything about those. Other scars that weren't visible and ran deeper would never vanish either.

What should he have expected when nothing would ever be the same as before?

Roth came in and arranged his hood to cover his face, and he allowed red strands to hang out and show. "They'll know me, but you're just a friend. Keep quiet."

"I know. Thanks for this."

Roth hesitated before he gave Oriel's cheek a peck. "I wish we'd met in different circumstances. I'm sorry it was like this."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Still..." Roth pulled up Oriel's hood. "Let's go."

It was the first time Oriel had walked the halls with Roth without being led or made to crawl like a dog. He'd worn clothes all of his life and never imagined going out in public naked. It almost felt strange after being nude for so long. Luckily, the halls were quiet and empty. At this time, the residents might not be asleep, but they were likely in their rooms or they had gone out somewhere. Others were probably hunting for the bratty cousin who ran off.

Roth had clearly been in pain from the burn all day, and it certainly wasn't better, but he walked upright as if nothing had happened. He'd loosely bandaged it earlier to keep his clothes from rubbing, and Oriel had winced at the blisters. The cream hadn't even been enough to keep them all away.

Oriel had a feeling that Roth had spent a lot of time working on his posture, gait, and expressions over the years to hide whatever injuries he'd suffered from Lord Delwin's fists so everyone would think he was fine.

They headed outside and across the grounds. Oriel couldn't shake the feeling that he stuck out like a sore thumb even though he could have been anyone, and Roth's presence kept him safe. A couple of guards passed with a murmur. Since the place wasn't in a panic, everyone must have assumed Lord Delwin had gone to look for the brat who had run off.

Maybe Oriel should have been a brat and somehow convinced Aspen to run away with him ages ago. Then he imagined if Kard or Zale had been taken alive and put through this. His stomach twisted at the very thought, and he started to sweat as they stopped by the stables. Roth told a man smoking a cig to hurry up and get a carriage ready to head to Buds in Bloom.

The man didn't point at Oriel and scream that he was escaping. In fact, he barely looked at the pair. Roth's visible red strands made it clear who he was.

A guard came with the horseless carriage, and Roth climbed in easily as if he wasn't suffering from a horrible burn. Oriel settled in the seat next to him and discreetly tugged up the high neck of his shirt even more just to be safe even though he wore a cloak. The guard settled across from them with a faintly bored expression.

"You should ask for the one with blue hair," Roth muttered to Oriel simply for the sake of talking. "I can't remember his name, but he knows some tricks and is definitely worth his price."

"I'll remember that."

The carriage jiggled along through the city for a good thirty minutes, but it felt like an eternity. The guard looked ready to fall asleep, and he stayed in the seat when the carriage stopped. Roth climbed out, Oriel followed, and they entered through the red doors of a whorehouse.

Swaths of colored silk draped the walls, and a couple of closer whores clad in far less fabric cooed at Roth as he entered. At the bar on one side, a couple of men sat on stools as they drank. They passed a raised platform with a pole where a naked man with a short-haired tail danced. Oriel didn't understand how the fairy hooked his legs on the pole, hung upside down, and slowly twirled around. Oriel would have fallen on his face if he tried that.

A completely naked lady with pale orange skin lounged in a chair by a door, and her feathery wings twitched as they approached. "Back for more,

Roth?”

“Just your back door this time.” Roth slipped a coin to her.

“Which one?” She snorted and jerked her thumb. “Go on.”

Oriel followed Roth into a hall that smelled faintly of lavender. They passed a few blank, closed doors, and they slipped outside. Hours from now, the guard might grow concerned at why they were taking so long. If he went in, the whores would play dumb, and the guard would have a hard time tracking Roth and his friend.

Nobody paid much attention as they strolled down the street. The Red Arch, another whorehouse for higher-ups, had a red arch over the door, and it was lit with floating flames. The stones of the building had a faint, pinkish hue. The inside was dimmer than the last place, and most of the whores seemed to prefer leather outfits that barely covered anything. The Madam approached with a smile.

“You brought a friend, Roth.”

He drew her aside and passed her something. Money, of course. “We’re playing a game and need to give someone the slip.”

“Take the horses,” she said instantly. “But only the two at the end, and you have to saddle them yourselves.”

“You’re a doll.”

“Not as much as you.”

A fairy with black cat ears and a tail bared his fangs as they passed. “Bite me, Daddy.”

“Maybe next time,” purred Roth.

A stable outback held a few horses. After Roth tucked his hair back and made sure none was showing, they saddled the two horses at the end and rode out into the night. Oriel’s mount plodded after Roth’s like this was a big bother to him, and he tried to calm his heart. They’d gotten this far and had more time. Roth’s guard would never guess that they left the city.

“I haven’t been to Lord Mather’s house in ages, and we didn’t stay long, but the way isn’t hard,” said Roth. “We’ll be alright.”

Oriel’s heart still thudded when they left through the city gates, but the guards said nothing. The road went straight, over a few hills, past a tiny inn, and through some fields. He couldn’t believe he was out here, and his heart threatened to beat its way out of his chest when a house came into view in

the starlight. He couldn't make out too much with the wall and it being dark, but a light was on upstairs, and no guard sat at the closed gate.

Oriel dismounted first to check, and it wasn't even locked. He led his horse in, and Roth followed before he slipped down with a faint grunt.

"You brought the cream, right?" whispered Oriel.

"Yeah, I'll put some more on in a bit. Let me knock."

No servant came even when Roth knocked a second time. Impatient, Oriel tried the doorknob, and it swung open.

"The servants must be lax if they don't even check that the doors are locked."

"Hello?" Roth called as they stepped into the darkened hall. A lantern guttered on a side table, and Oriel snatched it.

"Come on. If they're around, screw it."

Oriel tried not to hurry too much up the stairs since movement had to be a bitch for Roth no matter how well he hid his pain. His mouth had gone dry, and he had no idea how Aspen would react now. Unless he was dead. A broken bottle lay in the hall on the top floor, and he saw a cracked open door with a light.

Chapter Thirteen

“Aspen!” Oriel rushed forward and barged in. He had to be there.

The sitting room was a mess like nobody had bothered to straighten up, but Oriel only had eyes for the rumpled, thin figure on the couch. Aspen’s hair was askew, and he was pale. For a horrible moment, Oriel thought he was dead, but when he checked his pulse with a shaking hand, it was there. A whiskey bottle sat on the table in front of the couch.

Oriel set the lantern next to the bottle and sank to his knees. “Aspen?”

He shook as he wrapped an arm around the limp figure which smelled like roses, although it was tainted with alcohol. He wasn’t dead, but why was he passed out and completely left alone?

Roth slipped in. “Is he...?”

“He’s alive, but he’s drunk and completely out.”

Roth eyed the bottle and the room. “Did he have a problem with alcohol before?”

“No.” Finding him passed out from alcohol was beyond foreign to Oriel. In fact, he was pretty sure he’d never even seen him tipsy before.

The unspoken truth loomed. Maybe he had a problem now. After what he’d been through, maybe this was how he’d been numbing himself. If he couldn’t go elsewhere in his head like he did on the boat, maybe he’d found a different path.

It was another thing to add to Oriel’s list of faults. He buried his face in Aspen’s shoulder, trying to hold back tears.

Roth came over after a minute and knelt by him to rub his back. “Let him sleep it off. He’s on his side, so he won’t throw up and choke on it. When he wakes up, we can figure out what to do.”

Oriel lifted his head. “All right. Um...”

“We could check the house and take stuff with us later. There’s probably food left, and we’ll need that even though I have money. We shouldn’t stop anywhere for a bit.”

Roth’s logic calmed him since he had a purpose and something to do. Oriel stuck a pillow behind Aspen so he wouldn’t roll on his back in case he

threw up. Roth hadn't taken a lot with him since looking like he was running away would have been a bad idea.

To be sure, they checked the house and found no servants. Once they made sure all of the doors were locked, they found a few old packs stored away in a spare bedroom and stuffed them with clothes and various supplies. Another bedroom looked like it had been recently vacated and was oddly sparse. A portrait showed a boy with black hair, and Oriel gazed at it for a couple of moments.

Perhaps that was the real son who should have taken over here. Aspen and Philre didn't look much alike beyond their hair, but it had been enough to fool others. A boy could change a lot as he turned into a man, and people's memories could grow dull over time.

Oriel took care of the horses outside, checked on Aspen who hadn't moved, and went to the room's balcony. He stuck his legs through the railing to sit and took a sip from the bottle he'd taken. He hadn't bothered to look at the label, but the whiskey was quite smooth. It had probably been tucked away for a special time, not that Aspen had cared. It wasn't like the last lord was around to miss it. Maybe Oriel could numb himself for a little bit too.

He heard Roth come up behind him. "What is that?"

Oriel looked up at him and saw he had taken off his shirt. The burn was a darker patch on his pale skin. "Whiskey."

Roth crouched and made to snatch the bottle.

Oriel leaned away. "Get off."

"You're not starting that."

"I just want a drink," snapped Oriel. "I've been through shit too, in case you forgot. And I don't mean you. Everything before."

Roth's eyes glinted like shiny coins as the moonlight caught them just so. "Aspen has passed out, so I think we can see what a 'drink' does. I'm not letting you go that way, especially after you got this far and are back together."

"I'm not," insisted Oriel. "I promise."

Roth paused. "If you do, I'll knock a bottle over your head."

"Okay. Fair enough."

Roth settled next to him and stuck his legs through the railing. "You know what? Give me a sip too. I've hardly got anything to complain about,

but I wouldn't mind dulling my brain a bit tonight."

Oriel handed him the bottle. "You've been through stuff too."

"You've been through worse."

"It's not a competition. It's not...it's not like only those who have been through what I was get to complain. That's not how it works. I'm not your Father, and you don't have to keep up an image around me either."

Roth took a good gulp and handed the whiskey over. "Complaints weren't handled well before. What should we do now that you've got Aspen?"

"Queen Asara is my cousin," said Oriel. "She'll take us in."

"I know we're going to the Windswept Isles, but what about after that?"

Oriel already knew what he wanted as he took another drink. "I..." It might be impossible and a fool's dream.

Roth's arm brushed his. "What?"

"I want my Kingdom back. Father would want me to have it. With three sons, it seemed like the line was set, and our family would branch out more. Now it's just Oriel Keeper, and Asara doesn't even have the same name. He'd want me to get West Bay back for us and our people."

"I don't think Queen Asara has quite such a large army. She could defend her Kingdom quite well, but invading a country is another matter, right?"

"She doesn't have that big of an army." Oriel took another gulp, and the warmth settled in his belly. "She has a pretty good fleet of ships, and she could probably rival King Taven in that, but I don't know if we could do it. She might not want to risk her army and send them to death even for family. King Leneer was closer to her than us, but...it'd be different if my family was alive and hostage."

"What if she finds out you're alive? News will take a bit to reach her."

"She'd probably try to bargain and pay for me, not that King Taven would agree. I'm not sure if she'd fight for me. Again, I think she'd be outnumbered, and he could threaten to have me executed if she attempted."

Roth held out his hand for the bottle. "Well, now that you're not trapped, you could get allies."

"No one may want to help."

"That's true, but you don't know until you try. If she says no, you could ask other royalty."

"I'm a traitor's son. Queen Asara would believe me, but others might not."

"Or they may not believe King Taven's lie. You're Father seemed respected."

Oriel leaned his head on the railing. It wouldn't bring back his family if he took his Kingdom. They'd still be dead, and he'd be the King in an empty Castle. Making his own family seemed impossible. He didn't even know what Aspen would be like when he woke up.

He tried to imagine these two coming to live with him. Neither had a real home to go to now, and he could protect both if he was the King of West Bay.

It was too much to consider right now, especially with whiskey burning in his gut.

He lifted his head. "Did you put the balm on?"

"Yeah. It still hurts." Roth leaned back and carefully laid his upper body down on the stone. "I feel rather free at the same time too. Every time it hurts when I move, I know he won't touch me again. That was truly the last time. I won't be told how I'm an ungrateful bastard or look at his face and think of how he justified things to keep his image and shift blame." He paused. "Everyone will think I'm simply a murderous son once they find his body stuffed under my bed like old rubbish. They won't know, and I'll seem utterly evil in their eyes."

Oriel patted his hand, but Roth quickly grabbed it and squeezed like he'd been looking for someone to do that too.

"You should go to bed," said Roth. "The sooner we leave the better, but you need rest."

"Yeah, I know."

"I picked a room to set my stuff in. I'll be three doors down."

Oriel's head spun a little when he stood, and he grabbed the railing. The whiskey hit pretty hard. No wonder Aspen was out, and he was a lightweight to begin with.

"Can you walk?" asked Roth.

"Yeah. I've been more smashed than this. My brothers beat me in a few drinking games." Never again would that happen. He also wouldn't see Father's disapproving gaze like the next morning when all three sons looked

hungover after a night of too much. Oriel's throat tightened as he let Roth take the bottle.

Once he left, Oriel thought about collapsing on the bed, but he didn't want to leave Aspen alone. He went into the sitting room, collected him, and brought him into the bed. Hopefully, he didn't throw up in the night. Oriel wrapped him in his arms under the blanket.

"I'm not letting you go again," he whispered.

He fell into an uneasy sleep that seemed too quick and not restful enough. He awoke to a hand shoving on his chest, screaming, and someone kicking at him.

"Get off! Get off me!"

Oriel jerked back as his heart rate soared, and he grunted as he hit the floor. The blankets were still half-tangled around him, and he thrashed at them, terrified that someone was hurting Aspen who gasped in the bed.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?!"

Oriel looked up at the crazed fairy on the bed as his heart thudded behind his ribs. "It's just me!"

"Get the fuck out! GET THE FUCK OUT RIGHT NOW! I'll kill you, you fucking piece of shit."

Oriel scrambled away from the bed, and Roth burst in, apparently having heard the screaming.

"What are you doing in my house?" Aspen shakily scooted back against the headboard. "I didn't say you could come to my home! Get your fucking slave out of here!"

"He's not-"

"Whip him too. How dare he get in the bed with me?"

The order to have him whipped made Oriel's insides clench. "I'm not his slave anymore. It's complicated, but he's with me now. He's not my Master, and we're running away. We came to get you."

"What you saw-I had to act," said Roth. "It's a lot to explain, but-"

"Get out," snapped Aspen. "Whatever the fuck you're doing, I don't care. Get out."

"I'm not leaving without you," said Oriel. "That's why we came here."

"You're supposed to suffer, you cocksucking bastard," said Aspen. "I'm not going with you."

Oriel's head pounded as he stood. Even if he hadn't gotten smashed the night before, too much stress and shitty sleep hadn't done much good, and Aspen's yelling wasn't helping. "You are. We're escaping this damn Kingdom and going to Queen Asara. She'll help us."

"I'll tell her you're a traitor's son."

Oriel flinched as he backed against the wall, and Roth hovered in the doorway with his ears back. "You know damn well I'm not--"

"You betrayed me! You let me get burned so you could hold onto your stupid fucking Kingdom, and you didn't give a shit while they tortured me. You only gave up the seal when they threatened your cock."

Oriel's mouth opened slightly. He thought Aspen had hated and ignored him in the hold because of everything that happened two years ago which led to Aspen being there that night. That was certainly Oriel's fault, but where in the world did this other shit come from?

"What are you talking about? They didn't threaten my cock."

"Liar!"

"I'll be in the hall," mumbled Roth. "Unless he tries to kill you."

"I tried to save you," Oriel said as the door clicked shut.

"You're a fucking liar."

Oriel stepped forward, and Aspen flinched against the headboard. "I acted like you weren't important in the hallway because I was hoping they'd leave you alone. Letting them know anything I felt was a bad idea, but that lord guessed anyway. He already planned to torture you, and when I heard you screaming, I begged him to stop."

"You held onto the seal. You knew your family was dead!"

"How could I have known they were dead?!" yelled Oriel. "I was in my room! I was attacked by several men and brought to the office after one- That lord said my family was alive. I tried to hold out at first and said Queen Asara would pay for us if they didn't hurt us. I also begged him to not hurt any employees, including you, because they had nothing to do with this. The lord said King Taven didn't want money, and I thought they'd kill you and my family once they had the seal. I didn't know what to do! They didn't threaten my cock, but I told him because they wouldn't stop hurting you, and he threatened to do worse. He kept on torturing you anyway when I said where it was. Only after he had it did he admit my family was dead."

"That's not what he said. You kept refusing because your precious Kingdom mattered more than even the servants, and he punished me because of that!" Aspen came forward on his knees. "You kept quiet until they put a dagger to your prick."

"He lied to you just like he lied to me! Nobody threatened my dick. He only told me the truth after he had what he wanted. He wanted you to believe I completely betrayed you because he knew it would hurt. I did lie and say I didn't know where the seal was at first because if my family was alive, I hoped that there would be some way for us to get out of that alive if the civilians and city guards rose up or something. I swear to Elira, that's what happened. I did not know my family was dead!"

"You're fucking lying. You hate me."

"I don't hate you!"

"Yes, you do because I signed the contract, and you didn't speak to me for two years."

Oriel scrambled onto the bed, and Aspen tried to throw a punch, but he wrapped his arms around him, pinning Aspen's arms to his side.

"Get the fuck off!"

"Would you fucking listen to me?! I never hated you. I wanted to marry you. I was angry, and I'm sorry, but I'm never losing you again."

Aspen had frozen, but he suddenly twisted with a panicked noise like he couldn't breathe. Oriel released him, terrified he had been squeezing too hard without realizing it. Aspen slugged him in the face a second later.

Oriel swore as he clutched at his bleeding nose. Aspen scrambled to get away and fell off the bed. "I still hate you. You ignored me for two years. You don't do that to people you supposedly love. Get out."

"I'm not leaving without you. I can't take the chance that someone will--"

Aspen unsteadily stood as he shook his right hand which must have hurt after punching Oriel. "I don't need you. You're not shit anymore, and I'm a lord now."

"You were passed out drunk."

"To numb all the shit that's your fault!"

"I didn't try to hold onto the Kingdom for that alone! I just said--"

"Maybe the lord did lie," hissed Aspen. "I was rather preoccupied at the moment to figure out if he had any other motives. But it is still your fault I was at the Castle."

Oriel held a hand to his nose. “I know, but you can’t stay here.”

“Yes, I can.”

“I’m not leaving you behind! If someone figures out-”

“Fuck you, Oriel.”

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Chapter Fourteen

Of course, Oriel was gone once Aspen bathed and went to collapse on his couch. Oriel had lied about never leaving him behind. As soon as he could, he was fucking gone. How dare he come here and try to “save” him like Aspen needed him. It must have been a ploy to make himself look good to Roth or something.

He stared at the fire. Maybe the lord had lied and used them against each other without any other reasons except to be cruel and because he wanted something. He’d held all of the control at the moment, and when a person has that, their cruelty can come out.

The men in the Hall hadn’t needed a reason to hold Aspen down on the floor and use him one after another, but they had done it anyway. The opposing side could often be savage simply because they could.

Oriel had been in his room and wouldn’t have seen his family die. Aspen hadn’t even considered that afterward.

But it was still his fault that Aspen had been there in the first place.

The door opened, and Roth peeked in. “Can I come in?”

“No. I’ve got a hangover, and I’m not in the mood to talk to pretty pricks. Fuck off with your slave.”

“He’s not my slave.”

“I saw his rear that day. You sure beat him like one.”

“That whole thing involved my Father, and that’s why I’d beaten him and threatened him. I didn’t want to, but everyone had to believe he was broken and compliant...Oriel’s free now. We need to leave soon.”

“I’m not going with you.” Aspen remained on the couch, and he tensed as Roth came in. The burn Aspen had vaguely noticed earlier was now hidden by his shirt, but he seemed stiff.

“Oriel told me what was said,” said Roth. “I’m not here to tell you to love him, like him, hate him, forgive him, or whatever, but right now, you are coming with us. That’s the most important thing at the moment.”

“Even if you’re a lord’s son, I’m a lord. I’m telling you to fuck off.”

Roth drew himself up. "A minor lord. Baron's are low, but-"
"So?"

"-regardless of how high your position is, if anyone finds out that you're a slave masquerading as Lord Mather's son, you'll be torn down before you can blink," continued Roth. "What you're doing is a crime. Lower treason isn't looked upon with kindness. Frankly, I don't give a shit that you're impersonating someone because I'm sure the servants dragged you here and used you since Lord Mather was ill, and I'd heard his sight had grown poor. But others will give a shit, and you'll end up back in a collar. Perhaps they'll simply kill you, but there's a good chance you'll end up as someone else's slave."

Aspen went rigid on the couch because Roth was right. He was playing a dangerous game. All it took was for one person to grow suspicious, or if by chance, that orange-eyed lord ever saw him again and remembered his face out of many from that night.

One mistake and a few words from the right person would have him back in chains.

"Oriel will drag you kicking and screaming from this house if he has to," said Roth. "He won't leave without you, he'll keep you safe, and we'll go to Queen Asara. In the Windswept Isles, no one will know you, and I doubt anybody will look for you specifically. Hopefully, everyone here will assume the son has run off again. Oriel wants his crown back, but he and Queen Asara can discuss that when we get there."

"I don't want to go."

It'd be better if he swallowed the laudanum he'd found after a couple of bottles of wine. He'd never wake up, but he'd never have a nightmare again either.

What was Aspen supposed to do in the Windswept Isles? Suffer in his head while sitting on a beach and enjoying the lovely view?

"Oriel won't give you a choice," said Roth. "Not with this. I think he'd rather die than leave you behind."

Aspen could kill himself later. If he went, because Oriel was a stubborn fucking bastard, he could make the once Crown Prince miserable. Every day, he'd be a reminder of Oriel's failures and how he should have stayed away to begin with. It wasn't fair if he somehow got everything back or lived with his royal Aunt while Aspen had nothing.

Oriel denied what the lord said, but he didn't deny that Aspen being there was his fault. He certainly wouldn't forget anytime soon either. Aspen would make sure.

"Fine."

Roth started toward the door. "Don't hold things against him. He doesn't hate you. He's hurt, and he regrets th--"

"Don't tell me how to feel when you weren't even there two years ago."

Roth hesitated. "Okay."

"Go fuck yourself too."

Roth quietly retreated. Fucking hoity-toity cat bastard. Aspen rubbed his forehead. How was he supposed to survive weeks with them even to punish Oriel? They'd be riding for days and days. He needed a drink.

Oriel came up later with damp hair and went to pack some clothes for Aspen who hadn't made much effort to actually do anything besides putting on his boots and cloak and grabbing a bottle. Maybe they'd leave without him.

Oriel left with the pack and returned after several minutes. "Put that down. We're going."

Aspen stood with the bottle. He felt like shit, but this asshole wasn't going to treat him like shit. "Don't tell me what to do. I wish I'd broken your nose."

Oriel's eyes were red from crying, and his nose looked fine now that it wasn't bleeding. "Put the bottle down first."

"Go fall in a ditch."

Aspen made to sweep by, but Oriel grabbed his arm and wrestled the bottle away.

"What are you doing?"

"You're not drinking."

Aspen snatched at the bottle, but Oriel tossed it away. It hit the floor, shattered, and sent shards and liquid across the floorboards at a safe distance.

"I'll just get another!"

"No, you're not. We're leaving, and you can whine later." Oriel scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder. "Nobody wants to watch you drink yourself to death."

The way he picked up Aspen like he was nothing made his stomach clench. Oriel had already been in the bed with him and taking liberties he shouldn't.

The pressure on his chest increased, and he couldn't tell if he was over Oriel's shoulder or on the floor with him on top. He'd hurt Aspen physically this time and chip off more pieces until he couldn't even think of how to numb himself anymore.

"Aspen! For fuck's sake, breathe!" Oriel's panicky voice came through.

He was on the floor, and he thrashed at the feel of Oriel's hands touching him. He couldn't do this again. He wouldn't be used like on the ship.

Oriel's hands were gone, and Aspen huddled on the floor as he struggled to get air in.

"I'm sorry." Oriel's voice was choked.

Aspen's limbs unfroze enough for him to scoot away on the floor as he became aware of the hallway. He had to get away even though his lungs were so tight, he thought he might suffocate and die.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you panic."

"Don't touch me," gasped Aspen.

He had to get away. One glance told him Oriel was on his knees with a devastated expression. Let him feel like shit. It couldn't match what Aspen felt right now.

The terror barely lessened when he managed to stumble outside. The sunlight was too bright for his pounding head, and he sank to the steps to lean over and hug his legs while his heart thudded. He wanted to go back in and hide in his bedroom, but Oriel might try to drag him out again.

Roth came closer on a horse, and he pointed at two others patiently waiting by the stable to one side. "The lighter one's yours. Where's Oriel?"

Aspen shrugged. He wasn't touching him, and that was all that counted.

Roth said nothing as he trotted his horse back to the stable. A couple of others had packs on them, and Aspen figured the extra horses could be sold. Oriel might come out soon and grow angry, so he forced himself up. The light horse had a pack on it, and he mounted it, still struggling to make his shaky limbs work the way he wanted.

"There's money and clothes in your pack. We have supplies and food--"

"Okay, cat boy. I think I can figure that out."

Roth turned away from him, so Aspen couldn't see his expression, but he felt savage pleasure either way. Oriel finally came out with his head down, and he mounted his horse without a word.

Who liked who would have been pretty obvious if anybody had been around to see them. Roth led them around Cardinal's Brook, and Aspen assumed they had already decided on a route. Or at least for now, they knew where they were going.

Oriel and Roth rode together as they led the other horses who patiently plodded along. Aspen stayed back, not willing to speak to either. Oriel and Roth spoke with each other in low voices as he watched with a sour expression.

Roth had seemed pretty convincing when he held his dagger to Oriel's throat, but he said he had been acting. Why the hell was he now running with Oriel? He'd mentioned his Father, so maybe he got in a fight with his Daddy, Lord Delwin. He probably didn't like slavery either and decided to take Oriel away.

Still, how could Oriel stand him? Aspen had seen the brands and the brutal cane marks. It figured he would find someone willing to save him and come along. Aspen was only bought for an ulterior motive and dumped afterward because he was too broken.

These two dickheads would probably dump him soon. Oriel was such a fucking liar by claiming he still loved Aspen.

Before, Aspen would have liked someone such as Roth with his lithe body, red hair, and red kitty ears. It figured Oriel would end up with someone pretty who was willing to help the Crown Prince.

Roth touched Oriel's arm once. He was too familiar. Had they already fucked? Of course, a lord's son would be good enough for a damn Crown Prince. Damn Oriel and his lies of marrying a street whore.

"-get that cut off," Aspen caught from Roth as his horse drew a little closer.

Oriel shifted like he was checking that his collar was fully hidden by his shirt and cloak. "Not in Meadow. If one word gets out."

"Not all of the citizens will be okay with slaves, especially in the smaller areas, but you're right. We should wait."

"And not in West Bay either. Who knows who's been left behind to watch over things? I hate this damn thing, but I'm not taking chances."

Aspen tried to picture how far inland the West Bay Kingdom stretched since he'd seen a map. He couldn't remember too much of it, and geography wasn't a strong point for him. Not knowing where Cardinal's Brook was on the map didn't help much either.

"Where the fuck are we going?" he asked.

Oriel jumped, and Roth spoke. "This way, it'll be about two weeks by horse until we hit the West Bay border."

"And why are we going through West Bay when the fucking Crown Prince is supposed to be a slave? If you two ran away, wouldn't they be looking for you?"

"Yes, but I think I know someone who can help if we're lucky," said Oriel.

"I killed my Father, and I doubt they think my slave and I will be running to West Bay," said Roth. "Lord Delwin hurt me and Oriel if you're wondering why I killed him."

Like Aspen cared about the damn lord. At least he would have weeks to make Oriel feel guilty. The Crown Prince wouldn't even look at him now, so Aspen's presence had to be beyond uncomfortable. So much for love and keeping up his damn fakery.

They only stopped to piss, water the horses at a stream, and eat. Aspen dug through his pack for alcohol. Oriel hadn't packed him any which figured, but some money was in there. Sira must have missed it.

"We need to stop somewhere."

"We're avoiding civilization right now." Oriel sat on a rock with Roth.

"I'll go in. Nobody's going to know who I am."

"The answer is no."

Aspen clenched his fists as he stood by his horse while it ate oats from a nosebag. "You're not above me in station anymore. You're the same. Lower actually, considering you're such a piece of shit, so you can't tell me what to do."

Oriel's jaw tightened. "We're not risking anything this close to Calatan. We have food and water, and if you're planning on buying booze, you can forget it."

"I'll go myself."

"I don't want to touch you and make you panic again, but I will if I have to," said Oriel, and the words made Aspen go cold. "The fact you're that

desperate shows you have a problem.”

“I don’t have a problem.”

“You’re desperate so you do. The only thing I’m grateful about is that I don’t think you’ve been drinking long enough to have physical effects, so at least we don’t have to deal with your shaky ass while you puke and go insane from withdrawal. If we let you keep drinking, you will end up like that.”

“You try getting raped and see if you don’t want to dull it, you fucking prick.”

Oriel shoved in the last of his bread and stood. Aspen involuntarily took a step backward, but Oriel only marched off alongside the stream.

Roth avoided his eyes like looking at a whore would hurt his lordly self.

He was supposed to put up with these two and all of this traveling with no alcohol? Aspen sat on the ground on the other side of his horse and faced away even though he was visible between the horses legs. How was he supposed to deal with hours of being on horseback with nothing to smear the sharp edges in his mind? Everything lurked right around the corner.

He drew up his knees and clamped his mouth shut as tears filled his eyes. Why did they care if he ended up as an alcoholic anyway? He’d kill himself once he was done making Oriel suffer because he wasn’t spending his life like this, so it wasn’t like he’d be a bother. His last weeks should be spent on his terms, but he always had to live on someone else's terms.

Once they got to the Windswept Isles, they’d surely wash their hands of him and pretend like they were great for getting him so far away. Oriel would have his Aunt, and even if he didn’t go after his Kingdom, the Queen would certainly never let him live on the street. Pretty boy over on the rock would do more than touch Oriel’s arm, and he’d start bending over for royal cock.

Worthless Aspen would be a forgotten whore and barely a dot in their memories after a while.

Oriel returned after a bit and said nothing. The rest of the afternoon was quiet as Aspen lagged behind by a good fifteen feet.

They slept on the ground that night. Or Aspen tried to sleep. He woke up every hour or so with a jolt. The bedroll was warm and comfortable enough, but he kept thinking he heard noises. Oriel and Roth seemed to be sleeping

just fine. He finally sank into a deeper nothing before dawn, but Oriel was soon telling him to get up, so it didn't last long.

The following days passed in the same cycle. Get up. Do necessities. Eat food that tasted like nothing to him. Ride for hours. Lunch. Ride. Dinner. Shitty sleep. Feel like crap. Repeat.

Aspen used to have a nice horse that he loved back when life was good, and it was just him and Father. The horse had been sold to help pay for Father's enormous debts. Aspen could have bought one while he was at the Castle, but he never did, and he'd borrow one if he went out into Lork.

The sudden increase of riding for hours and hours made his thighs and arse hurt. To top it off, he knew he woke up shouting a few nights after dreams of being crushed under men's weight. The other two never said anything, but it shamed him beyond belief while he tried not to cry in his bedroll.

Oriel and Roth had each other all day. Aspen didn't even have a sip of wine to take off the edge. It wasn't fair that Oriel could get his way so easily. He got to move on to other things. He had lost his family, and Aspen knew that hurt like a bitch, but he'd probably get his crown back or stay with Asara. He'd have *something* and *someone* while Aspen had no family, no friends, no way to get by, and no way to survive his head.

After one week, Oriel decided he'd go alone into a town since they needed food for themselves and the horses. Since they were too close to Calatan for comfort, he and Roth bickered over who would go but finally settled on Oriel anyway. Roth was too noticeable with his red ears, tail, and hair. Even with a cloak, someone might see his bright, red eyes. They probably thought Aspen would get sloshed in a tavern and never come back.

Oriel left with the extra horses to sell along with some items. They waited for quite a while in the woods. Aspen ignored Roth who kept flicking his tail in agitation and twitching his ears at every tiny sound.

Oriel returned without issue and no news. The town was small and sleepy according to him.

Oriel and Roth must have decided it was safe enough after over another week since they all went into a town near the border. They kept their hoods up and found an inn that looked decent.

“I’ve got a big room up top.” The innkeeper behind the front counter scratched around his horns. “The price is reasonable, and it’s got three beds.”

“Two rooms,” snapped Aspen. If they thought he was sleeping with them, they had another thing coming. He’d never get any rest in such close proximity.

Oriel glanced at him. “Two regular rooms for two nights. We’ll eat there too.”

Aspen slammed his door once he was in his room. Finally, he was alone. There was a bathing room down the hall, and he made use of it before dinner was brought up to his room.

“Can I get some ale?” he asked the innkeeper after he took the bowl of stew.

“Hm? No. No ale.”

Aspen kept his hand on the doorknob, ready to slam it closed if the man did anything to scare him. “You don’t have ale?”

“We do, but you can’t have any.”

“Excuse me?”

The innkeeper backed up and glanced down the hall. “The one who paid for the rooms, Billan, he said no ale due to your health.”

That was Oriel’s fake name. “My health is fine.”

“He paid. It’s his rule.” The innkeeper hurried away, clearly not wanting to get into something with his latest guests.

Aspen slammed his door again.

Chapter Fifteen

Oriel came from the bathing room down the hall, glad to be truly clean after so long. Roth was combing his long hair as he sat on the bed, and Oriel sank into the chair at the table by the open window.

“I don’t like the way he treats you,” said Roth.

“He’s been through...stuff,” said Oriel. “Far worse than me.”

“I thought it wasn’t a competition.”

“It’s not, but...how’s he supposed to cope with that? Especially when it’s my fault.”

“I told you it’s not,” said Roth.

They’d had plenty of time to talk in the past two weeks, and Oriel had opened up about things with Aspen and what happened that night and on the ship to both of them. He leaned forward on the table and covered his eyes. “I fucked it all up.”

“How were you supposed to know what the future held? You were both eighteen, and eighteens-year-olds don’t always handle stuff so well.”

“I still did what I did.”

“And Aspen did what he did. He didn’t deserve later, but neither did you. I just don’t like seeing you both so miserable with each other. It’s not helping either of you.”

“What else am I supposed to do? I can’t fix the past or what happened to him. I can’t let go of him either.”

He didn’t dare tell Aspen certain things after that nasty comment two weeks ago. He had Roth to talk to during the day, but the nights had been growing difficult. In the dark, it was hard to push away thoughts like how that man had raped him in his bedroom, or how the sailors had nearly made him throw up while they grunted away over him.

Sleep had mostly been like lights out and pure nothing from that night until recently. He didn’t remember any dreams. Maybe it was his brain’s way of keeping together while he’d been tortured in the room and terrified of Roth. A week ago, he had seen his beautiful, delicate Mother hanging in

one of the sitting rooms at home with blood on her torn skirts, her eyes dark, the rope digging in.

He'd woken in a cold sweat and hadn't slept for the rest of the night. The urge to crawl into Roth's bedroll and be held had been strong.

"Do you want me to sleep on the floor?" asked Roth.

"No. I can do that."

"I don't want you sleeping on the floor."

"I've slept in a cage. The floor is fine."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not you. The floor won't kill me, okay?"

"Or we could sleep in the same bed." Roth picked up his tail and started combing it. "I don't mind, but I'm not sure where I stand with you."

"Huh?"

"You fucked me quite willingly a second time that night, but...you seem to love Aspen."

"I do."

"That's why."

"He hates my guts, so it hardly matters if I love him, and he doesn't give a fuck where I sleep."

Oriel didn't even know what to do with him later, and he could barely think past getting to his cousin. That alone was their main issue at the moment, but they'd certainly never have a relationship again. Not like before.

He glanced at Roth and wondered what he expected exactly because Oriel's feelings had certainly changed. Even though they hadn't screwed in the past two weeks considering they'd been tired, focused on getting away, and Aspen had been nearby, he'd already been feeling a lot closer to the fairy.

He had also enjoyed fucking Roth that night for the pleasure part. Adding a knife to sex had been interesting.

"Are you sure I'm not fucked up in the head for liking what we did?" he blurted.

Roth quirked an ear. "We've been over this. It's not wrong."

"So we could do it again?"

"Yes. If you want. I'd love it if you took me with no warning one night." Roth leaned back against the wall, and the tip of his fangs showed as he

smiled. “Just attack me, hold me down, fuck me, and cut me, but do oil my ass. I don’t need tears later even though I could heal them.”

“I wouldn’t go that far!”

“I know, but I’m just saying to be careful.”

“Do you have a safety word?”

“Stop.” Roth waved his hand. “If I say that, it means to stop. Or if I snap my fingers. Nothing else means to quit no matter how much I plead or beg.”

Oriel’s cock at the thought of pinning Roth over the table or on the bed and forcing him to *take it* while knowing that the cat fairy was loving every second of it.

“All right. I will.”

After two weeks, Oriel needed relief, but force fucking him right now might be too soon since they’d just discussed it. It would take away the suddenness and the thrill of it, and if he was going to do that for Roth, he wanted him to enjoy it wholly. And if he was willing to fuck, it didn’t always have to be forced either.

He glanced at the fairy’s lithe body. Shit. He wanted Roth. Really, really wanted him in a way he’d only wanted Aspen before. The slow dawning had been there for a few days already.

He figured it was like with Aspen. He had to feel closer, and the sexual attraction came after.

“Um...so what about tonight?”

Roth’s pupils grew bigger. “What do you want?”

“Do you like to have control sometimes? I can hand it over.”

“I like either, but I don’t want to...” Roth’s eyes flicked down. “It takes a level of trust for one man to let another in his ass.”

“I do trust you. We’ve gotten this far, haven’t we? I’ve told you a lot of stuff too, and I’ve been up your ass.”

“True, but that might not mean you’re ready.”

Oriel honestly wasn’t sure if he wanted to be penetrated, but he wanted some form of release. He needed to feel something else and have those few seconds when he came and all thought was wiped away.

“Get over here and suck my cock.” They hadn’t done that yet.

Roth bent a leg up, clearly not in a hurry to obey. “Is that an order?”

“What do you think it is, kitty? Come here, little kitty.”

That got Roth off the bed. He flattened his ears as he approached to stand over Oriel. "I'm not a kitty."

Oriel leaned back in the chair and spread his legs as he started undoing his belt. "You're supposed to be on your knees, kitty."

But instead of getting on his knees, Roth leaned forward to pin his shoulders to the back of the chair, and he paused as if checking to see if Oriel was all right with this. "Maybe I'll get on my knees after you swallow me."

"I think I should go first."

Roth used one hand to loosen the ties on his sleep pants and pull them down so his erection was practically right in Oriel's face. "Start sucking. Kitty's ordering it."

This wasn't like the garden when Oriel had been disgusted and terrified of Roth and everyone else. He didn't need to block it out and be elsewhere. He could be in the moment and enjoy it.

Roth grabbed his hair and pushed his head forward to take it, and he let out a low growl as his entire length was sheathed in Oriel's mouth. "That's it. All the way down your throat."

For a moment, he felt shame because Aspen would probably think he was insane for doing this. How could he want anyone after being attacked or after Roth had been forced to do things to him? But even with Roth fisting his hair and driving his cock into his throat, Oriel still held enough control. If he had to stop, it would all end with a word. Roth would never even touch him again if that's what Oriel wanted.

Oriel grabbed Roth's ass to push him deeper even though he was ready to gag on the shaft. He could keep going or stop it, and dear Elira, he fucking wanted it. Nothing else mattered besides making them both feel good.

Roth pulled him back for air, and Oriel spoke before his mouth was stuffed again. "I don't want you to go."

He meant he didn't want to lose Roth too. He didn't want to get his crown back only to be alone in an empty Castle without even one person left.

Roth forced his cock in all the way, and Oriel's eyes watered as he looked up with his airway cut off. Roth's pupils were so huge with lust, the red could barely be seen.

He stroked the side of Oriel's head. "No one will ever hurt you again. Not without getting through me first."

The grip with his other hand was so tight, he pretty much held Oriel's life in the balance. For the first time in weeks, he didn't feel fear when his safety was in someone else's hands. Everyone else had abused him, but this one wouldn't.

Roth pulled out entirely, and a thick string of saliva ran from the tip of the cock to Oriel's mouth. Roth rubbed his thumb along his lips as he gasped for air.

"No one's hurting you again either as long as I'm around," promised Oriel.

Roth grabbed both sides of his head and started fucking his mouth in long strokes. Oriel worked his tongue on the underside as he gripped Roth's hips and listened to the little noises he made.

"Fuck, I'm going to cum," he gasped.

Oriel's own cock was painfully hard as cum filled his mouth. He squeezed Roth's ass and moaned as he tasted the saltiness and licked at the vein on the underside. Knowing the cat fairy was having those few seconds of bliss where he felt nothing else made it all better.

Roth stilled for a moment before he pulled out, straddled Oriel in the chair, and bared his fangs.

"Hold still."

Oriel swallowed before he felt the pinpricks where his shoulder and neck met. He wrapped his arms around the fairy, welcoming the bite.

Mine," Roth hissed before he dug his fangs in.

Oriel stiffened in the chair as a thrill shot from his neck to his cock. It throbbed, and he returned the bite without breaking skin since he couldn't make neat punctures. Roth hugged him as he went rigid and let out a growl. His tail lashed as they remained wrapped around each other.

So much touch. Oriel didn't want to let go, but his dick demanded attention.

"Get on your knees, and I'll give you some cream to lap at."

Roth needed a little hair tugging to convince him to let go, and his eyes were hazy with lust as he was forced to his knees. Oriel undid his belt with one hand to free his erection.

“That’s it, kitty,” he murmured as he forced Roth’s head down. “Good kitty. Lap at it just like that.”

Roth took it down, tongued the base, held eye contact, and snaked his hands up to slip them under Oriel’s shirt. Oriel guided the pace, enthralled with the sight of Roth’s eyes and his lips wrapped around his shaft.

He’d never thought he’d be sexually attracted to another person besides Aspen. How wrong he was. Roth took the punishing pace as Oriel fucked his throat.

“I’m cumming. Lap up your cream, kitty.”

Roth clutched at his hips as he took the load in his mouth and moaned. For a moment, nothing existed besides his touch. Oriel jerked his hips and made the chair scrape as the pleasure raced through him in waves. Roth’s tongue worked the underside, and it seemed like it would never end.

He went limp as it ebbed, his mind cleared, and some of the stress went too. He grunted as Roth’s tongue danced along the tip.

Roth hummed before he straddled Oriel’s lap and pressed his lips to his mouth. Oriel tasted his cum as their tongues met, and they kissed, swapping it back and forth. Roth kept some to swallow as he drew back, and Oriel swallowed the rest.

“Kitty likes the cream,” Roth whispered in his ear before his tongue flicked out to tease the edge.

“Ohhh, fuuuuck.” Oriel wrapped his arms around him and hugged him. “You make me feel things.”

“Me too.” Roth’s breath was warm on his ear as he fiddled with a piece of his black hair. “Do you want me to heal the bite?”

“No. I like being marked by you.” Oriel touched a little spot on Roth’s neck that was faintly red. “You know what? I’m going to have to get you a cat collar with a bell.”

Roth drew back a bit to look at him. “No.”

Oriel narrowed his eyes. “I can’t you get a leather one with a bell so I can flick it and make it go tink tink?”

“Absolutely not.” Roth’s lips twitched slightly, but his pout said he’d never accept a bell collar like a pet cat. Or at least not without a bit of a fight.

Oriel suddenly started laughing, and Roth broke into a smile. Oriel couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed. It was at some point before

that night. Roth ran his fingers through his hair with an expression like he'd been granted something precious before he chuckled.

"I definitely want to hear that again, but no cat collar."

They both laughed that time.

In the morning, Oriel woke up practically on top of Roth with their arms around each other. Elira, how he'd needed this touch. For a few moments, his whole world consisted of the feel of Roth's bare skin against his, and he let a hand wander, trying to memorize it.

A little trail of red hair led down into Roth's sleep pants, and above it, the burn had healed with liberal application of the balm over the past two weeks, although the skin was now discolored and didn't quite feel the same anymore. Oriel ran his hand up to Roth's nipple to play with it and make him sigh with pleasure.

Guilt coiled in his belly a second later because Aspen had been alone in his room. That's what he wanted since he couldn't seem to stand either of them, but at the same time, it wasn't exactly his choice. If his mind hadn't been so hurt, he wouldn't have wanted that.

Oriel knocked on Aspen's door after they'd eaten in their room. They'd be staying another day since the horses needed a rest.

"Go away."

Oriel took a deep breath before he opened the door to peek in. Aspen was sitting on his bed and tucked in the corner against the wall. The sight of him hunched up like that made Oriel's throat tighten. So many what-ifs.

"Aspen?"

Oriel was ignored so he slipped in, closed the door, and leaned against it. "I'm not expecting things to be the same as before, but if we're going to be together on this trip, can't we talk? Or not be so stiff?"

"Why?"

"Because...I miss you. I know you won't feel the same about me again, but if we could at least be friends. I meant it when I said I still loved you, and I never stopped. Even though I said nasty stuff to you that day you first came there, I think you did love me back then. We didn't handle any of that well, and it only grew harder."

Aspen didn't deny it, although that didn't make Oriel feel better.

"If we could like each other as friends...Later, you can stay in the Windswept Isles if you like it there, but you can also come home."

“I don’t have a home.”

“You can always have a home with me if you want,” said Oriel.

“You’ll probably lose and die on the field if you go to war. Go eat shit. I don’t feel like talking to you.”

Oriel pressed his lips together. “Are you going to just sit in the room all day?”

“Yep. You can fuck off now.”

He held back a frustrated noise as he opened the door and left. Part of him wanted to go back in and beg for forgiveness, but he’d just get more insults hurled at him.

“If he could at least talk to me,” Oriel told Roth in their room a few minutes later. “I know I fucked up-”

Roth pinched his thumb and fingertips together in a shush gesture. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Blaming yourself. It’s not your fault. Blame King Taven for being a despicable piece of shit. If he hadn’t betrayed your family, you’d all be at home right now.”

“Still, I want you to stay with me, but I can’t leave him or let this go. I can’t walk away.”

“I’m not saying to dump him on the street.”

“I know, but if you’ll really stay with me...” Oriel flopped backward on their bed. “I want him to stay too. I need to watch over him, and he doesn’t have anyone else at all.”

“Bring him home later if you want, and if he’ll come with you. I’m not going to get in the way of you two because this started before me. But you’re both different people now, and he may not want to stay with you.”

“Yeah, but he hasn’t made an effort to go away either! He fought coming, and yeah, I threatened to grab him if he tries to go get alcohol, but he hasn’t honestly tried to leave us.”

“I know. Maybe he needs more time. I mean, this isn’t something that can simply heal, but it’s too soon as well. He’s lost, he’s hurt, and he probably has no idea how to feel about anything or what to do. Maybe he’ll continue to stay.”

Oriel dared to voice something. “You said you’d stay.”

“I will, and nobody will hurt you again without getting through me.” Roth turned to look him in the eye and took his hand. “I didn’t say that just because my cock was in your mouth.”

“But what if things change later, and he decides he wants to be with me? I’m positive it won’t happen, but in the tiny sliver of a chance that it does, I don’t know what to do because I’m not leaving you either. It’s strange if he sticks around, but you’re there too.”

Roth sighed. “Oriel, you’re making this so complicated in your head, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“If you’re willing to share, we can do that.”

Oriel stared at him. He’d never thought he’d feel a certain way about two people, so he’d never imagined being with more than one person. He had nothing against a polyamorous relationship, but he didn’t see how this would work out for Roth. “Your type is pretty possessive unless it’s a consort for children, and Aspen’s not an abundant male.”

“Most of my type are possessive and aren’t into poly, but that doesn’t mean I’m obligated to be like that,” said Roth. “Yes, I do want you to be mine, but I know how important he is. That’s why I said I’m not getting in the way of you two. I want you to be happy, and I can be possessive of you both. We can figure out the rest as we go.”

Oriel squeezed his hand. “All right. That makes me feel better, but honestly, I don’t think that’s happening.”

Another worry nagged him. He’d said he’d never let Aspen go. He’d meant it, but at the same time that was also rather foolish.

“I might have to let him go off on his own anyway. I can’t drag him around with me forever if he hates me and doesn’t want to stay. Then he’ll be like a hostage, and I’ll be even shittier.” He pulled his hand away to cover his face. “I haven’t let go for two years, but maybe I’ll have to later.”

Roth lay beside him and wrapped an arm around him. Oriel turned to him to sink into his embrace. At least with Roth, he could just *be*, and it wasn’t so complicated.

He went downstairs later to chat with other travelers in the dim common room. Roth left to find a tavern. They’d gotten far enough away that they felt they’d be safe as long as they didn’t use real names or stick around for too long.

Beyond news of the war, nothing about them seemed to have reached here. Lord Delwin had surely been found rotting under Roth's bed by now, and men were probably tearing the city apart for the son. He could picture them going through local areas and asking about Roth. The net would grow wider.

Other lords would get wind of this and possibly send out searchers to help. Oriel planned for them to be gone.

As for West Bay, Oriel's heart sank as he heard the news. With the seal, plenty of towns and cities had fallen to heel with King Taven lying about the surrender, but a few places had been attacked when they refused to believe it. Oriel had assumed everyone would kneel to King Taven.

Once the story of the supposed treachery got back to them, they'd be furious. But going against the firmly seated ruler was treason, and whoever won had the manpower to deal with people like that. It also wouldn't bring back the last King.

In the long run, there wasn't much to be done. Wars like this were between rulers and their men. The commoners just suffered the results unless the majority rose up which wasn't always too likely in most cases.

But some had tried to fight back against the army groups that had been sent around to make sure the country was under King Taven's command. Loyalty like that meant a lot, although Oriel couldn't quite see why so many had risked themselves.

He wasn't around to lead anyone, and King Leneer was dead.

Nobody mentioned Oriel specifically, so maybe they hadn't gotten news here that he'd been sold into slavery or didn't care. Either way, it stiffened his resolve to get his Kingdom back. Queen Asara just had to agree.

If she didn't, he'd try to get someone else to support him.

They'd leave tomorrow morning to continue, but Oriel had something in mind for tonight.

Roth came in after his bath. He didn't seem to give a shit about walking the hall in his sleep clothes and cloak and with a drying sheet wrapped around his head to hide his hair and ears. Oriel had changed into his sleep clothes after he returned in normal ones.

"This isn't home, you know?" Oriel raised an eyebrow as Roth hung up his cloak.

Roth rolled his eyes as he slipped his tail from his pant leg. "Oooh, sleep clothes in the hall with a cloak too. How scandalous. It's not like I strolled naked through the common room and shook my dick at everyone." He removed his shirt and flung it on the bed.

"You're not a commoner."

"I'm not exactly a higher-up either right now."

"You're a bad kitty."

Roth smirked before he took the drying sheet from his head and ducked to rub at his hair. Oriel stood from the bed, and as soon as Roth flipped his hair back behind him, Oriel hooked an arm around his neck and pushed him into the wall by the door. Roth tried to twist away, but he stilled pretty fast when he felt the knife against his bare chest.

"Wait-don't-"

Oriel tightened his arm. "You seem to like prancing your ass around. Don't act like that when someone wants a piece of it."

"I wasn't prancing-"

"Shut up, whore."

Roth's breathing picked up, and he twitched as the tip of the knife ran down his torso. "Please, don't hurt me. I'll do anything."

Oriel slipped the knife down to the ties of his sleep pants. "Damn right, you will." The ties gave easily under the blade, and he yanked down the sleep pants. "Over to the bed, bad kitty."

"No!"

"What happened to doing anything?"

"I didn't mean that!"

Roth fought against him, but Oriel wrestled him over, shoved him down, and got on top of his wiggling body.

"With the way you walk around, you're practically begging for it." Oriel slipped the leather ties out from under the pillow where he'd hidden them and pinned Roth's wrists together despite a snarl as he struggled. "I'll teach your ass a lesson."

"Please-please don't hurt me."

Roth sounded so desperate for a moment, Oriel almost paused, but he hadn't said to stop or snapped. Oriel snatched the drying sheet from the edge of the bed, rolled up the corner, and shoved it in Roth's mouth.

“Just lay there and take it like good slut,” Oriel said in a low voice since he didn’t want anyone to hear something suspicious and think a guest was actually being raped in their room. That was also the last thing Aspen needed to hear. “You want it anyway since you prance your ass around.”

Roth still struggled as Oriel got to work on oiling and stretching his ass. He mumbled hopeless pleas around the cloth, pulled at the ties, and even tried to scoot forward to get out from under him, but Oriel kept him down. Having him pinned and writhing made his cock throb with want.

Roth renewed his desperate little noises when Oriel pushed his tail out of the way and started working his cock in. He didn’t snap, and he let out a moan that sounded more like he was having the time of his life when Oriel grew a little rough.

As he thrust, he kept Roth pinned down like he wanted to fuck him into the bed. The convincing struggles and muffled pleas would have horrified him before, but they spurred him on as he ran the tip of the knife along Roth’s back. A faint, jagged scratch blossomed, and that was the only thing that made Roth be still. His breathing quickened, and he made a strange noise in the back of his throat.

Oriel pressed himself along the lithe body under his, further pinning it.

“Take it, you fucking whore.” He pressed the knife against Roth’s throat just hard enough to nick him. “You even squeal just like one.”

He kept the knife at Roth’s throat as he rammed himself in. Skin slapped against skin, the bed creaked, and he let out a growl before he bit Roth’s shoulder nearly hard enough to draw blood.

“Maybe I should invite my friends in to watch while I rape your tight little hole, and they can pass you around afterward to try it out.”

It was either the words or the slightly deeper cut above his collarbone. Roth groaned, stiffened, and shuddered as he came.

Oriel forced his face into the mattress. This was what he wanted: Roth clenching around his cock and coming completely undone beneath him. He pounded himself into Roth’s tight ass as he kept him down despite his jerking.

“Fuck,” he said in a strangled whisper as he came. “That’s it. Clench like the slut that you are.” He tried to hold back a groan and failed.

He pumped out the dregs, and the pleasure finally ebbed. He lifted Roth’s head to pull out the cloth.

“Good little whore.”

Roth gasped as he lay limp beneath Oriel who tugged on the special knot he’d made. It easily came loose, and after he tossed the leather ties away, he settled on the bed and pulled Roth to lay against his chest.

“Good kitty,” he whispered before giving Roth a gentle bite on the back of his neck.

Roth pressed the length of his body against Oriels. “That was perfect.”

“Did you like the deeper cut or the threat of someone watching?”

“Both. The idea of others watching while I’m violated...” Roth let out a little sigh. “That was perfect the way you did it.”

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Chapter Sixteen

Aspen stared at the wall in the dark, unable to sleep. What he started hearing didn't help. An innocent noise. Suspicious noises. The faint sound of a bed creaking.

Oriel and Roth were definitely fucking.

Aspen was sure he caught the faint sound of Oriel groaning. His eyes filled with tears as he thought about all of the lies again. Oriel certainly didn't love him or give a shit. He'd already forgotten about Aspen for the most part if he was busy fucking Roth. That damn red-haired slut was already happily bending over for him. Or maybe he was up Oriel's ass.

He'd known it was a possibility, but hearing the truth was like a stab. He pulled the blanket over his head as he quietly sobbed.

He didn't bother with breakfast the next morning. All he felt was numbness when they got on the road. Oriel was pleasant, but Aspen ignored him. He didn't even listen when Oriel tried talking to him. He kept thinking about the sound of the bed and pictured him being happy with Roth.

Even if he was running and disgraced in the eyes of some, the red-haired fairy was still better than Aspen. Roth wasn't all busted up in his mind, and who wouldn't want someone that looked like him with the vivid hair and the tail?

Why did Oriel lie about loving him? What was the point of this unless it was some faint guilt he was trying to assuage? Although he was doing a pisspoor job of it if he was fucking Roth.

"Why don't you go talk to your pet kitty?" Aspen snapped after a few minutes. "Don't you have to go scratch his ears or something?"

"He's not my pet cat," said Oriel. "Were you listening to me?"

"I don't listen to turds."

Oriel flung up his hands and urged his horse ahead to catch up with Roth.

They continued through West Bay and stuck near the coast while avoiding heavily populated areas. Everything seemed pretty normal. Life

had gone on here in a lot of ways since King Taven took the place by treachery and didn't march his army in to slaughter and wreak havoc as they went.

Aspen wondered if Vima had survived that night in Lork. He had probably tucked himself somewhere and waited for all of the shit to calm down.

Oriel mostly kept his hood up, his head down, and the collar hidden with his cloak and clothing. When they reached a city that was directly on the coast and south of Lork, he left them by the edge of a green on the west side and hurried off. Aspen sat on a fence while Roth waited on his horse and held the lead for Oriel's mount. The edge there wasn't too crowded, but Aspen wished they could hurry up and go elsewhere to be away from people.

"What is he doing?" It was the first thing he had said to Roth in ages.

"Oh, it speaks," said Roth, and Aspen's face warmed. "You could have asked him yourself."

"I don't want to."

"Maybe I don't feel like speaking to you either."

"Fuck you, kitty boy."

Roth slowly turned his head and leaned toward him. "I don't mind what Oriel has had or has with you now. Or will have. But maybe you could try not being such a dick to him like earlier when you told him to go fuck himself because he dared to say good morning. He went through the trouble of getting you, and he's made sure you're safe and fed on this trip--"

"That doesn't erase the past."

"He still does it."

"I didn't ask him to."

Roth leaned forward a little more. "And that's exactly why you should make some effort. At the very least, keep your mouth shut if you truly can't stand to talk to him. You have no idea what he went through when King Taven betrayed you and after he was separated from you."

Roth straightened and turned away as Aspen went cold on the fence. He'd seen the brands and figured Lord Delwin had wanted to mark his slave with his last initial too since Oriel would technically be a valuable piece of property.

But truly, he didn't know too much about what happened to Oriel. He could have suffered anything.

"Did you get him directly?" asked Aspen.

"Ask Oriel. He'll tell you if he wants."

Aspen clamped his mouth shut. Guilt hooked its claws in his chest once more because he still loved the bastard even though he tried not to. He imagined Oriel and Roth humping in an inn room, and his blood boiled as his mind struggled with the conflict.

"You're just his fucktoy," hissed Aspen.

"Pfft."

"He won't love you either."

Roth didn't even grace him with a response which just infuriated Aspen all the more. He didn't even try to deny that they had screwed.

Oriel finally returned. "Come on. He'll take us. Thank Elira because he was about to go, and I wasn't even sure if he'd be here at all."

Who would take them? Aspen had no idea who or what they'd talked about in the past days since he always hung back, and he wasn't about to ask now. Once Oriel led them to the docks, he said Captain Nalha had someone who would take the horses. He'd refused payment and given Oriel money instead for the mounts out of respect and loyalty. Someone seemed to think of Oriel as the proper heir.

Aspen's heart pounded when they stopped near the gangplank of a modest but sturdy ship with the word Windrunner painted on the side.

Fuck. No way. The sounds of the docks faded a little as Aspen's chest tightened at the idea of getting on. Going below deck. Being trapped in the hold. Sailors were on board, and some were in the rigging. They might all come after him.

Oriel's voice cut through the fog of horror. "Aspen, get down."

A burly man had the other two horse's bridles, and a sailor was taking their packs up the gangplank.

Oriel gestured. "Come on."

"You planned this?" asked Aspen.

"I prayed that Captain Nalha would be around when we came here because this was typically a stop for him. Thankfully, he was, and we better be damn grateful. This will save us a lot of time, and we won't be stuck on a regular passenger ship--"

“I’m not getting on a ship at all,” said Aspen. “You’re fucking crazy.”

Guilt flashed on Oriel’s face. “It won’t be like last time. I promise. He’s helping us.”

“I’m not going.”

“And just where do you plan to go?”

Aspen didn’t have an answer. Without Oriel to torment, hanging onto his useless love would just torture him further. He might as well die now. “You can’t drag me around for the rest of your life.”

“True, but you’re staying until I’m sure that you’re well enough.”

Aspen almost could have laughed. Well was a fantasy at this point. “Bye, Oriel.”

He turned the horse’s head, intending to at least get off the docks first. Then he could find some whiskey, buy some laudanum, and slip off somewhere. Probably in an inn room. The owner could feed him to someone who had pigs and be done with the mess quite quickly. Aspen wouldn’t have to feel anymore. Oriel and Roth could get to work on forgetting him which would take about ten seconds. They had each other and didn’t need him.

Oriel lunged for the bridle and barely managed to get a hold. The horse danced sideways as Aspen tried to swipe at his arm. “Let go, you fucking idiot! You’re scaring-”

Oriel grabbed his arm and yanked him off the saddle. For a moment, Aspen was weightless, and he was caught in arms stronger than his. Roth rushed to calm the horse.

“Let go of me!” Aspen kicked but Oriel’s grip around him was like iron. “Don’t let him take me!”

“Uh, maybe you shouldn’t-” the sailor started as a few people stopped to stare.

“He’s just scared of water.” Oriel hurried for the gangplank. “He’ll be fine in a room where he can’t see it.”

Aspen tried to push on him, kick, and punch wherever he could reach. “Don’t do this to me! Please! Oriel! ORIEL!”

Just like the last time Aspen screamed his name, he was ignored. Oriel tightened his grip as he raced up the gangplank. The familiar tread of boots on the deck met Aspen’s ears. The slight swaying. It was dark again, and he

couldn't move while someone held and breathed over him. Why wouldn't they just let him die?

The lantern moved with the sway, throwing shadows around, and he burst into tears. It would hurt so bad, but they never cared. He was less than a fairy to them. Less than an animal.

"Aspen, you're safe. I promise. If anybody ever dared to touch you again, I'd kill them."

Oriel's arms tightened around Aspen. This wasn't the hold, but he had no memory of getting into this room. He choked on his tears as his chest threatened to burst from the pressure in it.

"I didn't mean to scare you, but we have to get away. They will send men farther and farther out. News will spread. I have to get us farther north just in case. It's not just about reaching Asara and hoping she lends me her army. I have to protect us now."

"I can't-I can't-"

Oriel set him on his ass and pushed him into a corner before he shoved something solid into Aspen's grip and forced his fingers to close around it. "We'll be fine, but if anybody tries to touch you, stab them with this. Keep stabbing until they don't move, and scream for me and Roth."

He leaned down to hug him so tightly, it should have hurt, but it didn't. Aspen clutched the dagger handle as he shook. If he couldn't get off of the ship, he needed something. To his surprise, the touch helped to ground him a little since Oriel had also given him a weapon. He wasn't completely helpless now thanks to him.

Oriel settled on the floor with him. They were against the foot of the bed, and the cabin was a bit bare. The Captain of the Windrunner probably ferried small groups of people around now and then for money.

"I know Captain Nalha from when I was a kid. Father took us boys on his ship to go out on the water. He usually takes people up and down the coast or transports stuff. I suspect he might have done, erm, a little piracy in his youth, but me and...and my two brothers visited a couple of times over the years. I wasn't even sure if he'd be here now, and it was a stroke of luck that he was. West Bay isn't safe for us, and I was trying to avoid a passenger ship. I promise we'll be safe."

"Out," whispered Aspen. He needed air and openness.

Oriel helped him out to the tiny hallway and out to the deck. The gangplank had already been drawn up, and he slumped to the ground. The cabins for passengers were one structure with a hall cutting it in half which was normal. The Captain's cabin was ahead of him, and he assumed the sailors probably had spots below deck since they often slung hammocks.

How was he supposed to be safe here with all of these men?

"Do you want to sit somewhere in particular?" asked Oriel.

Aspen shook off his hand and huddled against the wall as a man with a gold earring and leathery skin, brown from years in the sun, walked up.

"Sorry, I was busy, but you found your way."

"Where's Roth?"

"Oh, the red-haired guy? I said I was letting you have my cabin, and I guess he'll be sleeping in there with you. He took the packs in. Who's that?"

"That's Aspen. A friend."

"Come speak to me in private. There are too many ears out here."

Oriel knelt by Aspen. "Do you want to stay out here or in your room?"

"Room."

Like he was staying alone with all of these sailors. He could have sworn one had given him a look. He brushed off Oriel's grip and went to hurry back to his cabin.

With a chair under the handle, he sat on the bunk and clutched the dagger as he watched the door for hours. How was he supposed to cope with a trip that lasted for days? The sway was also making him sick, not from the motion but from remembering the last time he'd felt that.

The chair wasn't even that sturdy so that certainly didn't help his nerves.

Food was left outside of his door later since he refused to come out and eat. Oriel begged him to, but there was no way he was going around those sailors.

Aspen didn't even care to get the food, and he was trying to ignore the sway. It had grown worse since they'd gotten underway earlier although the sea was calm. No matter how he sat, the sensation never went away. The damn ship wouldn't stop moving. He almost wanted to scream even though he was aware of how stupid his thoughts were. Of course, no boat wouldn't stay perfectly still.

As the light from the porthole window faded, he stayed in his spot while the lantern continued to burn. He almost wished Oriel would hug him again to give himself something else to focus on. He couldn't believe he'd gotten a dagger since he figured Oriel would be afraid that he'd off himself.

He woke later with no memory of falling asleep. The lantern must have burned out since it was dark. The door handle jiggled, and he figured it was Oriel trying to check on him again.

The thump that came a second later made him jump, and the next must have broken the chair. Wood scraped. He froze as a square of light appeared with a figure. Where was the dagger? He'd just had it. He fumbled for it on the blanket as the figure advanced.

He couldn't do this again. Oriel had said to stab and scream, but he couldn't find his voice, and his fingers seemed stiff as he frantically felt in the dark.

Another figure appeared, and the first made a faint choking noise before it collapsed on the floor with a thump.

"Aspen!" Roth's voice broke through the freezing terror, and Aspen let out a sob. "Come on. I've got you."

Roth had to partly carry and drag him from the bed. Aspen's legs shook while he clutched onto him for a moment even if Roth must have hated his guts.

"We have to get to Oriel. Now."

With his arm around Aspen, Roth paused in the doorway as he peeked out. The ship seemed calm, so why had that one sailor decided to come for him? Aspen might have screamed if he hadn't been so terrified. Why risk it?

Aspen kept his arm around Roth's slim waist as they hurried down the darkened hall. No door blocked either end, and starlight showed the deck ahead seemed empty from what he could see, but he knew sailors had to be about and up in the rigging or the crow's nest. The whole crew never went to sleep. Someone was always on watch on a ship.

Roth hurried him across open space when he heard something shatter, and a roar ahead. Behind them, he heard movement, and Roth damn near dragged Aspen as he broke into a run and threw open the door to the Captain's cabin. Oriel had driven his sword into another sailor who was dead on the floor.

“What the fuck!” Oriel planted his boot on the sailor’s chest to yank out his weapon. “Thank Elira I woke up and heard something.”

Roth locked the door as someone’s boots pounded on the quarterdeck above them, and Aspen saw his bloodied dagger in one hand. “Your Captain Nalha has betrayed us. We’ve barely gone past Qualquetty, and we’re closer to land now.”

Aspen had no idea how many sailors there were, but with only three of them, they were fucked, and Oriel couldn’t use his magic. Aspen could channel fire through the dagger, but he’d last about five seconds in a real fight. “You promised we were safe!”

Guilt flashed in Oriel’s eyes, and he started to say something, but someone pounded on the door. Roth backed away and went for his sword lying near a pack. Something else took over Oriel’s face as he marched toward the door and hooked his bloodied sword on his belt.

“Wait-” started Roth.

Oriel got down and put his cheek to the floor as he peeked through the crack under the door, and he stood again. “Cover me.”

“Oriel? Are you all right?” Captain Nalha’s voice seemed quite concerned. “What’s going on? I-”

Roth hovered as Oriel threw open the door. Aspen couldn’t see with it blocking the way, but Captain Nalha was jerked in, and something crackled. Someone screamed, and another man shouted.

“His lightning tracks!”

“It hit Billy!”

The Captain fell on the floor as Oriel went to throw the door shut. Something thumped on it as if a person had thrown their shoulder against it, and Oriel couldn’t quite get it closed. Aspen threw his body against it, and he heard it click.

Oriel locked it. Someone kicked the wood, but the sturdy door held.

“You better fucking unlock-”

“Call him off!” Roth shouted as he pressed the tip of his sword into the Captain’s neck.

“Stop trying to get in!” bellowed Nalha.

Angry voices muttered, and boots thumped as Aspen shook.

“What the fuck did you do!” roared Oriel.

Nalha blinked his pink eyes. For a moment, Aspen caught sight of a moving tattoo on his arm as he lifted a hand, and his sleeve slid back. "Oriel. What are you talking about? Why is there a dead man in my cabin?! There was a commotion and-"

"You're a fucking traitor," snarled Roth.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Get that away from my neck."

Roth pressed the tip a little harder. "I don't think so."

"You're fucked if you don't talk. I know you need something to channel your magic, so keep your hands where I can see them, or Roth will open up your throat." Oriel snatched the Captain's dagger and sword and flung the items on the floor near Aspen. "Take that."

"Oriel, get the rope," Roth said as Aspen collected the weapons. "There's some in that chest. Lay on your stomach."

Nalha had no choice but to comply. Once Oriel started tying his wrists behind his back, he spoke. "Please, let me go! My crew is worried, and I haven't done anything to you. Let's just talk like men-"

"Save it," snapped Roth.

"If Roth thinks you've done something, you have. Someone also tried to attack me."

Oriel forced Nalha into the chair and tied him to that too while Roth cleaned his dagger and spoke. "Oriel, we saw the Qualquetty Temple Light right before bed, right?"

"Yes."

Aspen had never been there, but he knew that in Qualquetty, the Temple was on a chunk of land that jutted out, and a huge Norian crystal sat on top. It soaked up the sun's rays all day and emitted beautiful light at night. He'd seen paintings, but not the real thing. It was considered a marker for ships.

"I couldn't sleep, so I went out," Roth told Oriel. "We've passed the temple now, but it's not that far south of us, and I could still make out the light. With the wind, this much time, and smooth sailing, it should be gone by now. We're also much, much closer to shore than we were earlier."

"Maybe we have a reason!" blustered Nalha. "You're not a sailor."

"You promised to take us up the coast to-"

"That's what I'm doing!"

"Then why are we so close to shore? There's no need." Roth pointed his sword at the fairy. "Besides that, nobody knew I was out there, and a couple

of your sailors don't know how to be quiet. I knew who the 'scared twig' was, and what would happen if that sailor had 'got' him."

Aspen's face burned as he remained frozen against the wall. Roth hadn't been noticed in the dark with his light footsteps. Luckily, he'd also gotten up and gone outside at the right time. If he'd stayed in and fallen asleep with Oriel...

"He's dead," added Roth.

"A sailor tried to attack me in here," said Oriel. "I got lucky, but you won't."

Nalha glanced at the dead man. "I would have put him to death myself if I'd known-

"Bullshit."

"Who paid you?" asked Roth.

"What are you talking about?" snapped Nalha. "I paid you for the horses and gave you free passage. I am deeply sorry that two of my men wanted to harm you. They're newer-

Oriel slapped him across the face. "You fucking prick. Even if nobody paid you yet, I know you're taking us to shore with the intent to sell me back to King Taven or someone there."

"Tell your men to guide the ship farther out," demanded Roth.

"I'm the Captain of this-

Oriel dragged his chair to the speaking tube in the corner, and the wooden legs scraped on the floor. "You will or I'll start cutting off fingers."

Nalha's mouth fell open. "Oriel, you've known me since you were a boy. I know you're not like that, and neither was-

"That was then. This is me now. Do you know what I've fucking been through and seen since I was taken?" Oriel got in his face. "Do you have any fucking idea? I'm not the sweet little boy who pointed at everything to ask what it was and wanted to steer the ship by myself. I'm not even the same person I was a few months ago. I swear to fucking Elira that if you don't tell the men to turn away from shore and get this ship going as fast as possible, I will cut off each and every finger."

He moved the metal flap covering the tube. Nalha shook his head, and something in Oriel's eyes seemed to snap as he closed it and went around the chair while drawing his dagger.

“Wait! Wait! Please don’t!” Nalha tugged on the ropes, and he tried to throw himself from the chair when cold metal touched him, but the bindings held him.

Aspen should have been horrified, but he felt a savage pinch of pleasure. Nalha didn’t give a fuck about them, and Aspen had been viewed as a toy that happened to come along with a huge payday. Oriel’s face showed no remorse as his dagger sliced through the man’s forefinger. The bone put up a pitiful resistance compared to the flesh, but he didn’t let that stop him. The Captain shouted, and the bloody digit landed on the floor.

“Please! No!”

Oriel sawed off the next finger. “If you run out, I’ll start on your toes.”

“Please-”

“I’ll hurt your balls too.” Roth stood in front of Nalha and licked along the flat of his dagger. “Cutting them off comes later, and I think a few shocks might convince you.”

Nalha paled at those words as he stared at Roth. “Okay. Okay. I’ll do it.”

He gave orders to someone through the speaking tube. One argued back until Nalha screamed that he was tied to a chair, he’d already lost two fingers, and the cat fairy was threatening his nutsack. Commands were shouted outside while the sailors must have been adjusting the sails. After a bit, Aspen felt the motion of the ship start to shift.

Roth twirled his dagger. “Threatening a man’s balls always works wonders.”

Aspen rushed to the porthole, and a few dots of light seemed to slowly shrink as the shore fell away. The Captain remained silent the whole time.

“While we get some more distance, you better start talking,” said Oriel. “Why don’t you tell us who you planned to hand us over to? Hm?”

“I didn’t-”

Roth slipped his dagger into the man’s shirt and pulled down. The weak buttons and cloth didn’t stand up to the blade, and a couple of the buttons pinged on the floor. “You could make this a lot easier.” He used the tip to flick aside each side of the Captain’s shirt.

A faint tremble ran through Nalha. “As my Crown Prince still even with King Taven over West Bay, I’m begging you. Get this freak off of me.”

“I happen to like this ‘freak’ as you called him,” said Oriel. “Don’t insult him again or I’ll shove your severed fingers up your ass. He went against

Lord Delwin for me, got me out, and saved Aspen. I'd fucking die for these two if I had to."

Nalha's eyes went to Aspen by the window with a plea in his eyes, but he flipped off the bastard. "Don't you dare fucking look to me for help. Your men would have raped me."

"And if he's important to Oriel, he's important to me," Roth hissed as he leaned toward the Captain.

Aspen sat against the wall and drew up his knees as those words rang in his head. Why would he be that important especially if he used to have something with Oriel and couldn't stand him now? Roth should despise him.

Nalha tensed as Roth put the edge of his dagger on his nipple. Aspen couldn't help but to squirm even though nobody was threatening his nipples with a sharp object.

"Talk," Roth deadpanned.

"The-There's no one. I'd never dare-"

Blood blossomed on his chest as he tried to move away, but the edge sank in, and he couldn't go anywhere. The little speck of flesh landed in his lap, and blood ran down his torso.

"One left, and then we'll start on other stuff," said Roth.

"You've got more fingers," said Oriel. "I guess I'll take one of those before you become nippleless."

"You're torturing an innocent man. Please-" Nalha screamed as Roth touched his shoulder and shocked him.

Chapter Seventeen

Nalha held out for a good ten minutes. Another finger was sliced off, but it was the shock to his balls that broke him. Aspen watched from the bed and almost wanted to cover his ears at the scream the Captain let out.

Roth threatened him again once Nalha could talk, and he quickly shook his head.

“It wasn’t a specific person,” he said as his new stub bled. “When you found me, I knew the authorities in Qualquetty would take you. King Taven’s men are everywhere, and a new lord is over that city as a reward. The last one died in your court. I’ve never personally met the new lord, but I know that if I brought you, he’d pay me handsomely.”

Oriel leaned against the wall with an expression of such disgust, Aspen was surprised the Captain didn’t shrivel on the spot. “So this was for money. You were willing to sell me out for a few coins?”

Nalha grew paler. “I’m nearly forty-five, and it’s been hard lately. I have men to pay, and I thought-I thought maybe I could get a small holding for such a service. I’m-”

“It’s okay if I’m taken back, enslaved, tortured, and raped, so you can have a small holding and sit on your arse? You think it’s okay to have your men rape someone I love?” Oriel leaned forward as Nalha started to speak. “Shut the fuck up. I’m still talking. You’ve spoken to my Father and had us on your boat. Even if I’ve never specifically done anything for you, I’ve also never done anything to you. I expected you to have some common decency to get us away and keep your fucking mouth shut. I guess you never figured that there might be a reward in the future from me if I get my Kingdom back. What’s in that cupboard over there?”

Aspen eyed the lock on a cupboard by the bed and assumed weapons. Nalha confirmed it, and when Roth let a tendril of lightning curl around his forefinger, he blurted that the key was in a little locked box under the bed. Roth still let the tendril escape his finger and head right for its target. Nalha squeaked when it hit his bare chest.

Oriel found the flimsy box and busted it against the floor. Inside was a key, several coins, and a couple of useless trinkets. When he opened the cupboard, a few crossbows waited on the racks. They had already been drawn, and Aspen spotted two much smaller ones too. They could be drawn by hand but weren't as powerful. Still, a bolt to an unprotected chest could kill.

Oriel pulled out a metal one and handed it to Aspen. "I know this is heavy, but it'll handle your fire. Roth, take this one."

Aspen sat on the edge of the bed with the hefty piece. His archery lessons had been a long time ago, so the crossbow might be pretty useless.

"If you let us all go, I'll tell the men to let you have the lifeboat. You can row to shore with no problem. We won't bother you, and I won't say a single word about you or your friends. It'll be like it never happened." Nalha squirmed in the chair as Oriel approached with two pieces of cloth that were intended for cleaning and polishing the crossbows. "I'll even give you money--"

"I don't want to hear any more of your shit." Oriel shoved a piece of cloth into his mouth and tied the other strip of cloth around Nalha's face. "First, I'll remove your other fingers."

Nalha's gagged screams grew worse as each remaining finger was cut off. The severed pieces remained on the floor as blood dripped from the stubs. His shaking grew with each cut, and he kept pulling on the ropes so hard, his wrists started to bleed.

Aspen had never seen such rage on Oriel's face before. Nalha made a high-pitched noise when Oriel drove the dagger into the back of one hand and surely severed a few tendons. Aspen swore he heard a bone crack.

"That's for Aspen." Oriel twisted it, and Nalha's eyes seemed to bulge out of his head. He didn't scream, but Aspen thought he might pass out.

"Cut off his dick," he whispered.

"What?" Oriel's expression only softened when he glanced at Aspen.

"I want you to cut off his dick. I bet he would have had a turn with me too if they'd gotten you tied up and out of the way."

"Oh, I promise you, Aspen, I will." Nalha started sobbing at those words, and he shook his head as Oriel stood in front and held up his blood dagger. "Don't try to pretend you wouldn't. If you were willing to sell us out, what's a piece of ass to you? You don't even know Aspen and probably

wouldn't get anything for him if you turned him in. I'm sure Roth also would have been another hole in your eyes."

Nalha was a shaking, sobbing wreck by the time Oriel finished carving the word "traitor" into his chest. Blood ran from the cuts and coated his torso. Some had dripped on the floor, and the front of his trousers were soaked. Considering that he seemed to be nearly in shock, it was a wonder he hadn't passed out yet.

"Now, here's what we'll do," said Oriel. "There's...eight left?"

Roth glanced at the door. "I think that's right, not counting the Captain."

Oriel thought for a moment. "If they're loyal to him, they'll want to save him, but they'll also want to save themselves. We can let them get off on one of the lifeboats. There are three, but they can fit in one. We can pretend to agree to send the Captain down on a separate one. This is what we'll do."

Once they were fully prepared, Oriel opened the flap on the speaking tube. "Is someone there?"

A second passed before a gruff voice answered. "Yeah. If you think-"

"I think you know threats are useless when I've got your Captain, and I don't need to channel my fire."

The fairy on the other end shut up real fast when he heard that.

"I'll set this whole fucking ship on ablaze before we fall to your men. We've got nothing to lose at this point, and if you fuck with us, some of you will die for sure, including your Captain. I'm willing to let you all live and go free if you all get in a lifeboat. Once you're down, we'll send the Captain in another. The shore isn't that far, and you can row. You'll get there soon enough. If you refuse, I'll slit his damn throat and set the ship ablaze. Your choice."

Oriel squinted as Aspen caught the gruff voice again, but it was lower. The sailor must have been speaking to everyone else. After a couple of minutes, he spoke.

"How do we know if you're lying? You could've already slit his throat."

"How do you know if you'll survive if I set this whole ship on fire? Do you think I give a fuck at this point?"

Another pause. "Is the Captain alive?"

Nalha made a desperate noise through the gag.

"Do we have a deal?" snapped Oriel.

"Yes."

“In ten minutes, you better be on a lifeboat. If I see any weapons or magic, you’ll have fire and Roth’s lightning coming at you. In such cramped quarters, you’ll all be fucked. Even if you live, have fun swimming to shore.”

“Fine.”

Oriel explained what Aspen would have to do, and he didn’t complain even though the crossbow was heavy. He’d taken archery lessons before, so he hoped he could make one decent hit even though he hadn’t practiced in ages. He’d handled crossbows before too, although they had been lighter.

When Oriel opened the door, the deck appeared empty. One of the frames on the port side was empty, showing that a lifeboat had been taken down. Roth followed him out. Aspen locked the door and listened by it. No shouts or sounds of fighting came, so maybe everyone had listened.

Nalha tried to speak through the gag, and Aspen side-eyed him. “Shut up, you sack of shit. I’m just a scared twig, remember?”

When Oriel knocked and spoke, Aspen opened the door. This was it. With his crossbow ready and the bolt coated in oil to make the flame last longer, Aspen approached the portside railing with the other two and got between two smaller cannons. A couple of balls from those would annihilate a lifeboat, but they’d take too long to load and deal with. Oriel and Roth probably didn’t even know how to effectively use one.

The men made an easier target with the two lanterns they’d brought. Aspen had to support an elbow on the side to deal with the weight, but it also helped to steady his aim a little as he positioned the crossbow. Oriel and Roth were already on the other side of the cannon to his right. Oriel held a normal crossbow and set another down. He straightened and started to speak as though he intended to follow through with the deal, and Aspen summoned his fire.

The metal crossbow lit up and grew faintly warm since Aspen’s own magic wouldn’t burn him. It would certainly burn another fairy if they touched it right now. The oil on the tip of the crossbow flared brighter than the rest of his pale yellow fire, and he pushed the trigger lever.

The lit bolt flew toward the boat. One of the men shouted something as it hit a wooden seat and narrowly missed someone’s thigh. Roth sent out his lightning as Aspen ducked.

“Yessss,” Oriel hissed after he crouched. “I hit the lantern.”

Roth dropped down as a fireball whizzed overhead, harmlessly went the width of the boat, and headed down. The ocean would put that out. Aspen went around the cannon as Oriel took a smaller crossbow, stood, aimed, and ducked just in time to avoid another fireball.

“They dropped the oars. The boat’s on fire, a few are dead or knocked out, and I think a couple jumped.”

Roth stood, and while Aspen didn’t dare stand to see, he heard screams, and he knew Roth had sent electricity toward someone in the water. Purplish sparks were carried up and snuffed out by the wind.

“Most of them must have been channelers like Aspen,” Roth said as he ducked.

Someone splashed and shouted. Like anyone would help them now. Roth stood one more time to attack again, and it grew quieter. Oriel stood.

“Are they dead?”

“I think some are knocked out, and they’ll drown.”

“Good riddance.”

“Dead men can’t talk.”

Aspen stood and peeked out. Since the ship was moving, the remains of the lifeboat were bobbing farther out now, and a piece of flaming wood went under. They wouldn’t have to worry about those sailors anymore. A little shudder of relief went through him, and Roth squeezed his shoulder.

“Good aim earlier.”

Now for the Captain.

Nalha didn’t try to scream or beg when he was dragged out and tied to the mast. He seemed half out of it since he’d lost a lot of blood, and he could barely keep his footing while Roth and Oriel worked on the bindings. The rope around his neck to help keep him up was probably too tight, but Aspen certainly didn’t have any sympathy toward him. Oriel started cutting off the man’s trousers.

Wait. Was he really going to do it? Aspen had thought he was just saying that.

Nalha let out a muffled shriek when the edge of Oriel’s dagger bit into his ballsack. He thrashed against the ropes keeping him in place as blood poured. Oriel ignored his racket and kept cutting. After he dropped the man’s testicles on the deck, he started on the Captain’s dick.

Nalha's screams weren't pleasant, but Oriel didn't hesitate, and he sliced away as though he was simply carving a roast for dinner.

"Fuck you!" He dropped the severed dick too. "That's for Aspen, you fucking piece of shit. For wanting to sell us out, you can bleed to death. We've already lost enough, and you wanted to take more from us."

Nalha had gone rigid and silent as shock seemed to take over. Blood flowed from his crotch, and he grew paler in the light of the lantern that Roth held. Disbelief flickered in Nalha's eyes as if he'd really thought Oriel would show some shred of mercy in the end.

But Oriel had been right. He wasn't an innocent little boy anymore, and none of them were the same people they'd been a few months ago. Nalha had picked the wrong people to betray.

Oriel turned to Aspen. "Do you want to finish him? We can let him bleed out like I said, but it's your choice."

It was almost like an offering to show not everything he'd said was lies. He'd kept his promise to cut off the bastard's dick just like Aspen wanted, and he was trying to give him back some control over his life. Roth had even saved him and said he was important.

But Aspen had seen enough blood tonight and didn't want to sink a blade into flesh. He wanted to lie down and not think.

"Let him bleed."

The Captain had gone limp and probably only had minutes left.

For the first time on the boat, Aspen felt truly safe since it was just them. With the sailors gone and Nalha nearly dead, no one could touch them.

Then he remembered something when Roth mentioned they'd have to go soon.

"Unless you know how to sail," he added.

"Erm, no." Oriel glanced around. The ship was steady for now, the ocean was calm, and the wind was good, but such things never lasted, and a ship couldn't simply be pointed in one direction and left to go for ages. "We can steer it a bit, and it's steady for now, but there's only three of us. We can't do this ourselves for long. We have a little bit of time, and we can use the lifeboat to get down later and go to shore."

If any of those men had survived, they'd have a hell of a time getting to shore. Even if they went to the new lord of Qualquetty and explained what happened, the trio would be long gone.

“Go lay down for a bit,” Oriel told Aspen. “See if you can get a little sleep before we leave. I don’t want to go to shore in the dark.”

Now that they were safe, Aspen also had a strange sense of deflation. Roth, who he’d treated like pure shit, had saved him. Oriel had given him a weapon, kept his promise, and tried to give him some control over someone who would have let his men hurt him without a second thought.

Maybe some part of him really did love Aspen. Maybe he wasn’t a heartless liar who had only viewed Aspen as a hole two years ago and only brought him along to assuage a little guilt.

But why? Oriel didn’t need him, and he shouldn’t bother caring. He had Roth who wasn’t broken in his mind, and Roth certainly didn’t need Aspen. Perhaps he should settle for silence instead of insults and snaps.

They’d be better off without him, and soon, they’d be too busy to worry about him at all. Both needed to move on without him, and that was better. Roth had proved he was better than Aspen thought, and so had Oriel, which was why they deserved each other.

Aspen couldn’t fit into the equation. He was a pile of busted pieces that would never fit anywhere now.

At dawn, Roth got him up. They loaded up a lifeboat with their stuff including all of the money they could find. The shore was visible. Once they lowered the lifeboat, Oriel and Roth took turns rowing since they had more muscle than Aspen.

He imagined someone seeing the ship at some point. If they boarded it and the Captain wasn’t too rotted, they’d see the word traitor carved into his torso. They’d wonder what he’d done, who the ship had belonged to, and why his testicles and penis had been severed.

Let them think what they wanted. They’d probably assume pirates had gotten them.

When they finally got onto an empty stretch of beach, they left the lifeboat and had no choice but to walk since they didn’t have horses anymore. Aspen wasn’t sure where they were, but Oriel said they wouldn’t be stuck in the wilderness for too long. He seemed to have some idea of where they were.

He seemed beyond agitated as they finally made their way into another port town by the afternoon.

Aspen sat against their packs near the docks. People walked to and fro, ignoring them. Oriel had gone off to find if there were any ships taking passengers around here. If not, they'd go farther up the coast. Aspen glanced at Roth who was silent, and he wanted to thank him, but the words stuck. Surely, Roth hadn't forgotten what an ass Aspen had been.

Apologies were useless. Roth would probably give him a smug look and said he'd actually done it for Oriel, not Aspen. Maybe he'd just said Aspen was important to make Oriel feel better.

Oriel returned. "We have to go right now. There's one ship heading north to Realm's Edge. From there, we'll find another to the Windswept Isles."

Oriel had already gotten tickets. Someone checked the little stamped, wooden pieces at the gangplank so nobody could sneak on. Aspen could already feel his body freezing up and his breath growing short at the idea of being on yet another ship. There would be so many people, and passengers would mostly be in the hold since they couldn't put everyone in a cabin.

This was what Oriel had been trying to avoid for him and partly why he'd gone to see if Captain Nalha had been in port by any chance.

The sailor stamped each little wooden piece and handed them back with a warning to watch the warm wax. Oriel pocketed them, took Aspen's packs, handed them to Roth, and picked him up. "I know you're scared, but we have to go. Close your eyes and try to focus on me."

"What the fuck's his problem?" asked the fairy who checked their tickets.

"He's scared of water," snapped Oriel. "Shut up before I give you a reason to be frightened of water."

There were so many people, and anyone could hurt Aspen if they got him alone. To his horror, they had to go below deck just like he'd assumed. It wasn't quite like the hold on the slave ship, but it was close enough. Voices pressed on him from all sides, a woman called someone's name, and a baby cried. The only way out was through the hatch, and anyone could come through it at any moment.

He couldn't stay down here for so long. He'd go insane.

"Put the packs here," said Roth. "We can stay in the corner and try to shield him."

Aspen didn't dare open his eyes when Oriel put him down. He'd see that solitary lantern swinging, the chains, and a sailor climbing down the ladder

to crush and make him hurt again. He wanted Oriel's arms back around him as he curled up on the wood and trembled.

"Aspen..." Roth's voice was hesitant, and his touch was even more so, but he pulled Aspen up to lean against him and tightened his arms. "I know you're scared, but we won't let anyone touch you."

Aspen kept his eyes closed and leaned into his embrace while Roth stroked his hair. More voices filled the space, boots, and shoes clomped around, and when someone started weeping, he wrapped his arms around Roth's waist. He tried telling himself this wasn't the same hold, and the crying fairy wasn't a slave that had been chained up, but terror still clawed at his brain.

Oriel's voice came through the madness at some point. "There's a physician on board so I paid for this."

Roth paused. "That might work. Aspen, lift your head."

"No," he mumbled.

"I got something that will take off the edge," said Oriel.

Aspen let Oriel put a bottle to his lips. Instead of alcohol like he'd hoped for, the liquid was bitter and had a strange, sweet undertone.

Oriel pulled away the bottle after a couple of sips. "No more. It'll relax you a bit, and we won't let anyone touch you either."

Whatever it was, Aspen felt like he was floating in a few seconds. He couldn't even keep his grip, and Roth held him anyway. If only he could feel like this forever. Time meant nothing, and he was nowhere at all. Holds, sailors, nightmares, nothing existed. He had the feeling that Roth's voice was directing a question at him, but he couldn't focus on the words, and quite frankly, he didn't give a fuck.

He was free.

When he realized someone was moving him, he still didn't care. They could have been taking him to dump over the side of the ship, and it wouldn't matter. After flashes of bright sunlight and fresher air, it grew dark again, and he was placed on something soft.

"It'll be just us three in here," came Oriel's voice. "I promise."

Where was here? Aspen was nowhere.

"I don't think we should give him that much again," said Oriel. "The physician said two mouthfuls, but I think that's too much."

"Maybe he thinks incoherent equals calm and fine," said Roth.

Who cared? This was the best thing ever. Nothing was wrong now. Unfortunately, it didn't last forever because Aspen started to become aware of his surroundings after a time, and the scent of blackberries came back. They were in a tiny cabin that contained two beds with barely any space between them. Roth had him tucked against his side, and Oriel was sitting against the wall on the other bed.

Roth felt him shift. "Good, you're awake. You should drink some water."

Aspen's mouth was dry, but that wasn't what he wanted. "Give me more of that stuff."

"You need water." Roth helped him to sit up and put a cup to his lips. "It's been hours."

The cool water was a relief, although he was sure he'd drop the cup if trusted with it. He still felt rather floaty, and once he was done, he flopped back down on the bed.

"I paid someone to switch with us," said Oriel. "It was a lot, but I don't think you could handle at least three weeks down there."

"Okay."

Roth pulled the blanket over Aspen to cover him and pulled him against his side once more. "You can sleep, all right? We're safe here."

Why was Roth still being so nice to him? He'd even held Aspen down below and tried to make him feel better. Oriel had wasted so much money on him now. Aspen was going to die soon, so why bother taking care of him?

Once they had things figured out, that was it. Oriel would probably go to war, Roth would go with him, and Aspen would end things. He wasn't following them around and making them deal with him anymore. They'd both redeemed themselves back on Nalha's ship, but he didn't deserve the care. Once they left to try and get Oriel's Kingdom back again, that'd be the last time they ever saw him. They could focus on their own future together without the ball and chain.

It was pretty obvious they already didn't need him anyway. Around bedtime, Aspen became aware enough to see Roth had changed into his sleep clothes, and he was getting in bed with Oriel to sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Oriel had hoped that keeping his promise would help. Even if it hadn't, he had still intended to keep it. He would have cut the Captain into pieces if Aspen had said so.

It was all he could give Aspen at the moment. With that and Roth saving him, the snappy comments dissipated, but there wasn't any improvement in his overall well-being.

Oriel hadn't expected any of that to fix him, but he hadn't expected Aspen to sink further. Maybe he should, considering that they were on a ship.

The trip took an eternity. Actually, it was only a little over three weeks since they had good winds, but it felt like forever. Aspen stayed curled on his bed, barely spoke, practically had to be forced to eat, and he spent too much time on that medicine Oriel had gotten.

He was pretty sure halvin was what made it work since tiny amounts of that could sedate a person. He didn't let Aspen have more than a sip at a time. Being incoherent on it for hours at a time probably wasn't healthy.

He only got up to wash himself and use the privy when they gave him privacy. He didn't want to sit outside, meet anyone else, or talk. Oriel had hoped that Roth trying to help him would have done something more, but he was afraid Aspen was slipping to a spot where they couldn't reach him. Roth's cuddles couldn't pull him up.

Somehow, Oriel would have to deal with a possible war and still take care of Aspen because he was too afraid to leave him behind now.

"Maybe he needs a steady place," Roth said as they stood outside by the railing one night. Aspen was fast asleep in the tiny cabin. "All of this traveling isn't helping him. We sleep in a new place every night except for now, but a ship isn't good for him. If Asara will help you, maybe he should stay behind, and she can watch over him. Perhaps some herbs and stability will help him."

"I don't want to leave him."

“But maybe it’s for the best. You can come back for him.”

“What if I die?”

“We both might die either way. At least you’ll know he’s already in a safe spot.”

Oriel ran a hand through his hair. All of his ideas on how to take care of Aspen had been vague, and with the days bringing them closer to their first goal, maybe Roth was right. He needed to let go of this idea of keeping Aspen close and place him somewhere safe. He could come back later if he lived.

But maybe Aspen wouldn’t want to see him again.

“What if he’s never well? Hmm?” Oriel tilted his head. “What if I come back and find that he managed to kill himself or vanished?”

Roth looked away over the dark ocean. “I don’t have an answer, but I think Asara would watch over him. She’ll see how important he is to you, and she won’t let him run off or do anything harmful to himself. At least Aspen’s not angry now.”

“I don’t think him staring at the wall or sleeping all day is healthy either,” snapped Oriel. “That’s not helping him.”

“I know that.”

Oriel took a deep breath and hugged him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

Roth wrapped his arms around Oriel. “I know you didn’t. We’ll take this one day at a time, okay? That’s all we can do.”

What if Aspen ran out of days while Oriel was gone? Asara couldn’t be pasted to his side all day.

Aspen remained quiet, and he shrugged off Roth when he tried to hold him one afternoon. Oriel didn’t try because if Aspen wasn’t panicking, touching him might raise his wrath.

When they came to port and went straight to another boat, Oriel’s gut became constantly tense. The Windswept Isles were four days away if the weather remained pleasant. He kept imagining Asara refusing to help him with logical explanations of their chances. She’d let him stay, but he’d be adrift with no real purpose.

Or she’d say yes, they get a plan together, and he’d die in war. That wasn’t comforting either. He was a good fighter, but that didn’t mean he was invincible, and he didn’t want to join his family anymore. Not like that.

When they made land at Harpsen on the main island of Wind's Respite, he thought he'd throw up. They were so close. He'd have to tell her everything that happened.

Aspen followed them, and he was quiet as usual while they walked through the busy streets. He hadn't had any of the medicine that morning.

Queen Asara lived just outside of Harpsen, and Oriel could see the Castle far ahead. The pale blue stones shimmered slightly even at this distance, and he figured it would be a good thirty-minute walk once they reached the edge. He almost considered asking a blacksmith here to cut off the damn collar, but he was still too nervous to show it to anyone.

He wanted to be safely in his cousin's home with Roth and Aspen before that happened.

"Should we get horses?" asked Roth.

"No, let's just hurry up and go."

He had no idea where anything was in this city, and he didn't feel like trying to find stables. The air here wasn't as warm, and he knew the cooler months were coming. At least his cousin didn't live in the Iceland Kingdom where winter reigned forever.

The paved stone road meandered through flat land with bushes and palmers dotted about. A chuckle chickie giggled at them as it flew by, and he saw a bright yellow bird that was at least four feet high with toothpick legs walking at a distance. He couldn't remember the name, and he didn't care to.

They approached the gate where guards in pale blue armor watched them with mild interest.

"What's your business here?"

Oriel knew they probably appeared like a raggedy bunch. Their clothes were dingy, he needed a haircut, and so did Aspen. They probably looked tired too.

"I need to see the Queen. She's my cousin."

He expected the guards to frown, and he'd have to convince them, but one stepped forward.

"Oriel? That's really you?"

"Yeah." His family wasn't the only ones to have purple eyes, but they were a bit rare. He pulled down his shirt to show the ever-present collar. "It's just me now. The others..."

He cut off, but one of the guards hurried away, and the one who had spoken gestured him forward. "Queen Asara knows. She got a dove from someone saying what happened, and she's written to King Taven demanding that you be released. The note said you had been enslaved, although they had no idea if you'd be alive by the time she got it. She didn't have high hopes, but if you did escape, she knew you'd come here. We didn't actually think we'd see you..."

"Who sent the dove?"

The guard shook his head. "I don't know. It must have been someone that managed to escape the court that night or maybe they were in the city."

Someone must have seen Oriel being taken to the ship that night while collared and nude so they'd correctly guessed his intended fate. He'd probably never know who it was now.

"These two can wait while you speak to the Queen," said the guard.

"No, they're coming with me," said Oriel. "If it wasn't for them, I'd probably be dead by now."

The guard didn't seem inclined to argue. Oriel almost felt like he was in a dream as they entered the Castle that was just as lush as the one he'd grown up in, although there were more potted plants, and the color scheme was different with a lot of blue. As though they didn't have enough with the sky above and the ocean on either side.

He paused in the hall on the top floor when he spotted a portrait on the wall. It showed him at the age of five with his two brothers. All three had been dressed by Mother in matching purple coats with gold and silver embroidery.

Oriel's memory of that time was vague, but he remembered Mother had scolded all three for fidgeting too much.

He'd thought it was stupid to be painted when he'd rather run outside, and he'd known Kard and Zale had felt the same. He'd sit still for days on end now if he could see Mother one last time. As he looked at the younger triplet's faces, he burst into tears.

He'd never see any of them again.

"Oriel!"

Queen Asara, nearly as tall as him, hurried down the hall while an attendant hovered farther down. Her black hair had a faint purple sheen, and a couple of greys showed in the braid wound around her head.

“Oriel! I thought you were in Meadow.” She took his shoulders while he cried.

“They’re dead,” he managed to get out before more poured out. “I shouldn’t have left the High Table. They got me in the bath. Maybe I could have done something, but I went upstairs...”

“No, no, no. Come here. We can’t talk right here. Wait, who’s that?”

“That’s Roth and Aspen. They stay with me.”

She shooed off the guards. A couple of servants that had come around to lurk at the commotion were given the packs and told to get rooms ready instead of staring like idiots. She made the attendant leave and locked her sitting room door once they were inside.

Oriel wasn’t sure what to do as he looked around the grand room with two couches in front of the fireplace. It was bare and empty since it wasn’t cool enough for a fire. Bookshelves lined one side, and little trinkets and statues had been placed among the books. Ahead, a door led to a huge terrace.

“Sit down,” said Asara. “I’ve got wine and water. Are you hurt?”

Oriel sank onto a couch with Roth who rubbed his back. Aspen huddled in an armchair with a pinched expression as he stared at his lap.

“No,” he said. “Not like that. We don’t need a physician.”

Asara always seemed so composed and regal from her letters and what he’d heard from his parents. Right now, she looked like someone had pulled a rug out from under her feet as she brought over pitchers and cups. Oriel accepted a glass of watered wine.

“I wrote to King Taven to try and get you released. I said to name any price, but I didn’t have high hopes if a response came, and I really didn’t think you’d escape. Obviously, you’re here now, thank Elira, but I was planning to go to war to get you back.”

He almost choked on his wine. She really would have done it for him if he hadn’t been able to escape. “But his army is much larger than yours.”

“You’re family, and I have someone that might help. They owe my family, but I want to know what happened unless it’s too much right now.”

His first instinct was to ask for a day. They had just gotten here which was a huge thing to cross off of his list, and it’d be nice to sleep for a night without worrying about traveling tomorrow.

He thought of the portrait in the hall. His younger brothers had always been more immature than him. He figured it was because they weren't directly in line. That had fallen to Oriel since he happened to come out first by pure chance.

Still, if the situation was reversed, and they needed to avenge him, they'd get on with it.

The sun had set by the time Asara knew everything that happened. Aspen looked ready to fall asleep from the amount of wine that he'd had, but Oriel didn't have the energy to tell him to stop or argue. Maybe he needed a night to dull everything since part of the story had involved him in the hold, although Oriel hadn't gone into heavy details. He couldn't complain anyway since he'd had a bit too much himself.

The note Asara had received lay on the table, and Oriel didn't recognize the handwriting. Whoever had put quill to pen had been shaky as if traumatized by that night. It simply said West Bay had fallen, and the whole family was dead except for Oriel who had been taken as a slave. It wasn't signed. Oriel assumed that a lord had managed to escape that night. Perhaps a servant had, although the cost of a dove to fly a message so far would have been quite costly.

"Who would help?" asked Oriel.

"King Kalen and King Rhys of East Forest." Asara didn't seem to be at her best, but after hearing of so much death and what the survivors had suffered, he didn't blame her when she reached for her wine again. "My husband, Elira rest his soul, met Nemyr. This was after Kalen's parents were dead, and the traitor had been put to death."

Oriel had heard of that. Kalen's Uncle Harren had tried to suffocate him in his sleep. By chance, a playmate of his who should have been in bed came to see him. Her screams had alerted someone and saved him.

"Nemyr went to some lord's home on business. My husband was there too. I don't even remember where they had gone exactly since it was so long ago, but Nemyr slipped out in the back garden. It had rained earlier, and the stone pathways were slick. Thankfully, my husband found him out there and he could heal broken bones because Nemyr had cracked his skull. He was fine after my husband healed him."

Oriel's eyes widened. "I never heard of that."

“Nemyr said to keep quiet about it. I think he wanted to make sure no word of the incident ever got back to Kalen. The poor boy had already lost his parents and a traitorous Uncle. Imagine if his remaining Uncle went on a trip and didn’t come back alive. Even though he lived, if Kalen heard of it, it likely would have scared him to no end. He surely had already figured out that no one is invincible.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“My husband told me everything, of course, but I kept the secret. Nemyr said that if our family needed anything at all, even an alliance, we could always ask the Valentine family. He said it was a small price for his life and stability for his nephew.”

“What caring words. And then he locked up his nephew.” Roth threw back what was left in his glass.

Oriel had heard about that and never really got a straight answer from anyone about it. Then again, how would locals know? All he knew was that Kalen had been locked up for ten years, apparently of his own accord because he didn’t know how to love and had to learn.

He must have known how to love since he had a husband now who used to be a human. Besides, how could someone not know how to love? None of it made sense, and it had all sounded quite suspicious to Oriel. Nemyr had died after an incident with a demon when he got caught tampering with his wife’s body.

Oriel didn’t have the energy to wonder about that. “They’d help us?”

“I’m sure Kalen would keep such a promise and lend us his army. Nemyr said the Valentine family, not just himself, and they’re not the sort to forget debts and such. If you want, I can send out a dove first thing tomorrow when I can think straighter and ask. The wine’s gone to my head, but with our combined armies, we’d certainly have a chance.”

“Okay.”

They could really do this and have a chance. Oriel had worried himself sick, and now, he already had a yes from his cousin plopped in his lap. Beyond that, he needed to sleep and give his mind a break from the past. Reliving everything had taken a lot out of him.

Asara seemed to know that they needed time to get settled. The servants had prepped separate rooms, but Roth simply fetched his stuff and came to

his. Dinner was brought, although he had no appetite. He went to check on Aspen who had fallen asleep while fully dressed on top of his bed.

Oriel slid off his boots and pulled the blanket over him before he sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hand on Aspen's arm. Asara said a blacksmith would come with a cutting tool for the collar, but he had a few minutes.

Besides that, he needed this. Even with Roth, he still craved touch from Aspen. He knew Roth would say to not do it, but he ran through all his failures again.

He'd never get what he wanted from Aspen. A smile, his laugh, his hands, a kiss. He'd fucking ruined it all. He stood, kissed Aspen's temple, and left the room after he found the dagger he'd given him and slipped it into his belt.

He wasn't taking chances.

In his sitting room, Roth was on the couch, and the blacksmith had arrived. The bulky fairy wore a leather apron and carried something that most people wouldn't want near their neck.

He lifted the black, shear-like tool when he caught Oriel's expression. "I promise I won't lop off your head."

That still wasn't comforting, but Oriel was more than ready to take off the damn collar. He sat in a chair at a table by the wall. "Okay. Do it."

"Tilt your head this way-no, like that."

One side slid under the collar. It was a bit tight, and it dug in. Oriel steadied himself as he closed his eyes.

"Almost..."

Metal grated on metal as the pressure increased for a second. Like shears, the tool cut through the collar. Suddenly, the weight was gone, the pressure vanished, and he heard it clunk on the floor. After all this time, it finally fucking gone. He sucked in a deep breath as his skull tingled.

"Don't worry if your head feels a bit funny," said the blacksmith. "That happens with some prisoners when I cut off their collars, and it's just your magic. Have a good day, Your Majesty."

"Thank you."

"No problem."

The blacksmith took the discarded collar and walked out. In the hall, they heard him start whistling as he thumped away. Oriel lifted his hands

and summoned his fire.

It was probably no big deal to the blacksmith, but Oriel stared at the yellow fire around his fists in amazement. He'd taken his magic for granted when it came during puberty because who would dare to collar a Prince? He'd never imagined for a second that his ability would be taken away.

Roth smiled. "That's one thing done."

"It's been so long." Oriel leaned against the wall as he gazed at his hands and flexed his fingers. He almost wanted to set something on ablaze just to prove to himself that he could use his magic again, but he made the fire shrink and palmed it. "I can finally protect myself with more than a basic weapon like...like a human."

Roth snorted. "They'd probably take offense to that. Come take a bath."

The servants had left fine clothes for them, and it felt strange to wear silk again in the morning. He'd slept well, and Roth, the darling that he was, had woken Oriel with a blowjob. The favor had been happily returned.

The servants brought breakfast, but he hurried to check on Aspen again. As he rather expected, Aspen looked hungover as he sat in an armchair in the same clothes from yesterday. Oriel still had a headache from all of the wine, but Aspen had downed more than him. His food hadn't been touched.

"Um, Aspen—"

"Whatever you're going to say, stuff it," snapped Aspen. "Talk to your cousin, or go hump Roth...or whatever."

Oriel blinked at the sudden anger after so long. "Excuse me?"

"You got here like you wanted. Now you can go off to war or whatever. Regardless, leave me the fuck alone. If it's not clear by now, I fucking hate you!"

Oriel remained frozen by the door. "Aspen—"

"Nothing's changed, asshole. Fuck off."

Oriel turned on his heel and slammed the door as he left. What the fuck? He hadn't thought things were mended, but he hadn't expected such anger to return.

"What's wrong?" Roth asked when he stormed into their rooms.

"We're back to anger. I can go fuck myself according to Aspen." Oriel flopped into the chair at the table set for breakfast and stared at the poached eggs on his plate as if it was their fault.

Roth set down his fork and thought for a moment. “I’ll go talk to him in a bit.”

“Don’t bother. He’ll just yell at you too. I’ll ask Queen Asara if she’ll make sure he’s taken care of. He can stay here, and I’ll figure out the rest later. I can’t deal with him, myself, and a war. I...” He rubbed his face. “I just can’t do it all.”

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Chapter Nineteen

Aspen had bathed and cleaned his teeth so he didn't feel so disgusting in that aspect at least. Breakfast was too much of a hurdle when he was trying not to cry. He wasn't expecting Roth to storm into his bedroom with a face like thunder and his ears drawn back.

"Normally, I wouldn't do such a thing especially since he loves you so much."

"What are you doing?" Aspen tried to scoot back as Roth snatched his ankle.

"But I think you need this."

"Get the fuck off!"

Aspen was jerked down and flat on the bed. Like lightning, Roth slapped him right across the face and completely blew out all coherent thought. Instead of tossing a nasty insult, Aspen lay stunned as his cheek stung.

"That's for being a brat," snarled Roth. "If you want to continue hating him, go right ahead. Hate his fucking guts. Hate mine too if you want, but don't you dare talk to him like that again after all he's done for you and for us. It's tearing him apart, and the guilt is eating him from the inside out. He doesn't need the weight of your insults on him before he goes to war."

Aspen's eyes filled with tears. "I don't hate him. Not anymore."

Roth cocked one of his ears as his tail kept swishing. "You have a funny way of showing it especially since you blatantly said you hate him."

"I don't. I just..." Aspen started to cry. "I-I want him to hate me so he'll leave me alone. He doesn't need to keep dragging me with him or trying to fix the past. He's got you now, and he doesn't need me."

When they were nearly at the Windswept Isles, Aspen had figured that if Oriel grew angry enough with him, maybe he'd finally leave for good. Most people could only take so much verbal shit thrown in their face. He'd stop trying and pay attention to things that actually mattered in his life.

Aspen could off himself because no one would miss him, and he wasn't sure how he'd survive while alone in his mind. If Oriel made it through the

war, he could work on forgetting Aspen, focus on what was important, and move on in life with Roth. Roth didn't need him either. He'd already saved Aspen and tried to help him on the ship, but he should focus on Oriel who was worthy of his time and attention.

Roth's ears twitched after a few seconds. "I'm not a replacement for you if that's what you're thinking. That was never the point."

"He clearly loves you. You sleep together and do everything. I know you've fucked each other too, and Oriel's just dragging this out. It's you he wants, and you're much better because you're not all fucked up in your brain. I bet you never had to whore your ass out on the street to survive either. There's no room for me."

Roth sighed. "If you pulled your head out of your ass for five seconds, you'd see there is room for three. We've already discussed it, but he doesn't think you'll ever want him again. If you don't, that's your choice, but he knows I'm fine with a third in our relationship."

Aspen stared at him. There was nothing wrong with two spouses if everyone agreed, but cat fairies usually were possessive about their mate and didn't want a third. Oriel certainly didn't seem into such a thing either. "That's not him. He never would have dreamed of that two years ago. We didn't even fuck for a while."

"Maybe he's grown in some aspects, and it's possible to love more than one. He's close to us both, and he's developed feelings. But like I said, pull your head out of your ass and stop acting like a brat. Be civil, and don't fucking attack him with your words. He's suffered enough, and he doesn't need more from someone that he loves. He's done his best for you, yet you keep abusing him. I've kept quiet about it since this was your relationship with him, good or bad, but I'm tired of seeing you chip at him when he's been through enough."

Aspen wasn't sure if another slap was coming since Roth was still leaning over him with his red hair dangling down. His ears weren't so back anymore, but they weren't relaxed either.

"You keep punishing him, and you're punishing yourself too."

"I don't deserve him." Aspen dared to sit up and scoot away a bit. "The thing with Captain Nalha proved that. Then he spent money on the medicine and to get us a cabin. He still keeps trying even though I don't

deserve him. I did hate you two, but you both keep doing nice things and taking care of me even though I'm shit."

Roth got on his knees and leaned over the edge of the bed. "Let me tell you something. My Father beat the crap out of me a lot while growing up since I was a bastard kid. I won't get into all of the exact details right now, but he used me like a punching sack at times. I hid the bruises and pretended everything was fine. I have a kink where I like to be attacked and 'raped' by someone who I trust. It's not actual rape, but I like the feel that it is."

Aspen almost gaped at him. He'd heard of that kink before, but he didn't think he'd met anybody who engaged in it. Quite frankly, it sounded horrifying to him.

"You don't want that," he mumbled.

"I want the feeling from someone I trust," said Roth. "It's different. I like the other to take control from me. I don't want it truly taken from me, but I have more power by allowing the other to do it. I'm safe. Oriel's done it for me, and he's even cut me. I trust him."

Oriel had done that?!

"I've been made to feel guilty for being a bastard all my life even though it's not my fault. I'm guilty that I had to be cruel to Oriel at first and convince him that I was some cold-hearted fucker so he'd obey me."

Aspen knew all of that from yesterday except for the rape kink.

"I'll probably always like it now. It's helped me to give up control, allow someone else to take it, and still feel safer. I get to control the outcome. Oriel doesn't seem interested in receiving during sex, but he likes getting the control and making me feel good. It works for us and gives him a sense of control without actually hurting me. You punishing yourself and tormenting him with your words isn't helping anyone. No trust or safety is built from your verbal attacks. If you truly want to separate, you have to tell him civilly, although I hope to Elira you don't kill yourself afterward because if he learns of that, it will tear out another chunk of him. Even if you live, you won't get anywhere by punishing yourself with *actual* harm. You can't get back at those who hurt you by truly hurting yourself and or Oriel."

"You let someone hurt you."

“Oriel doesn't actually *hurt* me. You keep to yourself, lash out, and want us to hate you. I don't push away Oriel's love or keep to myself because it won't do anything to Lord Delwin. Even if I have a kink that seems strange, I can take good stuff when it's there and reciprocate it. Oriel likes doing it to me, and it's mutual. With you and him, it's all hurt, hurt, hurt, and nobody gets anything good from it. Maybe you could take what Oriel is willing to offer you.”

Aspen turned his head away to look at the window. “Even if I tried to be with you both, I don't know if I can live like this. I still feel it sometimes. It's like I'm there, and even sleep doesn't always keep it away. I still remember seeing them all die in the Hall, and in the hold...”

Roth crawled up onto the bed to take him in his arms. Aspen broke down into his coat while Roth stroked his hair and tightly held him.

“You can try, and let us help you. You know Oriel will punish at least one person responsible for this. The root. In war, a lot of King Taven's men will die, including those that hurt you. I can't guarantee they'll all die, but I'm sure some will.”

Oriel would. If he was able to, he'd probably personally hunt down every single person that touched Aspen and make them beg for mercy before they died. He'd brutalized Captain Nalha not just to get out, but because his plan would have led to his sailors hurting Aspen.

“Maybe you should talk to him,” said Roth. “Without nasty words. We'll be leaving soon, and you should decide if you'll come with us or stay here for now. We can get you later, and if you stay, you'll be taken care of here.”

Talking to Oriel made Aspen's guts churn even though a part of him did want to. “He's mad.”

“He's not mad. He's just hurt.”

Keeping quiet this time might bring regret later. Oriel wasn't guaranteed to live through this, and Aspen might forever lose his chance if he refused to talk to him now.

He straightened up and sniffled. “All right.”

Oriel was sitting on his balcony when Aspen came to find him, and he hovered in the doorway that led to the sitting room. Oriel glanced at him and quickly focused his eyes beyond the railing.

“I didn't tell Roth to speak to you, so if you're pissed and ready to tell me how I'm shit, I don't want to hear it.”

"I'm not." Aspen rolled a button on his cuff as his throat tightened. "I-I'm sorry. For acting like that, signing the contract, everything." It was all so inadequate, and the rest stuck in his throat.

Oriel hesitated like he still expected a pile of insults to be thrown in his face. "I'm not mad about the contract."

"I wanted you to hate me so you'd leave and forget me because you've got Roth. That's why I yelled this morning."

"I'll never hate you or forget you," said Oriel. "I am with Roth, but...I still love you. I did since those days when we went to the beach and the woods. I still loved you even when I didn't speak to you for two years, and I'm sorry for that. I had my head shoved so far up my ass..."

Aspen came forward to sit on the bench. "Would you really come back for me if I stay here?"

"Yes, I would."

Aspen leaned forward, and Oriel immediately took him in his arms as he started to cry. "I want you to come back for me."

"I will."

"I missed us, and how things used to be. I want that again."

"When I come back, we'll have that again."

"Roth is okay with it if we love each other," said Aspen.

"He told me that already," said Oriel. "Most of his kind are rather possessive, but some are fine with poly. He said he'll be possessive of us both."

"He told me about the other thing he's into and why."

Oriel glanced away for a moment. "It's not like we'll do that in front of you. You don't have to participate or anything."

"Are you going to love him more than me?"

Oriel tilted his head. "I'm not going to love him more."

"He's better than I am."

"This isn't about who's better. I love you both, and that's that."

"Roth's not all messed up in his head. I'm not like how I used to be, okay? Getting through a single day is a struggle." Aspen couldn't even fathom sex, and Roth could give Oriel a lot more in all ways.

"I'm not the same either, and I don't expect either of us to be," said Oriel. "I just want all three of us to make it work somehow. We're all we have left now."

Aspen stared out at the back portion of the Castle grounds which seemed empty. Beyond the wall, he could make out trees in the distance, and he knew the ocean lay beyond somewhere.

Aspen sank into the feel of his arms. For a moment, it was almost like when they used to sneak off together to go swimming and make love in the woods afterward. Except it wasn't because they'd never be that innocent again. But if he could somehow keep getting through each day, maybe it'd be worth it if he had Oriel and Roth.

Oriel kissed his forehead. "Do you want to stay here while we're gone? It's a long trip, and I imagine we'll be taking a ship for most of it. The river's faster."

Aspen knew he'd be pretty much useless. He had taken sword and archery lessons in his youth since Father had paid for them, and while he hadn't been terrible, he hadn't shown promise of being an epic fighter either. Besides that, it had been a long time since he practiced. One lucky crossbow shot didn't mean shit.

"I think it might be best if I stay here for now," said Aspen.

"Asara will make sure you're taken care of. She has a court physician, you can eat in your rooms if you prefer no company, and she has a library if you wish to read. No one will make you eat in the Hall or socialize if you don't want to. She'll give you a horse to ride if you want to go out. Just... promise me that when I return, you'll be here and that you'll be okay."

He was making Aspen promise that he wouldn't kill himself.

"I'll be here. Will you kill King Taven? He hurt me in the Hall once the others were dead."

Oriel took a deep breath as his arms tightened. "Yes. I'm not keeping him as a prisoner. I'll cut him into fucking little pieces if you want for hurting you and killing my family."

"I just want him gone."

Oriel and Roth left the next morning with a huge group of men. They'd take ships to the mainland, and use the Path River to get to the East Forest Kingdom. Aspen watched the ships move as he stood on the docks and could still feel the ghost of the hugs that Roth and Oriel had given him.

They might return. Or he might never see them again. It would be a while before they received any real news, and his stomach clenched at the weeks of waiting that lay ahead.

The court physician gave him a tincture from a glass bottle every morning as the days went on. He said it would help Aspen, although he didn't see how. Nothing could erase what happened, and every day felt like an endless drag. He was living because Oriel and Roth would return, but it was like being in limbo.

He stayed in his rooms for the most part and slept a lot. It made the time pass, and if he didn't have a nightmare, he didn't have to feel anything. Other times he woke up crying and afraid. Once he sobbed for hours after he dreamed about Kard and Zale teaching him to play a card game.

Even though he'd never quite had the same feelings for them as he had for Oriel, it was still almost unbelievable at times that he'd never see any of them again. He wouldn't even sit with King Leneer in his office and wonder how he managed to keep so many lords and various cities and holdings straight in his head. There wouldn't be any more card games with Kard and Zale whining because Aspen had a good streak and kept taking their money.

He asked for the physician to give him medicine that would take away all thought and consciousness for hours and hours every day until Oriel and Roth returned, but the man clucked and said that wasn't healthy.

Aspen said remembering the past and grieving over King Leneer and his dead sons wasn't healthy either. The physician sighed and said he needed to keep taking the medicine for a while to see results.

The handwritten label on the clear bottle said "uplift." That didn't tell Aspen what was in the medicine, but he figured it was the physician's own special formula.

He tried reading since he used to enjoy it, but it was often too hard to concentrate on the words for the most part, and he kept losing interest part of the way through. Sleeping was better.

Asara readied the rest of her men and sent the fleets away to head south and wait. She wasn't going to fight. After Oriel and Roth had been gone for about three weeks, she came into his rooms one morning. Aspen was lying on the couch and waiting for the physician who was late.

"I have your medicine," she said. "The physician's not feeling well, so I said I'd give it to you since you know me. I'll pour it for you."

"He's not very good if he can't heal himself."

Asara snorted. "Not everything's curable in a second."

He knew that too well. The servants had left a pitcher of pin juice on the sideboard. Pin fruits were popular on the Isles, and he didn't think the skinny green things were that great, but it masked the taste of the tincture which he hated. Everyone said the juice was good for a person too. Asara poured a glass and added in a good splash of the clear liquid from the bottle before she brought it over.

"Here. Drink it all up."

"Thanks. I don't think this stuff does much."

"It takes time."

"To do what?"

"It'll help you..." She seemed to be looking for the right words. "It's supposed to uplift the mind which will help you function better."

As though he was an object that could be made to work with a few tweaks. He took the glass, sat up, and paused. The greenish-yellow juice appeared normal, and the tincture was clear anyway, but he looked at the clear bottle sitting on the sideboard. Asara went to the sideboard and corked it.

Aspen remembered the physician's room back at King Leneer's home. When he first got there, he had to get checked out to be safe, and he remembered the cupboards with glass doors. All of the bottles had been labeled so that the physician could tell what was what. He hadn't been to the room of the physician here, but he imagined it was pretty similar.

Where was this bottle's label? The one he saw every other morning always said "uplift" in curly letters.

Asara pocketed it as she turned to him with a smile. "Drink it."

Aspen stared at her innocent face, and the words tumbled out before he could further doubt himself. "I don't think I can."

"Why not?"

His mind tripped as he tried to come up with a reasonable excuse. "It'll make me shit."

Dear Elira, why on this realm did he say that? Then again, it wasn't a bad excuse.

She knitted her eyebrows together. "Pin juice is pretty gentle unless you drink too much with the pulp in it. That's strained, and you've been having it every morning, right?"

Aspen's mouth went dry. "My stomach still hurts from breakfast. The eggs were spicier than I'd normally eat."

He had rather enjoyed the spicy eggs, and he hadn't thought he'd like something so hot, but they weren't bad.

"Well, drink the juice. You need the medicine, and you shouldn't waste it."

"But I tried to drink some water, and I was practically pissing from my ass."

She wrinkled her nose. "Why didn't you say something?"

"I took some of the peppermint tincture in the privy room, but I don't think it's working. There's not much else for the shits."

She drew nearer and made another face as if her queenly sensibilities were deeply offended by the mention of shit. "If you make liquid when you sit, then you still need to drink something or you'll get dehydrated."

"I don't want this now." He straightened up a bit. "I can already feel it again. My stomach's cramping."

"Then hurry up and drink your medicine before you go back to the privy. You need it in you."

"I don't want it!" He leaned forward with an arm around his midsection and hoped his pain expression was believable. The glass might as well as have had teeth considering how desperate he was to put it down. He reached to set it on the table in front of the couch, but he purposely placed it too near the edge. "I can't."

The glass slipped to the floor. The rug wasn't thick enough to cushion it, and it cracked. Pin juice went everywhere as he stood and raced for the privy room.

"Fuck!" He slammed the privy room door and locked it. Breathing heavily, he backed up and stared at the door. For a moment, he almost expected Asara to bust in, pin him to the floor, and force the contents of the bottle in his mouth.

Of course, she didn't do that.

"Aspen, what are you doing in there?" she called.

"What do you think I'm doing on the privy?!" he shouted. "Writing a tune?"

He heard her faint huff as he leaned on the wall that stuck out from near the privy seat. What if he was crazy and overreacting? Why on Ymir's dirt

would she ever want to kill him for? He hadn't done a thing unless sleeping and sitting around was a crime in the Windswept Isles. They had no quarrel, and while he had treated Oriel like shit, he hadn't harmed her cousin.

Roth and Oriel viewed him as important, and Asara had agreed to make sure he was cared for. Even if he was eating her household's food and taking up space, it wasn't that much.

She had no reason to kill him.

But why did the bottle have no label? The physician's bottle had been labeled and half-full yesterday. Even if he made a new batch for some reason, he'd make sure to paste on a new piece of parchment and write on it so it was never mixed up with anything else. He couldn't risk giving patients the wrong medicines.

She had to be trying to poison him, and he wasn't drinking anything from her.

He opened the window for air and listened. Servants came to clear up the mess he'd made. He pretended to be taking ages and finally decided that was enough. From the basin, he dabbed water on his forehead and neck as if he'd the sort of shits that made a person sweat. The peppermint tincture bottle sat on the cupboard which held things like drying sheets and cakes of soap, and he poured a little into the privy. If she checked that bottle, it would look like he'd used some. The liquid disappeared into the dark chute.

Finally, he went to the bedroom through the connecting door and collapsed on his bed.

Asara heard the door and bustled in. "Dear Elira, you took ages."

"It hurts," he mumbled.

"I'll get you more of the peppermint tincture." She started toward the privy room.

"I just took some and an extra mouthful to be sure, but it's not helping."

She frowned at him as she paused. "Maybe...it just needs to come out. Still, in a bit, try to sip some of your water here, and go slow." She pulled the bottle from her pocket. "You still need your medicine. You have to take it every day so it works."

She seemed awfully insistent that he should have his dose. It had to be poison. Maybe she planned to betray Oriel in some way, and take his Kingdom or something like that. She seemed to care about him, but people could pretend, and she wouldn't be the first person in history to stab a

family member in the back. Aspen heard the faint splash of the “medicine” being added to his water.

“Here, drink a bit now.” She held out the water glass to him.

“Asara, I can’t. I don’t want anything in my stomach. It’s going to cramp up even worse.”

She pursed her lips. “Have a sip.”

He rolled away. “Later. I just want to sleep.”

The glass thunked on the bedside table as she spoke again. “Fine. Be stubborn.”

A little ball of anger formed in his chest. “The next time you shit your guts out and feel awful, I’ll force water into you even if you don’t want it. We’ll see how you like that. I want some time with nothing in my gut so maybe I can take a nap before I have to crap again.”

She was silent for a moment. “Fine. I’ll check on you in a couple of hours. Try to drink a bit. Sips. If you get too dehydrated, you’ll feel worse, and you’re sweating too.”

“I know. This isn’t the first time in my life that something’s upset my guts.”

She left without another word, and even though the room was comfortable, he grew cold. The glass seemed to loom behind him. The whole pitcher of pin juice was probably poisoned now. She wasn’t concerned about him staying hydrated.

She wanted him dead. He couldn’t avoid eating and drinking for days and weeks. He’d die. For a moment, he was almost tempted to chug the glass. Let the poison enter his veins and take him away. No more pain. No more dreams or memories.

But he’d made Oriel a promise. Hadn’t he suffered enough too? Aspen wanted to feel his arms again and even Roth’s.

Besides, if Aspen was dead, who would warn them?

He got out of bed, changed his clothes, pocketed his coin purse, and grabbed a dark cloak. With his dagger up his sleeve, he peeked into the hall to find it empty.

Aspen used the back halls, slipped into the servant’s passage, and hurried down. A few servants passed him, but they said nothing. He was sure it was a few he hadn’t seen yet, but they didn’t seem concerned. If he was in Asara’s home, he probably had a reason.

He went out a side door, across the grounds, and slipped into the stable. The horse he'd been given was supposed to be gentle, but he hadn't ridden it yet. He told the stableman to ready it.

Asara wouldn't have told anyone that he wasn't to leave, and she probably didn't think he was capable. From what Oriel had said, she must have known the trip to the Windswept Isles had been awful, and so far, he seemed content to stay right where he was.

Before he mounted the horse, he had a stab of self-doubt once more that told him he was being stupid and overthinking it. There was another reason for the bottle being blank and her insistence. His mind was so cracked, he saw danger everywhere and not just from men who might do unspeakable things.

"She's gentle, m'lord," said the stableman who obviously must have thought he was someone of importance.

"Er, right."

If he stayed, he might never get the chance to warn Oriel and Roth. What if he wasn't overreacting? King Leneer, Kard, and Zale wouldn't have wanted to risk Oriel's life.

He mounted the horse and rode her out of the stables. She seemed placid, but he could tell she was fast. This wasn't the time to test her out. The guards didn't care about someone leaving, and they didn't even glance at his hooded face. Once he was past the gate, the way ahead was clear, and he kicked her into a gallop.

Her hooves pounded the ground as she flew down the packed dirt road. The wind blew his hood back, and for a moment, he remembered him and Oriel galloping down the trail in the forest two years ago.

Time was of the essence now. Asara would soon realize that he was gone because he suspected her. She'd send men after him, and it wouldn't be hard to make up a lie. She'd say he stole something, and they'd drag him back without a complaint.

If Oriel was victorious and returned, she could lie again and say he killed himself. Oriel's food or wine would probably be poisoned shortly after. Roth would die too. As the next living blood heir, she'd inherit everything that was his.

He rested the mare since a horse can't run forever without stopping, but he still pushed her hard. She huffed and sweated as they entered the city at a

trot to avoid running anyone over. The only way off this damn island was to get onto a ship which he still feared more than anything. His heart pounded, and the noise from the citizens hurrying about the streets didn't help his nerves.

The mare carried him along the docks a while later as he eyed the ships. The majority were manned by men, and he didn't know how he'd sit on a passenger boat and not panic. He had money to get a cabin, but if none were left and no one wanted to trade, he'd be stuck in the hold. Of course, people could come up for air, but they slept down below at night. It was also safer in case of a storm.

He had to do this for them, but the terror would take over, and he wouldn't have them here to help him. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

Aspen spotted the answer.

The ship was pretty similar to many others, but most didn't have an enormous flag with the blacked-out figure of a woman in a suggestive pose. An enormous banner hanging off the side proclaimed it to be called Elira's Doves which also wasn't something that most male sailors wanted to be thought of as.

All of the people he could see aboard were women, and he knew a floating whorehouse had to be the way.

Aspen approached the gangplank and didn't even get to think of how to ask before he was noticed. A woman with dark skin and a mass of tight curls by the railing leaned over it. "We're closed and about to cast off."

"I'm not looking for services," said Aspen. "Not like that. I need passage."

"We don't take passengers." She started to turn away,

"Wait! I'll pay, and it's important. I-my Father will kill me if he finds me."

Elira forgive him for the lie. Father wouldn't have dreamed of hitting him. The woman paused and seemed to study his face before she went to the gangplank and started to slowly come down.

"I'm not taking someone if trouble will follow."

"He doesn't own a ship, and he's passed out drunk right now. He'll never guess who's taken me or where I've gone."

"Where are you looking to go? We're heading south."

“Uh...” Aspen had no idea where. Even if he took the Path River and made it to East Forest, Oriel and the rest would already be long gone. They’d go over land for a bit and probably take the Eden River to speed things up. It led to West Bay, through it, and to the ocean. There, Asara’s ships would be waiting.

“I need to go to West Bay,” he said.

“That’s a bit farther than we planned.” She frowned and adjusted her sword belt. “How about if we drop you off somewhere south, and you can go on your horse? You’ll be far away from your Father.”

It was better than nothing. “Okay.”

“I’m Captain Kalani. You can pay me later. We’ll be busy when we cast off so don’t touch anyone or anything. We’ve got a couple of horses, so the girl in charge of them will take care of your mare. How come you don’t have anything?”

“I took the chance and ran. I was afraid he’d wake up if I stayed any longer.”

She seemed to accept that. He knew he probably looked like shit, and that helped his fake story.

Another woman came down to take his horse. She didn’t look back as he stood there, trying to force himself to step onto the gangplank. Oriel wasn’t here to haul him up by force. Aspen couldn’t do this. Even if it was all women, it wouldn’t work. He’d only managed himself decently on Captain Nalha’s ship after everyone was off it and dead.

They’d all be dead if he didn’t fucking make himself do it. He hadn’t been able to protect himself in the Hall or on the ship, but he could try to protect someone else now.

His legs started shaking the second his boots hit the deck. He kept repeating to himself that the woman wouldn’t hurt him. They wouldn’t trap him in the hold and chain him down to use.

He hurried to sit by the railing on the port side and look out over the water as he clutched onto the wood and tried to ignore the sway.

Captain Kalani approached, and her hair was now tied back with a ribbon. With the red sash around her waist, a sword at her side, and trousers tucked in black boots, she looked more like the Captain of a soldier or pirate ship instead of a floating whorehouse.

“Why don’t you go below deck?” she asked. “We have space.”

“Erm, no thanks...”

“This is my ship, and you need to follow my rules. I don’t have to take you anywhere.”

“I hate sh-ships. I was on one once, and...”

He could feel her gold eyes boring into him as she tried to figure that out. “Did it sink?”

“No.”

Whatever she thought, she decided to stop pestering him. “I need payment now.”

His fingers shook as he counted out the money she wanted. She didn’t comment but took it and left him there. Aspen stayed even when the ship finally left shore. The women were mostly busy, and he ignored the shouted commands as he stared out over the water. He had just had to deal with this for days and days.

“Hey, cutie. You got any money for a fuck?” A winged woman came to his side and lifted her shirt. “I’ll let you play with these for a discount.”

Aspen glanced at her. “I’m not into women.” He knew damn well that whores always lied about the discount too.

“Aw.”

A couple of the women busted out laughing. Aspen dared to look around and noticed most who weren’t busy were staring at him like he was a spectacle. Most wore trousers and loose shirts, although few had cut the trousers off at the knee. They all had weapons too even if it was simply a dagger at their belts.

The winged one pursed her lips. “Why are you over here clutching onto the railing? Your Father isn’t going to appear and drag you away. Our ship isn’t about to sink either.”

Captain Kalani must have said something to them. “I’m still scared.” He wanted to shrivel in shame because they probably all thought he was weak. Some man he was.

“Come on. I’ll take you to a cabin, and you can rest.”

“No.”

“So you’re just going to stay out here the whole time? Even at night?”

“Uh...” Aspen’s mind blanked on what to do exactly.

The woman pursed her lips, and her feathery wings flexed a little as she stood. “Fine.” She whistled.

Several of the sailors heard it and began to converge. A few up in the rigging climbed down, and boots thumped on the deck. Aspen froze for a moment as he realized he'd fucked up. They only wanted to put him in a cabin to get him in a confined space for...whatever they were planning.

"I didn't do anything!" he screamed as one made a grab for him.

He jerked away and stood to sling a leg over the railing. He'd take his chances in the ocean if he had to and swim back to shore if he could. Two women grabbed him and started to drag him across the deck despite his kicks. This was it. They'd probably torture him and hang him from the mast once they were finished with him. They must have viewed him as sport for whatever reason.

Or they knew how much filth had been ingrained into him and wanted to wipe it from the world. His chest hurt too much to drag air in.

Oriel and Roth would never find him.

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Chapter Twenty

"Wake up!"

Something sharp hurt on Aspen's cheek, but it brought him around enough for him to realize he was in a cabin, and one of the women had already fixed a shackle to his leg.

"I've never seen anyone pass out from terror so fast." Captain Kalani tossed his coin purse up in the air and caught it. "I almost feel sorry for you, but I guess that'll help later."

The cabin was empty except for the built-in bedstead which didn't have a mattress. He didn't remember getting down here at all, and his chest was still too tight. The one that had slapped him had his dagger tucked in her belt, and he knew he was fucked even if he could get it. Nine of the women were in the room and staring at him like he was some kind of freak.

"I didn't do anything," he whispered. "I just wanted to-

"No, you didn't, but I figured you'll have a use in a couple of days," said Captain Kalani. "Otherwise, I'd have left your ass on the docks. If you behave, maybe you'll get to go free later. We'll see."

They marched out, and he heard the door lock. Aspen completely broke down as he screamed and yanked at the chain in his terror. But Oriel and Roth couldn't hear him, and nobody came to save him. The women certainly didn't give a shit.

It took him a while to calm down, and he huddled in the corner while he watched the door and shook. He had no idea what the madam of a floating whorehouse and her ladies wanted, but whatever they had planned for him, he'd probably end up dead.

The hold of a regular passage ship was starting to look pretty good now. These women probably did some piracy on the side and thought he was an easy victim.

They let him be for the rest of the day. At one point after dark, he heard them singing and playing instruments for about an hour as if they were having a grand old time out there on the deck while their prisoner sat in a

dark cabin. Worn out from panic, he remained on the floor and didn't move while he hoped he could black out and not know whatever was happening later if it was painful. The only time he got up was when he knew he couldn't hold his piss anymore. The ship had grown quiet, and he tried yanking on the chain again, but that thing wasn't coming off anytime soon. Sliding his foot was impossible too.

He assumed he must have slept since the door banged open later. He blinked at the sun coming through the porthole and curled up tighter in his corner as his chest constricted again.

Captain Kalani came in with a couple of water skins that she tossed near him. His mouth was dry, but he was too stiff with terror to reach for them as she moved away from him. The chain went to a metal plate on the floor, and he only had a few feet of slack.

"It smells like piss in here." She wrinkled her nose.

It wasn't like he'd had much of a choice, and the dark stain on the floor was obvious.

Captain Kalani straightened her red sash and folded her arms. "If you're good, you can go free later once you do what we want. We'll dump you off on shore with your horse, and you can go on your merry way."

"Wh-what do I have to do?"

"Just pretend it's a little game of dress-up to help us out." She narrowed her gold eyes. "As long as you don't scream and make a fuss in here like yesterday, we'll feed you and water you, and we won't hurt you."

She gave him a hard look as he remained hunched in the corner. "Oriel will find you and kill you."

"I don't know or give a fuck who your buddy Oriel is, but he won't find us."

"He'll hunt you down-"

"Pfft. Whatever."

She slammed the door on her way out. A couple of the women brought him a bucket for pissing and a bowl of stew. Aspen forced down a few bites and drank some water before he curled up on the floor again.

Why did nearly everyone always want to use him?

He barely ate even though they brought him regular food. They gave him enough water too which interested him more, but he mostly stared into space. A couple of the ladies gave him pitiful looks which he ignored

because it was fake. They didn't give a shit about him. He had no idea what they meant about dressing up, and quite frankly, he didn't give a fuck.

It was evening on the second night when the ship grew noisy, and Captain Kalani came in to throw something at him. Two women loomed behind her.

"Take off your clothes."

Aspen stared at the dirty yellow linen shirt. A dark yellow dandelion was stitched onto the chest. "Why?"

"Do it or else."

He reached for the shirt. Might as well get this over with so he could get to the dying part faster. She snapped her fingers.

"Clothes off first, stupid."

"Wh-why?"

"Because I said so."

He noticed one woman had a case, and his heart quickened, but she opened it and pulled out a brush which would be a strange thing to torture him with. "You need some special marks, and I can make it look like you've been brutalized."

"Or we could actually beat the shit out of you," said Captain Kalani. "Make your choice."

Aspen started unbuttoning his shirt. She'd said earlier to think of this as dress-up. He had a feeling they had something humiliating planned, but he couldn't imagine what. At least they weren't stuffing him into a dress.

He couldn't properly take off his trousers with the shackle on his ankle, but one of the women came forward with a dagger to cut them off along with his drawers. He shrunk into the corner, afraid she would use it in other ways, but she sheathed it, and the other came closer.

"Come out of the corner and sit up properly. We're not whacking off your dick."

"What are you doing?"

"Shush. We've got to hurry up."

Someone started playing a violin on the deck. The tune was bouncy and the sort intended to make people want to dance. Captain Kalani left the two women who unpacked loads of little pots and jars from the wooden case. One started rubbing some sort of cream onto one side of his face. The other loaded up a brush with darker powder, and she dabbed it on.

Both seemed to know exactly what they were doing as they brushed on various powders. They started working on his chest, and he saw it looked like bruises as though he'd been horribly beaten. They even added on red liquid that looked like smeared blood. They worked on his legs too and added more bruises along with what looked like a trail of blood down his inner thighs.

Just like the blood that he'd been covered in after the men in the Hall finished with him.

"Do not cry and ruin what I just did!" Her voice came from far away.

"Something's not right with him."

"We don't have time for this."

"I said she should have explained what-"

"It's not his fucking business, and he needs to be fucking scared."

The Hall was too bright, and the men were too loud. Something cracked on the side of his face that didn't have too many marks, and he realized the nastier one had slapped him.

"Don't you dare cry."

"Fuck off," said the second. "The poor guy's obviously been through shit."

"Oh, like Nany didn't go through shit!"

"It's not his fault." The second took Aspen's shoulder as he struggled to breathe. "Hey. Look at me."

He wanted off of the ship. He wanted Oriel and Roth to get him away and take him somewhere with no other people. Or death if he couldn't have them.

The first stalked off in a huff while the second tapped his cheek. "It's not real blood, okay? It's just rouge and salfin sap. It looks pretty real, but it's not, I promise. We need you to *look* like you've been violated."

"WHY?!" he burst out.

"Because we're not going to actually rape you with a fake phallus or beat you up, stupid. We're not monsters."

Not monsters? They'd kept him locked in a room, threatened him, and would probably kill him once he'd served his purpose, but they weren't monsters. Of course not.

The woman added more fake blood. "If you don't do as you're told, we will hurt you, so remember that. We all only get one chance."

The music continued, and a horn sounded from farther away. Captain Kalani was shouting commands over the sound of the violin. Aspen was sure he caught the faint sound of a flute, and bells joined it as some of the women started singing. The ship sounded like a damn fair out there. He numbly watched the case as it was loaded up and snapped shut.

"Put the shirt on," she said.

"Just kill me before they do whatever."

"If I have to ask again, I'll cut off your fucking left testicle. Don't mistake my kindness for weakness."

Aspen took one look at her shiny dagger before he reached for the tattered shirt. He managed to get it on even though his hands shook. These women were insane, and they'd probably cut off his nuts anyway. Maybe the Captain would wear them as a necklace.

"Hands behind your back."

She tied them with rope, shoved a cloth into his mouth, and tied another strip around his head to keep it in. His heart pounded as she kept the dagger out and shouts reached him from outside. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Whatever they wanted was coming closer and closer.

"Hooks!"

Male voices that sounded much farther away reached him, and he realized these women, who were probably also pirates of some sort, must have wanted him as an exchange. He'd be handed over to men, and once they realized he wasn't who they wanted, they'd probably use him for sport anyway because why not?

He started to cry and tried to plead through the gag as the sound of wood grating vibrated the ship. They were boarding someone or a ship was about to board them. The woman undid the chain and dragged him to knees.

"Up, or I will slit your throat. Don't you dare fuck up and disobey when you're this close to freedom."

Freedom!? On a ship full of men?

His legs barely worked as she tugged him into the hall and closed the door. A folding lattice screen blocked one end of the hallway. It was dark in the hall, and nobody could see that way, but he had a good view of the deck which was brightly lit.

Some of the women were entirely naked, and they'd pasted little fake jewels and gems to their bodies. Some had flimsy bits of gauzy fabric and

shiny silk carefully pinned and draped to cover the important bits. Captain Kalani was naked, and swirls of gold paint ran all over her brown skin. Arced lines on her hips seemed to point to a certain area, and she'd dusted her nipples in gold. A woman wearing a sheath of see-through lace played her violin while another draped in scanty silk played the flute and danced. The bells tied to her ankles tinkled.

"This is what every man hopes to find after weeks on the open sea. Merriment and willing arms." A man in a yellow linen shirt with a matching sash came toward Captain Kalani who immediately snaked her arms around his neck before she whispered in his ear.

Whatever she said, it made the other man, probably a Captain, yell to his men. Others came into view, and Aspen started to shake as the woman holding him down on his knees put her dagger to his neck.

"One sound," she whispered.

The female sailors went for the men like cats after a string. One woman must have jumped from the rigging, and she landed on the deck to crouch. Every inch of her naked blue skin had been dusted in silver, and she went for the nearest man who immediately reached between her legs.

Aspen had been a street whore and a pleasure slave, but he'd never seen so much sexual activity at once. Two male sailors either weren't interested in women, or they liked each other better since they were already fucking against the wall of the Captain's cabin. Most of the men ended up entirely naked as the ladies worked their charms. One was on her knees as she sucked on a man's cock and fingered his asshole. Captain Kalani and the other guy had disappeared.

What was the point of all this sex and making him watch?

One of the men suddenly shouted as his woman stabbed him in the throat with a tiny knife. Where she had concealed that was a mystery. The rest of the women seemed to snap, and the men were too slow to react. They had been too busy thinking with the wrong head the moment they saw a floating whore house that seemed to promise merriment.

Two of the pirates burst from the Captain's cabin with weapons. One woman didn't even need a weapon as she kneed her victim and punched him in the throat while adding a good dose of her lightning magic. He dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The dagger pressed into Aspen's throat as the woman tore their way through the men with brutal efficiency. Blood gushed, noses were broken, burns blossomed, and one man screamed and twisted on the deck as a woman held him by the balls and sent lightning through his body. Another man was hit with a ball of blue energy. He slipped on someone's blood and busted his head on the deck. Another to the side that Aspen couldn't see screamed in agony.

The winged woman came into view with the naked male Captain. Her wings struggled and flapped as he fought against her. They fell to the deck, and she sprung away, leaving him in a heap.

Captain Kalani came into view. "We'll kill your brother if you move."

Aspen was suddenly yanked closer to the screen by the woman holding him.

"You don't have my brother, you fucking bitch. He's been gone. Deserted."

"He's been gone because we have him."

Captain Kalani entered the hall and pushed the screen in. The man froze and squinted into the dark at Aspen's figure. At this distance, and with the poor light, Aspen realized he could have been anyone. He was forced forward a few more inches.

"Dariny?"

Aspen couldn't help his squeal when the dagger cut his skin. It was barely a nick, but it was terrifying enough.

"You took your men ashore about three months ago, and Nany was found dead in her inn room. The innkeeper remembered Dariny from before and knew he'd taken her up there. She'd been choked to death."

The man gaped at her. "You-"

"Yes, we've had him this whole time. He squeals like a pig when we fuck his ass. A huge phallus slathered in hot pepper juice makes him squirm and beg quite nicely."

The man bared his teeth. "You fucking whores-"

Captain Kalani waved away the insult as the other women stood by their kills. "We know what we are, but I bet you'll deny what you are. This isn't the first time you've let your men run loose. For a merchant business, you've got some foul bastards on your ships. I heard some particularly disturbing things about you when I started asking around."

The man's chest heaved as he sat up. "Let him go to the ship--"

If you tell us where the key to your lock box is, we'll let him leave," said Captain Kalani. "I could kill you, loot you, and have the lockbox dragged aboard, but thanks to your bragging, I know you've got one made of diamond and kaxon. The key would be much easier."

"I'll never tell you where that is."

"Then I guess you don't care about your brother. I certainly don't, and he deserves to suffer for what he did, but I'm willing to make a trade."

"Once you get the key, you'll kill him anyway. You're a bunch of whores and liars."

"You haven't got much of a choice, do you?" Lightning crackled around Captain Kalani's hands as she marched forward. The man slowly stood. "Get back on your knees. You and your brother won't survive this if you don't cooperate."

The man looked to his left and back at his supposed brother. He must have picked himself since he bolted to the port side to return to his ship. The women yelled and stampeded after him.

"Fuck," hissed the one holding Aspen. "They'll get him anyway, but still. I guess he only cares for himself."

She suddenly let out a muffled shriek, and the dagger dragged across the side of Aspen's neck. He screamed through the gag, thinking his last moments were done since the other Captain hadn't cared enough to bargain for his "brother."

Blood dribbled from the cut, but it wasn't deep enough, and something thumped behind him. He turned just in time to see fire flash, but the woman let out an agonized scream as the man who had her smashed her wrist into the wall. She dropped the flaming dagger, and he started wrestling her into the room Aspen had been held captive in.

Perhaps he'd slipped off in the earlier festivities, and nobody had noticed while they serviced other males to distract them. It had been easy to come up from behind. Aspen scooted back on his ass to reach the dagger. The blade burned his fingers, and he fumbled for the handle instead. The woman's scream in the cabin pierced his brain as the two fought.

"You fucking bitches with your tricks," snarled the man.

Even if they'd treated Aspen as something to use, he didn't care. Nobody deserved to be held down and forced like that.

The dagger slipped and burned him again as he struggled to cut the rope. Once it loosened, and his hands were free, he firmly grasped the blade by the handle as he scrambled to his knees and channeled his own fire. It cooled the remnants from the woman's magic. At the next scream, something snapped in his brain.

He barely registered anything but the man trying to pin the woman to the floor, and he lunged to stab him in the back. The sailor shouted, and Aspen stabbed him again before yanking him off of the woman. The sailor said something. Maybe he begged for mercy. Maybe he cursed Aspen. It didn't matter.

He heard none of it as he fell on the man and thrust the flaming dagger into his soft throat. Once, twice, three times. Blood hit his face, and he still didn't stop. He drove it into the bastard's chest and stomach. Burns blossomed. Blood coated the blade, spilled on the floor, and stained his yellow shirt as he kept stabbing.

He'd fucking kill everyone that ever touched him or another person in that way. Aspen withdrew the red-coated weapon as he stood to grab the man's arm.

Flames crackled somewhere to his right when he managed to heave the limp man out onto the deck. Let his comrades find him dead if any were alive. Aspen cut at the man's trousers, heedless of the bloodied lines that blossomed on his skin. More red spurted when he used the dagger again.

He realized he was standing on the deck in a yellow shirt that barely covered his crotch as real blood mixed with the fake bruises and red streaks. Captain Kalani, still covered in gold swirls that had been smeared, stared at him as he held the man's severed cock and balls in one hand and the gorey weapon in the other.

"Aspen, put the dagger down," she said with a warning note. "And the-the-"

He breathed heavily and vaguely noticed the other woman coming back with the last remaining male. They'd bound him with rope, and huge burns marred his skin along with bloody cuts. The woman from the room was led out by another.

He needed the other men. He'd drive his dagger in them too and cut off what they'd used to hurt him and others over and over. They'd bleed and pay for it with their screams. Anyone that touched Oriel or Roth would

follow the same path. They'd beg, and he wouldn't care, just like the men in the Hall hadn't cared even when he'd been bleeding on the floor.

But they weren't here.

Captain Kalani said something as he dropped the bloody penis and testicles on the deck. The dagger followed with a clang, and he stumbled toward the dark hall as his strength left him. If they wanted to chain him back up or toss him overboard, so be it. At least he'd killed one bastard and wiped the filthy smear from this realm.

It was a relief to curl up on the floor in the room and let the darkness take him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Oriel was beyond tired even though the trip hadn't been that hard. Sailors had taken care of the ships and guided the fleet down the Path which had swiftly carried them along. It was the largest and fastest river in the realm. Still, three weeks was a long time, and he knew Roth was tired too.

It was worth it to look into Kalen's icy blue eyes and hear his words.

"We always pay our debts. We'll aid you."

Some of the tension left Oriel's body. In general, the Valentines weren't known to go back on their word, but they could have said no and hemmed and hawed about entering a war that didn't truly involve them.

King Kalen and King Rhys had agreed. They sat on the other side of the desk from Oriel and Roth. Their men were camped outside of a lord's home. Kalen and his once-human husband had met them at the port city where they'd planned to disembark to make the trip overland. Oriel didn't think they'd be there, but both Kings had seemed eager to meet him.

The lord was letting them use his own home, and he sat off to the side of the desk.

"We've already been getting the men and supplies ready," said Rhys.

"You have?"

Kalen nodded. "I wouldn't say no even though Nemyr neglected to mention any such deal to me." A faint scowl crossed his face as he brushed back a strand of silvery hair. "When you make that sort of agreement, you should probably tell your family."

"He probably thought it would never be needed," said Rhys.

"True. Or...Can we have a moment?" The lord nodded and slipped out. Kalen's eyes pierced Oriel's as he spoke. "Is she lying?"

"What? No. Why would she lie about anything?"

"Why would you agree if you thought it was a lie?" Roth cocked an ear.

"Did you promise her a part of your Kingdom?" Kalen asked Oriel.

He shook his head. "No. I can't technically promise her something I don't have yet."

“The wording of her first letter was a bit strange.” Kalen leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “She wrote that you were a slave in Meadow Kingdom, and the only living member from what she heard. She wanted our help to go to war if King Taven refused to release you for a sum. She mentioned giving us a mine if we aided her and won. Our family debt would be paid, but a gold mine would be an extra reward as a thank you. It’s a bit strange since if you were saved, you’re the heir. Like you said, you can’t promise or give away what’s not yours.”

Oriel tilted his head. “That sounds like she was trying to sweeten things, and besides, in her mind, there’s a very good chance that I was already dead or would end up dead. He wouldn’t have released me, and with an invasion, my life would have been on the line. I think she would have taken that latter risk, and quite frankly, I’d rather have been killed than to spend my life as a slave to some bastard. I got lucky with Roth. If you had rescued me, I would’ve been happy to give you a mine, and I think she knows that. If I was dead, but King Taven was defeated, West Bay would be hers. She could do as she pleased.”

“Hmm. Alright. I can see that,” said Kalen, and Rhys nodded. “We don’t need the mine.”

“It’s no trouble,” said Oriel. “I’d say that’s a small price for helping me get my Kingdom back and taking Meadow. If we win, West Bay will double in size, my family will be avenged, and I’d have revenge for other things. I can guarantee Roth’s safety at my side once I’m King. Aspen too, and he’d have a home with me. That’s worth more than gold to me.”

‘Still, we don’t need it. Our Kingdom has plenty of resources.” Kalen tapped the quill on the desk. “She said she’d send ships to wait?”

“Yes. She figured you’d say yes.”

“The men are on their way already, and we have ships,” said Kalen. “Not like your cousin, of course. We’re not a seafaring Kingdom, but my Father made sure we had some just in case. I think we can manage thanks to his foresight. The Eden River goes to West Bay.”

They were getting closer to their goal with every passing day.

It took a lot of planning, and some soldiers were still traveling that way. Despite Rhys’s human life before, he seemed to have taken to the fairy world and ruling quite well, and he helped with all of the final plans to get the army organized and to West Bay.

“He’s trained me a lot,” Rhys told them five nights later as they sat in a sitting room downstairs. The lord had gone to bed since they’d be leaving in the morning. “I already knew how to fight with a sword, but once I got my powers, I had sword and archery lessons along with learning to control my magic, and he didn’t let me slack off. He really knows how to crack the whip.”

Kalen let out a snort from over by the sideboard. Oriel had a feeling there was some sort of inside joke, or maybe they were into whips in the bedroom. Who knew? Kalen was an abundant male, although he and his husband hadn’t had a child yet. So far, the heir was a cousin and the son of the traitorous Uncle that tried to murder Kalen as a child.

“Is your cousin coming?” Oriel asked as Kalen handed his husband a glass of juice and sat next to him.

“He’s not a fighter,” said Kalen.

“Oh.”

“I wanted to ask you something,” said Kalen. “Is there anyone in particular you want dead?”

Oriel tilted his head, and the reply came out sharper than he intended. “I want King Taven dead. I think that’s obvious.”

Kalen’s tail, which was white and like that of a short-haired cat, lazily twitched as it hung off the cushion. “I know, but is there anybody else? Someone specific that we should try to take alive or kill?”

Oriel shrugged. “I don’t have names.” Roth wasn’t sure which lord had ordered Aspen’s torture since he didn’t know every higher-up in Meadow, and Oriel described the one with orange eyes. “He’s one that I would prefer to personally kill. There’s also a common soldier with a scar like this.” Oriel ran a finger up his face. “Aspen told me that before we left. The one in my room-if I saw him, I’d recognize him, but he was so average, and he could be anyone to you. I’m not good at describing faces anyway.”

“Whatever prisoners are taken will be gathered for you to look at,” said Kalen. “There are things a fairy shouldn’t do to another fairy.”

Like making his nephew learn to love? Oriel didn’t dare ask, but considering Kalen’s disgust for his Uncle which showed when he was mentioned, Oriel had a feeling the dislike ran deeper than tampering with a grave.

Oriel had a feeling being locked up had led to dreadful things for Kalen. The bit about learning to love had been a pile of bullshit to hide something else.

At least he had Rhys now. His icy eyes always softened when he looked at his husband, Rhys seemed to adore him.

"I can't wait to marry you," Oriel told Roth as they went upstairs. "If Aspen says yes, we'll have three Kings." Roth paused, and that instantly made fear spike in Oriel's gut. "You said you'd stay."

"I will, and I love you, Oriel, but I'm not with you in the hopes of being the King."

"I know that, and that's partly why I want to marry you," said Oriel. "I want..."

Roth took his hand. "What?"

Kalen and Rhys were like the perfect pair to him. He couldn't quite place his finger on why, but they just fit together so well.

"When this is over, I want all three of us to be like them downstairs. I want to have what they have. It won't erase the suffering, but I want to be with you and Aspen forever. I bet if Kalen wasn't the King, Rhys would still be with him. They fit, and I think you and I fit with Aspen. I want what they have for us."

"I do too." Roth leaned forward to kiss him on the lips. "Not all of your innocence is gone. And yes, I will marry you."

Oriel wrapped his arms around him. "I need to get you a ring."

"Yes, you do." Roth smiled when they parted. "But nothing too big. I've never been into flashy jewelry."

"A gold band?"

"That's perfect."

"If Aspen says yes, I'll get one for him too," Oriel said as they headed up the stairs. "Oh, and a bell collar for you."

Roth poked his side with a smirk. "You won't collar me."

"We'll see about that. For now-" Oriel reached to take Roth's tail and run his hand down the length. As soon as he let go of it, Roth lifted it almost like an invitation. "This kitty needs to ride my cock so I can feel you cum on it."

The journey down the Eden River seemed to take another eternity. With someone in command of everything from the ships to keeping the soldiers

in line, Oriel didn't have much to do. The other ships were a bit overcrowded, although the one the Kings were on was less so. Despite having privacy in a cabin, he was worried the walls were a bit thin.

He never heard anything from Kalen and Rhys's cabin, but still. It was safer to make sure that Roth was thoroughly gagged one afternoon.

On a ship, things can slide around if the waters grow rough, and the table was nailed down in their room. That was helpful so it didn't slam or move when he bent Roth over it and forced him to take a good ass pounding with a knife to his throat.

They practiced fighting on deck too. Oriel had spent all of his life being trained, but more never hurt anybody

And he worried.

Oriel ran through plenty of failure scenarios in his head when he didn't have something to distract him enough. He pictured Aspen waiting in the Windswept Isles and hearing of their deaths.

The thought made his stomach clench so hard, he almost wanted to ask Roth to stay out of the battles so that Aspen would have someone, but he knew the cat fairy would refuse to leave his side. He'd trained through childhood too, and wouldn't ever let Oriel go fight without him.

Either way, the end was coming. Whether it was Oriel's life or King Taven's remained to be seen.

Two days away from West Bay, it was barely dawn when Oriel was under the blanket and nearly done with taking Roth's load in his mouth. He heard a loud thump on the quarter deck above him, and several panicked yells rang out.

Roth made a noise that wasn't caused by pleasure. Oriel hastily swallowed the last of his cum and tripped as he hastened to get off the bed.

"What the fuck?" Roth swore as the sounds of a scuffle came from above.

"I swear, our own better not be fighting and starting stupid shit."

Oriel managed to jam himself into a pair of trousers before he ran out with his sword. A few guards were manhandling a guy down the steps from the quarterdeck. Roth came out half-dressed and the two Kings joined the pair.

"He jumped down from a tree," said a guard.

Oriel glanced at some of the massive trees along the riverbank, and he gazed at the man who had dared a branch hanging out over the water to jump on their boat.

“Are you mad?” The swirls and looping white lines that decorated Kalen's torso and arms were vivid in the angle of the morning sun.

The man smirked. “I always pictured royalty as being all dressed fancy, but I guess I caught you sleeping.”

“We don't usually have people dropping on our boats at dawn,” said Rhys. “What the hell do you want?”

“To speak to you. Dorren's full of people willing to follow you.”

“You don't even know what's going on-” Kalen started.

“Hmm. Let's see. West Bay fell to that prick. I don't believe Oriel's family betrayed him. I know Kings can be greedy, and King Taven proved that since he always seemed alright before, but I just can't see King Leneer betraying a guest at dinner. I think he was richer than Taven anyway. What else?” The man squinted and pretended to think. “We're near the border of West Bay, and a whole slew of boats with King Kalen and Rhys's new heart crest is coming down. By the way, that's a nice shade of purple. Now, why would the East Forest rulers come all of this way just to go fishing or have a little holiday with the whole army?”

Kalen pursed his lips. “Get to the point.”

“You're either hungry for more land yourself, or you're helping King Oriel since I'm pretty sure that's him right there. Not many have purple eyes. If you intend to start eating your way through West Bay to reclaim it, take Dorren first. It's right on the border, not far, and they'll gladly follow you to get out from under that prick. He's raised taxes and had guards going about to terrorize people there.”

“Why there?” asked Oriel.

“Lord Abney was under King Leneer and allowed to stay at first since I guess he pretended to accept things,” said the man. “He was in bad health, so they probably thought he couldn't do anything. Something happened, and the King's men came for him. They accused him of treason and hung him in the prison. The people revolted, and some were killed before the city was brought back under control. They have a new lord-some ass licker of King Taven.”

“Why are you out here?”

“I live out here, but I was in the city that day. This is technically my land you’re going through.”

“What’s your name?” asked Oriel.

“Mark.”

“If you're not lying, and Dorren is full of loyal supporters, you’ll be the new lord later.”

Mark frowned. “I’ll keep my own house, thank you very much, Your Majesty. I’m not lord material. I’ll declare every day a holiday, and spend all the tax money for you on whores. I’ve always wanted to wake up in bed with a couple of pretty ladies and guys on either side of me.”

Kalen made a slight face as Oriel slowly nodded. “Okay. At least... you’re honest. You can have something else then.”

“Can you dump me overboard now?”

“What? No!”

“I can swim real good, I promise.”

“Uh, I think you’re going to stay with us for a bit. Just in case.”

Dorren looked normal when they approached two days later. Thanks to Kalen and Rhys, Oriel, and Roth had a nice set of armor that they donned. As they approached the riverside docks of Dorren, one of the boats set off a light burst, and Oriel watched the yellow stick fly up. It almost seemed like it would go forever and vanish, but it popped in the air. Three more followed. Purple and grey smoke gushed out of each one, and the citizens beyond the wall who couldn’t see the river would know East Forest and their army had arrived.

The guards on the walls of Dorren looked like panicked ants. There weren't many, and they likely had expected any sort of attack here.

People on the docked ships rushed to get off and haul ass as some of the cannons were aimed just in case. Oriel ignored those shouting orders aboard the ships as he watched the gate.

“They’re not closing it,” said Rhys.

“I told you,” Mark said from behind them. One ankle was chained to the chair that he was in since they weren’t entirely trusting of him, and he kept stuffing down the eggs and biscuits he’d been given for breakfast.

Someone came flying over the wall at that moment. People came pouring onto the walkway and seemed to be attacking the guards, or at least some. No doubt, the new lord had given some loyal lackey a post here.

But the citizens were fighting back.

The ships came into the docks. There were too many, so some got as close as they could to the riverbank, and lifeboats were lowered. A ship with horses had a spot by a dock, and men were already working on unloading them.

The gangplank on Oriel's ship was lowered, and he hurried down. Soldiers poured out and swarmed the riverbank and the docks as cheers rose from the walls while some pointed at the heart flags on the ships.

They were still cautious as they approached the gate. The soldiers formed a protective group around the royalty. Citizens crowded around the entrance as they shouted. A guard was suddenly tossed over the wall, and his neck must have snapped when the rope around it ran out and went taunt. His lifeless body swung.

Oriel gripped his sword. If this was a trick, it was a good one. The people hardly needed convincing to back up and let them through as the Knights approached first. A few fliers hovered overhead to watch, and winged citizens seemed willing to stay grounded to not alarm them.

Kalen was probably the most noticeable with his pale blonde hair that looked silvery in the sunlight since he'd hung his helmet on his saddle.

"King Kalen! King Rhys! King Kalen! King Rhys!"

Oriel saw someone close by point at him, and it wasn't long before a new chant started.

"King Oriel! King Oriel! King Oriel!"

The city was a madhouse when they fully entered. In every direction, citizens screamed, pumped their fists, waved their wings and tails if they had them, and pointed. One fairy with long, pointy ears wiggled them like he was trying to fly. Soldiers kept the people back, but hands stretched out toward Oriel as they kept chanting his name with the title.

Parents lifted their children so they could see better and say that they had laid eyes on the King. His horse gave a little shake of its head as if proud to be carrying the proper ruler of West Bay.

For a moment, Oriel's throat tightened. The people here wanted him. They weren't ready to give up and kneel to King Taven. They might have decided same shit, different ruler, and gotten on with their lives like many did after a war, but they had remained loyal to him.

A guard hung from a signpost with his tongue sticking out. The cushy job of being a guard had probably been rethought while the man had choked to death. One of his horns had been broken off, and only a bloody stump for a tail remained.

The citizens parted on the main road ahead and followed the best they could as the procession moved through. The Castle was at one end and surrounded by a massive wall. It was completely devoid of guards, and the gate was down.

Citizens ahead ran to it and climbed up the gate as they shouted. A few started to climb the wall and a flier lifted someone up. Some citizens had already climbed in and were beating at the door to the gatehouse.

They must have already attacked the guards earlier, but one or two had locked themselves inside the gatehouse. The iron door was resisting fire and lightning so far. Someone with yellow energy tried, but they had no results.

“Death to Lord Taggert! Death to Lord Taggert! DEATH TO LORD TAGGERT!”

The chant grew deafening, and the procession had to stop as there were too many citizens clustered around the gate and the wall. The Knights were trying to convince them to move without force, but nobody was listening.

A different cheer rose from one side as a tall, buff fairy who looked like he ate nails for breakfast and lifted mountains for fun came through. He shouldered aside a Knight who got too close and tried to tell him to clear off, approached the gate, and pushed up his spectacles.

It wasn't hard to guess what this fairy's ability was. He squatted, gripped the bars of the gate near the bottom, and lifted it. With a screeching grate, it went up as if it weighed nothing, and he stood to the side as he held it up.

Citizens poured in like water and rushed for the Castle itself. Oriel's group finally made it over, and the fairy adjusted his spectacles as he managed to make himself heard over the insane shouting.

“The trick is to lift with your legs,” he bellowed at Oriel. “Not your back. That's how you hurt yourself.”

Like Oriel would ever manage to do what this fairy had done, but he nodded. “I'll remember that.”

Citizens were throwing things at the Castle windows. Glass tinkled and rained down. Others were pounding on the massive doors. To Oriel's

surprise, they opened, and the servant inside was nearly bowled over as several people stampeded forward.

Kalen's army could barely do a thing with the citizen's single-minded goal. Oriel dismounted in the yard once they were close enough, and Lord Taggert was dragged out moments later. He had burns on his clothes, and someone had bloodied his shoulder pretty badly, but he was still alive. Amazingly, he had a collar around his neck which meant someone had robbed the local guardhouse for it and likely had the full intention of getting around his neck.

For a moment, Oriel froze as he looked at the orange-eyed lord who'd coldly told him that his entire family was dead.

On that night, Lord Taggert had been calm and sure of himself in the way of a man who is on the winning side and thinks no harm can come to him. He'd also been that way on the ship when he said something special awaited Oriel. Now, real fear flashed in his eyes as those holding him threw him down. The rest of his new people who hadn't been brought to heel roared their displeasure.

"KILL HIM! KILL HIM!"

Oriel approached him. "Do I look like a slave to you now?"

Lord Taggert glanced at Roth and must have known who he was. Roth's sneer wasn't pleasant.

"Traitor!" spat the lord.

Oriel kicked Lord Taggert in the face and was pleased to see blood gush from his nose. "Don't you ever speak to him. You're not even worthy of looking at us. You two, strip him and hold him on top of the steps so everyone can see."

Two Knights complied. Even when Taggert was naked, he still wore his defiant expression, although Oriel planned to strip that off too. Those in the yard quieted a bit as they waited to see what would happen.

Several citizens were crowded inside of the entrance hall to the Castle, and Oriel entered. The fairies stared at him like they expected him to take his sword and run Taggert through, but he had something else in mind. If he simply requested for someone to fetch what he wanted, there would probably be a mad rush to get it, so he pointed at a particular fairy and asked.

Oriel stood at the top of the stairs to look out over the massive crowd. Many had gotten up on the wall to see better, and the mass spread out into the city streets. A lot wouldn't be able to hear, but they'd get the gist.

"Taggart was there that night when my family was betrayed, and he had someone near and dear to me tortured. He kept me and this person in horrendous conditions on a ship to Meadow while my friend was repeatedly raped."

"He had Lord Abney hanged!" shouted a citizen.

"Make him suffer too like you and Lord Abney did!"

"Your Majesty," said a voice behind Oriel.

He stepped into the entrance hall where a young man held what Oriel wanted. He removed his gauntlets and was about to take it when he noticed a portrait on the wall. He started toward it, and the people moved aside the best they could to make way for him.

"Who's that?" he asked.

A woman with a rag tied around her hair spoke up. "That was Lord Abney."

Oriel vaguely recognized the face. "He had a limp, right?"

The woman nodded. "He walked with a cane and had many health issues, but he was a good lord to us, and we loved him. He was always kind just like his Father."

A lot of people used to come to court, and Oriel would often forget about someone quite quickly unless he had more interaction with them. He did faintly remember Lord Abney had been to court when King Taven betrayed them, and the lord hadn't been in the best of health. They hadn't spoken much. When Oriel had gone to his rooms that night, he remembered a man with a cane heading to the privy rooms, but he hadn't thought about it or paid much attention.

"He was at court that night," said Oriel. "I do remember him a little."

The woman frowned. "He was in the privy when it started, Your Majesty. He managed to escape through the servant's passage, and he got into the city with a few others, and they all hid. Someone joined their spot after a bit, and they told Lord Abney that they'd seen you being taken through the city. When he made it back, he told us what happened, so we know King Leneer did nothing wrong. He said that if you somehow lived and came back, by the grace of Elira, we should be loyal to you."

“We know you’re not a traitor’s son,” said another man. “Lord Taggert somehow found out that he was refuting King Taven’s story. They said he was committing treason and inciting the people into rebellion. That’s why they hanged him, and Lord Taggert gained another chunk to add to his holdings..”

“If he’d kept quiet, no one might have remembered he was at court,” said the servant. “He was lucky to have gotten out and back to us, but he couldn’t keep quiet. He wasn’t much of a fighter due to his health, but he used his words the best he could.”

He must have been the one to send the note to Queen Asara in the hopes that she would do something if she knew one cousin remained. It was because of him that the Queen had asked Kalen and Rhys for help and enabled them to get on with things faster.

Lord Abney didn’t look very special in the portrait with his plain features and thin form, but in Oriel’s eyes, he was greater than a King for what he’d done. Since his people had loved him so much, they had believed him over King Taven and remained loyal to the true ruling family and heir. Some of those civilians must have talked to others, and that was why some other towns had refused to kneel.

And Taggert had sentenced him to hang for spreading the truth.

Oriel took the item he wanted, stepped back out, and stood to the side of Taggert still being held by two Knights.

“You’re a foul bastard.” Oriel tucked his gauntlets under one arm. “I can never fully repay what you’ve caused me, Aspen, and others, but I can give you a taste. A quick death is too merciful for you since you like causing pain for absolutely no reason. I have a reason now, and I’m using it.”

The defiance in Taggert’s expression flickered as Oriel summoned fire to his left hand and held the tip of the poker in it.

“Aspen deserved it.” He didn’t stop speaking even as Oriel glared at him every ounce of hate he had. “His Father owed money, so it wasn’t cruelty for the sake of cruelty.”

Oriel lowered the poker and leaned in. “I’m sorry. What?”

“His Father gambled,” Taggert said hastily as if he thought this was a revelation that would make Oriel release him. “He never paid everything off before he died.”

Oriel remembered that. Aspen had told him over two years ago that Father had sold most of their stuff, moved them into a smaller home, and kept running his merchant business while he struggled to pay what he owed.

Despite the debts, he hadn't been able to stop gambling because it was like a sickness for some people. He bet the whole merchant business one night, lost, and had a heart attack from the stress. Aspen had been kicked out on the street.

Taggert gazed at Oriel's hard expression. "What? If a man owes debts, he must pay them."

"So you thought having Aspen tortured and raped was suitable enough?"

"I was one of those his Father owed money to, and by the time I found out he had died, his son was gone, his possessions had been sold, and others he owed had picked over everything. Aspen became a pleasure slave, and since his Father still technically owed me money, I saw him there and decided he could pay it back. The sailors paid me for every fuck."

A muscle twitched in Oriel's cheek as he moved the poker to his left hand and struggled to keep his voice calm. "Am I supposed to care that you were owed money?"

"It's fair." Taggert lifted his chin. "He was just a pleasure slave."

Since he'd figured out that Aspen was important to Oriel to some extent, he'd lied to Aspen. He never mentioned that Aspen's Father had owed him money, and he'd done that to fuck with him and Oriel.

People closer had gone silent as they watched the pair. Oriel snapped as he punched Taggert with his bare fist. A nick of pain blossomed on his knuckle, but he didn't give a shit. A piece of tooth went flying, and blood dribbled from the lord's mouth. The Knights held him up as he sagged for a moment.

"Fuck you," hissed Oriel. "If you think it's fine to be chained down and raped to repay a gambling debt, there's something severely wrong in your head."

He took the poker in his right hand and made his left glow with the fire.

"Your Father would be ashamed of you." Taggert had lines of red between his teeth, and a trail ran down his chin. "He'd never do such a thing."

"I thought he was a traitor, right? I'm just a traitor's son according to Taven and everyone that's willing to kiss his ass. But no one believes that

here, so save your lies. Besides, I remember very well that you had Aspen burned.”

“King Leneer wouldn’t torture someone. If I’m so terrible, why sink to my level? Both he and your Mother would wish they’d suffocated you at birth if they saw you doing this.”

Oriel almost wanted to laugh as he turned the end of the poker in the fire. This lord was utterly insane. He’d been so confident and at ease while on the winning side, but now that Oriel had him, he was trying the stupidest excuses to get out of this.

Or maybe he was trying to be ridiculous because he was hoping that Oriel would snap too hard and kill him right there. Taggert surely knew death loomed in his future, so why not skip the torture?

“You have no idea what my Father would do if he was alive and someone hurt his wife or children,” said Oriel. “He was a good, gentle man who loved his family, and we took after him in many ways. The problem is, when you take a gentle person, and you push and break them, and you snatch away their innocence and those they love, don’t be surprised if they push back and break you too.”

The tip of the poker glowed orange as Oriel’s fire vanished, and he locked eyes with Taggert.

“This is for Aspen.”

Taggert kicked and struggled so much as the poker burned his lower stomach, the Knights could barely keep him still. The familiar stench of burning flesh filled Oriel’s nose, but he felt no regret. Aspen had suffered this repeatedly that night, and this bastard would too.

“Hold him down on the ground.”

Taggert was wrestled down, and another Knight joined in to hold his legs. The crowd watched with pleased expressions and murmurs as the poker came down again. And again. And again. The torn-down lord attempted to thrash, and he screamed each time the flesh on his inner thighs was scorched. Once he ran out of skin there, Oriel moved on to other places. One burn for each family member, each day on the ship, and each time Aspen had been raped.

When Taggert fainted, the Knights slapped him to bring him around. Cold water to the face brought by a servant helped too. His begging and

pleading didn't move Oriel. After all, the bastard hadn't given a shit about Aspen when Oriel begged.

He finally told the Knights to release Taggert. He gasped and sweated as he lay and didn't seem to have the energy to run, not that he'd get very far. Oriel went around to give him a mighty kick in the side. Taggert screamed as he rolled down the stairs and fresh pain surely shot through the multiple burns.

He came to a stop at the bottom and found the energy to get his knees as his eyes swept over the crowd. Nobody seemed to hold any pity, and Taggert looked up as his limbs shook. "King Kalen, p-please-he's mad. You're not a cruel King-"

"No, I'm not a cruel King," Kalen interrupted him. "But if anyone ever did that to my husband, they'd wish they'd never been born. You might not have held Aspen down yourself, but I have a particular hate for anyone who sentences others to such a fate." He waved a hand at Oriel. "Whatever you decide, he deserves it."

He turned his horse to leave the grounds. Rhys made to follow, although he leaned out of his saddle to spit on Taggert's astonished face.

"Bastard. It was fine for you to do such atrocious things, but you can't handle it when it's dished back out to you." He guided his horse to follow Kalen's.

"Did you actually think anyone would have mercy on one such as you?" asked Roth.

A scuffle broke out by the gatehouse since the hefty fairy must have decided to let the gate down after making sure no one was under it. He'd busted down the strong door to the gatehouse, and screams came from inside as a few others dealt with the last of the guards.

Oriel slowly came down the stairs as the mechanism for the gate was worked, and it started to creak up on its own. Roth jumped down from his horse and sent out a bit of lightning to make Taggert scream as he tensed and jerked on the ground.

"Shall we kill him?" asked Roth.

"No." Oriel threw the hot poker at Taggert who shrieked as it hit his back. "Let the citizens have him and do what they want. They loved their lord, so I think they should be allowed to have their own revenge." He

raised his voice. "Do whatever you want to him since he had your lord killed."

As Oriel left the grounds with Roth, the nearest citizens had already rushed for Taggert. His screams were quite loud.

The next day, Oriel and the army left the city with over three thousand extra people willing to fight for West Bay. Taggert's corpse hung from the open gate. He was high enough to where nobody had to duck under his body, but the damage was clear. The citizens had taken over a day to kill him with a healer to keep him away from the brink of death.

Someone had carved the words "Killer of Innocents" on his back, although it was hard to make out considering the rest of the blood and bruises that marred his entire body.

One of those who had hurt Aspen was dead.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Aspen didn't remember the women bringing in a mattress, putting him on it, or wiping away all of the makeup and putting him in decent clothes. He woke up with clean blankets over him while Kalani sat in a chair.

The gold paint was gone, and she was back to being a Captain, although she was much nicer when she asked him if he knew where he was. Did he remember what happened?

He did, although he was faintly stunned at what he'd done to that man.

"Why did you save Starry and prevent that man from raping her?" Kalani finally asked him. "She'd held a dagger to your throat. We kept you prisoner, robbed you, and used you. You owed her nothing."

Aspen stared at her as he sat upright on the mattress. "I used to be a whore on the street."

She squinted. "Did your Father make you do that?"

"No! My Father's actually been dead for a long time."

He didn't even know why, but the words tumbled out: How he'd been a street whore, a pleasure slave, and the night West Bay fell. He couldn't get through telling her about the ship, but Kalani, who'd quietly listened, seemed to understand.

"Oriel escaped, and I went with him. I was going to stay with Queen Asara." Aspen told the Captain how the Queen had wanted to poison him.

"I only said yes because Dariny had longer black hair like you and was about the same height," said Kalani. "Captain Regert was with the Dandelion Merchant Traders. They were ashore one night, and his brother, Dariny, took Nany to an inn room. We are prostitutes, and sometimes, we'll find customers ashore too. Dariny strangled her to death and fled. We found him and killed him. His body is somewhere in the ocean, but Captain Regert didn't know."

"He didn't look?"

"I'm sure he did, but Dariny wouldn't be the first drunk sailor to miss his ship. They're on a pretty tight schedule, so they couldn't wait or spend too

long searching. If a sailor misses his ship, he'll likely lose his job. Captain Regert would come back, and since Dariny was his brother, he'd be allowed his job back. We did some digging and learned other things about the Captain that I won't tell you. It wasn't the first time his men have done things, and he's guilty of a few himself. His death was just."

Aspen hugged his knees. "I didn't want Starry to suffer that. Besides, I heard what you told Regert earlier, so I had a pretty good idea of why you did this."

"I'm sorry we used you for that. You practically fell into my lap, and... sometimes we're pirates, but we don't kill and torture for fun. I figured something happened with the way you acted, but we already had you, and I needed revenge for Nany and to make sure Regert was dealt with along with his foul men. I also wanted the key to his lockbox."

Aspen figured they wouldn't toss him overboard now that they'd finished with him.

"We took their merchandise from the ship that didn't catch fire and sank the other. I didn't find that damn key to his lockbox, and he died from his injuries. All the bodies are gone. I don't know what to do with you except take you to wherever you want to go as payment and an apology. I'll give you your money back too."

"I need to meet up with Oriel. I have to tell him what his cousin did."

"Do you want to meet up with the fleet of ships she sent?"

"Yeah, but..." Something occurred to Aspen.

"What?"

"What if they know I was supposed to die? I don't know if I can trust them. Asara could have told her army anything. Maybe someone in charge knows."

Kalani thought for a moment. "We'll ply our trade, find out what we can, wait for Oriel, and keep you hidden for now."

That would work. Plenty onboard might be fucking to ease the boredom, but for any who liked women, a ship full of new, gorgeous ladies in shiny paint and silky bits of cloth would be tempting.

Aspen finally agreed to come out of the room. The change in the women was astonishing. Several wanted to kiss his cheek, and they acted like he was a hero for cutting off the cock and balls of an attempted rapist. Starry apologized for being so mean to him, and the others did too. One of the

women could heal broken bones, and Starry's snapped wrist was like new now.

Most of the women seemed faintly leery for a bit as if they thought he might snap again. He knew he must have looked like an utter savage that night, but he hadn't cared. All of his anger had come to the surface and needed to be released. He had absolutely no regret for killing that bastard.

He had free roam of the ship, so he often sat near the railing with his cloak over him so he didn't get burned to a crisp in the sun. It was easier to look at the water. The ladies fed him, drank with him, and treated him like a proper person even if he knew he probably seemed odd and refused to go below deck for any reason. At night, he slept in his room.

He was allowed to drink on board, although Kalani rationed him. They had nowhere to buy it on the open seas, and it needed to last. At least the rum helped blur edges a little bit now and then.

They started calling him King of the Doves, although he said he was hardly the King of Shit, much less them. They laughed and said Kalani made the rules, but he could have the title.

He didn't expect to find the Queen's ships at a standstill and separated into two groups. Kalani had their ship anchored a distance away as she used her spyglass to check out the two groups.

Nearly everyone clustered on the quarterdeck while she observed. She finally lowered the glass and pointed. "They fly two shades of blue. Those have no flags anywhere on their ships, but they seem to be the same overall. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary happening."

Aspen looked at the ones to his right with the dark and light blue flags. That group was smaller than the other.

"Mutiny," someone muttered.

"There's only one way to find out," said Kalani.

Aspen hid in a cabin while the ladies decked themselves out in tempting outfits and makeup. A ship full of whores wouldn't be attacked. What were they going to do?

They approached the side with colors first and someone boarded them. If Aspen was found, he was to be Starry's brother who could clean and cook a bit but was too simple to do much else. The cabins weren't even searched, and it wasn't long before Elira's Doves grew quiet. Aspen knew the women had followed the sailors back to their ships and were plying their trade.

An orgasm can make someone quite relaxed and willing to talk. Combined with a ration of rum or something like that, many lips would likely grow loose. Aspen wished this didn't have to take so long, but they were probably servicing plenty of sailors.

It was late when the woman returned. Some were half-sloshed, body paint had been smeared beyond saving, and several had knowing and pleased expressions as they squeezed into Kalani's cabin to speak.

"Queen Asara's men have split," she said. "They were supposed to betray and attack Oriel when he arrived, but the majority decided to go against her orders. That's the side with no colors."

"Why?" asked Aspen.

"They'd rather follow Oriel."

"But why risk committing treason?"

Another spoke up. "It's only treason if they get caught or captured afterward. If Oriel wins with them on their side, and they beat those loyal to Queen Asara, he'll likely reward those who stuck with him. If he gets West Bay back and overtakes Meadow, he'll have more than enough power to beat what's left of Queen Asara's army."

"Some might simply prefer to fight honestly instead of following the Queen's way of betrayal," said Starry.

Aspen fiddled with the edge of the blanket as he sat on Kalani's bed. If they betrayed Oriel as soon as he came with Kalen, there would be massive damage to the ships on both sides. Survivors from each would retreat, but Queen Asara couldn't take West Bay. King Talen would smash what was left if she tried.

"Did they say when they would betray Oriel?" asked Aspen.

"No."

"I don't think she wants the whole country," he said. "They would have betrayed Oriel at a key point while attacking Meadow. King Taven might have been willing to give part of West Bay to her or split the mines in return."

"She wouldn't have gotten anything if Oriel had remained a slave," one pointed out. "King Taven owes her nothing, and he's only in trouble because Oriel escaped and has East Forest backing him now."

Politics wasn't Aspen's strong point, but he had a feeling, and he spoke slowly as he tried to keep the threads of his thoughts aligned. "Her Isles are

smaller. She has resources from the sea, but maybe it's not enough, and..."

"What?" asked Kalani. "You knew Oriel's family."

"Except for her," said Aspen. "I do remember King Leneer mentioning letters to her. They wrote to each other, but I never thought much of Asara, and from what I gathered, it was him that was closer to her. The children weren't as interested in their distant family member. I think she might have orchestrated this with King Taven from the start, and he used Oriel as a scapegoat to help his reputation with his own people. Asara must be greedy like King Taven, and she never wrote to ask for Oriel's freedom or to bargain or anything..."

"And?"

"They might have worked together, and in the end, they would have made an 'agreement.' Perhaps he would have pretended to offer her part of West Bay including coastal parts and mines to keep peace, but Oriel would have remained a slave as punishment for his Father's 'betrayal.' She would have agreed and claimed it was to save the lives of her people since her army is smaller. Oriel escaped, and she simply changed things a bit. Instead of refusing to aid Oriel, she helped him to get an army, but with betrayal, she and King and Taven could beat Kalen and Rhys's side. That would also leave East Forest open. They have an heir, but with most of the army decimated, they could march in and take that too. Once again, King Taven and Queen Asara could split things. She might not care to have an empire that's spread out, but this would profit her enormously. It would also be easier to attack Oriel's army while fighting for Meadow because King Taven's men would aid them."

The woman stared at him, and for a moment, his stomach twisted. They probably thought he was dumb, but he'd just said that because it made sense. King Taven wouldn't want to do a bunch of hard work and give Asara everything, but together, they could split things and turn war into a profitable arrangement for them both.

Even if Oriel was her cousin, it didn't mean she cared that much for him.

"That makes sense," said one of the women. "It'd take a lot of planning, but it'd certainly be doable."

"Other rulers would be leery of them both," said one.

“Not if he hammered in the lie that Kalen and Rhys were helping a traitor,” said Kalani. “King Taven will spout that until his dying day. Besides, who cares about other rulers as long as they don’t fuck with him? The nearby ones won’t like him snatching up territory like a warlord, but they probably won’t risk war and lives when it doesn’t affect them in the long run as long as he doesn’t try to take more.”

“They’ll sit on their ass like with South Sea,” said Starry. “Others only tried to help once it was too late.”

“Exactly.”

The women didn’t even get a chance to go tempt the other side for money and info. Kalani had said that those loyal to their Queen had sent a few lifeboats across the gap and tried to tempt their past comrades to come back. They spouted threats of death, treason, and lack of honor, but were rebuffed. It was barely dawn when those with Queen Asara started to head north.

Oriel was coming, and he’d surely attack since he’d have control over a much larger army. They’d rather face Asara’s wrath instead of dying out there on the ocean and sinking to the bottom.

With that, Kalani and her women approached the remaining side. The men confirmed what happened and said they had followed one of their Captains who had started the split. The Queen had commanded the army to wait until Meadow to turn on Oriel, Roth, Kalen, and Rhys. With King Taven’s men on the other side, they’d be fucked, but one Captain had refused first.

According to him, Elira hadn’t put him in this realm to wage war with such brutal trickery. Others had followed him.

Aspen didn’t dare go speak to anyone on the remaining ships. He was happy to stay on Elira’s Doves where he didn’t have to worry about men bothering him. Kalani allowed no one aboard and said her ship was a sanctuary for her women to rest and refresh.

They made heaps of money, and Kalani set aside a cut for Aspen even though he said he didn’t need it, and he certainly was selling his arse. She insisted, because without him, she wouldn’t have come this far south in the first place.

It was midafternoon when Aspen, dozing by the railing, heard bells ringing, horns blowing, and faint cheers from those who refused to serve

Asara. In the distance, he knew the river entered the sea, and they barely could see land from this point.

Other ships were coming.

As he stood, Kalani came up next to him with her spyglass. "Look through it. Hold it like that. That's Kalen's new crest with the purple heart although you can't see it properly."

Aspen closed one eye as he peered at the incoming ships. Sure enough, black, purple, and grey flags fluttered, although he couldn't make out the heart insignia even with the spyglass.

"Let's go see your Prince."

Oriel's side probably had a few spyglasses, and they likely thought the floating warehouse was eager to make more money with new customers. The women who weren't busy with the sails and steering came out with a large piece of rolled cloth.

"Just imagine King Oriel's face when he sees this!"

They let it unroll, and Aspen blinked at it. "Oh, come on."

"We're putting it up whether you like it or not."

The women tied it to the top of the railing and let it hang. Oriel and Kalen's ship was at the front of the group coming closer. Elira's Doves kept moving toward them even when they anchored, and no one seemed alarmed at their approach. When they finally came alongside, a few sailors shouted something to the ladies, clearly knowing what they were about.

"Keep moving," shouted one man. "We haven't got time for that."

"I do," bellowed one.

Aspen's heart quickened as he saw Oriel come to the railing. The shouting must have alerted him, and his mouth dropped for a second.

"Aspen!" he yelled before his eyes flicked to the banner. "Aspen's Doves?"

Ropes with hooks were flung out to bring the two ships together, and the gangplank had barely been laid across before Oriel was halfway across it. Once again, Aspen regretted how horrible he'd been because even though Oriel had been with Roth the whole time he was gone, he'd still clearly missed him.

"What are you doing here?" Oriel nearly crushed him in a hug, and Aspen didn't try to push him away.

Oriel was still alright. Nothing had happened to him so far. Aspen lost this voice for a moment as he focused purely on the touch that he'd almost lost more than once. Oriel smelled like magnolias as usual although it was tinged with salt.

Without warning, Oriel kissed. Aspen stiffened for a second because it had been so long since anybody had kissed him, but his eyes pricked with tears. Oriel still tasted the same as he had two years ago when they were innocent teenagers sneaking out of Lork to play on the beach.

Oriel didn't push it too much and broke it off first. "I thought you'd stay in the Windswept Isles. Why did you come all of this way?"

"I have something to tell you..."

"What?" Oriel drew back to look at him.

"In a minute. Where's Roth?"

"He was below deck with Rhys. I'll get him."

Oriel seemed to understand without being told that Aspen would rather stay on the ship that only contained ladies and not strange men he'd never seen before. While Oriel went to fetch Roth, he caught sight of someone with silvery hair and realized that must have been Kalen who was speaking to someone else.

Roth seemed just as surprised to see Aspen and the banner the women had made. Kalani went across to speak to Kalen and Rhys about the info she'd gathered, and Aspen took the other two into the cabin he slept in at night.

He told them what happened with Asara likely trying to poison him and the fleet.

"Why would she kill him then?" asked Roth. "Why not wait and keep him comfortable and clueless?"

"Why not take care of a loose end that's hogging up a room and isn't doing anything to help *her*," Oriel spat as he paced the small room. "She just wanted him out of the way and figured he'd be easy to sweep under the rug. 'Oh, the poor broken boy killed himself. How sad.' And then later-" He drew a finger across his throat. "You and I would be dead. She didn't bet on her army fracturing and picking me over her." He let out a frustrated growl as his pacing in the small space grew vigorous. "I'll go back and fucking slit her throat. I swear to Elira..."

Roth drew Aspen into a hug. "She'll pay. I promise. I'm just glad you got out."

"I have some news of my own," said Oriel. "That lord on the night we were taken. His name was Taggert, and he's dead."

Aspen peered over Roth's arm. "How?"

Aspen stayed on the lady's ship that night. He was worn out from talking and all of the commotion. They'd be leaving tomorrow, and Kalani had agreed to follow and keep Aspen in her care, although they wouldn't be in the battle. It wasn't their war.

The door opened, and Aspen automatically stiffened, but it was only Oriel. "I wanted to say goodnight, but I also wanted to ask if I could stay too. Even if it's on the floor," he hastily added.

Aspen hesitated. "All right. The lantern stays on."

Oriel had brought a blanket. "That's fine. The light won't bother me." He started spreading it out on the floor.

Even if they'd gotten this far, it wasn't over yet. He could still die, and Aspen might not get the things he wanted. Neither would Oriel. "You... could sleep in the bed with me if you wanted."

Oriel paused on his knees. "I don't want to scare you."

"I'm not scared of you."

"But if you fall asleep and wake up-" Oriel gestured. "My being there might frighten you."

"If I tell you to get out, would you?"

"Yeah."

"Then come lay here with me. We'll try it."

Oriel dragged his blanket along and climbed in. Considering he hadn't argued, he must have wanted to be closer too. Wrapped up, he lay on the bed without touching Aspen as they faced each other.

"Won't Roth miss you?" asked Aspen.

"He knows I wanted to spend time with you too," said Oriel. "He's not jealous."

Aspen hesitated as he thought of how Roth had held him before and tried to make him feel better on the ships. "Are we all gonna sleep together in the same bed later?"

"If you want. Whatever's most comfortable for us all is what we'll do. You can have your bedroom if you feel like you need space."

"Okay. Thanks for killing that lord."

"I'll kill anyone for you." Oriel sounded sleepy.

He fell asleep first, and Aspen lay awake for a while before he finally nestled closer and inhaled in his magnolia scent. He couldn't lose this again. Oriel needed to win so they could all make a home together.

Oriel had lost enough too. Aspen pressed himself closer, and after a bit, Oriel shifted a little to put an arm around him. Even in his sleep, he sought touch. Awake, he'd sought to punish someone who'd hurt them.

He'd told Nalha he wasn't the same person anymore, but in some ways he was. All of the good pieces were still there, and he still loved Aspen just like two years ago.

Oriel was up and gone in the morning since he had stuff to do. Aspen didn't have a fleet of ships to command, and being the King of the Whores wasn't a very demanding job.

He thought they would have already been moving and on the way when he dragged himself out of bed, but they must have had a lot to do with new ships in the group. He was sitting on the quarter deck and nibbling toasted bread when he heard boots and tensed at the maleness of the tread. Kalen paused at the top of the stairs.

"Do you mind if I come up here?"

Aspen's first thought was to say no, but this was the King who was helping Oriel and had loaned his whole army for the cause. Besides, Oriel would never let anyone harmful near Aspen.

"It's fine."

Kalen came closer but not too near, and he sat on the deck. "That's a hell of a pair of future husbands you've got there."

Aspen froze with his toasted bread. Oriel had talked about them living together and figuring out sleeping arrangements. Of course, they'd get married after this. It was more proof that the Crown Prince hadn't lied years ago. They'd have an extra person that they hadn't planned on as teenagers, but he wanted to be with Aspen forever.

Kalen's pale hair, silvery in the sunlight, blew loose in the breeze. "Did he tell you about Taggert?"

"Yeah. Yesterday."

"I don't find torture amusing or fun, but even I certainly wasn't sad about his treatment after what that fucker did," said Kalen. "I won't pretend to

understand exactly what you went through, but I have a special hate for those who...take away the control that a person should have over their body especially in a sexual way. Rhys does too."

Aspen had heard a bit about him being locked up for a decade to find love, and he never thought that made sense. He didn't want details, but he had a feeling that Kalen understood a few things in a way. Someone had taken control from him in some form even if he hadn't gone through what Aspen did.

"I'm guessing you didn't choose to be away for so long?" he slowly asked.

"No," Kalen said shortly. "Taggert was a bastard and deserved what happened to him."

Aspen felt a little stab of savage pleasure at the thought of that bastard being burned. "Oriel said it was terrible. I didn't want the full details of what the people did to him, but I'm glad that fucker is dead too."

"Oriel's a good man. Roth is too. You'll be safe with them, and they'll have the same with you."

"I wish I could say that," said Aspen, and Kalen raised an eyebrow. "I don't have their training, and I'm not even fighting in this war. In a real fight, I'd probably get my ass kicked."

"Sometimes, safety can come in other forms. Rhys has proven that to me without fighting, and I always feel safe with him. You came all this way for them, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Sometimes, it's just being there when needed. I went a long time without that, and it felt almost foreign to have someone that cared and was willing to stick with me."

Even if Aspen couldn't fight, he could start by being around for them. With the future fast approaching, he imagined Oriel dying and wished he hadn't since his stomach threatened to lose the toasted bread. Maybe it was better if he at least stayed with them for now. During the actual battles, he could wait on Kalani's ship since they wouldn't be fighting.

"Could I come on your ship for now anyway?"

"If you want, go ahead," said Kalen. "It's reserved for royalty, a few trusted Commanders, our guards, and that's it besides those who sail it. You

count as royalty since you'll be with Oriel and Roth. We don't have a bunch of rough soldiers hanging around on it or anything like that."

"Can you get Oriel or Roth for me?"

"Sure."

Kalen's eyes were rather icy in color, but he didn't seem perturbed about fetching someone. Aspen waited by the gangplank as he eyed a few men up in the rigging. Some of the ships had arranged themselves and had their gangplanks down to form a sort of trail so one could move between them. Oriel might have gone to speak to other Commanders about certain things. On another ship, he spotted female soldiers and sailors. There were more men than women.

It wasn't too long before Roth came across to him. "Kalen says you want to stay with us?"

"Yeah." Aspen remained rigid. "Can you just pick me up and force me across?"

Roth cocked an ear. "If it makes you feel that bad, there's nothing wrong if you stay on this one. It's mostly men on ours."

"I'd rather spend more time with you both."

Roth's tail lazily swished. "We could come over here."

"Or I can come over there and save you the trouble. It's easier if you want to talk to Kalen or something. Now pick me up, kitty boy."

Roth narrowed his eyes, but his lips twitched in a smile as he picked Aspen up. "Okay, brat."

"I'll put a bell collar on you while you're sleeping."

Roth froze for a second on the gangplank as Aspen clutched at him. "If Oriel told you that, you'll both get it later."

"He didn't say anything, but now I know he did." Aspen allowed himself a quick smirk. This was definitely something he would have to bring up to Oriel in private. He could just imagine a pretty pink collar with a bell. He'd poke it and make it go tink tink, although Roth would probably shrivel him with his lofty glare.

He forgot about pink collars and bells when they reached the deck, and he heard other male voices. His chest tightened as he hid his face in Roth's shoulder although he could still see that one, swinging lantern.

He was aware of Roth shifting him a little. They were in a cabin, and he'd sat on a bed to hold him. "This is our room. No one comes in here, and

if Kalen or Rhys want us, they knock. Nobody barges in, all right?”

Oriel came in later when the ships were underway, so that meant he’d probably have some free time.

“Captain Kalani said you’d gone over here.”

Aspen was in the bed with Roth and snuggled against his side. “I wanted to spend more time with you.”

Oriel sat on the edge of the bed. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

He felt a little better with their presence and since no one would come in here. “I can manage. Can I sleep here?”

“Yeah, if you want.”

That was more time spent, and if felt overwhelmed, he could get on the floor to sleep alone or go back to Kalani’s ship.

He leaned forward to tug on Oriel’s sleeve. “Hey.”

”What?”

“When we have time, we need to get a collar with a bell and-”

“Oh, for Elira’s sake,” Roth said as Oriel’s face broke into a smile.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Oriel had decided they would head for Lork and take back the capital first.

When the ships grew close enough to where he could see the city, it didn't feel like he was coming home.

Aspen wouldn't come out of the cabin, and he probably had no desire to see that place, or at least not right now. Oriel didn't blame him. He almost wanted to order the fleet to go elsewhere. Anywhere but the place where he'd lost his parents and his old self.

But he also wanted to take back Lork since it had started here.

Basic orders could be passed with simple, colored flags lifted to certain heights or combined with others. Everyone was ready and knew what they were doing, and while some citizens by the docks seemed to flee in terror at the sight of approaching soldiers, others lingered. Clearly, they wondered at Kalen's and Asara's colors. They must not have received word from anyone else yet.

Oriel spotted a few guards who hauled ass. Lork hadn't been set up for battle and properly protected, so this wouldn't be a difficult place to take. The nearest ships were able to dock with little issue. Once there was hardly any space left, others pulled up as close as they safely could and gangplanks were lowered so soldiers could go through the maze of ships and get to land.

Kalen's ship had properly docked, so Oriel and everyone disembarked.

"It's Prince Oriel!" someone shouted.

"He's back!"

The docks shook as soldiers rushed forth to start sweeping through the city. Oriel was sure he caught terrified screams deeper in as the clueless citizens tried to figure out what was going on.

A couple of soldiers brought a few citizens forth to speak to Oriel, and he asked what the state of this place was. What had happened since the betrayal?

Several citizens had been taken prisoner that night, and they knew many of their own had been sold as slaves for labor and sex. Plenty of those left behind had written to various lords in Meadow Kingdom.

No one was to be released unless a ridiculously high sum was paid. King Taven must have been receiving a good amount of taxes from the sale of slaves, and he wasn't ready to let anybody go so easily. A fisherman said he'd lost his two brothers that night, and he couldn't afford such a price to buy them back. He wasn't even sure if they were alive. A few wealthy people had been able to locate and purchase back family members, and a couple had done it for those with little money.

"After you were taken that night, most of the trouble was done before dawn. The ships left with the prisoners, but many soldiers remained." The fisherman wiped his face with his sleeve. "Some of the people had tried to fight back, and our dead were still in the streets. We never had a chance because men came from docks and even beyond the walls. Others came from inside the Castle later. The city guards tried, but there were too many of King Taven's men. Before dawn, the remaining soldiers and a couple of Commanders took over. We had to clean up the city ourselves. We heard you were alive because some saw you being taken to a ship. No one was allowed in the Castle for a couple of days. I think it had been cleared of valuables the first night by those who were with King Taven, and then the rest got to pick it over." He stopped.

"My family?" Oriel asked in a tight voice.

"They're-they're all dead," said the fishermen. "I thought you knew."

"I know. Where are the bodies?"

The fisherman looked away.

Oriel couldn't keep his voice down. "Tell me where their bodies are!"

The fisherman's eyes grew glassy. "They hung the bodies from the gate into the grounds. That's how we knew you were the only one to make it. I don't know if that was an order or if someone simply decided to do it from spite. I didn't see, but some said your family was tossed into a common grave outside of the city in the woods. No one has been allowed to go there because the soldiers have a spot set up. Many are in the city, but they have a location there too."

For a moment, Oriel saw red at the thought of his family being tossed into Ymir's Earth like utter trash and not given a proper burial. Even a

simple, proper grave like a citizen would have been better.

“Fuck.” He took a deep breath. “And the Castle?”

“It’s being used as a station for soldiers, but they don’t have Lork properly defended. I don’t know what they plan to do here. No lord was assigned here like in other holdings where the original died.”

“We’ve just been waiting,” said a woman.

“For what?” asked Rhys.

She lifted a shoulder. “Something. I guess it’s this since you’re here now. I think the soldiers were just to keep us under control while King Taven figures out what to do around here since it was the capital of Lork.”

Oriel and his little group moved into the city. He spotted a few dead bodies in leather armor in the street which showed King Taven’s soldiers had been patrolling. Of course, they hadn’t stood a chance against the army. By not setting up any form of proper defenses, they had paid. It wasn’t like King Taven suspected Oriel would be back with reinforcements anyway.

Where some of the citizens had seemed terrified before, their faces now showed joy since they knew these new soldiers weren’t to create havoc and slaughter the city. The night of the initial betrayal had beaten the fight from many, and plenty had lost family members to death or slavery that night. They didn’t seem ready to storm the Castle and tear down the intruders, but they were waiting for Oriel to do something.

They hadn’t been saved before, and they wanted someone to do it now.

Some soldiers had left to check outside the walls and get the small encampment. Oriel had no idea what that was for, but he didn’t care right now. The gate to the Castle grounds had been opened, but the soldiers hadn’t gone inside. Men had come out and been dealt with, but Oriel had said he wanted to be the first to step inside if possible.

They dismounted, and he took his strung bow. There were likely more inside. Judging by the broken windows and a horrid stain on the front door, likely old blood, the enemy hadn’t taken care of the place.

The last time Oriel went through those doors, he’d been naked and collared. This time, he stepped through as a free fairy once again.

For a moment, it almost looked the same.

But as he took in the entrance Hall, the differences were obvious. No one had made a real effort to clean up. The huge rug that ran toward the stairs must have taken ages for someone to weave. It had been there since before

Oriel's birth and had only been removed to be cleaned or have the dust beaten from it.

Brown stains from old blood showed on the dark green filigree pattern. Some of the spindles on the first flight of stairs had been busted out. A few holes and stains marred the walls in the entrance hall as well, and the doors to the Hall were open. Singe marks showed on the carved wood.

When Oriel, Roth, Kalen, and Rhys gathered in the entrance to the Hall with several behind them, the sight of the empty High Table was like a stab. A few soldiers went ahead to check behind and under it just in case.

Many of the smaller tables and chairs were overturned. Tablecloths had been torn, and broken glass littered the floor in some spots. It looked like someone had tried to sweep, and the food from that night's dinner was gone, but overall, the Hall was trashed. A few righted tables and the High Table had likely been used to sit at and eat, but these soldiers had been using his dirtied home like a simple spot to plant their arses while they awaited new orders.

While soldiers spread out through the rest of the Castle to check, Oriel approached the High Table. Of course, his family's bodies were elsewhere, but he almost expected to see the corpses still there. Or to find Aspen bleeding on the floor even though he was safe on the ship right now.

"Roth, can you please go with some men and make sure that other encampment is taken care of? Bring a Mage. I want my family dug up, and I know you'll make sure they do it right. I want them placed in coffins."

"I'll do it," said Roth.

Oriel should probably do it, but he couldn't bear to see the rotted corpses. He already had enough bad images of their final moments in his head, and he didn't want more added. Simply being in this place was threatening to choke him. He left Kalen and Rhys to head upstairs. Other soldiers had gone ahead, and he heard a scream which proved some of the enemy had tried to hide.

Good mixed with bad. Trash littered the once pristine halls where he had often run with his brothers as a child. Soldiers had made messes, and the rooms they slept in were cluttered with crap. Blood marked the floors and walls. Paintings were gone. Others had been slashed. Furniture had been taken.

His rooms had been half-emptied. The tub where he'd been grabbed and collared was dry. The rug where he'd been raped had been stolen. His books? Gone. The bed had been stripped. His clothes had been carried off or lay about in the closet. The couch in his sitting room had a mysterious green stain on it, and a cushion was missing. A window had been busted.

It didn't feel like his rooms anymore.

His parent's rooms had also been robbed, and someone had been using the bed judging by the dirty blankets. The idea that some filthy bastard had been sleeping in his parent's bed almost made him want to scream. A stranger's clothes littered the floor. A coat of Father's, torn beyond repair, lay near the closet room, and when he opened it, he swore he caught a whiff of Mother's familiar scent.

Her dresses were gone because the silk, jewels, and velvet would be worth something. On a shelf at the back, he recognized a simple knitted shawl that a woman had given her. Mother had often worn it in her rooms despite it being so plain and something a commoner would wear. It had been left behind and deemed worthless.

It still held a bit of her smell.

He knew that would eventually fade, and nothing could quite evoke a memory of her again. Nothing so direct from her would ever exist again. Never again would he come into his parent's rooms like when he was little and see her sitting by the fire. He'd never sit in her lap, lean against her shawl-covered chest, and listen to her voice. He'd never vie with his brothers for a spot against her while she told them stories.

Kalen found him standing in the hall, crying, holding the shawl, and clueless about what to do next. Every room would be tainted. He couldn't even bring himself to go to Father's office because he'd remember being forced to kneel while hearing Aspen scream and the agonizing truth that he'd lost his family.

"Oriel?" Kalen said as he approached.

"This isn't home," Oriel choked. "How can I ever come back here again?"

Kalen said nothing as his expression darkened with understanding. It wasn't about cleaning the place up. He'd never view it the same. He'd never even be able to step foot into the sitting room where they had hanged his Mother after they violated her. He'd never be able to sit at the High

Table even if he had a different chair. He'd always think of his Father and brothers being killed there and Aspen being held down on the floor.

"I don't want to sleep in the room where I was raped," Oriel spat out, and Kalen flinched. "I can't bring Aspen here to live either. Not after what happened to him. Even if I changed bedrooms-I-I don't have a home anymore. I think they'd want me to take it back, and I can't."

Kalen looked down for a moment. "I'm sorry, Oriel. If you can't stay here, I wouldn't blame you, and I don't think your family would either."

"I kept thinking about going home later, but there's nothing to go back to."

"Your real home is with Roth and Aspen, and I think your parents and brothers would understand that. It sounds like your family was close and wanted what was best for each other. If they could, they'd probably tell you to find a new place with Roth and Aspen so you can make new memories. It doesn't mean you'll forget the good things that happened here, or the bad, but there can be good again in the future."

As the King, he could pick a new city. He and Aspen would never ride on these nearby beaches or make love in *those* woods. He'd never share those things with Roth here, and add a third to the memories in this city.

But they could do it elsewhere.

They didn't have sex in the cabin now with Aspen around, and quite frankly, Oriel was too afraid to even mention sex around him. Still, he'd gone out to look at the water the night before, and Roth had gone with him for a bit. Sex by the railing wouldn't be happening with so many around, and Roth, pretending to hug him from behind, had given him a little bite where his neck and shoulder met. His clothes covered it, but it was a reminder.

They belonged to each other. And even with no bites on Aspen, he also belonged. No matter what, they had each other wherever they went, and that was more important than any set of walls with a roof. Kalen was right.

"Do you want to go outside?" asked Kalen.

Oriel did. He wanted out of there, but he had one last thing he wanted to do.

"Would you come with me for something?"

"Of course."

Oriel started down the hallway. "How do you even get through shit? You were locked up for ten years. You lost people too."

"Because I have Rhys. He's the first to really see me for who I am, and he never tried to change it. We have some similarities in some ways, but where we're different, we accept it. Rhys has said we were made for each other."

Oriel had felt ready to break in his parent's rooms, but somehow, Kalen had helped. Oriel needed to keep going, and he wanted to.

When he and Kalen entered the attic space, they found it had also been robbed. Oriel tried not to think of the things from past generations that were now gone forever. When he saw the open chest in his corner, his gut tightened. Please, not that too.

The toys had been left behind. Nobody cared for the things that triplets had played with, and the items had been simple. Boys who play rough and have a tendency to accidentally break things don't need gold or gems on their toys.

The chest had certainly been searched, and some blocks lay scattered along with a few other things.

The things that Oriel wanted were at the bottom. After being stuffed in a chest for so long, they were still in pretty good shape, although they smelled musty.

Oriel gathered them up and went to sit on the steps for a bit with his items clutched in his arms.

Each soft bear that Mother sewed when they were little was stuffed with wool, and each had a tiny vest made with cloth from an old shirt of Father's. Oriel had gone to sleep for years with his toy, and so had his brothers. The bears had gone in the box once the triplets grew too old for toys. They had figured that perhaps their future children could play with those things. Oriel hadn't thought about them for years.

Kalen let him be at his request. Oriel only wished for one more thing, and that was Father's sword. It was likely gone. Perhaps King Taven had it to keep as a trophy. Or had it been thrown away and was lost forever.

Even without that, he had to keep moving, and he had one more thing to do now for Aspen.

Rhys came along as extra protection, not that the citizens would hurt him. In fact, the mood somehow seemed lighter with the presence of the

enemy soldiers gone. It was strange to ride down the street and see typical activity going on. Life had gone in some way, and people needed to work to eat.

It still wasn't the same. The past was gone.

The docks were full of soldiers as he searched. A soldier might want a quick fuck later if nobody in the ranks caught his eye or was willing to get naked. A new face and body might be tempting.

The pinkish hair was probably also rather interesting to some since it was almost as rare as red. Aspen had said it was likely he'd be hanging around with such an opportunity for money.

"Hey." Oriel paused the horse. "Vima?"

The man leaning against the side of the dirty dockside tavern looked up with faint surprise, but a second later, he smirked.

"Oh, you do have a thing for street whores, don't you? I'll have to charge you extra."

"I'm not here for your services," said Oriel.

"From what I remember, you didn't seem interested in Aspen's either for a while. You preferred playing on the beach." Vima's face darkened. "Any idea where he's at?"

"He's on one of the ships, and he's with me now. He was taken prisoner that night."

Vima's face showed true surprise for a moment, and that blossomed into further shock before he looked away and laughed. "Oh, that lucky, lucky little whore."

Oriel dismounted. "He's not a whore. He told me yesterday that he wanted me to find you and make sure you're okay. You helped him a lot."

Vima's face twisted for a moment. "Considering that you're here, I was also wrong about things. All my experience meant shit when it came to you." He pushed himself away from the wall. "Listen, Your Majesty. I'm glad he's all right, or at least to some extent he is. And he's with you, so that's good. I knew he'd fallen for you ages ago, and I told him not to believe anything you said."

"Yeah, I know. Royalty and a street whore don't often mix well, get married, and live happily ever after. He believed you, not me, and then I further ruined it after he agreed to be my Father's pleasure slave along with my brothers."

“Aspen wrote to give me his few worldly possessions and money that he had hidden in his hidey spot, and he said to write if I never needed anything. Since you got him now, it seems there was more.”

“I’m marrying him.”

“I should have kept my mouth shut and let him frolic with you on the beach without my beliefs whispering in his ears.”

“We’re past that. Stuff happened that we can’t change, but we have the future.”

Vima gave him a look, and he probably assumed what happened to Aspen in the Castle that night.

“He’d like to see you,” said Oriel. “If you want, you can go to the ships. Ask for Captain Kalani. She’s guarding him now with a couple of her women.”

Vima nodded. “All right.”

Oriel held out his forearm. “Thanks for helping him in the beginning instead of thumping him when you found him in your area.”

Vima clasped his forearm. “It’s no fun thumping the innocent ones.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“You made it,” said Aspen.

Vima looked so out of place in the cabin. It was small, but it was clear it wasn't for a simple soldier. Vima was still thin, his hair was practically the same, and he had the same hard look about his eyes. More lines had been added, but he'd lived.

“Like a rat. I survived.” He didn't ask but plopped on the bed next to Aspen.

Surprisingly, Aspen wasn't afraid of the male presence being so close, but Vima had clearly never wanted to fuck him. Fucking was just something he did for those that had the coin to pay, and he'd aided Aspen in the early days.

“I was wrong,” continued Vima. “The Crown Prince loved a street whore. But you're not really a whore now, huh?”

“Captain Kalani made me the King of the whores.”

Vima snorted. “You weren't fit for street life. Not really. I just wanted to see you with my own eyes before you all leave and get on with taking the Kingdom back.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

“As a hole or a sword? I'm not good with a sword. I'd probably stick myself by accident.”

“Not as a hole,” said Aspen. “The soldiers can fuck each other if they need to blow off some steam. I mean...as something else. I'm sure there's a job you could do.”

“I don't need saving.”

Aspen had said those words to Oriel once, and he could see why. “If you want more choices, you can have them. Like someone offered me.”

Vima sighed. “Eh, I can't think of nothing. I'm not really keen on spending ages on ships that might get sunk since you're about to be at war and all that. At least in Lork, nobody is fighting right now, and I can't run away on a ship.”

“True. But if you change your mind, send a note to wherever we live. Technically, I owe you a lot, so consider that.”

“I’ll think about it. You’re not staying here later?”

“I don’t think Oriel will want to.” Aspen figured that and couldn’t even stomach stepping into the place where he’d seen his loved ones die.

Vima stood. “I better get going, but it was good seeing you, Aspen. Stay with the Prince you snagged, you lucky bastard. He’s cute.”

Aspen managed to tack on some semblance of a smile. “He’s so much more than cute.”

“Like I said, lucky bastard.”

Vima left. Aspen hadn’t expected tears, hugs, or anything like that, and this had been good enough. Each knew the other was alive, and Vima wasn’t somebody he’d forget. Not when Aspen had been a lowly street whore living in a shed and trying to make his way. Maybe they’d see each other again. Or not.

Now that was done, he just had to pry himself off the ship. Simply being here made his stomach twist and sicken, and he thought he’d throw up when Kalani accompanied him through the streets. He said she could go back when they approached the Castle, and he let her have the horse he’d ridden.

It took every ounce of willpower to force himself through the gate. Beyond those walls, he’d grown to love the younger triplets and the King, and then, it all had been ripped from him. Oriel had lost his family too.

But they had gained each other. Oriel sat on the steps while his horse wandered several feet away and grazed. The proper King looked small as he hunched over some items, and he looked up in surprise at Aspen who sat next to him.

“I’m not going in. Now that we’re actually here, I don’t think I can live here either, Oriel.”

“We’ll pick a new place. I can’t either. Here.” Oriel stuck two soft bears in Aspen’s lap. “Mother sewed these for us when we were little. If you want me to go in and find something of Father’s, I can. I know you loved them each in your own way, and they loved you. I figured you’d want something of Kard and Zale. Most of the stuff was stolen, but nobody wanted our old toys.”

Aspen clutched the bears to his chest. “This is fine.”

Oriel crushed his own to his chest. "I want Father's sword, but I don't know where it is."

"I'm sorry." Aspen inched closer and let himself lean on him. When Oriel put his arm around him, he nestled in further.

Now that he'd come out, he couldn't leave Oriel and go back when the bodies were brought. They'd been placed into coffins before they were carried into the city. Soldiers said the encampment nearby had held plenty of men who seemed to have grown lazy with nothing to do. They were all dead except for two.

Two men had been sent to pick a spot for a new Castle so King Taven could have a place to stay if we wished to visit this area since his Kingdom had doubled in size. They would have planned the building based on the terrain, and they had some basic plans drawn up. Oriel told them there would be no home for King Taven now, and he let them go.

The two seemed quite happy to get the hell away.

The underground tomb where more current members of the family were buried was two days away. Dragging the army two days over land and back was a bad idea, so a proper burial would have to wait.

Nobody was supposed to be dug up or touched at all once they were buried in Ymir's Earth. Elira said so, and all fairies followed this rule even if they had some varying customs for death, but the Royal Family's graves hadn't been proper. Mages from the Temple had moved the bodies.

For the time being, they would be stored in the Temple, and once Oriel returned, they would be properly interred. The Mages would keep them safe for now, and they promised that if Oriel failed, they would get the bodies to the tomb and make sure it was done.

Aspen stood in the Temple on one side of Oriel, and Roth was on the other. The coffins were plain and lined up according to status.

Even though Aspen had been purchased and kept for sex, they had grown to love each other. Most pleasure slaves were considered more important than basic employees. Aspen had loved each in his own way. As he looked at the coffins, he tried not to picture them as how they looked after death on that night. He wanted to remember how they looked while alive and well.

Oriel barely spoke for the rest of the night. When they slept on the ship, Roth and Aspen got in the bed with him and stayed on either side of him.

They only had each other now, and Aspen knew Oriel was terrified of losing them too. It was the same terror he felt.

There was nothing to do but go on. More men joined them from Lork, and they left the city that was no longer home behind as they continued.

The next city they targeted fought back at first. Aspen stayed on the ships and watched from the quarter deck with Kalani even when he lost sight of Oriel and Roth. The fight didn't last long since the place wasn't equipped for a full-on battle. The men had also likely only been following the orders of their new lord and were trying to escape death. They were cut down, and the city quickly fell into line after that.

More of the coast fell under their control, and they gained more men willing to fight for Oriel instead of some conniving King and whatever lackeys he gifted holds too. It was hard to know if King Taven would have better defenses set up in important areas on his original side. All it took was for one person to run and tell or send a dove.

It had likely happened by now.

Oriel wanted to head right for Juniper, the capital of Meadow Kingdom. He could take other places, but he said it was better to cut out the heart first. A few disagreed and said to encroach slowly, but others agreed. Why waste men on other coastal places of less importance? People who had been Meadow fairies from the day of their birth might not care to join Oriel who had no wish to press citizens into fighting.

Since Oriel was the real King of West Bay, they followed his orders. Kalen and Rhys had agreed with him.

Aspen dared to stand outside by the railing one night. He still hated ships and wished for a bottle to dull things, but Oriel hadn't let him have any alcohol. He figured this had to be some improvement since he wasn't ready to have a panic attack. He'd been in the cabin for the most part for so long.

Roth sitting with him probably helped. They'd all been sleeping in the same bed even though it was crowded, although sometimes the lack of space made Aspen get out of bed at night to lie on the floor. Waking up with a nightmare and feeling someone against him was...unpleasant.

"You know, if you want me to stay out here for a bit, I can," said Aspen. "I think I can trust Kalen and Rhys, so if they'd stay with me..."

He figured he could trust Kalen more. There was nothing wrong with Rhys, but if he couldn't have Oriel or Roth, he'd pick Kalen. He had

seemed to understand things in a way.

Roth looked at him after a moment. "You don't have to force yourself to come out or stay out here for a certain period. Do things in your time."

"I mean, if you and Oriel want to fuck..." said Aspen. "I'm kind of a third wheel."

"I would like to have sex with him, but we're not kicking you out for that."

"If something happens, wouldn't you like a last fuck?"

Roth snorted. "I love him for far more than just that."

"I know, but go fuck and enjoy it. At least you can."

Roth leaned his head on the railing. "Maybe you will too one day."

Aspen didn't see how he was ever supposed to let someone get on top of him or flip him over. Maybe if he was in control and on top, he could manage it, but sex with anyone hadn't been on his mind.

Roth drew close enough for Aspen to feel his breath on his ear. "Even if you never let Oriel touch you in that fashion, he'll still love you. The same goes for me. You're also mine, and I'm yours."

Aspen stilled at the warmth so close to this skin. Roth had proved that more than once despite Aspen being a total dickhead for so long. Saving him. Holding him to keep the bad away. He still let Aspen lay against his side. Any two fairies could fuck, but not everyone would stick around through other shit.

When his lips brushed Aspen's neck, he knew what the fairy wanted. He'd seen the marks on Oriel's skin before.

"Do it." Aspen shifted an inch to his left and toward him.

Roth didn't touch him in any other way, but he let his fangs sink in. The little pricks of pain did something weird to Aspen that he couldn't even quite explain. For a moment, Roth held still, and a little growl came from his throat. He was probably aching for far more, but he wouldn't do it.

He let out a little shuddery breath when he pulled away, and for the first time in ages, Aspen didn't feel disgusted at the thought of someone wanting to fuck him. If they ever had sex, it wouldn't be like on the ship or the last night in the Castle when every single act had been forced on him.

"Go work that out on Oriel," said Aspen. "Don't make him go to battle with full balls."

Roth chuckled. "Do you want me to get Kalen?"

“Yes, please.”

They were days away from Juniper now. Aspen wished he could fix all the bad in his head and fuck Oriel too. He knew Oriel would never dare ask, but a part of him had to miss the old days when they’d make love in the woods. He’d sometimes let Aspen take full control of him and been quite a good submissive in bed.

He couldn’t bring himself to get naked with Oriel or anyone, but he could do one thing.

Roth was out of the cabin the next morning, so Aspen sat next to Oriel on the bed. They’d be at Juniper by midmorning the next day, and if everything crumbled, he wanted one last thing.

“I only want a kiss, and nothing else.”

Oriel widened his eyes. “You want...a kiss?”

Aspen nodded. “It’s been over two years, so hand it over.”

Oriel snorted and leaned in. Aspen closed the gap, and for a moment, he forgot the cabin since he’d shut his eyes. Oriel did nothing besides press his lips against his, and he seemed to be handing over the control.

Aspen deepened it a little, and Oriel responded without pushing things. This hadn’t changed. He still smelled and tasted like before. Aspen pulled back, having had enough intimate touches for the time being.

“One day, I’ll give you a longer one,” said Aspen.

“I don’t care about it being longer. I enjoyed it, but I care about you being comfortable.” Oriel gazed at him. “That’s what I want most.”

“I want to be comfortable with more.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Oriel finally laid eyes on Juniper for the first time, and he knew the sight would be burned in his memory forever if he lived.

Aspen was with the “angels” on the floating whorehouse and way back. If this all went south, they’d get farther away and keep him safe.

Everyone was prepared, and the cannons were ready. As they had suspected, King Taven had prepped Juniper for all-out war. If they failed and were able to retreat, they had places in West Bay to use as a base before planning further action. Kalen and Rhys would grant Oriel, Roth, and Aspen permanent asylum if need be since Asara was a damn traitor.

The ruler’s ship, Elira’s Fire, was farther back, and the ones ahead in the front line would soon be firing. Oriel heard the faint boom of a cannon, but the enemy shot fell short. Someone had miscalculated or panicked. No one on their front line made such a mistake.

Their front line fired. Special cannons built to handle the magic of those who needed something to channel their power also went off, and Oriel watched the balls fly out. A few were on fire from those who had the magic, but they couldn’t be continuously used. They grew too hot and became a danger to the ship itself since it was made with wood, and not much protective magic could be worked into wood.

Two with lightning also went out, and Oriel watched them make a direct hit on the hull of a ship. Normal cannon balls also whizzed toward the enemy, and Meadow started firing back.

Soldiers whose lightning could track sent out bolts from both sides. At such a rage, it would grow weaker the farther it went, and Roth’s first few blasts probably missed too since they were away.

A ship closer to Elira’s Fire took a hit with a flaming cannonball in the stern as Oriel’s side drew closer. A much smaller one on the edge started to sink when several balls pummeled the hull, and he was sure he heard the screams from those on board.

Shields went up around the railing as their ship drew close enough to where it had a better chance of hitting. Men shouted orders as it started to turn to aim their broadside at the enemy. Oriel, Kalen, and Rhys didn't have tracking fire, but they could throw it. Even better, they could use catapults.

A glass orb half-full of oil sat in a small catapult. Part of a rag dangled in the oil, and the rest stuck out. Oriel set fire to the free part, and the fairy manning the catapult pulled the lever. A few others on the deck were also set free, and Oriel watched his own as it sailed out. It rolled mid-air, further soaking the rag, and exploded entirely once it was over one of the Meadow ships.

The others burst, and the noise was lost among shouts, screams, and the sound of cannons firing. Flaming oil and glass rained down on the ship. A sail caught fire, and a sailor up in the rigging must have panicked since he lost his grip. A man below him on the deck collapsed at that moment as Roth's lightning nailed him.

The cannons on Elira's Fire went off

The combined boom of seventy-five cannons on the port side shook the deck. Wood splintered a hundred yards away as hulls were battered. Magic flew back and forth. It hit shields, the boat, and a sail above Oriel caught on fire. A cannonball harmlessly went overhead.

Soldiers on both sides reloaded as fast as they could. The smoke from fire, burning wood, and black powder grew. To his left, two of their ships had rammed into a seventy-gun ship that was trying to turn itself to get a better aim at Oriel's. The half-naked metal woman on the prow caused the wood to split and crack, and the force had been so strong, the Meadow ship was shoved a few feet back as it tilted slightly in the water. Fairies immediately swarmed forward with grappling hooks to climb while others covered them with magic and longbows.

Elira's Fire let loose with another barrage of cannonballs again before the sailors started to turn it. Oriel joined Roth at the railing so he could loose more fireballs. Roth's lightning wrapped around one and sent it flying into the seventy-gun ship.

They ducked at a hailstorm of flaming arrows, and someone fell dead only feet away from Oriel. Kalen narrowed his eyes and sent out a fireball over the shields. Oriel followed it and watched a Meadow soldier try to

move from his spot in the rigging, but he wasn't fast enough. Seconds later, he was hurtling toward the deck below where a bloodbath had broken off.

Ahead, one of Meadow's ship prows had an enormous snake with a woman's head, and it was headed right for them. Heedless of a small ship that hadn't moved fast enough, it plowed through the water and hit the stern. Elira's Fire wouldn't be able to move in time to avoid its path.

"Brace!" someone screamed. "For Elira's sake, brace!"

Oriel dragged Roth back. The deck split as fairies scattered and abandoned the cannons on the port side. One slipped from its mooring and disappeared. Oriel wished he wasn't close enough to see the hideous snarl twisting the snake woman's face, or the way the blank eyes coldly gazed upon everyone. On the side, he finally caught the name: Revenge.

Kalen's soldiers must have gained control of the seventy-gun ship at that moment because it fired right at its fellows.

The Revenge took several balls, and the damage was so massive, Elira's Fire shuddered since the Revenge's prow was jammed into the side. Commanders screamed orders as the sailors tried to move Elira's Fire away enough to break free of the other. The balance of the ship had shifted from the damage to the hull, and Oriel knew they were probably taking on water below, not that anyone cared right now. The ship wouldn't have time to sink from that alone if Meadow had their way.

As they shifted, the prow loosened. Rhys threw a fireball at someone Oriel couldn't see. Soldiers were reloading the remaining cannons. The Revenge shifted slightly as if they thought they had time to aim their broadside.

The deck thrummed as the cannons fired upon the Revenge. A flier took the chance to launch herself onto the woman's hideous head. As he channeled her fire into the mental, the snake woman glowed with the heat, and the wood she was attached to started to catch.

Some of Kalen's soldiers cheered. The Revenge listed to one side while the prow went up. An enemy panicked and jumped even though his chances in the ocean were probably quite small now.

The main mast cracked and snapped. It must have already been heavily damaged, and with the listing, the weight grew to be too much.

The seventy-gun ship fired again.

Oriel dared to look between two shields with Roth. Splinters flew as the already damaged side of the Revenge further crumbled. The woman was a mass of hot metal as the flier still clung to it, unhurt by her own power. More of the wood nearby caught fire, and those who had survived the onslaught started to abandon ship. A couple of fliers took off above it, but someone's lightning knocked them out of the air.

Elira's Fire still had life. As the Revenge started to sink, it hardly looked like a ship anymore.

Everywhere Oriel looked, he saw fighting. The two masses had been growing more entwined as cannons went off, magic flew, fliers started taking to the air since they were close enough, and ships rammed others.

Ships can't turn in a second, and Kalen's let out one more barrage of cannonballs into the enemy ahead to hit whoever. A few from their side started launching flaming oil orbs again. Magic and arrows still flew as they drew closer to the wall. Meadow's fleet had been sliced in half, and as more gaps appeared, that meant more of Oriel's men drew closer.

It also meant the cannons on the wall could start firing.

A ball narrowly missed the mizzenmast of Elira's Fire. The flaming sail gave up, and the tattered remains came loose. Unfortunately, it blew right into a ship behind them, but there wasn't anything they could do about that. There wasn't much left to the sail anyway.

An eighty-gunner called the Flyer had made surprisingly good headway despite its size, although it had taken some heavy damage. It was still able to fire at the walls of Juniper.

Stone chips flew in all directions as grey dust exploded up and out. A cannon collapsed and took a couple of men with it as that part of the walkway was destroyed. Ten daring fliers headed for the wall with their weapons, and the first of Oriel's army had breached the defenses.

Fliers from both sides grew more daring the worse the fighting grew. A ship didn't get out of the way in time, and the prow of Elira's Fire rammed into it. Wood splintered on both sides, but Elira's Fire was bigger, and the little ship dangerously tilted. Someone slid along the deck, hit the railing, flipped over it, and vanished in the water.

Roth thumped Oriel's back. "Almost."

Cannons from the wall fired, and some weren't being too careful about who they hit anymore with the enemy being so close. Men with longbows

aimed for Elira's Fire as she cut through the water, debris, and probably soldiers too. Plenty had fallen in. The water lapped at the walls and the rocks near the base. The most dangerous part was coming.

Kalen had agreed to sacrifice Elira's Fire for this along with a few others. Oriel and Roth knelt with Kalen and Rhys as the stonework drew closer and closer.

If they had more speed and time to gain it, it probably would have been worse, but the shock of the hit still nearly knocked Oriel back. Their Elira prow which was made out of a few hundred pounds of metal and had the force of a ship behind it smashed into the stonework right below where a cannon was. At that moment, a different cannon fired at them and blew away part of the quarterdeck. A Commander who had been up there with his crossbow was no more. Oriel gripped onto Roth to help him keep him steady as wood flew behind them, and stone chips exploded ahead.

"Now!" someone screamed.

Oriel raced forward with the rest toward the prow which had created a crummy but working bridge. More fliers headed for the wall, and an enemy with butterfly wings suddenly launched himself toward Oriel.

He came from nowhere, but a fireball hit him in the face, and a dose of lightning made his wings spasm. Rhys, slightly ahead of Oriel, swung his sword, and the fairy's throat opened in a spray of blood.

Getting onto the wall bottlenecked them, but some of their fliers helped cover them in those vulnerable seconds. With his sword and shield in hand, Oriel went for the nearest men at a cannon. Bravely, they had stayed and were trying to get a shot off even though death lurked ten feet away.

Oriel swung for one, and his blade bit through leather armor. The green-clad enemy screamed. The powder man broke and ran, but an arrow from one of the ships below drove itself into his skull.

Out in the water, the ships still fought, and more rammed others as the wall became a more desperate goal for those trying to get to it and those trying to keep the invaders away. Wreckage floated in the water, and some ships were listing so badly, they were useless. Cannons boomed from both sides, and the wall shook behind Oriel as it took more hits. Several fliers descended on another cannon farther down to fight for control.

Oriel dodged around it and threw a fireball at a powder man who had just panicked and tipped his sack of black powder. It exploded, and one of

the loaders screamed as his armor failed to fully protect him. Another simply collapsed. The mangled corpse of the powder man didn't look like a fairy anymore. Someone with a longbow aimed at Oriel but fell back when a blast from Roth hit them in the face.

Soldiers started abandoning the cannons to fight as more and more of Oriel's army made it onto the wall. Someone else with a ship to sacrifice rammed theirs right into the stonework, and the horned bull at the front impaled an idiot who had been too close.

In the next second, they were swarmed by a couple of dozen soldiers who rushed forward and tried to prevent more men from pouring onto Juniper's wall. Someone's lightning hit Oriel, and even with his protective armor trying to dull it, he still felt the jolt, although it wasn't enough to stop him.

Next to him, Roth, Kalen, Rhys, and others he didn't know cut, burned, and shocked their way through the army as more men from the ship with the bull prow came up their self-made bridge. Kalen was knocked flat by a hulking, armored fairy. He wasn't so tough a second later when Kalen's fire slipped through the slits in his visor. He reared back with a scream and ruined vision before Rhys drove his sword into a weak spot on his armor.

A flier dove into Roth from above, and they flipped on the walkway as both struggled to get the upper hand. The enemy stiffened a moment later as he was shocked, but he held on. Oriel grabbed him by the back of the neck and smashed his face into the crenellation. Metal clanged on stone as he screamed, and his visor bent inward. Enraged, Oriel smashed his face into the stone again and then another time for good measure before he dropped the body.

"Bastard."

Some of their soldiers had started pouring into the city itself. The fish markets were half-destroyed, empty stalls burned, and a tavern had already gone up on one side. Soldiers from both sides clashed in the streets, and an enormous group of Meadow Knights were cutting their way through a group.

Things would be a lot easier if they had mounts, but it's rather hard to keep horses from panicking on a ship during a battle, and forget getting them onto the wall. Oriel followed Rhys down a set of stairs as Kalen and Roth followed as they sent fire and lightning toward the group of Knights.

A horse bucked as it was shocked even though its armor prevented serious injury. His owner landed with a clank and was trampled a second later by one of his comrades who couldn't stop in time.

A warhorse who must have had nerves of steel ran for them, and it didn't stop or panic when Roth shocked it. Oriel sidestepped and brought his shield up in time to block the Knight's strike. In the second that he was open, Kalen yanked on his arm. The Knight tried to remain seated, and Kalen had to jump aside to avoid another Meadow Knight who rushed to help his comrade.

The distraction was still enough. Oriel rammed his sword into the side seam of armor on the first Knight and was rewarded with a pained cry. The Knight sent out an errant fireball, and his horse danced backward. Oriel yanked him down, blasted fire right into the slits of his visor, and yelled for Roth to take that horse.

Kalen and Rhys were fighting with the other, and Oriel ran to meet a different one. The new Knight reared his horse, and the dangerous hooves that were shod in steel flashed as Oriel leaped to one side and threw fire at the Knight who turned his head away just in time.

His sword crackled with lightning when it came around, and Oriel parried the strike. Lightning jolted the bastard as Roth charged it on his horse, and a second later, he had cut down the Knight.

Oriel took that horse, and it danced under him as if deciding whether or not to trust this new fairy or send him flying. Stealing a horse in a battle is often a gamble, but it paid off for him since the horse tossed its head and accepted him. Oriel whirled it around as more of his side started to converge on the remaining Knights.

Magic and steel clashed as horses neighed and men screamed. Oriel trampled a fallen Knight and didn't flinch at the sounds of armor and bones breaking. He was already focused on killing someone else. The Meadow Knights started to break apart as they were overwhelmed.

The battle was nowhere over. The docks had turned into pandemonium as Meadow tried to push them back, but more and more came over the walls. Oriel kicked his horse into a gallop to enter deeper into the city

He ignored a woman who ran by with a baby. She should have already fled ages ago if she lived that close to the wall. An enemy who seemed more interested in fleeing than fighting didn't last once Oriel's sword met

his back. A second later, he sent a fireball toward a flier and set a feathery wing ablaze. Wings were useful in battle, but they could be a hindrance too.

Down one street, he saw a group of what looked like slaves. As he came closer, they all had collars and some had ragged clothes. It was impossible to tell if any had once been his citizens or if they committed crimes. Some had managed to snatch something from a weapon, and a few were running to join a group of fighters. One bashed a Meadow soldier in the back of the head with her club, so Oriel figured they were on his side.

A few who didn't look like they'd be much good at fighting ran off down a side street.

Bit by bit, Oriel's side started eating through the city. The Meadow soldiers started retreating, and one group had formed a huge phalanx. It looked like it might hold until a flier went overhead with a container of flaming oil. When she dropped it, that caused a huge panic among several of the Meadow soldiers, and the flier remained above to throw more fire at them.

With Roth at his side, Oriel and other soldiers started to cut through it. A pike nearly took out his new mount, and he barely jerked it aside in time.

An East Forest Knight had found a golden unicorn somewhere and taken it for himself. Its shiny horn shined as it charged in and nearly cut the phalanx in half on its own with hardly any help from its new rider. Red gleamed on the horn a second later as it gored someone right through their armor. The phalanx started to break apart even more as the rare beast caused more panic than the flaming oil.

Roth attacked someone just before they managed to hit Oriel with an axe. He reared his mount, and the enemy, caught off guard by Roth's lightning and sword, didn't move in time. Hooves slammed into his plated chest and knocked him flat. Ahead, the unicorn kicked and brained some unfortunate who didn't move fast enough. He'd lost his rider somewhere but was still fighting on his own. Blood streaked his golden coat and mane.

The phalanx was a memory, and Oriel's side was cutting down the survivors. A bleeding, burned enemy who'd lost his helmet crawled along the ground with his right leg trailing. Both were useless once Oriel's horse ran him over.

He charged down the street and cut down anyone in his way with Roth at his side. He'd lost Kalen and Rhys somewhere in the mess.

Juniper was slowly eaten by the army. Fires raged to one side and sent out thick plumes of smoke. King Taven's Castle was about a mile ahead in the direction Oriel had gone, and it was protected by another wall.

That wall was choked with men ready to fight to the death, and they had cannons aimed out. Oriel told Roth they should head back because assaulting the Castle would take a concentrated effort. Two people running for it would be slaughtered pretty fast.

Fortunately, Kalen and Rhys were fine when they found them. Some soldiers had started gathering in a square since most of the city was overrun. Kalen said there was fighting on the west side, and one of his Commanders would bring those men over once they had finished off the people there.

They had lost men, but it had been a success so far. Bodies littered the street, and some soldiers were directing injured soldiers who could walk toward healers.

Oriel was grateful for the moment to rest, although he'd barely felt shit while fighting. The other, older men had been right when he'd trained in his youth. When it came down to it, instinct could take over. Some men broke, and others fought like that was their only purpose.

"Are you hurt?" asked Roth.

"Nothing more than bruises, and I'm sure I'll have a few sore muscles later. You?"

"Same thing." Roth took off his helmet and wiggled his fuzzy ears. Blood had splattered his armor.

Despite his helmet, Kalen had somehow gotten blood in his silver hair on one side, and he had to reassure Rhys that it certainly wasn't his. All had red smeared on them, and their mounts sweated from the exertion. Several soldiers came with stolen horses they snatched from stables since plenty of horses had been injured too badly to continue. Someone said if the fires grew any worse, they could let the smoke drive out King Taven.

"He might not even be here," Kalen grumbled.

"It's hard to tell if he'll fight or run considering his cowardly betrayal," said Oriel. "If he's here. I want him."

He'd spoken with Aspen the day before about how King Taven should die. Oriel had thought about hanging him with his intestines after some other things. King Taven had raped Aspen in the Hall and didn't deserve a

quick death. Aspen had his own idea about how he should die if possible, and Oriel had agreed.

A Commander approached and said they had taken prisoners.

“They’re to be kept alive for now,” said Kalen. “Oriel will look through them later and see if he can find someone to settle a score with. Gather citizens somewhere away from here, but keep them together. Don’t let anyone sneak off.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

As more joined them, people replaced helmets. Kalen and Oriel called out orders, and lords relayed them. Longbows were brought from the ships and handed out.

As one, they started to move toward the wall blocking off the Castle. The cannons would be pretty useless once they got too close, but the men would be a huge problem.

It seemed King Taven and his men weren’t above destroying parts of their own city. The cannons fired, and a few nearby businesses and homes had holes blown through the walls. Debris from a few skittered out into the streets, and someone’s mount in the front lines neighed as a chunk of stone from a wall nearly hit it.

As they drew closer, more fired as arrows flew. Magic came from both sides, and their longbowmen rushed forward to use some of the buildings as shields. Oriel shifted his grip on his longbow and nocked an arrow, although he didn’t pull back to conserve his strength.

Someone on the wall fell back with an arrow in their eye. The ground forces started focusing on those manning the cannons, and with everyone so close together, it was too easy to hit someone. A child probably could have made a kill as long as they could draw the bow.

Fliers went forth, and Oriel’s line drew closer. Their bowmen fired plain and magic arrows. A cannon fired, and a Knight and his mount went to Elira in the next moment. Oriel aimed his longbow, aimed, pulled back, and released. The man who had lit the cannon with his fire fell back after the arrow drove itself into his cheek.

Roth ducked in time to avoid a blast of green energy and sent out lightning. Some of the men on the wall started to panic. They were outnumbered, and the wall wouldn’t protect them forever.

Discord broke out as some screamed to hold their position. Oriel's side took advantage to hurry forward as they kept attacking. Oriel's horse screamed as an arrow hit its eye. It reared, and another hit its neck. Oriel knew he had to ditch it or risk being trapped under its weight when it fell. He jumped, and an arrow nearly missed his leg by an inch. Roth thrust out his hand, and Oriel grabbed it.

Roth's stolen mount would be slower with two, but they didn't have far to go. Everyone was crowding in, and men with hastily built ladders rushed forward.

The first went up, and the first soldier that tried his luck was hit with energy and knocked off. Another ignored his scream and started climbing. A second went up as the enemy was further thinned. Oriel took someone out with a fireball when they tried to hit the second ladder with an axe. Fliers swooped down to help.

"Now," said Roth.

They dismounted and ran for another ladder that was placed. Two soldiers barreled up ahead of them. More ladders thunked on the stonework, and some of the enemy started to retreat. Roth made it onto the wall, ducked, and swung his sword for someone who thought they'd do better in leather armor. Blood spurted as the man's knee buckled.

"Please-mercy-"

Oriel drove his sword into the soldier's throat and cut off his desperate pleas. His wide eyes meant nothing, and if given the chance, he'd have done the same to Roth or anyone.

Roth straightened, spun, and ran another man through as Oriel threw a fireball toward a clump. An arrow from the Castle yard nearly took him out, and Roth yanked him down.

More soldiers poured up the wall, and some made it over only to die seconds later from an arrow. Kalen had to duck as soon as he got up there, and so did Rhys. Oriel dared to peek over the crenellation to see swarms of men with longbows. Most of them had on light armor so they could run and move with better ease. Oriel sent a fireball into a cluster and made them scatter.

Roth popped up and treated a few to lightning, although they had to keep lowering their heads. Magic and arrows flew thick and fast, and a soldier near Oriel started screaming as an arrow drove itself into his chest.

“I want to go home. I want to go home. Elira-”

Another enemy arrow shut him up. Oriel blocked out the screams and pleas from those who were hit as he sent out more fire. Someone shouted to stay down on the ladder since the walkway was getting too crowded, and they were making the same mistake as the enemy had earlier. With them being clustered so close, it made it far easier for an arrow to find a mark.

Those who were near the stairs rushed down. More screams rose, but the longbowmen had to retreat or switch to swords as the numbers kept coming. Oriel and Roth made their way along the wall at a crouch.

The yard looked like a bloodbath when they went down the steps. Soldiers came from the Castle itself, and Oriel sent a fireball toward a window when he saw an arrow poke out. The Castle itself wasn't made for battle, but they were improvising, and King Taven wasn't ready to give up.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Oriel fought his way through the yard, and the longbowmen were quickly dispatched along with those who had rushed out to fight. Nobody could stop to rest as arrows and magic came from the windows and the roof. The yard had turned into a deathtrap, and some started to go around the side. Getting inside was the only goal now.

The doors were sturdy, but a few with axes were working on them. The first-floor windows were too high to reach from the ground, so the ladders were hauled up. Getting them through the crowded yard was another issue.

Arrows bounced off of shields, and Oriel went under the covering over the front door with Roth. Someone screamed a moment later and came hurtling down from the roof to land on the bottom step. The step won.

Oriel ignored the bone and armor crunching and snapping as the man was instantly killed. A ladder went up, and several soldiers rushed for the window. Glass shattered, screams rang out, and a couple disappeared inside. Oriel and Roth rushed for it next.

Blood sprayed Oriel across the face as soon as he entered the sitting room, and the soldier who had gone ahead collapsed with an open throat. Oriel shouted for Roth to watch out as he dropped and kicked. The big fairy grunted as his knee gave out, and Oriel swung a moment later.

Lighting and steel did the trick. A bookshelf clattered against the wall, and books fell off as one of their own was slammed into it by an enemy. Both were shocking each other and tensed with their muscles locked. Oriel ran forward and thrust his sword into the enemy's back. The other soldier collapsed to his knees with a grunt.

Steel clanged and lightning crackled from the hall, and Oriel knew other windows had been breached. Two went at it near the Hall doors, and Oriel raced to his left down the main entrance hall.

Within minutes the bottom floor of the Castle was overrun, the front doors were thrown open, and they started to work their way upstairs to kill

more and allow room for the rest trying to get in. Oriel picked a hall to fight his way through with Roth.

Oriel had just killed a soldier by a bookcase in a sitting room when he heard a creak, and something looped around his neck. Instinctively, he tried to make a fireball, but the wire cutting into his throat must have been lirek.

For a moment, all he could think about was the men in his privy room and the lack of air as they shoved his head under to collar him. He was jerked backward as he dropped his sword, and Roth's panicked face was the last thing he saw.

Something clicked as darkness swallowed him. He hadn't passed out yet although the wire had drawn blood, and the lirek restrained his magic. Something thumped against the bookshelf as Roth screamed for him.

"It's nothing personal," King Taven said as Oriel scrambled at his neck.

He wasn't supposed to get his far to be taken out by yet another cowardly sneak attack. He was supposed to come out alive with Roth and Aspen.

In a split second, he remembered Father telling him a trick if he was ever caught with something across his neck. It didn't matter if it was a bowstave, a garrote, or the flat of a sword. The trick wasn't to run forward because it only further cut off the victim's air. Panicking would waste what precious little air and time they had left, but most people's first instinct was to run from whatever was hurting them.

Oriel dug his boots into the rough ground and shoved himself back. Taven grunted as he hit the wall, and Oriel planted a boot on the opposite wall of the narrow passageway as he struggled to keep pushing back. The garrote loosened enough for him to suck in a breath. Taven tried to yank him sideways, and Oriel fumbled for his dagger.

He vaguely noticed a crack of light, and it grew bigger as whatever covering the peephole was ripped away entirely. As Oriel stabbed behind him with the dagger, purple lightning lit up the dank space a moment later.

Oriel grunted as the shock passed through him too with so much of Taven's body against his. Even the armor couldn't block all of such a blast from Roth, and he sagged for a moment which tightened the garrote even as he twisted the dagger.

Taven went limp behind him, and Oriel finally jerked forward as he gasped. The lirek fell away, and he lit up his other fist to see in case Taven

lunged again.

The King had fallen but was already struggling to his knees. He pulled his dagger since the space was far too narrow to properly use a sword, and lightning sparked. Without a second thought, Oriel smashed his boot into the man's face.

Taven roared as his nose spurted blood, and his weapon fell with a small clank. Oriel drove his boot into his face once more and heard his nose crunch that time. As Taven instinctively clutched at his face, Oriel lunged with both of his fists lit up.

"You fucking bastard!"

Father was dead because of him. He'd never get another piece of advice because of this man. He'd never practice with his brothers or try to beat them at drinking and miserably fail. He'd never hug Mother again and smell the familiar scent that she'd dabbed behind her ears every morning.

Every flaming punch made Taven grunt, and something clicked.

Roth was at his side in a second, and Taven screamed as he was jolted. Oriel snatched his hands back so he wasn't touching, and Taven went limp in the dim light.

"Are you all right?" asked Roth.

"Yeah..." Oriel breathed heavily as he tried to clear the rage from his mind. A quick death right now was too easy. He'd promised Aspen... unless...

He felt the limp man's pulse. It was still there although it was weak, so Roth's last attack hadn't killed him.

"I want him healed enough." Oriel stood and wiped at his throat as he kept one fist lit for light.

"I know. You're bleeding."

"I'll be fine. Your lightning saved me."

"I noticed a slight gap in the frame of that painting on the wall." Roth crushed him in a hug. "Thank Elira, you made it."

They dragged out Taven's body, and Roth got someone to fetch a healer. Most of the soldiers were still working their way up, and things were nearly done here.

Oriel plucked the garrote up by his wooden handle. Even though it wasn't affecting him now since he wasn't touching it, a lot of fairies weren't too thrilled to touch lirek or be around it. Oriel wound it around Taven's

throat as a makeshift collar and left it loose enough so it wouldn't choke him. Someone fetched rope to bind his wrists and ankles before a healer took care of his stab wounds.

At Oriel's command, she left the burns and his busted nose.

"I want him down in the Hall in front of everyone instead of hiding in a dark space like the rat that he is."

Taven was dragged off. Oriel sat in an armchair for a moment while a few soldiers went to check out the passage. The painting that Roth had torn away had tiny holes in the eyes.

"Are you sure you're alright?" asked Roth.

Oriel nodded. "I'll live. I'm surprised he tried to choke me."

"Better to draw you into that spot instead of coming out to fight two."

The narrow spot had been an advantage for Taven who must have assumed Oriel. He hadn't had armor on either which was a bit odd. A couple of soldiers returned from the passage and said the rest had gone on. So far, they had found a pack and discarded armor.

"I'm not sure why he would take it off," said the soldier.

Oriel tried to picture what he knew of the layout of this city so far. Taven must have been willing to stay and fight for a bit, but once he knew his end was quite close, he'd gone to hide and watch. The painting had provided a peephole, and by luck, Oriel came in here.

If Taven's remaining soldiers hadn't performed a miracle and pushed the opposition out, he would have escaped through the passageway.

"It probably runs down to the water somewhere," said Oriel. "Maybe he's got a little boat, and he took off his armor. If he had an accident in the water, the armor would be too heavy to swim in."

Sure enough, the other soldiers returned and said the passageway led out into a small area near the edge of Juniper. A little boat had been waiting, and since it wasn't anywhere near the ships, a single man could have easily escaped.

Oriel let out a bitter laugh. "That fucker would have gotten away if he hadn't tried to kill me at the last moment."

Bodies were being hauled out of the Castle, someone said they'd found the wife dead in her rooms. She'd swallowed something judging by the vial next to her. With her poor health, she must have been terrified of being imprisoned or mistreated. Oriel would have let her live in far better

conditions compared to what he'd been forced to deal with, but it wasn't like he could tell her that now.

Oriel couldn't go down to the Hall right away. They had prisoners to deal with, bodies to clear, and plenty of things to do now that they'd taken Juniper. Someone was already searching for the seal, and Oriel would use that if he could to take over the rest of Meadow with less bloodshed.

Orders had to be given so the Commanders could disperse men to deal with certain things. They'd be staying overnight at the very least. Prisoners were being taken from the Castle, and the servants were herded into one room to be watched over. The injured were dealt with, boats needed repair, and the enemy ships would be taken. Some also had to take a small ship out to let Aspen and the women know they had won. It was a good two hours before Oriel finally went into the Hall with several Commanders and Roth.

He'd taken off his armor for the time being, although he hadn't had a chance to bathe or clean up beyond washing his hands. Blood had seeped in and made patches although his clothes were dark. Roth followed him, and as sat at the High Table, Oriel glanced at him. Even with his red hair all messed up from his helmet, he was still gorgeous. Best of all, he was unhurt.

Oriel was starting to feel a little stiffness from fighting, tension, and being shocked a few times even with armor. He gazed down at Taven who had been forced to kneel in front of the High Table for ages. With wrists and ankles tied, he wasn't going anywhere, and the lirek garrot wound around his neck prevented any magic from him.

"It's a good thing you need something to channel your magic," said Oriel. "You might have gotten me good, although the rest of the army would have torn you to shreds unless you managed to escape in your little rowboat. You couldn't stay with your men and fight like one? I see your wife killed herself."

Taven said nothing.

"I learned something interesting," said Oriel. "We've got your servants and employees gathered up. You see, I don't plan on enslaving any of them, and if any of your children were alive today, I wouldn't sell them as slaves or allow them to be raped. Clearly, we don't see eye to eye on how the conquered should be treated. But your physician told me something

interesting. Usually, he administered all of Tenea's medicine, and she's been ill for a while, but she wasn't about to croak."

A muscle twitched in Taven's cheek.

"The physician said you took the medicine to give her today. He couldn't tell you no, and he thought you simply wanted a little extra time with her." Oriel raised an eyebrow.

"Well?" asked Roth.

"Did you kill your wife?" Oriel asked as Kalen and Rhys entered.

"It was better than letting the army get a hold of her." Taven noticed one of the soldiers behind him raising a fist. "Your Majesty."

"You better address him properly," the soldier grumbled.

"We don't let our men rape," said Kalen.

"Like I care what you say. You'd rather fuck your human-turned-fairy."

Kalen raised a hand at the soldier as he paused by Taven and a slight smile grew on his face. "I'd rather get in bed with him any day of the week. My husband is twice the man than plenty of fairies I've known."

"You think you have that much control over your men, Your Majesty?" asked Taven.

"We specifically commanded against it," Kalen said as he came toward the High Table with Rhys. "I'm sure some scumbag soldier has broken that, and I won't know if nobody saw or says anything. But if Rhys and I found any soldier that did such an act, he'd be executed for rape. I know plenty turn a blind eye in war to such atrocities, but we don't."

"Enemy or not, no one deserves that sort of treatment even if some would say it's simply a part of war." Rhys paused before he sat. "Even some humans would agree with me."

"You're guilty of murdering your wife," said Oriel. "I would have let her live and even given her some comforts since a sick woman who has done nothing is hardly worth killing. I wouldn't have had her raped and hung in a sitting room. You didn't give a fuck when your army got a hold of my Mother!" The last bit came out far louder and nastier than he intended. "I also wouldn't have raped your pleasure slave if you had one and left him to be used by my other men as if he was just a hole, you foul, fucking piece of shit."

He had to take a couple of seconds to breathe before he continued.

“You used to be a decent King, and that’s why my Father invited you. We thought you were honorable and worthy of doing business with. We had no idea you had allowed slavery. I guess that was right before you left, and you figured you could make a quick buck. Did you really just want the mines and the rest of West Bay’s resources?”

“Why do you think plenty of Kings go to war, Your Majesty?” asked Taven. “I’ve read a little about human rulers. They do the same. You’re young, and I doubt you think ahead.”

“We’ll see about that now that these two Kingdoms are mine. I would have been content with what I had if you hadn’t done this. We could have had peace, and if you were so worried about your wife being harmed, you should have thought of that before you betrayed my family, but I guess you were full of confidence especially since you had Queen Asara on your side.”

Something flickered in Taven’s face.

“Yes, I know what she planned,” said Oriel. “She wanted a few mines and a nice cut of West Bay. Gold is such a temptation to some, and if Kalen’s army fell, East Forest would have been open. Luckily, I have someone loyal who loves Roth and me, and when he suspected something, he came to find us. Her army split too. If they’ve made it back or sent a dove ahead, I’m sure she’s shitting her skirts by now.”

“We did business.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t use blood for that. Anyway, you also let Lord Delwin have me all for a stupid grudge. Did you know he abused his son?”

Taven’s eyes slid to Roth. “He’s a murderer. It was said the body of his Father was found stuffed under his bed, Your Majesty.”

“He attacked me,” said Roth. “He also deserved that for his treatment of Oriel.”

“If I could kill you once for each family member that I lost, and once for every person you’ve harmed, I would,” said Oriel. “Your greed brought you to this. Now, where’s the seal so I can take over the rest of Meadow and not cause more bloodshed?”

Taven snorted. “I think you know very well that I’m not telling you. Unlike you, I have no one you can use against me now. I have no pleasure slave or family at this point. If you put a dagger to dick, I won’t say a word. Go fight some more, *King*. I don’t care if you live or die or what happens to

my Kingdom at this point. I'm as good as dead, and I owe you nothing. I did what I wanted, and you've done what you wanted. I lost. You won."

Oriel pursed his lips. "True. Since the option of running away isn't feasible, I guess you're ready to put on a brave face, but I can make the rest of your life quite painful. Do you want to see how brave you are after a few hours in prison?"

"Ah, yes, you're the little savage who tortured a lord with a hot poker."

"He caused grievous harm to someone important to me."

"M'lord!" A guard raced into the Hall and approached the High Table with a clumsy bow. "We have the city gates closed, but there's a whole group of people shouting and chanting by it. They want in, and one demanded to speak to King Oriel if he's alive. If not you, then King Kalen or King Rhys."

Oriel squinted at him. "Who?"

The guard shrugged. "I don't know. He won't say who he is. The rest of the people keep shouting to free the slaves. We haven't attacked anyone, and some are armed, but they're not trying to hurt us. None have used any magic."

"We should go see before we do anything else," said Roth.

"All right."

As Oriel walked along the wall near the city gates with the others trailing after him, he guessed the group was about two thousand strong, and they kept yelling.

"Free the slaves! Free the slaves! Free the slaves!" A few spotted him, pointed, and the shouts grew louder. "FREE THE SLAVES! FREE THE SLAVES!"

If Oriel had never come today, he had a feeling these people would have marched in, planted themselves as close to the Castle as possible, and kept chanting. They probably would have gathered others along.

While some people were quite willing to purchase another fairy as soon as it was permitted, it made sense that others would never go for such a thing. Anyone who lost a family member to slavery would be highly against it too.

One man jumped up and down as he waved his arms and tried to shout over the racket. He shoved and shouldered his way to the gate. Oriel went down the nearby steps to find the man clutching the bars.

“Let me in. I’ve got something for you, King.”

Oriel squinted. “What? A dagger in my face? I don’t know who you are.”

“Do you think I’d be that stupid when you’ve got two other Kings and an entire army? I like living, thank you very much.” The man held up his fist and moved a finger so something gold showed.

“Let him in,” said Oriel.

The gate was lifted just enough so he could squeeze under. A few others tried to follow, but guards kept them back.

“I want my sister!” screamed a woman in a ragged dress. “All she did was steal a fucking loaf of bread!”

“Get back!”

“I’ll shove a loaf of bread up your ass if you don’t let me in to find her!”

The newcomer approached Oriel and held out his hand while others hovered in case he was dumb enough to try something. “You want this, don’t you?”

Oriel held his hand out, and the seal was dropped into his palm. The gold ring twinkled in the light as he stared at it before he lifted his gaze to the man. “How the fuck do you have this?”

The man narrowed his eyes. “King Taven-er, just Taven, I guess. He paid me to keep it. I mean, you’d never suspect such a thing, right? You’d tear the Castle apart for it and torture him, but he might not break. You need this to get the rest of the Kingdom and lords to fall in line with less trouble. This is my country too, and while I should have remained loyal to him, you’ll simply fight your way through. Meadow is yours either way. Taven forgot I might love my people a bit more than him. Some of the people in my village have lost family members to slavery over the stupidest of shit, so he can go fuck himself. Can I keep the pay he gave me? It was quite a lot.”

“Yes!” Oriel stared at the seal again. “Dear Elira, thank you. You’ve saved us a lot of time and effort.”

“Also, he promised me a holding later too for my great service.” The man rolled his eyes.

Oriel smiled. “For this, I’m sure I can find you something.”

It took a while to collect the slaves since some had hidden all over the city in fear that they’d be tossed right back into a cell to await their sale. Some had robbed others or committed crimes, although murderers and

rapists weren't permitted as slaves. Oriel wasn't about to hold petty theft against them.

When the gate opened and the newly freed ones who had family outside were allowed in, the crowd cheered as they rushed forward to those they had lost. Oriel was pretty sure he had just gained a huge amount of respect from the citizens of Meadow, but either way, he would have done it.

He knew some of the slaves had likely been forced to do disgusting things. They had been asked, names had been noted, and those who thought it was fine to rape and torture a slave wouldn't be left alive for much longer.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Aspen held Oriel's hand the next day as they stood on the Castle wall and watched the city trying to come back to life. The citizens had been freed from their temporary arrest to go back to their lives, and soldiers were still hauling out bodies. The ships were also being repaired which would take a bit. Some were beyond saving, but they could be stripped for wood and such.

"They found the man from that night," said Oriel. "The one with the scar. He was among the dead. I would have caught him so if you wanted to choose his death, you could."

"It's fine," said Aspen. "He's dead. I know you'd hunt every bastard to the edge of the realm if you could, but it's more important that he's gone."

"When I looked through the dead, I saw the man who raped me," Oriel said in a quiet voice. "His face was pretty burned from whoever attacked him, but I'm pretty sure it was him. The build and hair were the same. He's gone." He paused. "We won't get every single person who hurt us."

Aspen squeezed his hand and knew what he meant. The sailors on the ship during that week might have taken jobs on different boats and could be anywhere. Not all who committed such atrocities were brought to justice.

"Taven will die like you wanted, so that's one more erased," Oriel added.

"I don't want to watch," said Aspen. "I've seen enough."

"I know. Roth and I will make sure it's finished, okay?"

"Okay."

Aspen knew a pissed crown can be savage, but he didn't want the details. He'd seen enough violence, and he didn't want to lay eyes on the King. He'd asked Oriel to let the families of the slaves have him. Oriel had Aspen had gotten revenge on those who had hurt him, but those families wouldn't. To him, it seemed fair to let Taven face his end with those people.

They'd make his final hours hurt.

When Oriel and Roth returned, they said it was done. The people who killed Taggart had made it last longer, but the families of the enslaved had

grown too violent after a few hours. Still, Aspen was satisfied that Taven was dead.

Things still weren't quite over just yet.

They had claimed a set of guestrooms as their own to sleep in, and Aspen sat on the couch while Roth claimed an armchair. Oriel paced in front of the fire.

"The splintered part of her army will return before us," said Oriel. "They haven't seen Aspen, and she might imagine he's dead somewhere, or maybe he was never able to leave the Windswept Isles. Even with that, she'll still know that I know what happened. She might run, and we won't get there soon enough."

"She barely has an army now compared to us," said Roth.

"The only thing we can do is go there," said Oriel. "Kalen and Rhys said they'll come with us, and Kalani will too. If Asara tries to fight us, we'll kick her ass. If she runs, I'll take control of the Windswept Isles, let her treachery be known, and have her hunted down."

More time on the ship. Aspen's stomach still tightened at the thought, and his face must have shown something since Oriel sat on the couch.

"Do you want to stay here? This is another long trip, and we'll be coming back this way for good."

Aspen shook his head. "I'd rather stay with you. What the fuck am I supposed to do here by myself? I'll end up in a bottle again. I'd rather see this through to the end with you."

Repair on the ships that could be fixed in a decent amount of time didn't stop as the men worked in shifts. Taven's fleets had been decent, but many had been destroyed. They had fewer men now too, but extra had to bunk together when they finally left since they'd lost so many ships.

When they were about three days from their location, it was nighttime when Roth tried to pry Aspen out of the cabin.

"You haven't been outside much this week."

"I don't see a problem with that. Besides, it's chillier now."

"Come on."

"No. Stop being a bad kitty."

Roth narrowed his eyes. "I'll drag you out and up to the crow's nest."

Aspen raised an eyebrow. "Why would we go up there?"

"The view would be pretty good."

“Or kitty just feels like climbing something.” Aspen sat up on the bed. “Fine.”

Oriel came in. “Hey, Kalen and Rhys are going to the Raindrop. One of his Commanders was acting like he can clean us out at cards. Rhys wants to prove him wrong. Aspen, I know you’d probably rather not, but you are welcome, and you too, Roth.”

Aspen had felt the ships slow a little and the grappling hooks a few minutes ago, so he knew someone had wanted to talk. “Thanks, but I’m not going over there.”

“I’m taking Aspen up to the crow’s nest,” said Roth. “Don’t come back stupid if you drink.”

Oriel smirked. “I’m not letting whiskey dull my brains. Those East Forest fairies play a mean game of cards, and they’d kick my ass if I get stupid. Kalen and Rhys aren’t big drinkers either.”

Oriel left, and Aspen and Roth went on the deck with their cloaks on since it would be cooler up in the crow’s nest with the wind.

“Won’t someone be up there on their watch?” asked Aspen.

“I chased him off already,” said Roth. “He can go elsewhere. Besides, the rest of the ships have men on watch, and I doubt we’re about to crash into anything out in the open water.”

They had a ladder to use to go up, but the sailors said that was the landlubber’s way, and no self-respecting sailor would use it. Aspen didn’t like being so high and was glad he’d never tried to be a sailor in his youth. He couldn’t imagine climbing around the rigging.

He felt better once he was in the crow’s nest with Roth. It was sort of like being in a big wooden wash tub minus the water. With the fleets spread out and in neat, even intervals to keep order while they sailed at night, it was rather pretty. Little lights twinkled here and there, and he could faintly make out the froth in the wake with the moon out. Occasionally, he could make out little figures or someone holding a lantern on farther ships.

“How do they climb the rigging in the dark like that? A ladder’s bad enough.” Aspen knew sails had to be managed whether it was day or night as the wind shifted.

“They’re so used to it, they could probably manage it blindfolded in the dead of night,” said Roth.

It was cooler up high with the wind blowing, and Aspen pressed himself against Roth who slung an arm around him.

“Hey, what happened to that gold unicorn that Oriel mentioned? Did a soldier catch it?”

“No, I think someone said it ran away. They couldn’t find it later.”

That was better. Such a pretty, rare animal should be running free and not used like a warhorse.

“Do you know the constellations?” Aspen asked as he glanced at the stars. One was supposed to be some mythical unicorn, but he could see pictures. Stars just looked like a bunch of dots to him. “I don’t.”

“No, I never paid much attention to that sort of thing,” said Roth. “Kalani would surely know. You should ask her or one of the ladies.”

“I’ll rather miss them later.” Aspen figured once this was over, and Oriel paid them for what they’d done, they’d go back to sailing on the open seas once more. Hopefully, they’d skip the piracy and not kidnap guys.

“Oriel’s not jealous, is he?”

Roth snorted. “No, Aspen. He’s not jealous. We’re all together, but all three of us don’t need to do every single thing together.”

With Roth’s slim body in his arms, and his familiar blackberry smell, Aspen felt safe even though he was so high. He started wondering what would happen when they truly returned to wherever home would be. Oriel hadn’t picked a place to live, but at some point, they’d be settled.

They’d been sleeping in the same cabin, and Aspen sometimes remained in the bed all night. A couple of times he’d sat with Kalen or Rhys, who had all kinds of human stories. He knew Oriel and Roth probably fucked each other’s brains out when they had a little time alone.

“What if I don’t want to have sex for a while?” he blurted.

“You don’t have to have sex with either of us,” said Roth. “It’s not a requirement to be in this relationship.”

“But I might want to do something later.”

“Then you can.”

“What the fuck are we supposed to do on our wedding night? Oriel wants to marry us both. I’m sure he’s not going to want to wait that long, but I might not be ready to do that. Sex is usually pretty important in marriage.”

Roth stroked the side of his head. "Our marriage is more about us being together, not who has sex when or how. Consummating doesn't make the marriage void or anything like that, and neither of us would ever make you do anything you don't want. I would rather like it if we could at least keep this since you let me touch you."

Aspen did enjoy the touch, but he wondered about something else. "What if I just wanted to watch you two?"

"Hmm, I would like that."

"You don't do that kink of yours every time, right?"

"No, it would get old," said Roth. "I like the...surprise of it."

The idea had crept Aspen out before, but it wasn't the same since both parties wanted it. He imagined it would be more like watching rough sex with one dominating the other since Oriel wouldn't truly harm Roth.

"And if I ever wanted to join someday?"

"I'd like that too, but don't rush to make decisions now. Take it as we go depending on how you feel."

"If you don't do the rough stuff all of the time, does that mean that the kitty has a soft side?"

He felt the vibration of Roth's chuckle in his chest. "Yes, I do."

Aspen hadn't kissed anyone in a long time, and he wondered what that would feel like with someone else besides Oriel. Roth wouldn't take it as a message to keep going and escalate things. Aspen could try it and feel safe that nothing *more* would happen.

He shifted and tipped his head up a little. Roth met his lips, and while he put his other arm around Aspen, his hands didn't wander down. His tongue teased Aspen's lips, and he parted them slightly to allow him in.

It was different from kissing Oriel, but still nice. Aspen let himself relax in his arms, and he reached up to find a furry ear and scratch around the base. Roth made a faint noise of pleasure,

Aspen's stomach tightened at the sudden boom of fifty cannons going off, and it seemed to drop entirely when the crow's nest shook. Roth pulled his head away and swore while he practically crushed Aspen to his body as if trying to protect him from something.

The crow's nest was tipping, and shouts came from below. At that moment, multiple cannons from other ships fired, and panicked yells rang out. In the next second, Aspen was strangely weightless despite Roth's grip.

For a moment, he knew nothing as pure terror and panic blanketed his mind.

Freezing cold water snapped him back when he hit it. Roth was gone, something slammed his back, and a sharp pain ran along the lower part. He couldn't tell if he was upside down or not. Dark, murky water surrounded him, and he tasted nothing but salt as he kicked. Where the fuck was Roth?

Vaguely, he realized the mast must have been directly hit, and the cannons hadn't all been aimed at the hull with the intent to only sink the ship as fast as possible.

Something brushed his arms, and he grabbed at it in desperation.

It had to be one of Roth's arms. Aspen was sure he saw light above him, and he kicked as he tried to go up. Roth's body dragged on his, and he used one arm to paddle while he clutched with his other. His sodden cloak was a weight, and he fumbled at the clasp for a moment. Luckily, it loosened and fell away with little effort.

He kicked and struggled for the surface as he dragged Roth unwilling to let him go even though he was sure he wouldn't make it. His lungs felt ready to burst, and his muscles burned. The cold water would drag him down with Roth where the ocean would hide them forever.

His head broke the surface, and he gasped as he kicked and tried to haul Roth's limp body up too. A piece of wood floated nearby. Surely, Elira had nudged it that way, knowing he'd need it. He grabbed ahold of it and tried to adjust his grip on Roth as his arms trembled. More cannons boomed, and the smell of black powder was already thick as screams and shouts pierced the night.

To his right, Elira's Grace was a mess. The mainmast and mizzenmast had collapsed, the rigging was in tatters, and the sails flapped and twisted uselessly in the wind like enormous, ghostly figures. The galley must have been hit, and that's why a fire had caught. In the moonlight, he was sure the cabins where the royalty slept were a splintered memory.

Roth's head lolled against his shoulder as Aspen struggled to get an arm hooked on the wood enough so he could lean Roth against it.

"Roth! Wake up!"

What if he was dead? A piece of wood must have hit him, but Aspen couldn't tell if he was bleeding or seriously hurt. His muscles burned as he tried to heave Roth's upper body more onto the wood, and he clung on the

best he could while supporting the other fairy. The wood wasn't big enough for them both to climb on, and he felt for Roth's neck.

He still had a steady pulse, but they were trapped in the dark waters while the entire fleet fought around them.

The hundred-gun ship had been reloading while Aspen worried about getting himself and Roth situated. They were probably dots in the water and unnoticeable as the current dragged and tugged on them. A hundred cannonballs went over ahead and crashed into Elira's Grace.

They were mostly aimed for the hull that time to sink it. Aspen tried to cover Roth's head, and he turned his own. If a chunk flew their way... Screams were drowned out, and Aspen had never known the sound of cannonballs crashing into a hull could be so loud.

He dared to look. The hull was so battered now, the whole ship was listing, and it was lower in the water. In minutes, it would be gone. The men on it must have surely been abandoning ship and trying to get lifeboats down. Oriel, Kalen, and Rhys were on the Raindrop which was about forty yards away on the starboard side of Elira's Grace. It would be an open target with Elira's Grace sinking.

All around them, the neat formation they'd been in earlier was falling apart from what Aspen could tell. Behind Elira's Grace, Ymir's Love started to move up. Aspen wasn't sure if he should try to kick and pick a direction to go, not that he'd get anywhere fast. Maybe staying still was better for now.

Roth shifted slightly and grunted. Aspen tightened his arm. "Don't move yet."

The portside guns on Ymir's Love fired as it continued forward. Elira's Grace was a lost cause, and Ymir's Love rammed into the wreckage to push it out of the way so it could use itself as a shield for the Raindrop. The one that had attacked was fired from another ship that Aspen couldn't see. Far out, he saw two lifeboats inching by.

Despite the panic in his gut, it clicked. The split before Kalen's army met up with Asara's ships had been a fake, and it had fooled all of them. No one had ever planned to attack Oriel's side during the war on Meadow. The small group that had returned to Asara had duped them. The much larger portion had been planning to wait until much later to betray Oriel.

Asara had used them so they'd help take care of Taven and his army, leaving the way for West Bay and Meadow open for her to take.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Oriel’s already lost half of his playing money,” Kalen said. “Maybe he should cut his losses because I think he’s about to lose some more.”

A Commander snorted as Oriel scowled at his current cards.

“What was that earlier?” asked Rhys. “Something about West Bay showing East Forest how it’s done?”

“I think there was something about taking all of our money too,” said Commander.

“But oddly, I have more money now than when I started,” Kalen said with a small smile.

Oriel internally cursed the cards he held. “I will win all of your money... in a few minutes.”

“Suuuuure.” The Commander threw back the last of the whiskey in his glass.

Oriel was about to say something else, but he forgot it when he heard multiple cannons go off.

“What the fuck?” Rhys swore as he dropped his cards.

Oriel knew what happened before they ran out onto the deck. The soldiers and sailors were already jumping into action, and his heart nearly stopped when he squinted in the dark.

Elira’s Grace had been hit, and those on board were in a panic as they tried to prepare to fight back. A ship on the other side, manned by Windswept Isle fairies, had fired on them. The mainmast had been hit hard enough to crack it, and it was tipping over.

Aspen and Roth were probably still in the crow’s nest at the top.

He tried to tell himself that they’d seen something suspicious and came down. Maybe they didn’t go up at all. Somehow, they had to be safe.

Lifeboats were prepped to be lowered in case their ship was going to go down. All around, ships fired upon each other as confusion and panic spread. Elira’s Grace was soon ready to go down after a hundred

cannonballs pummeled the hull. The Raindrop's cannons were prepped, but firing would only hurt their own.

It was clear the fairies who had claimed to be against Asara's treachery were liars.

Tracking lightning came somewhere, and a sailor screamed as he was hit. A flier took off from the rigging above Oriel, and he tackled another flier in midair. They spun for a moment as fire, and the enemy that had gone for the Raindrop went down into the ocean with a scream.

Ymir's Love used its bulk to shove the wreckage of Elira's Grace out of the way as it pulled up to protect the Raindrop. Oriel left Kalen and Rhys to give orders while he ran for a lifeboat.

"Lower this down, and get four men to row," he told a sailor.

"We're not sinki-"

"Do it! Roth and Aspen might be in the water!"

Rhys noticed him climbing in with four other sailors and darted over. "What are you doing?"

"Roth and Aspen were in the crow's nest, and they might be in the water. Stay here with Kalen. We're protected on all sides at the moment."

His heart hammered as the lifeboat was lowered into the choppy water. The sailors undid the ropes on either end and started paddling. One looked ready to shit himself, but Oriel figured they were actually quite safe like this. Down in the water, they'd be hard to make out, and the enemy would likely think they were common soldiers. It'd be difficult to fire upon them, and why waste ball and powder when the bigger ships were a problem and far easier to aim at?

Ymir's Love had kept steady to protect the Raindrop, and the sailors slowly inched the lifeboat toward the wreckage of Elira's Grace. A few lifeboats had made it down, and they were overcrowded, but trying to make their way to the Raindrop.

"Where's Roth and Aspen!" Oriel bellowed at the fairies in the closest one.

"I don't know!"

"They went up into the crow's nest!" another bellowed.

Fuck. The impact in the water might have killed them. If not, Aspen could swim, and he was sure Roth could too, but there was no guarantee.

They had gone around the wreckage of Elira's Grace when they saw a fairy drop into the water from the destroyed chunk that was still floating, and he started paddling toward a floating piece of wood. A female sailor on it shouted for him. Oriel had their boat go to them to pick them up.

A nearby ship fired on Ymir's Love but missed. Tracking lightning went overhead, and he saw flames erupt farther out as a boat was set on fire. Lightning and fire went back and forth as people tried to fight hand-to-hand.

"Get away! Get the fuck away from us!"

Oriel squinted in the dark as he frantically looked for Aspen. That had definitely been his voice. He spotted the dark shape of a lifeboat lit only by someone's fire. A ball of it flashed out and fizzled as it hit the water, but the second of light allowed him to catch the shape of someone clinging onto a piece of wood and a glint of red hair.

"That way!" Oriel stood and threw fire toward the lifeboat.

The idiots on it had been too busy trying to kill the two survivors they'd found, and they must have spotted Roth's red hair. Or perhaps Aspen had shouted, and one of Asara's men had remembered his voice. One screamed as fire hit him right in the face. Oriel tried his luck again and sent out another.

It missed, but lightning hit one of the men who had stood. In the light of someone's fire, the standing fairy jerked and stiffened before he wobbled. The lifeboat rocked, and Oriel's next fireball hit the side.

The shocked fairy tipped back and damn near flipped the lifeboat. It was enough to knock another enemy out, and Oriel's lifeboat drew close enough for him to put out his hand.

"Take Roth," shouted Aspen.

A sailor threw fire at the last enemy in the lifeboat, and he fell out with a splash. Oriel grabbed Roth and heaved him up. He was moving, but something didn't seem right. One of the sailors helped to get him in, and Aspen grabbed Oriel's forearm so he could be pulled up.

"For Elira's sake, I thought you were both dead."

Aspen shivered. "I think something hit Roth's head. I'm okay. Mostly."

The sailors started paddling. The enemy in the lifeboat must have come from a sunk ship, and they'd seen an easy target. Oriel huddled in the center of the lifeboat with the four they'd rescued.

“Roth? Can you hear me?”

“I’m a healer,” said the one who had dropped off the ship to swim to the wood. “Find where he’s hurt.”

Oriel lit his fist. Roth was pale, and red glinted near his temple where something had hit and cut him. Oriel’s gut clenched at the sight. The healer didn’t hesitate to touch that spot, and the wound slowly receded.

“Thanks,” Oriel said shakily. “Roth? Can you hear me?”

“He’s probably disoriented,” said the healer. “He’ll need a minute.”

Roth shifted a bit as Aspen spoke. “He managed to shock that one fairy. They were trying to knock us off the wood. I couldn’t hold on to him and the wood and reach for my dagger. I didn’t know what to do because I’m not strong enough to swim and keep him up.”

He sounded like he was about to panic despite that particular danger being over with. Oriel wrapped his free arm around Aspen.

“You saved him, and you’re safe now. That’s all that counts.”

Ships were still fighting, and Oriel noticed lights out in the distance. Some had pulled away from the mass, and he wasn’t entirely sure if they were the enemy, or if some of their own had fallen back in an effort to save themselves and get out of the confusion. He couldn’t tell if those particular ones had been damaged either. A great cracking sound came from his left as the sailors paddled as fast as they could, and Roth tried to sit up.

“Kitty lives,” he mumbled. “I’m fucking freezing.”

Oriel could feel how cold they both were from the damn water, and he let out a shaky sound as Roth wrapped his arms around Oriel.

“Thank Elira. I thought I’d lost you both.”

“Aspen saved me. I don’t remember hitting the water.”

They made it back to the Raindrop without a problem. It hadn’t been hit, and Ymir’s Love had taken out another ship that tried firing that way. Several fliers swooped overhead in the moonlight, although Oriel couldn’t tell if they were friends or foes.

Aspen stumbled on the deck. “My fucking back.”

Roth grabbed his hand. “Where’s the healer?”

Oriel lifted the back of Aspen’s shirt to reveal a dark slash across his skin. He ordered the healer to follow them into the cabins. Kalen and Rhys were fine, and a flier landed on the deck with a thump near Kalen. He

probably wanted orders, but Oriel was more worried about his two future husbands.

“This ship's protected enough on all sides,” Oriel said in a rush as they entered the cabin.

“They must have thought all of the royalty was on Elira’s Grace,” Aspen said as he dripped on the floor. Roth looked fine, although both were shivering.

“Can you let the healer touch you?” asked Oriel. “I can’t tell how deep that is, but it’s bleeding.”

Aspen’s face tightened as he grabbed Oriel’s hand and turned his back to the healer to lift his shirt again. “Yeah. I stopped feeling it. After something hit me, I got us to the surface, but I forgot it was there.”

“Panic does funny things,” the healer murmured before he touched it with his finger. It glowed, and he slowly moved it along to heal the cut. “The cold probably helped numb it a bit too. There you go. Not even a scar.”

“Anything else?” asked Oriel, and Aspen shook his head. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Roth?”

He was already tugging off his shirt. “I’m just cold now.”

“I think they aimed higher and tried to hit the cabins,” Aspen said through clenched teeth as the healer left. “They must have thought we’d all be in for the night.”

“Asara wants both Kingdoms. You need to change.”

Aspen grabbed some clothes from an open chest. “I’ll get changed in another cabin.”

Oriel almost didn’t want to let him leave since he’d just gotten them back, and they weren’t safe yet. He grabbed the blanket from the bed to wrap around Roth. He had no idea who was using this cabin, and they were going to have to get over it if they found their blanket wet later.

“Who sleeps in here?” Roth sat on the edge of the bed and hunched over a bit.

“I have no idea.” Oriel dug through the open chest and pulled out some more clothes. “They’re bigger than you, but that’ll have to do.”

Thankfully, they'd packed their armor on a different ship since the cabins were kind of small. They had planned to get what they needed before landing on the Windswept Isles, and Oriel hoped that ship hadn't been sent to the bottom.

He flung the clothes on the bed. "Here. I have to go see what's happening."

"I'll be out in a bit."

Oriel raced outside. He almost wished he could fly too so that he could help fight, but he also didn't want to leave the others here. The Raindrop was still safe with the ships that had formed a barrier around them. He spotted a lifeboat with a lantern in the choppy water. The fighting seemed to have wound down on this side although cannons were still firing much farther away from the port side.

Fire, lightning, and energy flashed too, and occasionally, he caught a scream that sounded high and thin from the distance.

The formation they'd had that night was long gone, and some ships started moving to get around and help where there was still fighting. Kalen ordered a flier to pass a message. They wanted thirty to form a circle around the area. With lifeboats, they were to search the edges for survivors that might have helplessly drifted farther out while clinging to something.

Other ships started to send out lifeboats too, but Oriel knew plenty had already been lost from their side. Injured soldiers and sailors might die or grow too exhausted if they were struggling to swim and keep their head above water.

It took another forty minutes for the fighting to completely stop. Wreckage bobbed in the water, ships listed, and shouts sometimes reached his ears as searchers paddled around.

It took even longer to try and pull together what was left. Half of the fleet had been lost. Some of Asara's boats had been salvaged from fairies who flew down to fight on the decks and stop them. Survivors were taken aboard, and plenty of enemies found in the water were killed upon being found.

Oriel and Kalen weren't heartless, so any of the collected dead from Asara's army were placed aside to be later buried in the Windswept Isles. While Asara was a traitor, and no soldiers had spoken up against her,

families in the Windswept Isles would want their members back to properly bury.

He knew the army “splitting” had been fake. They had done a good job and even fooled Kalani and her women. They had planned all along to bring Meadow down, and then take out the new Kings along with Kalen and Rhys. Asara was probably already gloating over her territory. With fishing and mining, her wealth and power would massively increase. Oriel sat on a crate by the railing and leaned forward to cradle his head in his hands.

“All of this for money and power. I meant nothing to her. Father meant nothing. My brothers, my Mother. We didn’t mean shit in the long run. She’d take everything and forget about us. Her own blood was raped and tortured, and she just doesn’t fucking give a shit. I know I wasn’t close to her while growing up, but...”

Aspen rubbed his shoulder, wordlessly offering comfort, and Oriel grabbed his hand to press it against his face. Asara had tried to take everything he had left, including Roth and Aspen.

“She’ll pay.” Roth sat next to him on the crate to wrap an arm around him.

By the time the sun rose, no one had gone to bed. A wide circle had been formed around them, and lifeboats were still combing through wreckage and debris. Sailors worked the pumps on ships that had taken water to try and salvage them. The healers performed what they did best. Bodies were all collected on two ships and separated according to where they came from to make it easier later. Sailors did repairs, and some boats would have to be towed since their masts and sails were destroyed.

Kalani and her crew had made it through unscathed and helped to find survivors. They also had dealt some damage because the enemy had ignored the whore’s boat and forgotten that they had cannons too.

It was midmorning before Kalen said they could finally get some sleep. The ships they had left were more crowded now since so many had been wrecked. A cabin was given to them on the Raindrop, and Aspen didn’t even complain that Kalen and Rhys would be in the small space with them. There were two beds, so they’d make it work. As soon as Oriel and Roth lay down, Aspen nestled between them.

“You saved me.” Roth kissed his temple.

“You saved me too because you held onto me when we fell.”

“And Oriel saved you both,” Rhys said sleepily from the other bed that he and Kalen had claimed.

Oriel lay awake for a while even though he was exhausted. Aspen turned over in his sleep and snuggled closer to Roth. Oriel almost couldn't believe how far these two had come in their relationship. Aspen had treated Roth like an unwanted pest at first, and now he was cuddling up to him. Roth's unending patience with the initial, cold dislike had certainly helped with that.

Asara would rather tear it all apart.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Oriel was sure the size of the depleted fleet had wrecked the enemy's morale.

The coast of the main Island, Wind's Respite, was in the distance, and he could barely make out Harpsen. Asara had left her remaining fleet stationed to block the way. No doubt, a dove had already been released to warn her because it was clear Oriel and Kalen's side had won, and the coming ships flew East Forest flags.

A white flag went up, and since a lifeboat was being lowered, it was clear someone wanted to talk. Oriel gave the order to have a lifeboat prepped so he could meet them, and Roth would go.

"I'll come too," said Aspen. "Give me a crossbow that I can channel with."

"You don't have to." Oriel was rather surprised that Aspen had come out on deck at all considering all of the strange men about.

"If we're all going to rule, I need to try and do stuff too."

"You can also stay behind too if you'd prefer it."

"Well, I don't."

Aspen probably would rather go hide in the cabin and be alone if he couldn't be with them in there, but he kept himself planted in front of Oriel.

"I don't want to be a leech," Aspen mumbled.

"Has that been bothering you? You saved Roth from drowning quite recently, and you came a long way to get us. You're hardly a leech."

"Still, I want to come."

"Okay, but you're not a leech, and you never have been." Oriel kissed the side of his temple.

Aspen didn't look too comfortable with the heavy crossbow he'd been given, but he didn't complain. Ones to channel magic were always made from metal. They all had weapons, and Oriel stayed near the prow of the boat as it went to meet the other side.

A Commander in magnificent sky-blue armor stood in the lifeboat and didn't seem to have a weapon, although Oriel had no idea what sort of magic he had. He called out a greeting as they neared. Oriel returned it and kept his expression hard.

"You can call me Domal," said the Commander. "I'm sure you've destroyed most of Asara's army."

"We have prisoners," said Oriel. "But many died too."

Domal glanced back at what was left of Asara's army. If Oriel gave the order, they wouldn't last too long in a fight. "I'd rather surrender if possible. We were following our Queen's orders as any soldier should do."

"I've been trying to protect those I love and our army as a good King would do," said Oriel. "Asara's betrayal made that far more difficult."

Domal's shoulder sagged. "We won't win if we keep following her orders. There are good men on our ships." He jerked his thumb behind him. "They have spouses and children. Siblings. Parents. We didn't decide to enter this war or to betray you. That was Asara. I'm asking you to let us surrender and live so that we can end this now, and some people on Windswept Isles can see those men again. It's unloyal of me, but we've already lost, and I'd prefer to spare lives."

Oriel gripped the hilt of his sword. Asara was the root, and this band of leftovers wasn't going to get revenge for her.

"Very well. You'll be left alive as long as you follow orders. You will take your ships further out and let us surround you. One wrong move, and you'll be fired upon from all sides."

"Done."

"Did she really think that she could defeat us so easily with what's left? Did she make no plans in case we lived through that betrayal and continued?"

"I-I don't know," said Domal. "She doesn't tell us her plans. She gave us orders and what we needed to know to carry them out. I don't know of any contingency plans. I'm assuming she's at home now, but I could be quite wrong."

"Does she have another country on her side? If we land and head up there, is there an army waiting for us?" Ships could have come from the opposite side of Wind's Respite.

Domal shook his head. "I know of no such thing."

Oriel narrowed his eyes. Domal appeared honest, but some people were excellent liars. Asara had fooled him, but maybe Domal truly knew of nothing. She might have simply put too much confidence in her plans and didn't create a decent backup to salvage her position and life.

Perhaps she was ready to meet death since she'd made a huge gamble and lost.

"We'll tell you when you can dock," said Oriel.

"Are we really going to simply go up there, deal with her, and be done with this?" Aspen asked as the rowers took them back. "It seems too... easy."

Oriel glanced toward land. "I don't have a good feeling."

"Go with your gut," said Roth.

Oriel certainly wasn't marching in there alone.

Asara's remaining boats were rounded up farther out and surrounded on all sides. The enemy gave up their weapons as a show of good faith. Of course, they had their magic, but Oriel had a feeling any coming trouble wouldn't be from them.

The rest of the army headed for land, and some of the citizens ran from the docks. Some had to have guessed something when part of Asara's army returned, and they must have been terrified that an enormous group of armed soldiers was ready to wreak havoc on them.

Oriel didn't care to harm the innocent citizens. The streets had partially emptied, and braver ones that were out stayed away as the army went through. Aspen had agreed to come for this too with his crossbow, and one ship with horses had been saved.

The way to the Castle was clear. A flock of diggy doo birds close to the road ran away on their chubby legs as their multicolored feathers flashed different colors in the sun. They certainly weren't about to fight for Asara.

Asara's Castle wasn't even manned. The gate was wide open, and not a single guard stood by to keep out riff-raff from wandering in. A chuckle chickie clung to the bars of the gate and wiggled its yellow tail feathers.

"Teehee," it giggled.

It almost seemed to be mocking them as if it knew something was up. Asara had to know that they were coming. She was either quite eager to die with dignity and no heroic last-ditch efforts to save herself, she had fled, or she had something up her silken sleeve.

“I have a bad feeling,” Kalani said from farther back.

Oriel ordered the Castle to be surrounded, the wall to be manned, and anyway in or out guarded. The back garden had to be searched, and archers aimed their bows at the windows. Others were ready with magic.

The Castle looked quiet. The stable had been abandoned except for the horses who snorted at the newcomers. It had been checked, and Oriel walked through. He remembered Asara mentioned her new, beautiful grey horse in passing, and sure enough, a fine, grey mount fit for a Queen was in a stall.

“We’ll check inside,” said Oriel.

“And if she’s not there, we’ll start looking elsewhere,” said Kalen.

The Isles had plenty of places to hide, and one only needed a small boat to get around on days like this when the weather was chilly but still fine. Oriel felt warm enough in his clothes and armor.

A large group approached the front. Three soldiers went ahead to open the doors while two others with flaming arrows were ready. Nothing came from inside, so they moved in.

One gave a quick whistle as he looked in Hall, and the rest of Oriel’s chosen group entered.

In the Hall, Asara sat at the High Table. Oriel entered first with his sword drawn and a shield, but she didn’t try to attack him. She merely sat like a Queen. Not a hair was out of place, and her deep blue dress was immaculate as she trained her purple eyes on her cousin.

Standing by the side of the High Table to her right was a fairy dressed in plain trousers and a loose linen shirt. His silver hair needed a good combing, and his expression said he wasn’t there of his own will.

“You’ve lost,” said Oriel.

“I know,” she said.

Oriel’s eyes scanned the Hall. “Are you going to threaten a commoner to make me back down? Are you willing to go that low? Was it really worth betraying your own blood?”

Asara’s eyes darkened. “I saw an opportunity to better things for myself and my people.”

He stared at her, too lost for words for a moment. “Gold was more important than a living, breathing fairy?”

“I worked with King Taven and knew what he planned to do,” she said. “The original plan was to marry him.”

Oriel raised his eyebrows. “You were going to marry that bastard?”

Asara sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. “I didn’t have much choice. We would have joined our Kingdoms and ourselves. His wife was sickly, and he...perhaps he planned to help her along toward her death. Either way, there were notes before he betrayed your Father. If I said no and refused to marry him later, he would have come after the Windswept Isles once everything was settled and he’d had time to ‘mourn’ his wife. You know my army did not match his, and while we are experienced with the sea, I wouldn’t have won. He only viewed me as a way to get more land after taking West Bay.”

“And you just didn’t mention that?” asked Oriel. “Did you forget that when I first got here?”

“It’s all true, and I decided to take it all,” said Asara. “With him dead, I could have West Bay and Meadow to myself. I’m not the first King or Queen to take more. You are family, but we’re not that close. Honestly, besides what your Father told me about his children, I barely knew you. If your Father had escaped and stood before me, then yes, I think I would have fully aided him with no betrayal.”

The words cut like a knife even though she was right. They weren’t close, but he thought he would have mattered enough. They were still family, but she’d been able to distance herself from him in that manner and view him as a bump on the road to the throne.

The silver-haired fairy cast her a dirty look.

Oriel slowly approached the High Table although his eyes kept snapping to the silver-haired fairy. Something was up with him, although he couldn’t figure it out. “Let the commoner go.”

“I like them,” said Asara. “They can stay, and I think they’d rather remain.”

The fairy kept their eyes on Oriel like they were trying to say something else as they kept their arms folded. Their pinky twitched near their sleeve, and Oriel caught the barest hint of something under the loose fabric. A knife? A dagger? Did they have some kind of ability with weapons?

“Elira despises selfish ones like you,” said Oriel.

“Perhaps one day you’ll see something you want, and you’ll see how it will better your people in the long run.”

Oriel snorted. “I’m not selfish like that. My Father didn’t raise me to be a warmonger.”

“Neither did mine. If you’re expecting me to grovel and give you a true apology. You’re mistaken. I’ve got this far, and I know you’ll kill me.”

Oriel heard the rest of the soldiers coming closer. The fairy standing on the dais involuntarily took a step back. Asara could throw fire like Oriel, so were they simply a hostage? Why hadn’t she at least tied them up? Perhaps they were one of the fairies who could heal but had no way to fight with magic.

“So what now?” asked Oriel. “Are you going to come quietly?”

“I prefer living.” Asara looked over. “Wren, no tricks or your husband dies.”

Wren cast a desperate look between Oriel and Asara as they slipped something long and thin from their sleeve.

Oriel understood perfectly. It was a custom here for parents to take their babies to a cove and thank the Goddess for their blessing. Elira granted some babies a musical instrument with simple, harmless abilities.

Oriel shouted for everyone to retreat. Wren’s hands shook as they brought the flute to their lips and started to play. It was already too late. The clear notes had an instant effect on everyone.

Not that Oriel noticed them for long. The room blurred, and everyone grew indistinguishable as his cares slid away. He should remain where he was at. It was fine. No harm would come from not doing anything.

“Oriel?” came a familiar voice. “What the fuck are you all doing?!”

Chapter Thirty

Aspen backed up a step from the group. Everyone had paused, and some started dropping their weapons. Oriel seemed to be looking at nothing. It was like everyone in the room had forgotten what they were supposed to be doing.

“Oriel? What the fuck are you doing?!”

The fairy with the flute. It was their fault. One of them damn fairies that were gifted with a musical instrument had been granted one that could cause real harm. Aspen had no idea why he wasn’t affected, but at least he could fight back.

The notes changed ever so slightly as they cast their eyes about the room and looked toward Asara. Aspen channeled his fire into his crossbow, hefted it, tried to aim, fired, and missed like an idiot since Wren jumped aside at the last second while they kept playing.

Aspen shouted as he ran forward, ready to swing his burning hot weapon into the bastard’s face. Wren’s eyes widened as they jogged backward and skipped a note. Vaguely, Aspen noticed that Asara jerked in her chair.

“Get her!” Wren nearly fell off of the dais as they started playing again.

The Queen stood with no expression and started walking toward Aspen. Wren suddenly bolted past Aspen who froze with indecision for a second. Them or her?

He swung.

The burning metal stock slammed into the Queen’s face, and she dropped like a rag doll. Aspen swung it down, smashed it into her skull once more, and took off after Wren.

Everyone had parted for Wren like water, although no one was reaching for their weapons. A few mumbled something as Aspen took off after the flute player.

“Get back here, you little freak! What the fuck did you do to them?”

Wren was already racing up the stairs with their flute, and Aspen followed. He could span his crossbow with the hook on his belt, but it

would take too long. Still, whatever that bastard was doing, Aspen wasn't about to let them get away.

Wren started playing their flute down a hall, and they skidded to a stop outside of a door. They gave Aspen a desperate look just before the door opened.

Two men came out with faintly puzzled expressions and followed Wren who walked backward down the hall. Behind them, Aspen spotted a pair of glass doors that led out onto a little balcony. Wren only paused to throw them open, and the men seemed to snap out of their spell for a moment, but Wren picked the music back up and led them out.

When Wren came in again, they locked the glass doors, let the notes keep coming, and hauled ass for the open room.

What the fuck?

Aspen crept forward while the men seemed to come to their senses. With the distance and the glass between them, they probably couldn't hear if Wren had continued playing. Aspen peeked in and saw a guy on the floor who had been bound and gagged.

"Keep them away if they bust the glass!" Wren pulled away the gag and started undoing the ropes.

"What's going on?" the guy asked. "Did they kill her?"

"No, but we have to go."

"What the fuck?!" yelled Aspen. "I'm not doing anything you say! You made everyone go all funny downstairs."

"I didn't kill the army like Asara wanted," shouted Wren. "You owe me."

Wren managed to loosen the ropes while the two guards tugged and yanked on the locked doors. One drew his boot back. Aspen didn't know if he could trust the two in the room, and the silver-haired fairy was pretty powerful with that flute.

Glass shattered. The other guy, free at last, let his spouse take him on their back, and Aspen suddenly noticed his trouser leg was half-empty on one side and pinned up.

"Go downstairs, and keep your damn flute to yourself!" snarled Aspen.

"Gladly." Wren hurried by.

"Thanks," said the other guy.

The guards were using the hilts of their weapons to clear away more glass so they could climb through without hurting themselves. Aspen turned to run as they came through, and he channeled fire into the crossbow to warm it.

Wren wasn't going nearly as fast as Aspen wanted, but then again, they were carrying someone.

"How about if you move a little bit fucking faster!" shouted Aspen. "This thing's not loaded."

Footsteps pounded down the hall. They had barely reached the landing when a man roared, and Aspen saw one of the men lunge from the corner of his eyes. His heart pounded as he swung the blazing stock to parry the flaming sword. The collision made his arms ache, and the man started to draw back his weapon again.

A fireball hit him in the face. He roared and stepped back to instinctively grab it. His buddy came up behind him and raised a hand, but lightning hit him a second later.

"Aspen! Go!"

Oriel and Roth had come looking for him. Aspen hurried down the stairs after Wren and their husband, but Wren paused near the bottom. Half of the army was glaring daggers at them, and Aspen also shot the fairy a pissed look.

"If you reach for that flute, I'll slug you!" His arms ached from carrying the crossbow and hitting with it. He certainly wasn't fit for serious fighting in that regard.

"I betrayed her, not you!" exclaimed Wren. "I know it looked bad, but I needed everyone to relax. I left you out."

"Huh?"

"I didn't control you because you were closer and had a crossbow. I was hoping you'd hit the Queen and not shoot it at me!"

Aspen's face burned. "You were the one controlling everyone and seemed like the most dangerous person in the Hall at that point."

Oriel and Roth came down the stairs, so those two guards must have been dead. Kalen ordered several men to go up and make sure the place was clear.

"You have some explaining to do," said Oriel. "But first..."

Asara was still alive, but she didn't look too good. Parts of her face and scalp were burned, and Aspen wrinkled his nose at the smell of scorched hair. Blood ran down her face and neck.

Oriel looked down at her. "Good Elira, Aspen."

"Sorry-"

"You're sorry?!"

"I think you wanted to be the one to take her down, but I slugged her."

"I'm more glad that you're okay. I'm not mad that you walloped her."

"My arms hurt."

Wren explained how they and their husband got into such a predicament. They lived in Elira's Rest on another nearby island with their family. Wren's ability with their flute wasn't exactly a secret, but it wasn't something they bragged about either. Still, Asara must have heard of them at some point.

Before, nobody had ever bothered Wren or made demands of them.

Soldiers busted into Wren's home one early morning to take the whole family. Even their little sister, Nariel, had been snatched, and they were all currently in the local prison. When Oriel heard that, he told several men to go release them.

Asara wanted Wren to control Oriel and everyone else when the army came so they would drop dead drop dead. Wren could do some things like making people follow or dance, and causing them to instantly croak wasn't on the list.

But they could lure the whole army into the ocean to drown.

Asara used Wren's husband, Aiden, as leverage. His leg had been amputated below the knee after an accident as a child, and he used a prosthetic piece now. Asara took that away and threatened to have her men beat him.

If Wren still didn't comply, Aiden would have been killed in the room upstairs. Asara said the men would know it was her and not harm Aiden if she came later and used a special knock. If anybody else came in or tried to save him, the men would have slit Aiden's throat.

She also offered Wren many things such as the title of Earl, all of the money they could possibly want, and a huge Castle for their whole family. She said terrible things about Oriel and tried to convince Wren that killing

him wasn't such a bad thing. Besides, they should be loyal to their Queen, and the chance to do such a great service was rare.

"I pretended to be convinced bit by bit," said Wren. "If I kept refusing, she would have hurt Aiden and my family. I even tried to haggle for a better holding like I was really going to do this, and she agreed. She shouldn't have trusted me."

Aiden, sitting on the High Table, shook his head. "Letting them have their flute back was her first mistake."

"Exactly," they said. "I just had to wait until you got here. I made you stop, and I left Aspen out because he had the crossbow and was closer."

"And...I shot at you instead of Asara," mumbled Aspen. "Sorry."

"But he took care of her pretty well since I made her get up and come toward him," said Wren. "I didn't use my flute too hard on the rest of you because it can leave people rather messed up for a couple of hours, but I needed to get to Aiden, so I made you all move and stay there to buy me a few minutes just in case."

"That's a really strange instrument you've got," said Aspen.

"I didn't think anybody has ever received something like that," said Oriel. "Or at least not that I know of."

Wren looked away. "I guess the Goddess trusted me. She knew I wasn't going to be an outlaw with it."

"She must have been desperate," said Roth. "No offense to you Wren, but using you like that was like sticking your hand in a snake den. She should have known there was a chance you'd betray her even with all of the grand stuff she offered."

"But maybe she was hoping you'd kill me first and ask questions later if I betrayed her," said Wren. "I was a dangerous option, but I might have also done it for the materialistic stuff. I pretended like the idea of being an Earl was quite tempting. I even asked about finding a higher-up for Nariel to marry when she's an adult."

"But Wren's not like that, and I don't care to be a lord," said Aiden. "I like our life in Elira's Rest."

"I thought my cousin wouldn't be like this either," said Oriel.

Someone had put a lirek collar around her neck, tied her wrists and ankles, and healed her enough so she wouldn't end up dying right there on

the floor. The area was being secured, and as far as Wren knew, she had no last-minute tricks up her sleeve.

They had been her last resort, and it had failed.

Someone found Aiden's prosthetic upstairs, and he was nearly done with strapping it on when Rhys came closer to the dais.

"Hello, fellow human," Aiden said as Wren chuckled and boosted himself up onto the High Table to sit. "Well, we're not human anymore."

Rhys's eyes grew wide. "You were human?"

"Yeah, but I met this fine fairy while I was living in Emaray," said Aiden. "Long story."

"I kidnapped him," Wren said with a completely straight face. "And I forced him to marry me."

"I went along with it because they've got a great ass." Aiden tried to keep a straight face too, but he ended up laughing.

Rhys chuckled. "Technically, someone else really did kidnap me for Kalen. That's also kind of a long story."

"I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

Aspen left them to walk around the High Table. Oriel was standing over his cousin's body with his arms folded.

"I kind of want to stab her," Oriel said as Roth joined them. "Or chop off her fucking head and stick it on a spike. But I think I'll have a healer bring her around and simply hang her on a short rope. I want this to be done and over with."

It took a while to get things organized. They had to bring in the rest of the army, what was left of Asara's, and gather the citizens. Instead of building a gallows, they picked a good tree in the woods on the way, and Oriel said he planned to leave her body there to rot. Later, she would be buried in a common grave, and she wouldn't get the honor of being placed in the tomb for rulers.

Aspen thought it was fitting for scum like her. It was a savage way to go, but Oriel also wouldn't be forcing people to see and smell a corpse. Once Oriel stood in front of the citizens on a crate so those farther back could see him better, they seemed to understand and agree.

The story of Wren and their family's treatment had already spread like fire. Wren stood with them to one side. Fortunately, everyone was fine, and Asara hadn't harmed any of them since Wren had agreed to obey her. The

Mother took the daughter away once Oriel stopped speaking, apparently not wanting her to see a hanging. Aspen didn't blame her.

He wanted to see it. This war would be truly over with her dead. Asara was brought out, and the healer had fixed her so she was completely aware of everything, although they hadn't cleaned her up.

The people stared as she was hauled over to the tree by two men. Some started to throw insults like traitor Queen. Aspen heard the word greedy more than once.

"He's your cousin!"

"You hurt your own too!"

"Greedy bitch!"

Asara's face was completely stoic while she stood on the crate, and the noose was placed around her neck. With the collar and her hands tied behind her, she was completely helpless. Her eyes flicked to Wren and settled on Aspen.

"You would have gladly watched me die from poison!" he shouted. "Fuck you!"

Oriel's face was like stone as the men backed up. He marched over and lifted his boot. Something seemed to snap in the Queen's eyes with death looming.

"Wait! Oriel-"

He ignored her and kicked the crate out from under her feet. She went limp and immediately started kicking as if that would somehow help her. The rope was strong and looped over a sturdy branch, so she wasn't going anywhere. She cast her desperate eyes at the crowd, but no one rushed forward to help her, and no one appeared to have any sympathy.

Roth watched her with folded arms. The Queen twisted a bit and begged Oriel for mercy with her eyes, but he simply held her gaze.

It takes a while to die on a short rope. It probably felt like an eternity to her. Her movements grew weaker and soon stopped which meant she was unconscious but not quite dead. Her face was red, and Aspen finally looked away. Roth put his arm around him.

Once a Commander pronounced her dead, Aspen didn't feel relief or particularly better. Technically, everything was over, but none of them would forget it, and they'd all bear various physical and mental scars for life.

They had dinner in the Castle that evening. Higher-ups and Commanders ate inside, soldiers slotted themselves wherever, and the rest stayed outside. Oriel kept the Hall cleared so they could have some peace, although he invited Wren and their family to eat with them.

Aspen had never seen a little girl eat so much food in one sitting. Nariel packed two full plates down as if she had a hollow leg to fill. Afterward, she sat on Wren's lap and picked from their plate while occasionally snatching bits from Aiden's.

The atmosphere was somehow lighter because the war was finally over. It was heavier because the betrayal stung, and Oriel was obviously feeling it the most.

"I don't want this Kingdom," he said once they were nearly done. "Technically, I am the King of the Windswept Isles now since there's no one else, so I can do what I want. Kalani, how do you feel about trading the title of Captain for Queen?"

She nearly choked on her wine. "Me? I barely fought in this war. I came in here to stick with you in the final bit, but not for a reward."

"You got Aspen off of this island, and I know things between you were a bit rough, but you saved his life. You got him south to me. You also let him stay on your ship where he felt safe." Oriel tilted his head. "You can still be a sailor, but I think you'd be a good Queen. This is a Kingdom built around boats and fishing. You surely know people and could increase trade. You could build the army back up. I know it would be in good hands. Besides, if you agree to be Queen, who can tell you that you're not allowed to step foot on a ship again?"

Kalani thought for a moment. "Maybe, but I'd have to talk this over with my girls first."

Oriel nodded. "All right. Remember, you could give jobs to whoever you think is best. If you have a particularly good fighter, she could train soldiers. That sort of thing."

"All right. Er, thank you, Oriel. I appreciate that."

"Is there anything else you want?"

She squinted and sighed. "Yes. I've fallen madly in love with you and need a King by my side." Her sad expression fell away as she laughed, and the table joined in.

“You almost had me going for a second there,” said Oriel. “But no thanks.”

“Aspen and I would get jealous,” said Roth.

They decided to stay for a bit. The ships needed repairs, men needed rest, and they had to restock. While Kalani could probably navigate a ship and kick a man’s ass at the same time while blindfolded, taking over a Kingdom was a different matter. Oriel helped her with that, and they found the treasury was lower. Asara had planned to boost it up.

With careful management, Kalani would be able to increase it while taking care of the citizens. Aspen thought she’d make a good Queen. Her ladies were fine with it, and plenty were staying since they’d have jobs and important roles. A few preferred life on the sea, so Kalani appointed one to be the new Captain and gave her the ship as a gift.

The men were also supposed to be resting and relaxing to destress a bit, but not all could. Kalen and Rhys decided to take their men and head home. They’d been away for a while, and they had their own Kingdom to take care of. Plus, their soldiers missed their families.

Aspen shook their hands on the docks the morning they were leaving and realized he’d miss them, and not just because they’d helped with the war.

Kalen and Oriel both wanted to visit.

“It’d be nice to see more of East Forest and not quickly leave with an army at our side,” said Oriel.

“It’d also be nice to visit West Bay without fighting,” said Kalen.

“Thank you for aiding me,” said Oriel. “I don’t know if Asara lied about the supposed debt with Nemyr or not, but I’m thinking she did. It’s possible he might not have wanted you to know that he’d had an accident since you were young, but I’m thinking she lied. I didn’t even think to ask before she died.”

Kalen spread his hands. “She probably did lie, but I don’t regret it. You’ll be a better ruler than Taven, and you were able to avenge those who needed it.”

“If she wasn’t lying, then the Valentines can say they always pay their debts,” said Rhys.

“If you ever need anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask,” said Oriel.

After a few last words, Aspen stood with Roth and Oriel on the deck as the ships moved away.

“I’ll miss them,” said Roth. “They’re good people.”

Destressing also involved a bit more than sitting around on one’s arse. Aspen was sure plenty of the soldiers were spending coin at the local whorehouses or making friends for a night at the nearest tavern.

Aspen had a talk with Oriel about something he wanted to try. Oriel had said they could work it out, but only if he was fully all right with it. He seemed to think that maybe it wasn’t a good idea, but Aspen had thought long and hard about this. It wasn’t done on a random whim, and doing or not doing something was his choice as long he wasn’t harming anyone else.

Aspen knew Roth was fine, and he’d mentioned it. Aspen could go as far as he wanted or change his mind entirely and not do it. There wouldn’t be any hard feelings between the three of them if he decided to leave the room, and they’d still love each other.

Aspen knew the scars of the past months weren’t anywhere near gone, but some part of him still wanted to try to participate to a point and see how he felt. It wouldn’t be fair if those dead bastards that had hurt him stole away something he’d once enjoyed. They were dead, and no one should have that kind of power over him. It was his body, his mind, and the two men he loved most would be his husbands.

He took a deep breath and opened the door one morning. The sitting room was a bit bare since these rooms were for guests. Oriel hadn’t wanted Asara’s. He quietly opened the bedroom door and had to remind himself it wasn’t real.

Oriel said Roth always fought and got excitement from being pinned and tied up. Oriel had tied his wrists, gagged him, and blindfolded him. He also said that for this session, he’d use a strip of leather around Roth’s balls to pull them down and away from his body. It would help to keep him from cumming too fast.

From what Aspen could see of Roth’s face, he was flushed. He also still struggling a bit, but Oriel held him down and fucked him with long, hard strokes. The knife at Roth’s throat was probably a good reminder to not fight too much.

Oriel said nothing as Aspen quietly shut the door since Roth wasn’t supposed to know anything just yet. He’d known that Aspen would join someday, but not which one and that was it, so it’d be a surprise to him.

Aspen knew the cat fairy could snap his fingers, and the whole thing would stop. It was completely safe, and no one was being harmed. It wasn't like things that had happened...before.

He approached the bed and nodded to Oriel. He was still okay with this. As he crawled onto the bed, Roth flinched a bit as he felt the movement from another.

"See?" Oriel grabbed a good handful of Roth's hair and partially withdrew his cock. "I told you I'd invite others to watch while I destroy your tight little ass."

He slammed himself back in, and Roth made a sound like he was about cum right there.

Oriel ground his hips against the fairy's ass and put the knife to his throat. "Maybe once they're done watching, they'll take a turn. I know a slut like you loves having your ass used over and over again."

Aspen watched, partially amazed at how both excited and fearful Roth seemed as he squirmed. He only stilled when the knife made a thin red line on the side of his neck.

"Maybe we'll put a cage on your cock and keep you tied up at all times. It'll be interesting to see how many loads your ass can hold."

Roth whimpered as Oriel gave him another hard thrust.

Aspen's cock was already like a post. As a whore, he'd rarely ever gotten to do what he wanted, and as a pleasure slave, he'd always been the one to be tied up, gagged, and whipped. He'd been okay with that, but he'd rarely ever gotten to indulge his dominant streak.

He'd always enjoyed the few times he got to tie up someone or fuck them. Oriel had let Aspen hold him down and pound his ass the first time they'd done it in the forest. While he wasn't about to do any actual fucking, he'd decided he was okay with this so far, and he wanted to feel Roth's mouth on him. It would extend the fantasy for the cat fairy too.

Aspen pulled out his erect cock and shifted closer. If it was too much, he could stop. He grasped the sides of Roth's head which made him squeal, and he brushed the wet tip across his cheek.

"He looks nice, all tied up and helpless," said Aspen. "His face is almost as red as his hair. I think he likes having his ass ravaged."

Roth made a negative sound as Aspen loosened the gag.

"Wait-no," Roth said once he could speak. "Please-"

Aspen slipped his cock in. "Shit."

It was so warm, and despite his pleas, Roth's tongue eagerly slithered along the underside like he'd been aching to taste it. Aspen fisted his hair and thrust. Roth choked but took the whole length in his throat.

"He takes it just like a whore."

"I told you so." Oriel fucked Roth slowly as he dragged the knife down Roth's back. He tensed and squirmed when a little nick appeared.

Aspen kept Roth's airway cut off while Oriel put the blade to his throat. "You're just a pair of holes, so you better do a good job while you suck off my friend."

Aspen pulled back, and Roth gasped. He almost wanted to take off the blindfold and have Roth look him in the eye while his mouth was stuffed, but it was better like this, and he seemed to love the idea of "friends" using and sharing him.

He guided the pace as he held Roth's hair and moaned at the sensation of his tongue lapping and gliding along the underside.

"He licks just like a good kitty."

Oriel picked up the pace and made another scratch on Roth's back to make him grunt. Aspen waited until the knife was pulled away before he leaned forward. Oriel kissed him, and Aspen closed his eyes to savor it while he worked his hips to keep the cat fairy's mouth full.

"Let's put him on his side," said Oriel.

Aspen pulled out, and he gave Oriel a look. Oriel withdrew himself and while being careful with Roth under him, he shifted and leaned forward so he could take Aspen in his mouth.

"Fuck." It was almost like being back in the woods again. Oriel sucked and licked while he looked up. Dear Elira, how could he go from being dominant to submissive in a blink like that.

"I want to blow in the whore's mouth," said Aspen.

"No! Dear Elira, I'll do anything--"

"Shut up, whore." Oriel pulled Roth onto his side and spooned against him. "You probably wish we'd keep you and use your ass all day."

"No!"

"Don't deny it."

Roth moaned as his erect cock bobbed. Oriel took off the leather strip from around his balls and flung it aside before he stuffed his fingers in

Roth's ass.

"You're going to cum for us just like a good little slut, and you're going to clench around my cock." Oriel pulled out his fingers and started working his dick in.

"Please don't hurt me."

"Are you going to do what I say?"

"Yes..."

"It's not like you have a choice anyway."

Oriel grabbed Roth's leg to hold it up. Aspen, on his knees with his dick still out, watched Oriel's cock disappear. Roth's dick oozed pre-cum even though he tried to pull away.

"Suck my friend off and do something useful with your mouth."

Aspen scooted over on his knees and let his dick brush Roth's lips.

"That's it," Oriel whispered as he kept Roth's leg up and thrust in his ass. "Give him what he wants, and don't make me use the knife again."

Roth whimpered as he opened his mouth.

"Do a good job," Oriel ordered, watching him bob his head.

Aspen dared to grab Roth's cock, and smear the pre-cum around before he started stroking. Roth jerked his hips as he lavished Aspen's cock with attention.

"Let's make the little slut squeal." Oriel sounded breathless like he was near the edge.

Shit. Aspen was too, and as he stroked Roth's cock, he felt his own nuts tighten. With the way Roth was sucking and working his tongue, there was no way he'd be able to hold back for much longer.

"Fuck."

He spilled all over Roth's tongue and gave a few vigorous thrusts. For a few moments, it was absolute bliss as his hips tensed, and he kept spurting. As the pleasure ebbed, Roth groaned as he started to finish, and Aspen felt his warm cum hit his wrist as he jerked him.

The sight of Roth finishing with his lips wrapped around Aspen's cock wasn't something he'd forget anytime soon. It grew too sensitive so he slipped out. Oriel swore and must have been feeling him clench. A little of Aspen's cum had dribbled down Roth's chin, and he squirmed as another rope of cum spurted from his cock while Aspen stroked him.

Oriel buried his face in Roth's shoulder as he thrust and came. "What are you?"

"Your whore," Roth said in a strained voice.

Aspen stilled his hand since Roth seemed done. Oriel pumped himself in and out a few last times and paused before he gave Roth a little bite on his shoulder. He grunted as Roth smirked.

"I'm just making sure I got every last bit out."

Oriel kissed his neck. "You're greedy for the cream, huh?"

Aspen lay on the bed while Oriel untied Roth. Once the blindfold came off, Aspen looked over to see Roth smile at him. He'd already healed the nicks, and he inched over to wrap an arm around Aspen and whisper in his ear.

"Kitty liked the cream."

Aspen snorted. "You were a good kitty."

Oriel spooned against Roth's back. "Are you okay, Aspen?"

"Yeah." He noticed Oriel lifted his head to look at him. "I enjoyed it. If I'm not fine later, I'll tell you."

He wanted some time to process it on his own later before he did anything else sexual with them again. He still didn't want to penetrate either or be penetrated, but at the moment, he felt fine with this. He'd take things at his own pace.

He knew one thing for sure.

All of those bastards hadn't taken away his ability to enjoy a sexual activity that should be beautiful and special with loved ones. He'd felt safe, and it showed that Roth trusted him too.

He could also have touch, just like he still craved.

Epilogue

Home was with Aspen and Roth, but since they needed a place to stay, Oriel picked Qualquetty. Aspen and Roth liked it too. The Castle was quite large, and they'd talked about getting it renovated later, but at the moment, they were enjoying the peace of being settled and not having a court.

On the day of the Spring Equinox, they stood in front of the altar in the Temple at midday. Oriel couldn't see the crystal on the roof from inside, but he knew it was there and soaking up the sun's rays.

The High Mage chanted in a low voice as he asked Elira to bless their reign and allow them to rule with a fair hand. On the altar sat three crowns with amethysts set in them. The middle was the original, and the second was nearly as old. The third crown had been made for Roth since this was the first time West Bay would have three Kings.

The maker of the first two had also made the crowns for the rulers of the Glasswood Kingdom back in ancient times when the Goddess Elira still came to visit her children. It was why they had the same design because the man, whose name was lost long to history, had wanted to remind them of something.

The King had great power, but he also had enormous responsibility. Sometimes, the bearer of the crown also had great losses.

The High Mage finished chanting and came around the altar. He picked up the oldest crown and set it on Oriel's head. The gold thorny vine that was a part of the design didn't cut his skin, but the little pricks on his scalp reminded him of Father explaining why the crown had been designed in such a way.

Being the King wasn't all glamor and riches. Some rulers were lucky to keep everything for their whole lives and have peace. Others had to fight. They might fail, and it could be stolen from them because sometimes, the King's position looked pretty good to others, or another ruler might want his land and power.

The crown could be a heavy, painful burden.

Once Roth and Aspen were wearing their crowns, the High Mage stepped back. “May Elira watch over you. Pray that she makes your words fair and your hand light.”

The other Mages went ahead to the wide steps and stood at the sides. Oriel glanced up at the painted ceiling that showed the ocean before they turned around and headed to the steps. The streets were packed, and the noise started to rise as they drew closer. At the top, they paused while the people cheered.

West Bay had the rightful heir once more and two other Kings. The burden had been heavy, and Oriel would feel it for a long time. He’d always thought he’d be one of those lucky Kings to have nothing but peace back when he was young and thought he’d always be safe. He’d also imagined that when he took the crown, his parents and brothers would be alive to see it. The lack of them made his throat tighten even though he plastered on a smile for the crowd and waved like Roth and Aspen were doing.

Oriel would feel many burdens for a long time, but he wasn’t alone. The two that had shouldered it with him stood on either side. If anything happened again, he knew they’d remain at his side.

It took a while for the crowd to calm down a little. Someone with light circles far off to their left started setting them off, and purple smoke gushed out above the crowd. The new Kings retreated to leave by the side entrance where their carriage awaited.

Their wedding would come in a few months once summer rolled around. All three had been so busy, they hadn’t done the coronation until spring. It was more of a formality, but it needed to be done.

Oriel had felt a bit guilty about doing something celebratory after a war. Plenty of Kings did so, but he knew plenty of citizens had lost loved ones. His own grief over his family certainly hadn’t gone away either. They didn’t even have a court at their new Castle, so why have a party with three people.

Aspen had suggested that they pay for food and wine to be delivered to the city. Let them drink and eat themselves silly if they wanted. Whoever wanted it would be happy, and the Kings could celebrate in their own way.

“Almost done,” Oriel later told Roth as he tied his long red hair back for him. “I can’t believe I’m a King now, and I still have to sneak out like a damn kid.”

“That almost makes it more fun,” Aspen said from the couch. Behind him on a bookshelf, the three soft bears that Oriel had salvaged from the attic sat and watched them.

Oriel knew damn well that if they rode out today, they’d have people following in their excitement. He still put on his trousers one leg at a time, and so did Roth and Aspen, but they’d act like Elira herself was riding by since it was their Coronation Day.

The excitement would die down as normal life took over, the citizens here would grow used to them, and they could go out without having a bunch of people trying to gawp at them, but he wasn’t waiting. None of them felt like having a stupidly big dinner by themselves in the Castle, and new memories were waiting to be made here.

Aspen already had his black hair tied back, his cloak on, and his hood up. A servant had said the basket would be in the stables. Oriel made sure Roth’s hair was hidden with his hood, and he went into the closet room to grab his cloak.

Mother’s shawl was folded on a shelf, and it had already lost her smell, but he touched the soft fabric for a moment before he grabbed his cloak. He’d never found Father’s sword, but he told himself to focus on what he did have today.

He could have lost far more than items.

When they rode out, the city was celebrating, and it was rather hard to get through on their horses. They’d used plain saddles, and with their borrowed clothes, they didn’t look very fancy. Hardly anyone paid them any mind. Oriel didn’t need to hide since the guards wouldn’t forbid him from leaving if they realized who he was. This time, Aspen held him from behind when they rode through, and they had a third at their side.

Oriel kicked the horse into a gallop, and Roth’s followed alongside. The wide roads that wound through grassy fields for a bit led to the beach. Oriel wouldn’t go to the old ones, but he could make new memories here with the two most important men in his life.

The grass gave way to sand, and the horses carried them parallel to the water for a while since they wanted to be far away from the city itself. Aspen tightened his grip on Oriel as he looked out.

Roth pushed his hood back. “This is nice. Maybe we should do this for our wedding too. We don’t need to bring a court or have a big meal, and

who's going to say otherwise?"

"True," said Oriel. "Peace and quiet is nice too."

Partly, Oriel hadn't bothered with a court so Aspen wouldn't feel so uncomfortable. He'd done all right with the coronation, but he still preferred being around only them two in general. Beyond that, it was easier to keep the place empty.

The past months hadn't been easy for them. On some days, Oriel didn't feel like faking a smile for people who didn't really care that much about him.

They picked a good spot and tethered the horses out in the grass before they headed back to the sandy area. Oriel fell back a step as he loosened the laces on his sleeves, undid his belt, and removed his cloak clasp.

Roth and Aspen paused slightly ahead as they seemed to be looking at the water. Oriel let his cloak drop and already had his shirt buttons undone before he spoke.

"Last one in is a rotten egg."

Aspen turned to find him already half-naked, and his mouth dropped. "You're cheating again!"

"Did you think I wouldn't?!"

Aspen and Roth were still trying to get off their clothes when Oriel ran butt naked for the water.

"His ass is still pale enough to be seen in the East Forest Kingdom," he heard Aspen say. "Kalen and Rhys are probably blinded by now!"

Oriel snorted as he made it into the water and went out until it reached his shoulders. He reached to scratch behind his shoulder, and his fingers brushed one of the burns. Sometimes, he could almost forget the brands even though he knew they were there, and the other two would always see them. They'd never fade at this point.

Aspen barely beat Roth to get in the water, and he turned to splash the cat fairy. "Are you going to hiss when your tail gets wet, kitty?"

"This kitty likes water," Roth said in a lofty tone.

The scarring from the burn on his stomach had faded slightly, but the skin wasn't quite the same. Aspen still had dark shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there before that night, and he was a little thinner than what was normal for him.

The past showed in various ways on them, but Oriel shoved it back. Today was for making better memories, and they deserved it after last year.

“You’re both rotten eggs.” He splashed at them both.

Aspen cracked a smile as he headed for Oriel. “Maybe, but you get to be my royal steed again.” He looped his arms around Oriel’s shoulder and slung his legs around his waist. “Come on, Roth. Free piggyback rides.”

“Wait,wait-you can’t ride a horse from the front! Hey! Come on!”

They had a few moments of readjusting legs and arms while Roth held onto Oriel, and Aspen was against his back.

“I’ve never gotten a piggyfront ride,” said Roth.

“Get moving,” said Aspen. “You have to carry us since you cheated.”

“You’re just sour at being rotten eggs,” said Oriel.

“You loosened your clothes before you said anything. Cheater.”

Roth put on a convincing pout. “You didn’t even give us a chance.”

Oriel couldn’t help but laugh as he started walking along the sandy bottom. Thankfully, both were much lighter in the water, and the ocean was calm today. Aspen leaned his head on his shoulder just like before, and Roth lifted a hand to smooth back his wet hair. Aspen let out a little pleased sigh against Oriel’s shoulder.

For a moment, Oriel paused in the water just to relish being surrounded by the touch of the two men he loved

Roth's Present is on the next page.

Meow.

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Roth's Present

Roth barely had time to wonder why the bedroom was dark before he was pushed into the wall, and something was pulled over his head. Their grip on his wrists was too tight, and real fear rose in his gut as a third hand grabbed his neck.

"Let go of me!"

"No one's going to hear you scream."

Cold metal touched Roth's throat as his heart raced. "Get the fuck off!"

Hands were all over him as his wrists were yanked behind his back and tied. As much as he struggled, he couldn't get both men off of him or keep them from forcing him to the floor.

"Let go! I'll scream again!"

"Go ahead. No one will hear you."

Someone had straddled him, and he kicked as the other slipped off his boots. They managed to pin his legs together, and his ankles were tied. Roth tried to twist, but the one straddling him held him down. He could barely make out light from the sitting room through the open bedroom door. The sack over his head blocked everything else.

If the servants had been sent away, no one would hear his screams.

"I'll pay you-" he started.

Oriel laughed. "We want something else. Besides, you want it, you little slut."

"No, I don't. I swear to Elira, I'll pay, or-"

"Yeah, you'll pay with your ass. Don't move, slut."

Metal at his throat made him quiet down. His cock was already thickening, and the cold edge that could cut him only made his entwined fear and excitement grow.

The sack was pulled off, but a strip of cloth was quickly pulled over his eyes and tied behind his head.

Oriel got off before two sets of hands grabbed Roth and dragged him into the sitting room.

"Where the fuck are you taking me?!"

"You better watch that mouth," Aspen said as Roth was dumped on the floor and turned over on his stomach.

"Bring that chair closer." Oriel's knife slipped into the collar of Roth's coat in the back as something scraped. "Do I need to gag you?"

"No. Please, just let me go." The knife tugged, and he knew they intended to cut off his clothes and completely strip him like that. "Don't you fucking dare!"

Aspen smacked his ass. "Someone's got an attitude."

"Bad kitties get punished," said Oriel.

Roth tried wiggling out of the ropes, but they hadn't left him any slack to get loose. Oriel started slicing open his coat. With the knife that close to his skin, Roth lay still as the fear he liked so much spiked through him. Oriel rolled him onto his sides and sliced at the cloth as needed.

His coat went first, and his vest followed. His trousers and shirt were removed, and lastly, his drawers were cut off, leaving him completely naked and at their mercy.

"The slut's hard," said Aspen.

"See? They always want it, and they prance their little asses around all day to tease and tempt everyone, but when you want a piece, they try to act all aloof."

Roth's cock throbbed as the knife skimmed his hip, and Aspen snorted. "Aw, look. His face is all red."

Roth gasped when he felt the knife touch his balls.

"Are you going to be good?" Oriel asked with a warning note.

"Y-yes," whispered Roth.

Aspen gripped his shaft and rubbed his thumb over the tip to smear the pre-cum that was gathering. "You're desperate for it."

"No, I'm not," said Roth. "Please, just let me go."

Oriel was rough as he picked up Roth. "You're our slut now, and you're going to serve your purpose."

Roth was set in a chair. He tried to jerk himself forward, but they both held him in place while rope was wound around his torso and the back of the chair. Oriel made a satisfied noise as he did the knots.

Aspen fiddled with his red hair. "What a pretty kitty. Do you like toys, kitty?"

Roth grunted when he felt a sharp shock on his nipple. When the hell had they gotten a charged lightning channeler?

"When I ask you a question, you better answer me," said Aspen, and the tip touched Roth's nipple again although it didn't shock him. He still tensed and tried to press himself into the back of the chair. "Well?"

"No, I don't like toys." Roth's ear cocked at the sound of footsteps. Oriel must have been going to the bedroom to get something else to torment him with.

Aspen sighed. "Too bad. I do."

"Ow! Fuck!" Roth jumped at the shock.

"Hurry up," called Aspen.

"I'm getting it," Oriel said from the bedroom.

Aspen ran the cool metal tip of the channeler down Roth's chest, and he stiffened the lower it went. "Maybe I should see how you act if I use this on your balls."

Roth pulled at the ropes. "Please...no."

"Come on. Open your knees a bit."

"You tied my ankles," Roth said in a snarky tone that he regretted when the channeler shocked his nipple.

"You could spread them a bit."

Roth's left ear twitched as he heard something metallic when Oriel came in again. Aspen gripped the back of his hair and slipped the channeler between his legs. "Hold still."

Roth flattened his ears as he heard the noise again. "No, no, no! I'm not--"

"Hold still or I'll shock your dick instead of your nuts," Aspen said.

Cool leather went around Roth's neck, and he tried to pull his head away, but Aspen tightened his grip. A warning jolt went through his dick and made him squeak.

"Get that off!"

Aspen giggled as Oriel buckled it, and the bell jingled. "Be a good kitty."

"You look nice with your new pink collar."

For a moment, Roth was almost speechless.

"I'm not wearing this!" he snarled.

"It sure looks like you're wearing it." Oriel poked the bell to make it go tink tink. "You can listen to that while I pound your hole."

"See if you can make it jingle a tune while you're fucking him," said Aspen.

Oriel laughed, and Roth's face grew hot as Aspen fiddled with the bell. "Take that off right now, and let me go."

"Be a good kitty." Aspen grasped his cock and started stroking it.

The channeler was used on Roth's other nipple, and he felt something brush his arm. He was pretty sure it was the braided leather whip they owned, and while it was short, it packed a sting.

"Do you want to feel this on your bare ass?" Oriel looped it around his throat. "You're not in control anymore. Whores that wiggle their ass around deserve to get their holes raped."

"I wasn't-" Roth cut off as it tightened, and the channeler brushed his lower stomach.

"Don't try to deny it."

Aspen kept jerking. "He looks ready to blow."

"Don't cum, kitty, or I'll have to punish you." Oriel took away the whip.

With the way Aspen was stroking him, Roth wasn't sure if he could last that long. "I don't think I can hold it back."

"You better. Your purpose is to please us. That's what sluts do."

"I swear I'm not a slut." Roth tried to keep still, but he bucked his hips while Aspen forced him closer. Oriel touched the knife to his nipple, and he thought he'd go crazy with the mix of fear and lust. His face grew hotter as every movement made the bell tinkle.

When the tip nicked the flesh of his collarbone, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold back for much longer. "Oh, Elira, please!"

A faint line of pain blossomed. The cut was thin, but it was enough to spike his fear and excitement while his nuts tightened.

"As long as you keep misbehaving, I'll keep cutting," Oriel snarled near his ear.

Roth shouted and jerked his hips as he came. Oriel made another faint cut below his collarbone. Roth cried out as the pleasure from the faint pain combined with the orgasm was so insane for a moment, it was almost too much.

Oriel growled as he grasped Roth's throat and mumbled under his breath. "Fuck. I love watching you lose it."

Aspen made a satisfied sound as he kept fisting Roth's cock. The bell tinkled as his breath came in ragged gasps, and the waves started to ebb. Aspen's grip had grown slick as some of the cum dribbled down, and he didn't stop.

"Wait!" Roth twitched at the sensitivity in his dick. "I can't take it!"

"Maybe I'm not quite done yet."

Roth squirmed his hips. "It's too much."

Oriel grabbed his hair to yank his head back. "Are you going to be a good kitty and wear your collar without complaining?"

"Yes, yes." Roth couldn't help but try to twist away even though he was tied to the chair.

The knife brushed Roth's ears before it trailed down his temple, his cheek, and his throat so it could tap against the bell and make it ring.

"So you'll hold still while your mouth's thoroughly used?"

"I'm not sucking your cock," snapped Roth.

Aspen stopped fisting him which was a relief, but the blade touched his balls.

"How about now?" asked Oriel. "Your mouth is for sucking, not complaining. Maybe I should cut these off. Your hole will work just fine."

Even though he knew Oriel wouldn't dare to nick him in that area, the threat was enough to make his breathing pick up. "Not there. I'll do anything, okay? Please don't hurt me."

"Damn right you'll do anything," said Aspen. "Open up."

Roth's head was lifted and turned to the right a little, and something warm brushed his lips. He clamped them tighter but the tiny cut that blossomed on his hip without warning made him gasp.

"See? He's such a tease. He says he'll do it, but he tries to wiggle out of it."

Aspen pressed the moist tip of his cock to Roth's lips, and he opened his mouth when the knife touched his stomach. He tasted salty pre-cum for a moment before Aspen thrust himself in, and Roth choked as it hit the back of his throat. Oriel held his head still and forced him to take it.

"You make such a pretty kitty," said Aspen. "Lap at my cock. Get it nice and slick."

"Listen good, kitty." Oriel put the edge to his nipple. "Your mouth better stay on Aspen's cock no matter what when he moves. If not, we'll tie you to

bed, and I'll take the whip to your ass before we use both ends of you. Understand?"

Roth made a strangled noise as Aspen's shaft kept pumping in and out of his mouth, and the steel touched his neck.

The ropes binding him to the chair loosened. Oriel pulled away the pieces and cut the ones around his ankles. Roth's wrists were last, and technically, he was free, but the flat of the blade brushed his nipple.

"Remember, keep your mouth on his cock or else. All my friends watching will get a turn with your ass too once I'm done if you disobey."

Excitement fluttered in Roth's stomach at the idea of others watching while he was forced to behave and accept his violation. Aspen looped a finger in his collar and pulled.

"On your knees, kitty."

Without his sight, Roth had to grab one side of the seat as he kept Aspen's cock in his mouth and slid off to get on his knees. Aspen slowly backed up a step and forced him to come forward. The leather of the whip brushed his back as a reminder of the consequences. Roth imagined a bunch of faceless others taking turns with his ass after Oriel finished with him, and his heart raced as he scooted on his knees. The bell tinkled.

Aspen shifted his footing. "Down on all fours. Kitties don't walk on two legs."

He grabbed Roth's shoulder for a moment as he got on his knees. Roth used his forearms to support himself as he held Aspen's cock in his mouth. Like this, he knew Oriel had a good view of his ass and balls hanging down, and he quickly lowered his tail to hide it.

"Good kitty." Aspen stroked the top of his head. "Keep lapping at my dick, and don't let it out of your mouth."

Oriel brushed Roth's right shoulder and took his hand. "Take your time, kitty. You'll get the cream."

What the fuck was he putting over Roth's hand? It seemed almost like a cloth bag, and it wasn't too tight, but the fabric felt thick. Oriel cinched it around his wrist, and he heard a sound like a lock. Roth made a noise, but Aspen drove his dick in a little deeper.

"Shh, just keep sucking like the little whore kitty that you are."

Oriel did the same on Roth's other side, and his hands were helpless now that they were locked in bags or whatever they were. On the palm side, he

felt something on the cloth and assumed it was stitches.

“Kitties don’t have opposable thumbs.” Oriel stroked his tail. “Keep that ass up, and move your tail out of the way.”

Roth moaned when he felt an oiled finger touch his hole, and he tried to scoot forward, but that only pushed Aspen’s cock deeper in.

“Oh, you want more, huh?”

Roth made a faint noise as it filled his throat. Oriel slipped in an oiled finger, and Roth whined as he worked his tongue.

Aspen looped two fingers in the back of his collar to pull his head away. “He’s going to make me cum, and you’re not even in his ass yet.”

“I have to make sure the kitty’s nice and slick.”

Aspen rubbed his cock on the side of Roth’s face and wiped off some of the spit. “Tell me how much you want it.”

“Please, let me go. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I know won’t tell anyone because you’re never leaving.” Aspen smeared the spit across Roth’s cheek. “You’re our pet kitty to use now.”

Roth’s moan when Oriel found his prostate probably didn’t sound like something a terrified, trapped person would let out.

“Try to catch my dick,” Aspen ordered him.

The tip brushed Roth’s lips, and he tried to get it in his mouth, but it kept moving to touch his cheek and chin. Aspen smacked it across his left cheek once. It was hard to concentrate, especially when Oriel started pumping three fingers in and out of his ass. Oriel shifted to get behind him, and he felt something else against his hole.

“Wait-”

Aspen grasped both sides of his face and slipped his dick in. “Shut up and take it, kitty.”

Oriel held Roth’s hips and pushed in the head of his cock. He had nowhere to go, and his cloth-bound hands slipped on the floor as he gave a token attempt at resistance.

His breath grew ragged again as Oriel worked in his full length. Aspen slipped himself into Roth’s throat to cut off his pleas. He let out a choked noise as Oriel started to thrust.

Impaled on their cocks, Roth had no choice but to stay on his knees with his forearms supporting his upper body while took it. His hard cock bounced as he clenched his hands in the cloth. Oriel’s breathing grew harder

as he thrust like he only cared about his pleasure. If he lasted long enough, Roth might be able to finish too.

Aspen sucked in a breath as he pulled out and lifted Roth's chin with one hand. "Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue."

Roth obeyed, and Aspen must have fisted himself since warm cum streaked his tongue a second later.

Oriel groaned. "Fuck, yes. Take the cream, kitty."

His rhythm stuttered as he pounded, and he swore before he shoved himself to the hilt. Roth clenched around him as Oriel shuddered. Aspen moaned as ropes of his cum landed in Roth's mouth.

Oriel dug his fingers in as he pumped out the last bit. He withdrew, and Roth's throbbed.

"Swallow the cream. Good, kitty." Aspen stroked under Roth's chin as he swallowed the salty fluid.

Oriel reached around to take his balls, and he wasn't exactly gentle. "Does kitty like the cream?"

Roth hesitated, and Oriel pulled just enough to make him worry. "Y-yes, kitty likes the cream."

"See? I knew you were a slut. Say it."

"I'm a slutty kitty."

Oriel pulled just a little harder. "Do you want to get off?"

"Y-yes. Please."

"Too bad." Oriel released him to stand, and his footsteps moved away.

"Poor kitty," Aspen cooed before he pushed Roth's head to the floor. "Maybe if you're good, we'll let you cum, but you're going to have to work for it without complaints. Or..." Aspen let go of his head and stood, but Roth had a feeling moving wouldn't be a good idea.

A few seconds later, the whip cracked across his ass, and he sucked in a breath.

"What happens to bad kitties?" asked Aspen.

"They get punished."

"Remember that. No touching yourself."

Aspen left him there. Roth assumed they were cleaning themselves in the bathing room attached to their bedroom, and he stayed put while the line across his rear stung. He fiddled with the bags on his hands and wondered why they picked such a strange thing to use. Partially to distract himself

from his abandoned cock, he focused on the little nicks and cuts. A faint warmth blossomed on each one for a split second as he healed them.

Now he was as good as new for whatever else they had planned.

When the other two returned, one attached a lead to his collar and tugged on it. Roth's face burned as he was made to crawl across the floor. The bell jingled merrily as he went and shame coiled in his stomach. When he felt the thick rug under him, he knew he was near the couch by the fireplace.

"Remember, kitties stay quiet," Aspen warned him.

Aspen pulled off the blindfold as Oriel, entirely naked, flopped on the couch. He quickly tucked something down the cushions by his leg before Roth could get a good look at it. "Look at your paws, kitty."

Roth looked down. The thick cloth was pink and completely immobilized his hands. Without the use of his fingers, he'd never be able to undo the little locks that kept the ties cinched around his wrists, and while it didn't restrict his circulation, they were too tight to pull off.

Oriel smirked. "Look at the bottoms."

Roth flipped his hands over, and his face burned. He'd been right about the stitching, but he hadn't expected that. Dark pink cloth patches had been sewn on the bottom, and it looked like the print a cat's paw would make.

"Those were my idea," Aspen said with a note of pride in his voice. "Now you've got pink paws and toes to go with your pink collar." He reached down to flick a finger against the bell and make it tink.

"And now that you're our kitty forever, we got you some other presents too." Oriel pulled out a stick with shiny silk ribbons dangling from the end.

Oh, Elira, no. Roth was about to say some choice words when he remembered the warning to keep quiet. Aspen could easily go get the whip or the channeler that he'd left on the floor by the lone chair they'd set out to tie him to.

Oriel shook the stick to make the ribbons swirl. "Come on, kitty."

Roth glared so hard, he was surprised Oriel didn't shrivel on the couch.

Aspen nudged him with his foot with a warning look although he couldn't quite hide his smile. "Go play, kitty."

Oriel stood and backed out in the room while he shook the stick. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." He made kissy noises.

Roth grudgingly crawled after him while his half-hard cock threatened to perk up again at the humiliation. They hadn't been lying when they teased

him about the collar, but they'd gone a step further and combined his rape kink with forcing him to play as a kitty. He'd loftily insisted that he'd never wear a collar like a pet kitty, and here they were, making him eat those words.

Oriel's smile grew as he dragged the ends of the ribbons on the floor and made kissy noises.

Roth had never owned a cat or any sort of pet, but he'd seen enough to know how they acted and played. He lowered his upper body, flattened his ears, wiggled his rear, and focused on the shiny strips.

"He's actually doing it!" Aspen laughed behind him.

Roth's bell collar jingled as he pounced on the ends of the ribbons and tried to trap them, but he couldn't grip anything with his hands encased in the fake paws. The shiny wooden flooring didn't help either. Oriel jerked the ribbons away and snorted as he waved them while slowly walking backward. Roth crawled after him and took a swat before he lunged again. That time he put more weight on the ends with his paws instead of trying to grab them.

Before Oriel could get them away, he bit one and held on as he swished his tail.

"Good, kitty," Oriel praised him.

Roth tried to shrivel him with another lofty glare, but his thickening cock betrayed him.

"Yeah, you love this, don't you? Let go."

As soon as Roth released the ribbon from his teeth, Oriel yanked on the stick, and the strips slid out from Roth's paws. He waved the stick higher, and Roth flattened his ears as he peered up the wiggling colors. A dribble of cum slid down the back of his thigh, but he ignored it and stayed on his knees as he reached up to bat at the toy.

"Kitty's having fun." Oriel snatched the stick away and smoothed the silk with one hand. "Aspen, show him his other new toy."

Roth hadn't noticed the other thing on the couch, but he did when Aspen picked it up, and his face grew warmer. They were going to make him crawl around after that too?

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." Aspen showed him the small ball made from shaped copper wire. The bell inside it was bigger than the one on Roth's collar, and it jingled when Aspen shook it. "You know you want it."

He flung it across the room, and Roth cocked his ears at the rather pleasing sound before he hastily crawled after it.

Oriel chuckled. "I will never get tired of seeing either of your cute asses."

"We should make him crawl around more often."

The bell ball bounced a little on the floor and started to roll toward a bookshelf.

"Get it, kitty!" exclaimed Aspen.

Roth swatted it just in time before it rolled underneath and disappeared. He chased it across the floor as he gave it gentle smacks to keep it rolling and jingling. He directed it back to Aspen but accidentally whacked it too hard, and it vanished under the couch. Near where it disappeared, he reached under to feel for it, but it had gone too far.

Aspen approached to rub his ass. "Aww, poor kitty. Did you lose your toy?"

Roth shifted to rub on his legs and flick his tail on him.

Aspen scratched Roth's ears which made him let out a pleased sigh as he tilted his head for a better angle. Oriel came over and pushed the couch over a bit to get the ball.

"Look! He's got it." Aspen ran his hand along Roth's back and grabbed his tail.

If they wanted him to pretend to be a kitty, he would in other ways too. He reached back to swat at Aspen's hand.

"You better be careful what you grab, Aspen." Oriel tossed the ball across the room again. "There you go, kitty!"

Couldn't they be done with shaming him? To please them, Roth swatted it around the room and kept it from rolling under anything while the other two sat to watch him with smirks. Roth finally stopped the toy in the middle of the sitting room near the chair and hunched over it while he lifted his ass.

Even though it was humiliating to act like an animal, he decided he wouldn't mind doing this again. His husbands had grown sweeter with him as they went tonight, and he certainly couldn't complain about that. The combination of forcing him but praising him too wasn't a combination he'd experienced with anyone else.

Aspen had started rubbing Oriel's cock at some point, and his own stuck up like a post. Oriel leaned over to kiss him, and Aspen shifted to straddle

his lap without breaking off the kiss. Roth's own cock further hardened as he watched their hands wander over each other.

Oh, fuck.

Aspen grasped both of their cocks together and started stroking them. Oriel moaned against his lips and wrapped his arms around him.

Roth wanted to fist himself while he watched, but the damn paws wouldn't work. He swished his tail while he watched Oriel kiss down Aspen's neck.

"Suck my cock," growled Aspen. "Save your cum for kitty's ass."

He straightened up with his knees on either side, and Oriel gestured for Roth before he lowered his head to take Aspen's shaft in his mouth. Roth abandoned the toy and quickly crawled over which made his bell collar tink the whole way.

"I hear a pretty kitty," gasped Aspen. Roth crawled up onto the couch and rubbed the side of his face on Aspen's hip. He flicked his tongue out to taste his skin, and Oriel fisted his hair.

"Have a few licks and be good, or we won't let you cum," Oriel warned him.

Roth allowed his head to be guided so he could lap at Aspen's balls.

"What does the kitty say?" asked Oriel.

Not that too. Roth flushed, but Oriel tightened his grip enough to make his scalp sting.

"Meow," whispered Roth.

"I didn't catch that," said Aspen.

"Meow." Roth gently sucked one of Aspen's balls into his mouth and rolled it on his tongue.

"Good, kitty."

Roth released his ball, and Oriel guided his head to lick along Aspen's shaft. "Now take me in your throat, and you better do a good job."

Roth stayed low as he took Oriel's length in his mouth. Their positioning was a bit cramped, but it worked well enough. Above him, he heard Oriel sucking on Aspen's cock. Roth took the thick length in his throat, and Oriel made a slight strangled noise.

"That's it, take it all in," Aspen ordered him.

Roth couldn't see, but he had a feeling that Aspen was using Oriel's mouth like a fuck toy. Roth's cock dripped as he throatated his husband and

reached with one paw to stroke along his other husband's thigh. Oriel reached between his legs to jerk him, and Roth bobbed his head faster. Fuck, yes.

"Faster," gasped Aspen. "I'm going to cum."

Oriel mumbled something around the shaft in his mouth before Aspen grunted.

"Fuck, yes. Hold it in your mouth. Hold it."

Oriel moaned, and the cum in his mouth seemed to spur him on as he jerked Roth like his life depended on it. Roth worked his tongue on Oriel and didn't stop even when Aspen moved to get off the couch. Roth had more room now, but Aspen pulled his head up.

"Drink your cream, kitty."

Oriel cupped the sides of Roth's face as they kissed. Roth's abandoned cock dripped as they swapped Aspen's cum back and forth. Saltiness coated his mouth as their tongues clashed and smeared it around.

"Fuuuuck," Aspen moaned as he petted Roth's back and watched. "Such a good kitty."

Oriel passed it all over and drew back as Roth swallowed the thick fluid. He licked off a drop and reached to fondle Roth's thighs.

"Kitty's got cream on his legs," he whispered. "I think I need to fill your ass with more."

Roth rubbed his face on Oriel's shoulder and hoped that showed he badly he wanted it.

"See, Aspen? You give a whore a couple of toys and a pretty collar, and they're all yours."

Roth's face flushed when he was pushed down on the couch, and he moved his tail to the side to invite what was coming. Aspen fetched the oil so Oriel could make sure his hole was properly slicked.

Aspen crouched by Roth's head. "Paws here. Keep them together."

Roth obeyed and knew he probably looked rather like a cat when they stretched out their front legs and stuck their bum up in the air.

"Fuck," Roth moaned when Oriel rubbed his prostate.

"Shh. Kitties go meow."

"Meow!" Roth yelled when Oriel's rubbing grew quite vigorous.

Aspen rubbed his chin to hide the quick smile that flashed on his face. "Just take your ass pounding and stay still like a good kitty."

Oriel didn't wait too long to get his cock in. Roth moaned as Oriel's hips slapped his ass with every thrust, and he kept his paws together. Aspen scratched one of his ears and leaned in to kiss him.

Roth had slipped his tongue in when Oriel leaned down to bite his neck just hard enough to make him stay still.

Roth whimpered against Aspen's mouth. Fuck. After all the stimulation, he was so close, and judging by Oriel's breathing, he was ready to burst too. Aspen's kisses grew more aggressive, and he reached to stroke Roth's cock.

"Fuck," Roth gasped. "I mean-meow."

"Cum for us, kitty." Aspen cupped his face with his free hand and kissed along his jawline.

The pleasure snapped and raced through Roth as the orgasm seemed to burst from inside. Aspen's hand quickened, and Roth clenched around the thick shaft pumping in and out of his ass. The sound of Oriel coming undone above him made him squeeze harder to milk out every last drop. He pressed his face against Aspen's as he clenched his paws.

Aspen growled as he stroked, and rope after rope of Roth's cum hit the couch cushion. "That's it, Kitty. Clench and make Oriel feel good."

"Fuck." Oriel had rammed himself in as far as he would go, and he stilled against Roth as he seemed to be trying to regain his senses. Roth, braced on his knees and forearms, turned his head to find Aspen's lips.

"Mmm," Aspen hummed as he released Roth's cock. "Who's a good kitty?"

"Mew."

"The best damn kitty," Oriel mumbled. He straightened up on his knees but didn't pull out. "Kitty spilled his cream. Come on. If you make a mess, you have to clean it up."

He kept his cock buried as he scooted back and tugged Roth along with him.

"Watch the cream," said Aspen.

Oriel maneuvered them enough. "Lick it up." Roth clenched around him to make him hiss. "You're not getting out of this, kitty. You better get every last drop."

Roth lowered his head for the last degrading act of lapping up his own cum from the cushion. Aspen watched to make sure he did a good job, and he leaned forward for another kiss.

“Kitty tastes good.”

Oriel finally pulled out and flipped Roth on his back so he could get on top and kiss him. “You were such a good kitty.”

“Meow.”

Roth stretched out like a lazy cat as Aspen managed to get on the couch next to him. For a few minutes, they lay in a tangled heap together to enjoy the afterglow. Oriel started poking the bell to make it tink.

Roth smiled without opening his eyes. “I like my gift, and I’ll definitely wear it again in the future.”

“Being a kitty isn’t so bad, huh?”

“No. I’ll do it again when I feel like it.”

“Or if I decide to put the collar on you. Then you’ll do it.” Oriel chuckled as Roth opened one eye to aim his lofty glare at him.

“I need the sand tray,” he said.

Aspen shifted to get up. “I’m not taking the game that far.”

Oriel moved and gave Roth a swat on his bum. “Go use the privy like a normal fairy.”

“You have to take these off.” Roth held up his paws. “I can’t grasp anything.”

“I know. They’re great for bondage. Maybe we should keep it on you for a bit.”

Aspen snorted. “I’ll get the keys.”

“I should have thought to put a blanket down,” said Oriel. “Now there’s a cum stain on the cushion.”

“Eh, just flip it over, and no one has to know,” said Aspen.

Once the paws were off, Roth was in the bedroom and heading to the privy room when he heard Oriel yelp.

“Ow! Get that thing away from my ass.”

Aspen chuckled. “Maybe I’ll wake you both with this one morning. You won’t be groggy after a jolt to your asscheek.”

Roth decided he might have to hide the lightning channeler toy if Aspen was planning to shock their arses first thing in the morning.

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