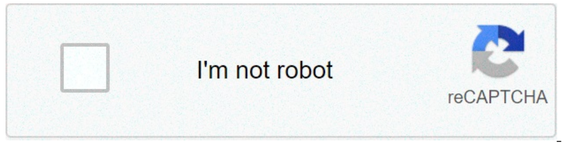

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A wicked novella

The Queen: A Wicked NovellaFrom #1 New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout comes the next installment in her Wicked series.The King must have his Queen....Bestowed the forbidden Summer's Kiss by the King of the Summer fae, Brighton Jussier is no longer just human. What she is, what she will become, no one knows for sure, but that isn't her biggest concern at the moment. Now Caden, the King, refuses to let her go, even at the cost of his Court. When the doorway to the Otherworld is breached, both Brighton and Caden must do the unthinkable—not just to survive themselves, but also to save mankind from the evil that threatens the world.**Every 1001 Dark Nights novella is a standalone story. For new readers, it's an introduction to an author's world. And for fans, it's a bonus book in the author's series. We hope you'll enjoy each one as much as we do.**A queen now in exile as a traitor, Lara has watched Ithicana be conquered by her own father, helpless to do anything to stop the destruction. But when she learns her husband, Aren, has been captured in battle, Lara knows there is only one reason her father is keeping him alive: as bait for his traitorous daughter.And it is bait she fully intends to take. Risking her life to the Tempest Seas, Lara returns to Ithicana with a plan not only to free its king, but for liberating the Bridge Kingdom from her father's clutches using his own weapons: the sisters whose lives she spared. But not only is the palace inescapable, there are more players in the game than Lara ever realized, enemies and allies switching sides in the fight for crowns, kingdoms, and bridges. But her greatest adversary of all might be the very man she's trying to free – the husband she betrayed.With everything she loves in jeopardy, Lara must decide who – and what – she is fighting for: her kingdom, her husband, or herself.#1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout returns with book one of the all-new, compelling Flesh and Fire series—set in the beloved Blood and Ash world.Born shrouded in the veil of the Primals, a Maiden as the Fates promised, Seraphena Mierel's future has never been hers. Chosen before birth to uphold the desperate deal her ancestor struck to save his people, Sera must leave behind her life and offer herself to the Primal of Death as his Consort. However, Sera's real destiny is the most closely guarded secret in all of Lasania—she's not the well protected Maiden but an assassin with one mission—one target. Make the Primal of Death fall in love, become his weakness, and then…end him. If she fails, she dooms her kingdom to a slow demise at the hands of the Rot.Sera has always known what she is. Chosen. Consort. Assassin. Weapon. A specter never fully formed yet drenched in blood. A monster. Until him. Until the Primal of Death's unexpected words and deeds chase away the darkness gathering inside her. And his seductive touch ignites a passion she's never allowed herself to feel and cannot feel for him. But Sera has never had a choice. Either way, her life is forfeit—it always has been, as she has been forever touched by Life and Death. Did it make you a bad friend if you were completely, a hundred percent envious of that friend? Yes? No? Kind of?I figured it was somewhere in between.That's what I was mulling over as I watched Ivy Morgan brush thick, red curls over her shoulder, laughing at something her boyfriend Ren Owens had said to her.At least I wasn't envious of that—their love. Okay, well, that wasn't entirely true. Pretty sure anyone who was as single as me would be envious of all that warm and fuzzy that was passed back and forth with each long look or casual brush of skin. The two could barely tear their gazes away from one another to eat the dinner we'd grabbed at the cute little diner inside the shopping center on Prytania Street.I honest to God couldn't be happier for them. They'd been through so much—way more than two people should ever have to go through to be together, and here they were, stronger and more in love than ever, and they deserved that happiness.But their epic love story wasn't the source of a current case of the green-eye monster that was sitting on my shoulder.Ivy was just such a… badass.Even right now, relaxed in the chair, surrounded by twinkling Christmas lights with her hand in Ren's and her belly full of a cheeseburger deluxe and crinkle fries and half of my tater tots, she could kick ass and take names along with addresses, telephone numbers, and social security numbers.If the proverbial poo hit the fan, you called Ivy or Ren.If you needed to know what streets Royal intersected with, you called… me. Or if you needed coffee or fresh beignets but were currently busy, you know, saving the world, you'd call me.The three of us were all members of the Order, a widespread organization that was literally the only thing that stood between mankind and complete, utter enslavement and destruction by the fae. And not the super cute fae found in Disney movies or some crap like that. Humans thought they were on top of the food chain. They were wrong. The fae were.The only thing pop culture got right about the fae was their slightly pointy ears. That was it. The fae were more than just beings from another world—the Otherworld—they were capable of glamouring their appearance to blend in with humans. But all Order members, even me, were warded at birth against the glamour. We saw through the human façade to the creature that lurked beneath.No amount of imagination could capture their allure in their true form or how luminous their silvery skin was or how they were beautiful in the way a leopard stalking its prey was.The fae preyed on humans—on the very life force that kept our hearts beating and brains working. Much like the mythical vampire feeding on blood or a succubus feasting on energy, the life force that they stole from humans fueled their abilities, which truly ran the gamut. They were faster and stronger than us, and nothing on Earth rivaled their predatory skills. Feeding off humans was also the way the fae slowed their aging process down to a lifespan that rivaled immortality. Without feeding, they aged and died like humans.There were some of them who didn't feed on humans, something we'd only discovered recently. The fae from the Summer Court chose not to. They lived and died like us, wanting nothing more than to be left alone and out of the crosshairs of their enemies, the Winter fae.My fingers drifted to my wrist, where I wore a bracelet that, combined with the words spoken at our births, held the charm that blocked the fae's ability. I never took the thing off. Ever.Four leaf clovers.Who ever would've thought a tiny plant would negate something as powerful as a fae?But a week ago tonight the Order, along with the Summer fae, had done the impossible. The psychotic and wholly creepy fae Queen who went by the name Morgana had been sent back to the Otherworld. She could come back, but no one was expecting her to. Not for a long time. Maybe not even in our lifetime, but the Order would be ready when she did. So would the Summer fae.That's why the three of us were having dinner—a little celebratory dinner. We'd survived the battle with the Queen and those who supported her had crawled back into whatever cesspools they were hiding in. We all could take a deep breath now and chill out, knowing that while there was still a metric crap ton of Winter fae out there who needed to be hunted down and stopped, we'd leveled out the playing field with the Queen's defeat.Things were as normal as they'd ever be for an Order member. Hell, Ren and Ivy were even planning to take a vacation after Christmas. How crazy was that? Super crazy!I wasn't planning a vacation, because I hadn't really taken part in the battle. If I had, I wouldn't be sitting here. I'd be dead. Like clinically, irreversibly dead.I'd only received minimal combat training before that had come to a grinding halt when I was twelve. And while I still took the Order-mandated training classes along with Ivy, I've never seen any real action. Working through take-down maneuvers or knowing how to avoid a punch or a deliver a bone-snapping kick was completely different than actually taking that knowledge and using it against someone who was actively trying to straight-up murder you.If my life hadn't veered off track at twelve, I would've been just like Ivy and Ren—a walking weapon on two legs–but everything had changed when my mother had been captured by the fae she'd been hunting.My mother was a fighter, much like my father, who'd died when I was too young to remember him beyond the photographs that hung in the hallway. She had been one of the greatest, most skilled fighters in the Order - dare I say, even more badass than Ivy. She'd raised me while still pulling all nighters, patrolling the streets of New Orleans for fae, hunting them before they could hunt humans. When I was younger, I swore I was going to be just like her—like every child raised in the Order planned. We were indoctrinated at birth and our duty to protect mankind was what all of us prepared for. Training started young, at the age of eight. Mornings were dedicated to schooling and afternoons were part learning about the habits of the fae and part training.But then came the morning, when I was a few days shy of my twelfth birthday, that Mom… she hadn't come home. Those days that had followed, those days that felt like an eternity, were some of the worst memories I will ever have.Mom had been found on day four, in one of the bayous several miles out from the city, left for dead. Even as skilled as she was, she had fallen to the fae. They'd tortured her. Worse yet, they had fed on her, and while they hadn't enslaved her, all those feedings had done something to her. To her mind. Thank God, my mom had come home to me.But she hadn't come home the same.There'd been days and weeks where it was like nothing had happened to her, and then things weren't okay. She'd just up and disappear one day or would refuse to come out of her room. She'd rant and rage and then break into fits of laughter that would last hours. Things got easier in the months and years following her attack, but taking care of her had replaced training, and when I came of age, I was given an administrator-type job with the Order, something reserved for the lucky few that made it to retirement. I accepted it even though the money the Order had paid out to my mother for her 'injured in the line of duty' situation was substantial.But I was hoping that could change now. Things were going to simmer down, and I was hoping with a little more training, I could start patrolling. The Order needed me—needed all the help they could get since so many had been lost in the battle with the Queen. I could become just as badass as Ivy and Ren and then I'd finally be able to fulfill my duty.I'd finally be… useful. Worthy of those I called my friends and, most importantly, worthy of the legacy of my family. I could—Fingers appeared directly in my line of vision. They snapped, causing me to jerk back in my seat. The fingers lowered to reveal Ivy staring at me.My cheeks heated as I laughed softly. "Sorry. I spaced out. Were you saying something?""I was saying that I was about to strip naked and run outside."Ren's green eyes practically twinkled. "I am so down for that.""Of course you are." Grinning, she gestured at the menu. "Did you want dessert, Bri?"Only Ivy called me Bri. Everyone else called me Brighton or Ms. Jussier. I hated the latter. It made me feel like I was three decades older and should be living in a home full of stray, un-neutered cats. And I was already twenty-eight and living with my mother. I didn't need to feel worse than I already did."No, I'm good." I'd already peeked at the menu. If they had cheesecake, I would've made room.Ren glanced over the menu and then shook his head as he handed it back to Ivy. "So, you going to let Tink move in with you?"I nearly choked on the sip of diet Coke. "What?"Dropping the menu on the table, Ivy smiled as she clasped her hands together. "If Ren and I go on vacation, Tink's going to need an adult in his life."I opened my mouth, but I had no words. I could not have heard them right. No way could I move Tink into my house—my mother's house—because not only would Tink most likely destroy it, he was….Well, Tink was Tink."And he really likes you," Ren added. "He actually listens to you."My brows lowered. "That's not true. Tink listens to no one. Not even his boyfriend. And why wouldn't he stay with him?""Well, I made that suggestion, and according to Tink, he's not ready for that kind of commitment," Ren replied dryly."What? That's not a commitment," I reasoned. "It would only be temporary, right?""We tried explaining that to Tink." Ivy rolled her eyes. "But you know how he is."I didn't. I really didn't. I lowered my voice so we weren't overheard. "Why can't he stay at Hotel Good Fae?" That was what Ivy called the compound the Summer fae lived in. "They love him. Like near worship levels.""We suggested that, but he said, and I quote, he can't 'be himself' around them. That their admiration is too much pressure on him."I stared at Ren. "You're joking.""I wish." He leaned back. "You know we can't leave him alone. He'd burn down Ivy's apartment.""He'll spend all my money on shit from Amazon," Ivy added as her phone rang. She picked up her bag. "Anyway, we'll talk out the details later."We were so not talking out the details later. "But—""What's up, Miles?" Ivy held her hand up, and I snapped my mouth shut. "What?" She glanced at Ren, who was alert and all eyes on Ivy. "Yeah, we're nearby. We can check it out." There was a pause. "I'll update you in a few."Disconnecting the call, she pulled out her wallet and said, "Miles said Gerry didn't show up for his shift and no one can get ahold of him," she explained, and that wasn't normal at all. Gerry was habitually on time. "He asked if we could swing by his place and check things out.""Can do," Ren answered as Ivy dropped several bills on the table. "By the way, I'm pretty sure Tink is at your place now with Merle.""Wait. What?" I immediately forgot about Gerry not showing up for patrol."Yeah, he said something about wanting gardening tips or something bizarre." Ivy shoved her wallet into her bag. "Honestly, I wasn't really listening.""Oh God." I fumbled for my wallet as visions of my mom impaling Tink with steak knives danced in my head. "He cannot be there alone with my mom.""I think Merle likes Tink," Ivy said."Really?" I dropped cash on the table—more than enough cover my food and a tip. "Depends on if he's Tink-size or people-size.""I feel the same way," Ren muttered, and then he slid a sly glance in my direction. "By the way, I'm pretty sure your mom has the hots for Tanner."I was frozen, halfway standing. Tanner ran Hotel Good Fae. In other words, he was a fae and my mom—well, Mom did seem to like visiting him, but she also talked quite frequently about killing fae, all kinds of fae. Shaking my head, I decided I really didn't have the brain space to process any of that. "I better get going. God only knows what my mom and Tink could get into.""I figure it'll either be epic or epically disastrous." Ivy grinned at me as she and Ren stood."Agreed." Wishing they had mentioned all of this at the beginning of dinner, I slung my purse over my shoulder and said my goodbyes.Hurrying through the small diner and skirting the oversized Christmas tree, I made my way outside. Cool wind caught the fine strands of hair around my face, blowing my ponytail over my shoulder. I lived a handful of blocks from the shopping center, and it was quicker just to walk instead of trying to order an Uber.Shoving my hands into the front pocket of my oversized hoodie, I jogged across the street. The Garden District was beautiful any time of year, but it really amped up its curb appeal during the Christmas season. Lights of all different colors decorated porches and balconies, twisted around wrought iron fences, and twinkled from the massive oaks that lined many of the streets.I could not believe Tink was at my place. What in the world were Ivy and Ren thinking? Mom didn't hate Tink, but Mom had also, at one time, suggested to Ivy's face that Ivy should be put down.All because Ivy wasn't exactly a hundred percent human. She was a halfling and there had been this whole prophecy that involved her permanently opening the gates to the Otherworld, allowing the armies of the Winter Court to enter our world, but all of that was over. Thank God. And Tink was definitely not even one percent human.Cutting down a side street, I tried not to let my imagination run wild with what could be happening at home. They could be sitting together and watching Harry Potter. Or Tink could've brought his boyfriend, who just happened to be Prince Fabian—one of the two Princes of the Summer Court—to the house. I doubted Tink would've brought Prince Fabian's brother with him. At least there was that.A shudder racked my shoulders as an image of the Prince formed in my head. I'd never seen him when he was under the Queen's enchantment, masquerading as the Winter Prince. He'd terrorized the city, becoming a living and breathing nightmare who had kidnapped Ivy to fulfill said prophecy.I'd only seen him after the enchantment was broken, and even then he'd been the most intimidating creature I'd ever laid eyes on. And when he looked at me, I couldn't help but feel—"Mom." My steps drew up short as I spotted her coming down the wide sidewalk, her thin housecoat flapping behind her like wings. "What are you doing out here?"She stepped under the street lamp, her short blond hair messy from the wind. "Oh, I was just getting… antsy and decided I wanted to go for a walk."I hurried to where she stood, taking her hands in mine. Her skin was cold. "Mom, why didn't you put on your jacket?""Honey, it's not that cold outside." She laughed, squeezing my hands."It's cold enough for something heavier than this robe you've got going on. Let's head back home." My stomach twisted with nerves as I looped my arm through hers and turned her back around.Anxiety and the inability to stay still was usually a sign that we were about to hit a rough couple of days. It came out of nowhere and nothing and everything could trigger it. She would go from being clear minded and sharp as a tack for weeks, months even, and then wham! She would start roaming off and then the nightmares would start. She wouldn't be able to sleep and things would…they would just spiral.Worry was like a virus. By the time you felt it, you were already drowning in it. "How long have you been outside?""Long enough to walk from the house to here," she replied, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "And what's wrong with my robe?"There were several things wrong with her roaming around the Garden District in a robin's egg blue robe.I slowed my pace to match hers as I guided her across the street. "Did you have company while I was gone?""Company?"Maybe Ren and Ivy were wrong about Tink being there. "Did Tink come by?" I asked, starting to get nervous.She was quiet for a moment and then she chuckled. "Actually, come to think of it, he was watching a movie and then he stepped outside to make a phone call.""So, he was still there when you—" The street lamp above us flickered once and then faded out.All the way down the block, as far as I could see, the lights flickered and then disappeared."That's odd," Mom commented, a shiver working its way through her. "Brighton?""It's okay," I said, swallowing hard. "Everything is okay."A blast of what felt like arctic air swept down the block, lifting the edges of Mom's housecoat and stopping both of us in our tracks. The tiny hairs all along the nape of my neck rose as I scanned the empty street, only lit by the faint, twinkling Christmas lights. I recognized the for sale sign in front of the empty antebellum home. We had another two blocks to go."Mom," I whispered, heart pounding in my chest as I started walking again, dragging her along with me. "We need to—"They seemed to come out of nowhere, moving so fast they were nothing more than shadows at first, surrounding us.A scream built in my throat as I saw them. Silvery skin. Eyes filled with hate. Four of them, and they were on us before the scream could even part my lips. Page 2 Sunlight.That's what I felt on my skin and tasted on my lips. Sunlight. Its warmth seeped through my skin, buzzed through my veins, and settled into my muscles and bones.Was I lying outside? That wouldn't make sense, though. It was December, and not nearly warm enough to sunbathe, but I knew I had to be lying close to the sun. I could feel its touch on my cheek and my lips still tingled from the closeness.I opened my eyes, but I didn't see the sun. I saw a form… a shape of a man. The features blurred, but I knew the man. It was him.The Prince….But that also didn't make sense. None of this made sense. Confusion crept into the fuzz crowding my thoughts. Something was off. I tried to lift my hand, but my arm felt like it was weighted down. Something was wrong, very badly wrong, and I needed to remember—Sleep.The desire to slip away hit me hard and fast, obliterating the confusion and consciousness, and I slept. I slept for what felt like years and then I heard a steady beeping. It intruded on wherever I was, becoming so loud, so obnoxious to me, that I had to pay attention to it. A part of my consciousness zeroed in on the sound, clung to it, and I followed it back, tethering myself to the rhythm. With each passing second, my surroundings became clearer. Footsteps. I heard footsteps. Whispers. There was the sound of hushed voices. I dragged in a deep breath, and a shock hit my system. The breath hurt. Like my chest and ribs were too tight and a simple deep breath was too much to take—Mom.I saw her in my mind, as clear as day.I saw her lying on her back in the darkness, her eyes wide and fixed on mine. There was nothing behind those eyes. No life. Nothing.The beeping sound sped up.The horrifying image of my mom faded like smoke, replaced by luminous skin and bloody smiles and taunts and…Pools of blood. Actual pools of it. The ruby-red liquid spilled across stone, forming rivulets that ran between the spacing in the pavers. Why had there been so much blood? A vague feeling of wet warmth bubbling up my throat and choking me swept through me."Bri? Are you awake? Brighton?"I recognized that voice. Ivy. She was speaking to me, and I took another breath, relieved to discover it didn't hurt as bad as the first. But my… my body felt weird. My face felt weird. Like it was swollen and stretched too tight. It was the same with every inch of my skin.My eyes felt like they were glued shut, and it took forever for them to open. Hours maybe. But when they did, I found myself staring at a drop ceiling and florescent lights."Bri." Ivy spoke again, and her fingers lightly brushed my left hand.Slowly, I turned my head toward the sound of her voice, to my left, and I saw her pale, drawn face. All that bright hair was pulled back in a bun. Her eyes were red and swollen and full of sympathy.And I knew.I remembered.The fae had come out of nowhere, surrounding Mom and me. They'd dragged us into the courtyard of the empty house. There hadn't been four of them. I'd been wrong. There'd been five and one of them had been an Ancient.I swallowed, or tried to, but the motion hurt my throat. Everything hurt. My legs and face, but especially my stomach. That felt like someone had dug around inside and pulled everything out.Ivy's fingers curled around mine. She squeezed gently. "Are you in pain? I can get the doc."I squeezed my eyes shut, and I saw flashes of teeth and razor-sharp claws. The fae didn't need to use their teeth to feed, but they liked to use them to cause pain."Mom," I croaked out, and Ivy's hand spasmed around mine. When she didn't answer, I forced my eyes open again. "She's… she's gone?"Ivy pressed her lips together as she nodded jerkily. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Bri."My gaze dropped to where Ivy held my hand. Instead of seeing her hand, I saw my mother's blood-soaked one squeezing mine. I saw it slip from my grasp as I felt the strength seep out of her."They made several hits, all across the city," Ivy was saying, curling her other hand around mine, clasping it between her two palms. "That's why Gerry didn't show up for his shift. Ren and I found him. That's when we knew." Her voice turned hoarse as she started naming names—names of those killed and there were so many, an endless stream. "They must've been watching us. They knew where to go. So much violence, all in one night."Ivy dropped her forehead to her hands. I didn't see her, though. I saw the five faces. I remembered their faces. I would always remember their faces."You're going to be okay. The doc says it's a freaking miracle, but you're going to be okay," she said. "They'll probably keep you for a couple more days, but then you can come home with me, if you want. Tink said you can take his bedroom—""I… I couldn't stop them.""What?" Ivy lifted her head. Her eyes were glassy."I… I couldn't fight them off."She slowly shook her head. "Bri, you were hunted down and—""I couldn't stop them!" The shout tore at my raw throat, but I didn't care. "They killed my mother and I couldn't stop them!""No." Ivy rose, leaning over the head of the bed so her face was right in mine. "I know what you're thinking. Trust me, I know. This is not your fault. I would've been screwed if I was caught off guard and surrounded like that."I didn't think that was the case. Ivy would've fought tooth and nail. She wouldn't have panicked and flailed. She wouldn't have let them get her on her back, the number one thing they taught you to never let happen in training. Ivy might've struggled, but she would've prevailed."What they did to your mom and you is on them." Ivy placed the tips of her fingers against my cheek. The touch was light, as if she knew if she pressed too hard, it would hurt. "There was nothing you could've done, Bri. Nothing. You survived. That's all that matters. And it's going to be okay. Everything is going to be okay."As I stared at her, remembering what I'd said to Mom, and knowing that it had been a lie, I knew that this also wasn't true. That wasn't all that mattered and it wasn't going to be okay.Things were never going to be okay. Page 3 Two years later….The heavy, rhythmic beat thumped from the speakers above and flowed over the packed floor. Gleaming bodies twisted and churned under the flashing overhead lights, lost to the music and the press of flesh against flesh. The scent of perfume, cologne, and sweat turned my stomach as I lifted my hands, scooping the long strands of hair off my damp neck.Tonight I was a wild redhead with bright, red lips.Last night I'd been a raven-haired seductress with smokey eyes.The past weekend I was a naïve blonde in pigtails with flushed, peachy cheeks.Each time I was someone different, but I was always the perfect victim, and every night ended the same.I swayed my hips to the beat, to the hard, warm body behind me as I scanned the dance floor, searching.Hands moved over the silvery sequins of my dress, slipping over my stomach. He hauled me against him, pressing his front to my back.He was really into this.A lot.Those questing hands dragged down my hips, inching closer to my outer thighs. Letting go of the hair, I caught his wrists and tossed a reckless grin over my shoulder. "Behave."The nameless man gave me a toothy smile. He was cute, definitely younger than me by a good decade and some change. Probably in college at Loyola or Tulane, which meant two things. He'd choke if he knew I was pushing thirty-one and this was the last place he should be. A tiny part of me wanted to warn him, to tell him to find his fun and pleasure anyplace but the club Flux.But I wasn't here for him.Holding onto his wrists, I let my head fall back against his chest as my gaze flickered over the dance floor and the horseshoe-shaped bar at the front. I couldn't see into the shadowy alcoves surrounding the floor or upstairs, on the second floor VIP area.That's where I needed to be, because I knew he was up there.A squat, broad man blocked the staircase. Behind him was a red rope. Entry to the second floor was by invite only, and those up there didn't come down here. They sent scouts instead, scouts that were trained to find a certain type of human.And I was the living embodiment of that type and tonight was the night."Hey," the man said into my ear.I kept searching. "Yeah?""What's your name? I'm Dale." He tried to move his hands again, but I kept them on my hips."Sally," I lied as a tall, slender woman at the bar pushed away and turned to the dance floor, a vibrant, too-bright purple drink in her hand. Nightshade. She lifted the drink to her lips as she stared out over the floor.I'd found who I was searching for, and I saw her for what she really looked like."You wanna get out of here, Sally?" Dale asked, his lips brushing the side of my neck. "I know a place we can go to.""No, thank you." Letting go of his wrists, I pulled away from the man, walking off and slipping between the bodies before his shocked expletive could get under my skin.Keeping an eye on the scout, I eased around a couple who were practically mating right there on the floor. I couldn't tell where one of them ended and the other began.Goodness.I passed a high, round top table, plucked up the forgotten, half empty pink drink, and made a beeline for the bar. As soon as I stepped out of the cluster of bodies, I slowed my step and fixed a lax smile on my face as I neared the female. She wasn't focused on me, instead eyeing two young college girls who were dancing and laughing, obviously buzzing. She started toward them.Letting the borrowed glass dangle from my fingers, I tripped, bumping my shoulder against the female.She turned to me in a slow, calculated snake-like movement. Her lips peeled back in a sneer as she lowered her glass of nightshade. To everyone else in this club, her smile appeared normal. To me? I saw the two wickedly sharp incisors on each side of her mouth. Not fangs. Just sharp as an obsidian blade teeth that could tear through flesh."I'm so sorry." I teetered on my high heels as I spoke over the music, placing my free hand on her arm. "Someone bumped me. Ugh. People are so rude."She lifted a single dark eyebrow."What in the world are you drinking? It looks sooo amazing."The female cocked her head to the side as her pale blue eyes drifted over every inch of my body, from the thick red hair and bright lips to the plunging neckline of my strappy silvery dress that showed off more than it hid. She must've approved of what she saw, because a tight-lipped smile replaced her sneer. "This drink is a little too hard for you.""Oh?" I bit down on my lower lip. "I like… hard drinks, though.""Do you?" When I nodded, the female stepped closer. She was my height, so her gaze lined up with mine. "How hard do you like it?""Very hard," I repeated, forcing myself to hold her gaze as I giggled.She tilted her head slightly. "I might have something better for you. You here alone?""My friends already left. I was getting ready to go, but… I think I have another good hour or so left in me.""Perfect." The moment her black pupils constricted was brief and not noticeable to anyone who didn't know better, but I did. I knew what she was doing, entrancing me. I forced my muscles to loosen, for the eager smile that said I was down for anything to slip off my face. I stood before the female, silent… and waiting as she leaned in, brushing her lips against mine as she whispered, "Come with me."She plucked the borrowed drink out of my hand and placed it on the bar beside us, then she took my hand in her cool grasp. Her pace was fast and steps long as she led me around the bar to the staircase.Jackpot.The man standing at the foot of the stairs stepped aside, and one glance at his vacant expression told me he was a human that had been fed on until he was completely under the fae's control. And just as dangerous and unpredictable as the fae themselves.She led me up the wide spiral staircase, her grip tight as she all but dragged me along, turning right at the top to a dimly lit balcony. Downing half of the nightshade, a drink toxic to humans but more like tequila to the fae, she led me to a set of occupied couches and chair. I registered several fae, all with a tranced human by their side or in their laps. It was likely none of these humans were going to make it out of this club alive tonight."Look what I found, Tobias." The female pulled me forward with a strength that didn't match her willowy frame, and I let myself be shoved, even allowed myself to stumble. The fae caught my arm, stopping me from toppling flat on my face.My gaze darted around, and then I saw him.He was sitting on a small, black couch, his arms and legs spread in an arrogant sprawl. I saw the human façade just for a brief second. Pale skin gave way to a silvery tone. Hair and features remained the same. Blond and handsome, he looked like a frat boy with silver skin and pointed ears. He was definitely one of them.And now I had a name to match a face I'd never forget.Tobias.A rush of anticipation shot through my veins, spreading goosebumps all over my skin. It was him. There'd been five of them total and he was one of the three that remained."You always treat me well, Alyssa," he said, his pale blue gaze crawling over my length. "You know how I have a soft spot for redheads.""A soft spot." The female fae called Alyssa let go of my arm. "More like a hard-on."Oh dear.I kept my face impressively blank as Tobias jerked his chin. Oscar worthy, really. Another fae came forward, out of the shadows. He was a tall one and it took everything in me not to flinch as he put his hands on me, skimming them down my front and back, checking for weapons. The fae had gotten smarter in the last two years.So had we.The fae's hands moved up my legs meticulously and then my hips. His fingers glanced over the wide cuffs at my wrists. "She's clear.""Good." Tobias leaned forward. "Come here, Red."I forced my steps to be slow and uneven, and when he lifted his hand to me, I placed mine in his even though it utterly sickened me.Tobias didn't pull me into his lap like I expected. Instead, he rose from the couch. "What time will Aric be here?"Aric? That name wasn't familiar to me; then again, it wasn't like I hung out with these murderous, psychotic Winter fae."You have an hour, tops." Alyssa tossed herself onto the couch. "Make good use of it.""You bet." He circled his arm around my waist, drawing me to his front. He smelled good. Like winter mint. But they all smelled good. They all looked good, too. And this fae was obviously in the mood for more than just feeding, which was what I was betting on. "You want seconds?""Sure," the female fae purred. "If there's anything left."Tobias lifted me up without warning, tossing me over his shoulder like a damn Neanderthal claiming his prize. To go limp scratched at my skin as he stalked across the short distance. A door opened and then we were inside a room that I imagined a lot of very bad things happened in. He kicked the door shut behind us and I heard the lock turn without him touching it.His hand curved over my ass as he lowered me onto the floor. Strands of red hair had fallen in front of my face, and I stood there as he brushed them back behind my ears. "Do you know why I like redheads? No. Of course you don't."I blinked slowly, taking in the room as he let go. There was a chair. A bed that looked… well used. My stomach churned with nausea. But he didn't go to the bed; he went to the throne-like chair with crushed velvet cushions. He sat and stared up at me."Come on. Don't be shy." Those pale eyes seemed to burn. "We're going to get to know each other, aren't we?""Yes?" I whispered.A half smile spread across his lips as he hooked a finger in my direction. "Come on then."I forced a small smile as I shuffled to him. The gasp was real when he grabbed my hips and tugged me down into his lap, causing the skirt to ride up my thighs. He toyed with the straps of my dress, tracing the low v-shaped neckline."You want me?" he asked.That was an odd, unnecessary question. Guess someone had a low sense of self worth or something. "Yes.""You'll let me do anything to you, won't you?"I forced myself to nod. "Yes.""Then touch me," he ordered softly.My jaw clenched as I placed my hands on his shoulders, smoothing them over his chest."Honestly, I really don't like redheads." His hand moved fast, closing around my throat. "I hate them."Oh, hell.He squeezed not too gently, digging his fingers into my windpipe as he drew me forward. His icy breath danced over my lips as I winced at the spike of pain. "Why?" His other hand was on the move, sliding down my spine, going lower. "They remind me of the bitch halfling."I knew exactly who he was talking about.Ivy Morgan—wait, she was Ivy Owens now, having gotten married over Christmas to Ren.Then, before I had a chance to process what he was doing, his cold mouth was on mine. Lips. Teeth. Tongue. It was harsh and brutal, and I wondered if he even knew how to kiss or if he cared. He let go of my throat, and I figured there'd be bruises there later.I held still as he eased the straps of my dress down my arms, fueled by one of the most powerful emotions known to man.Vengeance.I was so close to retribution, I could taste the bitter sweetness of it on the tip of my tongue. It burned through the iciness his kiss left behind.The top slipped, pooling low on my hips and exposing the black, seriously uncomfortable strapless bra. My gaze fixed on the ceiling as his cool lips skated down the column of my throat and then lower, over the swell of my breast. I forced my body to stay loose, accepting even as the tips of his fingers skated over my sides to where the material bunched. His fingers brushed the thin, silver chain that rode low around my hips. Tobias drew back, and I could practically feel his gaze roam over my chest and then my stomach, and I knew what he saw. Not smooth, unmarred skin. Pale, shiny scars that covered the entirety of my stomach. Teeth marks. Multiple ones that had healed and faded to a shade or two lighter than my normal skin. Deep groves made by sharpened claws. All of them a permanent reminder of the night nearly two years ago when the fae who'd supported the defeated Winter Queen had sought bloody vengeance and commenced wholesale slaughter. They hadn't even fed on us. They'd just wanted us to hurt.And we did.The night my mother, who had already suffered so much at the hands of the fae, had died, nearly ripped apart by their teeth and claws.The night I should've died.His hands clenched my hips, digging into my skin. "What the hell?"I lowered my chin as he tugged on the chain and the small, circle medallion pulled free from the dress. I knew the exact moment he recognized the encased four-leaf clover. Tobias knew what that meant.I wasn't under his glamour.Tobias's pale, furious gaze flew to mine. I smiled then. "Remember me?"Powerful muscles coiled underneath me as recognition flared in those eyes, but I was faster than I had been that night, than I had been for my entire life, and the Order had gotten smarter at hiding our weapons. I twisted my right wrist and the wide cuff bracelet disengaged a collapsible iron stake. The deadly metal shot out over the palm of my hand. Clutching his shoulder, I jabbed my right arm out, slamming the iron stake deep into the fae's chest.Surprise parted his lips as he gasped out, "Bitch.""Yeah."Then it happened.As quick as a heartbeat, the sick bastard collapsed into himself as he was sucked back into the Otherworld, locked away and as good as dead to me. Falling forward, I caught myself on the back of the chair, my knees slipping across the cushion. I disengaged the stake, hearing the mechanical click as it folded back into the bracelet.Dragging in a deep breath, I held it as I squeezed my eyes shut. There had been five of them that had found my mother and me. Five of them that had gone after an old woman and her daughter. Three were now as good as dead, and that left two more. A fae and a—An odd thump hit the wall outside of the room, causing my eyes to snap open. Pushing off the back of the chair, I spun around and dragged the straps of my dress up my arms. There was a hoarse shout and then the sound of the door unlocking from the outside was like cannon fire in the room.Damn it. I hadn't planned on anyone coming in this quickly. I needed time to—The door swung open, and terror poured into my chest as I saw who filled the entirety of the doorway. It was….It was the Prince. Page 4 The fae didn't scare me anymore, not like they used to, but this one… this one terrified and enthralled me in ways I couldn't understand. Ways in which I really didn't even want to try to figure out.Air lodged in my throat as his gaze immediately zeroed in on me, and I didn't need to pretend to be entranced. I was frozen, rooted to the chair by invisible vines.I hadn't seen him in what felt like forever, and I wasn't even sure that I had seen him at the hospital after the attack or if that was some kind of bizarre hallucination. I'd been on a lot of powerful drugs. I didn't even know he was still in New Orleans. I'd figured he'd gone to Florida, to the community his brother oversaw.The Prince was what was called an Ancient, fae that had lived for hundreds of years, if not more, and were not only capable of a hell of lot more than a normal fae was, but they were nearly impossible to kill. Stabbing them with iron did absolutely nothing beyond pissing them off. You couldn't send them back to the Otherworld. You had to kill them, and that was only accomplished by separating the head from the body.And good luck with that.Ancients were the most powerful of the fae and they could be Knights or Princesses or Princes or Queens.Or a King.They didn't look like a fae. Their skin wasn't silvery and the point to their ears was hardly noticeable, which enabled them to blend in with humans and escape the Order's detection until it was too late.He was supposed to be good, so why in the hell was he here, at Flux, in a club frequented by the enemy—his enemy?The Prince cocked his golden head to the side while my heart threw itself against my ribs. Did he recognize me? There was no way. I was well disguised, even beyond the wig. I'd discovered that I had a flair for makeup. I basically reshaped the features of my face with contouring and a keen eye and steady hand.He couldn't know it was me, because it wasn't like he'd paid attention to me. It wasn't like anyone paid attention to me. I was a ghost in most rooms, unseen even when I wanted to be seen and heard. That was one thing that hadn't changed after the attack. And it was freaking ironic that the one thing I hated the most about myself, how easily I took to just blending in, had become my greatest asset.I willed my heart to slow, but when he closed the door behind him, my heart launched into my throat. He was supposed to be good, but he was here, and if it came down to fighting, there was a slim chance I'd win.Or land a single kick."You're alone." His voice… God, his voice was deep and melodious, an odd accent that reminded me of twinkling lights and lush flowers. "Are you alone?" he repeated.I let the façade of being entranced slip over me and murmured, "Yes?""Is that so?" He strode forward, coming closer, into the dim light offered by the exposed lightbulb screwed into a ceiling fan. The Prince was…. God, he was strikingly beautiful.Golden blond hair brushed broad shoulders and framed high, sharp as a blade cheekbones and a jaw that could've been carved out of marble. His brow was several shades darker than his hair and his nose straight, aristocratic. Full, expressive lips were currently pressed together in a hard line. There was no glamour to fade away. This was what he looked like, an example of inhuman perfection designed to lure the prey in.My pulse pounded as I kept my gaze level."You were in here with someone."Oh God, there was a good chance I was going to vomit. Just a little. In my mouth."Where did he go?" He was now in front of me, standing a few feet away."I… I don't know?" I said it like it was a question, like I knew humans under a trance would speak."Really?" His voice dripped with derision.A fine sheen of sweat broke out along my skin. Not for one second did he sound like he believed me, so I didn't answer. I stared at his stomach and chest—his rather defined chest that stretched the black thermal he wore."Look at me." His voice was a crack of thunder, and I felt like I was tranced.I lifted my gaze, and I immediately wished I hadn't. I was no short woman, but even if I wasn't sitting down, he would've towered over me. The Prince was around six and a half feet and every inch of him was intimidating. To meet his gaze, I had to tilt my head waaay back.His eyes…. They were the palest blue color that was startling against the blackness of the pupil and the thick, heavy fringe of his lashes. Only a fae had eyes like that.Something flickered over his face, gone too quickly for me to figure it out. "What is your name?""Sally." I rasped out, throat dry."Is it? That's… odd."One of two things was going to happen at this point if he recognized me. Either he wasn't on Team Good Fae and he was most definitely going to kill me, because there was no way I was going to win a fight with a Prince. That would… suck. Or he was going to haul my ass out of here, report what I was doing to the Order, and then everything would be over. I couldn't allow that to happen either. Not when I was so close to finding the last two fae. So close to complete retribution.His hand snaked out faster than my eyes could track. Warm fingers folded around my forearm, sending a jolt traveling up my arm, much like the static charge I got from dragging my feet over a carpet. He eyed the bracelets with a sardonic twist of his lips. Would the Prince recognize what they were? I wasn't sure.Then his gaze lifted to mine as he folded two fingers under my chin, guiding my head farther back. A sound rumbled from him, reminding me of a very animalistic growl. My stomach hollowed. A long, tense moment passed and then he pulled his fingers away from my chin."So, Sally, I am confident that you entered a room with someone I am looking for." His thumb slipped over the skin just below the cuff I wore. "Those outside told me he was in here." He paused. "Then again, those outside this room are unable to tell me anything else."What did that mean?I thought about the odd thump against the wall. Had he done something to the fae out there?"He was in here and now

because it was sort of true. “He’s not going to be down there forever. He’s coming back.”I wondered if there was something wrong between him and Fabian. “Is everything okay with you guys?”“Of course.” Tink dropped Dixon’s paw and pinned me with a look that said he couldn’t believe I’d actually asked that question. “Fabian not only thinks that I’m the most amazing creature to walk this world and beyond, he’s so in love with me, it’s adorable.”My grin grew as I reached over and scratched Dixon behind the ear. “That’s good.”“Speaking of love, how was your date?” He changed the subject as he plopped down on the pillow beside mine and crossed his legs, leaning back against Dixon’s fluffy belly.“Date?” I almost laughed right in Tink’s face. As if I ever had a date. Kind of hard meeting people when you were a member of the Order, knew that fae existed outside of Disney and fairytales, had a twelve-inch brownie who sometimes was people sized and often crawled into my bed when he was Tink sized—wait. His brows lifted. “Oh, it wasn’t that good. Nothing to write home about.”Tink folded his arms. “You lied to me. You didn’t have a date.”“I—”“You went hunting instead, didn’t you?” His little mouth pursed with irritation. “You went hunting for one of those fae who hurt you, but you didn’t want me—the most awesome of awesome company to ever be blessed with—to tag along.”“Tink—”“Not only am I freaking awesome, I am also pretty damn badass. If you go out there hunting those fae, you take me with you. I can help.”“Tink—” I tried again, no point in lying. He knew what I was doing. He was the only one to figure it out. “I know you’re awesome company, but the moment they saw you, they’d know what you were. That would kind of throw a wrench into everything.”“Oh, yeah, and you ending up dead or worse would also throw a wrench into everything.” Tink leaned away from Dixon. “What you’re doing is dangerous. If Ivy knew—”“Ivy’s not going to know. Neither is Ren or anyone else,” I told him. “Look, I get that you’re concerned, but I don’t want you out there, putting yourself at risk. You’ve already done so much,” I told him, meaning it. “You saved my life.”Tink shook his little head as he stared at me, gaze somber. “I didn’t save your life. I found you. That’s all I did.”“You still saved me.”“No,” he said, louder this time. “It wasn’t me who saved you.”I opened my mouth, unsure of what to say. The way he said that struck me as odd, but before I could say anything, he spoke again.“Did you find who you were looking for?”“Yes.”“Did you take him out?” Tink asked, holding my gaze.“Yes,” I whispered.Tink smiled then. “Good.” Page 7 Miles, the leader of the New Orleans branch of the Order, called first thing Monday morning with a request that both confused and interested me.The Summer fae had requested a meeting with the Order, but Miles couldn’t spare any of the essential members to go see what they wanted.Since I was not considered an essential Order member, I’d been assigned the task to figure out what they could possibly want.Tink was passed out in the living room next to Dixon, so I didn’t bring him along with me. Granted, I could’ve woken him up, but the fae treated Tink like he was some kind of golden calf to be worshipped, and Tink’s head was already overinflated, adorably so.So, that’s where I found myself Monday morning, staring at the beam of sunlight that shone through the large windows of the office inside Hotel Good Fae, keeping the room nice and toasty despite the chilly March temperatures outside.That’s what Ivy called this place, and it did remind me of a hotel—a really glitzy, mammoth hotel. To humans and even to the Winter fae, Hotel Good Fae appeared to be nothing more than an abandoned power plant on St. Peters Street.Based on the old maps I’d found in my mother’s past research clutter, I suspected all the strange markings of places that couldn’t or shouldn’t exist were more well-hidden communities.This might not be the only one.Hotel Good Fae was a massive structure set up a lot like a hotel. Several stories tall with hundreds of rooms on each floor and sprawling communal areas outfitted with multiple cafeterias, theaters, shopping, gyms, and even space for a school of sorts, the compound had the ability to house thousands of fae. The Order had no idea exactly how many fae lived in this place, something that I knew disturbed Miles and the other Order members.The kind of power and magic the Summer fae used to glamour the building was astonishing.It was a good thing they didn’t want to feed off humans and seemed to like us, because if not, we’d be so screwed.Then again, I knew that Prince Fabian fed, supposedly on willing humans who knew what he was, because he didn’t age and was capable of extraordinary actions. I assumed that his brother, the Prince, fed too.Tugging on the neck of my chunky cable-knit sweater, I was beginning to think I would melt in this office before anyone showed up. The sweater had been perfect for when I was outside and it covered the bruises on my neck, but now I was sweltering in it.If Ivy hadn’t been in Florida with her husband handling some kind of super-secret mission, she’d be here, sitting in the Hotel Good Fae, acting as the liaison between the Order and the fae. Not me. She was better at handling these types of meetings, and right now, the best needed to here, because things between the Summer fae and the Order were tense.I found myself staring at the long, narrow desk in front of me as I waited, smoothing a blonde strand of hair back into the ponytail. The surface was free of clutter. Just a large desk calendar and computer monitor. An iMac. My desk at home looked like maps and books had thrown up all over it. I couldn’t even see the top of my desk, let alone use the keyboard to what was definitely not an iMac.I used one of the guest rooms upstairs for my office, which was perfect, because I could close the door on the room and pretend that a hoarder didn’t live there.Nervous energy filled me as I dropped my hand and ran my fingers along the neck of the sweater. My throat was still tender and I knew it probably would be for a couple of days. At least the weather was cool enough to wear a turtleneck.Got to look on the bright side.Pressing my lips together, I dragged my gaze from the empty desk just as I heard footsteps outside the room. I dropped my hand. Seconds later, the door opened.The Summer fae known as Tanner strode into his office. His real name was totally unpronounceable, as were the names of most of the fae who lived here. Almost all of them, including the woman behind him, had adopted human sounding names. Even the Winter fae did that, because I doubted Tobias had been that bastard’s real name.Tanner drew up short when he spotted me sitting there, as did the female fae called Faye, who was carrying a file. Odd reaction considering when they saw me, I looked like I normally did, no wig or heavy makeup. No façade.I was Brighton today even if I… I didn’t feel like her.I only saw the mask Faye and Tanner wore for a second before the humanity seeped away and I saw them in all their fae glory. The only thing that hadn’t changed was their hair. Both were dark haired, but Tanner’s was salt and peppered, proving that he was aging like a human while Faye was younger, her hair a deep flaxen color.“Ms. Jussier.” Surprise colored Tanner’s tone as he crossed the room and stopped in front of me, offering his hand. “I am surprised to see you.”“Brighton,” I corrected him as I glanced at his outstretched hand. The moment of hesitation didn’t go unnoticed by Faye. The shrewd female cocked a dark eyebrow. I took Tanner’s hand, shaking it as firmly as humanly possible. I didn’t even know why I hesitated other than just being weird—and I was weird. A lot. “You know you can call me Brighton.”He squeezed my hand affectionately. “Goodness, Brighton, I haven’t seen you in ages. I’m… I am so sorry to hear about your mother and for what happened to you.”I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been in this office or to Hotel Good Fae, but it was before the attack.“Merle was an amazing and unique woman,” he continued, his tone and pale blue eyes full of genuine sorrow, and I wasn’t surprised he said that. He and several of the Summer fae had attended her funeral. “She is greatly missed.”The next breath I took got stuck in my throat. I pulled my hand free, placing it on the velvety arm of the chair I sat in. I opened my mouth, but found that I couldn’t speak as sorrow and anger threatened to rise up and smother me. I couldn’t let that happen. Not here.Clearing my throat, I pushed away the messy emotions and focused. “Thank you. My mother enjoyed knowing you.”“She did?” Tanner chuckled as he stepped back from me and turned to his desk. “Your mother was a hard woman to win over.”“She had… trust issues,” I explained, shifting in the chair. “But she trusted you. Both of you.”As crazy as that sounded, it was true. Mom actually liked Tanner. I thought she might’ve been developing a crush on the fae, which sounded absurd considering what she had been through, but she really did like Tanner.A faint smile crossed Faye’s face. “And we consider that a great honor.”Nodding, I wished that the bitter, razor edged ball of emotion that now sat heavily on my chest would just go away. It was time to get this meeting underway. “I can tell you weren’t expecting me. Ivy was unable to make it. She’s with—”“Prince Fabian in Florida,” Faye finished, standing a few feet from me beside the end of the desk. “We are aware that Ivy isn’t available, but we thought they’d send… someone else.”I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I kept my face blank as Tanner sat behind the desk. “I’m sorry, but Miles is busy with the new recruits.”“I imagine he does have a lot on his hands.” Tanner smiled, and he was always smiling politely. It was like his face was permanently fixed that way. “But we expected someone… higher up.”Heat crept into my cheeks as my hand on the chair became rigid. They knew. I glanced between the two fae, feeling the warmth travel down my throat. They knew that Miles had sent me in for the meeting, because, in all honestly, he was too busy to deal with Tanner and, at the end of the day, didn’t really care enough to pull any of the members off the street or out of training. That was why I’d been sent in, because in Miles’s eyes, I had disposable time.I wasn’t remotely essential.I lifted my chin. “I can assure you that I, like every other Order member, has been born and raised within the organization. In reality, I’m more knowledgeable about anything that has to do with the Order than Miles.” I wasn’t being a braggy-mc-bragster either. That was the damn truth. That was my job at the Order. The researcher. The reader. The studier. I was the Willow in an army of Buffys and Angels. “I can assist you with whatever it is that you need to speak with us about.”“I’m sorry,” Tanner was quick to reply. “I didn’t mean to insinuate that you couldn’t handle this. It’s just that….”“What?” I lifted my brows, waiting.“You’re uncomfortable around us,” Faye stated plainly. “Which I can completely understand with what happened to you—”“What happened to me is irrelevant.”Faye’s gaze softened just a little. “I can smell your anxiety. It reminds me of woodsmoke.”Now my face was on fire. Was it truly that obvious that I was anxious? “You can smell my anxiety?”Faye nodded.Well, that was something I never knew and that was somewhat creepy.“And you’re gripping the chair like it’s some kind of lifeline,” Faye pointed out. “It’s like you’ve already forgotten that two years ago, we fought beside the Order and pushed the Queen back into the Otherworld.”Tanner tensed at the mention of the Queen. Couldn’t blame him. I’d never seen the Queen, but from what I heard, she was a whole bucketful of nightmares.“That we lost many good fae that night,” Faye continued. “And it seems you’ve also forgotten that the biggest betrayal did not come from us, but came from within the Order.”“I haven’t forgotten.” How in the world could I? Betrayal had come from the top of the Order, starting with David Faustin. He was the head of the New Orleans Sect, keyword being was, and his betrayal had spread throughout the Order like a virus, infecting nearly everyone. Those within the Order who hadn’t died at the hands of the not-so-friendly fae, the Winter fae, had done so at the hands of those they’d trusted.I exhaled roughly as I eased my grip off the arm of the chair. “I….” I started to apologize but stopped and decided to be as bluntly honest as Faye. “I was raised to hunt fae and taught that there was no such thing as a good fae. And yes, there were some members of the Order who knew of your existence, but the majority of us didn’t know that the Summer Court had escaped into our world after the war with the Winter Court, and were just trying to live their best lives as human. If anyone had suggested two years ago that there were good fae out there, fae who weren’t feeding on humans, I would’ve laughed straight in their face.”Faye’s jaw hardened, but I wasn’t done. “And you know damn well the Winter fae, those still loyal to the Queen, far outnumber you all. Two years, Faye. That’s all I’ve had, all many of us had to come to terms with the idea that not all fae are evil incarnate. So, yes, the fae make me uncomfortable. Just as I’m sure we make you uncomfortable.”“Of course some of you make us uncomfortable, considering there are still some Order members who want to kill us,” Faye shot back.“I think what Faye is trying to say this whole time, is that we have a fairly serious issue, and we’re worried that your… uncomfortableness may get in the way of helping us resolve this issue.” Tanner folded his hands on the desk. “That is all.”Okay. Wow. This was getting awkward. “May I be painfully honest?”“Of course.” Tanner sat back.“Besides Ivy and Ren, there is not a single member of the Order who isn’t uncomfortable around the fae or may be somewhat prejudiced by all their years fighting fae who want nothing more than to enslave mankind and destroy them. Even Ren isn’t exactly going to be rolling out the red carpet, and his wife is half-fae,” I said, holding their stares. “So, if you’re worried that my uncomfortableness is going to be an issue, then you are going to have the same problem with any Order member besides Ivy. Either you tell me why you wanted a meeting with the Order or you wait until Ivy gets back. Your call.”“It’s not just that we make you nervous.” Faye tapped the file on her denim-covered thigh. “It’s also that we scare you.”My head snapped in her direction. “You do not scare me.”“Is that so?” she murmured.“That’s so. And just to clarify, the anxiety you’re sniffing isn’t because of you two. I’m just an anxious person ninety percent of the time. You guys make me uncomfortable, but you do not make me anxious or scared. There’s a Mississippi River’s worth of difference between the two.”A measure of respect filled Faye’s eyes. Not much, but I saw it.“Well then, we will make do, won’t we?” Tanner said.Slowly, I turned back to him, thinking he sounded like he had as much faith as I did that Tink wouldn’t create a mess by the time I got home. “I guess so.”“We needed to speak with the Order because we’ve been noticing a disturbing trend.” Tanner took the file Faye handed to him. “Over the last month, several of our younglings have gone missing, and we fear the Order is involved.” Page 8 All right, I wasn’t expecting that.He opened the file, and I could see a glossy colored photograph of a young man—a young fae. “As you know, many members of the Summer Court do not venture outside these walls. It’s not something that we prohibit, but many find everything they need provided for them here.”I nodded absently. The fact that most of the Summer fae remained within the hidden, sprawling compound worked perfectly for us. It often meant that the fae we encountered on the streets weren’t the friendly neighborhood sort.“Some of the younglings want to experience the… human world and all it has to offer. It has become a sort of rite of passage in a way.” Faye propped a slim hip against the desk. “They always keep their loved ones in the loop and they’re never gone too long.”“Four in the last month have not come back,” Tanner said grimly. “Their parents and friends have not heard from them and the last we’ve seen them is when they left.”I took several moments to process this. “When you say younglings, are we talking about children size, teenagers or early twenties?”“Children size?” murmured Faye, blinking rapidly.“All four are in their late teens, early twenties,” Tanner clarified. “These are their photographs and identification.”Watching Tanner display four photographs along his desk sort of stunned me. I started searching for the right thing to say and ended up giving up as my gaze glanced off what were similar to driver’s license photos. “You’re sure they’re missing?”“Unless they’re here and currently invisible, yes,” Faye replied dryly.“That’s not what I meant.” I scooted forward, getting a better look at the four young fae. All male. Each one named underneath his smiling photo. They were young, probably early twenties, and handsome. I was willing to wager a bet they were even hotter with the glamour and probably were having the time of their lives in the Quarter. “This is New Orleans. There is a lot of stuff they can get into. Crazy stuff.”“We understand that. Many of our younglings do… have an enjoyable time, but they are always in contact with their loved ones,” Tanner stated.I lifted a brow. “A lot of younger people get caught up in the party scene here. They meet new people—” And hopefully don’t feed on them. “—and they lose track of time. The city swallows people whole, and I don’t mean that in a bad way—” I sort of do. “—It often spits them back out, exhausted and ready to make better life choices, like, for example, keeping your parents up to date on your whereabouts.”“Do human children not keep their parents informed of their whereabouts, for days if not weeks?” Tanner asked.I pressed my lips together to stop myself from laughing, because I could tell that was a genuine question. “Some do, but not nearly enough.”“Human offspring may have a lack of respect and courtesy toward their elders, but our younglings do not.” Hardness seeped into Tanner’s tone. “Our offspring are not raised that way.”“Pretty sure eons of human parents have said those same exact words.”Faye cocked her head. “Be that as it may, that is not the case with our younglings.”Glancing between the two, I shook my head as I chose my words wisely. They thought… they thought the Order was going to be concerned about missing fae, even fae from the Summer Court? As terrible as it sounded, I knew that the Order could freaking care less. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what this has to do with the Order.”Tanner didn’t respond immediately. “There is a burgeoning concern that they were… mistakenly targeted by the Order.”Tension crept into my muscles. “Are you suggesting that these young fae are not missing, but were killed by the Order?”“As I said, it is a burgeoning concern and hopefully, a misguided one,” Tanner said slowly. “But there have been incidents in the past two years where innocents were slaughtered.”He was right.Before the war with the Queen and the reveal of the Summer fae, the Order had been ‘kill first and most likely never ask questions’. There had been no such thing as good fae. Things were different now. Complicated. “There are new protocols in place, Tanner. The Order does not blindly dispense justice. Any fae targeted by the Order is monitored now and based on whatever evidence gathered—”“You and I both know that most Order members operate on the basis that the Summer fae do not interact often, if ever, with the human populace.” Faye’s pale blue eyes glinted. “They assume that every fae they see on the street is the enemy.”I stiffened. “That is not the case.”“Really?” Faye challenged. “Solomon posed no harm to humans and he was slaughtered.”Solomon was a fae who’d been killed a year ago, having been wrongly identified by one of the newer Order members.“That was a mistake, a terrible mistake, and I’m sorry that it happened.” And I was. I wasn’t remotely okay with any innocent being killed, fae or human. “But that doesn’t mean that is the case with these guys.”“There hasn’t been just one mistake,” Faye pointed out.“I know that.” There’d been… several mistakes. “And I wish there was something I could say or do to change that, but—”“But the Order is trying to adapt. We understand that and we also understand that this is a learning period for all of us,” Tanner said, ever the diplomat. “We know that many Order members have died with the new protocols in place.”Many had.Six times more than any Summer fae who had been injured by the Order. Taking the time out to make sure you were killing the right fae proved to be a wee bit dangerous. We’d lost the upper hand and the element of surprise. By the time we’d figure out if a fae wasn’t on Team Human, the fae realized who we were.The Order had been nearly decimated two years ago, and we hadn’t been able to rebuild our numbers.Which was why Miles was always busy with new recruits.“Is it possible that these fae chose to go off the grid?” I asked, toying with the neck of my sweater. “Perhaps they don’t want to live here. There’s a big world out there, and some of them that live here have to be interested in seeing it. Especially since they watch our TV shows and movies, read our books and magazines. As nice as this place is, maybe they wanted to experience the world beyond these walls, this city?”Tanner stared at me like he hadn’t considered that.Silence crept into the room. Faye shattered it as she reached over, picking up a photo of a dark-haired fae. “This is my younger cousin. His chosen name is Benji. He’s been missing for a week, and I can assure you that he would not do that to his mother. Not after his father died two years ago, fighting the Queen.”My stomach twisted as I focused on his picture.“This is his friend Elliot, who went missing about two weeks ago. Benji had told his mother he was going to look for Elliot,” Faye continued. “He disappeared since and we haven’t heard from either Elliot or Benji.”“I’m… I’m sorry,” I whispered, lifting my gaze to hers. “Truly, I am.”“Then help us,” Faye said quietly. “You will help us find my cousin and these young fae if you feel sorry.”“All we want is to know if the Order has any idea what happened to them and if they could possibly keep an eye out for these younglings.” Tanner spoke up as Faye looked away, her throat working. “Kalen has been out there, searching for them with no luck.”I jolted at the mention of the fae who’d worked closely with Ivy and Ren. I’d assumed he was with them and Prince Fabian.“I can help,” I said after a moment. “Can I have those photographs?”Tanner nodded.“I can check with the members to see if any of them look familiar.” I wasn’t sure if any of the Order members would fess up if they had anything to do with these fae. They were supposed to, but I was learning in the last two years there was very little consequence for these types of situations. “I can also make sure they keep an eye out for them.”Faye handed over the photo of her cousin to Tanner, and he closed the file. Rising from the desk, he walked it over to me. “We appreciate anything the Order can do.”Nodding, I took the file and stood, hoping that none of the Order members recognized these young men. If they did, it probably meant they’d met a tragic, unfair ending.The meeting was officially over. Faye and Tanner were quiet as they led me out of the office and down an empty wide hall. Upon entering the building, I’d been escorted through the front and not the amazing courtyard, and it looked like they were leading me to the front once more.As we neared the cafeteria area, I began to see more fae. Some lingered outside the wide archway, others walked to and fro, in small groups or alone. Most didn’t pay any attention to me. Others looked on in curiosity while some stared with outright distrust as we made our way to the grand, brightly lit lobby that truly reminded me of an upscale hotel.“Please contact me directly, whether or not you have any information,” Faye said as we passed several occupied couches and chairs. “I will.” I reached into the pocket of my purse, searching for my phone. From here, I was going to have to Uber it back to headquarters over on St. Phillip Street. I glanced over at Faye, and could see the worry etched into her face. The concern tugged at my heart. Lord knew I had this same kind of wretched experience of living through the disappearance of someone you loved and not knowing what happened to them. The desperation was the worst, the need to do everything and anything to find them, but not knowing if what you were doing was right or would even help.Faye was experiencing all of that.Stopping, I reached over and placed a hand on her arm. The contact surprised her as she swung her head toward me. “I’m sure your cousin is fine.”Faye held my gaze. “I hope so. After losing his father….”A slight frown pulled at my brow as Faye trailed off. She tilted her head slightly as a hush descended over the lobby and then she turned back to where we came from. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Tanner turn back as well. “You should leave now, Brighton,” she whispered.An acute shiver danced over my shoulders and the tiny hairs along the nape of my neck rose as I stared down at her dark, bowed head. Don’t turn around. Keep walking. That’s what I kept telling myself. I was done here, and Faye was right, I should leave now.But I turned around, because some primal instinct inside me already knew who had arrived. And some insane, disturbed part of me just had to see him.The Prince had entered his lobby, dressed very much like he had been Saturday night. Dark pants. Dark thermal. He wasn’t looking at Tanner or Faye or any of the other fae.Pale, ancient eyes fixed on mine. He didn’t recognize you. That’s what I kept telling myself as a wave of goosebumps spread along my flesh.I took a step back. Wrong move. Oh God, total wrong move.The Prince’s eyes narrowed.Tanner murmured something in his native language, and the Prince spoke. I didn’t understand a single word he said, but his voice was deep and booming and yet quiet somehow.The fae turned to stare at me, because the Prince… the Prince hadn’t taken his eyes off me.My heart hammered in my chest as I opened my mouth to say what, I had no idea, because the words turned to ash on the tip of my tongue as the Prince strolled across the lobby, heading straight for me.

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