

Flames of Rapture - Sample

Book 1 in the Carnal Fever Trilogy

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*I dedicate this book to the people who supported me the most. You know
who you are.*

Prologue

The night held its breath as Gabriel approached the wrought-iron gates of the Siphon estate. It was the perfect night for a Becoming. The tension before the storm spoke volumes through its stillness. As for storms, this seemed to be the only little plot in the whole state of Massachusetts that wasn't currently riding one out. That could mean only one thing: the Siphons had a storm nymph in their employ. A powerful one, too.

The gates opened of their own accord. Gabriel stepped back in surprise. An earth nymph? Or did families this wealthy have electric power running through their whole property? Aware that he was likely being watched, he strolled casually through the entrance with his most confident swagger. This was just another Becoming, something he knew well. The fact that it happened to be for the most powerful succubus family in the country should matter little.

The heavy knocker resembled entwined lovers. Gabriel ran his thumb over a smooth metal thigh before pounding it heavily against the door. An old man, ungloved, greeted him. The man gave no response to Gabriel's introduction, saying only, "This way, sir."

The house was in line with expectation. Erotic paintings lined the

walls, which were all painted a deep shade of red. Elaborate statues adorned ornate pedestals.

Gabriel's boots clanged on the hard stone floor as he was shown into a sitting room full of luscious sofas. Unlike the doorman, everyone in this room was gloved. Seven people, all clearly resembling each other and connected through strong pulses of blue light, chatted quietly from different corners.

"Thank you, Marty. You can go fetch the others now," the eldest male said.

"Congressman. It's... a pleasure," Gabriel said, extending a hand to the man.

"Derek. Please," the man responded in a pleasantly deep voice. "We're all family here."

Dressed in fine clothes like the rest of his kin, Congressman Derek Siphon stepped forward to take Gabriel's hand between both of his own.

"Welcome to my home. I've received several recommendations of your services."

Suddenly glad he'd put a shirt on under his leather vest, Gabriel stood up straighter.

"I'm sure I won't disappoint," he responded with a grin; an expression which turned out to be more forced than casual. The congressman smiled back knowingly. Gabriel, so used to being the center of any room, flushed slightly under the man's gaze. It was disconcerting being surrounded by so many of his own kind, he mused, as he took in the rest of the gathering.

"And your daughter?"

"Upstairs asleep. We'll wake her shortly. But first, let us get to know one another. My wife and I were just ruminating on what motivates someone so young to appoint himself with this noble responsibility."

"I had a bad time during my own change," Gabriel explained, accepting the congressman's offer to sit.

"I was alone. I didn't even know what was happening to me. Thought afterward that maybe someone should be looking out for those of us that had the bad luck of being born into human families."

The woman sitting across from him looked away at this comment, but the congressman moved forward in interest. “And how many of those have you found? How many Becomings have you presided over?”

“Eighteen. I try to stay on the move. Always looking. But I’m sure there’s many I’ve missed.”

“Certainly,” the congressman said. “Since moving into the public limelight, we’ve had at least a dozen runaways show up at our doors. It’s good work you’re doing, son. It has been a generation since anyone came along with your particular talent.”

“It’s not talent, sir. Just practice, and passion.”

“Yes. Like my late grandfather. You have taken up an honorable mantle, doing this work. It’s important to look out for one another. Especially in these times. I encourage you to connect these lost souls with me and mine. If you have addresses...? I could write them myself.”

“I don’t know,” Gabriel said. “Not sure I should share those without asking.” He cringed at his potential rudeness, but the congressman waved, as if to say *no matter*.

The woman Gabriel presumed to be the man’s wife rose to her feet. She retrieved something from above the fireplace and brought it to him.

“Well regardless, in appreciation for your role in our daughter’s Becoming, we’d like to gift you this.” Gabriel ran his fingers over the handprints on the surface of the box, surprised at such an offering.

“You know how to use it?”

Gabriel nodded.

“Then may it assist you in your work.”

“Should I open it now?” he asked.

“Later. Now, we have other business,” the man boomed as five new people were escorted into the room. He lowered his voice to add, “But I hope you know... you always have friends here. And so does anyone else you find. Additionally, I hope you know the contents of this box are for *our* eyes only.”

“Of course, sir.” Gabriel ran a thumb along his jaw as he turned to take in the newcomers. The two women were decorated with delicate

stone jewelry, and the men had vines woven through their hair. Stone nymphs and wood nymphs. He could work with that.

“Shall we?” The congressman said once they’d completed their introduction.

Leaving the rest of the family behind, they entered a grand hallway.

“My daughter will of course be familiar with the process. You will merely be assisting her, not educating her,” he explained, leading the party up a spiral staircase. “We have a dedicated room for the event, in fact. Though once a member of the household turns, we never re-enter it.”

Stopping outside a bright red door, he added, “Which means this is where I leave you. After it’s done, our butler will assist you with anything you may need for the next couple weeks. This floor is yours, along with the kitchen at the end of the hall. When she’s ready, we’ll greet our daughter with dinner in a grand celebration, which you will all be welcome to attend. See you in a few weeks.” He shook Gabriel’s hand, patted his human friend on the shoulder, and departed.

Gabriel cast one look over his party, contemplating how each person might best be useful, before pushing open the door. The room was beautiful, with a fireplace at each end and a four-poster bed in the center. Everyone hung back as Gabriel approached the object of attention. The woman rolled over in her sleep, a frown on her face. She looked about the right age. Maybe nineteen? Her long blond hair was soaked in the same sweat which covered the rest of her. She’d clearly tried to apply makeup, but it now dripped down her face.

Gabriel took out a handkerchief and began to wipe her clean. Leaving her eyes closed, she showed she was awake by saying prettily, “I thought you’d never get here. I’ve had to entertain myself all day.”

When he was done drying her, she sat up and took in the rest of the new arrivals. Gabriel watched hot red light flash between her and several of the other members. He knew who she would choose before she said it.

“You.” She pointed at one of the dryads. “Come here.” The wood nymph smiled widely as he approached the woman, who was now kneeling at the edge of the bed. She kicked the blankets away, leaving

her body visible through her wet nightgown. The man grew hard just looking at her, causing the woman to smile.

"I've already had a child and received copious instruction regarding sexuality. This isn't going to be new to me, understand?" she said as he reached the edge of the bed.

Gabriel could tell this was going to be a challenge. This woman was clearly hoping to remain in control of the situation, which was exactly the opposite state he needed her in if he was going to help her transition painlessly. Gabriel took a seat next to her on the bed. Removing his trusted leather gloves, he decided there was no time like the present to work his magic.

Leaning into the woman's ear, he said huskily, "That's not exactly true, is it? That this isn't going to be new to you? Before a Becoming, a person has no interest in sex. You may have read books, and even reproduced, after what I imagine was a boring one-night rutting. But you've never experienced this."

He stroked one finger against the bare flesh of her arm. She sucked in a breath. "I think you should experience it, before you give it," he whispered, biting at the lobe of her ear. "You'll enjoy it more if you know exactly what it is you're doing to someone." She turned to look at him, her face and neck growing flushed. He slid a finger under her shoulder strap and freed one breast. Reaching down to twist his fingers around her nipple, he felt his touch slowly penetrate her whole body.

It spread first to her lips and fingertips; a pleasurable sensation that made her breathing turn to a quickened pant. It traveled down her spine, managing to leave her chilled and warmed at the same time. As it reached her core, she couldn't hold in the sound that escaped her. She arched her back in a sudden jerking motion.

Sliding her knees apart on the bed, she clenched her thigh muscles, rocking her pelvis. Gabriel, able to feel every inch of her now that he'd made contact, observed the pressure building inside her. He felt the exact moment that the convulsions began. And with the little control he had over such things, tried to draw them out.

Normally he would stop at this point, leave her wanting more, but this woman needed to practice losing control. To increase the inten-

sity, he climbed behind her and slid a hand down her body and under her nightgown. Pressing his bare hand directly against the warm, wet flesh between her legs, he held her firmly with his other arm below her breasts.

She cried out as she convulsed back against his chest. He didn't let up; taking her as high as he was able.

Only when she'd completely lost herself and he didn't think she could take any more, did he withdraw his attentions, allowing her to collapse back against the bed as the aftershocks subsided. Making small sounds of contentment, she kept her eyes closed for a full minute as her breathing returned to normal. When her lids came open and she fixed her gaze on the wood nymph still standing at attention in front of her, Gabriel saw the deep red of raw desire flash from her to him. The light this time seemed pure; the fire in her eyes full of promises.

Toying with the inside of her own thighs, she slowly ran her hands upward and slid the gown up over her head. Letting the nymph look for only an instant, she pulled his gaze to her face with the words, "My turn."

She sat back up in front of him and extended a hand to his lips. The man's face changed as he took the woman's finger in his mouth. She stared back at him intently, looking equally satisfied by the experience.

Removing himself from the scene, Gabriel leaned casually against a bedpost to watch. Observing the woman's unconsciously writhing body, and look of raw, carnal desire, he knew he'd done right. And so the night began.

Outside, far in the distance, he could hear the branches snapping and leaves whipping in the storm that someone very powerful was holding at bay.

Chapter 1

A farm girl

Sadie entered the open doors of her neighbor's barn, pausing to show her usual respect to Tina, the young cow. Having been there at Tina's birth, she always made sure to acknowledge her whenever she dropped by. Sadie reached to rub behind the cow's ears and the animal pushed her head into the touch, throwing her a contented, big-eyed smile.

The commotion on the far end of the barn, however, pulled at Sadie's attention.

Jimmy was shoveling fresh hay into the nearest stall, sweat glistening off his naked back. He turned as she approached, and she swore she saw him tighten the muscles of his abs. Only he really didn't need to flex to show off his form; they were well into adulthood now and he had more than grown into himself. He worked with his body every day, after all, caring for both his parents' farm and assisting hers. He was plenty to look at. What she didn't understand was why he cared what she thought. He'd never been vain. It was just one of his many new behaviors that had her on edge.

"Having fun?" she asked, looking at the load of work still left.

"Shoveling hay? Always. But if you've come to hang out, I could use a break," he said. He kept his gaze on her as he picked up his

shirt to wipe his face and chest. Yep, this was another day of him being weird around her. She swore that every time she dropped by these days, he was trying to display himself like a rooster in spring. It must just be part of the weird mating habits she'd observed in her peers. Men in spring must display naked, sweaty body for passing females, even when said females are their entirely sexless best friends.

"Mom sent me to bring home Betty."

"Yeah, she's been up there an hour." They both turned to look at Betty's favorite wooden beam, from which the chicken was even now looking down on them.

"But she's so content there, I suppose we could let her stay a little longer." The chicken clucked along to Sadie's comment, as if to say she agreed with the plan.

"I brought you back your comics." Sadie swung the backpack off her shoulder and tugged it open while Jimmy went to kick open the cooler and pull out two beers. He twisted off both caps and handed her one as they squeezed together to share a seat on the cooler.

"And? What'd you think?" he asked as she laid out the comics on the flat surface created by their legs.

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't know. They seemed a little far-fetched. I mean, honestly. Why would Emilia have gone with Luis, when she had far more compelling reasons to trust Alejandro?"

Jimmy touched his favorite books affectionately.

"Perhaps because life is full of hard choices made on a bed of soft information," he said, in a direct quote from the comics. His familiar dark eyes looked so serious for a moment. Then he saw her watching and smiled.

"That's why I like them. In the moment, I can always understand each character, why they made the choices they did. Even if people can be foolish about other people sometimes." He looked intent again. He swept her curls over her shoulder and out of their lap.

She liked when he did that. It was as if her curls were his curls, like there was nothing in the world they didn't share.

"Well, I don't envy Emilia her choices, that's for sure."

Sadie was glad to see his expression return to normal as they

argued all the minutiae of the plot and characters. And for once, it wasn't her who broke the moment.

"We should get Betty back to your mom before she starts wondering where you are," Jimmy said. She laughed and downed the last gulp before saying, "Don't worry, my mom will just hope we're making out. These past few years, she's gone from not wanting me alone with you to finding any excuse to send me over here. I think she's concerned by my lack of dating interest."

Jimmy, suddenly alert, gave her an unreadable look.

"I told her you were dating Kate though, and that—"

"Actually, we broke up," he cut in.

Damn. She had been happy he was finally dating someone. It removed the unspoken pressure from their friendship. Though Kate frequently took a lot of his time and didn't like for him and Sadie to be alone. That was a drag.

"Sorry to hear that. What happened?" Sadie wished her tone sounded a little more sorry.

Jimmy gave only a shrug in response, then broke the silence with, "Well I think your mom should be happy to have the daughter she has."

"Definitely. I was a good student. I'm a good farmer. And one day, when I take over the family farm, I'll already be best friends with the neighbor. Though I've gotta say now that it's over, you're going to need to pick a better wife than Kate. I can't say I'll approve of any woman who won't let us drink a couple of beers alone together."

"Noted. I'll make sure she gets your full approval," Jimmy said, reaching to clink his drink against hers.

"I think she's just stressed that her only child will never give her grandkids," Sadie said, still wanting to talk about her mom. "But since you're practically like her son, you can give her babies."

"Oh thanks, Sadie. No pressure. I think your mom is spending a little too much time breeding sows," he said, tossing their beers in the tub nearby.

"Clearly," Sadie said, before looking him up and down and laughing at the thought of her mom breeding him. "You'd probably make a terrible sow anyway, you'd get bored laying around all day."

He surprised her with an offended look before saying, "But you forget, if I was a sow..." He stepped into a nearby stall and emerged with a little piglet. "I could spend all day with little piglet-wiglet's with their noses so tiny..." His voice traveled slowly from its normal deep tone to a prepubescent squeak, as the words became mostly incoherent. Sadie could just barely make out, "-cute-little-kissable-feet..." before it was all just cooing noises.

While she watched her best friend hold the piglet in one hand and rub noses with it, she felt a sudden pain in her stomach, a deep longing for things to just stay the same between them. She hated this growing-up. Life became so stressful when everyone around her suddenly became interested in romantic relationships. And though she didn't want Jimmy like that, she also really didn't want to lose him.

"But things might still change for me." She broke in on his moment with the piglet. "I might give her grandchildren, I mean. I'm only twenty, for god sake. It's not like I'm an old hag."

"Hey, hags aren't always old. That's just a stereotype," he rebuked, hugging the piglet one last time before returning her to her mother.

"How would you know? When would you have ever met a hag?"

"I got it from the human species class I took last spring. Remember? The one you rejected in favor of another math elective?" he said.

"It was one class! Will you never forgive me for taking one class different from you?"

"I had to study with Matt Shmitt. All he wanted to do was tell me about chicks he'd nailed. I'll tell you what, I promise to ensure all future wives and girlfriends approve of our relationship if you never leave me alone again with Matt Schmitt."

"Deal. Now go find your ladder so I can get Betsy."

"Dad has it. He's fixing the roof. I say we do this old school." Jimmy squatted down. Sadie just assumed he was joking and so made no move to climb onto his shoulders as he was suggesting. When he didn't budge, she gave a loud guffaw.

"There's no way you can lift me."

"Are you saying I'm not strong enough?" he challenged up at her from the squat.

"I'm saying I'm too big for you. I'm not the scrawny kid I used to be."

His eyes flitted quickly over her curves before looking away. Sadie, not sure what to make of him these days, pretended not to notice. She opened her mouth to break the awkward moment, but he cut in. "Tell you what, if I can't stand up, then I will muck out your chicken coop this week. But if I can stand up, then you have to come with me to the party that's happening down by the river tonight."

Sadie threw her head back in exasperation at the thought.

"Those people don't like me any more than I like them. Those parties are always exhausting. Why do you even want to go?" Before he could speak she added, "People always like you less when I'm around anyway."

He shrugged. "I just thought it would be something fun for us to do together. Besides, those girls just picked on you because they were immature and you were an easy target. But that was high school. We're a year older now. And why are you always so sure people aren't going to like you? It's like you decide before they do." Then before she could launch her typical counterattack he added, "The bet is that you have to go with me, not that we have to stay long. If it blows, we'll leave."

Sadie shifted uncomfortably for a minute, thinking about just how smelly that chicken coop was at the moment, before giving a groan of reluctant agreement. She stepped forward and swung one leg over his shoulders, grabbing the top of his head for stability. He wobbled dramatically as he started to stand, but with an exaggerated roar of effort, lifted Sadie's head until she was staring at the surprised face of Betty.

Sadie grabbed the chicken harshly, as if Betty had intentionally conspired with Jimmy.

With Sadie and Betty aboard, Jimmy turned to face the barn doors.

"Well, let's get this chicken home." he said, taking a firm hold of Sadie's knees.

"Put me down!" Sadie said, squirming on his shoulders.

“But I could do this all day. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Where to, Betty?”

Sadie thought he was really going to carry her out of the barn like that, but at the last minute he turned to face away from the pile of hay nearest the door and let them all fall straight backward onto the semi-padded bed. Betty gave a loud squawk; launching herself out of Sadie’s arms. Sadie’s initial squeak of surprise turned quickly into laughter. Jimmy’s head, now resting on her abdomen, looked up at her as he rotated onto his stomach.

“Betty’s never going to forgive us for that,” Sadie scolded.

“I think she will next time we feed her.”

She agreed.

Neither of them made an effort to get up immediately, and as Jimmy continued to look up at her something strange happened. Sadie became acutely aware of Jimmy’s body between her legs. It was a peculiar feeling; something she couldn’t explain. They had wrestled a hundred times over the years, and never had she felt something like this. It was a kind of heaviness in her thighs, a warmth in her stomach. She didn’t want him to move. He seemed equally reluctant to dislodge himself, and when she relaxed into their position, he followed her lead. His weight settled over her as he reached up to pull a piece of hay out of her hair, casting her a serious look.

In the post-commotion silence however, they seemed to become aware at the same time of a third person breathing. They both cocked their heads to listen. It seemed to be coming from somewhere underneath them.

They jumped up. Jimmy tore away the top layer of hay just to the left of where they had been laying. Sadie gasped as a strange woman’s head appeared, her blond hair mixing with the hay stuck to her sweaty face. She looked up at them in fear.

“Please,” the woman croaked out. Her voice sounded dry and raspy, as if she had just emerged from a week-long trek through the desert with no water. “I just needed a place to rest.”

Jimmy moved to finish uncovering her.

“No! Please. No one else can see me.”

“Who are you? What is this?” Sadie asked.

"Nobody. I was supposed to meet someone here." She paused with her eyes half-shut. "They never showed."

"What's wrong with you?" Jimmy asked in genuine concern.

"Nothing. Hungry. I'm a water nymph. Bonded to the Atlantic Ocean... been away too long."

"The Atlantic? That's a far cry from Washington." *What could have brought her to the pacific northwest?* Sadie wondered. "I thought water nymphs could never leave their bonding site; like earth nymphs."

"We can. Just not for this long," the nature feeder said.

"How long since you've fed off your site?" Jimmy asked, suddenly in action mode.

"Ten days," the woman wheezed. "I was supposed to meet someone at your river nearby. Four days ago."

"What could be so important that you wouldn't have gone home by now?" Sadie inquired, a little harshly given the woman's fragile state.

"I have to deliver something." The woman appeared to weaken; laying back into the hay.

"We have to get you home," Jimmy said. "You're putting your life at risk."

"No. Can't leave yet."

"I'm getting help," Sadie said.

"No!" The woman sat up, grabbing hold of Sadie's waist. "You can't. You can't let any more people know I'm here. Please." Given her emaciated state, Sadie was shocked at the strength of the woman.

"Okay," Sadie assured her; afraid she might hurt herself. "But let us help you."

"Just let me stay here a few more days. I'll stay out of sight. No one will know."

Jimmy and Sadie exchanged skeptical looks. "Can I get you something?" Jimmy asked. "Is there medicine...?"

"Water." The woman spoke the word like it was the name of God, and relaxed back into the hay. Sadie sat down next to her and looked the nymph over with concern, while Jimmy disappeared. She closed

her eyes completely then, apparently having decided to trust the humans.

Sadie looked from her gaunt face to her tattered clothes. What could possibly cause this woman to put herself through this?

Jimmy returned with a large bucket of water and a hose. The woman's face lit up as water poured from the hose to the bucket. Then at the look on her face, he turned the stream to flow directly onto her. For about a minute, her body just absorbed the liquid, leaving the hay around her dry. When she seemed content, and the hay began to soak, he finished filling the bucket and left to turn off the flow.

"We should move you to the old pig stall," Jimmy suggested. "That one over there. It'll be empty for a while. I can't ensure that none of my younger siblings won't come running through here, but I'll try to distract them for a few days."

"Thank you." The woman pulled herself awake just enough to give them both a small smile; a smile that didn't quite touch her eyes.

"A WATER NYMPH. From the ocean! Think of how powerful she must be to be bonded to such a large body of water. I didn't realize nature feeders of her kind could be so far from their bonding site," Sadie said. They were picking their way through the woods toward the river so she could make good on her agreement to go to the party, and it was a challenge to keep their animated chatter quiet enough that they wouldn't be overheard.

"Should we tell someone? She could be dangerous," she added, looking over her shoulder.

"She didn't look dangerous. More of a danger to herself. But if she doesn't head home in the next few days, I'll bring Ma into it."

"I just wonder if we should even be helping her. I mean, we don't know anything about what she's doing here, or her reasons for staying hidden. What if she's smuggling something deadly?" Sadie said, stopping on the edge of exiting the trail. They could hear talking and laughing.

"Anyone that afraid must have her reasons. My instincts are to

help her.” Jimmy responded, pulling up next to her and placing a hand on her shoulder. “Can we give her a shot?”

Sadie bit down on her lip; looking in the direction of the commotion ahead, then back to Jimmy. Her feeling of concern slowly faded into an awareness of the person in front of her. Why did it feel strange to be standing so close?

Rejecting her desire to step in closer, she said, “First this party, then a half-crazed water nymph... what are you going to get me into next?”

Taking his hand like it was any other day, she led them toward the smell of food and fire. Neither of them had ever actually been to a bonding party before. Given the fact their small town had no human feeders and only a smattering of nature feeders, neither of them had ever been to any non-human ceremony whatsoever. But they both knew you were supposed to bring a gift for the guest of honor and deliver it with well wishes.

Unfortunately, the guest of honor was Ina, and Ina was a part of the grove posse. There were four earth nymph families in the area, and they’d all decided to have children at the same time. The gang of all girls happened to be the same age as Sadie, and were as inseparable as they were exclusive. Their families often supported the crop growth in the many surrounding farms, and the girls, now women, had a way of letting Sadie know that they were infinitely more interesting and important than she.

The dynamic between them began to develop back in middle school. She had been friends with Ina at that time. Sadie had never quite been able to pinpoint what had happened to shift things between them, but she vaguely remembered that *someone* had said *something* about *someone*. And someone had definitely said something back. She also thought that she vaguely recalled the falling out wasn’t particularly her fault.

Lost in her own memory, Sadie didn’t notice her parents’ appearance in front of them. They had just emerged from the trail and the party was in full swing. She quickly let go of Jimmy’s hand as if they were still children, getting caught engaged in *inappropriate affection*.

“Ahh, look at you two,” said her mother, a curvy white woman

with a mane of auburn curls, the spitting image of herself. "I'm so glad to see you out, sweetie." She wrapped one arm around Sadie's shoulders, pulling her in to kiss the top of her head. Sadie always liked this affectionate greeting of her mother's, but in this setting it slightly embarrassed her. She wiggled away and murmured something about Jimmy making her come out. The comment successfully diverted her mother's attention onto him.

"Heading out so soon, Lillia?" Jimmy asked her mother mid-hug.

"Ahh well, Don's hip is acting up," she gestured at Sadie's father; a bearded man leaning heavily on a cane, "but you kids have fun tonight. This could be the only bonding ceremony any of us go to for a while, now that little Ina has reached maturity."

Jimmy pulled Sadie reluctantly forward. "We promise to make the most of it, Lillia."

"And remember to offer your congratulations!" her mother added.

"Can we get that part over with?" Sadie asked him, side-stepping a running child as they left her parents behind.

"I was going to suggest it. Figured you'd be antsy until it was over."

The party had a sizable turnout. It seemed half the families in town had some representation present. Ash River lay just out of town, and the site was a common gathering place for big events. Embedded in the woods, it was equipped with an abundance of barbecue pits, all currently lit, and makeshift seating. Ina's mother, the most powerful among the local nymph families, had grown several small trees into elaborate benches. For her daughter, the guest of honor, she had made an intricate chair of entwined living branches and woven flowers.

Ina stood out to the eye as they approached the crowd. Her seated form was surrounded both by gifts and by the elaborately dressed presence of her friends. All four women had flowing gowns and flowers in their hair, but Ina was dressed simply; looking radiant only in her happiness. Cassie Ash was draped over one side of Ina's chair, talking to her friend in a joyful tone.

"I always knew you would develop eventually. In a family like

yours, there was no way you could be human,” Cassie said, as if she was an authority on all things. “And you know what they say, late bloomers blossom brightest. And look. Bonded to a whole patch of woods.” She recrossed her legs and smoothed out her elaborate dress. “Even your mother only has three trees. But we should’ve known you’d have a powerful bonding. I mean you have the strong mother and the late blooming. Both of those are good signs.” She spoke almost without taking breath. “We’re going to miss you though, being so far out of town and all,” Cassie brushed a strand of Ina’s hair behind her ear, “but we’ll visit each other every day. Especially while we’re building you a house out there.”

“Actually, I was thinking—” Ina dropped her sentence as she noticed their arrival. Cassie’s expression also changed into what Sadie always interpreted as aggressively bored annoyance. It was the same old look she was used to from her. Sadie directed her attention at the surrounding posse in an attempt to be friendly. She nodded first to Cassie Ash, her biggest critic.

“Cassie. Ilda.” She said their names. Her forced half-smile turned to the Canopy twins. “Marisa. Sarah.” She bobbed her head to each of them.

“Ina.” Sadie’s voice turned small in her throat as she said this last name. “Congratulations.”

Stepping forward, she held out a basket of freshly laid eggs. She felt someone take it out of her hand and heard Jimmy offering his own blessings as she and Ina looked over each others’ faces. The two women looked similar in some superficial ways: of medium height, with dark brown eyes, sun-dyed skin, and auburn hair falling in curls around their shoulders. People used to think they were twins when they were together, but Sadie had never seen it. All of Ina’s features were small, and somehow matched her quiet personality. Sadie had always liked Ina’s face, and seeing it again brought back good memories.

Remembering they didn’t like each other, Sadie straightened her back and withdrew a few steps.

“Thanks Sadie,” Ina responded in an equally small voice. Sadie put a hand on Jimmy’s back to depart.

Steering him away from the group, she directed them toward a barbecue pit. The smell of a chicken being roasted drew them onward.

The owners of the local pharmacy were tending this pit. Sadie also recognized her fourth-grade teacher, who was standing next to the pharmacist's daughter. Their friends and neighbors. If only she knew how to talk to them. As she and Jimmy nestled themselves into the circle, the crowd made room for them to join without pausing conversation.

"I tell you. Every year we hear about more and more attacks," the south end baker was saying.

"It's just the news! They're always fear-mongering," her teacher responded in exasperation.

"It's the human feeder population growth," someone else chimed in. "I heard they've gone and doubled their population over the 20th century. Of course there would be more conflict."

"It's true there are a lot more of them these days. When I was growing up, I met not more than two of 'em in my whole youth. Now when you turn on the television, it's like they're everywhere. And these attacks..."

"Did you hear about the one back east? It was somewhere along the Atlantic Coast. A group of feeders moved into a small town and slowly drove everyone crazy. They can do that you know? Some of them can. And then one of the humans they were feeding on went and shot up his whole family. Terrible tragedy."

"Yeah. Terrible," people agreed.

"It's a new world coming," one person said.

Sadie leaned into Jimmy's body as he put an arm around her.

"Yeah. A new world," someone else agreed.

"Times are certainly changing," the baker concluded.

The conversation went quiet while the chicken crackled and dripped into the coals. Sadie felt she should care more about the happenings of the larger world, but it all seemed so far removed from daily life. After all, they didn't even have human feeders in their town. And apart from the handful of wood nymph families, they had no other nature feeders.

Not that anyone here was afraid of nymphs. It was human feeders, after all, who were the scary ones. Bonding to nature was one thing, but feeding off human emotion... well, Sadie at least agreed with her neighbors on this one, powers like that sounded scary.

But it was easy to feel overwhelmed when thinking about such things, and it was equally as easy to forget about them entirely. Which is precisely what she did, as the comfort of fire and distant chatter mingled with the crisp night air. Relaxing for the first time since they'd arrived, she softened against Jimmy.

When the conversation picked back up, it was to focus on who was having babies. Wanting to avoid being a part of such a topic, Sadie drew Jimmy to the next pit, despite the fact no one had yet spoken to them directly and she had no reason to believe they would.

Hours passed with them floating on the edges of different circles. Occasionally Jimmy chimed into the discussions, but Sadie never spoke to anyone and found only one-word responses to the few direct questions sent her way. After getting some food in their bellies and taking a brief walk down by the river, Jimmy agreed to leave.

"You should've gone without me. You would've had more fun," Sadie said as they walked through the dark trail back home. Solar bulbs, charged up from the long day, glowed softly on either side of them.

"No, don't say that. It would've been no fun without you," Jimmy said.

"I just never know what to say to any of them. They must think I have no opinions of my own," she said.

"Then they'd be wrong. And it's not always so hard, is it? You're fine around my family. And me of course."

"With you, I'm always fine." Sadie stopped them so she could face him. All evening she had been staying especially close to Jimmy. She told herself it was for comfort, but there was no denying that there was something else going on.

There was a buzzing under her skin and a knot in her stomach she normally associated with public speaking. Wanting again to be as close as they had been in the hay earlier that day, Sadie stepped forward hesitantly. Jimmy's brow furrowed in a look Sadie interpreted as

concern, but he didn't withdraw. He stood strong against her when she pressed both her hands against his chest. Sliding them up around his neck, she stepped into his solid form.

With a mix of confusion and impulse, she drew him into a hug. His cheek felt warm against hers and the same wave of pleasure she had felt earlier, swept through her. As it travelled to her stomach, however, it became a wave of nausea. She swayed on her feet and held on for balance.

"You okay?" Jimmy's voice came out in a tender whisper.

"Yeah. Sorry. I think I might be coming down with something. I've felt strange all day."

"Let's get you home then," he said, reaching to take her hand. This time, however, Sadie avoided his touch.

She focused on the path ahead as a shiver of unease crawled over her flesh and pulsed uncomfortably in her gut. Sadie felt like the host of a war of impulses, only she didn't recognize either side. There was one thing she was sure of, though. She was definitely coming down with something.

Chapter 2

A fever

Sadie couldn't remember what had been happening in the dream that had just woken her, but it must have been a nightmare, because her heart was pounding and she was covered in cold sweat. Rolling over into a ball, she cupped both her breasts in her hands. This seemed to quell some of the ache.

What was happening to her? Was it just that time of the month? She decided it must be when she noticed the wetness between her legs, but discovered in the bathroom that she wasn't bleeding at all. She stumbled back to bed, where the night passed in something resembling a drunken haze.

Sadie began to feel mildly more coherent when the morning broke and her mom came to find out why she hadn't come downstairs. She explained it was cramps and suggested she stay in bed for a while. Her mom agreed and asked her if she was up for any breakfast. At the churning in her stomach, Sadie squirmed away from the idea. Declaring she wasn't hungry, she managed to be left alone for most of the morning, during which time the situation only seemed to worsen.

It must have been mid-afternoon, according to the light wafting through her curtains, when another knock came at her door. Sadie mumbled some response.

"I hear you're not contagious," Jimmy said as he pushed open the door with a tray in one hand and a book in the other. Sadie sat up and wiped some of the sweat from her brow.

"Your mom said you need to eat something, or you'll just end up worse off in the end."

He sat on the bed and smiled down at her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Sadie tried to pull her thoughts and emotions into some coherent form.

"Oh, you know, just normal menstrual stuff," she said. With some men, this response might have been enough to turn off further inquiry, but this was Jimmy she was talking to.

"Have you been throwing up? Do you want a heating pad?"

She propped herself up against the wall and smoothed out the blanket in front so he could place the tray in her lap. She saw his gaze fall on her sweat-soaked white T-shirt, but made no move to cover herself up.

"No. I'm plenty warm. As you can see." Her voice came out in an uncharacteristically husky tone, as she toyed with the small hollow at the nape of her neck. Sadie watched him intently as she leaned down to suck a bite of eggs off her fork, suddenly ravenous.

In an equally uncharacteristic move, Jimmy dropped his gaze, flushing slightly.

"Well, I can read to you... I brought the next issue," he suggested, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Sadie didn't respond verbally. She was looking over his body and trying to remember her most recent dream. She was sure it had something to do with Jimmy's hands, and that smooth patch of skin right above his hip bones. That had definitely played a role somehow. She remembered he had a little scar above his right hip from that time they'd jumped into the river and he'd hit a sharp rock. She wished she could run a finger along that scar now.

When she continued to respond only through eating and looking at him, he slowly opened the comic and cleared his throat.

He began to read.

She cut him off.

"Do you remember that time, years ago, when you were down by the river alone?" Her words sounded slow and far away, as if she'd drifted back to dreaming and the scene was just about to shift.

"You were leaning back against a rock with your eyes closed, touching yourself. I ran into you there."

"What?" He looked alarmed at her question, but she was sure he remembered, because he swallowed hard and she saw his breathing increase drastically.

"You opened your eyes when you heard my foot snap a twig, and you pretended like you'd just been about to go pee, but I'd been there for a few minutes, watching. At the time, I just thought it was fascinating and couldn't seem to take my eyes off you. I think I would feel differently if that happened again now."

"Sadie, I..."

"I never do that," she said. "Touch myself, I mean. What does it feel like?"

The book fell out of Jimmy's hand and landed in a flop on the floor. Her mom pushed open the door.

"How are you kids doing? Ah, you got your appetite back I see. Good for you, dear." Her mom lifted the tray off her lap, as Jimmy bent down to pick up the fallen comic.

"Is it too warm in here?" her mom asked, touching Jimmy's forehead.

Sadie awoke from the moment and felt a sudden embarrassment at her comments.

"It's too warm for Jimmy, but not for me," she said. "He should probably go anyway though. I think I need some more sleep."



ANOTHER DAY and night passed like this. Sadie told her parents she didn't want any more visitors, not even Jimmy.

Especially not Jimmy, she thought. Though she did go back and forth in her emotions between dreading seeing him again after what she had said, and hoping he was going to come crawling into her bed any minute.

At the end of the second day, her mom began to become concerned.

"Maybe we should have Doctor Harris take a look at you."

"No. I'm fine really. It'll probably be all gone by tomorrow," she told her mom frantically, trying to look like she was on the edge of getting better. She wasn't even sure exactly from what she was trying to recover. Clearly this wasn't her period. She just couldn't seem to focus her thoughts, and her body wavered between a kind of panting, sweaty excitement and an exhausted nausea. Maybe it was a strange kind of flu; some new strand. In which case, a doctor should probably take a look at her.

Though something stopped her from saying so. She was embarrassed at the thought of talking about *all* her symptoms with the elderly doctor, and she was sure that no permanent harm could come from a little nausea.

By the time the third night fell, she was desperately grateful for the solitude that night brought. With no one there to constantly ask her how she was feeling, Sadie could let herself get lost in her feelings; her increasingly feverish dreams.

She rolled over in bed to discover it was now made of hay. For a minute she was afraid she was alone, until she saw Jimmy wiggle out of the nearby stack. He moved to rest on top of her and she spread her legs to wrap around his waist. She arched her back in order to press against him, a feeling of intense pleasure rippling through her body. Sadie moaned his name as the dream shifted into a dark bedroom.

"Yes. It's me," she heard him whisper, before she slowly became aware that she was awake again.

"You're here," she said, trying to pull herself free of the tangle of blankets.

"Yeah. I need your help," he said. "The water nymph. I think she's dying."

"What?" Sadie sat up. She had completely forgotten about the nymph.

"I had planned to tell my parents about her yesterday, but she threatened to take her own life, and even half-threatened to harm my family if I told anyone."

Sadie kicked out of bed and began to search for clothes in the dark as Jimmy continued to fill her in.

"I don't know what she might be capable of and I'm scared. I don't really think she wants to hurt anyone, but she seems incredibly desperate. I've been taking her food and helping her down to the river every morning. She says she needs to be there at dawn to meet... *someone*, but *someone* never comes. Then she stands in the river to replenish her energy, but it's been working less and less. It isn't her river. We need to force her back to the ocean, but I can't seem to talk any sense into her."

Sadie had never heard this kind of fear in Jimmy's voice before. It brought her sharply back to reality. Putting on a sweater and some gloves to protect against what was sure to be chilly predawn air, they crept out her window and did the usual hop from tree branch to ground.

"Well, clearly, whatever plan she has brewing isn't working. If we can just figure out what she wants, maybe we can help her make a better plan," Sadie said, almost back to her usual tone.

"Better plan than dying in my family's barn anyway."

As they approached the broad red doors, Jimmy shook to life a flashlight.

"Psst. Ocean," Jimmy called. "That's what I've been calling her since she refuses to give her name," he whispered over his shoulder at Sadie. "I've brought my friend with me. Don't be alarmed."

They approached the stall cautiously. Sadie half-expected to see a crazed animal by the way Jimmy had been speaking about her, but the tiny woman curled up in the hay looked almost like a child. She barely acknowledged them when he opened the door. He squatted down next to her.

"Do you remember Sadie?"

"I failed." The woman choked out in a high-pitched whine. "We failed. Should have been here earlier."

Sadie sat next to her, bumping into the nymph's backpack. The woman pulled it tight to her body, away from Sadie.

"What is all this, making you take this risk?" Sadie asked softly.

"Secrecy is key. Never know who to trust."

"How much longer can you stay here? Waiting for this contact?" Sadie asked.

The woman didn't answer.

"We've kept your secret so far." Sadie added.

"Take me to the river," she said, half-opening her eyes to look at Jimmy. He sighed and exchanged a look with Sadie, as if to say, *this again*. He hoisted her up as she clutched her bag. Sadie continued to try to reach her.

"What will you do if they never show?" she asked as they walked. The nymph never answered any of her questions, and when they began to descend the trail to the riverside, she collapsed entirely into Jimmy's arms. He hoisted her up, and looked a question at Sadie.

"First the water, quick. Then we can take her back to the barn and get her some help." Jimmy hurried down the trail as Sadie pointed the flashlight ahead of them. When they reached the waterside, he didn't hesitate to splash into the dark depths and lower the woman in. Sadie watched frightfully as the woman continued to remain still. After a minute though, her leg twitched. Her head shot up out of the water as she gasped, throwing two arms around Jimmy's neck.

"Where is it? Where's my backpack?"

Sadie, in an attempt to do anything to calm her, ran back up the trail to fetch it from where it had fallen.

"Take it," she cried.

"What is it?" Sadie asked.

"Don't know. The key."

"The key?" Jimmy asked.

"To stopping the war." The nymph could barely speak now, her words were nearly inaudible.

"Andre Amadi," she said so lightly that even Jimmy could barely hear it. "Give it to no one, but Andre Amadi."

Sadie screamed as the form melted in Jimmy's arms. The woman's flesh turned slowly to water and he was left holding only her clothes.

"Holy shit!" he said, scrambling backward in terror.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Sadie said as she launched herself forward to grab Jimmy's shoulders. When he was safely out of the water, he relaxed backward into her arms.

"Is she dead?" Sadie asked.

"I think so." Jimmy was panting.

"Did you know that's how it happens?" she asked.

"No."

"We just saw a woman die. Possibly aided in it," she said, voice choking on the word *die*.

They continued to stare at the river in shock for several long minutes, until Jimmy asked, "What should we do?"

"We can't tell anyone," Sadie said. "We don't know what this woman was involved in, but it sounds dangerous. We don't want anyone to come asking questions. She chose this. She chose this to protect whatever is in that bag."

They crawled to the backpack and pulled it open together. The only thing of interest seemed to be a marble box, which explained why the bag had been so heavy. Sadie lifted it out and placed it in her lap. The box was just big enough to have two handprints covering its lid. The thumbs and forefingers made a triangle shape in the center, with all the other fingers splayed outward.

After confirming it was impossible to simply open the box, Sadie shoved it back in the bag and donned the backpack. They sat on the edge of the river for what felt like ages, neither speaking. Sadie wasn't sure what they were waiting for. Maybe it was them who were now waiting for this magical person to show up and remove this burden from their care. Maybe they were both afraid of returning to regular life after what they had just witnessed, but the sky lightened as they sat.

"I'll hide it under my bed until we can figure out what to do with it." Jimmy broke the silence.

"Okay," Sadie agreed, hearing the weak sound of her voice and feeling like she might cry.

"Hey," Jimmy said, moving closer to put an arm around her. "You alright?" The past few days had been an emotional rollercoaster, and Jimmy's increased nearness did nothing to calm her.

Sadie stood and put some distance between them. "I'm fine. We should probably get back home before anyone wakes up."

They gathered up the water nymph's worn outfit and agreed to

have a private funeral for her at some point, but for now they would hide her clothes as well. They walked back toward the farms, switching off the now-unnecessary flashlight. The presence of a few birdsongs lightened the somber mood, or perhaps contrasted with it.

As the fear of the moment wore off, Sadie found her previous condition returning. Memories of all her dreams over the past several days were coming back to her, finishing with an echo of her words to Jimmy in her bedroom.

"Wait." She grabbed his arm just as they were about to emerge from the trees. "Can we talk?"

"Maybe we should finish this conversation later, after we get more information, and after we get some sleep." He said.

"No. I mean about me? And us? And what's been happening."

He looked suddenly wary.

"I know I've been a little... different... the past few days, and I need some time to figure out what it means, but I'm sorry for the way I talked to you earlier. In my room..."

She hoped he understood so she didn't have to repeat any of it. He nodded. "S'okay." Stepping closer, she searched his face.

"You were definitely in a mood," he added.

"Yeah," she said.

It wasn't obvious to Sadie how to interpret the look Jimmy wore, nor was it clear if it was her moving into him or the other way around, all she knew was that in that moment, on the edge of the woods in which they had grown up, she desperately wanted to kiss her best friend.

A branch snapped as if someone had stepped on it. They both jumped and looked to their left. The forest felt suddenly very uninviting, and a twinge of fear crept up Sadie's back.

"Let's get out of here," Jimmy said, grabbing her arm and breaking into a fast walk. They both increased their speed until they found themselves running. Sadie passed him the backpack and hauled herself up the tree outside her window. Jimmy waited until she was inside before turning away. She watched him until he was out of sight, heading back to his own bedroom to pretend that nothing more had happened that night than the restful sleep of a young man with a long

day of farming ahead. Now all Sadie had to do was put on an equal show of pretending as if her body wasn't going totally insane.

She decided to replace her bed with a hot shower. Stripping off her outer layers and her now-extremely-dirty pajamas, Sadie stood in front of the bathroom mirror. She examined herself, wondering how it was possible that she could look the same as she always did.

Something had changed. Something was happening to her. She admitted that now. Her real reason for not wanting to see a doctor was out of fear of finding out exactly what it was. Was it connected to the nymph? Had the woman somehow cursed her? Made her ill? Or was this all just a big coincidence? Maybe these were just natural hormones; hitting her system late in puberty; heightened by new and strange circumstances.

All she knew for sure was, if she didn't want Dr. Harris involved, she had to go downstairs for breakfast. Moving like some kind of zombie, she forced herself to bathe, brush her hair and teeth, don her best summer dress, and put on a smile. She thought she looked quite nice when she did a quick check in the mirror. A perfectly normal, happy daughter.

Her parents were both relieved to see her, and her mom immediately assured her that she shouldn't worry about helping out at the fair. She should take a day to recover fully. Sadie brushed that off. The midsummer festival was always a big event. Normally, she would help her parents set up their produce booth, then go off with Jimmy to help sell caramelized apples from his family's farm. If everything was normal now, she saw no reason she shouldn't do the same this year.

Which is how an hour later, Sadie and her parents were awaiting the bus in front of their house, stacked crates full of produce in front of them. Growing up, they always gone to market by horse and carriage, but when the federal government lifted some of the restrictions on resource extraction a few years back, the town had bought exactly five trucks and three buses.

No one had wanted to buy more after the nymphs had brought pictures of the extraction site to the town hall, but Sadie had to admit that getting around on festival days was a lot easier now. She coughed as the bus fumes hit her face.

The large vehicle was trailing a wagon to pick up the goods of all the nearby farms and they were clearly the first stop since the wagon was empty. The driver hopped down to help them load up. The driver's son, Clay, was also helping out today.

Clay was a few years older than Sadie, and built like he spent all day helping his dad load and unload cargo. He frequently paid her extra attention whenever they ran into each other. Usually, his gaze on her made her uncomfortable, but today she couldn't have been happier to see him.

Her dad, leaning back on his cane, directed the loading. When Sadie picked up a crate of lettuce, however, her mom stopped her.

"We got it, dear."

She waved her mom away and headed toward the wagon.

"Is everything all right?" Clay asked her. She passed the crate up to where he was standing in the back of the wagon and looked him over with the same interest he was directing at her.

"Everything's great," she said. And she meant it. She had never felt so good. It was as if her body had just woken up after a lifetime of sleep. Swaying her hips as she walked away from him, she looked back over her shoulder. He smiled at her. She smiled back, then had to put a hand on a crate to steady herself against another wave of nausea.

No. Not now.

She climbed up into the bus and took a seat directly across from Clay. Sadie watched his face as he made small talk with her parents during the two-minute drive to the Baker household next door. Her meditation on his jaw was broken only when the bus came to a halt.

Glancing at her parents, Sadie realized then that she had been avoiding looking directly into their faces all morning. What she saw there surprised her. They were both watching her intently, with matching looks of concern. They relaxed their faces under her gaze; her father looking away and her mother putting on a smile, but it was too late. Sadie knew they were worried about her. Why exactly, she wasn't sure. Was she behaving that strangely?

The Baker family consisted of Jimmy, his parents, and a hive of younger sisters. The youngest two girls had managed to get their fine dresses as dirty as possible before even departing for the festival. Sadie

expected nothing less and smiled at the sight of them. When her eyes fell on Jimmy, however, her body jolted unexpectedly. They exchanged serious looks as she climbed out of the bus to help them load up.

The world felt increasingly far away, as if someone else had taken the wheel and put her on autopilot while she was hidden deep inside herself, feeling increasingly like a rabid animal about to break free. She sat far from other people each time they reboarded the bus, until it was too full to avoid it. For the final leg of the trip, she sat directly in between her parents and stared only at her hands resting in her lap. She told everyone she was feeling motion sick, which she thought might be true.

Sadie watched her hands moving as they helped her parents set-up their booth and unload all the crates. She heard her voice exchange words with a variety of people. She put herself at the cash register ready to help make a few sales. She knew she should avoid Jimmy, and told her parents she'd prefer to stick with them.

She sold people lettuce and cucumbers and cherry tomatoes for some amount of time. It was deep into the morning when a man approached the register. He didn't look local. He wore a leather vest, frayed at the edges around his bare shoulders, and leather gloves. His dark hair made a nice contrast against piercing blue eyes. He flashed her a devilish grin that seemed entirely out of place in the context. Everything about him captivated her attention, and she felt present in her body for a moment.

"Um, is that all?" she asked, nodding to the vine of cherry tomatoes he'd placed in front of her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, leaning casually against the table.

"What? Fine. How are you?"

"A little hungry," he said with a wink.

"Well, these tomatoes might hold you over, for a bit," she rambled, sounding a little breathless.

"For a bit," he agreed. "And what'll hold you over, I wonder?"

She swallowed.

"Umm. That'll be four dollars," she said.

He dropped a five-dollar bill and backed away in an alluring swag-

ger, sucking a tomato off the vine. It wasn't until he turned away from her that she noticed there was another person trying to make a purchase. The woman followed her gaze and whistled.

"He's something isn't he? I'd be distracted too." Sadie's eyes snapped from the man to the woman. She had on a low-cut baby blue shirt and red lipstick. Sadie looked her up and down, eyes darting from the woman's waist to neck to hair. She felt almost nauseous when she looked at the woman's lips. Strangely, she found she wanted to reach out and run her finger along them.

"Sorry. I..." Sadie backed away from the register and called out to her dad to take over. She moved to sit down on the edge of the booth where no one would bother her. When she'd caught her breath, she decided she should take a walk. Sadie wasn't up for talking to anyone else just now.

She stood up to find her mom looking at her. When she said she'd be back later, her mother stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. Grabbing her attention with her gaze, she told her daughter softly, "I'll be right here, if you need me."

Turning away from her mom's serious expression, Sadie walked out into the crowd. The colorful dresses of people on a festival day swarmed in front of her eyes. Her feet carried her through the throng while her gaze danced from person to person. She needed something. She wasn't sure what it was exactly, but it seemed to be in the swaying hips of the woman in the cut-off shorts walking ahead of her, or in the eyes of the young man checking her out as he passed. It was in the smiles and smells and mere presence of many of the people around her.

She spotted the man in the leather vest leaning against a tree. There was a young woman attempting to get his attention, but he was staring intently at Sadie. She looked away. After a minute, she glanced behind her to find the man was following. She attempted to increase the speed of her walk, but felt a little unsteady on her feet. Averting her eyes from anyone she recognized, she started to focus only on the ground in front of her as she trudged onward in search of something undefinable.

A pair of feet appeared in front of her. She tried to walk around

them, but they stepped to remain in her path. She looked up. It was Ina Birch.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Sadie? Can you hear me?"

"She's drunk," said a voice to her right. Sadie turned to see the grove posse girls sitting around in lawn chairs, watching her. The sweet smell of the corn on the cob they were consuming filled her nostrils. They appeared to be laughing at her.

"Little early in life to be drunk and alone, don't you think?" Cassie choked out through a guffaw. Sadie felt herself swaying and widened her stance to keep herself upright. Looking back at Ina, she stared blankly at her old friend's button nose and tiny lips. Her hair hung long down over her chest. It was so pretty. Unbearably pretty. Sadie ran her fingers through it. She heard the laughter increase.

"She's wasted."

"Or high as hell."

"What's going on here?" a familiar voice said. Sadie turned toward the sound of Jimmy, before noticing a small crowd had gathered around them.

"Hi," Sadie choked out breathlessly. "It's you," she breathed, placing a hand on his chest.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?" He asked, handing off his tray of caramelized apples to Ina and placing his hands on either side of her waist to steady her. He asked her another question, but Sadie couldn't make out the words. The sounds around her seemed to blur as she leaned toward him. Her skin tingled as the whole world melted. She brought her lips close to his and breathed in the smell of his skin.

"I wouldn't recommend that," a voice said sharply in her ear, as two large, gloved hands pulled on her shoulders. She regained some awareness as she turned to face the man in the leather vest. She stared into his hansom face and found herself suddenly closer. Had she leaned in? Her gaze was still fixated on his mouth when he cupped a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her lips to his.

Her body exploded with sensation. She melted against him as pleasure traveled from her lips to her thighs, pounding hot between her legs. An excitement built rapidly in her and she wanted to be even

closer. When he began to withdraw, she rocked forward into him. He let her kiss him a moment longer, before pushing her back forcefully.

Holding her at arm's length with a firm grip on her shoulders, he looked over her face.

"It's time," he said.

The world snapped back into focus. She felt more steady on her feet and suddenly keenly aware of the watching crowd.

"The hell?" Cassie said, no longer laughing.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me," Sadie said, directing the words first at no one in particular, but then back at Jimmy, who was looking at her with such a frightened expression she wanted to reach out and hug him.

"Now that you're feeling better, let's get moving. We can talk on the way," said the man in leather.

"What? Who the hell do you think you are?" she asked, pushing him away from her, suddenly angry.

"A friend," he said calmly.

"A friend would never kiss someone without their permission," Sadie barked, still shaking from the experience of her first kiss. Was it always that intense?

"Which I didn't. I only did exactly what you wanted me to, but you're further along than I thought and we have a ways to travel. We should get moving. If you'll trust me for now, I'll explain on the way."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Sadie backed up to where Jimmy was standing and put a hand on his arm.

The instant their skin touched, a keen awareness of him spread outward from where her hand met his bicep to every part of his body. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest; his abs clenching. She could sense every cell in him as she traced in her mind the flow of blood through his veins. She observed it harden the soft flesh between his legs. Jimmy gasped audibly, then collapsed at her feet.

Chapter 3

A transformation

The man in leather grabbed both her hands.

“Here, put these on,” he said. Sadie didn’t see what he held out to her, because she had dropped to Jimmy’s side.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly in his ear, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

“A feeder,” Cassie exclaimed in the midst of the whispering of the crowd.

“He’s fine. He’ll want a minute before standing up,” the man said, thrusting two pairs of soft black gloves into Sadie’s face. She looked up at him above her, framed by the mid-afternoon sun, and felt a wave of shock and fear. He was implying she had done this. She had done something to Jimmy. He was suggesting she put on gloves. She stood up.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me,” she cried. The man stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I do. I know what’s happening to you,” he said, emphasizing every word. “And if you’ll trust me, I can help you through it.”

She took the gloves then, hands shaking, and slid them on. Jimmy stood up and looked at her with an unreadable expression. He seemed

to be unharmed. The man took her by the arm and began to steer her out of the crowd.

"No," she said, swiveling back to face Jimmy as the man tugged on her.

"Stay with me," she called out to her friend. Jimmy closed the distance between them as the crowd parted to let them pass.

"He shouldn't come," the man said. "This is a private ceremony."

"I'm not going without him." Sadie balked against the man's grip. He let go immediately.

"Okay. If it's what you want." He pointed to direct their path rather than retaking her arm. They cut through an alley which led them quickly away from the crowd.

"I really am a friend, you know? Name's Gabriel."

Sadie and Jimmy introduced themselves, but her suspicions of the man didn't waver. She continued to follow him, however, as he directed them to the edge of downtown. When they reached the train station, the man paid for all three tickets and climbed aboard.

He didn't look back. Sadie thought he was too confident in his belief that they would follow, but follow they did. The train that ran between towns in this area was never particularly crowded. They only had to pass through six cars before finding one entirely to themselves. Gabriel sat down next to her. Jimmy took the seat directly across, but facing her; keeping some distance, she noticed.

"How far are we going?" Jimmy asked the man.

"Just one town over. I'm renting a cabin there. It's secluded; a little out in the woods to offer us some privacy." The conversation went quiet for a minute. Perhaps Jimmy was also contemplating the wisdom of following a stranger into a secluded area. The man broke their reverie by asking, "Do you remember the last person whose skin you touched before today?" Sadie raised her eyebrows.

"Touched in a friendly way. A parent patting your back? A child jumping into your arms?" Sadie thought back over the past several days. Had her mom touched her? She couldn't recall. She didn't think she had touched anyone's skin over the past few days. Then she remembered when she had hugged Jimmy as they were walking back from Ina's celebration, how their cheeks had touched. Sadie

nodded in the direction of Jimmy, and Gabriel looked the two of them over.

“Remember that moment”, he said. “It was the last time.”

Sadie looked back at Gabriel. He seemed to be looking inward, but when he refocused on her, she was unable to keep the words down any longer.

She asked, “I’m a feeder?”

“Yes.”

“A human feeder?”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“What do you think?”

It was obvious.

“I feed off of...” She looked at Jimmy and felt her face flush.

“You feed off of sexual desire. And pleasure. You’re a succubus. Like me. Or... at least you will be soon.”

She looked at their gloved hands as his words sunk in.

“And succubi can’t touch anyone?” Jimmy asked, while Sadie felt panic welling up inside her.

“They can. They just probably shouldn’t in public.” He grinned.

Everything was different now, Sadie thought. Could she even return to her life? What did this mean? She wanted to cry or hit something, or scream. Why her? What had she done? She already felt like enough of an outsider.

Jimmy stood up and moved to take the seat next to her. He was careful to avoid touching her skin, but he laced his fingers through her gloved hand.

“It’s going to be okay,” he told her. At first, she felt only comfort from the gesture, but as she turned to see him so close, her unquenched desire kicked back up. She imagined reaching out to touch him again and shivered. She dropped her eyes from his to look him up and down. He watched her taking him in, and when she remade eye contact, he returned the look unflinchingly. She made no attempt to hide what she wanted and he made no move to withdraw from her. What he wanted, she couldn’t tell, but at least he seemed unafraid of her.

Sadie had more questions she had wanted to ask, but Jimmy's proximity was making it hard to focus. She let go of his hand, immediately missing the contact, and moved to sit directly across from the two of them.

"Sorry. I need some space." She said. If Jimmy was hurt by her withdrawal, it didn't show on his face. Taking a few breaths to recollect herself, she directed her focus back to Gabriel.

"How did you know? You've been following me?"

"It's a special talent I have. I was passing through your town a while back and spotted you."

"When? How long back?" She suddenly wondered if this man's appearance had anything to do with their water nymph.

"About a year ago. I knew you'd go through the transition soon and I've been keeping an eye on you."

"And why do you care?" she asked, in some attempt to determine his motives. She supposed a part of her blamed this man for what was happening. That was irrational, she knew, but she needed some outlet for the anger building up inside her.

"Because we should look after each other. A Becoming can be terrifying if you're alone. And occasionally dangerous to those around you."

"A Becoming?" Jimmy asked.

"It's what we call it when you manifest the succubus part of yourself. Most human feeders develop slowly, throughout their childhood, but for succubi, it happens in early adulthood. And it happens suddenly. Not everyone with the gene transitions, but I can usually tell when someone will."

"You've done this before? Helped someone... change?" Sadie asked.

"Many times."

"Must be a lot of you. If you happen to run into so many others," Jimmy said. Sadie didn't like being a part of the *you* in Jimmy's words; something different from him; something other.

"No. I chose this role. It's what I do. I wander around a lot, scouting out those who might need me one day."

This last piece of information relaxed her a bit. That story at least made sense.

They sat lost in silence until the train ground to a slow crawl, then all looked up at the map as Gabriel announced the name of their stop. She could see the little road attached to stop fifty-seven. It was the last stop before the train left town and there was clearly nothing else out there. The stop must exist for that cabin alone. Unless there were some nymphs out there?

They hopped off the train into the bright afternoon sun and followed Gabriel down the dirt path. Sadie struggled to form more questions in light of the fear now building up in her. She desperately wanted to ask what was going to happen, but the words kept catching. She looked over at Jimmy several times. Once, he reached up as if he was going to stroke her arm before catching himself.

Gabriel looked back at her, then broke the silence with, "Sorry, I'm not very good at the emotional support leading up to this. Why I don't usually reach out until it's time. But I promise you, I'm very good at what happens next."

Gabriel turned to walk backwards in front of her, his suddenly heightened swagger grabbing at her attention.

"Remember," he said, as he pulled open the buttons on his vest, "this is all just a matter of course. Your body is taking its natural path and nothing you're feeling is wrong." His movement and casual undressing, as well as the sudden purr in his voice, caused a reaction in her. As she was sure was his intention.

Behind him, the cabin emerged through the trees, and she was surprised to see they had company. Lots of company. A man and woman were swinging back and forth on a tire swing. An older woman sat on the porch, smoking a pipe. Three young men were tossing balls of fire between them like a baseball. Neither Sadie nor Jimmy had seen fire nymphs before. They gawked at their game.

Noticing their arrival, everyone turned to face them.

"Everyone, this is Sadie Hall." Clearly Gabriel knew more about her than he'd let on, since she was sure she hadn't given her last name. Sadie waved awkwardly. Gabriel didn't introduce Jimmy. The two people on the tire swing jumped down, but their movement failed to

make sense for a moment. It was as if a gust of wind carried them several feet forward. *Are they all nature feeders?*

The fire nymphs came and shook her hand. One of them, who introduced himself as Leon, also shook Jimmy's hand. He had a nice smile, and Sadie's gaze lingered on him a moment.

"Dinner's ready," a woman said. She'd just emerged from the cabin door with a bounce in her step. She had short purple hair and several piercings, and was carrying a tray.

"Ahh perfect timing. The guest of honor. Can you help...?" She directed the question at the air nymphs before walking out into the yard and placing the tray on a long table.

"Come." The woman gestured. They moved toward her while the air nymphs disappeared, returning a minute later with more trays. The table was already set. The napkins wafted in a cool breeze, and the surrounding trees provided a nice canopy for their meal. Everyone except the newcomers walked through the grass barefoot.

Sadie exchanged a look with Jimmy as they moved to take seats. Gabriel gestured for Jimmy to sit on the other side of the table, as the woman with purple hair pulled out a chair for Sadie.

"I didn't catch your name," Sadie said, taking in the woman's captivating face.

"Annabella," she whispered, almost touching their noses together. "You hungry, Sadie?"

Sadie leaned forward, but the woman pulled back. She moved to take the seat directly across from her and next to Jimmy.

The three fire nymphs stood staring at her succubus guide. Gabriel looked from Sadie to Leon before directing him to take the seat to her left before sitting himself down on her right. The other two men slumped off to find other seats. When they were all in place, Annabella declared, "Dig in!"

Sadie didn't feel particularly hungry, and when she didn't reach for any food, Leon put some salad on her plate. Normally, she might have been embarrassed about all this attention, but the humming under her skin caused her to want even more of it. She watched the muscles in Leon's forearms working to scoop up the salad. He smiled at her attention on him.

“Fire nymphs, you know, are naturally good mates for succubi. We can always withstand the heat, if you know what I mean? We’re particularly handy during Becomings.” He rested his hand an inch from her forearm on the table. She looked at it expectantly, but he didn’t move it further.

“I’m not gonna touch you, but you can touch me if you like,” he said.

Sadie blinked at his bold behavior. Then her surprise turned inward. Why did this not feel that strange?

She considered reaching for Leon’s hand, and her blood seemed to boil at the thought. Aware that Jimmy was watching, she glanced at him. He didn’t look away, but his expression still told her nothing. She had never seen Jimmy so subdued, and if she’d had the energy to, she’d have been worried.

Sadie’s gaze fell on Annabella, who said, “We’re all here to help out, just let us know what you want.”

“Eat first,” Gabriel ordered. “We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

Sadie did her best to follow his command, but couldn’t stop staring at the people around her. She was grateful to see them passing around a bottle of wine – perhaps that would calm her nerves – but when it reached her, Gabriel stopped her from taking a sip.

“Not tonight. We need you level-headed. For everyone’s safety.” He too, drank nothing.

The noise level at the table grew from the casual conversation of the many guests. All Sadie could hear, however, were Leon’s words echoing in her mind as she imagined reaching out to touch him. She felt the intensity of her desire increase back to the level it had been before Gabriel had kissed her, and she was finding it particularly difficult to focus on chewing and swallowing. And though she didn’t feel much like small talk, she did feel like looking at Jimmy. She spent most of the meal watching him converse with those around him. How had she never noticed how appealing his jaw was? How handsome his dark brown eyes?

He turned from Annabella on one side of him to the old woman sitting on the other side and asked, “How do you all know each

other?" The old woman tossed her cigar bud in an empty glass and immediately lit up a new one.

"Gabriel s'only one I know," the elder woman said in a low, husky voice which broke into a cough mid-sentence. "Keeps me in the loop."

"On...Becomings?" Jimmy pried.

"On succubi," she said this last word like it was the brand name of her favorite cigar. "My kind; always looking for a little unmet desire. Unrequited lust. That's my favorite. The kinda thing follows succubi around, you see."

"Requited lust follows succubi around too," Annabella said in Jimmy's ear, "but siren don't give a shit about that." She winked at the old lady, who raised her wine glass in acknowledgement.

"Oh. And you? You here for the same reason?" Jimmy asked Annabella.

She laughed. "Oh no. I'm definitely no siren. More like the opposite, if you know what I mean?" It was unlikely Jimmy had even the vaguest notion of what she meant, but he nodded anyway.

"Just a fan of the succubus. Gabriel keeps me in the loop too. I was in Spain when I got the call. Caught the first ride back."

"You flew? Across the ocean?" Jimmy asked.

"Ha! My parents don't have that much money. Na. I got the call back in January. It was enough time."

This woman had traveled from Spain for this? Sadie's thoughts refocused enough to register surprise. The knowledge made her nervous, as if she was about to go on stage in a famous opera house, only no one had told her any of her lines. And back in January? Gabriel said he'd known for a year that this might be coming, while Sadie had just been going about her life. The thought scared her. As if the ground she'd walked on for years had turned out to be quicksand.

If Jimmy was surprised at any of the things he heard, it didn't show. He continued to make polite conversation, as if he had spent his whole life around human feeders and nymphs alike. While in reality, neither she nor Jimmy had ever met a single feeder who fed off humans until Gabriel. And it seemed this old woman was also a human feeder, a siren. Was everyone else nature feeders? After all, you

couldn't always tell nymphs from humans or human feeders. Not unless you witnessed some visible interaction like throwing fire, or they wore some signifying adornment. Human feeders were even harder to spot, since they often fed in silent and subtle ways. Sadie didn't know any details about that, however, and felt she could possibly be wrong about anything she did know. After all, who remembered all the details of sixth grade biology?

Regardless, it seemed Jimmy and she were the only humans. Or, Jimmy was, at least.

Sadie turned to look at her guide. Gabriel had a special kind of allure to him, and she wasn't sure if she should trust it or not.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

She looked down at his lips as he spoke and suddenly found him even closer. Had she leaned in?

"Uhh. I'm not sure. Is...? Is it always going to be like this for me?" she asked, wishing he would just kiss her again. Instead, he brushed her hair back from her neck and placed a hand there. Then he rested his exposed forearm against her skin.

"No. It won't always be like this," he said softly, as a pleasurable sensation spread outward from his touch. "Life will be a little crazy for a while, but it will settle down." The sensation reached the base of her spine and she felt heat build between her legs.

"Succubi have almost no sex drive before the Becoming, making the experience kind of like jumping into the deep end of a very warm pool. But when it's over, your life will be more or less the same." She squirmed slightly, arching her back. "You will get hungry, like you do now for food, and then you will feed." He slid his right hand under the table and placed it on her knee. He had removed his glove somehow, and the intensity of the feeling more than doubled.

"And... what does that... entail, exactly?" she asked. He slid his hand along her thigh and up her dress, stopping with one finger hooked under her panty line. She leaned closer into him.

"Exactly what I'm doing right now. I'm causing the pleasure, and then I'm feeding off it. This feels equally as satisfying from my end, though in a different kind of way. The satisfaction of my experience as feeder is bound up in the intensity of the sensation for you. And, if

you want to get into some subtlety, it is also bound up in the emotional impact on you. This, right now, is very satisfying for me because pleasure is so new to you.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “And I love causing it.”

She felt the pressure inside her build and a small sound escaped her throat. He abruptly withdrew his touch and Sadie saw the old woman’s head snap in their direction. Coming back to her senses, she expected everyone to be staring at them, but she saw that they were all still engaged in conversation. The sound of their chatter hit her ears again.

Looking back into Gabriel’s eyes, she was on the verge of begging him to keep touching her. Why had he stopped if they both wanted it? She took a sip of water and tried to collect herself.

Then the question struck her, “Is that what I did earlier? When I touched my friend?” She was afraid to say Jimmy’s name in case it grabbed his attention.

“Approximately. Though you weren’t feeding. You won’t be able to feed until after the transition.”

She tried to scoot closer to him, but he sat up straighter. “And when you touch me... I feel a little better afterward. Like there’s a buzzing in my head and I can’t focus, and then you take it away.”

“It’s a momentary release. It will work less and less as the night goes on. But it’s one of the ways I can help,” Gabriel said.

“What are some of the other ways?” she heard herself ask. The words sounded as if they didn’t belong to her. Was she flirting with this strange man that had pulled her out of her life? The concept felt so foreign and yet natural at the same time. Gabriel just smiled and went back to eating. As she withdrew back into her space, she noticed Leon watching her.

“How’s the food?” he asked.

“Not really sure,” Sadie said, only half-listening.

She took a sip of her water. Leon’s words from earlier echoed again in her head. *You can touch me if you like.* With the bit of knowledge Gabriel had just thrown her, Sadie’s curiosity and impulse to take Leon up on that offer intensified. She pushed a potato around her plate, contemplating the rudeness of not finishing her food. *You*

can touch me if you like. She looked up to watch Jimmy again, his face both familiar and new. His smooth copper skin caught in the late-day sun. His kind eyes both attentive and hesitant. *You can touch me if you like.*

Sadie caved. Without looking at him, she gently pressed her left thigh against Leon's bare skin. She was impressed that he showed no reaction above the table. She saw him take a bite of food out of the corner of her eye as she observed excitement build slowly in his body. She was fascinated, and for a moment lost track of everything else around her. She wanted to look at his face, but was too shy. She kept watching Jimmy. He was turned toward the woman with the purple hair whose name Sadie couldn't recall just then. Sadie's thoughts again became muddled. She watched Jimmy speaking without being able to make sense of his words and suddenly she wished it was him she could touch. The instant she had that thought, she found she desperately wanted more.

"Time to go inside," Gabriel declared. She jerked herself away from Leon. Conversation halted as everyone looked toward them. She felt flushed and dropped her gaze to her plate; suddenly guilty about what she'd just been doing. Then the crowd stood up. A few people made to clear some plates.

"We've got it," one of the air nymphs said, waving them away. "Go on."

Sadie's eyes dropped to the bulge in Leon's pants, now visible to everyone. She looked at the faces around her in confusion and embarrassment, but no one else seemed to think much of it. Except for Jimmy, who registered some emotion in the coloring of his cheeks. Leon took her hand and began walking toward the house, while she looked back at Gabriel.

"I'm right here," he said, placing a hand on her back. Still looking over her shoulder, her gaze locked on Jimmy's, imploring him to stay with her. Jimmy moved suddenly to follow. Annabella opened the door for them and Leon led her into a dim entrance way, kicking off his shoes. Sadie did the same. The cabin was mostly empty. No furniture to be seen. The floor was covered with a rug and a flood of pillows. The setting sun cast a warm glow through

the skylight, but there appeared to be no other light sources available.

“Whose place is this?” Sadie asked.

“Ours,” one of the air nymphs said, coming in behind her with a stack of plates. “Gabriel’s an old friend. When he called, we said we’d be happy to host.”

Leon dropped her hand and went to the fireplace. She watched as flames flickered down his arms, and a moment later, the room brightened with a roaring fire. Several of the others, including Jimmy, seemed to appreciate the heat and sat nearby, but Sadie felt too warm already. The old woman stacked a bunch of pillows and made herself at home next to Jimmy, pulling out another cigar.

“Oh not in the house June,” the other host begged the old siren, entering with another stack of plates.

Sadie remained on her feet, still not sure exactly what she was supposed to do. One of the other fire nymphs stood with her. She turned to him and asked, “How did you find out about this?”

The man brightened. “The three of us perform with a traveling circus. We met Gabriel a few years back. He asked if he could call us sometime. We were in the area.”

“Wanna see our act?” Leon asked. He stepped within a foot of her, his gaze studying her face.

She did want to see it. She wanted a lot of things. Sadie nodded and went to take a seat next to Jimmy. Gabriel intercepted her path, placing himself on a cushion in between her and her friend. Sadie initially balked at that, wanting to be closer to Jimmy, but perhaps she was better off with a barrier between them.

The three men pushed the pillows out of the center of the room and removed their T-shirts. The bustling in the kitchen ceased as the hosts rejoined them, making themselves comfortable on a couple of cushions to enjoy the show.

The fire nymphs started by creating a rhythm with hands and feet, urging everyone to join in. Once the onlookers were holding a steady beat, they began to dance. Strings of fire jumped to life, creating a light show on their bodies. Occasionally, the flames would exist inde-

pendent of them. Two of the performers would create a ring and the third would flip through the hoop.

It was mesmerizing, and for a moment Sadie forgot all her fears. She felt her mind dancing right along with them, lost in the beauty of it. The sun set as they danced, and everyone seemed to be in a trance, stomping and clapping in time. Sadie watched until she could no longer ignore how overheated she felt. Moving away from the fireplace and everyone else, she placed herself near the window. The act seemed to be building to some kind of finale, and she didn't want to miss it by going outside, but she felt as if it were her skin from which the flames were sprouting.

The onlookers responded appropriately to their increased tempo by speeding up the beat, and the energy of the crowd seemed to fuel the performers. They ended with a bang and everyone clapped, except Sadie. She pulled at her dress, which she suddenly noticed was soaked through. She needed air. Without saying a word, she moved to the door and pulled it open. She could feel a breeze hit her, but it felt no cooler than it did inside. In desperation, she stepped out into the night without her shoes and waited for the usual cool dusk air to have an effect. She felt nothing. Scared, she went back inside, where she found everyone watching her.

"I'm too hot," she said to Gabriel. "I think something's wrong."

One of the hosts came out of the kitchen and handed something to her guide. Gabriel brought it to her. He said, "No, you're right on course," before placing an ice cube on the back of her neck where it immediately began to melt.

It helped. Slightly. His assurance helped more; calming her panic considerably. Though she was still uncomfortable in her skin, Gabriel's hand on the back of her neck reminded her of when he had placed it there earlier, and her attention shifted from fear to lust in the course of a heartbeat.

She leaned into him, half-expecting to be pushed away. Instead, he pulled off his gloves and reached to pull off hers. She moaned the instant their bare hands came in contact, and balked when he dropped them. He pulled open his leather vest, which had been hanging loose on his shoulders all night and dropped it to the floor. Then Gabriel

pulled her to him and kissed her, gently prodding her mouth with his tongue. She pressed herself hard to him, forgetting all the world.

This was what she needed. She grabbed at his chest and arms, struck by the intimate sensation of his skin on hers.

When he did push her back to arm's length, she looked around, shocked to find herself in this strange place, doing these strange things. She looked at Jimmy. His expression was made of stone, entirely unreadable. Did he want her to be kissing him? Would Gabriel allow it? Perhaps he wanted to leave and have nothing to do with this. What if he was only staying because she'd begged him to?

Their air nymph hosts stood up and announced, "Well, we should give you all some privacy. We're going to bed, wake us if you need anything." They disappeared through a door next to the kitchen.

The instant the door closed, the energy in the room changed. It was as if everyone was suddenly holding their breath. Leon, whose torso had been covered in soot and sweat, dropped the wet towel he had been using to clean himself and came toward her.

"What else can I do for you, Sadie Hall?" He looked stunning in the firelight and she hesitated a moment over what she was about to do, but couldn't seem to access the emotions of shame, embarrassment, and shyness she had felt earlier.

Despite everyone watching, she walked toward the man, put a hand on his chest and kissed him. Sadie slowly pushed him to the floor with the kiss until she rested on top of him. Sitting up into a straddle position, she ran her fingertips down his torso.

"Ice," she said, picking open the button on his jeans, "more ice."

"You're not gonna to find it in there." He smiled through the pleasure on his face, looking down at her fingers unzipping his pants.

"Is this what I'm supposed to do?" she asked, her breathing hectic as she pulled down his boxers. His erection sprang free and she stared at it in fascination.

"There is no supposed to," Gabriel said, appearing behind her with more ice on her neck.

"But to me, you can do whatever you want," Leon said, putting his hands behind his head, "and I'll do anything you ask me to."

Sadie stared for a long time at his body, before tentatively taking

hold of the thick shaft in front of her. It was warm and hard in her hand, and felt both familiar and strange. She swallowed as her desire mingled with uncertainty.

Gabriel appeared at her back, straddling the man's thighs with her. Handing the ice cube to Leon, he scooped his cold hand over hers. "Like this," he whispered in her ear, as he guided her fist in a slow stroke. "See how the precum pools here? You should take it and spread it."

Sadie watched their hands moving in fascination as the man they were stroking groaned. She'd never heard such an intoxicating sound, and as the sweet scent of him hit her, she felt she would go crazy with needing more. How had she been living without this?

Pleasure began to build between her own legs as Gabriel continued to make skin contact. Though it wasn't until Leon ran the ice over her nipples, that her whole body trembled. She slowly stroked him faster, taking more control.

"How does he feel?" Gabriel asked.

Sadie wasn't sure what to say, so she spoke simply, sticking to the truth. "He feels good. So good. Slick and warm, and... just right." More precum appeared and their hands make a slick sound as they continued to stroke him together.

"I like when it pulses," she breathed, as Leon sucked in air.

"That's because he's close to coming. I'm holding him back, though. He'll wait until you've finished your exploration." Then he added, "And *it* has a name. His cock. Dick. Shaft. Pick one, and say it out loud."

Sadie chewed her lip as she stared at it. Then she whispered, "His cock. I like when his cock pulses."

Gabriel slowed her stroking, taking control again of her hand. "And this is the cockhead. It's very sensitive, especially to the bare skin of a succubus." He slid her hand in a slow stroke downward to scoop up the sack. "And here are the balls. Cup them. Yeah, like that." He let her explore awhile, until she had the feel of him, and then added, "Now. Do you want to make him come?"

Sadie's heart was beating out of her chest, her own body taut with pleasurable tension. She nodded her head.

“Then let me show you something.” Gabriel directed their grip to wrap around the base of the shaft, but then he held them still. “Where you touch someone and how has an effect on the experience, but it’s not necessary to move. If you’re in contact with their skin, they will eventually climax.”

Sadie could feel the moment Gabriel released his control over Leon’s building pleasure. Though their hands didn’t move, she felt the rush of sensation take him. Acutely aware of every inch of his body, she observed with rapt attention as his heart pounded faster; every muscle grew taut, and his balls drew up tight and firm. Then the tension released in wave after wave as he cried out. A moment later hot fluid shot from him.

She looked up to watch Leon’s face at the last minute and the sight was utterly captivating. “God,” Sadie said.

When the man had finally stopped shaking, Gabriel released his grip and slowly slid his hand up her thigh. “That was part one of your lesson.” She knew what was coming and even so, she gasped as his hand slid into her panties. The pleasurable sensation that had been slowly building increased rapidly as he languidly stroked her.

“And *this* right here,” he stroked over the place between her legs which was throbbing the hardest. “This is your clit. It’s my favorite body part.” He added in a purr that somehow made her thighs feel weak even though she wasn’t using them.

For some reason, she suddenly remembered Jimmy was in the room. When her gaze locked on his, he looked rapidly away. But Sadie continued to watch his face as she rocked into Gabriel’s touch. *Yes*, something was happening. The tension that had been building in her was finally reaching a peak. She found her mind going soft as she chased the sensation.

Suddenly, Gabriel withdrew his touch, and a moment later he’d gotten to his feet. The feeling stopped abruptly, leaving her with a throbbing ache. She gasped, and Jimmy, who was directly in front of her by the fire, looked her way. Everyone was watching her now. Everyone except the siren, who was fixated on Jimmy.

Jimmy, whose masked expression was now colored by flushed cheeks, clutched his knees to his chest as they locked eyes. *God, how*

she wanted him. Could she do it? Touch him the way she'd just touched Leon? Suddenly, it was all too much, the desire building up in her too intense. She couldn't take it. Her skin was on fire and she wanted more.

"Ice," she cried, picking at her dress as Gabriel disappeared again into the kitchen. She wanted it off, but the bralette was built into the dress. Removing it would leave her topless. She felt that information was important somehow, but couldn't remember why in her haste to remove it.

Once she was mostly naked, she looked back up at Jimmy, but he was again looking away. She wanted desperately to be near him, but as she moved across the room Gabriel returned just in time to put a hand out in front of her.

"No, Sadie. He's off-limits tonight," Gabriel said.

"Why?" she whined.

Jimmy's eyes flashed briefly toward her, before dropping to the ground.

"You need to learn more control before you're ready to touch him."

Perhaps that was good advice, Sadie thought, as control was something she seemed to have in short supply just then. She felt an unstoppable force coming over her, and in search of something to satisfy the craving, approached the naked man she'd left laying on the ground.

Pulling off her underwear, she dropped back into a straddle over his thighs. He immediately hardened when their skin touched. "More," she said, reaching again for the now very slick shaft.

"Take as much as you want," Gabriel told her, as he ran the ice over her neck and back. This time, however, he avoided touching her skin. Sadie whimpered, and Jimmy glanced at her and then quickly away.

No. That's not what she wanted. She needed him to watch her.

"Look at me," Sadie said. "James. Look at me."

He did. At the same time, Gabriel slid a hand around her waist and cupped between her legs. Her mouth dropped open as her head fell back. She looked down at Leon, then up at the man she wanted most. The one that was finally watching. Holding Jimmy's gaze, she

rocked her pelvis back and forth as searing pleasure coursed through her.

She was on the edge of something incredible; something new, but just as it arrived, Gabriel again withdrew his hands, whispering in her ear, "Not yet." She turned around to grab at him, but he had slipped back on his gloves. He stopped her with a firm grip on her wrists.

She was too hot. Her skin burned her. And she needed him to keep touching her. Why had he stopped? "It's too hot. It's too much. Can't you do something?" She tried to stand up, but felt dizzy and instead found herself on all fours. Sadie sat up with her legs beneath her and writhed back and forth in place. Gabriel kneeled in front of her.

"You want me to touch you?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Yes," she said.

He ran his gloved hands up her hips.

She reached for his chest, but again he stopped her, holding both her hands at rest on her legs.

"If you know it's what I want, and you're here to help, why don't you give it to me?" she asked. Sadie barely recognized her own voice. She watched sweat dripping from the ends of her hair and fall to the ground between them. Their faces were inches apart.

"Because I'm trying to help you turn, not give you satisfaction. Your body is changing and I'm here to help it. It's uncomfortable, believe me, I remember, but the speed of your transition is related to your level of desire. My goal isn't to give you what you want, it's to give you what you need." He kissed her lightly on the lips before pulling back.

"When I turned, I was alone. It lasted days and became unbearably painful." He kissed her again, then held her back. "It's your longing that needs to reach a climax."

She squeezed her thighs together, wishing he would push himself between them.

"You're saying..." Sadie began, before losing her thought. She took a steadying breath. "You're saying you're trying to turn me on?" she asked.

“Not trying. Succeeding.” He kissed her again. She undulated under his grip, still firm on her hands, and felt her blood would boil.

Glancing at one of the other fire nymphs, she called him forward with her gaze. Gabriel retreated so the man could kneel in front of her. Sadie devoured him, holding the back of his neck as she firmly kissed him through multiple orgasms. She didn’t know his name, but she knew exactly what his tongue felt like against hers as he thrust into her hand.

She exhausted him and moved on to the woman with purple hair – again, Sadie had lost her name. Sadie could barely recall her own name, in fact. She cycled through the fire nymphs and young woman twice before coming to lie on the floor. She wanted more. Sadie tossed and turned as she lost track of time. Occasionally, her thoughts would focus enough to remember to beg for ice, but she had no words for the things she wanted most.

“Is this normal?” she heard Jimmy whisper somewhere in the distance. He sounded afraid. Called upright by his voice, she turned again to stare at him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gabriel jerk his head. An instant later, the third fire nymph appeared in front of her.

This time, things got a little out of control. Gabriel had to step forward and pull Sadie off the man, releasing him to rest in the corner. The spent nymph collapsed into sleep.

Leon stepped back into the picture. Everything seemed to consume her, his smell and texture and desire; her own earthly body, heated and alive; Jimmy’s gaze on her; the moments of relief when cool ice caressed her neck.

An hour later, Leon was resting in the corner and she was back to writhing uncomfortably, propped upright on her knees.

Gabriel scooped her face up in his hands. “Come on,” he whispered. “Let it happen. Let it go.” He ran his lips along her neck. “You’re almost there.”

Her abdomen tightened suddenly and a shiver ran down her back. Every time he touched her, the place between her legs would throb out of control. He continued to caress her neck and face with his

mouth as the sensation built to a peak. Then, just as he'd been doing all night, he pulled back, holding her down with his gloved hands.

She cried out. "Please. Gabriel, I need—" but she wasn't sure what she was seeking. "Please keep touching me. Just touch me. Please."

He nibbled at her cheek and his gaze flared as she panted with frantic desire for more. She found his lips, and he let her kiss him for one long precious moment. Then he pulled back once again.

Her body throbbed even more unbearably than before. This time however, a sudden surge of heat rose in her and she barked backward out of his grip.

"There," he said in satisfaction. Sadie convulsed forward, feeling the rug under her stomach. She gripped at it with both hands, before rolling to her back. A mix of sensations, both pleasurable and uncomfortable, swelled up inside her. She thought she heard someone screaming, then a man's voice yelling in anger.

Then she let go. Everything went still. The chaos in her thoughts paused even as the physical sensations intensified.

It came to her then. Clear as day. She knew the truth. She could reject it. She wasn't sure how she knew, but the knowledge coursed through her. She was about to change, forever, and right here and now, she could let the change take her or push it away. It must have shown on her face, because when she locked eyes with Gabriel, sitting a few feet away with an arm in front of Jimmy, he nodded.

Was he answering her question? Was he saying, *yes, you are choosing this. Yes, it's a choice.* She was sure he was.

The knowledge that it was up to her was the most terrifying thing that had happened all night. She could reject this, if she wanted. She could tell it no, and return to her life as usual. If she in fact, didn't want this new life. But what if she did? She had always felt like an outsider, without being able to identify why. Maybe it was herself she was outside of? The emotion coursing through her, the sensation, it felt right. How could she reject it? Beyond the fear of the unknown and the self-doubt, she knew it was what she wanted.

Gathering up all her reservations, she put them in a little corner of herself. Then she relaxed. She relaxed into it completely and let it consume. Flames kicked to life and licked down her skin, though the

heat caused her no pain. On the contrary, she felt a pleasure spread through, a sensation that was wholly new. Sadie convulsed repeatedly as she lost track of all time and space. Her first orgasm hit every cell in her body at once. And the instant it was over, she had time for only one thought, *I am born*, before she collapsed.

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Riley Kade is a romance erotica writer from the pacific northwest. She loves writing high-tension story arcs with big payoffs.



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