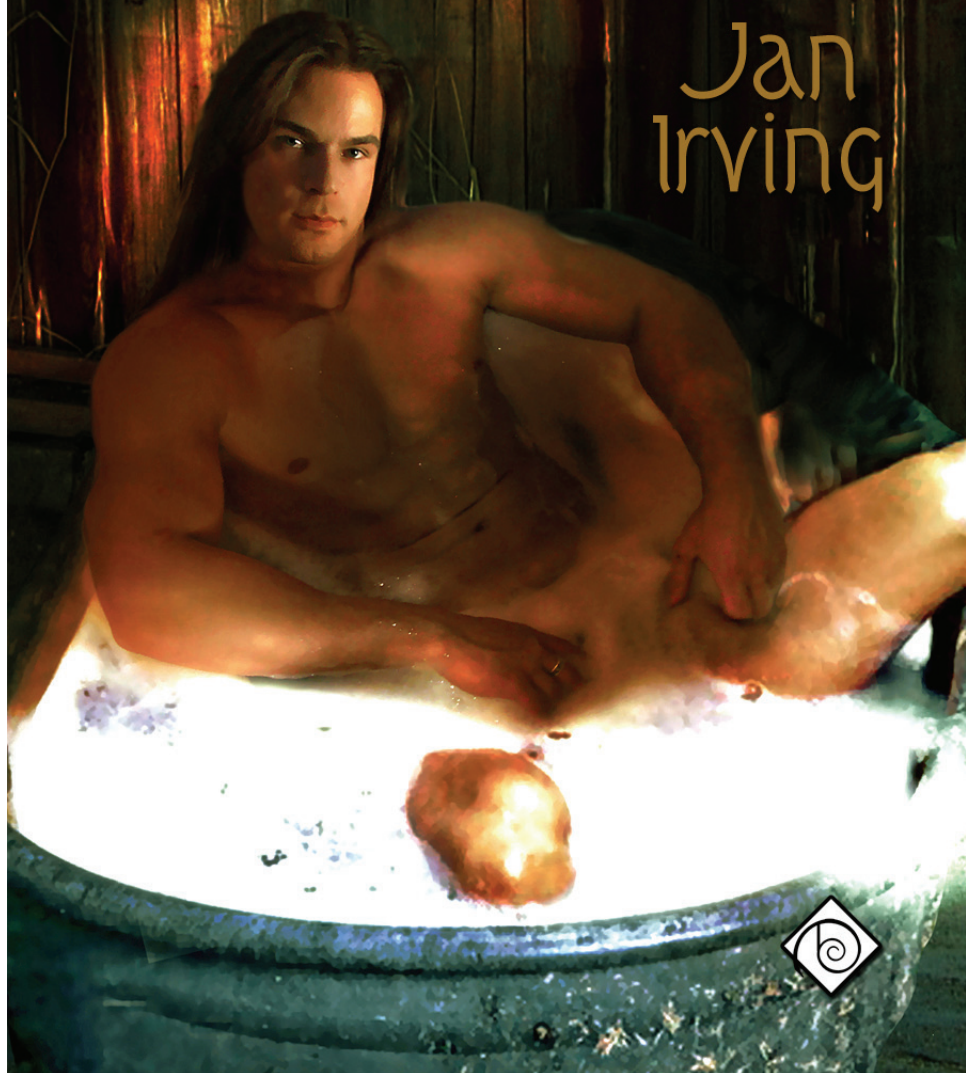


The Summer Gardener

Jan
Irving



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Chapter One

THE buzzing sound was getting on Alejandro Moreno's nerves, but he held onto his patience now that he knew the source. He was bent over the petunia bed, weeding, the sun hot on his back, his long hair in a braid over one shoulder, his muscles aching since he'd only just started working this garden and there was a *lot* to do. Mr. Appleby, the fussy head of the garden board, had been right in this case—whoever had done the job here before Alejo had been one lazy *cabron*.

Alejo started this kind of work on people's yards, gas station strips of greenery, and condo grounds as part of a landscaping crew in college. In fact, he'd liked it so much, he'd wanted to pursue a master of science in landscape design. But then his *mamita* had her first episode. Alejo was the man of the family since his father was dead. He had to do what was right: drop out of college, take care of her and his brother, Jose. Fortunately he didn't need any special courses to take a summer job working for the city.

At first, the work wasn't so bad. He worked in greenhouses seeding flowers to be planted in various common places, something he'd done all over town. He never thought he'd get a patch of his own, but right away he knew there was something different about *this* job. The wording and presentation of the assignment were very... odd. He'd received a scroll—rolled up and tied with ribbon—naming him the new guardian of Autumn Glade, a strange half-acre garden that, apparently, no one else wanted.

It took him less than two days to find out why.

“THERE’S a big-assed snail in there, you know.” A now-familiar and annoying silken voice interrupted Alejo’s reverie. “You almost stepped on it!”

Alejo sat back with a sigh, flexing the muscles he didn’t need a gym to maintain because of landscaping in the summer, construction jobs in the winter. He flipped his braid out of his eyes, looking around to see if he could spot his critic. “Yeah, I can see the trail. Don’t suppose you’ll tell me where?” He cocked a brow.

“Sorry, it’s the wee folk code. Can’t help the big, stupid people out.” There was a thread of insolence in the voice. Alejo would bet part of his family’s grocery bill that his visitor envied him just a little for being human.

“Yeah, wouldn’t want that.” Alejo grimaced.

“You look played out for a young lad.” The speaker had a slight accent, shaded Irish in intonation.

“I’m not *played out*. And I’m not a lad. I’m twenty-three, *Soy majo*—I’m hot, yes? And gardening is hard work. A lot of bending over and getting on your knees.”

Laughter. “I would think you’d be used to *that*.”

Alejo flipped his companion the bird before he found the snail shell and pulled it gently free of the underside of a winter pansy.

From his place propped on the bird bath, Fane, all nine inches of him, including his delicate webbed iridescent purple wings, gave Alejo a wary look. “Guess you’ll kill him now. Or maybe sprinkle salt on him, like the last gardener.”

Alejo shook his head. “You’d be wrong, *mosco bonito*,” he said, taking private amusement from calling the fae a pretty fly, since he was that, but irritating like one too.

He placed the snail in a small bag with the other assorted bugs and slugs he’d found as he dug through the raised beds, repairing the crumbling wood that divided them from the grass. This was a major task, and something he knew would take him at least a couple of weeks, pulling out rotting wood that circled the grassy area and the pebbled path, digging deeper, and replacing the wood with fresh. He already sent in a request for the planks, and to his surprise was assured, somewhat crankily, by Mr. Appleby that someone would deliver them the following week. It seemed the city board would give him just about anything if he kept working this particular garden.

The fairy demanded in an appalled tone, “You aren’t gonna eat that snail, are you?”

“Don’t you have anything better to do? Like... I don’t know, make nectar, or whatever guy fairies do?” Alejo pushed back damp, escaped strands of his waist-length hair. He was sweaty from the sun and he’d been followed around and mocked all day by the little guardian of the garden he was hired to care for. No wonder every other gardener quit! Although the last one went too far in trying to set fire to the sanctuary, Alejo could see how the resident imp might have driven him to it.

“Can’t believe I’m talking to an actual fairy,” Alejo grumped, still wishing he could go back to blissful ignorance about their existence. Fane scared the fuck out of him when he appeared like a streaking hummingbird, getting into Alejo’s face on his second day at the job and scolding him on how much he removed while pruning an aging apricot climbing rose.

“Gets boring being a fae. No one wants to talk to me, always thinkin’ they’re going mad,” Fane mused, leaning back lazily to let the sun warm his body. “Saw you have a lady in that locket you wear.”

Alejo paused, fingering the old fashioned heavy silver of the heart-shaped pendant he wore that was the twin of one he’d given to Alicia. He felt familiar pride that he had such a popular girlfriend even as uneasiness worked under his breastbone. He shoved it aside.

“How about you brag about how much she likes to fuck you? That’s always entertaining. You can pretend you’re virile for a human.”

Alejandro freed his braid, shaking out his long hair in a silken black waterfall. It was near closing time, and he thought maybe he’d stand under the garden hose in the greenhouse and cool off soon. As he climbed to his feet, he wondered how he looked to the fae, browned already because of his Hispanic heritage, six foot two, muscled but thin with serious sherry brown eyes, wearing only the cutoffs he lived in from spring to fall if he had his way. He had abandoned his T-shirt hours ago.

He probably looked pretty ordinary for a human. Not fancy, since he liked things simple, straightforward, even his appearance. His hair had grown so long because he forgot to get it cut, despite his *mamita*’s hints. But he liked the feel of it against his skin, so he let it grow.

“I’m not going to talk about my sex life with a guy who isn’t even as tall as my dick!”

“At least you have a sex life!” Fane lamented, and then his amber eyes widened with speculation—the fairy was terribly curious about Alejo for some reason. “And you must have a *nice* cock,” he said, eyes sparkling.

“*Joder!*” Giving the wee one a glare, Alejo followed the pebbled path to the compost house, a little lean-to he’d slapped together. He didn’t want to discuss his innocence with the fae. He knew people assumed that, at the age of twenty-three, he’d been around and he’d had plenty of opportunities, but he had reasons for preferring abstinence.

Fane followed, whizzing like a large dragonfly, as if stirred up over what Alejo would do next. Well, it wouldn’t take long before the fairy saw for himself.

Alejo took the time his first day to dig a deep pit for compost. Mr. Appleby thought it was a waste of his time—all this newfangled recycling was bullshit to him—but Alejo believed that a garden wasn’t just pretty flowers and statuary. It needed support, and that started with the basics.

Apparently Fane had watched him shovel all day long, stripped down to his T-shirt and wearing nothing but jeans with holes in them and heavy gloves. He’d told Alejandro that his sweat had smelled earthy, like a man used to the outdoors, so that’s why he introduced himself to the new gardener. Apparently not many humans smelled so good to a fey person.

In fact, for some reason that Alejandro couldn’t see, there must have been something about him, an ordinary seasonal gardener, that made Fane follow him around all day long. He did so right up until the moment the big man strode out of the walled garden, and then Fane would settle on a branch wearing a disgruntled expression.

According to Fane’s bragging, he’d already driven off the last twelve gardeners. They were all lazy or loud-mouthed, and one tried to capture Fane because he lusted after him!

Fane got quiet after he related that last bit, and Alejo paused in his digging, tense, but then Fane admitted he’d

hidden from that one on the night he showed up in the garden after hours with a butterfly net and a bell jar.

Even though the little one was a pain in the ass, rude, and nosy as his brother, Jose, Alejo had been relieved Fane hadn't been hurt by the amorous former gardener.

He finished raking up the compost and a few garter snakes wriggled free, vacating the steaming mess. The pile was a warm, safe nest for them. One of the snakes was missing a bit of its tail, maybe run over by a car, and it had found refuge in Alejo's mash of leaves, twigs, and garden scraps.

Fane smiled, seeing them. "It's a trip riding one of those snakes through the garden," he shared. "If you find a good-sized one they can really zip along at a good clip."

Shaking his head at this story, Alejo carefully emptied the bag with all the creatures he'd gathered into the pit.

"Won't they eat the flowers and stuff? I mean, shouldn't you just...." Fane drifted off, as if not sure why he was playing Devil's advocate and as if he couldn't make out this strange young human.

Alejo sensed Fane was wary of humans because they could easily hurt a fairy. Only his speed and his magic—not that Alejo was convinced he actually possessed any, but his mother and brother were sure a fae had to have it—seemed to have kept him safe.

"Maybe, but you can't fight nature all together," Alejo noted serenely. "I'll just have to do more work in the beds and bring them back here if I find them. But there's lots of decaying vegetation, so they should be okay. I was even going build a little wall around it and line it with copper tape. It doesn't hurt them, but it keeps them inside."

“You’d do all that rather than squish them?” Fane blinked, zipping onto a closer branch. Alejo studied him, taking in his shaggy black hair and strange glowing amber eyes. His skin was brown, but it glittered under the sun. He was nude, since he claimed no real fairy would ever hide his manly attributes—and Fane was proud of his.

Alejo flushed, but somehow Fane’s openness made him want to reciprocate, even if he was used to being self-contained, losing himself in abstract plans. “When I was a kid, I was walking home and saw a snail some other kids had used their shoes to squish all over the sidewalk. I, uh, stopped and gathered it up with leaves and buried it.”

The fairy stared at Alejo intently. He opened his mouth as if to say something but hesitated. Well, it was pretty dumb story, Alejo guessed, still blushing. He’d never shared it with anyone.

Alejo finished working with the compost, dusted off his hands, and rubbed his back, which had that stretchy-sore feeling. “Another day over,” he said, looking toward the setting sun.

Suddenly Fane hovered close, startling Alejo.

“Hey! *Que haces?*”

The fairy landed on Alejo’s left hand, then knelt, and kissed where a fresh callous had blistered and was giving Alejo some pain when he gripped the handle of his rake.

Alejo blinked, eyes dazzled as for a second his hand was engulfed in a kaleidoscope of mad, heated jewel colors, a rainbow that *burned*—

Then the wound was gone and so was the fairy.

He looked around but didn’t see Fane anywhere.

“Wonder why he did that for me?” Alejo mused aloud, rubbing his rough, large hand against his bare leg.

“I didn’t do it for *you*. Did it for that snail you buried,” a voice said from somewhere in the garden.

Chapter Two

FANE knew something was wrong as soon as Alejo returned to Autumn Glade. He'd been observing the human closely for the two weeks he'd been working the garden—*not* spying or meddling as Alejo once accused him—but merely watching. And why not? Alejo was on his land, after all.

But as the sun touched the roots and grass and rose like a hot orange ball, promising another scorcher, he noticed that Alejo's long, bare back was tense. He didn't snark back at Fane's pokes. And his hair was poorly braided today. One thing Fane had observed was Alejo took great pride in his long, silky hair.

The fairy liked it too.

But Alejo's absent responses to the fairy's needling left Fane feeling very deflated. He looked forward to arguing with the gentle gardener. Hearing him curse in Spanish when Fane got under his skin was very satisfying.

Almost as satisfying as sex, Fane thought wistfully. *Almost.*

After grappling with the right approach and finally deciding he was no good at being tactful because he wasn't human and didn't care about their bizarre niceties, he demanded softly, "Tell me what's wrong."

Alejo looked up from where he was weeding, something he spent a lot of time doing since he refused to use chemicals in the garden. In that moment his long hair down his back reminded Fane of Tarzan, a famous human whom Fane had glimpsed at the old drive in movie theater that used to play

across the street from his sanctuary. He missed it. He'd enjoyed the 1960s beach movies, but now it was going back to the wild, with trees sprouting up and graffiti over the old boards.

"I don't want to talk about it." Alejo's mouth formed a stubborn line.

"So there *is* something. Come on, I can be your imaginary friend and you can tell me all your secrets. It'll be great!" Fane enthused, hoping to needle Alejo into spilling. Something wasn't right; he could tell the gardener probably didn't have a lot of money, something humans always seemed to worry about, but he always seemed so serene.

It was an alluring trait.

Now Alejo shook his head, sherry eyes soft like crushed velvet, making Fane feel funny inside. Was he actually experiencing empathy for a mundane?

"Look, I don't know why you follow me around all the time, but I don't like you, okay? You *aren't* my friend," Alejo growled.

Fane hovered a moment, amber eyes wide, and then he zipped off, disappearing into the green.

ALEJO collapsed on his ass with a thump. *Jodido!* Why did he say that? The pretty little fly was a pain, almost like his irritating kid brother. But sometimes he almost enjoyed listening to his stories, even if Fane was impossibly full of himself and talked too much. But Alejo kind of thought he'd hurt its... *his* feelings.

He pushed his long hair back with trembling fingers, sitting in silence, big chest heaving, eyes moist. *Hombre*, get it together!

Finally, he pulled out the locket he'd gifted to Alicia. She'd driven him home last night where he discovered blood spattered on the kitchen counter and a frantic note from Jose.

Alicia had been nice enough to drive him to the hospital since he couldn't afford a car. He left her in the waiting alcove and joined Jose in *Mamita's* room, leaning down to kiss her forehead. *Mamita* took Alejo's hand in her bandaged one. "...I have to finish making dinner!"

Alejo swallowed thickly, meeting Jose's damp eyes across the room. "No, *Mama*," he said. "Jose and I will do the cooking now."

WHEN they returned home, Alicia lingered on the front porch, and Alejo noted that it was in need of a paint job, the white paint actually flaking off. He'd have to find time—

"I'm *not* selfish, Alejo," she said, holding his eyes gravely.

"Of course not," he agreed automatically.

She quietly returned the twin of the locket he always wore, this one bearing his picture, and his eyes stung with tears. No, oh, no. "You have to be willing to put me first, Alejo, to want a family, to want to move up in the world and be more than... this." She gestured and again, he was confronted with the broken rocking chair he had yet to repair, the wrinkling white paint.

"I have a family," he said. *Whether I want one or not.* The truth was: nothing in his life was what he wanted, except he did like working with his hands. But nothing in his life was what he, Alejo, had chosen. It was also why he resisted getting closer, and now Alicia was clearly fed up.

“Always it’s Jose or your mother. You had all these plans in school. You used to be so much fun! Now....” Alicia sighed. “Oh, Alejo.”

He couldn’t think of what to say, but he felt shame that he hadn’t realized his dreams and she saw him as a loser. Well, didn’t he see himself the same way? His hands traced the locket in his palm. He had no idea why she continued dating him at all. He wasn’t in college anymore, where they met and he had a future. He wasn’t rich or smart or even really good looking. He was just a guy who liked to work with his back. It gave him some brief illusion of freedom. It took care of his family. It wasn’t enough for her.

“She dumped you, huh?”

Alejo jumped and then flushed, embarrassed, seeing that Fane was actually perched on his *shoulder*, gripping his long hair for balance. Apparently fairies weighed next to nothing because Alejo hadn’t felt him, or maybe he was so lost in his thoughts he’d been unaware.

Now he reluctantly experienced a brief moment of wonder, looking at Fane. Delicate wings fluttering, luminescent, like he had glittery things just under the skin and the glowing amber eyes. Fane was *magico*.

Alejo cleared his throat. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to... I shouldn’t pick on a little fairy.”

Fane got pissed of course, puffing out his sleek muscled chest. “Who are you calling a *little* fairy? In case it escaped your notice, you stupid human, there is nothing small about me. I’m very macho!”

“Uhhhh.” Alejo suppressed a smile because the wee thing *was* flying around naked, and he guessed for something only nine inches, he was... uh....

The fae flew off his shoulder and hovered at eye level, and Alejo was treated to a close up of his male parts. “Also, very nicely hung for a fairy, I’ll have you know!”

Alejo blushed, looking down to toy with the locket.

“Just making a point.” The fairy was back on his shoulder again. It felt strangely right, even after the handful of days he’d known the creature, a lock of his hair tugged in a tiny, possessive fist.

“Okay.” Alejo didn’t know what to say. He didn’t stare at guy parts or think about them so having them thrust practically in his face by a feisty little guy was disconcerting. “You are very nicely, ah, formed, Fane. *Paz*, eh? We make peace now.”

“And not small at all!” Fane prodded, obviously still outraged.

“No.” Alejo’s lips twitched. He could understand manly pride, even if it came in a slight package.

“I could put a spell on you, you know. Give you boils or something.”

Now Alejo was alarmed. “Please don’t!”

“So what happened with the girlfriend then?”

“She....” Alejo cleared his throat. “She wanted me to put her first. She didn’t like my job.”

“But *you* seem to like your job.” Fane cocked his head. “You aren’t just puttin’ time in here. Believe me, after so many gardeners, I know the difference!”

Swallowing, Alejo nodded. “I guess I’m not enough.” He pushed a strand of his long hair behind his ear. “For her, I mean.”

The fairy didn't comment, and after a moment Alejo closed his eyes, relieved the conversation was over. Yet sitting on the grass, the moment stretched. Alejo watched the wind feather the leaves in an oak tree and felt his tension ease. There was something about this place. It was becoming his.

"Do you smell something?" he asked lazily, frowning as he caught the scent of burnt honey and whiskey. He licked his lips, almost able to taste it, like coffee seasoned with spices and brown sugar, made by his *mamita* after a special celebration dinner.

"Oh." The fairy left his shoulder and flitted over to the other side of the brook as Alejo watched, bemused. "That's me, I'm afraid. Fairy pheromones."

Alejo's eyes widened at a sudden embarrassing realization. *Joder!* He reached for his discarded T-shirt and placed it over his lap. "Huh. So it's like... a weird kind of chemistry," he muttered.

"The other gardeners usually make a grab for me, sooner or later," Fane said, resignation and just a thread of fear in his tone.

Alejo was mortified that a strange scent could give him a woody! But then he considered what the fairy revealed and realized why he was such a prickly guy. "I'm sorry, *mosco bonito*."

"S'okay. I can fly pretty fast. And I have all kinds of hiding places here in the garden."

"I should get back to work," Alejo said with a deep sigh. He stood when he was able, that *scent* still teasing him, but he felt pity for Fane because he couldn't imagine it was much fun for him, being so alluring to humans.

"What are you going to do with the locket?" Fane asked.

“Oh.” Alejo rubbed his chest and then looked at the locket. He suddenly wanted to let it go, to be free of it and the constant drag, like a heavy wheelbarrow leaving a groove in the grass. “Toss it in the water, maybe.” He hefted it, ready to splash it into the brook, but the fairy suddenly zipped to intercept him, taking the token by its gold chain.

“A heart gift has a lot of power. I collect such things for my stash, and if I have it, it might take away some of what you’re feeling,” Fane offered.

For some reason that made Alejo’s throat tighten—the idea that the fairy might take some of the pain and desolation he felt at being dumped, almost like he’d taken away Alejo’s painful blister the other day. He nodded, bending down to drop the offering on the mossy rocks for the fae.

“Okay, and now I’m going to repair the roof on the gazebo.” Saying that, having that simple mission, made Alejo feel better, as did striding away and leaving his locket in a fairy’s keeping.

WHEN Alejo bent over to leave his locket, his wallet fell from his loose cutoffs. Fane hovered, watching the big man stride toward the greenhouse without looking back.

Should he call his gardener back and tell him?

But Fane liked to nick things and hadn’t *really* taken Alejo’s wallet. It just fell into his hands, like it was meant to happen.

He ignored the locket for the moment, unfolding the worn leather sleeves of the billfold. The first picture showed an older woman, smiling, her hand on the shoulder of a child who resembled Alejo—probably the younger brother, Jose. The

woman had Alejo's serious sherry eyes with the same trace of sadness, so she must be his mother.

The second photo was of a girl with red hair, cuddling up to Alejo in some silly poses taken at one of those cheap booths. That was probably her, the bitch who'd broken up with him. Fane stuck his tongue out at her.

He flipped through, intrigued, but didn't find much else of interest. His gardener didn't even carry American Express! But at last he spotted what he'd been hoping for; a picture of Alejo.

Like an old fashioned cameo.

Serious eyes. Long silky hair. Cutoffs. A hint of a smile on the full, shy lips. Fane stared, wondering. Why was Alejo so different from those other gardeners?

He was gentle, Fane supposed, categorizing what he liked about Alejo. And he didn't try to grab the fairy when Fane's natural erotic aroma caught him off-guard. In fact, he seemed embarrassed that it affected him. His hair felt like warm silk to a fairy's hands.

And most peculiar of all?

Alejo *smelled* as good to Fane as another fairy would!

Fane took the picture and the locket and plunged into a thicket.

ALEJO was in the greenhouse working with his flowers. He particularly enjoyed the colors of the hibiscus—bright tropical yellows touched with orange, vivid vermilion, violets. When late summer came, he would plant them in the beds for people to admire until just before the first frost. He hoped to cut them back to woody stubs then, and despite how they could break

out from aphids during the winter, maybe he could winter them in the greenhouse, splash them with cool water to keep the pests down. That is, if Mr. Appleby thought he did a good enough job here and gave him a job next summer.

Since Fane was always around asking questions about his work, he found himself wondering if the fairy would like the specially bred flowers he brought from his own slapped-together hobby light cart in his house. He loved mixing bright, outrageous colors. They screamed and clashed, and the chaos made him happy.

His current favorite was a fuchsia topiary with blossoms striped with purple.

Suddenly, he heard shouting.

Que pasa? He frowned and wiped his hands on his dusty cutoffs. Not bothering to grab his T-shirt, he strode out to see what was happening, if a visitor to the garden had some kind of problem.

It didn't take him long to spot a man with binoculars, a butterfly net, and some kind of large jar. He was overweight and pale, licking his lips as he scanned the meadow with hard grey eyes where Fane and Alejo spent some of the morning talking.

Alejo felt his stomach twist unpleasantly, remembering the glimmer of fear in Fane's eyes. "Can I help you?" he asked curtly.

The man started, as if only just seeing Alejo. "Just... looking for something."

"The garden's plants and animals aren't for collecting," Alejo pointed out in a frosty tone. And suddenly he felt he was living the role he'd been hired on for—guardian of Autumn

Glade. There was something about the man that made him intensely uncomfortable.

“Can’t you smell that?” the stranger asked in a tight whisper.

“I think you better go, sir.” Alejo moved in front of the man and firmly pushed aside the quivering butterfly net.

“Seen him, have you? Want him for yourself, I suppose. Do you know if you can make a little one come, they’re yours for life? Give you their treasure, jewels, everything.”

The man was clearly off his rocker.

“I want you to leave, *vayase!* Now.” Alejo folded his muscular arms, knowing with his build he could look intimidating, though at heart he was as gentle as a golden retriever.

The man glared at him. “Fucking hippy!”

Alejo trailed him to the parking lot, where he took a scrap of paper and a pencil and wrote down his license plate, letting the man see him do it. He sensed there might be more trouble from this one.

HE WASN’T surprised when on his way back to the greenhouse a tiny weight lighted on his shoulder.

“Thought I’d go over to the coffeehouse for an iced mocha. Can I get you anything?” Alejo offered politely, as if he hadn’t just kicked Fane’s admirer out of the garden.

“I like the new one, with the cookie?”

“That’s pretty strong stuff. And how have you had it before?” Alejo raised his brows, watching the fairy tangle his

fist deeper in his long hair. Maybe he'd even leave it free more often, so Fane could do that. So he wouldn't lose his balance and fall, of course.

"Sometimes I give the kids some money I find," Fane commented wistfully. "But I can't leave this place for very long or go very far away."

"Huh, okay, I'll get you one of those."

An impatient hand tugged his hair again. "Guess you'll need your wallet then. You left it by the brook."

"I did? Whoa, thanks!" Retracing his steps, Alejo's brow creased as he considered the problem of the strange man. "Was he the ex-gardener who hassled you?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Fane," Alejo said simply.

WHEN Alejo returned with their coffee he had to scold the fae to give him time to find a rock to sit down on so he didn't spill his own cool drink. "I asked for one of those sample cups, so I'll pour it into that, and you should be able to handle it."

He dished out the drink and broke the cookie and dipped it into the coffee. When he noticed a wistful glance at his own creamy foam with chocolate, he used a stir stick to put a little into Fane's offering as well.

"This is nice," Fane said, taking his treat and wasting no time in chewing on his coffee-saturated cookie.

"Yeah, well, consider us even. What you said about taking the locket so I wouldn't feel so shitty? I don't know why, but it

kind of helped me. Thanks.” Alejo kept his gaze carefully on his coffee.

“No problem.”

AFTER they finished their treats, both lazed in the hot sunshine for a while. This was the best part of working out here—setting his own hours—but it was getting really hot! Alejo pushed his hair back, impatient with its messy weight in the heat.

He felt a tug and heard a buzzing sound.

What...?

Fane was arranging his hair!

“Making one fat braid. I’ll tie it with some old twine I found in a robin’s nest,” Fane said, his tone satisfied.

Alejo sat there, closing his eyes, bemused, and feeling oddly like a pharaoh or something from ancient Egypt, being cared for by an adoring servant. Christ, it felt good, someone simply touching his hair.

He watched the fairy lift up a heavy lock and sniff at it, rub it against his face. “*Soft...*” Fane murmured appreciatively.

“Was thinking maybe I should cut it. Alicia never liked it,” Alejo admitted.

“I *like* it, and who cares what she thought? She didn’t have the judgment to stay with you, now did she?”

“Yeah, you really like it?” Alejo smiled as more of his hair was pulled tight, the tugs never rough, but nice and firm. “When I took a vow of chastity, I decided to grow it out,” he

surprised himself by confiding, but he was drowsy under Fane's touch, as if the fairy truly possessed magic.

He let his head fall back, surrendering to his strange and acerbic new friend.

Chapter Three

ALEJO sighed, the tugging of his hair becoming somehow erotic. He always felt so good when someone touched him gently, but it rarely seemed to happen because of his large, muscular body. Now he absorbed the experience, hungry for tenderness. Since he was still shamed from being dumped, at first he pictured Alicia ministering to him as he dozed, the warm yellow sun healing his body, tired but content after a long day's work.

But then the fantasy changed, and Alejo daydreamed that morning glory vines snaked out from the brush, making a strange shushing sound as they slid across the grass, wrapping around his ankles and his wrists, holding him fast.

He licked his lips, moaning softly. Here was another of his secret fantasies—bondage. Something about having his hair tugged into a braid, almost caressed, if he were honest about the experience, made him imagine someone using a silk scarf to bind him and then playing with his body, as if he were some kind of virgin sacrifice, lying open and wanton, his hair fanned out around him.

His breathing picked up at the idea of being at someone's mercy, under someone's control even as it seemed unacceptable for a young macho man. But in his daydream, his eyelids ruby from the light of the sun, he imagined he was twisting in his bonds, his hard, aching cock prodding the air, needy, until lips tasted him, licked him—

Alejo moaned again, his eyes snapping open to meet the amber eyes of the male fairy who had enslaved him, not tiny

anymore, but human-sized as he mounted Alejo, pressing his body firmly between Alejo's spread thighs.

"This is what you want?" Fane whispered against his lips, completely in command of Alejo.

"I said, this is what you want?" Fane repeated.

Alejo jerked upright, clearing his throat, rubbing his shaking hands on his thighs. *Joder!* What an irrational, unsettling dream! He touched his long braid and found it running in tidy bumps down to his stomach. "Yes, that's very nice." He could barely meet Fane's quizzical amber eyes. "Thank you."

"Your hair...." Fane sighed. "So what did you used to do? You know, when you went on a date with—"

"Alicia, her name was Alicia," Alejo shared.

"Right. Her. The bitch."

"She wasn't so bad." Alejo had his feet in the brook, trying to cool off. He'd taken off his T-shirt and because the garden was closed, the gates locked now, he'd unzipped his cutoffs. They were sticking to him, damp against his skin from the undulating waves of humid air.

The fairy didn't seem to feel the heat, but he was, well, naked, which was pretty convenient, Alejo thought enviously. It must be nice to zip around and not worry about sticky boxers, not that Alejo wore even those today. He was commando because of the heat.

Now he dipped a lazy hand into the brook and dripped icy water over his bare chest and down to where a thin line of hair met his cutoffs.

He shivered and closed his eyes. That felt amazing! Almost as amazing as the weird daydream he had, not that it meant

anything other than he was probably feeling a little off balance right now, missing his girlfriend.

Fane was lying on his stomach on a tall rock above him, watching as Alejo continued to cool himself with refreshing water.

“Um, why do you want to know what I used to do with Alicia?” Alejo felt slow and groggy and wished he could just curl up in the grass and snooze like a sleepy caterpillar until the cool of morning.

“Just... wanted to know what you like to do when you spend time with someone, is all.” Fane cupped his chin in his hand. “Wondered if there was something special.”

“I dunno.” Alejo shrugged, brow crinkling. “Go to movies. She spent a lot of time on her phone, even when we went to dinner.” Alejo remembered now. He told himself he was proud to have such a popular girlfriend, but it always hurt him, as if he wasn’t important enough to hold her attention.

A breakup was kind of a revelation. He knew he hungered to be touched, to be important to someone, he just never let himself see that before. But it turned out he’d much rather be home watching *Babylon 5* or another of his favorite science fiction shows than having dinner with Alicia.

“I am going to miss touching her,” he admitted. “She had very soft skin.”

“Yeah, there is nothing like being close to someone,” Fane agreed mournfully. “Had a boyfriend myself for a while, name of William, who has the garden close to that big mall they just put up, but he was too stubborn so we couldn’t get along.”

Startled, Alejo felt his heart jump. A boyfriend? It made him think of his strange dream. He rubbed his chest and put aside the thought, continuing to listen quietly.

Fane nodded toward the water. “Why don’t you take off those shorts and wade in the stream? You’d be much more comfy.”

Alejo flushed. It was stupid. He had no idea why he was so self-conscious. The gate was down. The garden would sleep until morning.

It was just him and Fane now. So why did he feel shy about taking off his clothes?

“No, I’m fine.”

“You look hot.”

“Yeah?” Alejo snickered and so did his wee friend, after a moment. “*Gracias.*”

“You’re welcome.”

“FANE,” Alejo asked a little while later in a drowsy tone. “The man who harassed you hasn’t come back again after hours, has he? I mean, you’d tell me.”

Fane grimaced. He had been lying in an indolent haze enjoying the sunshine and the look and scent of Alejo Gardener’s big pretty body.

He could smell the aroma of the other man’s sex teasing his sharp senses, and it made him curious about it.

He wanted to see Alejo naked. Lying there with his long silky hair so Fane could explore him.

He wasn’t sure why. Fairies were very sensual creatures, but they didn’t lust after humans as a rule. Humans had hard hands, stupid customs, and clomped around. They were annoying.

But there was something about Alejo.

“Mind if I take a dip?” Fane asked, deciding it was time to cool off. He didn’t want to talk about the lusting gardener, not while he had Alejo so nicely relaxed.

“You need to ask me?” Alejo blinked.

“Gonna use your foot to hang onto. I can’t fly for a while when my wings are wet, but I have to keep them clean, same as birds do.”

“Right! I read birds have to do that every day. Keep their feathers in top shape so they can fly.”

The fae bounced from Alejo’s calf into the water.

ALEJO sat up and watched, reluctantly charmed.

A wee ass and a flash of jeweled purple wings as the fairy submerged himself, but when the stream’s current caught him, Alejo’s protective palm was there.

Fane lay in it as he was lifted from the water, dripping, his dark hair tangled around his face like a rescued merman, looking up at Alejo.

Stupid, but for some reason that made Alejo’s throat tighten.

“Should I put you back on your rock to sun yourself? I’ll stay here until you can fly again.”

I’ll keep you safe.

“No. I want to lie on your hair, using it as a blanket, since it’s warm from the sun.”

Alejo swallowed thickly. The fairy seemed to have a real thing for his hair!

“Okay.” He lay back and shook free Fane’s careful braid, spreading his hair out on the ground in ripples, making a silken bed for the fae.

He placed Fane carefully on it, admitting to himself he was more and more fascinated with the creature. When Fane turned over on his stomach and *rubbed* himself in Alejo’s hair, Alejo’s pulse jumped. *Joder!* What was going on with him?

“Mmmmmm. Smells like herbs,” Fane noted appreciatively.

Alejo shrugged, a little self-conscious. But what the hell, why not share? “Yeah, uh. I make my own shampoos and soaps. I taught myself how to use all the extra herbs I grow, since sometimes school children visit the park, and they want to know stuff you can do with plants.”

“Smells like oranges and lavender.”

Alejo smiled, pleased with Fane’s interest. He gifted Alicia a homemade bottle once, but she thought it was something to drink, and he’d been too self-conscious about her mistake to enlighten her. “Yeah, and I put in a touch of rosemary too, which is supposed to bring out highlights and shit.”

“Maybe that’s why you smell so good!” Fane mused, brow crinkling. “I can’t figure out what it is, you being a mere human.”

Alejo shook his head, blushing again. Truth was, one of the reasons he was shy about taking off his cutoffs was how hard he was growing. That teasing scent of Fane’s fairy essence, his hands in his hair. Shit, he had to try to block out these weird thoughts! Fane wasn’t a woman; he wasn’t even human.

“Gonna nap awhile, okay?” He really was zapped, and lately he slept a lot. The breakup left him feeling like his skin

had been scraped off. All he wanted now sometimes was to sleep and tune it out.

“Me too. I hardly ever get to do this, sunbathe in the open. Always have to be careful.” Fane’s amber eyes were heavy as he settled.

Alejo’s lips tightened. “Yeah, that’s shitty, but I won’t let anyone hurt you, so go ahead.”

Fane wrapped Alejo’s dark hair around his body like the blanket he’d wanted, smiling. The fairy really lived, and Alejo could relate to that since it was what he liked about working outdoors. The scents, smells, the feeling of working with his hands. It made him feel alive and not just the dutiful son caring for his family.

As he drifted, Alejo studied Fane, a faint smile touching his own lips. He was such a pain in the ass, but lately Alejo had hated leaving the garden at night. It was nice to have a friend, even if Fane was an unconventional one.

And he like sharing things with him, whether it was Krispy Kreme donuts or the comics he brought to read with Fane, letting him flip through them while Alejo worked the garden grounds. They both enjoyed the reprint of Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*. It was nice to share his stash with someone since his kid brother Jose had always been more into sports than reading, and Alejo figured it also helped to alleviate some of the fairy’s boredom.

As for the weird reaction he was feeling sexually to Fane, it came and went, so Alejo figured it had to be like poison ivy, just a physical reaction to Fane’s scent.

WHEN Alejo woke the sun was lower. He turned to look for Fane, but the fairy was gone. He felt a little disappointment but really, it *was* time he went home, and he'd see the fae tomorrow, same as always. And sometimes lately Fane disappeared just before it was time for Alejo to return to his real life, grill some fajitas for *Mamita* and Jose, fall asleep in his single bed reading yet another comic. Alejo had wondered if Fane's hiding might be because he also hated to see Alejo leave his garden every night.

Alejo got up and zipped his cutoffs, and then he stretched, shoving back his hair. A soft gasp caught his attention so he looked around, spotting Fane, who was—

Outraged, "What are you looking at?"

Joder! "Nothing!"

HE WAS in the greenhouse pulling on his T-shirt when Fane appeared. The fae was wet from the stream, having bathed again, his dark hair curled in loose ringlets, shivering.

Alejo had no idea what to say to him, so instead he tossed him a clean rag and folded his arms while Fane used it to dry off.

Finally, Fane sat on a stack of clay pots, folding his arms, a defiant look heating amber eyes. He was obviously not in the mood to discuss what Alejo had caught him doing in the stream—not that it wasn't something Alejo didn't do frequently in the shower.

"Starbucks in the morning?" Alejo asked now, breaking the awkwardness between them.

"Yeah."

“Okay then. *Buenas noches*, Fane.”

He was just out the door when the fairy landed on his shoulder and gave his hair a hard tug.

“Ow!”

“I can’t *help* it. I’m... I’m all alone, and there’s no one to touch me.”

Alejo held his palm up flat, and Fane flew onto it so they could talk, man to fairy.

“I didn’t mean to watch you, I was just surprised. But I do get it. I mean, you are a guy, even if you have wings and all that.”

“Yeah. And I’ve been *really* horny lately,” Fane complained, looking grumpy.

Alejo remembered how aroused he was lately as well and his cheeks pinkened. He could relate.

“You dated someone. Just wish there was someone for me.”

Alejo leaned against a tree. “I get lonely too, Fane. But I guess I’m not the kind of guy a girl would want.”

“Why not?” Fane frowned. “You smell good.”

“Half the time I forget to shave or something. And, I never—” Alejo coughed, really blushing now. “You know I’ve never been with anyone.”

Fane blinked. “Oh, yeah? Weird.”

“You think so?” Alejo shifted, restless. “Yeah, I guess I’m a freak.”

Fane caught a long strand of Alejo’s hair, twirling it in tiny hands. “No, I think you’re beautiful.” Serious amber eyes caught Alejo’s surprised ones. “For a human, I mean.”

FANE followed him this time as he strode from the park, not sure if he'd be relieved or sorry to leave today. "So you and Alicia never...?"

"I shouldn't talk about this with you." Alejo shook his head.

"Why not? Aren't I your best friend?" Wide amber eyes held Alejo's.

Alejo sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, surprised by the answer that came from his lips, "Yeah, guess so. Not sure how that happened since we have nothing in common."

"Well, we both like gardens."

Alejo smiled. "Yeah." He'd come to the edge of the parking lot, and it was finally time to let go. "Fane." He bit his lip, wanting to ask more about his special fairy aroma. Wanting to understand why more and more he felt drawn to someone it was impossible to ever be with, but of course he chickened out. "See you in the morning."

The next day it was Starbucks and Mike Grell's series of *Green Arrow*. The art kept Fane entertained while Alejo worked, though Alejo noticed how Fane lingered over one nude still of the hero. It was the same one that had caught his eye. Huh.

They both avoided each other, though Fane followed Alejo, sitting on a branch just out of earshot, like a wary robin.

When it came time for him to leave again at four, Fane returned his comic but still didn't say much. Alejo thought he might be a little down.

"You okay?"

“Fine. *He* was here again last night, is all.”

Alejo dropped the comic and put his hands on his hips. “Fane, *Joder!* I thought you’d tell me if that *cabron* came back?”

“Well, I’m telling you now, aren’t I?” Fane bristled.

“Okay, yeah, I’m sorry. I’m just... It really pisses me off he’d come here and frighten you.” Alejo felt sick, thinking of his new friend hiding during the night while he slept safe in his single bed.

“He doesn’t scare me!” Puffed-out chest. Attitude.

Alejo felt a smile inside for the first time that day, but he was careful to keep it off his lips so he didn’t anger Fane. “I’m gonna grab some dinner, but I’ll be back later.”

Fane cocked a wee eyebrow.

“I figure I’ll camp out for a while, bring my tent, just until he stops coming around.” Alejo shrugged, not wanting to make a big deal of it. He was just helping out a friend after all.

“You’ll come back?” Fane’s face glowed like sunlight through the greenhouse windows.

Alejo smiled, knowing some of the same shy radiance was on his own face. What was going on? *He hated going home lately, leaving Fane.*

“We’ll use the old fire pit since I just rebuilt it; I’ll bring some marshmallows.”

FANE covered his sleek belly later, groaning after all the marshmallows he’d feasted on. He lay back and looked at the fire, something that hadn’t been possible in years before Alejo

fixed the walls around the pit. He loved having his gardener here all night!

Alejo had a small pup tent set up. He told Fane he'd have to be sure and be up early to take it down since it was technically against the garden's rules and all he needed was Mr. Appleby to catch him!

"I gotta crash. Can't believe how many you ate!" Alejo shook his head.

"Did you say you brought Twinkies?"

"Fane!"

"What? I meant for breakfast." The fairy hadn't been this full since last year's midsummer fairy revel in a neighboring garden. Which was also the last time he had sex, he remembered glumly. That was before William started dating another fairy.

AS ALEJO unzipped the tent and made his bed, he didn't expect the fae to fly inside the tarp, making use of a corner of Alejo's towel for a makeshift bed. "Are you sure you want to sleep in here? I mean, I thought you'd roost in a tree branch or something."

The truth was, Alejo felt a bit nervous. What if he turned over and crushed Fane? And what about the fairy's effect on him? That could get awkward! But seeing Fane had settled, he sighed. "I'll leave the door open for you so you can leave if you want."

Alejo unrolled some light summer blankets and then shut off the flashlight so he could strip in the dark. He felt shy,

which he knew was dumb. Whatever weird dreams he had, he and Fane could never be together.

He took off his shorts under the blanket and then lay back, sighing. Just before he fell asleep, he felt a weight in his hair and then a warm little body curled against his neck.

SOMETIME before dawn the fairy woke in the familiar new blanket he'd made of Alejo's hair. He stretched, feeling *wonderful*.

Alejo had stayed the whole night here in Fane's garden!

He flew to a perch on the kerosene lantern on the opposite side of the tent, studying his sleeping human. He couldn't see him clearly enough, so he let his own natural fairy glow brighten the small space gently.

Alejo lay in a tangle of dark silky hair, his hands raised beside his head, palms open and vulnerable looking. The blanket rode low over his hips, revealing the thin thread of black hair that arrowed down his lower abdomen. He was all olive skin, young, muscled.

Last night the modest young human had undressed under the covers, frustrating Fane's peculiar curiosity to see him. Now he hovered over Alejo and lifted aside that shield, revealing Alejo fully to Fane's interested gaze.

Alejo's body was sleeping, but his sex was fully erect, thick as a sturdy stem of fresh rhubarb growing in their garden.

Bemused by why he looked at his gardener, Fane sat down on one lean thigh and admired Alejo.

Humans weren't of any interest to a fairy, but Alejo was different. Gentle, silken hair, callused finger tips, sun-warmed skin... and *Fane's*.

Chapter Four

FANE spent some time studying his friend's big body, lifting his limp hand to look at the life line that patterned it like a fallen leaf, brushing his hairy calf and watching Alejo twitch, obviously ticklish. He especially reveled in stroking Alejo's long virgin's hair, pressing the silky cool mass against his face.

He'd told Alejo he missed touching someone. His eyes burned when he thought about it, watching over his sleeping gardener. *His.*

When he thought of Alejo that way, as belonging to him, Fane realized that he wanted to make it come true, even if Alejo was a human. It made sense—Alejo was kind and patient. He loved the garden. He never frightened Fane. He lost his girlfriend and missed touch, as Fane did. He seemed at times to respond to Fane's special fragrance but was too timid to ever act on it. But the fact remained that Alejo was a human and Fane was not.

Then Fane had a sudden inspiration—it was an old spell, something that Fane could only draw from the Earth once for every full moon's passing, but they could make the most of it! Impulsive, he acted on it immediately, zipping up and down the chaste, sleeping length of Alejo's body like a dragonfly on patrol, trying to decide where to bestow his special kiss.

Finally, he decided to be naughty. Besides, the scent of the young man's sex was alluring, so he hovered over Alejo's hard cock before darting close to taste it.

A flash of sparkling light!

Oh, yes. That would do nicely.

Sitting back to admire his handiwork, Fane reached out to stroke Alejo's hair again. He had been so lost, so alone for centuries. He only wanted to get closer.

Surely this wasn't wrong?

WHEN Alejo woke up, he knew something was different. His head was thumping as if he'd had too much Mexican beer the night before, and scent and sound... *strong*, grating his heightened senses. He blinked, frowning when he realized he was lying on his stomach, and he almost *never* slept on his stomach.

His back was itchy. He lifted a hand to scratch, and—

His eyes shot open as he took in *miles* of bedding and Fane, sitting cross-legged on the mountain of Alejo's pillow, looking very smug. Fane, who was suddenly *larger* than he should be. Life-sized!

Alejo's head fell forward, and he groaned, "*Dios!* I'm so gonna be late for work."

PACING, Alejo looked over his shoulder at his heels, his bare ass, smooth olive skin and then—*Joder!* "Fane, I can't stay like this! Change me back!"

"What's wrong with how you look?" Vulnerability moved through the uncanny amber eyes. Fane's mouth was set at a stubborn angle as he circled Alejo, his hand grazing the high pointed ears, pausing on the newly grown amethyst wings.

“You’re so pretty. You’re small now so you can... you can be mine. My friend, I mean.”

Alejo put his hands over his face, feeling his wings ruffling with his upset. His feet left the ground, and he gave an embarrassing squeak. “*Shit!*”

Fane caught him, guiding him back safely to the bedding.

Alejo instinctively grabbed onto the fairy, who was still a little smaller than he was because he remained the more finely built of the two of them.

Just when he thought he was home free, his legs anchored around Fane, pushing their bodies together in an intimate and unsettling fashion, his new wings unfurled and fluttered, making them both leave the ground in an unsettling *hop*.

Fane countered his fluttering with his own busy whirring, bringing them back to the blanket a second time.

“Shhhhhh.” He cupped Alejo’s face, seeming to recognize how freaked out he was for the first time. “Don’t be afraid.” His long eyelashes fell, shielding the long amber eyes. “Not of anything.”

“But what did you do to me?” Alejo took deep breaths, wishing he could close his eyes, wake up normal again! “I never believed you really had... magic.”

“Very basic magic,” Fane outlined, his lips nuzzling Alejo’s cheek, still comforting him. “I kissed you and made you like me.”

Alejo became aware that he was wrapped around Fane. He felt the warm stiffness of Fane’s sex brush against his own hardness. *Joder!* He yanked his legs away and landed on his ass, blinking up at Fane. He couldn’t help but notice that Fane had been right—he wasn’t small for a fairy.

Oh shit! Alejo covered his face and took a deep breath. Whether he wanted to or not, he had to deal with this, so he peeked at Fane, catching him looking down at him and seeing a combination of compassion and innocence. Here was his friend, the annoying little *mosco bonito* who had grown on Alejo. That was still the same, despite how the unsettling feelings seemed more front and center. Remembering them but still not wanting to ever acknowledge them, Alejo rasped, “Change me back, Fane.”

“Don’t you want to be with me?”

“No! I’m *human*! And I’m also—” Alejo choked off the next word.

“What are you?” Fane demanded.

“I’m a man as you are,” Alejo finished, holding Fane’s eyes.

Fane raised a brow. “So?”

FANE didn’t understand his Alejo Gardener. He made such a beautiful fairy, as though he was *meant* to be one.

A fairy with dark honey skin, sturdy limbs, muscled back, long silky hair, delicately pointed ears and... all right, some beard shadow—you could only do so much, making a fairy out of a human.

They could be together all the time.

“Change me back, *now*!” Alejo ordered, seeming to get more steamed the longer he was in fairy form. “I don’t want to be like you, don’t you get it?”

Fane's eyes stung. He'd only meant to delight Alejo. "You said you missed touch. There's nothing like going to sleep wrapped in the wings of a friend," Fane offered.

But Alejo had his back turned now. "I can't be with you. I'm not a fairy—in *any* sense of the word."

ALEJO felt a whisper of movement, light flashed—

And he was kneeling nude on his bedding, his hands, feet, his body his own again.

He sighed, relieved but still a little freaked out.

"Fane? Thanks for changing me back," he said, looking around. "And, uh, about what I said before. You didn't even ask me if it was what I wanted. I'm not like you. I have a job, responsibility, family!"

No one answered him.

The fairy was gone.

Chapter Five

ALEJO didn't see Fane the rest of that day, and it was a long one. Light glimmered through the trees sometimes, sparkling on the pond, tricking his eye into thinking he saw the fairy.

He left the tent because he was still determined to camp out until the amorous ex-gardener was made to see he wasn't welcome in the garden after hours. He only wished he could complain about him to Mr. Appleby, but the head of the garden board had so far not seemed too impressed with Alejo's own performance, as he was a very old school gardener, never mind being receptive to Alejo's concern over the ex-employee's obsession with Autumn Grove.

Finally, he went to the greenhouse and retrieved his leather knapsack, grazing a finger over a pot where Fane typically liked to sit.

And then Alejo left his garden and headed to the hospital. It was his least favorite place these days.

Walking through the halls, listening to pages on the blurry intercom, getting on the elevator, he remembered what he'd alluded to with Fane after he'd thankfully transformed Alejo back to normal. Responsibility. *Family*.

His *mamita* was here. Lately she'd been getting some help. She was dressing better, and on the advice that activity might stimulate her memory, she'd even joined a women's Tai Chi group. On good days she remembered what month it was and where he was working, though they didn't let her cook without supervision anymore.

Entering the room where she was waiting for him to take her home after her latest round of tests, he reached out and took her hand, squeezing it silently. She was gazing out the window, the long scar on her palm still bright pink. *Joder!* What a night that had been.

She was wearing one of her new yellow suits with her dark hair soft around her face because she insisted on looking good for the doctor. Alejo kissed her cheek, looking into eyes the color and shape of his own. “Time to go home, Mama,” he said.

“Yes, I have to make dinner.” She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Jose said he would do it tonight.”

WHEN he returned to the garden later he was feeling trashed, his big shoulders aching with familiar tension. Today had been a bad day for *Mamita*, but now she was sleeping.

He carried a bag bristling with a single Krispy Kreme donut, Fane’s favorite with multi-colored sprinkles that he once joked tasted better than mythical fairy dust.

Alejo didn’t bother eating anything himself, because he wasn’t sure if he could. *Tomorrow is another day.* It was stupid, but that cliché was something he clung to sometimes.

Instead, he set up the tent efficiently, knocking in fresh pegs, before crawling inside, wrapping his arms around himself, and staring at the crinkled paper bag waiting at the edge of his blankets.

When he finally closed his eyes, he remembered Fane saying it was nice to fall asleep wrapped in the wings of a friend.

NEXT morning there was no Fane, but Alejo immediately noticed that the donut was all gone. Pretending to be affronted, he rubbed his morning beard and growled, “You could have left me some, *comilón!*”

Still no sign, even when he’d called his little friend a pig, which usually resulted in an argument. Alejo sighed. Guess it was going to be another quiet day.

“Fane—” His voice cracked, so Alejo swallowed and tried again, “If you’re around, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I....” *Miss you.* He couldn’t say that, so he ran a hand over his eyes, wishing he was another kind of man. Free of family, of fear, of a certain image of what a man should be.

ON THE bark mulch path, a sudden weight landed on his shoulder, and familiar small fists caught his hair. “So, Starbucks?”

Alejo felt his heart lighten, like sunlight breaking through lacy maple leaves.

“Almond or chocolate biscotti?” he asked, super casual.

“Almond. Today feels it’s going to be almond, I think.”

“Okay then.”

THAT night the fairy didn't appear when Alejo bedded down in the tent, but he'd been around all day so he felt like their friendship was mending.

Dios, he hoped so! So fucking pathetic, but the fairy was his only real confidant now that his girlfriend had dumped him. He didn't have anyone else he could truly be himself with, and now he felt like he was trying to repair something delicate in his big, rough hands, like a morning spider's web.

He lay on his back and stared into the darkness for a while, seeing the illumination of a crooked finger of moon glowing through his tent ceiling but when his little friend didn't show, finally he slept.

WHEN he woke, he was on his stomach, hard and pulsing, springing to life like the fertile garden around him. He rubbed his needy erection against the bedding and then reached down to find himself. He didn't think about Alicia or anything specific as he tugged.

It was all hazy, his eyes half-closed. Glowing amber eyes and skin with little dapples of lights, like spatters of sun and shadow, come-hither scent and wings wrapped around him, keeping him safe.

When he realized where his sleepy mind had gone, he jerked his hand away, sitting up, panting, unsatisfied, a little frightened.

A soothing whisper. "Alejo."

"Fane?" He flushed. How long had the fairy been there? *Joder!* Good thing he couldn't read Alejo's mind.

“Just wanted to say I’m sorry for making you like me. Without asking, I mean. You humans have a lot of rules.”

Alejo leaned over to light the lamp before looking over at the corner of the tent where Fane crouched. “Rules, yes. There’s just this other stuff going on in my life. Other commitments, Fane.”

“Oh. I thought she left you, and you were lonely and....” Fane’s voice drifted off.

Alejo pulled the blanket carefully around himself, shielding his erection, and shifted closer to the fairy. He reached out and, for the first time, really touched Fane, running a comforting finger down his back. “I wish it were that simple,” he said.

Fane leaned against his touch, looking up at him.

And Alejo’s erection flexed. Shit!

“It’s my *mamita*; she forgets things.” Alejo swallowed. “Like how to use a knife to cut up salad ingredients.”

“I’m sorry,” Fane said, very simply. Now the wings blurred, and his friend was on his shoulder, leaning against his neck, curling his arms around the brown column as if Alejo were his pet.

Alejo felt wonder rise like an unfettered balloon as he stroked him again, careful of his seemingly fragile gossamer wings.

“I just wanted you to be more like me.”

“Well, tomorrow’s my day off,” Alejo found himself offering. *jeh!*, was he crazy? “I could hang around, and maybe you could change me into a fairy, as long as it’s *not* permanent, *comprende?* And I’m also not sure about the flying.” Alejo flushed. “I can’t watch hang gliding on TV without getting vertigo.”

The elfin face illuminated with a slight smile.

Alejo smiled back.

"I'll take good care of you, only we have to wait a while."

Alejo blinked, oddly disappointed. "*Que haces?*"

"I can only do that kind of magic, transforming a human into a fairy, once every full moon," Fane told him. "It would diminish me to do it more often."

"Oh." Alejo rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Huh."

"Yeah, so I guess I won't see you on your day off now." Fane's shoulders were slumped. "No reason for you to hang around here all day."

"I'll still come, *mosco bonito*," Alejo decided.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So, Starbucks this morning?"

"Definitely!"

AS IT turned out, they had to wait twenty-seven days, until the moon waned just enough to awaken Fane's power again. It was maybe a good thing, Alejo had decided, since it had given him some time to get used to the idea of having wings. Of being naked with Fane. The last bit he guessed was a dorky thing to be self-conscious about, but he knew they'd do more than fly around the garden if he allowed Fane to transform him.

He just tried not to let himself think about it.

"So, uh, I guess I have to take off my clothes?" *Joder!* This was awkward.

“Yeah, unless you want to be *inside* your clothing after I change you. That might be slightly comical, not to mention disconcerting.” The fairy smirked.

“Right. Also freaky.” Alejo took a deep breath, turning his back and catching laughter as he shucked off his cutoffs. He guessed Fane found his reserve bizarre, more of those strange human rules he lived by.

“Okay, do your thing.”

He felt warm lips brush against his bare left ass cheek.

“*Fane!*”

He was still laughing in shock when suddenly he was small again, standing on the giant platform of his bedding. It was a little disorientating at first, so his stomach twisted queasily.

“Okay?”

“Y-yeah.” Oh, man. Breathe! Alejo closed his eyes and felt his wings thrum. When he tried to relax, he realized it was an intensely pleasurable sensation, mimicking the warm summer breeze through the open tent against his skin.

Fane moved closer, as if drawn to him, reaching up and cupping Alejo’s cheek. “Touch,” he whispered. “Fairies don’t think good or bad, black and white. To me, it doesn’t matter, you being male.”

Alejo swallowed, holding amber eyes. Hadn’t he known he was agreeing to more than sprouting wings by entering Fane’s unfettered and sensual world?

“I can’t believe I’m feeling this way. I was raised to define myself as never being... this thing.” Alejo finally gave words to his confusion and distress and desire.

“We’ll figure it out. Don’t we collaborate on the garden?”

Dryly, “We fight about that all the time.”

“Pah, spirited partnership!” Fane’s gaze was wise and compassionate, reminding Alejo he was far older than a mere human.

Alejo drew in a ragged breath. “Okay, so what now?”

“I want to teach you how to fly.” There was a thread of double meaning in Fane’s voice. Alejo’s eyes widened. Shit, was he ready for this?

Flushing with rosy embarrassment, he said, “I know nothing about flying, Fane.”

He saw awareness in Fane’s eyes... and *heat*.

Fane ran his hand through Alejo’s long hair. “Virgin’s hair, full of magic,” he marveled before adding, “If you get scared, just close your eyes and know that I’ll keep you safe. I want to show you my world, Alejo, share it fully with you.”

Chapter Six

SEEING Fane's world from the perspective of a part-time fairy wasn't easy at first. Alejo didn't fly so much as grip Fane's hand and let him tow him with his eyes tightly shut.

Joder! His vertigo didn't make it easy traveling in a blur, almost seeming to be on a sure collision with tree stumps and the falling petals of heavy summer roses.

But finally, his hand gripped tightly in Fane's, he opened his eyes and felt a dizzying punch of *joy* because he was soaring through the air, hopping over swaying branches, catching the eddy of cooler air rising like misty smoke from the brook below as they circled lazily to a landing.

"Sorry, beauty." Fane's tone was caressing, which made Alejo blush. "I have to make a quick stop."

Curious to see what errand a fairy could have, Alejo followed him, climbing over rocks he stepped on in his sandals without thought as a human but now loomed large as boulders. It was too weird.

Fane made his way to one of the toad houses Alejo had carefully placed around the swollen pond since some toads and frogs were endangered and he was trying to encourage them here in their garden. He'd even drawn out a plan for next year to build some extra water space for reeds and water lilies... assuming he was hired on to work this garden another summer.

"Give me a hand, will you?" Fane groaned. "Not a light weight, this one!"

Alejo jumped over some roots, experiencing an unsettling lightness because of the wings. Fane was chest deep in the pond, face scrunched as he tugged on something.

“What do you want to lift?” Alejo asked, timidly entering the stream. It felt as big as a river now he was pint-sized.

For answer, Fane lifted one bright green and black striped leg of a frog. Fane’s face was now red with effort.

Alejo hesitated another moment, startled, but then he reached down and found the other. He was used to doing his garden chores with Fane’s assistance, after all, so this wasn’t so different.

“Cat got it this spring so ever since the back legs are all screwed up. I come here every morning and put him in the water, and then I take him out after I think he’s had a good swim. Uhhhh!”

Alejo grinned. “How do you know it’s a *him*?”

Fane shook his head ruefully. “I don’t.”

Alejo and Fane tugged while their charge blinked large reflective eyes, passive, obviously used to Fane’s assistance.

“That really does in a fella’s back!” Fane splashed free of the mud where they abandoned the frog to wallow, and Alejo followed. “We have to stay here a bit in case he needs me to get settled. Something wrong, beauty?” Fane asked, as if only now catching Alejo’s intense look.

Alejo took a deep breath. “Just that I guess you *do* know about responsibility. I was wrong about that, thinking I was the only one. You’re special, Fane, and not just because you have wings.”

THE morning had passed into hot, lazy afternoon. Helping a disabled frog and trying to hop between branches and not wind up on his ass or tearing his fragile wings left Alejo tired and a little dispirited.

They settled by the stream, and at last he could appreciate how luxurious it was to be a fairy, letting the sun warm his nude body, stretching out his wings to sunbathe while his legs soaked in cool, lapping water, time clocked only by the slow pound of his heart.

Fane curled against him, and it felt entirely natural, his wings tangled with Alejo's, his erection prodding Alejo's hip. Alejo was hard too, one leg up to partially conceal it. A man got hard for a woman. That's what he'd been brought up to believe, but in Fane's world.... Maybe he could allow himself to be this way. "You are beautiful when you fly," Fane whispered. "I wish you could stay like this forever."

Alejo smiled, face pink and not just from the sun. Being called *beauty* was new.

"There's no hurry in our garden. Plenty of time to teach you how to fly." Fane placed a possessive hand on Alejo's chest, stroking him so Alejo's eyes closed.

He allowed himself to fully enjoy the caress.

Fane took advantage and leaned closer to give Alejo his very first man-to-man kiss. "Beauty," he whispered, strange light burning in his amber eyes. "I wish I had the magic so you'd never be satisfied with another lover."

Fane's words didn't even cause a ripple in Alejo's serenity for some reason. Instead, just like his secret dream of being taken, claimed by the fairy, Alejo allowed himself to be enjoyed now. *Sipping. Tasting. Saying hello... sliding into passion as light as a butterfly drifting past them where they lay tangled*

together, long hair wet ropes against their skin, Alejo's legs moving wantonly against Fane's.

When Fane paused, Alejo opened his eyes, reaching up and pulling Fane closer so that Fane covered him. Alejo hid his face against his seductive fairy's damp skin. "That felt... I liked it!"

"More where that came from. Will you lie down for me, beauty?"

Alejo saw the vulnerability under Fane's cocky bravado. He shrugged, not knowing how to put something into words that was so intense. Finally he settled for simplicity, hoping that Fane would see the buried meaning. "I'm here."

FANE wrapped his arms around Alejo Gardener, his face hidden from the other man's, so his human lover couldn't see his expression. He'd been alone so long. And here was this wonderful human who smelled so good, putting his innocence into Fane's hands. "I'll take good care of you." Fane promised.

He would take his human pet.

ALEJO felt the powerful emotions humming between them as if they were transmitted through the skin. He caressed the delicate fairy's back, stroking the gossamer wings and seeing how Fane's lips parted and his eyes became heavy whenever he touched him.

Fane seemed unable to resist another taste of his gardener, sucking on his upper lip and then the bottom one.

Alejo moaned and pulled Fane closer, encouraging the predator to feed on him. His skin burned to Fane's touch, sunlit warm, lazy and loose, a cradle for Fane's body, receptive to the blunt nudge of his cock.

"Feel better than that girl made you feel?" Fane demanded jealously.

"Fane... *ouch!*" Fane bit his nipple. *Hard.* "Yeah, okay? I've never felt this way before," Alejo reminded him shyly.

"Beauty, I want to be your first and your last." Fane reached down and gripped Alejo's hardness.

"That feels—"

"Spread your legs, pet."

Alejo felt a little apprehensive now but did as Fane asked.

Between his legs, Fane now hovered, his wings fluttering like an adoring hummingbird, tasting Alejo's sex. Gentle face nuzzling against him. Tongue that explored him—

"Oh, God! Fane...."

"It's all right, dearest boy. Fane will see to you. Just relax and feel good."

"But what if I...?" He'd never come in someone's mouth. Was there an etiquette to observe? He wanted to, desperately.

"Sweet on the tongue, pet."

"Oh, shit!"

"That's it, boy. Mmmmmm."

Alejo cried out when Fane suckled him. He'd never had anyone do something like that for him. It had always been his own shamed, furtive hand in the shower or late at night. He bucked his hips, his hands, open palmed, over his head as he lay vulnerable to his lover.

Finally Alejo couldn't hold back his innocent release. He spurted into Fane's willing mouth, sobbing out breath as Fane lingered to take all he had and then lave him clean as Alejo shuddered, lit up by every touch.

Shivering in reaction, Alejo lay there, taken as he'd wanted to be taken. He didn't feel the tears on his cheeks until his lover licked at them, whispering something Gaelic and soothing in his ear.

"Always a bit scary, the first time, beauty."

Alejo laughed shakily. He probably shouldn't like names like "pet" and "beauty."

"Be nice to hear what a wonderful lover I am!" Fane was teasing. And *not*, Alejo could see.

Chapter Seven

“BACHELOR pad, huh?” Alejo suppressed a laugh, not wanting to hurt Fane’s pride as Fane flew them toward his tree house high in the branches of an oak tree.

When they landed on a patio open to the outdoors, Alejo looked around in wonder.

It was done up like a James Bond movie set. Cool 1960s bed with psychedelic bedspread. A tiny table with one lonely backless chair—he guessed it was to accommodate a person with wings. Even a wee plastic television set with vintage bunny ears.

“Wow! It really is a swinging bachelor pad!” He marveled at the scraps of contrasting wallpaper colliding colorfully on walls made of salvaged wood, while trying to politely ignore bits of tiny velvet paintings of puppies and kittens—as Fane had told him, he’d had to scrounge the nearby bins for everything in his home, and he couldn’t always choose what he might like. Piled high in one corner was the fairy’s treasure, pennies, broken watches, Alejo’s abandoned locket and—

“Fane! My driver’s license!” He’d wondered where it had gone since it hadn’t been in his wallet when he’d recovered it earlier that summer.

Fane looked a little shamefaced as he poured wine from a travel-sized bottle into a chipped mug to serve his guest. “Wanted your picture,” he admitted. “And I didn’t want the one you gave that girl.”

“You’ve never had to get a replacement for one of those, or you’d know what a pain it is, but it’s okay. We don’t have a car

anymore.” Alejo hesitated, watching Fane, not sure exactly how to conduct himself in a fairy’s cobbled-together home. No, more than that, in the home of his... boyfriend?

“Come sit on the bed since I don’t have another chair for you. I thought we’d share this mug of wine. It’s not cold, and it tastes a bit like pink soda pop, but it’s all I have.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. Where did you get a bed this cool?” Alejo asked, admiring the beach wave pattern of the head board.

“Barbie’s dream bed. She gets all the great stuff!”

“Uh. Right.” Alejo couldn’t hide his smile this time over Fane’s Barbie furniture. But he couldn’t deny it *was* pretty cool. “Tomorrow,” Alejo sighed, taking a sip of Fane’s offered treat as he settled in the fairy’s bed next to his friend. “I have to go back to my real life, make sure *Mamita* is okay. And Jose has a baseball game. I always go to see him play.”

Fane nodded, his amber eyes a little forlorn as he leaned his head against Alejo’s shoulder.

“But I was thinking, maybe we could, you know, have weekends once a month. Spend time together in your tree house and the garden.” Alejo’s lips tightened. “For the summer, anyway. Usually in the wintertime I have to go up north to find a construction job.”

“You really liked being a fairy for a day?” Fane asked softly, studying Alejo’s face. “You liked me?”

“Sure, it was a bit like hanging out with Peter Pan, alone in our own world,” Alejo noted, a little wistful.

“A little sexier than Peter Pan, I hope.” Fane kissed him, and Alejo lifted a leg over Fane’s. Soon they strained together, panting, arms and wings making restless, seething sounds.

Alejo laid his forehead against Fane's. "Kind of hurts to stop," he rasped.

"Yeah, it does," Fane's tone was low, as if he too were feeling the trepidation Alejo did. "I got a bathtub. Want to wash up a little?"

"Am I ripe or something?"

"No, silly. Just want to spoil you. Before, well, you know...."

Joder! Before sex with another man. Alejo's heart gave a big nervous thump, but he saw such sweetness in Fane's amber eyes. "Okay, though I've never taken a bath with someone before."

FANE lit the tree house with tiny candles, swiped from a nearby church. He had also picked blossoms of hibiscus and passion flower to float in the tub water, setting the scene long before he'd brought Alejo home for the first time.

His bathtub was an old chipped mixing bowl with a faded blue pattern on the outside. "Heavy as hell to get it up here full of pond water, I tell you, but worth it for company," Fane said. "And I even nicked a face cloth out of someone's shopping bag the other day, so we can get you lovely and dry after."

Alejo blinked, seeing all this care. "What about you?"

"I've never had company before," Fane admitted, standing behind Alejo, arms wrapped around him, face pressed against his wings. "William always insisted I visit his place. I wish you could always be here with me."

Me too, Alejo thought, but of course it wasn't possible. He had ties to the world. He could only ever come here a handful of days.

Fane guided him inside the water, which was full of citron-scented bubble bath as well as the floating flowers. Alejo wondered if that was part of Barbie's dream set, also hoarded away for the occasion that someday Fane would have company. But it didn't matter, the little flakes of wood that made this house, the sad-eyed art, the oversized hunk of sea sponge Fane dipped in lukewarm water and then squeezed over Alejo's head all created a spell so he leaned against Fane. No sound but their breathing and the wind chime drips of water.

AT LAST Alejo sat next to Fane on his bed again, the mug put aside, the wine warmed in his belly, giving him a pleasant haze. He was really going to do this, lie down for another man. But looking at Fane, curving ears, hair like dark uneven lace, prominent hungry bones and the long, sensual eyes.

"Don't I have to do anything?" He was worried he wouldn't please his more experienced lover. He should have read up about gay sex, but he'd been afraid if he did it meant something.

Fane studied him. "Sure, tell me a secret. Tell me what you have always wanted but never shared with anyone."

Alejo stiffened, remembering his dream of Fane taking him. Could he actually share that? He licked his lips.

Fane cupped his knee, squeezing, a sensation that seemed to go straight to Alejo's semi-hard prick. "Come on, aren't we friends? You told me all about your break up with that bitch. I

know you take care of your family, that you love them but that sometimes you wish things were different. Is sharing *this* so much harder?”

“Bondage!” Alejo blushed at the abrupt word. “Um.”

But Fane didn’t seem shocked. “I have just the thing.” He went to a carved sandalwood box and opened it, revealing a colorful collection of embroidery floss. After taking a moment to choose, he pulled free strands the color of glowing melon.

“Alejo Gardener.” His voice was a gentle, welcoming caress. Matter of fact, he used the floss to tie Alejo’s wrists to the headboard. “Now you can relax and enjoy it. Now it’s just something the naughty fairy is doing to you, like a dream.” There was an edge of sadness in the long amber eyes.

Alejo watched as the fairy next opened a small jar of skin cream. “Open for me,” Fane ordered, and Alejo spread his legs, flushing, but not just with embarrassment as Fane’s fingers entered him for the first time, anointing him tenderly.

“Ah!” There were no words for *that* sensation, like sparks rising from a bonfire.

“That’s something another man can give you.” Fane palmed himself and easily, slowly, mounted Alejo. “Shhhhh.”

Now he was the wanton, ripe for it, as he’d been in his fantasy. Fane talked to him, reading the sweat on his forehead. Wanting, but.... “This isn’t real life, remember?” Fane comforted, seeming to know exactly Alejo’s boundaries and pushing against them as delicately as he did invading Alejo’s body.

“But it feels real.” *I love you. I love you thick inside me. I love my legs wrapped around your hips and my wrists above my head and my body yours.*

He felt the thick head of his friend seat fully inside him and tap against that place, persistent as the rain falling.

“I haven’t said,” Fane whispered. “Being such a macho kind of fairy, you understand.”

“Said? Oh. I figured.”

Alejo lifted up to meet the club inside him, his wings folded behind him, somehow the sensations that lived in his nipples, balls, and cock also translating pleasurably there since his fairy body seemed more sensual than his regular one.

Fane stroked his cock like a friendly pet. And that easily, lifted Alejo to climax again. “Boy, my boy,” he murmured as Alejo spilled, hands balled above his head, neck corded, feeling Fane’s cool release oddly comforting inside him.

Chapter Eight

FANE didn't sleep after. He had never had someone to sit in his kitchen chair except himself. No one had ever seen his bed or lain in it beside him. It would be another month before Alejo could get away. He had baseball with Jose. He had to make dinner for his mama. Fane only hoped that the garden didn't fade for him, like fallen autumn leaves underfoot, losing their color.

The crickets at the pond caught his attention. Shit! He had to drag froggie into shelter. He got up, deciding to zip through the sprinklers on the way to the pond to clean up.

He'd be back before Alejo even missed him.

HE COULD do this.

Alejo took a deep breath, thinking today had been all about firsts. And as it was August first, it seemed appropriate. The last full month of summer.

All he had to do was jump off the porch and glide. He could manage that, couldn't he? It wasn't so hard when he was holding Fane's hand. Sweat broke out on his forehead, but then he remembered the other big first. His ass ached gently, but it had been... nice.

He could do this. He closed his eyes and let his body fall.

“THERE you are!” A voice. Fane’s?

Alejo shook his head, still groggy from slamming his head against the poplar sapling. He’d been doing fine and then... tree.

Something huge and pink blocked his vision and then he recognized he was seeing a human hand.

“No!”

He tumbled inside a butterfly net, catching on the delicate, newly grown membrane of his wings. A pale gray eye. Huge teeth, smiling.

“Pretty. Got you at last!” Fane’s amorous gardener!

Fingers explored his body, and Alejo kicked, outraged. He’d told this *cabron* to take a hike, run him from the garden, but now he was small. Now he was helpless.

“Time enough to play with my new pet later. In the jar with you!”

Alejo smashed himself against the glass but to no avail. He was trapped inside with the lid fastened shut. He saw the garden blurring past as he was carried away from fantasy.

“WHAT? Leggo, you little fucker!”

Swat! Fane tumbled end over end through the air, barely avoiding spattering himself against a tree.

“*Let him go!*” he yelled, zipping around for another attack. He could see Alejo banging against the glass that held him captive, one jeweled wing sagging sadly, torn at the shoulder. “I’ll rot your dick off!”

“You can’t do that!” The big maw and eyes on the face yawned.

Fane darted close and kicked it, fat quivering like pallid jelly. “I’m a full-of-piss fairy!”

His loathsome admirer gasped, dropping the jar!

“*Noooo!*” Fane dove—

Glass shattered.

ALEJO looked up into Fane’s concerned amber eyes. *They were flying together.* Safe?

“He caught me.” Alejo swallowed, licking his bottom lip which had a lumpy, seeping bruise. “I ran him off weeks ago; he was afraid of me then, but today I was....” *Vulnerable.*

“I know. Turns out this is maybe not the escape you thought it was. But he’s gone now. He took me for some kind of Disney fairy, the dumb fuck!”

Alejo laughed. “He should have known better. I fell, didn’t I?”

“I cushioned the worst of it,” Fane said, and Alejo noticed that his rescuer was dusty, bruised, bleeding. “Your wings are a bit frayed, but I’ve got a needle and thread back at my tree house.”

FANE patiently repaired torn amethyst membrane with bright turquoise embroidery floss. It hurt as much as being sutured for real, but Alejo remained silent, lost in thought, and Fane

was also subdued, as if he knew that Alejo trying this experiment again was in doubt.

That night, body sore, Alejo eased carefully into Fane's bed. In the morning he'd have Fane transform him back to normal, human. He lay awake, staring at the reflection of lacy leaves making patterns on the ceiling. Fane eventually crept in behind him, tucking undamaged wings around Alejo.

"When winter comes I won't be here as much," Alejo finally confided. "Probably work construction. Maybe this once a month thing; maybe it's better if we just let it go."

"Summer always comes back."

"Is that all you've got?" Alejo looked over his shoulder into Fane's shadowed eyes. "All the wisdom and experience you can bring to this *thing* with us?"

"Go to sleep," Fane said. He buried his face against Alejo's silky hair.

Chapter Nine

FANE had a broken wing.

In summertime, this wasn't a big deal. He could hitch a ride on a robin or just curl up somewhere and sleep a few days or weeks and wake up and he'd be healed, like a butterfly uncurling from a cocoon.

But now the garden was abandoned, piled with dimples of snow under the gray light, and there were no snakes to bully into taking him home.

There was also no Alejo Gardener to mouth off to while his big hands patiently potted up nasturtiums or Alba lavender. Alejo was gone, the gate sagging across the parking lot, barring visitors, so Fane hadn't seen him since the last honey days of Indian summer.

Fane remembered that last time together as he trudged through the snow, shivering, miserable, one wing dragging behind him, catching on every buried rock and frozen twig. He'd tried to coax his gardener into taking fairy form one last time as he unpotted Mexican sunflowers and placed them carefully in the warm fall soil.

Alejo always seemed to be digging, sweeping, and doing various tedious human things. Fane hung around, waiting for a handful of words that made it worth putting up with his gardener's work ethic.

That last day he had been typically shirtless, his long hair loose over his shoulders and his muscles flexing as he moved the broom back and forth, seeming to lose himself in the rhythm.

Fane watched him, a dull ache living semi-permanently under his breast bone. Alejo had paused, hands clenched around the broom. He looked at Fane.

“*Joder!* I keep trying to find a way to talk to you, using Starbucks or the ice over the pond this morning as a way to say that... *Mamita* has some bills from the hospital, and I have to help her and make sure Jose has everything he needs for the fall semester so....”

Guessing where this was leading, Fane felt like he'd been kicked, even though Alejo had warned him. His gardener gone for months? Fane's wings curled around him like shriveled fall leaves. “But you said you might be able to visit me in the winter.”

“Probably can't.” Alejo swallowed, gaze fixed on the floor. “Have to take a job up north. I leave tomorrow. I'm sorry, *mosco bonito*. I wish I could be like you.”

It was the first time Alejo had ever said that he wanted to be with Fane. Fane bit his lip, not wanting to behave like a silly human. He was very old, so what were a handful of days?

“I don't even know where I'll be living or how safe it would be for you to stay with me since I'll probably have to stay in a bad neighborhood to save money. Plus you told me you can't leave your garden for very long. But anyway....” Alejo's shoulders slumped.

“What?”

“I'm breakingupwithyou.” Alejo was still staring at the floor as if fascinated by the water puddle marked wood. “Fane, how can this work? We had this wonderful thing all summer, but now we have to face reality.”

“Your escape is over, you mean?” Fane glared, wings rising in agitation. *You never wanted me. It was always me pursuing you!*

“You’re the only friend I have,” Alejo whispered.

Fane snatched seedling pots, sending them flying, crashing against the floor and the walls. It was just that he was out of practice that he didn’t actually *hit* Alejo, not because he actually cared about the big, stupid lug!

“What was I to you, a one-nighter in a rose tree?”

“More like several times a day.” Alejo smiled, but then his smile broke like one of the shattered pots.

“Who will braid your hair?”

Alejo shook his head, putting aside the broom with finality before striding from the greenhouse, slamming the door and then locking it with a jerky sound a second later, leaving nothing behind but the creak of corrugated plastic from one window pane that would never quite close.

FANE managed to make it back to the empty greenhouse. He yearned for his bachelor pad in the tree, where he had more supplies to hole up, but he couldn’t fly and he was so cold he was in danger of freezing out here. He was a tough fairy, but even fairies had their limits.

He crawled through a knot hole, gasping when it caught the ridge of his bloodied wing, falling through onto his ass in undignified heap, fortunately on some decorative Spanish moss.

He hunched over in the dim filtered light, breathing through the pain. When he was ready, he opened his wing to

examine it. He had only himself to blame—he imagined seeing a light on in the greenhouse this morning, early, so he'd barreled over to investigate, hoping it was his Alejo.

He'd flown too fast.

Now he looked at the fragile wing, pulling away damaged membrane, oozing blood, tattered like dried, waxy paper. He wouldn't be flying anywhere for a while.

Finally, he wrapped his wings around himself, shivering and bruised, seeing his own strained face reflected in the moonlit glass, sparkling in darkness.

FANE woke to the sounds of someone moving around the greenhouse. It made him grumpy since he wasn't much of a morning fairy but especially this morning when his wing ached like fuck. What he wouldn't give for some children's aspirin! "Keep it down," he growled, eyes tightly closed.

"Fane?"

His eyes snapped open, and he sat up and spotted... Alejo? He started to smile until he remembered he'd hurt himself looking for the stupid lug of a human.

Alejo looked weathered, not ripe summer brown. Around his eyes were some new wrinkles, and he was too thin. He stared at Fane as if he had forgotten that fairies existed. "I, uh, didn't think you slept in here."

"Don't. Had myself a bit of a fight, so I had to take a breather here."

"Fight? Wait, did that guy come back?" Alejo looked upset.

"What if he did? Not like you give a fuck, do you?"

Alejo took off his flannel-lined jacket and reached over for an indignant Fane, surrounding him with soft, body-warmed cloth. He knelt beside the swathed fairy, tired eyes examining him. "Just because it can't work between you and me doesn't mean you aren't my friend," he said firmly.

Fane swallowed, wanting to hold onto his resentment. "Yeah, well, what the fuck d'you want then?"

Alejo settled with his back against the support for the potting bench, letting out a sigh. "I had the day off so I borrowed someone's car." He pointed to a sleeping bag that only now Fane spotted sprawled on the floor. "Came down to see you."

Fane waved a hand, hiding a wince when it pulled his damaged wing. "I've taken up with William again. Bit full of himself and a reformer for plants' rights, but he's a good lay."

"Oh." Alejo swallowed. "I'm so glad you aren't alone."

"You are dating some human girl, I suppose."

"Uh, yeah."

"Oh."

"I thought it would be a good idea. I have all these responsibilities, so I can't sit around with my bare ass on a toadstool."

"I've got lots of responsibilities too, you know! You aren't the only one," Fane pointed out. "My world isn't magic. Winter can be hard for me, same as any of the other animals in this garden."

Alejo flushed. "No, I'm sorry."

"You cut your hair."

Alejo shoved it back. It curled down just below his neck now, still damp from the recent snowfall. No more handy silk

ropes for a fairy who wanted to hang on while he rode someone's shoulder. "Yeah, I didn't want it in the way while I worked construction."

"How's the job?"

"Great. Just great."

"And the new girlfriend?"

Alejo flushed, obviously taking Fane's meaning. "Uh, just, you know, movies and stuff."

"Right, best not to rush it." Fane cleared his throat, trying to bury his hurt. Alejo knew how much he loved movies, and since they no longer played them at the drive-in, he rarely got to see any.

"So who did you fight with?"

Fane blinked, for a moment not remembering the white lie, but then he put in smoothly, "Big troll by the name of Arthur."

Alejo reached out and with gentle fingers lifted Fane's broken wing, tattered like lace eaten by moths. "Oh, Fane."

"It's all right. It's happened before; I'm tough."

"I bought a hamper since it's Christmas Eve, the good night, eh? I hope you don't mind."

Fane cocked his head, already anticipating the treat. He'd missed the Danishes, biscotti, and most of all the companionship that used to come with Alejo's treats. "Why would I mind?"

"I mean, since we aren't together anymore," Alejo outlined softly. "I asked *Mamita* for some extra *Polvorones*, that's her crumbly cake specialty, and some *Alicante* and *Mazapan*, nougat and marzipan."

“Is that why you stayed away so long?” *Four months since he’d seen Alejo.* But Fane licked his lips as his gardener dug out the desserts, all cut up to tiny pieces. There was also a thermos, and when Alejo opened it, the hot incense of rich coffee warmed the frosty greenhouse.

“I was afraid if I came back, I wouldn’t....” Alejo took a deep breath and then looked at Fane with the tiredness clouding his sherry eyes. “I wouldn’t want to leave. But I have to take care of my family.”

“I know you do,” Fane said, biting into the nougat. He closed his eyes and moaned at the taste, followed quickly by coffee offered in a shared mug from Alejo. “I think I missed this almost more than touch!”

Alejo settled back, his face serene as he watched Fane feasting on the bounty he’d provided. “You used magic once to make me into a fairy, like you. Is there any magic you can use that might heal your wing?”

“Don’t really have the energy now. I get a lot of my power from sunshine and fertile earth. Not a lot of that in winter,” Fane noted around a bite of cake.

“Oh. Energy.” Alejo rubbed his unshaven jaw and the familiar gesture as well as his contemplative expression stung Fane with the memory of how they’d discussed things all summer. “What about me? Could you somehow borrow it from me?”

Fane crossed his arms, shrugging with one shoulder. “Can’t. It can only work as a heart gift.” They’d snapped that summer web between them over the fall and winter.

“BUT I want to do it for you,” Alejo confessed. He was looking down at his bruised hands, from working so many long hours on a building he didn’t care about in a city where he was always a stranger.

“You’ve stayed away so long,” Fane said.

“I know. Why does everything about being responsible suck?” Alejo sighed.

“Humans fuck things up.”

“Hey, that’s hardly a nice thing to say to someone when they offer to help you.” It was just like it had been before. Arguing with him. For the first time in months, Alejo felt like his unfettered self.

“I guess you could help out, seeing how you offered.” Fane shook out his shredded wing, avoiding Alejo’s warm velvet eyes.

Alejo put his hands in his jeans pockets. “How do I do that?”

“Well, if you let me make you a fairy again for a bit....”

Alejo frowned, blushing, all too aware of what always happened when he was in fairy form. “Uh.”

“Come over here, and we’ll get on with it then.” As usual Fane rode over all Alejo’s objections as if he didn’t hear them. And Alejo let him. He sat down on the potting table and closed his eyes. A second later, tiny lips brushed the oversized mole on the back of his right hand.

Dizzy, twisting through the air like a spiraling leaf—

“It’s chilly,” Alejo immediately complained. He had one hand cupped over his shriveled sex.

“Better warm you in the flannel if you want to share.”

“What about your wing?” Alejo asked a little suspiciously as he allowed himself to be tugged over to his giant sprawling shirt.

“Oh, you’ll help with that, don’t worry.” Fane smiled and then pounced.

Alejo made a squeaking sound, hardly the sound a macho human male would choose to utter, but then Fane pushed away his bashful hands and rubbed his silken hair against Alejo’s stiffening erection.

“Ohhhhh.”

“My boy missed this. Didn’t get any suck jobs up north, now did you?”

“How’d you guess?” A dimple appeared in Alejo’s cheek, his eyes lighting with familiar indulgence. Outside wet snowflakes struck the panes, but inside it was suddenly summer.

“Lie back.”

“Wait!” Alejo caught his breath. “How’s this helping your wing exactly?”

Fane used a bit of gardener’s cream on himself and then squirted it onto Alejo before taking them both in hand, tugging. “Takes my mind off it.”

“But you said—”

Fane shook his head. “I only have a thimbleful of power, and I’d rather use what I have to be with you than heal a little quicker, all right? It’s my choice. I’ve gotten banged up before.”

Alejo’s body arched in a way he hadn’t since the last time with Fane. “Why do I always end up letting you have your way with me?”

“Because you love me, you stupid ass.”

“Oh, right.”

AFTER, Alejo put his wings around Fane, keeping the slighter fairy warm, safe. “I have to go to dinner tonight at home.”

Fane kissed his chest and played with his shorter hair. It still felt like silk in his hands. “I think I might sleep till spring.”

“What about that other fairy you dated?”

“Oh, him. Well, turns out I might have exaggerated a wee bit.”

“I’m glad.” Alejo’s face relaxed as he stroked Fane’s back.

“No breaking up with me again.”

“It didn’t exactly take,” Alejo noted ruefully. “I’ll have to tell Jennifer, that girl I was seeing....” His voice drifted off.

Fane didn’t probe. He didn’t want to know about Alejo’s human life, because all he had was the time they spent together here. He nuzzled Alejo, breathing in the scent of his hair, liking that this one day in winter, he was wrapped in the wings of a friend. “The garden will be here waiting for you when you get done up north.”

“Yeah, but I may not get the job here again. Mr. Appleby was really unhappy with my work last summer.”

“It’ll work out; humans come and go, but this place is *mine*,” Fane reassured him although Alejo was still frowning. He took it as a good sign, apprehension over the summer job. “You’ll be here arguing with me about where to put the winter primroses in no time.”

Alejo sighed. “You are so impossible!”

Fane smirked. “Speaking of gardening, do you know that the original meaning of the word ‘fuck’ means ‘to plant’?”

Alejo’s face was soft under the gray light. “Why don’t you show me again, Fane?”

Chapter Ten

“I’M NOT impressed with your performance last summer at all, Mr. Moreno!”

“I’m sorry.” Alejo rubbed his slick hands on his jeans. Why hadn’t he taken off his gardening gloves while shaking Mr. Appleby’s hand before showing him around the early March grounds? He guessed he’d been too nervous since he hoped very much he’d be working here again this summer.

Of course, it didn’t help that he overslept at Fane’s pad and was on all fours with Fane inside him when he was supposed to be meeting with the overseer for Autumn Grove.

“The garden should be uniform,” Mr. Appleby was saying now. “All plants should be trimmed into traditional ball forms. The trees and bushes should be ruthlessly kept in order and not allowed to be so... disheveled.”

“Actually I did some research, Mr. Appleby,” Alejo interrupted. The tall, thin man with a thick mustache and green eyes snapped him a look, and he swallowed, but continued quietly, “I followed the original creator’s plan for the garden, which calls for the ‘naturalistic’ effect. It’s not only more eco-friendly, it’s also easier to maintain and family friendly.”

“It’s *messy*, and I won’t have it!” Appleby looked around Alejo’s neatly stacked tools in the greenhouse and shook his head. “I believe you are a well-meaning young man, if inexperienced, and at least you save the city money by using seedlings, but you’re just the summer gardener, a casual worker. Don’t you also work in construction?”

“Uh, yeah.” Alejo pushed back his shaggy hair, wishing he’d had time for a shower this morning. Showering with Fane consisted of standing under a leaf heavy with dew and yanking it overhead like an old fashioned shower cord.

And he was smiling now faintly at the memory. *Joder!* He took a deep breath and tried to *stop* smiling, but the truth was, being back here again, anticipating another long, sweet summer with Fane, made him feel as fizzy as their favorite passion fruit lemonade.

“Well, unfortunately you’re not a landscape architect such as myself or you’d have this place looking uniform. I’m going to be brutally honest with you: if I think you just took this job to coast again like last year, I’ll see you’re removed. You have one week to get this garden up to the standards we expect.”

Alejo’s eyes widened. Oh, no. He had to have his job here with Fane! Knowing he’d be able to return this summer was all that got him through the nondescript days of winter. Besides, he had to keep up with his *mamita*’s medical bills.

Suddenly a glittery blur whipped in through the window, like a bird diving in, just in time to catch the last of his conversation with Appleby. He saw the familiar amber eyes narrow, and one of the ceramic pots quiver on the shelf right above Appleby’s head.

“No!” Alejo yelled.

Appleby stared at Alejo. “What’s your problem, Moreno? If you can’t behave in a businesslike fashion, I’ll fire you on the spot!”

Suddenly a small thumb-sized clay pot whizzed toward Appleby, hitting him on the bare part of his head. It was quickly followed by another missile thrown by a tiny fury.

Alejo grabbed Appleby's arm and manhandled him out of the greenhouse, groaning as he saw the small spots of blood on the other man's head. "Oh, no, I'm sorry! I've got BAND-AIDs. Somewhere."

"What the *hell* happened in there?" Appleby had a hand on his chest, as if he was still recovering.

"Uh, one of my pots fell on you. I'm so sorry, sir!"

"Fell on me? See, this is what comes of being disorganized, Moreno! You have seven days to impress me, and if you don't, you are out on your hippy ass!" Appleby shook off Alejo's concerned, steadying arm and stormed off.

"Oh, man," Alejo breathed.

"Bastard!" Fane bulleted by Alejo's face, his naked body a blur of indignation. "I'll show him. Messy? The garden's just fine, since it's *my* garden and always has been! Who does he think drew up the original plan? It was me. I bribed a human to take credit for it, since humans are big on taking credit."

Alejo shook his head ruefully at his beloved friend. "Fane, how could you throw things at him? *Dios!* You only made it worse."

"It was pretty easy. Just pick up and toss at the big, stupid, slow moving target." Fane crossed his arms, hovering, unrepentant.

"He's going to fire me," Alejo said glumly. "Then we won't have the summer together."

"No," Fane said flatly.

"Fane, this isn't something you can use magic on!" Alejo found himself annoyed, no matter that Fane always seemed to have his way with Alejo since the day they met. "This is real life, not—"

“Fantasy? Is that how you still see me?” Fane glowered at Alejo. “If I’m your fantasy, then what we do together isn’t real, is it?”

Alejo flushed, since it was true he still had moments of discomfort over sharing himself with another man. Not that he felt that way in Fane’s arms. But away from the garden....

“A fantasy has no feelings to bruise like a fallen summer apple, but I *do*!”

“I know you do,” Alejo said, and then he offered, calling on their history, “We’re different.”

“You have a job, yeah, and that’s important with your Mom and all, but what you never seem to see, is that so do I. I’m the guardian of this patch, beauty, and no city gardener or board can do anything to *my* garden without my okay.”

Alejo took a deep breath, regretting they were at odds again so early in the spring. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t respect me.”

“*Mosco bonito*, the world you live in, it’s a dream to me.”

“A dream you are free to walk away from, indulge in without consequence, hmmm?”

“Now just a minute!” Alejo crossed his arms, glaring back at the fairy. “I didn’t mean that exactly.”

“I’m guessing *I’m* not real then either? So who fucked your ass this morning? Who keeps the slugs out of the flower beds or makes sure the tadpoles don’t all get eaten?”

“That’s....” Alejo sighed. “That is important.”

Fane nodded. “Yes, it is. Maybe not in the human sense, but frankly, you people are screwing up the planet. This garden is important. It’s a small place for old magics to reign.”

Alejo saw hurt and betrayal burning in amber eyes before Fane dived into the green and disappeared.

“Shit!” Alejo scratched his chin. That hadn’t gone well, but something told him that their friendship would right itself again, as always. Maybe because like the garden, it was built on solid ground.

Eyes widening, Alejo recognized something. Fane *did* matter to him, very much, as did this world. Okay, maybe he would lose this job, but he’d find a way to have his summer with his friend.

“YOU called the fey council over your *boyfriend*?” William’s voice rose from where the head fairy of the city was seated on a damp stump. “Plus, he’s a human, not even fairy!”

“It doesn’t matter what he is. The issue is that I need help protecting Autumn Grove.” Fane couldn’t help but make the point with William. He couldn’t believe that he once had a thing with the pompous fey. The big bruiser still acted like he owned Fane.

“Fane, come on. Fairies don’t help mundanes.”

“We do if one of our gardens is at risk, and mine is. If Appleby has his way, my trees and shrubs will all be tamed, and there will be nowhere for all the wild things to hide. The council *has* to intervene.”

ALEJO was still glum days later. He’d screwed up again with Fane on the fairy thing. He kept doing that, but when Alejo

visited, it was like he was on a cruise ship, and Fane was his shipboard romance. It wasn't just that the world itself was based on magic, but he was so happy that he couldn't quite trust the feeling. At the moment he was only just keeping ahead of the medical bills for his *mamita*.

"That troll, Appleby, gave us one week, right?"

Alejo looked up as Fane popped up suddenly, hovering in midair like the beautiful fly Alejo called him in Spanish sometimes.

He swallowed, wishing he knew what to say. Making up with Fane was suddenly more important than keeping his job. "Yeah." He rubbed his hands over his cutoffs. "Appleby's planning on hosting the gardening society meeting here. I was hoping maybe I might impress them with my orchids or maybe tidy it up around here a bit. Not go crazy, but maybe trim things the way he wants."

"Fuck that! There's nothing wrong with your work on this garden!"

But Alejo had had time for insecurity to seep in, like water absorbed by a dry patch. "Maybe he's right. I'm not very organized. I like things sort of free-spirited, you know?"

Fane smiled, shaking his head. "You *are* a wild thing once I peel away all those silly inhibitions."

Alejo blushed, remembering a recent game when Fane stalked Alejo through the garden like a persistent golden honey bee, and when he found him, he conquered him, making Alejo lie on his back and spread his legs and give the victor his due.

He cleared his throat. "I'm getting my hair cut again after work." He pushed back his longer hair, remembering pale fists holding it as Fane moved inside him.

“But I love your hair, and it’s only just growing back.”

Alejo bit his lip. “I have to think of my *mamita*. I need another year before I’m free and clear of paying off her debt, so if I can keep this job somehow—”

“So we just go on the way we have been, nothing but the summers?”

Alejo dropped his head. “In the fall, I’ll have to leave again for a construction job, so this can’t ever be all the time but...” He looked at Fane, sherry eyes burning. “You are important.”

“Sometimes I wonder how it can be so painful to love you, me such an old soul.”

Alejo shrugged, having no solution on that front. “I’m going to get the garden shears and try to reshape some of the shrubbery into, uh, balls.”

“I have some balls that would like to be reshaped right here,” Fane growled, watching Alejo head back into the greenhouse.

He could see Alejo didn’t recognize that the way he gardened was special. Fane had chosen him for his garden, just as he’d chosen him for his bed. Why did Alejo so easily lose confidence in all his hard work and passion for what he did just because some man with the imagination of wet newspaper told him his efforts had no value?

Clearly it was up to Fane to come to his gardener’s rescue.

THE day of the gardening society lunch, Alejo was a nervous wreck. His hair was freshly trimmed, and he kept smoothing it, feeling how alien it was under his fingers.

He found himself wishing that Fane's magic really *could* extend into the real world, like a trumpet lily leaning from the garden bed over the grass.

"THAT'S *him*, the troll?" the fairy Gerard asked William.

"Yeah, from Fane's description, that's Appleby. Remember, all we have to do is delay him a little. Fane said the people at this lunch are all on the city garden board, and they are the real power. We need to give Fane time do his thing."

"Long as his thing isn't you, I'm okay with that!" Gerard glared at William.

William smiled, flattered that his lover was jealous. He cupped his head and kissed him. "Not the way you keep me busy."

Gerard attacked the laces on Appleby's shoes as he sat with his car door open and chatted on his Blackberry. Gerard always coveted one of those.

Fane and two other fairies stealthily hefted the garden shovel up in the air, wings and biceps straining, easing it in place across the greenhouse door, barring Alejo inside where he was doing some last minute potting.

Fane regretted that he would be upset, but Alejo was his own worst enemy with his lack of confidence.

THE garden committee were sitting on chairs they'd brought over the freshly mown grass, waiting for Appleby and Alejo, chatting amicably on the warm spring day.

Suddenly something iridescent and a little larger than a late summer dragonfly commanded the air space before alighting on a pansy-ringed tea saucer and helping himself to a swig of tea from the cup above.

“Wow, that tea packs a real punch!” He gave the woman an admiring look. Surely these people could be reached since they favored his favorite whisky?

Before the startled lady holding the cup could speak, Fane was at the podium. He played with the microphone. “Might have to adjust it for my height,” he said calmly.

ALEJO was trying to divide some wild grasses while weighing things through his head. How he liked to garden, and how Appleby wanted him to garden, and... what was wrong with how he did things? He kept the garden free of dead fall, used more organic methods than fertilizers with lots of chemicals, worked with the earth. He shoved his hair back, only there wasn't much to shove, and he again felt the loss when he remembered how Fane loved it.

His head was as jumbled as a freshly shattered pot with all these thoughts. He took a deep breath. If he could somehow save his job, he'd go find Fane, spend a long weekend with him in fairy form.

With that resolution in mind, he twisted the greenhouse doorknob, ready to give it his best shot, but the door wouldn't budge.

Suddenly he had a very bad feeling.

“...MYRA has it right,” Fane said, enjoying his visit with the garden club. “A less structured garden is a more relaxing place to visit, like a summer cottage.”

The woman nodded, a smile still trembling on her lips. Like the others she stared at Fane, still dazed at his appearance.

“And my Alejo is a hell of a gardener. He has worked hard to leave...” Fane paused, trying to think of something to impress the members, “less of a carbon footprint. He has even proposed using solar panels on the garden lights to activate them at night.” Fane leaned forward. “So what are we going to do?”

“GET away from me!”

An hour later, a smug Fane hovered near the harassed Appleby, tied to his steering wheel with his shoe laces. Any move he made to free himself, William and Gerard put the hammer down. He was sporting a tiny bruise on one cheek from mouthing off to William, thanks to William’s lover, Gerard, who had taken exception to his language.

“Here’s how it’s going to be,” Fane outlined sternly. “You were right about someone getting the boot, but it turns out it isn’t my gardener! I just had a little *tête-à-tête* with the people who really run this garden. I showed them the original plans from 1922, and they feel it should stay as it is. So you’re not to interfere here again this summer.”

“*What* are you?” Appleby gasped, collapsing against his steering wheel.

“A guardian,” Fane answered truthfully. “And a pissy one. Alejo will now be employed *year-round* somewhere in this city by the garden board since they appreciate that there’s nothing wrong with thinking outside the box!”

ALEJO had given up trying to leave the greenhouse. He knew his fairy had to be behind this, and short of breaking the glass panes to free himself and being blamed for vandalism, he had to wait it out. He had probably lost his job now but realized it didn’t matter. Maybe he could get a job at the gas station and just pull in enough for his *mamita*. Maybe he could explore staying here every night, sneaking in his tent.

He looked at the decorative grass, the cow-spotted orchids, and the succulents neatly arranged on the potting bench; Fane was right, why was he letting the Applebys of this world make him feel bad about how he liked to do things?

FANE shoved the garden tool aside and waited for his gardener to come out of the greenhouse at last. He saw right away Alejo must have had a haircut this morning, and he swallowed, mourning its glory, but hair could grow back.

Alejo rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sorry. I said a lot of shitty things because... I’m only human.”

Fane zoomed over to his shoulder and settled there, a bit unsteady without silken hair to keep his feet, but he’d get used to it. “Everything’s going to be okay, Alejo. Marjorie, the head of the gardening committee, likes what you do around here, and I

got you a raise *and* work year-round because she was so impressed by your initiative.”

A HANDFUL of days later, they lay together by the pond since it was that one weekend a month. Alejo’s skin was still damp from lovemaking in a pool of sunshine.

“I was thinking of camping here full time this summer. That is, if you want me?”

Fane sat up, sitting cross-legged since this was an important conversation. “You mean it?”

Alejo gave a crooked smile, tracing the sand with one languid finger. “If you want me, yeah.”

“Living together. That’s a commitment.”

“Fane, what you said about how long you live?” Alejo chewed his lip. “I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Fane reached out and stroked Alejo’s hair, still a little too short for his taste. “One day I’ll offer you a choice, to make you a fairy permanently. If you take it, we can be together always.”

“I can’t! Not right now.” Alejo tensed.

“I know, beauty, but one day?”

Alejo smiled. “Maybe one day.” He kissed Fane, sealing his promise.

Fane settled on his side and tugged a strand of Alejo’s shorter hair. “I maybe know a spell to grow it faster,” he suggested.

“I don’t doubt you do,” Alejo said.

JAN IRVING has worked in all kinds of creative fields, from painting silk to making porcelain ceramics, to interior design, but writing was always her passion.

She feels you can't fully understand characters until you follow their journey through a story world. Many kinds of worlds interest her, fantasy, historical, science fiction and suspense—but all have one thing in common, people finding a way to live together—in the most emotional and erotic fashion possible, of course!

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