



Dragonfly



CALLIOPE STEWART
A SWEET MONSTER ROMANCE

DRAGONFLY
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A NOTE ON TRIGGERS:

This book contains references to domestic violence, blood, gore, depression, isolation, parent death and other themes that may not be something everyone wants to read.

This is also a monster-human romance, meaning that there are size differences as well as play with tails amongst other spicy things.

If any of this is not your cup of tea, please do not read on.

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*To all the ladies that dream of
more than what you have.*

Go get you more.

PROLOGUE

CASH

IRELAND

250 years before our story...

The echo of pale green flames illuminated the walls of the tall cave, casting a sickly glow on all of the inhabitants who were circled around me. Their stone gray skin flickered from green, to gray, to black as they stared at me with expressions ranging from disgust to pity.

In my forty-five years on the mortal plain, I'd never witnessed the green flames of judgment that my people used to punish those who did not follow our rules.

My people called them *lasair glas*, and as I stood in the center of the circle eyeing them, I knew that they were fated to end me.

Alasdair, the leader of our clan, stood in front of me. His heavy brow furrowed as he glared at me with a pair of luminescent eyes that seemed to glow in the darkness.

“Cashiel, son of Fiona, you have broken a core tenet of our laws. You have interacted with humans, something expressly forbidden by our ancestors,” Aladair’s voice rippled with the ancient magic that all gargoyles were gifted with. His magic

was the strongest, his wingspan was the largest, and he exuded enough dominance that he'd never been challenged for his position.

Lasair glas would not allow the average gargoyle on trial to speak. The magic forbade it, as their time to speak had long passed before the flames were conjured up.

But I had no trouble working my way past the enchantment tangling my tongue. Whether that was due to my own magic, or because of the gargoyle who had enchanted me, I could not be sure.

"I could not let the child drown," I protested, looking past Alasdair to my mother who was standing just behind our leader's shoulder.

Fiona was one of the few female gargoyles alive, being her only son had afforded me some level of privilege within our clan. She'd doted on me, teaching me everything I knew.

But now, as I searched her gaze, I found it empty of affection for me.

She turned away, her dark hair spilling over her shoulder as she refused to watch the proceedings entirely.

"You saved that child, and in doing so, that child brought the rest of their kinsmen to slaughter our kind during our stone sleep." Alasdair's voice was cold as he gestured for a pair of gargoyles to move aside.

Behind them were the crumbled remains of two of our brethren, smashed to pieces before the sun rose and released us from our sleep.

It was rare for all of our kind to sleep as one, it was within our abilities to resist the call of it during the day. Most only used stone sleep to recover from ailments or injuries. But yesterday had been our Winter Solstice celebrations, when night was the longest.

Customs stated that, after the long night, all gargoyles in our clan fell together into a collective stone sleep, resetting for the year to come.

An age had seemingly passed between then and the day I saw the youngling's head struggling to stay above water. I do not know how the little thing had managed to wander so far away from its mother, but as I watched its head bob up and down, the urge to save it took over me.

Pulling the child from the water was easy enough, but getting away from it before it could see me was much more complicated.

The child had called after me as I flew away, and I prayed to all of our gods that he didn't understand what he was seeing.

I was wrong.

When I awoke from my own stone sleep to the sound of wails, I knew that it had been me that had brought disaster to my clan.

Meara, one of our oldest female gargoyles, was sobbing over the remains of Bryne, her life mate. Her body was caked with the blood of the humans who she'd killed when she awoke to them shattering Byrne's stone form.

Gargoyles could survive most things, but our stone form being broken down was not one of them.

They had left one human alive who had told them in a stuttering voice that his child came back to their village talking of a stone angel pulling them out of the river.

I was the only gargoyle who had a penchant for venturing away from our caves, so it had been easy to figure out who had pulled the child from the water.

"I did not know," I said, my words broken as my clan, my family, all turned to look away from me.

Alasdair, however, did not. His eyes were fixed on my face.

"Judgment states that we should force you into a stone sleep and shatter you, the way Byrne and Conall were shattered. But that is too easy a fate for someone like you," the

gargoyle spat, drawing himself up to his full height. “You will become *gan sciathán*—a Wingless.”

There was an audible gasp from the gargoyles encircling me. To be Wingless was a fate worse than death.

Wingless lived a life of solitude. Never allowed to enter another clan, their existence never acknowledged. It was like living death for our kind.

But that was not the worst part about Alasdair’s judgment.

“*No*,” I rasped as two grim faced sentinels gripped my arms, turning me so that my back was to our clan leader.

I searched desperately for my mother in the crowd. “Mother, please do not let them do this.”

My pleas were useless. Fiona had left long before the judgment was handed down.

“I, Alasdair, son of Meara and Bryne, sentence Cashiel, son of Fiona, to a life without wings, without clan, and without hope,” firm hands gripped my wings, close to where they met my shoulder blades.

“Father, please,” I whispered hoarsely.

As clan leader, Alasdair was never allowed to acknowledge his young. This was out of fairness to the rest of our kin. A good leader was supposed to be impartial, and this was the gargoyle way of doing that. But I always knew who he was to me.

My mother used to whisper about how her heart sang for the gargoyle, a connection even stronger than life mates. It meant that they were born to be together, and I was the product of that union.

Alasdair paused for a breath, and for a moment, I was sure he was going to change his mind about all of this.

Then his grip tightened and he began to pull.

I would never forget the blinding pain of having my wings pulled from my back. Each tendon and sinew began to snap

and grind. My mind and body rejected the burning sensation crawling up my spine.

Flying was my greatest joy. Gliding on updrafts of air and seeing the land from the eyes of birds was my favorite pastime.

I had always been the best at it out of everyone in my clan.

But that was all over now.

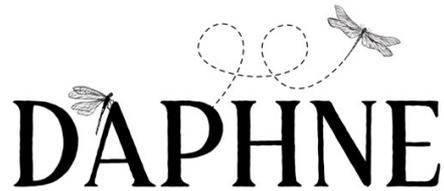
“*Gan sciathán, gan sciathán, gan sciathán,*” the gargoyles around me chanted, their taloned feet stomping the ground.

With one final shout, Alasdair tore my wings from my back and sealed my fate forever.

I was Wingless now.

And being Wingless meant a life of misery.

ONE



DAPHNE

The sound of the fire poker clattering to the ground was the first thing I heard over the roar in my ears.

Confusion filled me as I stared down at the crumpled form of my husband at my feet. I couldn't remember why he was there or what had happened.

What I *could* remember was Mike coming home from a day at court in a vile mood. Nothing I did could soothe him. He'd been a thundercloud all throughout dinner. Then I accidentally knocked over his beer. Unforgivable in his eyes.

Everything was a blur after that.

My throat burned and I brought my fingers up to cup it, prodding and hissing at the tenderness I found there.

The fucker had choked me, I realized as I took two big steps back away from my unconscious husband.

This complicates things, I thought to myself as I turned on my heel and hurried through the sliding glass door that led to the garden.

For the better part of a year I had been carefully planning my escape. Scraping whatever money I could get together, figuring out bus routes, and where I would go if I managed to get away from him.

After being married to Mike Campbell for almost five years, I was more than ready to get out.

My mom had introduced me to him when she was in the hospital towards the end of her life. Stage IV brain cancer had

taken both of us by surprise, and she had to rush to get all of her affairs in order.

Mike had been her lawyer and the executor of her estate.

Funny, charming, and most importantly supportive, Mike had been with me every step of the way. Through my mom's hospice stay and her subsequent funeral.

He'd even beaten off the relatives that came out of the woodwork to try and claim some part of my mother's estate. The ones that hadn't spoken with her in over thirty years.

As I dug into the bed of the rose garden with my bare hands, I could still remember how safe he made me feel and how easy it had been to say yes to his proposal.

How stupid twenty-two-year-old me had been.

Mike's control had started not long after we eloped in Vegas and eventually celebrated with a lavish ceremony in his home state of New Hampshire. I was supposed to return to college to finish my degree that Fall, but he convinced me to wait a bit until all of the issues with my mom's estate were settled.

So I did.

But then he bought our first home and I was so busy decorating and furnishing it that college was the last thing on my mind as I learned how to be a good housewife.

Mike was particular about nearly everything. From the thread count of his sheets to the way he liked his food cooked.

When I did things correctly he was sweet and affectionate, showering me with praise.

When things went wrong, however?

It was like living with a stranger.

At first, he would ignore me for days. Looking right through me as he ate the food I cooked and sat in the house I cleaned.

Then things slowly got worse.

The friends I made during my college days used to call and text often, sharing whatever memes or gossip that they heard about other people at our school. Those stopped out of the blue and all of my texts were left on read.

Mike had held me while I cried in his arms about losing all of my friends. He'd soothed away all of my worries and told me I would make new friends.

Then there was his mother, his only surviving parent. She lived just across town, but that didn't stop her from showing up to the house nearly every day while Mike was at the office.

My mom had been a soft and warm hippy, preferring to spend her days throwing pottery and painting. Lily Campbell was the opposite. She spent half of her time at the local country club with her friends, and the other half was spent criticizing my every move.

She didn't like my red hair, the way I cleaned and cooked, and she really didn't like having to share her son's attention.

After nearly three years of that, I finally snapped at her to leave me the hell alone.

That was the first time Mike ever hit me. The sharp crack across my face changed our dynamic forever.

Four years in, and I was a shell of myself. That was, at least, until my closest friend from college, Wendy, came back into my life.

Apparently, Mike had blocked their numbers on my phone and changed their contacts to his number. He read all of my pleas for them to respond to me and had let me believe that my friends were willingly ignoring me.

Wendy somehow managed to find out where I lived and snuck up on me at the grocery store. She wanted me to leave with her right there and then, but I didn't have the courage to even try at the time.

We agreed to meet every couple of months when I was doing the food shopping and she would slip me any extra cash she had.

My final straw had been Mike talking about having kids. I'd been on birth control since I was sixteen to help with my periods, but one night Mike dumped my pills down the sink and announced that it was time to start trying for a baby.

This was after he'd put bruises on my ribs and legs because I'd failed to get his clothing from the dry cleaners due to a storm making it unsafe for me to drive.

I realized in that moment that, while I wanted children, I definitely did not want to have them with him.

That epiphany finally put the ball of my escape into motion. Over the next year I squirreled away as much money as I could, burying it all in plastic baggies in the garden.

My fingers finally touched the edge of said baggie and I yanked it from the ground.

Inside was organized cash, two thousand and some change last I checked, a P.O. box key, and an old Nokia that Wendy had given me.

I switched the phone on and called the only number on the contacts list.

"Mina?" Wendy's voice was groggy, telling me she'd called it an early night after a long day of being a teacher. The sound of a gruff voice in the background told me that her husband, a tiger beastman named Reggie, was probably also asleep in the bed with her.

I sucked in a steady breath, trying to calm the shakes and nerves reverberating throughout my body. "I have to move my timeline up."

That seemed to wake her up.

"Do you have enough to do that?" Wendy asked. I could hear the sound of her footsteps on the hardwood floor which told me she was probably heading for her home office.

I wasn't sure if I did. My goal was to get as far away from Mike as possible and disappear. To do that, I'd set my sights on the West Coast. San Francisco specifically.

That city was massive enough for me to disappear completely into and never be found.

California was also a haven for supernaturals and had been since the Monster Accords of 1965. Mike hated monsters and would avoid them at all cost, so it made the monster-friendly San Francisco an attractive place to escape to.

“I think so,” I said as I hurried to cover the hole I made, patting the dirt down flat before standing. “Or, well, I hope so.”

I passed Mike’s unconscious form on my way back through the living room and paused.

Was he dead? The wound on the side of his head was slowly oozing blood and he didn’t even stir at my too-loud footsteps.

For just one, secret moment I wished he was. Mike being dead meant he wasn’t capable of coming after me.

But even though the man had spent half a decade making my life a living hell, I couldn’t imagine being the reason he died.

Cursing under my breath I crouched down next to him and pressed two dirty fingers to the side of his neck. A sigh of relief left me when I felt his thready pulse underneath my fingertips.

“What are you doing?” Wendy asked in my ear.

“Making sure he isn’t dead,” I informed her a little numbly as I stood and made my way through the house.

I heard her gasp. “What do you mean dead? Mina what the fuck happened?”

“I knocked over his beer and he came at me, so I hit him with a fire poker.” I stepped into the en suite bathroom of the master bedroom and began to wash my hands, scrubbing away all of the dirt that was caked under my nails.

I half-expected Wendy to tell me she couldn’t help me, especially since I could go to jail for assault now. But then she reminded me of why we were such good friends.

“Fuck yeah you did, I’m proud of you babe,” Wendy crowed into the phone, making me laugh in spite of the situation I’d gotten myself into. “Okay, I’ve booked your uber. It should be at your place in fifteen minutes.”

That meant I needed to hurry. Turning off the taps, I dried my hands and arms off and wrapped my dirty bag of cash in a towel.

At the back of my closet was a tiny duffel bag. It was one of the few things from my childhood that I’d managed to hang on to.

Inside were pictures of me and my mom, a ratty stuffed dog and as many clothes as I dared pack without Mike noticing. My bag of cash went in last and I zipped it up with a finality.

“Babe, two minutes,” Wendy’s voice reminded me that I was on a tight schedule.

Shouldering my bag I quickly changed into comfortable clothing. A pair of jeans, t-shirt, sweatshirt and a baggy black jacket. It felt like too much, but I didn’t want to regret not bringing a jacket when I got cold later.

Mike was thankfully still out like a light when I passed him again. I couldn’t remember how hard I’d clocked him, but obviously enough to put him out of commission for a while.

“Don’t follow me,” I whispered to him, still feeling a thread of fear in my chest despite his current state.

“Your Uber is arriving, red Prius,” Wendy sounded as breathless as I felt. I practically ran to the front door, throwing it open and stepping into the cool night air.

The Prius in question was idling silently at the end of the long walkway that led up to the house.

“Call me when you get to your destination,” Wendy said before hanging up, probably to finish getting the rest of what I would need in order.

The Prius driver was a peppy looking college student who greeted me with a grin when I opened the door. “Hi there!”

Her car smelled potently of car freshener and I nearly choked on it as I settled into the seat.

“Doing some gardening tonight, I see,” she said conversationally as she pulled away from the curb.

I frowned, confused about what she meant.

“On your face,” her eyes met mine in the rearview mirror and I brought a hand up to my cheek. It came away with dirt.

“Oh, um, yeah my rose bushes needed some extra love and it took all evening,” I lied, scrubbing at my face with my hand to get the rest of the mark off.

“I’m a houseplant nut myself,” the driver continued to chatter, filling the space with her bright voice. “Though, as a vampire, I only ever get to see them at night.”

I hadn’t even noticed that she wasn’t human. Everything about her exuded youth, but now that I looked more closely in the rearview mirror I could see the age behind her big blue eyes. Vamps had an easier time fitting in than most supernatural creatures.

Even in New Hampshire, where monsters were discouraged from settling in, vampires were able to live and thrive.

I gave the vampire Uber driver half-answers and nods, hoping she didn’t mind that I wasn’t the most engaging rider.

Finally, she pulled up to the curb of the post office and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you,” I murmured, shouldering my bag and scrambling out of the car.

The vampire gave me a jaunty wave before pulling away from the curb. Through my muddled thoughts, I briefly wondered about the irony of a houseplant-loving vampire, but I quickly shook it off.

I had bigger things to deal with than a vampire’s botanical hobby.

The main part of the post office was closed for the day, but the P.O box bay was open twenty-four hours. I climbed up the steps quickly, glancing over my shoulder as I opened the door.

It was impossible to shake the paranoid feeling that Mike was going to somehow appear from around the corner and drag me back to the house.

Digging in my bag, I found the little key that had been in the Ziploc bag I unearthed in the garden.

The number *403* was etched into the metal and my eyes immediately began to rove over the metal boxes that lined the walls.

“Four-oh-three, four-oh-three...” I whispered to myself, my brain immediately deciding that the box must not exist because I couldn’t find it right away. Even though boxes 406 and 402 existed.

Finally, my eyes found it. It was a bigger box on the end of the row. I wasn’t completely sure what Wendy had put inside. She’d just told me she was making me a go-bag.

Fitting the key into the lock, I opened it to find a nondescript black backpack within.

Then the Nokia phone rang.

“Did you make it?” Wendy asked in a loud voice when I answered.

I held the phone away from my ear with a wince. “Too loud, Wen, but yes I did. What’s in the backpack?”

“Well, your bestest friend in the whole wide world has created the ultimate *‘I’m leaving my shitbag of a husband’* go-kit,” she sounded proud of herself as she said it. “Now open the bag.”

The zipper to the backpack fought me as I wrestled it open, revealing the contents packed within.

“Hair dye?” I asked, pulling the first thing I saw out. It was a hot pink color. “Shouldn’t I be dying my hair dark, something that won’t stand out so much?”

Wendy scoffed. “*Pffft*, I don’t see why when shitbag expects you to do just that. Besides, didn’t you tell me you always wanted to dye your hair a bright color when we lived in the dorms?”

She was right. I’d always been fascinated by the girls in the dorm who would dye their hair blue or purple on a lark. But I’d worried that it wouldn’t look nice on me, so I never ended up taking the leap.

My red hair was also one of the few ways that I was like my mom. She was outgoing, charming and could work a room better than anyone I’d ever met.

At the parties she would host at our home when I was little, she could often be found by the sound of her distinctive laugh as she chatted with whatever business person was trying to wheedle an investment out of her. All the while being dressed casually in a sea of elegance.

By comparison, I was always a quiet child hiding under a table with my books and wishing everyone would go home early.

“I did want pink hair, but I’m not sure this is a good idea...” I trailed off, running a finger along the jaw of the model on the box.

Wendy’s exasperated sigh filtered through the speaker. “I’m not telling you to dye it right now, silly, you need to throw dumb ass off the trail first. Remember our plan?”

“I do. Is everything I need in the bag?” my palms were suddenly sweaty again.

“They are, start with phase one and call me when you’re safe, I love you, babe.”

My eyes stung with tears. “I will, I love you too Wen, more than you know.”

She had quite literally saved my life, and I would never be able to repay her for it.

Wendy sniffled and I could hear Reggie soothing her in the background.

“You get out of there safe, Mina.” With that my friend hung up, leaving me standing by myself.

The immediate silence was suffocating and I willed my limbs to start moving.

Over the past year, I’d created an escape plan with Wendy. It had been part-dream, part-reality at the time. But now I need every part of it to work.

Digging through the bag I found the little pre-paid shipping box that would fit my cell phone.

Briefly, I’d considered just leaving my phone at the house. I knew he was tracking my location with air tags and other devices. I’d even cut one out of the bottom of my duffel when I first started packing my bag two months ago.

Wendy came up with a better idea for the device, though. I unlocked my phone and turned on battery saver mode. It was at 60% battery. In a perfect world it would have been at a full charge so it would stay on until it reached its destination, but this would have to do.

I fired off a quick prayer that Mike would stay knocked out until after the mail was picked up in the morning and dropped the package into the mailbox.

“Have fun on your trip to Florida, asshole,” I muttered under my breath as I flipped the hood of my jacket up and began the fifteen-minute walk to the bus station.

Even at nearly eleven o’clock at night the bus station was bustling. Long-haul buses were weaving in and out of the station, and sleepy people were getting off and on as they transferred or were picked up by family members.

In the front of the backpack was a stack of papers. I don’t know how Wendy had done it, but she’d somehow managed to get all new documents for me. I suspected her husband, Reggie, had something to do with it. I knew he worked for the government, but nothing more specific than that.

Obviously he knew how to pull strings, because I had a new ID, passport, and even a new social security number.

Then my eyes found my new name and I couldn't help but laugh.

Daphne Clarke.

I was surprised Wendy remembered my telling her that my mom's nickname for me when I was a child had been Daphne. She used to tell me I looked just like the cartoon character from Scooby Doo, one of her favorite television shows.

Suddenly, I was glad that I never told Mike that little anecdote.

Stepping on the bus, I offered the leopard beastman bus driver my ticket and my ID.

"Daphne?" the man asked, looking down his long nose at me, yellow slitted eyes taking in my face and hair. "Like from Scooby Doo?"

"My mom really liked the cartoon," I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

The man just harrumphed. "I was always more of a Yogi Bear fan myself. Anyway, you better settle in. It's a long way to Omaha."

I thanked him and moved down the aisle of the near-empty bus until I made it halfway and settled into one of the seats.

As the bus slowly filled, so did my anxiety.

Dry mouth, thudding heart, and my sweaty palms were all I could focus on as I watched the clock.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the bus pulled out of the station.

Settling in, I kept my eyes on the road until we passed the '*You are now leaving New Hampshire*' sign. Only then did I let out a sigh of relief.

I'd made it out. Now I just needed to keep going.

TWO



DAPHNE

“Five hundred, five-fifty, six-hundred...” the greasy orc mechanic in front of me said as he counted out the crumpled bills that I’d handed him.

He was just one of many supernatural creatures that I’d seen on my journey across the United States. I’d never seen an orc in real life before as they tended to live in the West where there were less restrictions on monster kind.

Even at UMass, my pretty liberal university, monsters had been few and far in between. Though, we did have a few fae and a couple of other species staying in our dorm.

I fought off a yawn as I watched, wishing he’d hurry up. It had been two very long days since I’d left New Hampshire.

Every time we stopped for gas or for food, I was terrified to get off for fear that Mike had somehow figured out where I was going.

We’d made it to Omaha this morning and I checked into a motel for the night before calling Wendy.

My first task in Omaha was to buy a car. I could have probably taken the bus all the way to California, but I didn’t want my route to be tracked on bus routes if Mike ever caught on to where I was going.

Wendy had looked on Craigslist and found the mechanic in front of me selling an old VW bug. The car had seen better days, the hood and doors dented and the yellow paint was chipping, but it ran and it was cheap.

Well, sort of.

“Eight hundred even, thank you for your business,” the mechanic seemed smug as he whipped out the transfer of title.

Eight hundred dollars was at the top of my budget for a car, so I would need to be frugal for the last sixteen hundred miles of my journey.

“This car *will* get me to California, right?” I asked as I signed my new name. It was still strange for people to call me Daphne, but I needed to get used to it. Mina had died in New Hampshire and it was time to be reborn as someone who wouldn’t let their husband push them around.

The man grabbed a nearby plastic water bottle filled with dark green muck and spit more into it. “It should. Keep an eye on the engine heat, put water in it if it gets too hot.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, but the keys were in my hand now so there was no going back.

The next twenty minutes were spent getting used to the sticky clutch on the car. I hadn’t driven a manual transmission since high school when my mom taught me how to drive one of her old hobby cars.

There was nothing my mom liked more than spending a Saturday afternoon covered in grease as she worked on one of her babies. She didn’t get a lot of time to do it with how busy she usually was, but some of my earliest memories were of watching her roll under her cars and asking me to hand her tools.

It was a trait that I, unfortunately, did not share.

“Come on, please behave,” I begged the bug as I finally managed to get the car into gear and moving down the road back to the motel.

By the time I pulled into the motel parking lot, I had a better handle on the vehicle. I hadn’t driven often during my marriage, just to the store or to pick up whatever Mike needed for work.

A sense of freedom filled my chest as I parked the car. For the first time since my mom died, my chest felt light.

“It’s all going to be okay,” I muttered to myself and to the car, giving the wheel an affectionate pat before getting out.

Glancing down at the fading yellow paint, I ran a hand along the top. “I think I’m going to call you Peep.”

With my car named and a lighter heart, I hurried up to my motel room for the next phase of my plan.

After nearly forty-eight hours without a shower I definitely smelled ripe, so the first thing I did was put the shower as hot as I could get it and stepped under the spray.

Most of the room was dingy, and I was dubious about how clean things were, but the pressure of the shower was top notch and I let the boiling jet beat away all of the stiffness in my neck and back.

I scrubbed my hair three times with the cheap travel shampoo that I’d bought at one of the rest stops, eyeing the auburn strands as they were washed clean.

The box of hair dye that Wendy had given me was still buried in my backpack. I wasn’t sure at what point during my journey I should change my hair color, but given how expensive Peep had been I wasn’t sure if another motel stay would be in my future.

Resolving to dye my hair in the morning I stepped out of the shower and dried off with overly starched white towels.

Swiping my hand over the little mirror, I looked at myself for the first time in the mirror since I left New Hampshire. The woman looking back at me was pale and had bags under her eyes, but she also looked determined.

I scrubbed at the waterproof makeup on my neck, the same makeup I’d put on every day for five years, and revealed the outline of a pink dragonfly underneath.

When I turned eighteen, my mom and I got matching tattoos. It had been completely impulsive, but it was one of my

favorite memories of her. Every time someone asked her about it, she proudly proclaimed that we matched.

I brought my hand up to it, tracing the wings as I thought about her. She would have been so upset about all of the things that happened after she died.

She'd raised me to be a confident, independent woman, and in turn, I'd waltzed right into the arms of a man who wanted to control me and the inheritance she'd left for me.

That inheritance was completely gone now. When Mike asked me to sign papers so he could invest and 'double' the money, I'd done so willingly.

I was too twitterpated by the lawyer to do much of anything else and didn't get a second opinion.

Now, as I stood in a seedy motel bathroom prodding at one of the last pieces of my mother, I felt ashamed of myself.

Mike didn't like the tattoo, so I put theater grade makeup on it every day despite the fact that it usually made me break out into a rash. I suppose I was lucky he never wanted to laser it off of my skin.

The desire to leave it uncovered was intense, but I ignored it for now. Not many women had the outline of a pink dragonfly tattooed onto their necks and any defining feature I could eliminate would ultimately help me.

With a sigh I pulled my pajamas on and collapsed onto the rickety bed. I'd gone through the sheets and looked all along the mattress when I first came in. I may have been down on my luck, but I refused to add bed bug bites on top of everything else.

My eyes were immediately heavy with exhaustion. I needed to eat, but now that I was horizontal all I wanted to do was sleep.

With a sigh I gave in, all of the things I needed to do could wait until tomorrow.

“Well, it’s definitely pink,” I said to myself in the mirror as I stared at my new hot pink tresses.

The side of the box hadn’t given a ‘what to expect’ when it came to red hair, so I just assumed that it would be a deeper pink. But no, when I pulled the towel off of my head, all I saw was hot pink.

I turned my head left and then right, trying to decide how I felt about it.

Meeting my own hazel eyes in the mirror, I pointed at myself. “You look hot and badass. Mike would have hated this color.”

My words made me feel instantly better about the change of my hair. If Mike wouldn’t like it, then I loved it.

After I finished brushing my new hair, I braided it and got to work covering my tattoo.

“Soon I won’t have to cover you at all,” I told the dragonfly, feeling like an absolute nutcase. Being so isolated from normal people for five years had given me the nasty habit of talking to myself. Oftentimes I would get strange looks from other shoppers at the grocery store as I debated with myself under my breath about what produce to buy.

Humming under my breath, I finished dressing and packing my bags back up. Check out time was at one, but I wanted to get on the road ASAP so it was just past nine when I dropped my keycard off at the front desk.

The guy last night told me that they served a continental breakfast, but one glance told me that the only food that they were offering were a couple of sad brown bananas and a basket of granola bars.

I grabbed a few of each anyway. Beggars couldn’t be choosers and I would need all the food I could get my hands on over the next few days.

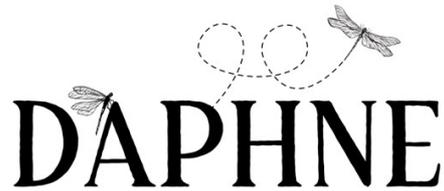
Peep started up easily and I sent a silent thank you up to the powers above that she did. It seemed that the orc, while greasy and a little bit brusque, was good on his word about the car.

On my way out of town I stopped to fill up and buy snacks at the Dollar General next to the gas station. I was going to need as much caffeine as I could get to make it to California.

Then I was off, the golden plains of Nebraska a blur in my rearview mirror as I left the state behind and turned in a Westward direction.

“California, here I come,” I whispered to myself, all of the fear and anxiety evaporating from my body with each mile that I drove away from Mike.

THREE



DAPHNE

“Oh, Peep, don’t do this to mama,” I told my car as I added water to the engine in hopes it would cool it off enough to take me the last four hour stretch to San Francisco.

My crooning was all in vain, though, as the car didn’t even turn over when I tried it the next time. I was completely stranded in the beach parking lot that I’d pulled it into.

It had taken me four days to drive from Omaha instead of two. The printed directions that Wendy had given me weren’t the easiest to follow, making me miss my maps app on my smartphone.

After getting lost and having to call Wendy twice, I finally made it through Utah to a little town called Port Haven. It was on the northern coast of California. The goal had been to stay the night here and take the coast all the way down to San Francisco tomorrow.

But as soon as I passed the sign that said *‘Port Haven - Where harmony lives,’* poor Peep started to sputter and jerk. I just barely managed to get the car into this parking lot before Peep finally gave up the ghost.

The sound of waves crashing against the rocky shore met my ears as I puzzled over what to do about my car.

Gas had been stupidly expensive and had only gotten worse the closer I got to the coast. I started my journey with a little over two thousand dollars and now I only had a hundred.

Not enough to even get a hotel room, let alone pay a mechanic to fix Peep.

I was half-tempted to see if there was a bus station that could take me the rest of the way to San Francisco, but I'd quickly grown attached to the old bug.

With a sigh I shut the hood and leaned against it, staring at my surroundings.

The meaning behind the town motto became abundantly clear as soon as I pulled onto the main street. Restaurants and other fancy shops lined the road, looking like the epitome of an expensive beach town and more supernatural creatures than I'd ever seen in one place roamed the streets, shopping with families or by themselves.

In front of me, lying in the sand, was a little beast kin, a humanoid creature that took the features of an animal. The child looked like a tiny tiger cub as he poured a castle of sand over his head before crying because he got sand in his eyes.

A tiger woman and wolf man immediately scooped the child up and comforted him with soft words and purrs.

On the sidewalk in front of me was a giant man with a thick jaw, a troll I realized as he stomped by.

It was like all of the supernatural compendium books I'd read in high school were coming to life before my very eyes.

As I people-watched, I felt a little bit of apprehension. It was hard to pick out humans amongst the masses of monsters, and being so out of my element after the last week of my life was making me feel anxious.

But then my eyes found a human man with a woman who was quite literally glowing with happiness as they walked past me hand in hand.

He seemed completely at ease with the town, his eyes on the woman's adoring face as he told her something about work.

From her back hung a pair of dainty gossamer wings that reflected in the light.

Fae, my brain provided.

The United States had added a fourth branch of government after the Accords, a supernatural branch. They were called The Council and the fae race made up most of its one-hundred members.

Supernatural creatures could run for the other branches, but the last time I checked they still remained persistently human. We'd never even had a supernatural for president, something that was a topic for debate during every election cycle.

Mike had always raged during those times, his anger over supernaturals being given an equal voice making him surly and hard to live with.

As if feeling my eyes, the woman turned to look at me from over her shoulder.

'Nice hair,' an unfamiliar voice echoed in my mind, making me jerk away from the hood of the car.

Tinkling laughter floated from the woman as I pressed a hand to my head. Fae were notoriously pushy with their abilities, and it seemed like the passing fae had been able to pick up on my thoughts as she passed by.

"I need caffeine," I said out loud to myself. I opened the passenger door of Peep and pulled my backpack out, locking the car behind me as I turned to try and figure out where to get an affordable cup of coffee.

All of the swanky places on main street seemed out of my price range and I didn't want to go too far from the car. My eyes scanned the shoreline until, in the distance, I realized that there was a wharf that most people seemed to be walking toward.

My feet carried me in that direction, and as I drew closer, my ears filled with the sound of the seagulls screaming on the roofs of the buildings that lined the long dock.

All of the shops on the Wharf could be best described as 'ramshackle,' they were brightly painted and squeezed together on the wood. Candy stores, souvenir shops,

restaurants, and more also filled the space, but unlike main street these all seemed less polished, more unique.

As I passed by a dingy carousel full of laughing children, my eyes finally found a coffee shop. It was a little hole in the wall with no actual name, just the word 'coffee' in neon letters above the door.

Inside was just as nondescript, it looked like every college hang out I'd ever been to, lots of plush furniture, low tables, and the smell of roasted beans permeating the air.

It even had the same hippy owner, though one look at him told me that he wasn't quite human. Something seemed to shimmer over him as he turned to greet me.

"Hey there, beautiful, what can I get for ya today?" he asked in a voice rough from years of smoking.

"Just a regular coffee, please," I said, struggling to rein my curiosity in and failing utterly.

"What are you?" I blurted the question and my face immediately flamed with embarrassment. I didn't know much about monsters, but I was pretty sure asking anyone what they were would be insulting.

But the man's eyes just crinkled a little bit as he fidgeted with the ring on his finger, pulling it off.

The shimmer seemed to melt away, leaving a skinny lizard man standing behind the counter.

I gasped, my eyes wide as I took in his true form.

"I'm surprised you were able to pick up on my enchanted ring at all, love, most humans can't," the man said good naturedly, his voice remaining the same. "I try to keep the human face on when I've got you Normies in here. You don't mind me leaving it off, do you? I'm a much better barista when I can use my tail."

The tail in question whipped out to snatch the cash I was holding in my hand.

Pull yourself together, Daphne, I scolded myself as I shook my head. "No, you go ahead."

The lizard man's lipless mouth turned up into what I thought was a smile. "All right, one coffee coming right up. You can wait over there, gorgeous," he said, gesturing to the wall of tall tables and stools.

Settling onto a stool, I pulled out my phone and began to text Wendy. Nothing made me miss my smart phone more than hitting the nine key three times to get to the letter I wanted.

By the time I finished drafting the text, the shop owner was calling me over to collect my coffee.

Surprisingly it was in a large ceramic mug instead of a paper cup.

"I can put it in a to-go cup if you'd like?" the man asked, his tongue darting from in between his lips.

I shook my head. "No, I'm just not used to getting coffee in an actual cup."

That made him smile. "I'm old school here, you want some creamer?"

"Please," I held the cup out for him, accepting the creamer and a ridiculous amount of sugar.

Once back at my table, I sipped my too-sweet coffee, a rebellious feeling welling up in my chest.

I *loved* coffee, but it was one of the things that Mike wouldn't let me drink. He was worried, and I quote, that it would affect my fertility.

In hindsight, I was pretty sure he just wanted another thing to control me with.

The coffee was good, and as I drank it I finally gave my surroundings a cursory glance. On the wall next to where I was sitting was a massive bulletin board covered in pinned ads.

My phone chimed with a message from Wendy:

'*ARE U OK?*' I could see my friends panic in those three words. '*SHOULD I COME GET U?*'

That definitely wasn't an option. There was no way of knowing if Mike had caught onto us and was watching her. Maybe it was my paranoia talking, but I always had the feeling that Mike knew I was seeing Wendy again.

I didn't know what else to do, though. A hundred dollars wasn't going to be able to get me to San Francisco even if Peep *had* been running.

As my fingers hovered over the number of my phone, I tried in vain not to spiral into an anxiety attack.

Then my eyes caught on one of the fliers pinned to the bulletin board.

It was a picture of a brick wall with a neon sign proclaiming it as 'MONSTROUS INK,' underneath in big letters was: 'LOOKING FOR CAPABLE RECEPTIONIST - IF YOU'RE WEIRD DON'T APPLY.'

I wasn't sure what constituted 'weird' in a town primarily made up of supernatural creatures, but it felt like serendipity that I would notice the posting just as I had started to panic.

Glancing down at the address, I realized that the shop was also on the Wharf, so I wouldn't need to walk that far to get to it.

Downing the rest of my quickly cooling coffee, I typed out another message to Wendy.

'GONNA GET A JOB,' I wrote, sending it off.

My phone buzzed almost immediately. *'WHERE? HOW? DAPHNE.'*

I didn't want to tell her until I managed to secure the job. It had been ages since I worked any job, let alone as a receptionist. So, I ignored the text and dropped my empty mug off at the counter.

"Can you tell me how to get to the Monstrous Ink tattoo parlor?" I asked the lizard man, hoping he knew of it.

His yellow eyes seemed to twist and dilate as he stared down at me, sizing me up. "It's at the end of the Wharf. You

can't miss it," he finally said, coming to some kind of a conclusion about me.

"Thanks," I shouldered my bag and offered the shop owner one last wave as I stepped back onto the bustling Wharf.

It was even busier now that it was firmly lunch time. A little boy with horns ran past me, a cotton candy clutched in one clawed hand as he squealed about the carousel.

I dodged differently sized monsters who, for the most part, paid me no mind. Ducking under the arm of what I was pretty sure was a golem, I hurried as fast as my feet could carry me to the end.

Finally, after what seemed like hundreds of shops, my eyes saw a purple neon sign hanging in front of a completely black building.

Monstrous Ink Tattoo Parlor.

It looked strange amongst all of the other brightly colored buildings, like the one goth sibling in a family full of preps.

Most people passed by it without a second glance, but as I stood staring up at it, I felt a little bit nervous.

I couldn't use my old work history from college. Mina had worked those jobs, not Daphne. I was hoping that I came off capable enough that they could ignore some of the things about me that didn't add up.

Pulling the door open, I winced when the bell above the door tinkled, announcing my entrance.

The front area of the shop was small. A couple of chairs lined the shop window that looked out onto the wharf and art lined the black walls, pasted into almost a collage.

A large receptionist desk took up most of the space and even from my vantage point by the door I could tell it was a complete disaster.

There was an open doorway with a purple beaded curtain hanging down from it, swaying in the breeze I'd just created by coming inside. It led off into a long hallway, shadowed with darkness.

Swallowing the sudden lump in my throat, I waited a minute, and then another, for someone to come.

A shiny silver bell sat on the top part of the desk with a note next to it that said '*ring for service.*'

Not wanting to be annoying to whoever was in the back, I stood awkwardly for much longer than I needed to until, finally, I tapped the bell with a sweaty hand.

Nothing.

After another couple of minutes I was about to turn and walk right back out of the shop. But Peep needed to be fixed and I needed money. I wasn't sure about the other places on the Wharf, but if anyone wasn't going to eyeball me too closely it would be a tattoo shop, right?

I'd only ever been in one before. A human one at that.

"Just ring the bell again, Daphne," I whispered, trying to psych myself up to touch the bell one more time.

Lifting my hand, I was just reaching for the bell when a thump followed by a curse filled the waiting area.

"Damn fucking door frame," a deep, gruff voice that was very slightly accented complained as whoever it was ducked to get under the door frame, their horns getting tangled on the beaded curtain as they tried to hurry to the front.

"Fuck! Effie, what did I say about the beaded curtains?" the mass hollered over his shoulder before turning and giving me my first look at what, or more correctly, *who* had just come through the doorway.

The man was tall, towering over me and making the waiting room seem even tinier than before. Every inch of his skin was gray, the color of stone.

Luminous silver eyes that seemed to glow in the dim light were just as busy taking in my face as I was his. He frowned, his heavy brow deepening as he finished taking in my appearance.

A pair of horns curled away from his forehead, framing inky black hair that spilled over one shoulder. As we stared at

each other silently, a long gray tail lashed back and forth behind him.

This man was clearly not human, but I wasn't sure *what* he was. All of my knowledge about monsters from school seemed to fly out of my mind as I continued to gawk.

The man's features pinched, as if he was uncomfortable with my staring. "Can I help you?"

FOUR

CASH

The sound of the front door bell tinkling filled the shop, rousing me from what I'd been busily sketching all afternoon. I had an appointment with a stone dragon next week and I wanted to give the guy enough options for his back piece that he tipped well.

Dragons were always flush with cash and if I wanted to re-roof the barn this summer I needed Magnus to be happy.

I almost wanted to ignore the bell. Everyone else but Effie was out for the afternoon, but knowing her, she was elbow deep in some kind of experiment upstairs and wouldn't have heard the bell at all.

Maybe they'll just go away, I thought to myself as I continued to sketch on my iPad. There weren't any appointments in the book and I didn't do any of the walk-ins. So it definitely was not any of my business.

Then they rang the bell on the front desk.

Irritation filled me as I dropped my tablet on the little desk I kept in my tattooing suite and stood, heading down the long hallway that led to the front.

Ever since our last receptionist quit because Ambrose couldn't keep his dick in his pants, Fiero had taken on most of the front desk duties. But he was out with Heath making a house call to a pair of water nymphs that wanted their blue skin dyed.

Hopefully whoever was out front didn't mind my cranky ass.

The closer I got to the doorway, the more I could smell. Whoever was in the waiting room was clearly human. I could smell the chemicals of the cheap shampoo and soap they'd washed with recently, but underneath that was something sweeter. Like fresh-cut strawberries.

I was so distracted by the scent that I forgot to duck, smacking my forehead on the doorframe.

“Damn fucking door frame,” I growled, rubbing my forehead and glaring at it. It was one of the few things on Dallan's to-do list that never seemed to get fixed.

Port Haven used to be a completely human town a hundred years ago, but after the Accords the humans in the town had been one of the first to accept supernaturals. In the present day, the monsters outnumbered the humans three-to-one.

Monstrous Ink used to be a swanky upscale restaurant that served overpriced shrimp cocktails until Dallan bought it fifteen years ago. The Cthulhu had put his own mark on it, renovating nearly every inch of the place, but the damned doorway to the entrance was still human-sized.

Ducking to avoid a second run-in with the damned thing, my horns were immediately tangled in the purple beaded curtain that Effie had insisted on hanging up. She swore up and down that it brightened the ‘vibe’ of the place, but I begged to differ as I cursed and tried to untangle myself without shredding it. “Fuck! Effie, what did I say about the beaded curtains?”

Overhead, I could hear Effie's footsteps up in the little apartment she lived in, and I knew she'd probably be on her way in a minute.

Finally freeing myself from the beaded curtain, I got my first good look at the human who was standing on the other side of the reception desk with wide eyes.

My first thought was that the color of her eyes reminded me of my favorite whiskey. A warm amber tinged with a little bit of green. I was fairly sure that the humans called the color hazel.

The woman in front of me must have been on the taller side of humans because her head came up just underneath my chest. Her face was softly rounded, framed by wisps of brightly colored pink hair that looked like it could really use a brushing.

She also looked exhausted. She had deep purple smudges under her eyes and her shoulders were hunched over as if she was carrying the weight of the world.

Then the woman opened her mouth, but all that came out was a pitiful squeak.

Heaving a sigh, I took a step back. I wasn't used to humans that hadn't been around monsters.

It had been twenty years since I settled into Port Haven, and all the humans here hardly even blinked at the supes they lived with.

"Effie," I bellowed over my shoulder again as the tree nymph finally breezed down the stairs and into the room.

"Stop all your yelling," she scolded, her green eyes flashing at me as she finished tying up her light green hair.

To the naked eye, Euphemia "Effie" Finch looked human. Thanks to her father being a warlock, she had human features that seemed to immediately put the strange woman in front of me at ease.

What the woman couldn't see, though, was the bundled vines under the back of Effie's shirt or the fact that the dark green freckles all over her arms and legs were actually sprouts that Effie systematically cut off every day. Those came from her tree nymph lineage on her mom's side.

"How can I help you?" Effie asked, turning her full attention to the woman.

The woman's mouth opened, and then closed again, like she was at a loss for words. Finally, she held up the flier we'd posted everywhere a few weeks ago.

"You're looking for a job?" I rumbled with disbelief. How could a human who was so clearly scared of monsters get a job

in a monster tattoo shop? It was fucking ridiculous.

Whiskey eyes shifted to my face again and she just nodded wordlessly.

Effie stepped forward, linking her arm through the woman's. "You are my actual savior," the nymph gushed, offering the woman her trademark megawatt smile.

It was clear that, in Effie's book, anyone applying was a godsend. Especially seeing how much of a fucking disaster the desk was right now.

"What's your name, sugar?" Effie asked, steering the woman down the hallway to the office.

I followed, more curious than anything, and was just close enough to hear the woman's whispered "Daphne," to Effie.

Just as I was about to follow them into the office when Effie whirled around to face me. "Not allowed," she said, holding up a hand.

"Why not?" I grumbled, crossing my arms over my chest. "Shouldn't a second person sit in on the interview?"

Effie shook her head, her eyes narrowing at me. "Not when you look like a fucking thundercloud, Cash. Get your face in order and maybe I'll let you talk to her."

With that the door was slammed in my face, leaving me standing alone in the hallway.

I stood outside of the door for longer than I should have, feeling conflicted. It had been a long time since anyone was scared of me.

The last time had been before I settled in Port Haven fifty years ago.

It was easy to forget everything when you lived in a place like this, where monsters were free to be themselves and the humans living here had seen it all.

Shaking off my morose thoughts, I left the office behind and returned to my sketching. Unfortunately, all of my earlier

inspiration seemed to have evaporated thanks to the arrival of the human.

With a frustrated growl, I tossed my iPad back down and decided to start working my way through some of my invoices instead. I'd been working on growing a social media following over the past year or so, selling rights to some of my art pieces and showing off my work.

Even though social media had been around for over twenty years, it still baffled me sometimes. Dallan loved it, relishing in doing lives and streaming his tattooing process.

I wasn't there yet. I hated being on camera, the same age-old fear that the wrong eyes would see what I was always filling me.

My back ached at the mere thought of another gargoyle seeing that their favorite stone-skin tattoo artist was a Wingless.

No, I didn't want that. So the only thing that was ever visible in my pictures or short videos were my hands and forearms.

Time may have made the human's grow tolerant of monsters, but it had done nothing for me or any other Wingless. We were still just as shunned and ostracized as we had been when my father tore my wings from my back two hundred and fifty years ago.

The local gargoyle clan barely tolerated my presence as it was, though they rarely came into town anyway. They preferred to overlook my status in favor of what I could do for them.

An artist that could tattoo stone skin was rare. If they chased me out, who would give them the tattoos they loved so much?

The computer that I kept at work was too small for my talons, forcing me to have to hunt and peck as I sent invoices off and double checked the ones that had come back.

After that, I checked my email and found one from Ronan, another Wingless that I'd known for a long time. Like most

Wingless, he was a little cracked in the head. Unlike me, he barely used any technology at all. The computer I'd set him up with last time I visited him was the only thing he used and it was usually only to email me or play Tetris. He also had an old landline that had seen better days that he rarely touched.

My eyes skimmed the body of the email, and found most of it to be a rambling mess. I'd probably need to make a drive out to Las Vegas to check on him soon. When I saw him a year ago he seemed okay, but now he was writing about a clan that had moved into Vegas and was trying to push him out.

They couldn't do that. Vegas, like Port Haven, was a supernatural sanctuary, the biggest in the United States. Any monster who wanted to live there was rightfully able to do so, gargoyle politics aside.

I wanted to respond back to his email immediately, but there was no way I'd be able to convey what I wanted to say if I had to do it on this tiny keyboard. My computer back home was more suited to my size, so I'd wait until then to try and soothe him.

The sound of the office door opening again made my ears prick up.

"Are you sure about offering me the job?" the woman asked, her voice still soft.

Then Effie's much louder one followed it. "Of course! You seem organized and if someone doesn't fix that desk soon I'm going to light it on fire."

Footsteps echoed down the hallway and then the sound of the bell tinkling filled the shop again.

Once I was sure the human was gone, I stood and made my way to the front, remembering to duck this time as I stepped into the waiting room.

"You hired her?" I asked incredulously, crossing my arms over my chest.

Effie rolled her eyes at me. "Yes, I hired her. She needs a job, we need a receptionist. It's a match made in heaven."

“But she’s a human. A scared one at that,” I insisted with a shake of my head.

“Despite your grumpy ass face, I don’t think it was you that she was scared of,” Effie told me with a scoff. “Now help me clear off the desk so our new receptionist doesn’t run screaming from the building tomorrow.”

I wanted to argue with her some more, but her words stopped me. “What do you mean it’s not me she’s scared of?”

Effie never got the chance to answer because the shop door opened and the rest of our staff stumbled inside.

Monstrous Ink didn’t have a particularly large staff, but we were all definitely different from one another. The group walking in was made up of a hipster Cthulhu, a dark elf with a chip on his shoulder, a satyr with a man bun, and a golden retriever of a lycanthrope. It was like the set up of a cheesy joke.

“There you are, you all were supposed to be back two hours ago,” Effie scolded, planting a hand on her hip.

Dallan broke away from the group, his golden eyes on Effie as the tentacles on his face twitched—his version of a cheeky grin. “We stopped at the pub for a few pints.”

Despite spending the past hundred years stateside, Dallan’s Scottish brogue was still as strong as ever. Even stronger than my Irish accent which had faded ever since I was banished from my clan.

“A few pints?” Effie asked, one slender green brow lifting. “That’s what took you two hours?”

“And a few rounds of pool,” Heath chimed in from the back. His words were followed by a doggish yelp as either Fiero or Ambrose elbowed him.

Effie’s arms crossed over her chest. I took two steps back, gearing up for the hurricane that was an Effie-Dallan argument.

But then, surprisingly, the nymph just shook her head and sighed. “Fine, but that means it’s going to take us all night to

replenish our ink supply.”

I watched the spots on Dallan’s face move and shift, deepening in color. “Fine,” he rumbled.

Effie gestured for the man to follow her, shooting one last sharp look at the gathered trio still standing in front of the door.

“Also, I hired a new receptionist. A human,” I heard her say to him as they headed together down the hallway toward the stairs.

“A human? What’d you do that for?” Dallan’s voice echoed down to us.

“Why the fuck did Effie hire a human?” Ambrose asked me, scrunching his long elven nose.

Out of all of us, Ambrose hated humans the most. He never spoke about it much, but I knew that his story and what led him to come to Port Haven was horrific to say the least.

I’d known about his disdain for humans before, but something in his tone irked me.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him gruffly despite the fact that I’d asked the same question only a few moments ago. “Now can you three help me clean the desk off?”

Ambrose looked like he wanted to argue with me, but when Fiero and Heath immediately jumped in, he begrudgingly started clearing papers and boxes off of the desk.

Most things would need to be organized and filed by the human. *By Daphne*, I mentally corrected myself.

What had Effie meant when she said it wasn’t me that Daphne was scared of?

My tail, which was normally hung sedately behind me, swished back and forth with irritation.

“Can you not whip me with that?” Fiero yelped when the end of it caught him on one of his furry legs.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I finished filling a box full of things that would need to go in the storage closet upstairs.

Leaving the trio to finish cleaning up the desk, I hurried up the stairs with my box in hand and my mind twisting with strange thoughts.

Then a muffled moan made me freeze at the top of the landing.

“It’s backed up because you put it off yesterday,” I could hear Effie’s voice as she scolded Dallan breathlessly.

“That’s not why it’s backed up,” Dallan’s voice was tight, followed by another whisper of a moan.

I turned on my heel and headed back down the stairs before I could hear anything else.

Monstrous Ink was one of the most famous monster tattoo parlors in the United States. Our tattoos stayed longer, were more vibrant, and were done by a group of artists that prided themselves on their craft.

We all knew where the ink that made it possible came from. I just didn’t want to listen to it happen in real time.

I’d just have to put the box away later.

FIVE



DAPHNE

I'd gotten the job. I couldn't believe it.

I was so sure that Effie was going to take one look at me and toss me out on my ass, but instead she'd offered me the position.

Several times throughout the interview she would ask me a question, whether it was about their scheduling software or my knowledge of the tattoo business, and I wouldn't even know how to start answering it.

My last job was in college as a desk assistant, so I figured that would be good enough. But that had mostly been answering phone calls and checking the English department's meeting calendar.

Monstrous Ink's scheduling software was sophisticated, and by sophisticated I mean complicated. Effie told me they would get requests from all over the world because they were able to tattoo most supernatural creatures, an apparent rarity.

Never before had I considered the implications behind tattooing supernaturals before. I'd seen them with tattoos when I was out and about in Boston, but now that I was thinking about it... it really shouldn't be possible.

Most monsters had fast healing capabilities. Meaning it would be difficult to get a needle with ink to puncture their skin and for it to stick. Their skin was also all different types and textures, making the tattooing process complex on a case-by-case basis.

I thought back to the gargoyle who had greeted me at the shop. His sleeves had been rolled up, revealing smooth gray skin and a few tattoos littering his forearms.

How had he gotten his tattoos? I didn't know much about gargoyles, but I did know that they had stone skin that wasn't easily punctured.

I thought about it as my feet carried me back toward Peep. I wished I could ask him about it when I started working, but his thunderous expression when he saw me made me think he wouldn't welcome my questions.

Regardless, I had a job. Effie had every reason to turn me away, but she didn't, and I was going to do my damndest to not make her regret it.

Peep was still sitting in the same spot as I'd left her and I hopped into the front seat and tried the engine one more time, hoping against hope that a break was all the bug needed.

The engine sputtered, working to turn on before a grinding noise made me pull the key out. I was scared if I kept trying I would cause more damage to the car that wouldn't be fixable.

"Mama's got a job now," I told her, patting the pock-marked dash affectionately. "She's going to get you fixed up in no time."

Or at least I hoped I would be able to fix her. It was stupid to be so attached to a car, but it felt like it was me and Peep against the world right now, and I'd be damned if I left her behind.

With a sigh I began gathering my toiletries. On my walk back from the Wharf I spotted a gym on the corner of Main street. Most gyms offered some kind of a day pass and I was in desperate need of a shower.

But as soon as I stepped inside, I knew that I was in for a headache.

The front desk assistant looked human. She was dressed in athleisure wear and her long blonde hair was pulled up into a ponytail.

Blue eyes took in my ragged appearance from head to toe and as she did so, the friendly look in them quickly faded. Whatever greeting she was about to give me died on her lips as they twisted into a frown.

Steeling myself, I stepped up to the desk. “Hi, I’d like to purchase a day pass please.”

Silence.

It was as if she didn’t want to acknowledge my presence. But then, begrudgingly, she made eye contact.

“We don’t do day passes here,” her voice was terse and impatient, like she couldn’t wait for me to go away.

My eyes glanced down at the price options list laminated on the desk. In big, bold letters there was a price for a day pass.

“It says here that a day pass is ten dollars.” I pointed at the price, trying not to let the irritation I was feeling thread into my voice.

The woman scoffed. “Yes, but that is for people who are actually going to work out.”

My face heated, probably turning the same shade as my hair.

I opened my mouth to argue with her, my desire for a shower outweighing my pride, but I never got the chance to say anything.

“Stacy, how many times have I told you to be polite to customers,” a gruff voice came from the office behind the desk. A huge man with one eye yanked the door open to glare at the front desk assistant.

Holy shit, a cyclops, my brain whispered, short-circuiting a bit. When I was small, one of my mother’s security officers had been an old cyclops with a scarred face. Some of my earlier memories of my mother also included him hovering nearby. It was surreal to see another one as most of them tended to remain in their home country of Greece.

“But *Anders*,” Stacy whined, turning to face the man fully, “she’s not even going to work out. Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of a gym?”

The man’s eye rolled. “Go wipe down the equipment before I send you home early without pay.”

Stacy pouted, looking like she wanted to argue, but then grabbed a spray bottle and a washcloth and stomped off to do as she was told.

“Sorry about that, Stacy’s the child of a friend and I told him I’d give her a job,” the man, Anders, told me with an apologetic smile.

I put the cash for the day pass down on the counter. “So, I *can* get a day pass then?”

I just wanted to shower away all of the grime clinging to my body from my cross-country escape.

“Yes, of course,” Anders jumped in to type some things on the screen in front of him, putting my cash into the register and handing me some change. “In fact, as an apology I’ll even include these.”

With the change he handed me a small stack of extra day passes and my gaze was caught on the intricate tattoo on the inside of his wrist.

I stared at the day passes, not wanting to accept charity from someone I didn’t know... but I also knew it would be at least a week until my first paycheck from the shop and I’d need to be showered and clean every day for work.

“Thank you,” I finally said with a sigh, accepting the passes. “Cool tattoo by the way.”

Ander’s eye squinted as he grinned at me. “Thanks I got it on the Wharf at the tattoo parlor, you know it?”

I nodded, brightening at the mention of Monstrous Ink. “Yeah, actually I just started working there today.”

“Well shit, definitely a small world in this town. Say hi to Effie for me, I’ve been trying to ask her on a date for the last five years.” Ander’s grin turned sheepish. “Anyway if you

need anything give me a holler. Feel free to use any of the gym's amenities, our hot tub is to die for.”

With one last wave the cyclops went back inside of his office.

It was still early afternoon, so the gym was empty save for a few people using the machines and Stacy furiously wiping down a treadmill.

The locker rooms were clearly marked on the back wall of the gym and I headed for them, ignoring Stacy's glare as I passed by her.

She could throw a fit all she liked, but this gym was going to be my saving grace for showering for the foreseeable future, so she'd just have to get used to me.

The locker rooms were fancy with several shower stalls and changing rooms. The showers even had shampoo, conditioner, and body wash dispensers so I could stop using the cheap stuff I'd picked up at a truck stop in Utah.

Humming to myself, I got to work washing myself.

The water was blessedly hot and I let it pound out the stiffness in my neck and back from driving all night. I stood for too long under the spray, letting the burning water rain down over my body.

My hair was the first thing I needed to tackle. I kept it up in a braid for most of my travels so that it wouldn't be too tangled, but my scalp ached from keeping it up for so long.

Undoing the pink braid I washed my hair twice, scrubbing with my finger nails until the strands no longer felt greasy. Then I lathered it in the conditioner and let that soak in while I washed the rest of my body.

By the time I was finished with my shower my limbs felt like cooked noodles, but I was clean and feeling human again.

Pulling on a fresh pair of leggings and a t-shirt, my dirty clothes went into the plastic bag I'd brought in with me and I was ready to head back to Peep.

Stacy was back at the desk when I passed by again and I couldn't help but shoot her a cheeky grin as I left the gym.

Crossing the street, I sat on the bench in front of Peep for a long time, staring at the ocean. The ocean in California was a completely different one from the one I'd grown up with in Massachusetts. Everything from the sound of the waves, to where the sun sat in the sky was unique.

But even still, watching the ocean made me think of my mom. I hoped that wherever she was, that she was proud of me for finally getting out.

While I may have been living in my broken down car, while I may have only had seventy-five bucks to my name, and while I may be starting my life over completely from scratch...

Things were finally starting to look up for me.

Why can't you ever do anything right? Mike's voice echoed through my mind as a hot flash of fear skittered across my skin.

A hand gripped my arm in the darkness, twisting the skin so hard that an animalistic scream tore its way out of my mouth... and then I realized the scream wasn't my own.

I awoke with a jerk, sucking in a lungful of stale car air as the sounds of seagulls screaming outside filled my ears.

It took a few moments of ragged breaths to reorient myself. I was safe. Mike was on the other side of the country and couldn't get to me anymore.

Stretching with a groan, I used the front seat to pull myself up into a sitting position. Every bone in my back cracked as I straightened my limbs, still stiff from the fetal position sleeping in the backseat had forced me into.

When I was preparing to sleep in the car the night before I'd put sunshades in the front and back windows. Then I'd put

towels, which I had stolen from the few motels I'd stayed at on my journey, up in all four of the windows.

It was about as private as living in a car could get.

What I hadn't been counting on was how cramped my five-foot-eight frame would feel in the little Bug.

"That's going to take some getting used to," I whispered to myself as I checked the time on my phone. It was still early and I had two hours until I needed to be back at the shop for my first day.

I took my time getting dressed. I'd forgotten to ask Effie what the dress code was like before I left yesterday, so I was taking my best guess.

A pair of jeans and a white t-shirt seemed safe enough, and if they weren't I could come back out to Peep and change during my break. I also pulled out a thick cardigan in case I got cold.

Effie had been wearing a t-shirt of some band and a pair of ripped black jeans. It looked rock n' roll, but in the effortless way that many people spent a lot of money trying to replicate.

By comparison my outfit felt bland. I hadn't bought my own clothes in nearly a decade. Mike hated anything flashy and usually sent his mother out to pick out clothing for me.

That meant that I wound up looking like a weird miniature of his mother, which seemed to please him. Psychologists would have a field day with my husband's Oedipus complex if they ever got the chance.

I wanted to buy new clothes. Ones that I would like... though at this point I wasn't sure what those would even look like.

"New clothes are expensive," I reminded myself as I brushed my hair and pulled it up into a ponytail. "Focus on getting Peep fixed first."

With my morning pep talk finished, I tugged on my sneakers and opened the car door.

The beach was pleasantly empty, a thick fog still hanging over the water from the night before. The tide had come in at some point during the night, washing away any footprints from the day before and leaving a blank slate behind.

In the distance I could see the shape of someone in the fog, a pair of huge dogs dancing at their feet. It brought a smile to my face.

We had lots of pets when I was growing up. Dogs, cats, an entire stable of farm animals and a plethora of smaller animals. My mom was a huge animal lover and always wanted to be surrounded by them.

By the time she told me she was sick, most of our animals had been sent to live with new families. All of them except for the horses which still pulled in revenue. It had been one of the few things we argued about during her last months. I would have taken care of them if she'd given me the chance. I would have taken care of everything.

Now that I really thought about it, Mike had probably convinced her that getting rid of them was the best course of action. He had her ear more than anyone else in her last few months.

I'd learned quickly that he had no patience for animals, not even the pair of Yorkies his mom owned. I'd seen him kick the poor things more than once during our marriage.

Hugging my cardigan more tightly around myself, I watched the figure and the dogs disappear completely into the mist.

Making sure that Peep was locked, I made my way back to the Wharf just as people were opening up shop for the day.

"Decided to stick around then, gorgeous?" a familiar voice called out to me as I passed the carousel.

The lizard man that owned the coffee shop was standing outside and putting up a sign. It had all of the specials for the day on it and a silly little lizard drawn in chalk paint. The man's yellow eyes rotated in their sockets until he was focused on me.

“Uh, yep, got a job and everything,” I said, unsure of how much information I wanted to give the guy.

He nodded before holding up a hand. “Stay right there, lovely.”

I watched as he ducked back inside of the shop and hurried back behind the counter. He fiddled around for a couple of minutes before emerging with a paper to-go cup in hand.

“For your first day,” he said as he held the cup out to me.

Eyeing the cup, I opened my mouth to tell him I couldn’t accept but the man didn’t seem to want to take no for an answer. A cool, scaly hand gripped mine gently and put the warm cup in my hand.

“I insist. It’s on the house. Can’t start your first day without caffeine, right?” His lipless mouth turned up into a dry smile.

He was right. My body still ached from the contortions I’d put it through sleeping in the backseat of Peep last night. Besides, as soon as the smell of coffee hit my nose my mouth was watering.

“Thank you,” I finally said, accepting the cup gratefully.

“Anytime, darling.” The lizard man grinned and turned back to his sign. “Now you go on, and don’t let those buffoons at that shop bully you.”

With one last wave I was on my way again, puzzling over how the man knew I was working at the tattoo shop.

Seagulls were still screaming overhead by the time I finally made it to the end of the Wharf, the pungent scent of fish and seaweed filling my nose.

I was fifteen minutes early, so the shop was still closed, the waiting room inside dark.

Sipping on my coffee, I practiced in my head how I was going to greet whoever came down to open the shop. I assumed it would be Effie since she lived upstairs, but I wanted to be prepared for anything.

My stomach began to sour as my nerves got the better of me. What if I couldn't figure out the complicated scheduling software that Effie told me about yesterday? Or I was unknowingly rude to one of the patrons who came into the shop?

I knew basic facts about most supernatural creatures, but then again some races had a specific social etiquette that I had no clue about.

Shifters were finicky about eye contact, but it really depended on what kind of shifter. The beast people were all about formal speech... though I had no idea what that entailed.

As I internally panicked, I didn't hear the door to Monstrous Ink unlock and open until Effie's voice broke through my anxious thoughts.

"You're early, Daphne," she said, her green brows furrowing for just a moment before she offered me a friendly smile.

I blinked at her like an idiot. While she'd been dressed in rocker chic yesterday, today she looked like a fifties pin-up model.

The deep green pleats of her vintage dress swirled around her legs as she came close with a worried look. "Are you all right?"

Shoving down every single worry, I mustered up a smile. "Yeah, just a little nervous for my first day."

"Don't be, you'll do great." Effie offered me her hand. "Come on, Daphne, I don't bite. Though some of the guys do."

A little shudder ran down my spine at that. Why did she have to make it sound like it was part-threat and part-innuendo? It had become abundantly clear to me during our interview yesterday that the woman in front of me didn't have any sort of filter.

Letting her lead me inside, I watched as she turned on all of the lights and made note of where they were.

“So you’ll be here most of the time, though we’ll also have you help us organize the kitchen and the supply closets. The guys are in charge of keeping their tattooing booths clean, so don’t let them harass you into picking up after them,” Effie said as she put a file box that was on the desk onto the floor. She gave it a haphazard kick, sending it sliding across the floor.

“I’m usually upstairs for most of the day doing my own thing, but I’ll hover today and make sure you’re getting used to everything,” she continued, scribbling something onto a sticky note. “This is your login and password for the scheduling software. We’ve got a pretty light load today, so it’s the perfect day to train. Go ahead and try to log in.”

I sat down in the desk chair and began to type on the computer, logging in and becoming immediately overwhelmed by all of the tabs and alerts.

Effie took one look at my face and chuckled. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t usually look like this. It’s been two months since our last receptionist quit and none of us are very good at clearing old appointments after we finish them.”

She began to explain the software, clearing the dashboard until it looked more manageable. The more I clicked through things, the calmer I became. It was pretty similar to the calendar software that my university job used—though there were more options to click.

“Today Cash, Dallan, and Fiero have appointments. You can see what kind of monster species are coming in as well as what tools they will need. As you get more comfortable you will be in charge of restocking our supply closets,” Effie explained.

“Diamond tipped needles?” I asked, my eyes scrolling down the supply list for a Talos named Greg.

“Yep, Talos are made from different kinds of stone. Greg’s a bronze Talos, so his skin takes a more heavy-duty needle to deposit the ink, not to mention a stronger power output.” Effie pointed at what looked like a car battery on the list.

I nodded, trying to wrap my brain around how different monsters could be tattooed. “So I guess normal tattooing needles don’t work for most monsters?”

Effie shrugged. “Depends on the monster. Some of them just need special ink, which we make in house.”

“How do you make ink in-house?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

The tops of Effie’s cheeks flushed a surprising shade of green. “Well—”

But whatever she was going to say next was cut off by the bell over the door chiming as a group of monsters piled into the shop.

SIX



DAPHNE

“Effie, why was Farrow giving us such a fucking hard time at the coffee shop this morning? He seems to think we’re going to bully our new receptionist.” The man’s words were edged with a Scottish burr as he stepped further into the coffee shop to let the rest of his companions come inside.

He was tall, towering over us at the desk as he put his coffee down on the counter. He was dressed like a typical hipster with a pair of gray jeans and a black Henley stretched across his barrel chest. But other than that he was far from any hipster I’d ever seen.

I’d never seen a monster like him before in my life. The sleeves of his Henley were pulled up to his elbows, exposing two arms completely covered in tattoos. The parts of his skin that weren’t inked were a mottled gray-green color that seemed to shift and change as I stared.

But the thing that really made him different from the rest was the octopus tentacles on his face. They looked a little bit like a beard, but extended from his cheeks and mouth.

“Maybe because you walk everywhere shouting?” Effie shot back, putting a hand on her hip. “Now all of you introduce yourself like normal people, or I swear to the Goddess I’ll hex you into next week.”

I watched as the two seemed to share an entire conversation with one look. The man’s shoulders sank. “Sorry, lass, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me,” I said, finally managing to find my voice. “I’m Daphne Clarke, it’s nice to meet you.”

I held my hand out, pleased when it didn’t shake. The man’s hands were cool, like a crisp ocean breeze.

“A pleasure, I’m Dallan. I own this shabby little shop. Are you familiar with monster kind?” The man who had come in hot tempered was now as docile as a lamb.

I shook my head. “I had lessons like everyone else in elementary school and met some during college, but not many.”

There was a snort from the group behind Dallan and it was quickly followed by someone whispering at whoever it was to shut the fuck up.

“That’s all right, I’m a Cthulhu and we’re not very common anyway, only about thirty of us left in the world,” Dallan explained as he shifted so that I could see past his bulk at the group standing behind him. “All right lads, line up and we’ll do introductions.”

I watched with awe as they spread out so that I could see all of them.

“Starting left to right we’ve got our apprentice Heath. He may look like the most normal of the bunch, but the kid’s a lycanthrope, so he gets a little furry sometimes,” Dallan began, pointing at the curly-headed young man who waved. He looked like the quintessential high school jock. Handsome in an all-American kind of way.

“Next to him is Fiero, he does most of our general tattooing and watercolor pieces. He’s a satyr and too horny for his own good,” Dallan continued, gesturing to the man who had his long brown hair pulled into a messy bun. Two little horns peeked out from either side of his head.

The man’s beard twitched with a half-grin as he rolled his eyes at Dallan.

“Is that supposed to be a horn joke? Do better, man,” he grumbled, though it was clear he didn’t mind the joke at all.

I peered over the top of the counter and caught a flash of brown fur covering the man's legs. A female satyr had lived on my floor during college, but she'd mostly kept to herself so I'd never been able to get a close look before.

Dallan ignored Fiero's words and moved on. "Next is Ambrose, a dark elf. He's got a bad attitude so I'd ignore most of what he says, lass, because he will usually say shit just to be mean."

The elf in question was busy glaring at me with a pair of ink-dark eyes. He was beautiful in a sharp kind of way. His skin was brown, but it was as if someone had sucked all of the saturation out of it leaving it closer to gray. His face was all high cheeks and elegant features which included a pair of long, pointed ears that jutted out from underneath his impossibly black hair.

He didn't say anything, but it was clear that I wasn't welcome in his mind.

Dallan didn't linger on him for long. "And last, but not least, is Cash. He's been with me the longest, going on seventy-five years now, right?"

It was the man who I'd seen yesterday. The one who'd glared at me, though he wasn't glaring now.

"Give or take a couple of years." His voice was gravelly as he spoke and it sent a curious shiver down my spine.

Dallan nodded, clearly pleased by the man's words. "Cash is our expert on tattooing stone skin seeing as he's a—"

"Gargoyle, right?" I chimed in before I could stop myself. My face flushed hot as all eyes in the room locked in on my face.

There was a beat of silence before Cash nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Okay!" Effie, who had been hovering behind my shoulder throughout the introductions, clapped her hands together loudly. "As much as I'd like for us all to gather around a fire and sing kumbaya until we're comfortable, you've all got shit to do."

Dallan, seeming to take her cue, nodded. “And be patient and nice to our new receptionist or else I fear Farrow will never sell us coffee again.”

Farrow must be the name of the lizardman who owned the coffee shop.

It didn't take much more than that to spur the rest of them into action.

Ambrose stomped past the desk, ducking under the door frame and muttering under his breath.

“Well, he's going to be fun,” Fiero said with a little shake of his head as he followed the elf, his hooves making a loud clicking noise on the tile floor of the waiting room.

I was a little taken aback by the entire conversation. It was a monster tattoo parlor, but I hadn't expected to be thrown into the gauntlet of introductions all at once.

“You all right there?” A pair of friendly blue eyes were suddenly level with my own as Heath rested his chin on the counter.

I didn't get a chance to answer before Fiero's voice came from the long hallway behind the beaded curtain. “Heath, stop wagging your fucking tail at the new receptionist and get your ass back here.”

Heath didn't seem angry by the tone of Fiero's voice. Instead he just straightened with a grin. “Oops, master calls. See ya later, Daphne, good luck!”

With that he practically bounced through the beaded curtain, narrowly avoiding braining himself on the low door frame that was far too short to be in a tattoo parlor full of supernatural creatures.

That just left Dallan, Cash, and Effie behind.

“You'll keep an eye on her?” Dallan asked, glancing over at the woman behind me.

“Of course, I don't have any of my own clients coming today. I'll make sure Ambrose and tall, dark and scary over there don't frighten her away.” Effie gave my shoulder a gentle

pat, like she was soothing a skittish cat as she continued to glare at Cash.

“Why am I tall, dark and scary?” The gargoyle muttered, scrubbing a hand along his gray jaw.

Our eyes met and I was once again amazed by how silver his eyes were. I wondered if they would glow in the dark like a cat’s eyes did.

Effie scoffed. “Because your face is stuck in a perpetual glare?”

“If that isn’t the truth,” Dallan snickered, reaching out to clap the man on the back. “Now come on, you’ve got to get your shit together for Greg. What’s he getting this time?”

Cash gave me one last, strange look before he ducked into the hallway.

“Apparently he met a girl and wants to get her name on his bicep,” I heard him tell the Cthulhu man.

“What happened to Jessica? I liked her...”

“How often do monsters get a lover’s name tattooed on their body?” I asked, frowning. You would think with their long lifetimes they would have enough breakups that there wouldn’t be any room left on their bodies.

“More than you’d think,” Effie said with a shake of her head. “For some it’s not so bad. The shifters have lifemates, so that’s just one and done. But not all supes get that.”

“And Greg?” My eyes went back to the Talos’s appointment information that was still up on the screen.

Effie chuckled, her green eyes dancing as she brought up previous tattoo information for him. “He’s basically the signature page of a yearbook. The ladies love him, but not for a long time.”

A laugh bubbled up in my chest and out of my mouth, surprising both of us.

“I was wondering how long it would take me to get you to laugh,” Effie said, clearly pleased with herself.

The bell dinged overhead, signaling our first customer for the day. It was a woman with the head of a tabby cat.

“Just smile and I’ll help you through it,” Effie whispered.

Gathering up all of my courage, I offered the cat woman a bright grin. “Hi, how can we help you?”

“How’d you fare on your first day, lass?” Dallan asked as we watched Effie flip the shop sign to closed.

“It was all right.” I still felt a bit shy around anyone who wasn’t Effie. Most of the tattoo artists stayed back in their rooms and Effie walked the clients back to them, but Dallan kept popping up to bug Effie or to ask questions.

By the fourth or fifth time I realized it wasn’t that he was curious about me, but that he wanted to be near the woman who’d hired me.

“She did great, so stop annoying her,” Effie said as she rejoined us, one of her long vines snaking out from the back of her dress to push against the man’s chest.

That was another thing I’d learned over the past eight hours of working at Monstrous Ink. I was the only human employed.

I thought Effie might be human too, despite her odd coloring, but when one of her vines had reached for the cup full of pens on the desk I’d nearly jumped out of my skin.

Effie had apologized profusely for scaring me and had sheepishly explained what she was.

“Sorry, I forget humans don’t have supernatural awareness like most of us do and my vines kinda have a mind of their own,” she’d explained sheepishly as she snatched the green vine in question back to her chest. “I’m a bit of a weirdo even by monster standards. I’m half-tree nymph, half-witch. Hence the green color and the vines.”

“It’s okay, it just startled me,” I’d hurried to reassure her when I saw that her face clouded over with an emotion that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

It had been awkward for an hour after that until I gathered the courage to ask to see all of her vines.

Turns out she had six of them that extended from her back, sort of like spider legs.

“Care to grab a pint with us at the pub to celebrate your first day?” Dallan asked, bringing me back to the present.

I wanted to, but one look over his shoulder at Ambrose’s angry expression told me that it was probably too soon for that.

I’d only seen him once throughout the day when Effie had gone to the bathroom and he’d muttered something about how the whole place stank of humans now. So he was definitely someone I wanted to avoid.

“Not tonight,” I murmured, unsure of whether or not my refusal would offend them.

But the man just shrugged, the tentacles on his face curling in as he looked down at Effie. “And you?”

“You go have fun, but not too much fun. We still need to finish getting the ink supply for the month.” Her vines seemed to be extra active as they pushed him in the direction of the shop door.

“Good job today, Daphne, you’re officially in my top five of all-time receptionists,” Dallan called over his shoulder.

“You’ve only had four since we started the shop,” Effie pointed out with a snort. “Now, good night.”

With that she shut the door firmly behind him, leaving the two of us alone.

“Sorry about that. They’re going to try and get you to go out for drinks as much as possible. I swear, Dallan probably has whiskey running through his veins at this point,” Effie said as she rejoined me behind the counter. She’d been in the

middle of showing me how to close everything down when the artists had come out to the front.

“They don’t mind that I didn’t go, right?” My nerves were completely frazzled after a day of learning how everything worked. I was hoping that I hadn’t just screwed up some kind of team bonding ritual or something.

Effie shook her head. “No, not even a little bit. They’ll use any excuse to go out for a drink after work. If you want me to stop them from asking you, just let me know.”

“No, it’s okay,” I hurried to reassure her. “I don’t mind.”

We lapsed into silence as Effie fiddled with her tablet, going through the closing checklist.

My thoughts drifted, once again back to Cash, the silent gargoyle. He’d come up to the front a couple of times to ask Effie questions and each time his silver eyes had fallen briefly on me before he looked away almost immediately. He didn’t say anything to me and I couldn’t help but wonder what he thought of me.

At least the rest of the guys made it obvious where they fell.

“Hey, Effie?” I asked, finally breaking the silence as my biggest curiosity about the gargoyle finally getting the better of me.

“Hmm?” Effie replied, not really paying attention to me as she stared at her screen.

I nibbled nervously on my lower lip, unsure of how to phrase my question. “Why doesn’t Cash have wings? I’m not super familiar with gargoyles... but aren’t wings kinda their thing?”

The tablet pen in Effie’s fingers froze and her green eyes met mine. “You don’t...? No, of course you wouldn’t know.”

“Know what?”

Effie set down the tablet and turned in her chair so that she was fully facing me. “You should never bring up what I’m

about to tell you to Cash. He's one of the most patient guys I've ever met, but this is a sore spot for him, understand?"

I nodded, swallowing heavily.

"Cash is something called a Wingless. Wingless are gargoyles that have been banished from their clans for one reason or another. Their clan leader rips the wings off of their backs so that no other clan will take them in. It's the ultimate punishment." Effie's normally jovial voice was grave as she spoke.

My stomach twisted at the imagery that her words conjured up, nausea rising up in my throat at the idea of how much that must have hurt. "That's *awful*."

"It is. He had no one really before he met Dallan, and I've known him for almost fifty years, so we're pretty overprotective. Just... don't bring it up with him unless he brings it up with you, okay?" Effie ran a hand through her mint-green locks, making them stand up in all directions.

"I won't," I promised, making a mental note to do some research on gargoyles once I got the chance. Then my brain seemed to catch up with the rest of the conversation, namely the forty years that Effie had known Cash. "Wait, how old are you, Effie?"

I thought she was the same age as I was. Everything about her exuded the kind of youthfulness people in their twenties seemed to have in buckets.

Effie's frown tilted up into a cheeky grin. "I was wondering how long it was going to take you to ask me that. I'm not as old as the rest of the guys, but I just celebrated my sixty-seventh birthday last month."

"Holy shit," I blurted before immediately clapping a hand over my mouth in embarrassment. "Sorry."

Effie's laughter filled the air as she leaned back in her desk chair. "Don't be. Age is weird for supes, so I'm still relatively young for what I am. Ambrose is only a hundred and fifty, which is basically an infant in elf years. That's why he's such a douche."

A surprised giggle slipped out of my mouth at that. “He doesn’t like humans very much does he?”

Effie shook her head. “Nah, he’s got his hang ups about humans like a lot of monsters do. It’s only been just over fifty years since the Accords, which is just a drop for most of them.”

I’d never thought about it like that before. I’d learned about the Accords in school and it seemed like such a long time since they’d been passed because my mom hadn’t even been born yet. I knew that prior to the Accords being written and ratified by the United Nations, there had been almost seventy years of the Age of Knowing where humans knew about monsters. That didn’t mean that the humans accepted them right away though.

For me, supernatural creatures had always been a part of society, for better or for worse. But for Cash and the rest, they’d lived a large chunk of their lives in the shadows.

It was nearly impossible to wrap my head around.

“Am I breaking your brain too much?” Effie asked, putting a cool hand over mine.

“No, it’s just a lot to take in, I never had to really think about it in New Ham—” I stopped myself before I could finish my sentence, my chest going cold.

I’d been doing so well at keeping any information that could be used to trace me back to Mike to myself. But Effie had a way of making a person feel completely comfortable.

Effie looked like she wanted to say something, but I was already standing. “Do you need me for anything else tonight?”

“No, but are you okay?” Effie questioned with a frown.

“Totally fine.” I plastered a fake smile onto my face. “Just tired.”

Effie stood, her vines snaking out to smooth the green pleats of her dress as she led the way to the door.

I stepped out onto the wooden planks of the dock and turned to find Effie watching me with a strange expression.

“I know we’ve just met, but you can trust me, Daphne,” Effie said, her lips twisting into a frown.

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Trust was not something I’d felt in a long time. It took Wendy ages for me to trust her enough to help me, and we’d been friends long before Mike came into my life.

But Effie didn’t know any of that. To her, I was just Daphne, the shy receptionist with hot pink hair. She didn’t know about Mina, the woman who let her husband knock her around and bully her for far longer than she should have.

“...I’ll keep that in mind, thanks,” I finally answered, my words coming out tinged with disbelief.

Effie’s shoulders sank with a sigh as she took in my suddenly defensive posture. “See you tomorrow?”

I nodded and waved as she shut and locked the shop door.

The Wharf was still bustling with nightlife as people headed to a late dinner or to one of the bars or pubs that were sprinkled in between the souvenir shops.

My entire body felt stiff and tense after a long day of being out of my comfort zone. All I needed to end the day was a nice hot shower and to call Wendy and reassure her that I hadn’t been gobbled up on my first day working at a monster tattoo parlor.

SEVEN

CASH

Linda Ronstadt's *Blue Bayou* wailed from the speakers of Dallan's favorite bar on the Wharf. The Dive was literally just that. A greasy, grimy dive bar that was more for the workers on the Wharf rather than any tourists.

Dallan liked to drag the rest of us here any chance he got to play pool, throw darts or just generally shoot the shit.

Most days I didn't mind it. They served ice cold beer and it was the perfect way to wind down after a long day of tattooing.

But tonight a restless feeling crawled up my back, making me feel antsy.

"You all right?" Dallan asked from across the table. He was nursing a giant stein of beer, the foam clinging to one of his tentacles as he took a massive swig.

I shrugged. "I'm the same as usual."

I was never really all right. Hadn't been for over two centuries. I was, however, pretty content with where my life was at.

Because I was banished from my clan, I should have gone crazy like most Wingless did. The lack of support from a clan mixed with trying to survive in a world where humans burned anything they didn't understand at the stake should have been enough to drive me insane.

After spending the first fifty years of my banishment completely on my own deep in the woods, the world felt brand

new by the time I finally emerged.

I spent an exorbitant amount of time trying to stay off of the human's radar as they grew and created technologies that boggled my mind. Eventually, I was even able to get my hands on a spelled ring that gave me a human appearance.

Only then was I able to truly start to thrive, if you could call it that.

I left Ireland in 1925 and headed to America to chase any semblance of a life. The supes living in the states were less preoccupied with keeping to themselves, so there were entire underground communities in big cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. While humans knew of us, they didn't accept us.

The foggy bay of San Francisco reminded me so much of home that it was easy to settle down there for the next forty years. It was where I first started learning how to tattoo and where I first met Dallan.

Then the Accords happened, and for better or worse, monsters stepped fully into the light of 'normal' society.

"Nah, you're broodier than usual," Dallan continued, oblivious to my internal trip down memory lane.

Heath, who was just returning from a rousing game of darts with Fiero, heard the tail end of Dallan's words. "Is he? He looks about the same to me."

The pup reached out to poke me, as he'd done a thousand times in the four years since he came to work at Monstrous Ink.

As always, I caught his pointer finger in my fist and gave him a withering look.

"See? If he was broodier, he would have broken my finger instead," the kid said with a snicker as he tugged his finger away from me.

"He probably isn't happy because Effie decided to hire a fucking human," Ambrose said from his place at the end of the table.

He'd been a thundercloud all day, stomping around the shop like he wished he could chuck our new receptionist into the ocean and call it a day.

“Cash hates humans as much as I do,” Ambrose continued, his dark eyes squinting into a glare as he tossed back the rest of his glass of tequila.

I wasn't sure where he was getting that from. He didn't know why I'd been banished from my clan—I'd only ever told Effie and Dallan the full story—and it wasn't like we got many human clients at the shop anyway.

In fact, I wasn't sure if Ambrose had ever seen me interact with any humans before at all.

“I don't hate humans,” I told him with a frown.

Ambrose's dark brows lifted in surprise. “Really? Because every time I've seen you look at the human it was like you were sucking on a lemon.”

Had I looked like that? I only saw her a couple of times and made sure to talk to Effie if I needed anything. Effie told me not to scare her and I'd been working my ass off all day to do just that.

Dallan's rumbling chuckle filled the air and he reached out and gave Ambrose a sharp slap on the back. “You'll understand when you're older, laddie.”

“I'm not a kid,” Ambrose grumbled, his cheeks flushing with a sudden blue that stood out from his otherwise monochromatic features.

Fiero snorted. “You may look like an adult on the outside, but your insides are akin to a newborn baby fawn.”

“You're twenty years younger than me, asshole,” Ambrose muttered as he pushed away from the table. “I'm going to get another drink.”

“I'll take another beer if you're going.” Fiero held his empty glass aloft with a grin.

Ambrose briefly looked like he wanted to murder the satyr right where he sat, but eventually he yanked the glass out of

Fiero's hand and stalked toward the bar.

"He's gonna kick your ass one of these days," Dallan said around a loud, barking laugh.

Fiero shrugged. "No he won't, Ambrose is like a pissed off cat. He'll hiss and sputter, but eventually come back for cuddles."

A passing pixie heard Fiero's words and let out a breathy little giggle when her jewel-like eyes settled on the satyr's form.

I wasn't sure what it was about the satyr race, but they were like sexual catnip to nearly every other supernatural creature.

Fiero turned and shot her a half-smirk. "Hey there, pretty thing, I was wondering whose cute laugh that was."

Fiero had her hook, line, and sinker.

The pixie's little gossamer wings fluttered with excitement as she stepped forward and whispered something into his ear. Then she tugged on his hand and Fiero shot us a grin as he let her lead him away.

Dallan shook his head as we watched the two disappear. "The man is a sexual Einstein, I swear."

"We were supposed to play cards later," Heath said, looking put out about losing his roommate's company for the night.

Dallan chuckled, his tentacles curling in. "Sorry, pup, but even I would have ditched you for the chance at some pixie pussy."

I snorted into my beer. Aside from a few flings here and there, Dallan hadn't so much as sniffed another woman in a decade.

"On that note," I said, standing from the table and leaving my drink still half-full. "I'm gonna call it a night."

"But we just got here," Dallan protested, frowning at me.

I shrugged, tossing down a couple of bills onto the table to tip the waitress for the plate of greasy nachos we'd shared upon our arrival. "I have to head to the gym and get back home to take care of the animals. Just like always."

Truthfully, the animals could probably have waited a couple more hours. I knew it, and so did Dallan. But the same restless feeling I'd had since I walked into the shop this morning was nearly unbearable now. I needed a long run on the treadmill or else I was going to go insane.

Gold eyes narrowed as my oldest friend seemed to be trying to read my mind. Fortunately for me, the Cthulhu race had no psychic talents.

"*Fine,*" Dallan finally surrendered. "See you in the morning."

I threw a wave over my shoulder before stepping out into the night.

The ocean chill that was usually chased away by the sun had settled onto the Wharf again. Damp fog clung to my skin as I made my way back to my truck.

My house was a fifteen-minute walk up the beach, so I probably could have walked to work every day, but I didn't want my gym bag taking up any space in my tattoo suite.

The employee lot was still packed full, but it was easy enough to spot my truck. The 1954 vintage Chevy practically sparkled under the light from the overhead lamp posts, its baby blue finish still shining from the wash I'd given it this morning.

Humans definitely did something right when they invented automobiles. I'd bought this truck brand new nearly seventy years ago and had treated it like my baby ever since.

I had a newer truck at home to take care of the heavier duty things around the farm, but the Chevy would always be my favorite.

I smiled as I ran a hand over the smooth finish. I'd briefly considered changing the color when I got it repainted a few months ago, but it had been blue for so long that it felt wrong.

“Blue as the day you were born,” I murmured to it before opening the driver’s side door and grabbing my gym bag.

The gym I always went to was on Main street. The difference between the Wharf and the main street where tourists were was like night and day. The wharf was grittier and more colorful compared to the elegant cream faces of the shops I passed by on my way to the gym.

Mayor Arsenio had been trying to get us to clean up the Wharf for decades, but thankfully the Wharf Preservation society was a cantankerous old bunch of monsters that hated change. Some of them had even helped to build the Wharf in the twenties when it operated primarily as a place for fishermen.

But over the past few years Mayor Arsenio had been trying to buy up some of the shops to start making the changes he wanted through a legal loophole. Most of the shop owners had stayed strong so far, save for a few. Dallon had been the biggest thorn in Arsenio’s side, however, as the shop was in a prime place at the end of the dock.

Those shops Arsenio *had* managed to purchase on the Wharf now looked as clean and elegant as the rest of Main street. They sold mostly higher end items that most tourists avoided in favor of the more colorful merchandise being peddled by everyone else.

“Welcome!” the front desk assistant sang as I entered the gym. “Cash, how are you?”

I stared down at her, trying to remember her name. She’d been working at the gym for the past year, but I usually never paid that much attention to her. She wasn’t wearing a name tag like most of the gym employees did either.

Thankfully, Anders saved me before I had to admit that I didn’t even have an inkling of what her name was.

“Stacy, have you gone in and dry mopped the studio after Zumba like I asked you to?” the cyclops asked as he leaned out of the door of his office.

Stacy's cheeks flushed. "I was just on my way to, but I was greeting a customer first."

She turned blue eyes in my direction and fluttered her lashes.

I shifted from one foot to the other, feeling suddenly uncomfortable under her gaze. Most humans didn't flirt with supernatural creatures. There was mixing, of course, but the majority of the humans that lived in Port Haven were usually already paired off with their monster mates.

"Well, congratulations you've done that. Now go. We've got late-night yoga in twenty minutes." Anders shooed her away from the desk, his single eye narrowing as she scurried off. "Sorry, Cash."

I shrugged. "It's fine, has it been a busy night?"

One glance at the main floor of the gym confirmed it. Nearly every machine was in use.

"It's nearly the start of the holiday season, so everyone's trying to get ahead of all of the holiday food weight gain," Anders said with a grin.

"Think I'm going to be able to use the heavy duties tonight?" I asked, leaning against the counter and glancing down at my taloned feet. I couldn't use regular treadmills thanks to them and putting on running shoes was out of the question.

Anders checked his watch. "I think so, Mary's been on hers for almost an hour. So she should be getting off soon."

Mary was another regular at the gym, she was a harpy that worked at one of the restaurants on the Wharf.

I grunted, acknowledging Anders's words as my thoughts drifted once again to the human with whisky colored eyes. I'd never seen a human with that eye color before, a vivid, shifting hazel.

As if my inner thoughts magically conjured her, Anders leaned around me and grinned. "Was everything okay today?"

“Yes... thank you,” a soft, familiar voice said from behind me.

I whirled, probably too quickly, around to find our new receptionist standing behind me. She flinched back away from me, those whiskey eyes of hers going wide when she realized who had been standing in front of her.

Her pink hair was in a wet plait that hung over one shoulder, the end of it still dripping with water. It was clear that she'd just taken a shower and the mixture of the gym's shampoo and her naturally sweet scent made my head feel foggy.

She had a bag clutched to her chest and her arms tightened around it as she stared up at me. Then my eyes landed on her neck and on the faded pink dragonfly that was tattooed there.

Surprise filled me. Why had she covered it up earlier when she was literally going to work at a tattoo shop? It didn't make any sense.

Her hand flew up to cover it, a pink flush filling her cheeks as she finally looked away from me.

“She's the new receptionist at the shop, right?” Anders asked from behind me.

“Yeah, this is Daphne.” It was the first time I'd ever said her name out loud. My chest buzzed strangely and I rubbed at my collarbone, feeling suddenly irritated.

My words seemed to unfreeze the human in front of me. “I'll see you tomorrow,” she whispered so quietly I almost didn't hear her.

Then she waved at Anders and turned on her heel, hurrying out of the gym.

Frowning, I turned back to Anders. “Did she come to work out?”

The cyclops shook his head. “Nah, just to use the showers.”

My frown deepened. Where was she staying that didn't have showers? I had a sneaking suspicion about the answer

and was half-tempted to follow her out.

“The treadmill is free,” Mary said as she rejoined us, wiping at the back of her neck with a towel.

“Thanks,” I grunted and headed for the locker rooms to change into my gym clothes.

Working out usually distracted me from all of my worries. It was one of the few times I could truly push my body and feel the same endorphins that I used to get when I was still able to fly.

But tonight as I pounded away on the treadmill, all I felt was frustration and confusion about the little human that had stumbled into our lives just a day ago.

Why would she cover up that tattoo? Was she embarrassed by it? It had been done well, as far as I could tell. The lines were delicate, so it was the kind of tattoo that was supposed to be touched up every couple of years, though it looked as if no one had ever done so.

Not only that, if she needed the gym to shower at night... Where was she staying?

Not safe, a little voice in my head whispered. I turned the speed on the treadmill up and ignored it.

It was none of my business.

I repeated that thought over and over as I went through the rest of my workout, doing enough sets and reps of my weight lifting that even my supernaturally strong body felt exhausted by the time I was done.

I was halfway through my final set when a voice cut through my inner mantra. “You’re certainly going hardcore tonight.”

I set the barbell on its hook and sat up to find Santi standing at the end of the bench.

“Santi,” I greeted him in my usual monotone. “Are you not working tonight?”

Santi worked as a bartender at The Dive and usually only came to the gym in the afternoon.

“Nah, not tonight,” he said as he began to unclip the barbell, lifting the weights three at a time with ease. “You using this?”

Aside from his unnaturally aquamarine eyes, Santi looked completely human. I knew better, though. The *Del Mar* were one of the rare breeds of monsters that were two natured, meaning he could shift at will.

Like Heath, Monstrous Ink’s werewolf apprentice, Santi had two forms. One that looked completely human, and the other looked something like the creature from the deep. I’d only ever seen it once when a group of rowdy vampires was harassing one of the waitresses and he’d kicked them out.

“It’s all yours,” I told him as I stood and stretched until I felt every bone in my spine pop.

Santi hummed under his breath, running a hand through his inky black curls. “We’ve been going to the same gym for a decade and you’re still just as friendly as you were on day one.”

“Sorry, I’m made of stone, so not very changeable,” I said with a shrug. “Have a good workout.”

I left Santi behind and headed back to the locker room to collect my bag. Normally after my workouts I’d shower at home, but the sweat rolling down my skin was making me feel uncomfortable.

Or at least, that’s what I was telling myself as I stepped into one of the taller showers and turned the water on full blast.

The shampoo and conditioner were on the walls and I pumped out a healthy amount and began to wash my hair. It was the same scent that clung to Daphne’s hair and skin earlier.

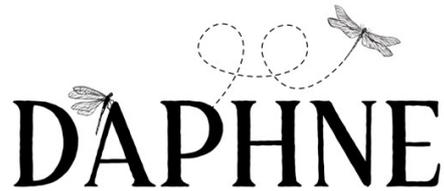
My chest buzzed uncomfortably again, like I had a hive of bees trapped underneath my ribs.

I ignored it, hurrying through my shower.

“Enough,” I said out loud, my voice echoing off of the tiled walls. I didn’t have time to worry about the little human right now. I needed to head back and make sure all of the animals were set for the night and then I had enough emails to respond to that would make a corporate drone sob.

Whatever was going on with Daphne was none of my business. I didn’t need to get involved.

EIGHT



DAPHNE

“And there hasn’t been any news or missing persons reports at all?” I asked as I tucked my phone into the crook of my shoulder. As I listened, I began to shove the towels up inside of Peep’s windows in order to settle in for the night.

The beach was busier than usual with what looked like college students having a bonfire on the beach. I could still hear their roaring laughter as they drank beer and had the time of their lives.

“No, there hasn’t been a peep out of him.” Wendy sounded just as confused as I felt. “Reggie drove by the house yesterday and he’s going to work business as usual despite the goose egg on his head. Good job on that, by the way.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, Wen,” I murmured, my insides twisting with anxiety. Why hadn’t he reported me missing or even filed a police report that I’d assaulted him?

He certainly had enough credibility with the local police department. There had to be some kind of angle he was playing at. The very thought sent a cold shiver down my spine.

“Even still, asshole got what was coming to him,” Wendy growled viciously into the phone.

That brought a smile to my face. “I think your husband is rubbing off on you.”

“That’s not the only thing I’ve been rubbing,” I heard a deep voice rumble faintly in the background of the call followed by Wendy shushing him.

“Do you have me on speaker phone?”

There was a pause, then: “Hi, Mina, how’s the new job treating you?”

“Hi, Reggie,” I sighed. “It was okay. Not a bad first day.”

I didn’t mention the hot and cold reception I’d received from some of the tattoo artists. I didn’t think any of them used the gym, so I’d been surprised to find Cash standing at the front desk when I was done with my shower.

He’d seen my tattoo and had frowned at it. I just hoped he didn’t mention seeing me at the gym to anyone else at the shop. I wanted to keep some semblance of my dignity—even if I was currently sleeping in a broken down car.

“I didn’t get fired at least,” I murmured absentmindedly, my thoughts still on the gargoyle. “Hey, it’s pretty late for you guys there, why don’t you head off to bed and I’ll call you in the morning?”

“Okay, but you’re all right? I don’t need to get on a plane and come save you?” Wendy sounded serious, like she was already one step away from buying a ticket.

“I’m good, really, now go get rubbed by your hot husband and leave the rest of us singletons alone,” I said, forcing a jovial note into my voice.

“You heard her,” Reggie’s purr came over the line. “Thanks, Mina, I owe you one.”

I heard Wendy’s breathy laugh right before the phone cut off, leaving me sitting in silence.

I’d only ever seen Reggie and Wendy together in person once. Usually it was only Wendy coming to our secret visits, so most of what I heard about her husband was through her.

But it was clear that they were madly in love.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I tilted my head and rested my shin on them. I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt that kind of love for Mike. Even in the beginning.

Space and time away from him had given me clarity about the relationship that I had let dominate my life. Mike had bombarded me with so many gifts and so much affection at the beginning of our marriage that I had no choice but to cling to him for fear of being alone.

He filled the void that my vivacious mother had created when she died. I was so entrenched in my own grief that I didn't realize that he'd systematically tightened the net around me until it was too late and I was trapped.

I shook off my suddenly morose thoughts with a shudder. "Enough of that, Daphne. You're out of that and safe."

Pulling my blanket tighter around my shoulders I curled up in the backseat, finally letting myself doze off. I was exhausted after such a long first day and just wanted to sleep so that I could do it all over again tomorrow.

Unfortunately, the drunk party-goers outside had other ideas.

"Dude, is someone sleeping in there?" I heard someone's muffled voice say outside.

"I saw some chick get in earlier," someone else slurred.

Someone knocked on Peep's window. "Hey, girlie, wanna drink a beer with us?"

I didn't answer, my entire body frozen with fear.

A few more knocks filled the cab of the car, all on different windows.

"Think she's even still in there?"

"I mean why else would there be towels rolled up in the window?"

Reaching down for my backpack, I grabbed the little can of mace that I'd purchased at a truck stop in Utah. I didn't want to mace them, but I'd be damned if they thought they could touch me.

Suddenly the car began to rock and it took me a second to realize that it was the drunk idiots who were doing it.

I was about to open my mouth and tell them to stop when the car stilled.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I heard a familiar voice growl outside.

“N-nothing, we’re just teasing a friend,” one of them lied.

Another growl. “I can smell your lies, boy, now I suggest you take your idiot friends, put out that fire, and go home before I really get irritated.”

The sound of flip flops on the concrete filled the air, and then there was silence.

“Daphne,” Cash’s voice came from outside of the car. “You can come out, it’s safe.”

I wanted to pretend like I didn’t hear him, that there really was no one in the car. So I stayed silent.

“Daphne, I know you’re in there.”

Heaving a frustrated sigh, I reached up into the front seat and opened the driver’s side door.

Silver eyes glowed in the darkness, just like I thought they would. He was dressed differently than he had been earlier and his gray sweatpants and black hoodie made him look almost human. If it wasn’t for his towering height, gray skin, tail, and horns, I was pretty sure that Cash would look like a muscly wet dream.

The thought was so far out of left-field that my face burned with embarrassment as I continued to stare up at him.

“How did you know I was in here?” I asked hesitantly.

“Why are you sleeping in a car?” he volleyed back, crossing his arms over his chest as his tail lashed behind him.

“I asked my question first.” I wasn’t sure where the courage or the attitude had come from.

The corner of Cash’s lip curled up, but the change of expression was gone so fast that I wasn’t sure I’d actually even seen it.

“I was walking my dogs and I could smell you,” Cash said, seeming to give in.

Two massive, furry gray heads pushed past Cash’s legs and into the car. They were some of the biggest dogs I’d ever seen and I reeled back in surprise when one of them licked my arm.

“Oscar, Saoirse, down,” Cash ordered. The two dogs reluctantly backed out of the car with a pitiful whine.

“Are you sure those are dogs and not horses?” I asked suspiciously, wiping my arm on my blanket.

Yet again, Cash’s lips twitched. “I answered your question, little dragonfly, now it’s your turn to answer mine.”

My hand flew up to touch my tattoo again. I hadn’t been sure he’d seen it earlier, but I was sure now.

“What was your question again?” I asked, playing dumb.

This time Cash’s expression shifted into a clear frown. “Why are you sleeping in your car?”

I sat trying to come with an excuse, any excuse, about why I was cramming myself into the backseat of a VW Bug.

“Because I live in it.” I finally surrendered with a sigh, deciding honesty was probably the best policy. Especially if he could smell a person’s lies.

Silence filled the air and my eyes studiously avoided the dark shape standing outside of the car. It was embarrassing enough to admit it to anyone, but for some reason I *really* didn’t want to tell Cash.

The silence lasted for another breath before Cash muttered a curse under his breath. “Come on,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

My eyes snapped to his face, finding resignation etched into his stony features.

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

Cash gripped the leashes of the dogs and tugged them back away from the car. “You can stay with me tonight until we figure out a better option for you.”

I shook my head emphatically. “You don’t need to do that for me.”

“I know I don’t need to, but I’m going to anyway,” Cash said, his voice gruff.

Opening my mouth to protest, Cash cut me off before I could say anything. “Don’t argue with me, little dragonfly, I am not going to leave you out here on your own tonight. So, either you get your happy ass out of the car or you’ve got yourself a pissed off gargoyle sentry and these two rowdy beasties for protection.”

I weighed both options carefully. I didn’t *know* Cash. It could be a monumentally stupid decision to go to his house. Isn’t that how women usually were murdered?

But then a hoot of laughter echoed down the beach, reminding me of the idiots who thought it was fun to shake a car they didn’t own. Everything about them had scared me.

Nothing about Cash scared me, even if it realistically should have. He didn’t seem thrilled to have me working at Monstrous Ink, but unlike Ambrose he didn’t voice it out loud.

“Daphne.” Cash’s voice cut through the rousing internal debate that was rattling around in my head.

I leaned back against the seat and scrubbed a tired hand over my eyes. “Fine, I’ll come.”

Even if I get murdered, maybe I’ll at least get eight hours of sleep beforehand, I thought sardonically to myself as I hurried to shove as many of my things into my bag as possible.

“You can drive the car to my place tomorrow,” Cash said as I stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut behind myself.

“Uhh... no I can’t. Peep’s kinda broken down right now,” I told him sheepishly, watching the liquid silver of his eyes shift with irritation.

“Anything else I should know?” He asked as the dogs began to dance around his legs, clearly excited to get back to their walk.

Just that I have a crazy ex-husband who I ran across the country from that may or may not be looking for me, oh and that my name isn't actually Daphne, I said inwardly, my mental tone sarcastic.

But I couldn't tell him any of that. The less Cash or any of the people at Monstrous Ink knew, the better. "That I'm allergic to mangoes, so if you're trying to murder me that's probably the way to go?"

Cash's eyes widened and a low, surprised chuckle rumbled out of his chest.

"So you *do* laugh," I gasped, watching as his expression immediately shuttered back to the same grumpy one he'd been wearing all day.

"Come on," he muttered as he turned and began to walk back down the beach.

Cash's legs were much longer than my own, so I had to jog to keep up with him. The two massive dogs didn't seem to have any trouble keeping up with their master, in fact they seemed to relish the quick pace as they got their energy out.

After a few minutes I was regretting the fact that I hadn't worked out since college. My calves were cramping and a sheen of sweat seemed to cover every inch of my body.

"How far is it?" I finally managed to ask Cash around a ragged gasp.

Cash, who had previously been facing forward without looking back at me, came to a sudden stop, causing me to run face first into his broad back.

"Ouch, you need brake lights or something, Mr. Gargoyle," I grumbled under my breath as I took a shaky step back, rubbing my sore nose.

"My apologies, I forgot to change my pace to accommodate you. I'm not used to being around humans," Cash said, ignoring my snarky comment. "We're nearly there, though there will be some stairs."

“Then just leave me at the bottom to die,” I groaned as we began to walk again, but this time Cash seemed to match his pace with mine.

Another quiet chuckle came from the gargoyle and for some reason the noise made me feel giddy. Though that was most likely from the sudden workout I was putting my body through.

“You will be fine, it’s not bad,” he rumbled.

“Says the gargoyle with long legs and calves of steel,” I said around a gasp as we finally made it to the bottom of a steep set of wooden steps that were built into the side of a sand dune. There had to be at least fifty steps to the top.

Cash released the two dogs from his grip and together we watched them bound up the steps like it was nothing.

“They can do it,” he pointed out as the pair disappeared out of sight.

“I think you’ll find that I’m built very different from a giant dog,” I quipped back.

Cash looked at me sideways, his features smoothing out into something more contemplative. “You’re very different from the quiet mouse of a receptionist that we all met earlier.”

I lifted one shoulder in a tired shrug. “Exercise makes me cranky.”

During my college years I worked out mostly thanks to Wendy and the rest of our friends dragging me to the gym or to hike with the promise of sitting in a hot tub afterward.

When it came to exercise I was like a very finicky houseplant. I thrived under the best circumstances, which usually meant an air-conditioned gym with all of the amenities, or doing a very short hike with a low incline.

Chasing after a seven-foot gargoyle on a sandy, cold beach was a far cry from that.

Cash put one taloned foot on the bottom step. “I could carry you, if you’d like?”

My legs ached so much that I nearly agreed in spite of myself. But then I remembered the fact that I had only met the gargoyle in front of me yesterday and letting him carry me around was definitely more of a third meeting kind of deal.

With a shake of my head I hurried up the steps in front of him without answering his question.

NINE

CASH

“This place is amazing,” Daphne gasped as I led her through the dark front yard.

Most of the animals were in the barn for the night, but Oscar and Saoirse’s entrance had stirred up the goats that usually preferred to sleep outside.

Randy, the biggest goat of the bunch, was angrily stomping his hooves on the wooden ramp that led to the barn as Oscar nosed at the fence.

“Oscar,” I called, distracting the dog from the pissed off goats. The behemoth gladly trotted back to my side, his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth as he happily followed us up the steps to the house.

“I’ve owned this place for nearly twenty years now,” I explained, unlocking the front door and letting her step inside ahead of me.

“It’s gorgeous,” Daphne murmured as she glanced up at the cathedral height ceilings in the foyer. During the day, the large stained-glass window above the door would reflect a rainbow of color on the stairs and seep into the two doorways that were situated on either side of the bannister.

When I bought the place in the nineties it was falling apart. I’d restored every inch of it with my own two hands, creating a sanctuary of sorts for myself.

Hearing the awe in Daphne’s voice as she glanced around the dark space made something in my chest hum with pleasure.

“Kitchen, dining, and sunroom to the left,” I said gruffly, ignoring the sensation. “Livingroom, den, and my library-slash-office to the right. There’s a powder room under the stairs that almost never gets used. Three bedrooms and two baths upstairs.”

Oscar and Saoirse were already settling into their giant beds by the time I finished my quick verbal tour. Both of the hounds were watching us with drowsy eyes and it was clear that they were waiting for us to leave so that they could sleep.

Daphne glanced around, her eyes taking in the space dazedly. The early attitude that she’d been displaying earlier as we walked from her car had disappeared entirely and she seemed unsure of herself again.

Gently I reached out and grabbed the bag she was clutching in a white-knuckled fist. She blinked at me like she’d forgotten I was next to her before she reluctantly let me take the bag.

“Come, little dragonfly, I’ll show you the guest room,” I told her gently. The nickname slipped as easily off my tongue as it had when I’d used it earlier.

I hadn’t expected to find her sleeping in her car when I took the dogs on their nightly walk.

After the gym I’d forced all thoughts of the little human out of my mind as I fed and watered all of the animals and put them away for the night. But when I came upon the old VW Bug being shaken by a bunch of idiots and her scent on the wind, I’d seen red.

The college kids were lucky I didn’t want to scare Daphne. Had it been anywhere else I would have grabbed them by the scruffs of their necks and chucked them into the ocean.

But my ears had heard her terrified gasps and my mind screamed that she was in need of my protection. So I broke my own personal rule to not get involved in other people’s business and stepped in.

The sound of Daphne’s soft footsteps trailed up the stairs after me as I led her to the bigger of the two guest rooms. Both

were bare bones, only ever used by Dallan when he was too drunk to go back to his own house or when he needed to whine about his latest fight with Effie.

This room was the better of the two, though, with a comfortable bed and dresser big enough for Daphne's things.

"There are some towels in the closet and there is a bathroom next door, I know you showered at the gym earlier..." I trailed off, kicking myself inwardly. She probably didn't want to talk about the fact that she'd been using the showers at the gym because she had nowhere to live.

With a cough to cover my growl of displeasure at the idea, I stepped back through the doorway. "Get some sleep."

I was just about to close the door when Daphne's soft voice called my name.

"Cash?"

Her expression was pinched with worry when I turned to face her again.

"Can we keep all of this just between the two of us? I don't want anyone at the shop to judge me," she said, her lips pulling together with frustration.

I wanted to tell her that no one at the shop would care. We'd all been homeless at one point or another. That was just the plight of monsterkind and why Port Haven was so important to us.

Then I remembered the way Ambrose was talking about her at the bar. It hadn't mattered much to me at the time, but now his words send a sparkle of irritation coursing through my body.

With a sigh I finally nodded. "Yeah, your secret is safe with me."

Needing a distraction, my eyes settled onto the car keys that were clipped to the handle of her bag. Reaching out, I grabbed them and swung them around the tip of one clawed finger. "I'll tow your car here in the morning."

“You don’t need to do that,” Daphne protested, her whiskey-colored eyes widening.

“It’s fine. I’ve been looking for another car to tinker with, so you came at just the right time,” I told her, trying to keep my voice light as I clenched the keys in my fist.

A little flash of the snarky woman I’d seen earlier filled Daphne’s face before disappearing again. “I’ll pay you for all of the needed parts,” she insisted.

I shrugged. “Whatever works best for you. Goodnight, Daphne.”

With that I shut the door firmly, cutting off whatever she was going to say next.

When I came home earlier, I’d been exhausted after a long day of work, but now energy buzzed through my limbs as I descended the steps again.

“Keep an eye on the house,” I told the two pups sleeping in their bed. Oscar huffed in response as I opened the front door and stepped back out into the cool night air.

My chest continued to hum strangely as I got into my work truck. In the nearly three hundred years that I’d been alive I’d never felt anything like it.

Making a mental note to ask Effie what she thought, I put the truck into drive.

I’d pick up the rust bucket that Daphne called a car and take a look under the hood. Hopefully, that would work off some of my nervous energy, but I sincerely doubted it.

“Good morning,” Daphne’s timid voice filled the kitchen, barely louder than the pop and sizzle of the bacon that I was busily cooking in a cast iron skillet.

I glanced over my shoulder, finding her already dressed in another pair of jeans and a black long-sleeved shirt. The plain look contrasted the vibrant hue of her hair.

I wanted to ask her why she chose such a bright color but then dressed the way she did. The image of her in a pair of ripped, dark jeans that hugged her slender curves and one of my baggy black t-shirts slipping off of one shoulder flashed through my mind. I shoved it down with an inward growl.

“Mornin’,” I quipped gruffly, sounding more pissed off than I’d been meaning to. “Your car is a piece of shit. I’m surprised you’ve been driving it anywhere. Where did you say you drove in from?”

“I didn’t say,” Daphne replied, deftly sidestepping my fishing. “And don’t call Peep a piece of shit, I’ll have you know she’s been a great car so far.”

I snorted at that. I’d spent the better part of the night trying to figure out what *did* work on the damn thing, and found that it wasn’t a very long list. “Why did you name it Peep?”

Daphne’s lips pulled up into a soft smile. “She looks like one of those Easter candies, you know the little marshmallow chicks you can buy?”

I frowned at her. “I’m not a fan of sweets.”

Her giggle was so tiny that I wasn’t sure if I was hearing things. “Are you one of those meat and potatoes men who don’t like froufrou things?”

“No, I just don’t like sweets,” I repeated myself as I portioned out some bacon for her and myself, finishing off the plate of eggs and potatoes.

“Eat,” I told her as I slid the plate across the table to her.

Daphne looked down at it, her expression changing to something into an expression that I couldn’t read. “You didn’t have to make breakfast for me.”

“I was doing it anyway,” I said, not looking at her as I shoveled a steaming bite of eggs into my mouth.

After a few seconds Daphne began to dig in as well. A surprisingly comfortable silence blanketed the kitchen as we ate and as I finished my food I realized that it was the first time I’d shared a meal like this in a long time.

As if she was reading my thoughts, Daphne glanced up from her plate. “Thank you for this, it’s been a really long time since someone has cooked for me.”

I shrugged. “It isn’t a big deal.”

“It is. My mom was a terrible cook, but our chef always made my favorites,” Daphne insisted.

“Chef? Are you rich or something?” I asked, surprised.

Daphne’s eyes widened as if she’d told me something she shouldn’t have. “Do you turn into stone when you sleep?”

She was changing the subject. Drawing a line between us. Things about her life outside of the town were clearly off limits.

That was fine with me as I apparently needed to relearn how to mind my own fucking business.

“No. It’s a myth that we turn into stone every time we sleep. It’s only used when we need to recover or for religious reasons,” I explained around a mouthful of bacon.

“Religious reasons?”

“Yeah, gargoyles are a Celtic species. We ascribe to many of the same holidays that the Celts do. Winter solstice being one of them.” I wasn’t sure why I was explaining it in so much depth. I didn’t observe any holidays anymore, let alone the Winter solstice.

Winter was always a nasty reminder of everything I had lost.

Shaking off my suddenly depressing thoughts, I glanced up at the human in front of me. “You can stay here as long as you don’t bother me. I’m not used to having anyone around, let alone a human. I’ll help you fix your car and then you can figure out where to go next.”

Daphne blinked at the abrupt change of direction that our conversation had taken. I had drawn my own line between us with my words.

A pink flush filled her cheeks as she nodded. “Thank you for letting me stay at all. I’ll be so quiet you won’t even realize I’m here.”

I snorted inwardly. Fat chance of that. Every inch of me was acutely aware of where the little human was at any given time, and the humming in my chest had only grown since last night.

“Are you finished?” I asked, nodding at her half-eaten food.

Daphne nodded and I piled her plate on top of mine, dumping both in the sink.

“Come on, I’ll give you a ride to the Wharf.”

“You don’t have to, I can walk,” Daphne hurried to stand, her fingers gripping the crossbody bag she had strapped across her chest.

I held in my sigh and turned to face her fully. “Dragonfly, let’s clear this up right now. If I don’t want to do something, I won’t offer to do it. If I say I’m going to give you a ride, I’m going to give you a fucking ride. Are we clear?”

Daphne nodded and swallowed heavily. For a split second I was afraid that I’d scared her with my words, but the deepening flush of her cheeks told me that was definitely not the case.

The hum in my chest swelled to a fever pitch and I rubbed at it, confused. “Besides, I’m not sure you’ll survive another trip down those stairs. I’ve never seen a human as out of shape as you.”

Daphne’s dazed expression shifted as she glared at me. “Well I’m sorry that I don’t pass your gym bro workout muster.”

“That’s all right, we’ll work on it,” I shot back smugly.

Daphne’s mouth opened but no sound came out before she snapped it shut again and stomped out of the kitchen muttering under her breath about stupid gargoyles and something I couldn’t quite make out.

The grin on my face ached and I rubbed at my jaw, wondering when the last time I'd smiled so much in such a short span of time had been.

TEN



DAPHNE

The cheerful ding of the bell above the door made me look up from the pile of old client files that I'd been spending the morning trying to digitize. The shop had been open for decades and it took Effie threatening to quit for them to finally start using technology.

That meant that there were nearly fifty years of documents that needed to be sorted and digitized so that they could be accessed from any tablet or computer in the shop.

Plastering a smile on my face I greeted the trio of seemingly normal looking women as they came up to my desk. "Hi there, how can I help you?"

The head of the trio took off her massive sunglasses, revealing a pair of inhuman eyes. They were a bright neon green with slitted pupils, almost snake-like as she smiled down at me.

The other two women took off their own sunglasses and I saw that they had the same eyes, but blue and orange respectively.

The air around them shimmered and wavered, like heat on concrete and I had to blink a few times to clear my vision.

"I didn't realize that Dallan hired humans," the first woman said, her words ending on a little hiss as she examined my face.

My mouth opened as I tried to figure out how to respond to her without sounding rude.

Luckily for me, I wouldn't have to say anything at all.

"You're an hour late, Medusa." Effie's voice came from behind me as she emerged through the beaded curtain, a frown already on her face as she faced the three women.

The air seemed to crackle for a moment as the woman and the tree nymph glared at each other.

"Better late than never I always say. When you've been alive as long as I have, time is more of a suggestion than a rule. You'll learn that in a thousand years or so, Euphemia," the woman said, her smile practically lethal.

Effie's cheeks flushed a lime green color and she opened her mouth, probably to retort something equally as nasty, but a hand gripped her shoulder and stopped her words in their tracks.

"Hello, ladies," Dallan said as she stepped into the waiting room. "I heard you from my office. I figured you'd come in late this time as well so I moved your appointments back for you."

I watched with disbelief as the three women, who had been nothing but hostile to me and Effie, melted into a puddle of simpering noises as soon as Dallan stepped into the room.

"Of course you did, darling, we've been your regular customers for nearly a hundred years. I'd trust no one else with my body," Medusa purred as she stepped in close to the Cthulhu. There was enough of an innuendo in her words that made even me blush.

Effie stepped behind my chair as the two other women crowded around Dallan.

"Is Cashiel my artist like I requested? I just love a grumpy man like him," one of the other women asked, fluttering her lashes up at Dallan.

"Cash and Fiero will be working on your pieces today," Dallan assured them as he steered them through the curtain, shooting a look at Effie over his shoulder before he disappeared.

“I hate when the Gorgons come,” Effie grumbled under her breath as she slammed her tablet down onto the desk.

“They’re *the* Gorgons?” I asked, surprised. I’d learned about them in school, but all of the history books said that they were notorious shut-ins who rarely left Greece.

Effie grimaced before sinking down into the chair next to mine, the skirts of her green poodle skirt fluttering around her legs. “Yep. They breeze through every fifteen years for new tattoos and take over the entire shop with their bullshit.”

“I didn’t see any tattoos on them.” I pointed out, pushing my pile of work aside. The three women had looked like typical sorority girls with unblemished golden skin and bright blond hair.

“That’s just the glamour they wear when they leave their mountain. It’s never the same one twice, so don’t expect them to look the same tomorrow when they inevitably come back.”

I thought about the shimmering over their heads as they spoke to me. “I haven’t been around supernaturals much, but why didn’t their eyes also look human?”

Effie shrugged a freckled shoulder. “I have yet to meet a witch or warlock that can create a glamour that is able to disguise eyes. Hence the terrible trio’s snake eyes. They’ll take their glammers off to get tattooed and put it back on before they leave.”

“And do all glammers shimmer a little bit?” I asked, nibbling on my lower lip as I thought of Farrow, the lizard man that owned the coffee shop.

Effie’s expression shifted from annoyed to surprised. “You can see the shimmering?”

“Should I not be able to?” I asked with a frown, feeling uncomfortable with the way that she was suddenly looking at me.

“If you’re fully human you shouldn’t be able to see it at all. The shimmer is the magic of the glamour in the air,” Effie confirmed, her eyes sparkling with sudden interest. “You must have a supernatural parent or grandparent somewhere.”

“My mom was fully human and so were her parents, so there’s no way of that,” I told her with a shake of my head.

“And your dad?” Effie pushed.

I didn’t know how to explain that my father was a sperm donor, so there was no way that he could be anything other than human. After the Accords had been signed, the United States government had made it illegal for supernaturals to donate eggs or sperms for humans to use to produce offspring.

“He was human,” I confirmed.

Effie leaned back in her seat, clearly dissatisfied with my answer. “Well maybe it’s super diluted from hundreds of years ago. Probably fae blood since they’ve been intermingling with humans for millennia.”

I shrugged, wishing I could just get back to work. “I dunno.”

“Don’t let anyone outside of the shop know that you can see the glamour. Monsters get twitchy when humans have special abilities they shouldn’t have. You can tell Cash if you want, though.”

“Why would I tell him?” I asked with a frown.

Effie shot me a dry look, her lips turning up in the corners. “Because I saw you getting out of his truck this morning? I have to hand it to you, Cash usually doesn’t get involved with anyone and you work fast.”

Heat rose in my cheeks at her choice of words. “It’s not like that. He just gave me a ride this morning.”

The nymph just snorted. “Whatever you say, Daphne. As long as you don’t quit being our receptionist I don’t care what you two do.”

She had completely misunderstood everything.

“We aren’t doing anything, Effie, I swear. Now can I get back to work?” I asked hurriedly, wanting to change the subject as soon as possible.

But Effie, like a shark scenting blood in the water, was relentless.

“C’mon he’s got that whole hot, broody thing going on and you’re gorgeous even if you’re a little bit skittish which is like catnip for men like him,” Effie continued, her earlier irritation over the Gorgons gone completely now that she had something new to focus her energy on.

“Effie—” I tried again but was cut off before I could continue.

“All I’m saying is that if you wanted to climb Cash like a tree, I wouldn’t blame you,” Effie said, eyes dancing with mirth.

Suddenly, a very irritated, gravelly voice filled the waiting room. “Effie, if you’ve got time to bother Daphne, you’ve got time to make the ink I need for Stheno.”

I whirled around in my chair to find Cash poking his head through the beaded curtains, clearly having heard at least a little bit of our conversation.

“How much of that did you hear?” the nymph asked, at least having the decency to look chastised by the gargoyle’s stern expression as she hopped up from her seat.

“Somewhere around hot and broody,” Cash answered, his voice deadpan.

Effie huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You shouldn’t eavesdrop on conversations, Cashiel Windheart,” she scolded as she led the way back through the curtain. “Now what color ink does that bratty Gorgon want that I haven’t already enchanted?”

Cash glanced over at me one last time, his silver eyes measuring the blush on my face and what I was sure was a mortified expression. Then he turned and followed Effie into the hallway, the beads of the curtain clicking together loudly.

“The green is apparently the wrong shade.” I heard Cash say, his voice fading as they walked out of my human earshot.

I sat for a moment, pressing the backs of my hands to my face, trying in vain to cool the blazing skin there.

It was embarrassing enough trying to dodge Effie's nosey questions, but for Cash to overhear?

I wished a hole would open in the ground and swallow me up.

Cash was doing me a *huge* favor by letting me stay in his home and I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable about it. I didn't want Effie trying to make it into something it wasn't.

That would invite too many questions that I didn't have the answer to.

Besides, everything Effie said was true, a little voice in my head whispered, breaking through the whirl of embarrassment. *You do think he's hot and broody*, it finished gleefully.

I pushed the voice down firmly.

"You have got way too much shit on your plate to even entertain that thought," I muttered to myself, yanking the pile of files back in front of me and got back to work.

Between running away from Mike, being completely broke, trying to get my car fixed, and working for the first time in a long time... I had no room for anything else.

I just needed to keep my head down until I had Peep up and running again. Then I would leave Port Haven and everyone in it behind forever.

The shop was quiet by the time I flipped the sign on the door from open to closed.

It had taken most of the afternoon to deal with the Gorgons. They'd finally left a half hour before closing, their blonde haired, blue eyed glammers perfectly in place when they breezed back through the waiting room.

They didn't even spare me a glance on their way out.

"Daphne," Effie's voice came from behind me, making me jump. "Sorry didn't mean to scare you."

After going back with Cash, Effie had argued loudly with one of the Gorgons before stomping up the stairs to her apartment and I hadn't seen her since.

I didn't say anything, waiting for her to go on.

"I was just going to say that you did a great job getting all of those files digitized. My tablet was dinging all afternoon as you submitted them," Effie began, holding up her tablet. "And I was wondering if maybe you wanted to grab dinner? Just us girls?"

I wanted to say yes. Even two days in, it was clear that Effie would make a great friend to have and I found myself smiling more than I had in years when she would make jokes or gossip about people who I didn't know.

With a sigh I shook my head. "I have something to do today, maybe another time?"

Effie seemed to deflate a little bit and I felt like I'd just kicked a puppy.

"Yeah, sure, next time." Effie nodded, taking a step back so that I could grab my bag from behind the reception desk.

I shot her what I hoped was an apologetic smile before ducking out of the shop and into the bustling crowd of tourists.

Cash had told me to wait for him after work so that he could give me a ride back up to his farm, but after what happened earlier I was scared to even look at him.

"Mina!" An unfamiliar man's voice filled my ears, causing me to freeze in my tracks.

The couple that had been walking closely behind me had to separate and jump out of the way so they didn't collide into my back.

"Dude, you can't just stop like that," the guy grumbled, glaring at me as he grabbed his girlfriend's hand again.

I was only briefly aware of the guy's red tail lashing behind him as they continued on.

My brain was still stuck on the voice calling my old name.

"Mina, come back here!" the voice called again.

A shudder of fear vibrated down my spine.

Could I run? Not with how packed the Wharf was right now. I glanced left, and then right, trying to find a place to hide only to find nothing.

You should have just stayed in the shop and waited for Cash, my brain whispered unhelpfully as I willed my limbs to do *anything*.

Then, a little girl in a floral pink dress zoomed past me, throwing a cheeky grin over her shoulder. "You can't catch me, Daddy!"

Squeezing my eyes shut I willed my clenched muscles to loosen.

"Gotcha, my little Mina Beana," the original voice crowed.

When I opened my eyes again I found that the little girl had been scooped up into the arms of a horned man. The little girl had little horns too, I realized dazedly as I watched them walk away together.

"Daphne?" Cash rumbled from behind me, making me nearly scream with fright. He looked disheveled, the leather bag he'd brought with him this morning thrown haphazardly over his shoulder. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

He must have run after me when he realized I left without him.

"I didn't want anyone at the shop to gossip," I said with a shrug, avoiding his silver gaze.

The gray skin around the corner of Cash's mouth creased as he frowned at me. "I don't give a shit if they gossip."

"Well I do." My face flushed thinking about Effie's earlier teasing.

We stood together for a silent beat that seemed to go on forever before Cash finally let out an aggravated sigh.

“Fine, but you’re still riding with me in the morning. I’ll drop you off up Main street tomorrow instead.” Cash’s tone left no room for argument and it was my turn to sigh. “Now let’s go,” he said, jerking his head in the direction of the parking lot.

Then Cash led the way through the crowd of people, his bulk forcing them to part like the Red Sea allowing me to follow him with relative ease.

I hadn’t meant to give in, but something about Cash Windheart’s silver eyes made every bit of stubbornness drain out of my body.

ELEVEN



DAPHNE

The steady beeping of various machines filled my mother's hospital room. My normally lively mother looked tiny amongst all of the lines and tubes, her red hair standing out starkly against her pale skin as she slept.

The doctor had just finished checking her vitals, and judging by his stony expression, the time that he and my mother had spent the past year preparing me for had finally come.

She slept a lot now, and when she was awake, she was hardly lucid, usually babbling about things from her past that had happened long before I was born.

A different kind of exhaustion had settled deep in my bones. I spent every day by her side, ignoring the text messages from my college friends and trying to hang onto the last few threads of my mother before she disappeared from Earth entirely.

"Minnie?" My mother's groggy voice cut through my misery and I was up from my seat in a flash.

"Hey, Mama," I whispered, giving her bony hand a squeeze. "Do you want some water?"

I was already grabbing the little pink hospital cup by the time she nodded. Her lips were chapped as they closed around the straw and I made a mental note to buy some things to give her a facial tomorrow.

When she was done she leaned back against the mountain of pillows, fully awake now.

“You should go home and get some rest.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper, but her eyes still sparkled with life despite the illness ravaging her body.

“I did go home already,” I lied, hurrying to change the subject. “The doctor said your vitals are looking good today, how are you feeling?”

The corner of her mouth pulled up into a wry grin. “Like I could dance the night away.”

“That can be arranged,” I said and smiled back despite the misery that was fisted inside of my chest.

“Knock, knock!” A cheerful voice came from the hospital door:

My mother smiled at the visitor and held her hand out to them.

“Michael, how good to see you!”

I turned to look at him, frowning as the division between memories and dreams crumbled away.

Mike looked the same as the day that I left him. There was a gash on his forehead that trickled with blood, and his normally put together suit was disheveled.

“Stay away from us,” my voice shook as I glanced between Mike and my mother. She seemed unperturbed by his appearance, her tired smile unchanging.

I wanted to stand and get in between them, but my legs were stuck to the chair I was sitting in.

As Mike came closer, the expensive cologne he always wore filled my nose and I had to keep myself from gagging.

Bruised hands gripped the arms of my chair on either side as he bent over me until we were face to face.

His eyes were bloodshot and sharp as he glared at me. I expected him to launch into one of his usual tirades, tearing me apart with his words for hours on end until I was exhausted and sobbing.

But the only sound that came out of his mouth when he opened it was a garbled, animalistic scream.

It sounded almost like a... goat?

Then I was ejected from the dream with a gasp and staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling as the scream continued in the distance.

My skin was coated in a sheen of sweat, making the oversized t-shirt I was wearing cling uncomfortably to my back as I sat up in bed. It took another thirty seconds to reorient myself.

I wasn't in New Hampshire anymore and Mike didn't know where I was. For now I was safe.

As I quickly got dressed, I repeated the words in my head over and over to soothe my frazzled nerves.

The goat was still screaming by the time I stepped out onto the front porch. It was early, so the marine layer from the ocean still filled the air, making everything hazy—including the animal pen in the distance.

“How the fuck did you manage to get yourself into this situation, Roger?” Cash's gruff voice cut through the fog.

Without thinking, I let my feet carry me down the steps and towards where his voice came from.

The mist cleared, revealing Cash standing with his hands on his hips as he looked down at a goat who had his head stuck in between the rungs of the fence.

Cash must have heard my approach because he glanced over his shoulder at me and gave me a nod of greeting.

“What happened?” I asked, kneeling so that I was eye to eye with the goat. The poor things' eyes were rolling back in panic as he tried in vain to go back the way he came, but his curled horns were making that impossible.

“Meet Roger, the dumbest goat I've ever met. I picked him and the rest of his little herd in the middle of the night after local animal control seized them. This is the second time this stupid thing has gotten his horns stuck in the last hour. First it

was the water trough and now this,” Cash gestured at Roger who stopped struggling and instead looked up at us balefully like we were the ones who’d put him there.

Cash had casually mentioned that he ran a farm animal rescue during the car ride to the Wharf yesterday, but I was seeing what that actually meant now.

One glance into the pen showed fifteen to twenty emaciated goats, all with overgrown horns and sores covering their bodies.

Reaching out, I gave Roger what I hoped was a soothing scratch under his chin. “What happened to them?”

“Farmer a county over died last year and his kids were supposed to take care of the animals, turns out they were just stopping by once or twice a month to throw hay in their pens. There’s a pair of mares that will be dropped off by the vet later once they get their full checkups that are in much worse shape.” I watched the muscle in Cash’s jaw tense as he glared off into the distance.

“I can’t believe anyone would do this to a living creature,” I murmured, mostly to myself.

Cash scoffed. “When you’ve been alive as long as I have, you realize that all people are capable of evil. Doesn’t matter if they’re monsters, humans, or otherwise.”

There was enough vitriol in his voice that I had to force myself not to flinch at it. I knew better than anyone that his words were the honest truth.

“How are we going to get his head free?” I asked, changing the subject.

Cash stood for a moment, as if deep in thought. “I’ll see if I can manipulate his head back through, but if not, I’ll have to cut into the fence.”

With one last scratch under the now calm goat’s chin, I stood up straight. “Can I help?”

A flash of something crossed the gargoyle’s face before disappearing. “Have you been around farm animals before?”

I nodded. “Yep, I grew up with lots of them.”

I didn’t add that I never actually had to do anything other than muck out my horse’s stall after riding her. All of our animals on the estate were cared for by competent staff members. But I did spend most of my childhood hanging out in the barn watching everything they did.

Once upon a time I had dreamed about becoming a veterinarian. But after one of our younger horses had to be euthanized that dream had died with the beating of my too-tender heart.

Cash looked like he didn’t quite believe me, but he still turned and headed into the open doors of the nearby barn, emerging after only a few minutes, a saw in one hand and a metal toolbox in the other.

He set both on the ground in front of Roger.

“I’m going to get behind him and lift him, try to get his head pointing downwards so we can try to manipulate those horns of his out,” Cash said, already throwing a leg over the fence as he spoke.

Twenty minutes later, we were both frustrated and Roger’s head was still stuck. I was sweaty again, but Cash looked as fresh as a daisy as he prepared the saw to cut into the fence.

“Don’t you sweat?” I asked, grumbling under my breath as I gripped Roger’s horns and held onto them so he didn’t accidentally meet the sharp end of the saw.

“No, I never have,” Cash replied, and was that a chuckle I heard? No, it couldn’t be. Broody gargoyles didn’t *chuckle* at something so simple.

Cash tossed me a pair of safety glasses and lifted the saw and started to cut through the wood.

The loud growl of the machine was no match for Roger’s panicked goat screams. I held onto his horns firmly, holding his head in place as Cash made it through the wood and turned the saw off.

We switched spots and repeated the process until Roger's head was free and he was scurrying off to rejoin the clump of terrified goats in the middle of the pen.

"This was a new fence too," Cash muttered glumly under his breath as he lifted the section of wood that he'd just cut out of the rest of the fence.

"Should we put them in the barn so you don't have to turn your fence into swiss cheese freeing them later?" I asked, eyeing the goats with distrust.

Cash nodded and put his fingers up to his mouth. His whistle was loud and sharp as it pierced the air and echoed off the trees.

Within seconds Oscar and Saoirse were loping out of the barn, tongues lolling out of their mouth as they trotted up to us.

Cash opened the latch on the gate and opened it up, "All right you two, walk up."

Without missing a beat both dogs hurried into the pen and began to close in on the finicky goats. "To me," the gargoyle called, followed by another sharp whistle.

I stood out of the way and let him and the dogs work. I'd seen Border Collies herd before, but never dogs as big as Cash's.

They worked in tandem to push the little herd of goats to the edge of the pen and out, Cash calling commands here and there until they were entering the barn through the large door.

Trailing behind, I watched Cash open up one of the stalls, allowing the dogs to push the group of goats into the pen until finally, Roger the wayward goat, was last inside.

Afterwards, we watched the goats together, leaning against the door of the stall.

"There's fresh food and water in there, so they should be good until the vet comes this evening," Cash told me, his silver eyes combing over their emaciated bodies.

He then glanced at his watch and let out a groan. “And we’re running late.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? The clock on my bedside table told me it was just past five when I woke up.”

“That clock is an hour behind, I never set it after daylight savings this year,” Cash explained sheepishly. “So it’s nearly seven thirty now...”

“Shit!” The expletive exploded out of my mouth as I whirled on my heel and ran for the house. “I need to shower! I can’t smell like goat ass at work!”

As I clomped back up the front steps I heard another one of Cash’s chuckles as it was carried on the wind to me.

I paused at the top of the steps and glanced over my shoulder at him. His expression was relaxed as he laughed at me, his silver eyes dancing.

“Don’t just stand there and laugh, you need a shower too. You also smell like goat ass and I’m sure your clients won’t appreciate it,” I told him, part-serious, part-teasing.

“Hey, at least we match,” I heard him say before the screen door slapped shut behind me and I was hurrying up the stairs to wash the stink of farm animals off of my body.

I really hoped Effie didn’t mind if I was a few minutes late.

Turns out Effie didn’t care at all that I was late.

She was, however, curious about why Cash and I showed up together again this morning, this time stumbling into the shop out of breath at the same exact time.

I’d been planning to walk to the Wharf last night, but cutting a goat out of a fence had thrown that plan right out of the window. Cash had insisted that I ride with him and by the time I’d showered and gotten dressed I didn’t have it in me to argue with him.

“Okay, now you *have* to tell me what’s going on between you and our broody neighborhood gargoyle,” she whispered to me as we wiped down all of the furniture in the waiting room. Her vines were out in full force, one using the spray bottle to douse everything while the others wiped with paper towels.

The morning had been relatively slow, so once Effie finished up her tasks upstairs she’d come right down to bug me.

“He saw me walking and gave me a ride as a favor,” I insisted, looking anywhere but at the nymph as I sprayed with one hand and wiped with the other. Not as efficient as Effie, but it got the job done.

Effie snorted inelegantly. “Cash? Doing a favor? Please. That gargoyle doesn’t do favors.”

I was saved from answering her when the bell over the door rang.

“Hi, welcome in! Do you have an appointment?” I asked, wiping my hands on my jeans and hurried over to the desk and logged back into my computer.

“Yeah, at eleven.” The voice was so monotone that it made me look up from what I was doing.

I barely contained my gasp. Standing in front of the desk was another gargoyle. He looked somewhat like Cash, but his jaw was blockier and his eyes were more of a slate rather than a silver. But unlike Cash, he had a pair of impressive stone wings tucked against his back.

Effie was at my side in a blink. “Hello, Brendan, I’m surprised your clan agreed to allow you to come here at all.”

There was a note of anger in Effie’s voice and when I glanced over at her I found her green eyes glaring daggers up at the gargoyle.

“There’s only one tattoo artist within a thousand miles that can tattoo stone skin,” was all the gargoyle said, his voice still an even-keel. “So, they made an exception.”

This gargoyle's demeanor made Cash's somber attitude seem absolutely bubbly by comparison.

Effie looked as if she wanted to tell the gargoyle to get the hell out of the shop, but instead she just sighed and slammed one of the intake clipboards onto the counter.

"Fill this out and remember: you treat Cash with respect. We don't give a shit about gargoyle politics here. You treat him bad and I'll blacklist you and your whole damn clan and I'll put a call in to the other stone skin artist on the East Coast and make sure you can't get inked by her either, *capiche?*" Even as tiny as she was, Effie still managed to look threatening as she waited for him to respond to her threat.

"Of course," he harrumphed, like her warning was ridiculous.

Effie didn't seem totally convinced, but she still turned and hurried down the hall to get Cash anyway.

Turning my attention back to the gargoyle in front of me, I tried to paste a friendly smile on my face. "You can go ahead and sit over there, Cash will call you when he's ready. You can give me the clipboard when you're done."

Instead of looking at me or acknowledging me at all, Brendan just turned and headed to sit down.

"Okay... guess you're not fond of humans," I muttered under my breath, knowing he could probably hear me with those stone ears of his. "Note to self: not all gargoyles are created equal."

Brendan's head snapped up, a flicker of irritation on his chiseled features.

I was convinced that he was going to snap at me for daring to disrespect him, but he never got the chance because Cash's footsteps were rumbling down the hall.

In his hurry to get to the front, he forgot to duck underneath the human-sized door frame and ended up whacking his forehead on it, his horns tangling in the metallic hanging beads as he cursed.

I'd gotten a look at the top of the door frame after my first day of watching all of the monsters above six feet nearly clothesline themselves on it and it was sporting several cranium sized dents.

Cash rubbed at his forehead before turning his attention to the other gargoyle. He looked smaller than Brendan, but I was sure that it was just the absence of wings. "Brendan, good to see you."

Brendan stood up, and just like he had with me, he didn't acknowledge Cash at all, not even sparing Cash a glance as he passed by him to duck through the beaded curtains. Cash's shoulders sagged a bit.

Anger sparked deep in my chest, and without thinking, I reached out to grab Cash's hand before he could follow the other gargoyle to the back.

The contact was brief and electric, like static in the winter. I quickly let go, frowning at my fingers for a moment before speaking.

"Why did you let him treat you like that?" I asked, not even bothering to whisper.

Cash shrugged, his face perturbed by the shock he must have also felt. "It's how they all treat me, after over two hundred years of it I'm used to it."

"Yeah, but aren't you doing him a favor by giving him a tattoo? Effie said you're the only artist who can work with stone skin on this side of the country. You'd think he'd be a little nicer," I insisted.

"I'm Wingless. So, to them, I don't exist. It's honestly progress that they acknowledge my skills at all," Cash pointed out.

I scoffed at that. It seemed bad enough that they'd taken his wings, but I knew how awful it was to be ignored by the people who were supposed to be your family.

Mike had spent the better part of our marriage doing that to me and it grated against my skin like sandpaper.

“That gargoyle in there must be doing some crazy mental gymnastics then, who does he think is going to tattoo him? A ghost?” I asked stubbornly.

The corner of Cash’s mouth turned up into a smirk. “No ghosts make terrible tattoo artists.”

I frowned. “Why? Is it because they can’t hold the tattoo gun?”

“No, it’s because they have trouble boo-king appointments,” Cash said, completely stone-faced.

It took me a good fifteen seconds to realize that Cash was making a joke and not a very good one at that. “That was just awful,” I told him with a shake of my head.

Cash’s smirk broke into a wide grin and I was immediately dazzled by it. Then, as soon as it appeared, it was gone and Cash was serious again.

“I can handle Brendan, he’s on the nicer end of the gargoyles that come in to get tattooed by me, so don’t worry.” Cash turned to duck back through the beaded curtain, but stopped and glanced over his shoulder at me.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but was unsure about it.

Finally, he offered me another, less-blinding smile. “Thanks for worrying about me, little dragonfly, if I ever need a knight in shining armor again, I’ll know where to go.”

With that he entered the long hallway that would lead him back to his suite, his tail swishing languidly behind him, showing that my words had pleased him.

I watched him go, still feeling not only conflicted, but also protective. Something had shifted this morning when we were working together to free Roger the goat and there was no putting the nearly seven-foot, gray genie back in the bottle.

Before, Cash was the stone-faced acquaintance who was helping me out, but now? Maybe we were slowly starting to become friends.

I haven't made friends since my college days—at least not on my own. The wives of Mike's friends had been my 'friends.' But I could never tell them my true feelings without worrying about them telling their husbands who would then tell mine. So I spent most of my lunches with them sitting quietly until Mike or his mother picked me up to take me back to the house that had become my prison.

“That guy is a total asshole,” Effie said as she stepped back through the curtains, looking as irritated as she had when Brendan had walked into the shop.

“He didn't even fill out his intake forms,” I told her as I collected the clipboard from the coffee table where he'd dropped it.

Effie shrugged a green freckled shoulder as she flipped the shop sign over to close down for lunch. “Doesn't matter since after this tattoo I'm going to talk to Dallan about banning gargoyles until they can learn some fucking manners.”

She turned to face me again and blew a frustrated breath between her closed lips, sending the wisps of her green bands fluttering. “I need a change of scenery before I hex someone, I'd ask you to get lunch, but...”

I winced at her sudden shift in tone. I'd rejected her twice already and it made me feel guilty to see that she was starting to distance herself from me.

Effie had been nice enough to take a chance on hiring me, a twitchy human with a spotty work history, and I'd repaid her by putting up walls.

How much would it hurt to be a little bit friendly? My inner voice whispered. If you can be friendly with the gargoyle, why not her too?

“Actually...” I began, hoping I wasn't making a huge mistake by doing this, but it was too late now. “I think I will take you up on your lunch offer today.”

TWELVE

CASH

“**Y**ou need to make sure to spray this on the tattoo for the next few weeks so that the ink doesn’t fade,” I told Brendan, showing him how to spray the enchanted aerosol spray that functioned like a clear coat on his new tattoo.

Stone skin, while not truly stone, was still difficult to tattoo. No two supernatural creatures had the same kind of texture or thickness.

Golems, depending on what they were made of, were tricky to tattoo as it required an electric chisel and pigments that were enchanted by Effie. I always had to be careful not to completely puncture their shells, so as not to risk releasing the magic that gave them life.

On the other hand, stone and crystal nymphs were overly sensitive and required a diamond-tipped needle so as not to fracture the surface of their skin.

Gargoyles were somewhere in the middle. I’d learned how to tattoo myself long before even meeting Effie and using her enchanted ink.

What had started as a curiosity from seeing the tattoos on humans had turned into an obsession. I could never get my wings back, but I could make myself stand out in other ways.

I started with a regular human tattoo gun and broke several of them in the process. While my skin wasn’t completely stone, it was still thick enough that it couldn’t be punctured with mundane tools.

Then I watched a sculptor in Ireland use a delicate chisel to create a path for pigment to flow through. He'd explained that the pigment would stain the stone if left alone long enough.

I broke into his studio that night and gave myself my first tattoo on the inside of my wrist. The Celtic symbol *ruis*, a long line with five, shorter, tilted lines slashed through it.

It meant the end of one thing and the beginning of another.

After that, I stole the sculptor's tools and made off into the night, boarding a ship to the United States and starting a new life.

Over the years I perfected the craft, tattoos littering my own skin and my art gracing the skin of other supernaturals all over the world.

I'd even had the witch who created my last glamour sixty years ago translate the tattoos into my 'human' persona. I no longer wore the glamour, but if I put it on today my arms, legs, and back would still be covered with my art.

Dallan was the only other monster at the shop that knew how to tattoo stone skin as I'd taught him how to do it over the years so that we could service more customers together.

Because of that I could have *technically* left Brendan to Dallan to tattoo, but my tentacled friend was less patient with gargoyles than I was.

"Once you've been treating the tattoo for three weeks you can forgo the spray. If you work outside, try to keep it covered as the sun will make the ink fade, especially seeing as it's a colored tatt," I continued my explanation as I wrapped his bicep in saran wrap.

Brendan stayed silent, as he had for our entire two-hour session. He'd sent all of his requirements for the tattoo via email last month so he wouldn't have to talk to me. Apparently the taboo of speaking or acknowledging a Wingless didn't extend to electronic communication.

"If there is any trouble feel free to come back and we'll fix it," I finished, feeling the way I always did when I tattooed other gargoyles: completely invisible.

I wasn't sure why I even let gargoyles come to Monstrous Ink to get tattooed by me at all. Nothing ever changed.

Once upon a time I used to hope that the Accords would bring the gargoyle race into the modern day and they would abandon some of their more archaic rules about Wingless.

But it had been over fifty years since the Accords and I wasn't holding my breath anymore.

With a shake of my head I began cleaning up my station, ignoring the gargoyle still sitting in my chair. I wasn't sure what kind of thought process the gargoyles who came to get tatted by me while still pretending like I didn't exist went through, and I didn't care much anymore.

The money still spent the same. Now that I had a bunch of new mouths to feed I could use it. One of those mouths being one with plump pink lips that rarely tilted up into a genuine smile.

“You and that human a thing?”

At the sound of Brendan's voice, the chisel tip I was busily cleaning slipped out of my fingers and clattered onto the tin tray in my lap.

Whirling around, I faced the gargoyle, trying to keep my expression neutral. “Did you just say something?”

Over the years they would sometimes slip up and make a comment or compliment my work, but never in the over two-hundred years since my wings were ripped from my back had they ever asked me a direct question.

Brendan shrugged. “Yeah? What of it?”

I wasn't sure how old Brendan was, but he had to be on the younger side. None of the older ones, no matter how much curiosity they had rattling between their ears, would have ever broken the taboo.

“I don't think it's any of your business whether she and I are anything, you came here for a tattoo, not for a play-by-play of my life.” I spoke slowly, trying to measure out my words in what was suddenly an A/B conversation.

Brendan let out an inelegant snort. “You wear her scent on your skin like a fucking perfume. You Wingless are so un-gargoyle.”

Irritation sparked somewhere deep in my chest. It was true that I didn’t feel much like a gargoyle anymore. After two centuries living amongst humans and other supernaturals, the secretive nature that most of my species still kept seemed completely counterproductive.

Gargoyles still lived isolated lives, only coming into the modern world to buy supplies, or like Brendan, get some kind of service like my tattoo skills.

“If I’m so un-gargoyle, then I guess you and the rest of your clan won’t be needing any more tattoos.” My voice was tight as I stood and gestured to the door.

Brendan’s solemn face slackened with shock. Apparently he hadn’t realized what the natural outcome of his dumb ass question would be.

I didn’t *have* to tattoo anyone. Dallan would never make me, and if I said so, he wouldn’t accept any gargoyle clients either. They would have to fly to the East coast to get their ink.

At the thought of flying, a stinging ache throbbed across my back and I felt another wash of anger.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Brendan hurried to try and smooth things over, but I was done with his shit for the day.

I waved my hand at the door again. This time I would be the one to ignore him.

Brendan opened his mouth to argue, but I refused to look at him.

With a huff he got up from his chair and stomped from the room, the edge of one of his wings catching me in the face as he passed me by.

I followed him out into the lobby and was relieved to find it empty.

Brendan opened the door and turned to glare at me.

“You shouldn’t fuck around with humans, Wingless, they cause nothing but misfortune. You should remember why your wings were probably taken in the first place,” he hissed.

With that he left, slamming the door behind him.

The sound echoed through the empty lobby and I leaned against the reception counter with a frustrated sigh.

All I had to do was say that nothing was going on between me and Daphne because there *was* nothing going on with me and Daphne. Nothing other than me helping her out a bit.

But then the image of her shooting me a sassy smile this morning before running into the house flashed across my mind.

The buzzing and humming in my chest had shifted over the past couple of days into a very quiet, very slight melody. I had a sneaking suspicion of what it was, but I didn’t want to admit it to myself or anyone else yet.

I made a mental note to ask Ronan about it in a couple of weeks when I made my usual quarterly trip out to Vegas to check on him.

He had been a lot older than I was when his wings were taken, so I hoped he could confirm, or preferably deny, what I was feeling whenever I looked at the pink haired human who’d stumbled into my life.

“He’s not wrong, you know.” A voice came from behind me and I turned to find Ambrose leaning against the wall. I wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing there, but his dark eyes were filled with the same contempt that Brendan’s had been only moments ago. “It’s taken all of three days and she’s leading you around by your nose. Don’t think everyone else here hasn’t noticed you two coming together.”

The dark elf didn’t care about much, his hate for humans being the strongest emotion that I ever saw from him. He still hadn’t warmed to Daphne at all, even though the rest of the artists had, and spent most of his time ignoring her.

“And I’ll tell you what I told him, it’s none of your fucking business,” I growled.

Ambrose just shrugged. “Whatever you say, just don’t come crying to me when shit hits the fan because you got involved with a human. She reeks of trouble.”

The sound of beads clicking together announced the entrance of Fiero, Heath, and Dallan entering the lobby. Apparently the universe had decided that no one was going to stay out of my personal life today.

“I think you haven’t even given her a chance yet, Ambrose,” Fiero said, his tone scolding. “She’s really very nice.”

“She’s a human, all humans are cowards that used to burn us at the stake without a care for our lives,” Ambrose shot back, his eyes taking on a haunted look as he spoke.

“I was a human once, but you seem fine with that,” Heath pointed out. He’d been bitten by a lycanthrope on the night of his high school graduation, making him the most human out of all of us. “Besides, the Accords protect us now.”

Ambrose scoffed, turning to glare at the pup. “The Accords are a pretty piece of paper that makes humans feel superior to us. It basically *allows* us to exist when we’ve been on this Earth longer than they have, and don’t forget that even with that stupid ass paper they still hunt us down for sport. You can’t turn on the news without hearing about hunters kidnapping and murdering our kind, but Freyja forbid one of us kills a human,” he said, dropping the name of one of the Norse deities that the elf race followed.

Heath seemed to shrink where he stood, but Ambrose wasn’t done yet. “And quite frankly the fact that you were once human is my *least* favorite thing about you, right next to how you follow Fiero around like he hangs the moon in the sky when he’s too busy sticking his dick in the nearest warm hole.”

Fiero’s affable expression shattered and he took a step towards the elf, his hooves making a loud clacking noise as he seemed ready to throw down with the taller man.

“Ambrose, that’s enough.” Dallan’s voice boomed through the lobby, cutting the elf off. “You’ve been in a shitty mood since you walked in this morning and I understand it’s getting close to her anniversary, but you don’t need to take it out on everyone else around you.”

Ambrose’s gray-brown skin flushed a darker blue that spread out across his cheeks and nose. “That has nothing to do with this. I’m trying to look out for Cash before he ends up on the wrong end of a hunter’s crossbow for fucking around with a human.”

As Ambrose finished speaking, the bell over the front door of the shop tinkled and Effie and Daphne stepped inside. They were giggling about something, Daphne looking more animated than I’d ever seen her.

Effie glanced around the room, her happy expression fading as she looked at each of us. “Uh-oh, who died?”

Ambrose just let out a frustrated sigh and stomped for the door, his shoulder bumping into Daphne as he left and nearly knocking her over. Luckily, Effie’s vines were already steadying her on her feet.

My first instinct was to follow after him and give him a piece of my mind, but Daphne’s confused expression rooted me to my spot.

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Effie asked, glaring after the elf.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dallan grumbled, the tentacles on his face lashing back and forth as he shook his head. “We’ve got a busy rest of the day, so let’s just get ready for it.”

He shooed a morose Heath and a still pissed-looking Fiero back down the hall, shooting me a look that said we’d be having a conversation later about what had just gone down.

“Daphne,” he said turning to face her, a jovial expression on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You’ve been doing a fine job, just ignore Ambrose.”

Daphne’s pink lips pulled down into a frown. “So I take it whatever he’s mad about has to do with me?”

“No it doesn’t, he just has his own shit to work through, try not to take it personally,” I hurried to say.

Effie gave Daphne a little nudge. “Why don’t you go up to the supply closet and grab Cash what he’ll need for his next appointment, there should be a tub labeled ‘draconian.’”

My next tattoo would be on a half-stone dragon, half-human. We’d be tattooing him in his dragon form, which required special ink and a very hot needle.

Daphne glanced between the three of us, looking as if she wanted to say something, but eventually she just shrugged and headed up the stairs to where we kept all of the supplies for the shop.

Once she was gone, Effie turned her glare to me.

“I don’t know what the fuck that was all about, but I *just* got her to go out to lunch with me. You two need to keep that damn elf in check or I’ll hex him into the next century,” she whispered harshly before stomping up the stairs after Daphne.

“I didn’t even *do* anything,” Dallan muttered. “So why am I always the one getting shouted at?”

I ignored him, my eyes still on the stairs as the melody in my chest hummed in time with my heartbeat. My earlier anger at Ambrose fading with Daphne’s presence in the shop.

It looked as if I’d need to go see Ronan much earlier than I’d originally intended. I wasn’t sure how it was even possible, but I was pretty sure that the shy human upstairs was my heart song.

The one I’d been waiting nearly three hundred years for.

The one that, prior to Daphne’s appearance less than a week ago, I was convinced didn’t exist.

“So explain to me, in detail, what is going on with the wee human that we’ve hired at the shop,” Dallan said, his tentacles parting so he could take a sip of his beer.

It was much later in the day now and we were sitting at the bar of the Dive together. It was the middle of the week, so the place was pretty empty of its usual regulars. Instead, most of the people littering the place were local supes that spent most of their waking hours in the bar anyway.

Ambrose had come back an hour after his tantrum and had proceeded to finish his appointments and leave for the day. He didn't speak to anyone save Dallan, and had avoided the lobby and Daphne entirely.

Fiero and Heath had left separately, something that rarely ever happened. Apparently Ambrose, in his decision to butt in where he didn't belong, had also caused issues between the usually tight pair.

Effie had driven Daphne back to my house without a word of confirmation from me. I assumed that Daphne finally confided in the specifics of our situation, a fact that filled me with a mingled sense of relief and disappointment. Somewhere deep down I liked that it was our very poorly kept secret.

I shrugged. "What is there to say? I'm sure you've noticed that she's staying with me at this point."

And if he hadn't Effie had definitely told him because he seemed unsurprised by my words.

"I'd gathered that much. I have to say I'm surprised, you don't typically get involved with anything outside of the shop and the animals. Why help her?" Dallan didn't seem upset, just curious.

I didn't have the words to articulate to him why Daphne was different. I knew the Cthulhu had their own version of a heart song, but I'd never asked about it before.

"She was living out of her broken down car, I couldn't just let her continue to live like that when I've got an extra room," I said, pretending to read the label on my beer bottle so I didn't have to look him in the eye.

"And had it been anyone else would you be doing the same?" Dallan pushed, waving a hand under my nose to get my full attention.

I heaved a heavy sigh before honestly answering his question. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve known you for decades and I never thought I’d see the day where you get all twitterpated over a woman, especially a human one,” Dallan chuckled, his gold eyes dancing with amusement.

“I’m not ‘twitterpated,’” I argued, but my words were weak even to my own ears. “She needed help.”

Dallan just snorted. “I wager she’s going to need more than help by the end of all of this. Effie’s convinced she’s on the run from someone.”

I didn’t say anything because I’d been suspecting the same.

No one flinched the way she did while never experiencing the wrong end of someone’s rage. Just the idea of it sat heavy in my gut.

“So what happens if, once her car is up and running, she wants to continue to run? Are you going to let her?” Dallan asked, taking another swig of his beer.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I was still busily trying to convince myself that the music that throbbed in my chest whenever she was nearby was just my brain playing tricks on me out of desperation or loneliness.

Dallan’s expression turned dry. “My mum used to tell me about finding her *Anam Cara*—her soulmate. She was an old witch who existed for two hundred years before my Da came shoreside and they met by chance. They lived happily together for half a millennium and if you asked her, she would say that she only started living when she met him.”

“And what’s your point?” I asked, though I already had a sneaking suspicion of what Dallan was about to say.

“My point, my dear friend, is that ever since Daphne came to work at the shop it’s as if someone turned a light on behind those eyes of yours. You used to just go through the motion of things and you certainly never argued with any of your kind like you did with that gargoyle earlier,” Dallan said,

confirming that he'd heard the entirety of my conversation with Brendan.

"I could say the same about you," I shot back. "It's been thirty years since you and Effie have been dancing around each other and nothing's changed except the way you collect ink."

The spots on Dallan's face shifted into a dusky colored flush. "That's a bit different..."

I just shook my head in disbelief. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. "Whatever you say, Dall, but don't preach what you won't practice."

Together we lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, neither one of us talking as we morosely sipped our drinks.

"I think you're both full of shit," a familiar female voice said, cutting through the awkward tension.

Behind the bar stood Kit Carson, one of the few humans who worked on the Wharf. She was a professional free diver that spent most of her time under the surface of the ocean, but when she wasn't doing that she worked nights at the Dive.

For most regulars, she was the human they saw the most, but despite her race, she wasn't afraid to speak her mind.

With a toss of her shoulder length blond hair, she rolled her green eyes at the both of us. "You two are here having a heart to heart about your feelings, right?"

I exchanged a glance with Dallan before we both nodded.

Kit wiped down the bartop in front of us, working the rag over a particularly sticky part before continuing. "Have you ever considered, instead of talking to each other to, I don't know, talk to the actual people involved? I don't know who Daphne is, but I sure as hell know Effie isn't going to wait around for you forever my tentacled friend."

Dallan's shoulder sank a bit at her blunt words as she turned her attention to me.

"And you, if you spend the rest of your life brooding about things you can't change, you're never going to move forward.

I've only been here for a year and even I can tell you look different. I'm always on team give-the-human-a-chance."

"You really love to give unsolicited advice about other people's lives, don't you?" Dallan asked, his tone dry.

Kit shrugged, her green eyes sparkling as she collected our empty beer bottles. "Next to diving, it's my absolute favorite thing to do, but if you don't want people to butt into your conversation... Perhaps you shouldn't have them in a very public place while the bartender is changing the taps right in front of you. Now, don't forget to tip your server and have a lovely night, boys."

Kit then left us alone to help a pair of vampires at the end of the bar.

We paid our tabs and stepped out into the crisp ocean air, the sound of waves lapping on the underside of the Wharf and the whip of the wing signaling an approaching storm.

"You think Effie's back in her apartment yet?" Dallan asked, glancing in the direction of the shop.

"Probably, you going to talk to her?"

Dallan shook his head. "Nah, we've got ink inventory tonight."

Ink inventory was code for 'we're going to have sex and not talk about anything other than work.'

"You're a hopeless coward," I told him, giving him a playful nudge with my shoulder.

"This is true," Dallan accepted, his earlier dour mood completely forgotten. "But, then, I suppose it takes one to know one."

With a salute, Dallan turned and disappeared into the evening fog in the direction of the shop.

My cell dinged in my pocket and one glance at the message made me curse under my breath.

After everything that had happened today, I'd forgotten that the vet was dropping off horses tonight and was now

pulling up to the farm without me there.

THIRTEEN



DAPHNE

“Can you sign here,” the woman, who’d just jumped out of a pickup truck towing a horse trailer, asked as she handed me a tablet.

Inside the trailer I could already hear the frantic whinnying of horses as the sound of a hoof connecting with the metal sides echoed throughout the yard.

I’d only been at the house for an hour after Effie dropped me off, then I spent most of that hour checking on the pitiful-looking goats in the barn. I wasn’t sure when Cash would be back, but I hoped it was soon because I didn’t know if I was allowed to sign whatever the woman was asking me to sign.

“I’m not the owner of the house...” I began, taking a step away from the woman.

“I know that much, but obviously you’re a guest here and Cash must have told you I’d be dropping these mares off tonight,” the woman insisted, her eyes flashing an inhuman yellow as she started to lose her patience with me. She held the tablet out to me again. “Come on, I’m in a hurry. I’ve got to get back to the clinic before my next appointment.”

“I get that, really, but I don’t even know how to get them out of the trailer, nor do I know where Cash wants them,” I said and pushed the tablet back towards her.

The woman’s frown deepened and for a second I thought she was going to curb stomp me into the ground for slowing her obviously busy day down even more.

I opened my mouth to begrudgingly agree, my mind racing to picture the inside of the barn and where the hell I could put two terrified mares. But then a rumbling filled the yard, signaling the approach of a vehicle.

Cash's blue truck roared up the long drive, going much faster than it probably should have been. He whipped it to a sudden stop, sending gravel flying everywhere as he hopped out of the cab.

"Lanie, I thought you were supposed to be here a little later," he growled, approaching us.

The woman—Lanie—just shrugged. "That was before my day from hell, I swear everyone in town's farm animals have picked today to have issues. I've got another fifteen minutes to get back to the clinic to take a look at a sheep dog that's been struggling to give birth since this morning."

She held the tablet out to Cash who took it and signed with the pad of his finger, his claw clicking on the screen as he submitted the signature.

"Daphne, why don't you head inside while I get these mares into the barn," Cash said, turning to look at me for the first time since he'd driven up.

"I can help, if you want," I offered.

Cash shook his head. "Nah, that's okay. These mares are a bit more to handle than the goats were this morning."

Lanie, seemingly all business, was already opening the back of the trailers to reveal the pair of wild-eyed mares who were raring to get out of their tin can prison.

Not wanting to be in the way, I hurried up the front porch steps and watched as Cash worked to calm the mares. He took one by the lead and spoke quietly next to her ear, running a soothing hand down her scar marked back.

I always thought that animals strayed away from the supernatural, especially ones like Cash who looked more beast-like than human. But just like with the goats, he had the mare calmed in a matter of minutes and was able to lead her into the barn.

Lanie continued to struggle with the other, brown and white spotted one until Cash returned and repeated the process again.

“Thanks for taking them, Cash, I’ll be out in a couple of days to get shoes on them and check out some of those sores,” Lanie said as they shook hands.

I waited for the trailers to turn the bend before I trotted back down the steps. Oscar and Saoirse, who’d been lazing on the porch swings, flanked me on either side, rubbing their coarse fur against my palms.

Cash was leaning against the door frame of the barn, typing something on his phone when I approached.

“Sorry for not signing for them,” I told him, my eyes quickly adjusting to the dim light of the barn.

The stall we’d put the goats in earlier was quiet, all of the terrified goats having relaxed over the course of the day.

Towards the back of the barn I could hear soft snorting and grunting as the mares acclimated to their new space.

Cash finished his text before finally looking up at me. His eyes seemed deeper tonight, like I could swim in their quicksilver depths if I only had the courage to. “I don’t blame you, these two are going to be a lot to handle—even for me.”

“I’ve never seen traumatized horses before,” I admitted, my gaze moving from his back to the stall where the mares were being housed. “It’s a little bit scary.”

“Trauma can be detrimental, but now that they are out of that situation in a safe place we can start helping them to heal,” Cash said and I wasn’t sure if he was talking about the horses or me. Sometimes it was like Cash could see right through me down to the damaged marrow of my soul. As if he could see my entire past.

Then he gently reached for me, sliding the tips of his finger under my palm before wrapping them around my hand completely.

Over the past couple of days Cash had been very careful not to touch me, even going as far as giving me a wide berth when we were both in his tiny kitchen. But now his cool gray skin slid against mine as he led me to the back of the barn.

Despite his cooler temperature, I realized that his skin only *looked* like stone. In reality it was soft and smooth.

The contact made my heart race and then immediately slow down in the strangest way. One of Cash's fingers rested on the inside of my wrist, could he feel it?

Turning my attention to the mares, I watched as they stared at us with big sad eyes that seemed to mirror the look that I sometimes saw in my own eyes. They were too skinny, the edges of their ribs visible underneath their spotty coats.

"What did the farmer do to them?" I asked, wishing I could go into the stall and wrap my arms around their necks and whisper that they would be okay. The starvation from the farmer's children was one thing, but the scars covering their bodies came from years of abuse.

Cash sighed, leaning against the stall door and resting his elbows on the top of it. "As far as I can tell, he overworked them and when they didn't respond to his commands he used a whip."

My lip curled with disgust, thinking about all of the times when I didn't manage to clean the house to Mike's white-glove standards. My body shuddered at the memory of the slaps and venomous words.

Cash, seeing my expression, used his shoulder to give mine a gentle nudge. Something had definitely changed after his gargoyle client this afternoon and now he definitely wasn't wary of physical contact.

"You want to help me with them?" he asked, his normally neutral expression shifting into something more hopeful.

I glanced between him and the mares, unsure of what he was asking of me. "How would I be able to help them?"

I didn't know much about trauma and horses. What if I did something to make one of them worse?

“I can teach you, it’s not super hard. It just takes consistency and a level of understanding—sometimes hurt people can help hurt animals, kindred spirits and all that,” Cash said softly.

His words made me stiffen and I whirled to face him, a question already on my lips, but he stopped me.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to, dragonfly, but I think you and these mares could maybe help each other.” Cash gave me one last nudge before turning and heading for the door, calling over his shoulder: “Supper will take about twenty minutes or so to whip up.”

With that he left me alone in the barn.

I nibbled on my lower lip, forcing the sickening desire to pack up and catch the first bus out of town back down. I knew Cash could see right through me, but his words still made me panic.

“You’re safe, you’re safe, you’re safe,” I whispered to the empty air of the barn. “Mike can’t find you here.”

I stood for what felt like forever, my vision blurring as I worked to calm myself until a soft whinny brought my attention back to the two horses in the stall.

The first one, a butter colored horse with big brown eyes, was standing face to face with me. It was like she could hear the raging storm of my thoughts and was trying to comfort me despite the fact that she was in much worse shape than I was.

“I guess Cash was right,” I whispered to her, wishing I could reach out and stroke her nose without worrying about reaction. “We really must be kindred spirits.”

I knew staying in one spot for very long, especially in such a small town, was a bad idea. But the desire to learn more about the gargoyle who spent his days tattooing supernatural creatures and his nights caring for abused animals won out in the end.

I wouldn’t run. At least not yet.

“You’re letting your emotions get the better of you, dragonfly,” Cash called from outside the paddock. It had been two weeks since the mares were dropped off at the sanctuary and we’d quickly settled into a new routine.

Cash usually woke up at the crack of dawn to take care of the various creatures on the farm and I forced myself to do the same.

Cash’s property was much larger than I thought it was.

There was a second barn behind a copse of trees where the animals who had graduated from the first barn lived. These were the animals who had been with Cash for a long time and were... an interesting bunch.

From Lenny the three-legged cow to Como the blind emu, all of the animals that lived on Windheart Farm were unique in some way or another.

Working alongside Cash gave me a new appreciation for the men who worked in my mother’s stable. My shoulders were constantly sore as I worked out new muscles and after long days I usually collapsed into my bed, falling asleep instantly.

After our morning with the animals, we drove to the Wharf. I no longer cared what the other artists at the shop thought of Cash and I coming to work together, and for the most part no one commented on it anymore.

Well, no one except Effie. Effie seemed pleased as fuck with it.

As the days passed in a blur, I found myself getting even closer to the tree nymph. It was the first friendship I’d made since marrying Mike, and though I was resistant to her energetic advances at first, I was glad that I let her in.

Effie also didn’t push for more information about my sudden arrival in Port Haven. Just like Cash, I knew she

probably saw right through me, but I appreciated that she wasn't the type to force me to talk about my past.

"I am not, I'm completely calm," I called to Cash, keeping my eyes on the clearly upset mare that was trotting back and forth on the other side of the pen.

He'd let me name the horses the day after they came. I called the brown and white spotted mare Cocoa, and her butter colored sister, Marshmallow. At first, I'd been worried that the names sounded silly, but Cash just chuckled and told me he liked them.

"Cocoa can see the stiffness in your shoulders and it's upsetting her," he responded. "Try to relax and approach her."

We noticed early on that, when they were in their stall, they were calm and let us touch and stroke them. But as soon as we brought them into the paddock it was like they couldn't even recognize us.

Cash figured it was because they associated being outside with working on the farm, and being whipped for not working fast enough.

I took a deep breath and worked on letting all of the tension in my shoulders melt away before finally taking another step forward.

"Hey girl," I cooed softly, holding my hand out as I approached. "It's just me. You know me."

Cocoa eyed me warily, her nostrils flaring wide. I made it about ten feet before she shifted from skittish to enraged. The mare pawed at the ground once before charging in my direction.

She only made it a few feet before I was yanked up and over the fence by Cash. He held me against his chest so tightly that I could feel the slow thud of his heartbeat.

I could never get used to touching Cash. Over the past few days the contact had turned almost electric, like we both had too much static in our bodies and when we touched there was an almost audible snap.

“Thanks,” I told him breathlessly, gently pushing against his chest until he let me go. “I really thought she’d let me touch her this time.”

“You should let me handle her,” Cash grumbled, glaring at the mare who was galloping around the paddock in circles. “She’s much worse than Marshmallow.”

Of the two horses, Marshmallow had taken to the sanctuary the best. She was even getting comfortable with a saddle again.

Cocoa was not even close to being ready for that.

“I know she is, but I really think if we give it a couple of months she’ll open up,” I said as we watched her tire herself out.

Cash just snorted. “There’s going to be a day where I don’t pull you out quick enough and you’re going to get hurt. At least I’m much harder to hurt and I can calm her much quicker.”

“We can’t all have a calming Irish brogue to calm wayward animals with,” I teased, trying to mimic his accent.

If I hadn’t known any better, I would think Cash had some kind of magical ability to communicate with the animals. When we came out in the morning to feed them, they usually surrounded him adoringly, waiting for a pat from the gargoyle. It was one of my favorite things to watch happen.

“We can’t all be Irish gargoyles.” Cash said, the corner of his mouth curling up into a half-smile. It was one of the many expressions I’d managed to pull from the broody gargoyle since I’d met him almost a month ago. “But your impression of me is getting much better though.”

My fingers itched to touch the tattoo on the side of my neck that his nickname came from. When I was on the farm, I usually left it uncovered.

Cash’s eyes dropped to it, taking in the faded pink lines. “If you ever want me to touch that up, just let me know.”

“I didn’t know you tattooed humans,” I said, surprised.

Cash chuckled. “Even if I don’t normally do it, I *am* capable. We used to tattoo humans too, once upon a time before Port Haven became a sanctuary for supes.”

Finally, I gave in to the desire and touched the tattoo. I wanted to bring it back to the way it looked before my mom died. The memory of getting it with her was still just as vivid as it had been the day we did it. Her pink dragonfly had remained crisp and unfaded, even after she left the world while mine faded fast.

I could still remember fighting with her estranged aunt at the funeral home when she asked the mortician to cover it with makeup before the family viewing of her body. Mike dragged me aside halfway through and told me not to cause a scene, so I didn’t and the mortician made it look like the tattoo never existed.

“I don’t want to get it touched up yet,” I told him, my hand leaving the tattoo. I gave myself a quick mental shake, shooing the cobwebs of unhappy memories from my mind. The tattoo was hard enough to cover as faded as it was, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to manage it if the lines were crisp and pink again.

I was still on the run. A fact that I found myself constantly forgetting as the days went on.

Cash seemed to take my words in stride. “Well, let me know if you change your mind. I’m going to get Cocoa into her stall, can you pull some chicken out for dinner?”

I nodded, giving Cocoa one last look before turning and heading towards the house. Oscar and Saoirse, ever my shadows, followed behind closely. I fed them first, refilling their giant water fountain, before starting dinner.

It took a while for Cash to let me cook, but I’d insisted on it a few days ago. There wasn’t much that I was good at, but my cooking had never been one of Mike’s complaints when we were together.

I was busily chopping carrots and potatoes when my cell began to ring in my pocket.

“Hey, Wen,” I greeted my friend, tucking the phone into the crook of my shoulder as I continued to chop. “How’s the weather out there?”

As summer began to fade into fall, the East coast had been rocked by several tropical storms. It had made communicating with Wendy a bit of a nightmare, but I kept telling myself that no news was good news.

“It’s fine... hey, Daph, I have to tell you something.” Wendy’s tone was immediately off and my stomach dropped. I stopped cutting for a moment, afraid whatever she was going to say next was going to cause me to accidentally chop off a finger.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice practically a squeak.

Wendy’s sigh filled my ear. “You know how we’ve been doing some repairs on the house, right?”

“Yes...?”

A tree had fallen in their backyard onto their house during the last storm. She’d told me all about it last week during our check in.

“We were so caught up with getting it removed and getting everything fixed and cleaned up that I didn’t keep as good of an eye on Mike as I should have,” Wendy began slowly.

My entire body tensed up at the mention of his name. “What’s happened?”

“Sweetie, he up and moved. That house is completely empty,” she said, the words dripping with worry. “And that’s not the worst thing.”

“What could be worse than not knowing where he is?” I snapped and then felt immediately guilty.

“Daphne, we got an email this morning from one of Reggie’s contacts. Mike filed a missing person’s report for you two days ago.”

I froze as the safe little bubble I’d built for myself over the past month popped instantly. Mike filing a missing person’s report was inevitable. I’d been trying to figure out why he

hadn't done it yet and had come to a couple of chilling possibilities.

Mike wouldn't file a missing person's report without a good reason. Either someone noticed I was missing, one of his friends, their wives, his bosses... or he knew where I was and was doing all of the legal requirements to have me picked up by law enforcement.

The second seemed more likely, especially now that he'd disappeared himself. That meant Mike was coming for me.

My knees buckled and I barely managed to grab the counter with my free hand as I sank down to the linoleum floor.

"I should have kept a better eye on everything, I'm so sorry." Wendy continued to apologize, but I could barely hear her.

A dissociative numbness had crept up my limbs, locking them up as I tried in earnest to suck in a breath of air and failed.

I nearly screamed when a dark shadow filled my vision.

"Daphne, what's wrong?" Cash was crouched down in front of me, his quicksilver gaze worried as his long gray tail lashed behind him.

I opened my mouth to respond, but couldn't seem to find the words to describe how I was feeling.

Cash made a noise deep in his throat. His eyes dropped to the phone still clutched in my hand with Wendy's muffled voice still coming from the speaker.

He grabbed it and held it up to his ear. "I don't know who you are or what you said, but she's practically fucking catatonic."

He was quiet for a minute before he responded to whatever she was saying. "Yes I'm the one helping her. No, don't tell me any details that aren't yours to share. Yeah, let me get her settled and then I'll call you back."

He ended the call and dropped the phone on the floor, crouching low so we were eye to eye again. “Daphne, look at me, what’s going on?”

There was so much concern in his voice that it finally broke me out of the stupor that had taken over my body.

My lower lip wobbled as I shakily rubbed my hands on my jeans before answering. “I... I think he’s coming for me.”

The tendon in Cash’s jaw tensed as he clenched his teeth together, his expression shifting from worry to anger. “*Who* is coming for you? Dragonfly, I can’t help you if you don’t let me in.”

“I don’t think you can help me at all,” I whispered, afraid to break the easy peace we’d established between the two of us.

Cash gripped my face with gentle hands, making sure that I was fully looking at him. “Try me.”

A shaky whoosh of air left my mouth as I finally relented to the instinct to trust the gargoyle in front of me. The one I’d been fighting against because I kept telling myself that I wouldn’t be sticking around long enough to really get to know him.

“I ran away from my husband, Mike.” The words started to tumble out of me in a blurred jumble as I told him everything. From my mom’s death to how Mike had been the lawyer that the firm she’d been a client at for years had sent.

As I explained my married life with Mike, outlining how he’d treated me, Cash’s hands clenched into fists so tightly that I could hear the joints of his fingers pop.

I hurried to tell all of it and it felt a little bit like I was vomiting out all of the bad things I was keeping inside. So when I finished telling him how Peep had broken down in that spot on the beach, I felt exhausted, but somehow lighter.

“So that’s it, that’s everything,” I said with a yawn.

In a flash, Cash had me scooped up into his arms. The same electric pop from earlier happened again, and I felt my

heartbeat start to slow like it was trying to match with his for a second before it went back to normal.

“Where are we going?” I asked, nearly telling him I could walk, but being in his arms made me feel safe and I really needed to feel safe right now.

“You’re tired, so I’m putting you to bed,” he said gruffly, his expression still a storm cloud.

“So, we’re not going to discuss everything I just told you?”

Cash nudged the door to my bedroom open with his foot and set me on the paisley quilted bed.

“We will after you get some rest,” he replied, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

I sighed. “Well I can’t sleep in dirty farm clothes, Cash.”

Cash froze for a moment, looking panicked. “Right, just get some sleep for now and we can talk in the morning,” he said before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

In spite of everything that had happened in the last hour, I found myself laughing. Cash always seemed to know what to do or say, so seeing him flustered was new. I committed his new expression into my memory while I changed into my pajamas.

I felt better—or at least as much as I could feel with the information I’d just learned.

Nothing would happen in the next eight hours. Not with Cash in the house, not to mention Oscar and Saoirse who seemed hell bent on being with me every step of the day when we were home.

My hands stopped mid-button on my pajama shirt as I finished the thought.

Home. When did I start considering this little farm house my home?

Now it wasn’t a matter of when I would leave, but if I even could go now that Cash knew everything about who I was and my past.

The reasons for continuing to run were dwindling by the hour and as I crawled underneath the blankets and curled into a ball, I just hoped that all of my fears were for nothing.

That Mike wasn't coming for me and that somehow, some way I could keep the peace I'd built here forever.

FOURTEEN

CASH

“Yeah, let me know what you find, thanks Art,” I said to the monster on the other end of the line. He was one of Dallan’s contacts from before we opened Monstrous Ink, back when Dallan used to run in darker circles in order to protect other supes.

I hung up my cell and leaned back in the chair I was sitting in. It had been three hours since Daphne told me everything and my mind was still reeling with it all.

She seemed too fragile to have gone through so much in such a short amount of time. It made me want to fly to wherever that fucking asshole was and tear him limb from limb.

But I couldn’t fly and I didn’t even know where he could have gone. My back ached for the first time in a long time at the reminder that I was only half a gargoyle at this point.

Art was looking into both of them for me now, but it would take a couple of days and I needed a plan now. I’d roped Dallan in on a need to know basis, partly because he was Daphne’s boss and because he could help her more than I ever could.

Her friend Wendy had called back about thirty minutes after I put Daphne to bed and filled me in on everything that she knew.

It was odd that he’d chosen to move out of his house right before filing a missing person’s report for Daphne. Wendy had sent the poster to my email and the old Daphne I saw in the

picture was completely different from the woman sleeping upstairs.

Her hair was the biggest difference. In the picture it was a fiery orange color, cut into a sensible bob. She was also dressed like an East Coast socialite, pearl necklace and all. But the more I looked at it I could see the same sadness behind her whiskey colored eyes and the pain behind her smile.

Daphne's tattoo was also covered in the picture, but it was mentioned in the description. Now I understood why she was so hesitant to let me touch it up or to show it to anyone else at the shop.

All I wanted to do was to sit and plan on how to protect her, but without more information I was stuck.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, I scrubbed a hand over my face. I was supposed to go to Ronan's place in a couple of days, but now I wasn't sure if I'd be able to. I didn't want to leave Daphne on her own, especially not now.

Saoirse forced her wet muzzle into my lap, clearly having picked up on my mood. She let out a plaintive whine, her brown eyes worried.

"Sorry, lovely," I murmured, giving her a gentle stroke. "Why don't you go up to Daphne?"

As if she understood every word I said, Saoirse made a chuffing noise before she loped to the stairs and disappeared up them, quickly followed by Oscar.

My phone buzzed on the table with a message from Dallan.

DALLAN: Effie wants to know what's going on. Can I loop her in?

A low groan left my body. I knew he wouldn't have been able to keep this from Effie for long, but I at least thought he could manage for eight hours.

ME: No. Wait until Daphne tells her herself.

DALLAN: Cash. This is Effie. I don't like being kept in the dark about things especially when it comes to Daphne.

Effie had become almost as obsessed with Daphne as I was over the past month. I assumed it was because she wasn't used to having female friends so close by. She was like oil and water with most of the women who came in, especially the ones who flirted openly with Dallan, but it was different with Daphne.

ME: Daphne will tell you everything herself when she wants to. Now give Dallan back his phone.

After a few minutes, when I got no reply, I assumed that she'd done as I asked.

Leaving my phone downstairs, I climbed the stairs to check in on Daphne. The door was ajar, probably thanks to the two giant dogs that had entered the room and flopped down on the floor next to the bed.

Daphne was still asleep, but it didn't look peaceful. She was tossing back and forth, sweating as she frowned at whatever dream she was having.

Then her entire body shuddered and she let out a little gasp.

Having seen enough, I entered the room and gave her a gentle shake. "Dragonfly, wake up," I whispered.

Daphne's eyes shot wide open, her pupils dilating as she thrashed against me for a moment before collapsing into a heap on the bed.

"Cash?" she rasped, squinting in the dark at me. It was easy to forget sometimes that she didn't have the same kind of night vision that I did. Just like it was easy to forget that she was human. I turned the bedside table lamp on, waiting for her eyes to adjust before speaking.

"It's me, sorry for waking you. You looked like you were having a nightmare," I said, watching her brow furrow as she sat up with her back against the wooden headboard.

"I was... I think. But I can't remember it now," she lied. I could always smell the shift in her scent when she was lying to me. It would usually bother me to be lied to, but with Daphne

everything was different. She never did it without a good reason.

I reached out and brushed a stray strand of pink hair out of her face, the song in my chest soaring with the physical contact.

After spending the last few weeks with her, I was more sure than anything that she was my heartsong. My mate.

The surety of it was both comforting and terrifying.

Human lives were exceedingly fleeting. I would live long after she died of old age and just the thought of it made me start to spiral. I had spent two hundred years on my own until Daphne stumbled into Monstrous Ink... could I really sign myself up to do it after she was gone again?

It was part of the reason I was trying to go out and see Ronan. He'd been alive a lot longer than I had, so I figured he had to have encountered a gargoyle mating with a non-gargoyle at some point.

“Why do you never sleep?”

Daphne's question drowned out the song in my chest and pulled me from my thoughts.

“What do you mean?” I asked with a frown.

I could see pink rise to the tops of Daphne's cheeks in the dim light. “You don't turn into stone at night, but I've never seen you sleep either. Don't gargoyles turn to stone at night?”

A surprised laugh bubbled out of my chest. “I do sleep,” I told her. “It's usually only for a couple of hours a night.”

Gargoyles didn't need much rest. I could go days without sleeping if I needed to.

Daphne's blush deepened. “You don't have to laugh at me...” she grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Sorry,” I apologized, trying to hold in my next laugh. “I don't need much sleep, dragonfly.”

“Even without going into the stone sleep? Effie told me that gargoyles use it to refresh...” she asked, her earlier

nightmare temporarily gone as curiosity won out.

“Yes, it’s supposed to be a time of reset with your community at the zenith of a season, kind of a religious thing like I told you before. I hardly ever go into stone sleep anymore.” The last time had been a long time ago when a hunter had sent a crossbow bolt into my abdomen. It had been instantaneous and if Dallan hadn’t been nearby he could have shattered my stone form completely.

“Why not?” Daphne pushed.

I didn’t want to have to tell her the nitty gritty about my past, it was messy, lonely, and would show her just how truly broken I was. But she’d told me about hers, so it was only fair to do the same.

“Effie told you a little bit about why I don’t have wings, right?”

Daphne nodded.

“Well, they were ripped off right after the winter solstice a very long time ago,” I sucked in a shaky breath in an effort to steady myself before continuing. “I broke clan law and it caused some people I loved to die.”

“How did you break the law?” Daphne’s words were said in the exhale of one breath and were so quiet I nearly missed them.

“I saved a little human boy and he led his village back to our home with pitchforks. They attacked us while we were vulnerable in our stone sleep. Gargoyles can survive most things, but our stone forms being destroyed is a death sentence no matter how you twist it. I did that and then my wings and community were taken from me. No gargoyle will interact with a Wingless if they can help it.”

Daphne’s misty eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “And that’s why you don’t exist to them. Like you told me a couple of weeks ago.”

I nodded, clenching my jaw at the memory. “It’s gotten better over the centuries, they don’t take gargoyle’s wings anymore at least. But they still treat Wingless like shit.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Daphne said, her lips turning down into a frown as she slid her fingers through mine. Her skin was hot next to mine as a wave of sensation traveled up my arm at the contact.

The color of Daphne’s eyes shifted, the amber depths seeming to glow for a moment as the sound of her heartbeat slowed the way it always did when I touched her before everything went back to normal.

It always happened so fast that I was never sure if my eyes were playing tricks on me or not. I wasn’t sure what was happening to her, but I definitely needed to find more information about it, and fast.

“It was lonely,” I told her honestly, my mind conjuring up memories of the first few years where I spoke to no one and hid myself away. “But I eventually got involved in the underground monster community and that helped. Dallon and the rest became my clan.”

If I didn’t have Monstrous Ink, I wasn’t sure I would have survived as long as I had. It helped to keep the madness of solitude at bay. The same madness that Ronan had surrendered himself to over a decade ago.

“Have you ever met another Wingless?” Daphne asked, as if she was reading my thoughts.

“A few, but I’ve only become friends with one. His name is Ronan. I was actually supposed to go see him in a couple of days, but I may have to put that trip off for a bit with everything that’s been going on,” I explained. I didn’t want to leave her by herself, even if everyone at the shop was looking out for her.

“I could go with you,” Daphne offered, “If you’d like.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know how good of an idea that is, Ronan isn’t the most predictable creature and you’re much more breakable than I am.”

I’d never seen Ronan hurt more than himself or the trailer he lived in, but I found that when it came to Daphne I wanted

to be as risk averse as possible. If I could roll her up in bubble wrap and keep her inside the house, I would.

Daphne's lips twisted. "I'm not *that* breakable. I did make it across the country on my own after living in a nightmare for five years."

I couldn't argue with her there.

"I'll think about it," I said gently, tugging the blanket out from under her elbows and pulling it up to her chin. "But for now, you should get some rest, we've only got a couple of hours until morning chores."

Daphne scooted down with a playful pout. "You'd think that an angry ex-husband would get me out of farm chores for at least one day."

A chuckle rumbled out of my chest. "The farm sleeps for no one, not even crazy exes, dragonfly. The goats still demand to be fed and if you don't pet Como like you usually do he might just implode."

I swear the emu liked her better than he liked me and I'd had him since he was a one-eyed chick.

"Well we wouldn't want Como bits everywhere," she said around a yawn.

Reaching for the bedside table lamp, I flicked the light off and waited for her breathing to even out before quietly stepping out of the room.

I had a lot of things to get done, but the first thing I wanted to do was update my security systems. The barns were all wired, but it was time to do the same for the house. I could handle most things, but Daphne didn't have claws or super strength, so cameras and alarms would just have to do.

FIFTEEN

DAPHNE



“Wow, your ex sounds like a real cunt,” Effie said, giving the ‘T’ in cunt a hard enunciation before slurping on her straw loudly.

I’d waited until lunch to tell her my story, so she’d spent the morning buzzing between the front desk and whatever she was brewing upstairs. It had only taken one loud explosion in her apartment for Dallan to finally kick us out an hour early to eat.

It felt easier to tell Effie everything than it had been with Cash. It was like the wall of silence I’d placed on myself had been torn down and I could finally say the words without wanting to melt into a puddle of tears.

“He was definitely something,” I said, not wanting to say the word out loud, but agreeing with her whole-heartedly.

“Should I put a curse on him? I could totally do that if you had an item of his,” Effie offered, glaring at her pasta as she stabbed it viciously with her fork.

I shook my head. “No I don’t have anything like that, and isn’t it illegal to curse someone? Don’t they have witches and warlocks who work for the government to track that kind of stuff?”

Effie scoffed. “*Pssh*, I can get around a few measly government narcs easily, Daphne, who do you think I am?”

I’d never seen Effie do much magic aside from her ink making, but Cash told me that when she was younger she was

known for hexing people who pissed her off. I always just assumed she could do more magic than she let on.

One of Effie's vines snaked out from under her shirt and took the fork out of her hands before she could shatter the plate.

Effie glared at it. "I wasn't going to break it, Jiminy," she told the appendage sullenly.

It took me almost a week to ask her why she spoke to her vines as if they were people. Apparently they had a mind of their own, and she'd even nicknamed each of the six vines.

The vine seemed to begrudgingly hand her back her fork and let her resume eating, but it hovered just over her shoulder like it was waiting for her to lose her temper again.

"I appreciate the offer, but I want to handle Mike the human way," I told her, getting the conversation back on track.

"How? With a divorce?" Effie asked incredulously.

I nodded. "That and a restraining order are a start. Cash says he's got a friend with contacts in the FBI and they can connect us with the police force in New Hampshire to start the process."

Effie rolled her green eyes. "I bet he's talking about Art. The guy has been doing Dallon's bidding since the 1880s. I swear that man hasn't left his house in thirty years, so he's perfect to do all of the leg work." Then Effie snorted to herself, as if she'd just made some kind of a joke.

"Why the laugh?" I asked, picking at the broccoli on my plate of alfredo pasta.

Effie's lips tilted up into a sharp grin.

"Because Art's a naga—a snake man," she added upon seeing my confused expression. "So, he literally has no legs."

A surprised laugh bubbled in my chest and I nearly forced myself to hold it in. Mike used to always hate the loud boisterous laugh that matched my mom's. But Mike wasn't here and he couldn't control me anymore. I released the laugh and let it fill the little dining room we were sitting in.

Fuck Mike, I thought to myself. *I'll laugh as loud as I want to, when I want to.*

Effie seemed pleased to hear it as her vines danced behind her head. She speared a shrimp and shoved it into her mouth, chewing proudly as she waited for me to finish.

“It’s nice to see you so lively,” Effie said, her expression sobering up quickly. “But if I can’t hex him, then what *is* the plan other than the restraining order and divorce?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but was cut off momentarily by the waiter meandering over to us to refill our drinks. He looked human, but the air around him shimmered, telling me he was some kind of monster wearing a glamour.

He turned to smile at me, his teeth suddenly looking sharper than they had a moment ago before he turned and wandered back through the doors to the kitchen.

“Are there some kind of glasses I can wear so I don’t have to see magic in the air?” I asked Effie as I distractedly rubbed at my eyes. “It kind of gives me a headache.”

Most monsters didn’t bother wearing a glamour within town limits and other than Effie I hadn’t seen anyone else perform any magic.

“I’m sure I could whip up something, but that in and of itself would be magic so I’m sure it would still bother you,” Effie said with a frown. “What you *should* do is learn how to control it.”

“I don’t think I’d be very good at it, if I’m being honest.” I gave myself a little shake, blinking away the dots from my vision before returning to her previous question and changing the subject away from my eyes. “Anyway, the plan right now—or I guess more accurately—*Cash’s* plan right now is to make sure I don’t go anywhere alone until they can figure out where Mike is and keep an eye on him. I finally convinced him to let me tag along on his trip to Vegas next week using that argument.”

It had taken me wheedling from the time I woke up this morning up until we walked through the doors of the shop for

him to finally give in.

Realistically, I could probably have stayed up in Effie's apartment while he was gone, but I was curious about the other wingless gargoyle, Ronan. Cash spoke about him with a mixture of fondness and sadness and I wanted to meet someone who had some of the same experiences that Cash did.

"I see things are going well on that front," Effie said, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "I would like the record to state that I called it first."

My face flushed. "I don't know what you mean by that. Nothing is happening between me and Cash."

Effie snorted inelegantly. "Yeah, right, and my hair isn't green. I might believe you if you two didn't eye fuck whenever you're in the same room together."

"We do *not*," I insisted, sure my face was beet red. "Besides, I'm not sure how it would even work," I added in a mutter.

Cash *was* nearly two feet taller than I was and I'm sure that size difference also translated downstairs. Even just thinking about it made my body tingle, but also cringe with the idea of how much it would *hurt*.

Effie looked me up and down thoughtfully. "You could probably make it work with some spelled oil. I've seen human women take much worse than gargoyle dick before, you really are a part of a race that, when it comes to doing the horizontal tango with monsters, are a bunch of little daredevils. That's why there's so many halflings running around in this day and age."

Someone coughed, interrupting what was very quickly becoming a TedTalk on monster sex, and we both turned to find the red-faced waiter holding the check.

I covered my face in my hands and fought the desire to turn into a puddle of embarrassed goo and melt into the floor.

"Are you really embarrassed, dude?" Effie asked the waiter as she handed him her card. "Are my senses off or are you not an incubus?"

The waiter sputtered, his eyes wide. His glamour slipped for a moment, probably due to how flustered he was, and his human-colored skin turned a shade of vibrant purple as a pair of dark horns shimmered into existence. Then the glamour snapped back into place and he was a skinny human man again.

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I like hearing about sex all the time,” the waiter sniffed as he ran Effie’s card through his little machine and handed it back to her.

Effie rolled her eyes. “That literally is what it means. Sex for your kind is like having a protein shake.”

“Well I’m only sixty, so I’m not fully grown yet,” the waiter said. “Now you two have a wonderful day.”

I waited for the waiter to disappear behind the swinging doors to the kitchen again before I leaned forward to whisper to Effie. “How old does an incubus have to be to be considered fully grown?”

“They come into existence fully grown, so I don’t know what bullshit he’s spouting. But I’m pretty sure he’s new in town since I’ve never seen him here before,” Effie said back in her normal voice, obviously not caring whether or not he could hear her from the kitchen. “I feel like I need to check that off my life list or something, an incubus who is embarrassed by sex. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“You shouldn’t tease him, I was just as embarrassed by your use of the word gargoyle d-d,” I stuttered, trying to get the word out with as much ease as the tree nymph had.

Effie looped her arm through mine, completely enjoying my discomfort. “Come on, Daphne, say it with me ‘gargoyle dick,’ you’re going to see one at some point so you better get used to it.”

I just shook my head. “I doubt that. I’m pretty sure I’m just a project to Cash. Like I’m one of the three-legged rescue animals on his farm.”

“As far as I know, Cash doesn’t want to bone any of his weird farm animals, and if he does I’m going to rethink my

friendship with him,” Effie quipped as she tugged me back onto the Wharf.

It was Saturday, so the Wharf was packed full of tourists who were enjoying the air of summer turned into the crisp breeze of fall.

As we picked our way through the crowd back towards the shop, a man who wasn’t looking where he was going bumped hard into my shoulder. The collision would have sent me sprawling onto my ass if not for Effie’s vines gripping my shoulders.

“Hey man, watch where you’re going,” Effie growled as her vines set me solidly on my feet again, one of them giving my head a pat before disappearing back under Effie’s shirt.

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry,” he said, his eyes moving to me for a moment before he turned and hurried again off into the direction he’d been originally going.

I stared after him, a strange feeling in my chest. I wasn’t sure if it was my eyes playing tricks on me or not, but for just a moment there was recognition in his eyes when he looked at me.

But I’d never seen him before in my life, so I shook the feeling off as we continued our tourist duck and dodge until we made it back to Monstrous Ink.

“I hate tourist season. Most of these people are too busy gawking at the local monster population to watch where they’re going,” Effie said as she opened the door to the shop, the bell above the door tinkling as we stepped inside.

“There you are,” Ambrose said from where he was sitting in my desk chair. The elf still didn’t like me, but he was at least cordial when other people were around. “You were supposed to pull down the ink I need for my one o’ clock from the supply closet before going to lunch.”

My spine stiffened at the reproach in his tone. It sounded far too similar to Mike’s when he scolded me about something that I did wrong.

“Last time I checked that isn’t Daphne’s job,” Effie cut in, glaring at him. “All artists are responsible for getting their own supplies. Daphne just keeps the closet stocked and organized.”

Ambrose’s frown deepened. “I was busy with back to back appointments all morning.”

One of Effie’s dark green brows lifted. “You don’t look busy now, so why did you choose to sit and wait for Daphne rather than taking your happy ass up the steps to get the supplies you need yourself?”

Ambrose stood, the chains on his jeans clinking together as he slinked around the desk. “You don’t need to ride so hard for the human, Effie, it’s not like she’s going to be here for long,” he said before clomping up the stairs to get what he needed.

“What the fuck did he mean by that?” Effie asked as she watched him disappear.

“I have no idea,” I said as I settled back into my seat and booted up my computer.

The sound of plastic beads swishing together announced the entrance of Dallan who was walking his last appointment out, a pretty beast woman who looked like a lioness.

It was rare to see a beast person come into the shop. Their furry bodies didn’t really allow for tattoos, but I could see a row of new studs lining her cat-like ears.

“Just make sure to use the enchanted cleaner so that your heightened healing doesn’t cause skin to grow over the studs,” he told her as they stopped at the desk. “Daphne, can you print the piercing aftercare for beast people for me?”

I nodded and logged into the drive where we kept all of our aftercare instructions, printing the ones he asked for. “Here you go,” I said, handing it to the woman with a smile.

“I didn’t realize you had a human working here, Dallan,” the woman said, her whiskers twitching as her muzzle pulled up into what I realized was a smile. “How positively sweet. I’ve been trying to get a human receptionist over at the spa for the longest so that the human tourists don’t feel so out of place. How about coming to work with me, darling?”

Dallan frowned at the woman, the tentacles on his face curling with his obvious displeasure. “Leila, stop trying to snipe my employees or else I’ll stop re-piercing your ears when the holes inevitably close.”

Dallan’s threat fell on deaf ears, though, as the lioness just continued to purr, her gold eyes holding mine for another moment before she reached into her designer bag and produced a business card. “If you ever want to work with a group of monster women that will treat you right, just give me a call.”

With that she sashayed out of the shop, her new piercings twinkling in the afternoon sunlight.

“Why do I feel like I was just asked to join a sex cult?” I asked, mostly to myself.

Dallan’s laughter filled the waiting room. “You’re not far off, they are definitely all about pleasure and relaxation over at the spa.”

“Yeah, and heavy on the pleasure part. I remember going for a massage once and I was completely twitterpated by all of the hot women that work there. If I ever decided to swing that way I would quit this place in an instant,” Effie said with a snort.

Dallan’s laughter cut off abruptly as he jerked his head to look at her. “But you don’t want to swing that way though, right?”

It was Effie’s turn to laugh as she turned to climb the stairs. “I’m not sure, Dallan, Leila is *very* hot.”

“Yeah, if you like getting hairballs from eating beast woman puss,” Dallan muttered just loud enough for her to hear.

Effie ducked her head back into view, her green hair fanning out as she gave Dallan a sharp, teasing grin. “And who says I’d be the one doing the eating?”

Dallan’s gold eyes widened as he gawked up at her. I couldn’t help but giggle as Effie disappeared from view once again.

“That one sure keeps me on my toes,” he grumbled as he flipped through his tablet to look at his next appointment. “Don’t let her tease you the way she teases me, or she’ll never stop for as long as you live.”

I just smiled, thinking about Effie’s insistence that I say the words ‘gargoyle dick’ earlier.

“Oh gods, she’s already done it, eh?” Dallan asked with a shake of his head. “Well, I suppose you’re stuck with us then.”

“I’m afraid so,” I said, my chest warm from the sudden feeling of belonging.

“Well good, I sincerely don’t think we’d be able to find a better receptionist. When my next appointment gets here can you let me know? I’m going to be in the back talking with Cash and Fiero about covering his clients for next week,” Dallan said, tucking his tablet under his massive arm.

I nodded, the sudden ringing of the phone distracting me.

“Sure thing,” I said, grabbing the phone. “Monstrous Ink, Daphne speaking, how can I help you?”

SIXTEEN

CASH

The Mojave desert stretched out in either direction for miles, only broken up by mountains in the distance on one side, and the city of Las Vegas on the other. It was an hour or two before dawn and the dark sky was already starting to lighten.

It had been a day since we left Port Haven to drive to visit Ronan and Daphne was curled up against the door of my truck sound asleep.

At first, I'd been nervous about bringing her along because, when it came to Daphne, my brain was a constant loop of what if.

What if she walked to get coffee and was attacked?

What if she went out to feed the animals on her own and hurt herself?

What if she tried to get into the pen with Cocoa while I wasn't at the house and got stomped into the ground by the anxious beast?

There were too many things in the world that could hurt a human, and now that my brain seemed to have acknowledged her as my heart song, it was clear that I was royally fucked.

Finally, I rationalized to myself that it was better if Daphne came with me to see Ronan, at least with me I could keep an eye on her and keep her safe.

It had been almost five days since she told me her story and since then Art had been hard at work trying to track down

her ex, but so far he'd had very little luck.

Mike was a human with means and money to hide if he wanted to, so nailing him down to serve him with papers would be a challenge.

Art had sent over a file on the guy and I'd learned more about the asshole than I ever wanted to. Up until last year he'd been on a fast track to becoming a partner at his high-powered law firm. Right up until he'd gotten into the habit of bumping cocaine in the bathrooms at work. He'd been promptly fired and all financials pointed to his wealthy mother covering their bills ever since.

It had become clear when I showed Daphne the file that she had no idea about any of his work troubles.

According to her, he'd still left for work every morning and still expected his suit, breakfast, and briefcase prepared the same way it had always been. Apparently, nothing had been amiss with Mike other than the fact that his verbal and mental abuse had turned physical, probably thanks to the copious amount of drugs he was consuming.

Either way, I wanted to keep Daphne as far away from him as possible.

Art was supposed to keep me up to date with the search for him while we were out of town, but I wasn't holding my breath on him finding Mike anytime soon. He was a weasel, and if weasels were good for one thing, it was hiding.

The sound of Daphne's breathing shifted as she began to wake up, her eyes squinting as she sat up in her seat.

"Where are we?" she asked around a yawn.

"We're about an hour away from Ronan's place, you can see Vegas from here," I told her, pointing at the city which was still lit up in the distance. "You slept like a babe through the night."

"You should have woken me," she said, rubbing her still sleep-laden eyes. "I would have kept you company."

I just shrugged. “I didn’t mind. I’ve done this drive a hundred times on my own.”

Ronan used to live in the mountains above Port Haven, but after the local gargoyle clan kept complaining about him encroaching on their territory when he hunted for food, we decided it was best to move his trailer.

I’d been hoping to take him up to Oregon where there were no registered clans, but he’d insisted on the Mojave desert for some reason, telling me he’d had a vision about it.

Ronan always rambled on about the various dreams he had, calling them prophetic. But I’d never heard of a gargoyle having that ability before. I always assumed it was just the product of his cracked mind.

“Listen, when we get there I want you to stay in the truck until I go inside to make sure everything is okay. My last email exchange with him made me a little bit worried and I don’t want to have to worry about you getting hurt while I’m trying to settle him down,” I told her, glancing over at her to make sure she understood the importance of my words.

“Okay, but what if he hurts you?” she asked, her whiskey colored eyes filling with concern.

“Ronan is much weaker than I am. He’s about two hundred years older than I am and has been on his own for most of that time. I’m not worried about wrestling a little bit with him if I need to.”

I’d done it before, especially when he had his moments where he seemed to forget who I was.

We lapsed into a comfortable silence for the rest of the car ride. Rock music played softly from the truck’s stereo as the sun began to rise in the sky, illuminating the desert around us.

Ronan’s Silverstream trailer sat in, quite literally, the middle of nowhere. Only one single Joshua tree stood to the left of it, its spiky leaves swaying in the rough desert wind.

A few ratty lawn chairs sat in front of it and a plethora of pink flamingos in various designs were stamped throughout the yard.

“What’s with the flamingos?” Daphne asked as I pulled the truck to a stop.

I turned the truck off and shot her a grin. “I have my animals, and Ronan has his. They all have names, so don’t be surprised if you see him talking to them.”

“One of our retired neighbors used to do that with garden gnomes. She tried to explain it to me once while I was helping her weed her yard, but I didn’t see the appeal. It always felt like they were staring at me,” Daphne said with a shudder.

I chuckled. “Whoever invented garden gnomes must have used the real thing as their model, their expressions are exactly the same in real life.”

We didn’t get a lot of gnomes in Port Haven, but when we did they were perpetually cheerful while also having some of the deadest eyes I’d ever seen.

“Don’t forget,” I said as I opened the door. “Stay inside of the truck until I come get you. No matter what.”

“Okay,” Daphne agreed.

“Promise me, Daphne,” I pushed.

She sighed. “Fine, I promise. But please be careful.”

I nodded, offering her a reassuring smile before shutting the door and rounding the truck.

Everything seemed quiet, but that was most likely because Ronan knew someone was here. Either he was waiting for me to knock on the door or was lying in wait somewhere to jump out and tackle me.

It turned out to be the latter.

As I took two steps through the field of flamingos a shadowy figure leapt from the top of the trailer. It crashed into me, and suddenly we were rolling on the ground together.

“Ye can’t have me!” Ronan’s garble Irish lilt met my ears as I flipped him onto his back.

“It’s me, you old coot,” I growled down at him, finding his lined stone face to be crumpled into a look of unknowing rage.

His silver eyes which were nearly clear rolled wildly in his head as he fought against me.

“I don’t know anyone named Me!” Ronan insisted, his teeth sinking into my arm. Normally, nothing would puncture my stone-like skin, but like diamonds being used to cut diamonds, gargoyle teeth were special.

I howled and tried to yank my arm from his gnawing mouth. “Ow, you gobshite, release your fucking teeth before I pulled them out of your head.”

“Cash!” Daphne, who seemed to have forgotten the promise she’d made not even two minutes ago, screamed as she started to step out of the truck.

“Dammit, Daphne! I told you to stay in the truck!” I barked at her. “Get your ass back in there!”

With my attention on Daphne, Ronan took the opportunity to push me off onto my back and straddle my waist, his elbow on my jugular. “Tell me, fiend, who are ye!”

The sound of Daphne’s feet meeting the dirt made me turn to find her picking up a pitifully small rock from the ground and starting to advance towards us as if the rock would do anything to hurt the addled gargoyle currently trying to cut off my air supply.

I needed to regain control over this entire situation before my little human decided to try her luck scrapping with a creature that could rip her limb from limb.

“Ronan, look at me.” My voice was choked as I reached up and gripped the old gargoyle’s face and forced him to look down at me. “It’s just me. It’s just Cashiel.”

Ronan blinked once, then twice. Suddenly the elbow on my throat was gone and Ronan was leaning back on his knees, sudden clarity reentering his eyes again.

“Well why didn’t ye say so, my boy?” the gargoyle grumbled as if he hadn’t just been doing his very best to end me. He glanced up at Daphne who looked ready to murder him if he so much as looked at me wrong.

On one hand, her protectiveness made the song in my chest swell and crescendo with pride. But on the other hand, my heart was still pounding wildly with fear at the idea of her trying to defend me and getting hurt in the process.

“Who are ye, lass?” Ronan asked, his attention finally moving to Daphne. “And what did ye think the rock would do to me? It takes a lot more than a pebble like that to fell a gargoyle.”

Ronan stood and pulled me to my feet and set to work dusting my clothes off before frowning at the several flamingos that had been knocked over in the scuffle. “I’m sorry ladies, I didn’t mean to bring ye into my fight.”

He paused, as if listening to their responses. “No, I know his lass came to his rescue, but that doesn’t mean I need ye to do the same for me. Ginny, can the attitude before I put ye into time out.”

The flamingos, as always, remained silent where they stood.

“Ye might as well both come inside for a bit of tea, I just put the kettle on,” Ronan said, seeming to have forgotten his earlier question about who Daphne was.

Ronan hurried up the steps of his trailer, throwing the door open with a bang before disappearing inside.

I turned to Daphne. “I told you to stay in the truck.”

“He was hurting you,” Daphne said, pointing at the bite mark on my arm.

“Doesn’t matter, he would have killed you in a breath if I wasn’t here,” I told her, wanting her to understand just how serious the situation had been.

“But you *were* here, and you’d never let anything happen to me, right?” she asked, fluttering those damn lashes up at me before bending over to set the flamingos on the ground to rights.

Ronan popped his head out of the door of the trailer. “Thank ye for doing that, Irma and Magdalene appreciate it,”

he called before ducking back inside again.

“See?” Daphne said pointing at the flamingos. “Irma and Magdalene appreciate it.”

Then my fearless heart song waltzed up to the trailer and stepped inside as if the entire skirmish on the ground hadn’t happened.

“What the fuck have I gotten myself into?” I muttered to myself as I followed her.

The trailer was actually cleaner than it usually was. There was no trash littering the floor and his bed was even haphazardly made.

There was a cardboard box full of Snickers bars, Ronan’s favorite food, shoved against the fridge and I watched him kick it out of the way so he could get to the stove.

“I thought things would be worse,” I commented as I used one of the afghan blankets to cover the couch so that Daphne could sit down.

“They were, but I came out of my last bout of barminess a couple of days ago and cleaned up. But I will say, it took ye long enough to come and check on me. I sent you a letter on that stupid thing last month,” Ronan said as he poured clear liquid from the kettle into mismatched tea cups.

“Sorry, some things came up,” I apologized, the same guilt I’d been feeling about putting off my trip cropping up again. It also seemed like he couldn’t remember the entire email exchange we’d had last week, telling me just how bad things had gotten.

“I can see that, laddie,” Ronan said, nodding his head at Daphne as he handed her one of the tea cups.

She started to lift it to her lips but I quickly snatched it out of her hands. “Don’t drink that,” I told her, putting it back on the tray.

“Why?” Daphne asked with a frown.

“Because all this crazy asshole drinks is butane, which his system can handle but yours can’t,” I said, eyeballing the

gargoyle in front of us. He knew better.

But Ronan just cackled before pouring what was in her teacup into his and took a healthy swig.

“He’s drinking *lighter fluid*?” Daphne’s dark brows rose with surprise.

“Yep, keeps the demons at bay,” Ronan quipped gesturing at his head. “Though that’s just an expression. I wouldn’t mind if an actual demon popped by for a cuppa, they make great company.”

Ronan hadn’t seen a demon since the dark ages. Demons in the modern day were all capitalist heathens at the top of some of the country’s richest companies. If he met one today, I doubted he would like them very much.

“But you’re all right? Is the Vegas clan still bothering you?” I asked, pushing him for information. Last time I’d heard from him, he’d written that they kept vandalizing his trailer in a bid to get him to move on.

“Nah, that witch of yers sent me something to keep them at bay,” Ronan said, pointing to the sunlight catcher hanging in the window. “They haven’t been able to come close to the trailer since.”

I hadn’t known Effie had done that. Everyone at Monstrous Ink knew about Ronan at least a little bit. I’d confided in Effie a couple of months ago that I was worried that we were going to have to move him again and that I didn’t know where we could take him where he would be safe. She must have concocted the charmed item to help.

Effie, for all of her sass and teasing was one giant bleeding heart.

“Now that ye’ve seen that I’m fine, why don’t you ask the question you actually came here to ask,” Ronan said, folding his hands over his stomach and leaning back in his recliner.

“What question?” I asked.

Ronan’s wrinkled face pulled up into a grin. “The one I’ve seen in my dreams,” he said, pointing a finger at his head

again. “Your question about how this little human here is your heart song.”

I’d been meaning to ask about it when it was just the two of us in the trailer so that I could tell Daphne myself later when I had more information.

But apparently, Ronan had other ideas.

“Sorry, what’s a heart song?” Daphne asked, frowning with confusion.

I opened my mouth to cut him off before he could spill the secret I’d been keeping for nearly a month, but Ronan was already answering her question.

“A heart song is a gargoyle’s true mate, lass,” Ronan said fondly, glancing between the two of us. “And for Cashiel here, that’s you.”

SEVENTEEN



DAPHNE

“That’s you,” Ronan said, pointing at me.

I couldn’t help but mimic the gesture, pointing at myself.

“Me?” I asked stupidly as my brain struggled to catch up with the implications of what he was telling me.

“Yes, lass, you,” Ronan reiterated as he glanced over at Cash. “Ye haven’t told her yet?”

Cash’s jaw tightened as he looked between Ronan and me, clearly uncomfortable. “I hadn’t gotten that far yet, Ro,” he said through clenched teeth.

I frowned.

“I can’t be Cash’s mate, I’m human,” I muttered, mostly to myself.

Ronan’s laugh was loud and crackly, as if he hadn’t used it in years. “That doesn’t matter in the slightest. Despite the fact that the clan heads would have you believe it isn’t possible, we gargoyles have been mating outside of our species for millennia.”

I turned to Cash, filling my expression with every ounce of confusion I was feeling. “And you knew?”

But Cash ignored my question, his eyes still on Ronan. “How do you know that? That it’s possible to have a mate that isn’t a gargoyle?”

Ronan's eyes started to sparkle, like he was close to tears. "Boy, in all the time I've known ye, ye've never asked me how I lost my wings."

"It was never something that I wanted to talk about myself, so I figured you were the same," Cash said quietly, his gaze dropping to his lap where his fists were clenched.

"It was four hundred years ago," Ronan began, immediately jumping into his story. "My clan was always a bit more open minded, probably because we lived on the northernmost tip of Ireland and were close to the mainland. Our leader recognized that pure gargoyle children were a rarity and allowed us to love as we would so long as we kept the most basic tenets of our species."

"No contact with humans," Cash provided.

"Aye, no contact with humans. Several of the other males in my clan had already mated with other species. One was with a beast woman—a bear I think—and another was with a vampire. It wasn't uncommon." Ronan's lips tilted up into a reminiscent smile before he continued.

"I met my Maeve by chance. She was collecting herbs for her spells and potions in the woods. I was half-convinced she was fae by the way she looked in the sunlight, I tell ya. But no, she was a hedge-witch, close to humans with just a touch of magic. But she knew of gargoyles and I knew as soon as her hands touched mine that she was the song in my heart." Ronan placed his hands over his heart, his nearly colorless eyes fluttering shut for just a moment.

"Hedge-witches have human lifespans, how did you come to terms with the fact that she'd die long before you?" Cash asked, his voice tight.

My head whipped over to Cash. His facial expression was unreadable, but there was a hurt behind his words that helped me finally connect the dots. He didn't tell me how he was feeling because he thought he would outlive me.

Ronan's smile fell and he frowned at Cash's question. "I sometimes forget how young ye were when ye were banished

from your clan. No one ever told ye about heartsong mates?”

Cash just shook his head.

Ronan made a noise before turning his attention over to me. “Lass, can ye do me a favor and touch him and tell me what happens?”

I did as he asked, sliding my fingers through Cash’s as the same familiar feeling of electricity flowed through the point of contact. My heartbeat slowed down. “My pulse slows down, like it’s trying to match his, before going back to normal.”

“Good!” Ronan crowed, his expression pleased. “That is exactly how it *should* feel. All living creatures have a certain number of heartbeats. The faster the heartbeat, the shorter the lifespan. Gargoyles have some of the slowest beating hearts of all of the living supernaturals, akin to a tortoise if ye will. If we regularly go into stone sleep, we can live for thousands of years. Our mates’, once the ceremony is held, heartbeats slow down to match ours. For some, it’s a good thing. It allowed my Maeve to be with me for an extra twenty years after her human lifespan. But for the immortals, loving a gargoyle means putting a timer, no matter how slow, on their lives.”

“How is that even possible?” I asked, trying to understand. None of this had been written in any of my research’s admittedly small section on gargoyles.

“It’s the same as vampires and werewolves, lass, a bite,” Ronan explained. “Though sealing a mating bond between a gargoyle and their heartsong has to happen during the spring or autumnal equinox.”

“Why not during either of the solstices?” I asked.

Cash answered for Ronan. “Because the solstices are about rest, like I told you before, but the equinoxes are giant celebrations.”

He seemed to have gained clarity on whatever had been bothering him before, and when I glanced over at him, his lips were starting to tilt up into a grin. “The veil between our world and the spirit realm, where magic exists, is at its thinnest during an equinox. In turn it allows us to forge a connection.”

At the mention of forging a connection the barely bridled panic that had been bubbling up in my chest seemed to finally burst. One moment I was confused about where Cash stood or if he even liked me as more than a friend, and the next we were mates.

I pinched the skin on my arm, giving it a twist.

Nope, I definitely wasn't dreaming. I needed to change the subject before I started to hyperventilate.

"What happened to Maeve?" I asked, changing the subject. "You said it had something to do with your wings?"

"Daphne..." There was reproach in Cash's voice.

"No, it's all right," Ronan said, lifting a hand to stop Cash from scolding me. "About seventy-five years after I met her, Maeve used her magic to save a babe stuck in its mother's birth canal. The mother and her husband were grateful, but the rest of their village? Not so much. I was hunting that day and I saw the smoke from the mountains. They burned my Maeve at the stake before I could get to her."

By the end, Ronan's words were wobbly, his chest rising and falling in hitched sobs as he tugged on the end of the mangled t-shirt he was wearing.

"And your wings?" Cash asked, his expression stony and solemn.

The corners of Ronan's lips quirked up and an echo of the same madness from earlier reentered the gargoyle's colorless eyes. "Save the family my Maeve helped, I shred the rest of 'em limb from limb. No matter how accepting my clan was, they couldn't overlook the murder of sixty humans. It didn't matter much to me anyway, Maeve was my everything and she was taken away from me."

Once the story was done, Ronan seemed to curl in on himself. A long, whooshing sigh left Cash as he stood and rounded the ratty coffee table to put a hand on the other gargoyle's shoulder.

He turned to look at me. "Can you give us a couple of minutes, dragonfly?"

I nodded, torn between wanting to listen to the rest of the conversation and the desire for fresh air. The atmosphere of the trailer had suddenly become claustrophobic, and that suffocating feeling carried me out of the trailer and into the cool morning air.

I crouched next to a grouping of ridiculous plastic flamingos and put my head between my knees, trying to calm myself down.

I hadn't expected any of this when I pushed for Cash to bring me along on this trip. Cash knew though. He'd known the entire time.

It made me angry, not necessarily at him, but at the choices he'd made every step of the way.

Rubbing at the spot in my chest where my heartbeat continued to thump in its usual human fashion, I pondered and picked through my emotions. I pulled each one out like it was some kind of collectible kept in a cabinet, turning them over in my mind as I tried to figure out just how I was feeling about the revelation that Cash and I were meant to be together.

Confusion, anger, fear, and anxiety were paired alongside elation, contentedness and a strong sense of rightness. Like everything in the universe had lined up so I could meet the wingless gargoyle with silver eyes.

Why else would I have driven the way that I had to California? Or why Peep—a car that realistically shouldn't have made it out of Nebraska, let alone across the United States—had only broken down once I made it to Port Haven?

I wasn't sure if I ever believed in fate before now, or at least I hadn't wanted to. Believing in fate meant that everything that I had gone through with my mom and with Mike was meant to happen.

On one hand, that was comforting. Believing those things were fate meant that there was no choice I could have made that would have changed the outcome. There would still be years of living like a ghost under Mike's thumb, and my mom would still have died.

But on the other hand, it meant fate was cruel and fickle. If Cash was my fate, who was to say that it still wouldn't end horribly just like everything else in my life? Cash was strong and impervious to most things, but he could still be hurt or killed.

Even the thought of something happening to him made my chest ache fiercely.

"Dragonfly?" Cash's voice broke through the mental Rubik's cube of emotions that I was currently trying to solve.

I don't know when he'd come out of the trailer or when he'd crouched down in front of me, but his concerned silver eyes were locked onto my face.

At some point I'd plopped down onto the ground amongst the flamingos and pulled my knees up to my chest.

"Sorry," I mumbled, trying to push down the torrent of emotions I was currently experiencing.

"I called out to you a few times, but you were too deep in thought to hear me," Cash said softly. "Are you ready to go?"

"Already? Don't you want to stay for the day to make sure he's okay?" I asked, nodding at the trailer.

"I'm fine, go and have yer talk," Ronan's voice called from the still open door. "Ye definitely need to."

"He's okay," Cash said, a small smile on his face. "I think it was good for him to tell his story."

I nodded, remembering the feeling of relief when I finally told Cash the truth about my past. It was like a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders and I could finally breathe again.

Cash held his hand out to help me up and as soon as I took it the same feeling as always overcame me. The proof that our connection was something *more*.

As soon as I was on my feet I gently pulled my hand from his grasp. "Let's get in the truck," I mumbled, hurrying past him and doing my best to avoid the hurt in his gaze.

The first twenty minutes of the ride was spent in silence. Cash looking forward and me looking back, watching Ronan's trailer sink into the distance until it was gone completely.

The silence grew until I couldn't stand it anymore. Turning to face him, I finally blurted out: "Why are you so different from him?"

The truck slowed and Cash glanced over at me. "What do you mean?"

"He's not all there, Cash, and he still talks like he's been living in the fourteen-hundreds. You two had similar things happen to you, so why do you seem completely sane?" I asked.

Cash sighed and pulled to the side of the road, flipping the engine off and turning to face me fully. He looked tired—or at least as tired as an immortal that rarely slept could look—and he ran a hand over his face and through his dark hair before answering my question.

"Ronan and I are two very different gargoyles. I stayed by myself for a while, but in the end I craved any kind of interaction. That forced me to talk with other supes and eventually make a lot of friends. I think that's what kept me sane. Ronan, on the other hand, kept almost completely to himself until we stumbled across one another. It took several decades for him to trust me, and even longer for him to learn any kind of technology," Cash explained.

All of that made perfect sense, but for some reason I still wanted to pick a fight. Maybe it was immature of me, but him knowing that I was his heart song and not telling me made anger fizzle just under the surface of my skin.

"And when were you planning on telling me that I was your heart song?" I finally asked, addressing the elephant taking up more space than it had any right to in the cab of the truck.

Cash looked away, his silver eyes watching the horizon.

"I couldn't..." he began, his mouth opening and closing like he was trying to formulate a response. "I couldn't tell you

when I wasn't sure how anything would work. I was so young when I was banished from my clan that I never learned about mates in any meaningful way."

"So, had Ronan told you that I would die an early death, would you have ever told me?" That was the question that had been rattling around in my head ever since Ronan had spilled Cash's secret.

The muscle in Cash's jaw jumped. "I hadn't gotten that far yet, but if I had to I would have found a vamp or other immortal to turn you so that we could be together forever."

"But it wouldn't be forever," I pointed out. "Then I would outlive you. Not to mention you were thinking about all of this on your own while pretending that I was nothing more than the down-on-her-luck human that you were just helping out."

"It wasn't like that, dragonfly..." he began, but I cut him off.

"I wasn't finished. Do you know how confusing it's been for me over the past couple of weeks? Strange touches that set my skin on fire one second, and then completely platonic words in the next? I thought I was losing my mind, Cash." My words were verging on scolding at this point, but I didn't care.

"How can you be sure you even like me like that? Weird gargoyle mates thing aside, I'm a mess. I have no money, a soon-to-be-ex-husband who fucked my head up for years, and I'm human," I glanced down at my clenched fists. All of the emotions that I'd been carefully picking through were pulled tight like guitar strings, ready to be plucked by my overstimulated mind at any given moment.

There was a growl from Cash's side of the car and suddenly I was being pulled across the bench seat until our chests were pressed against one another.

Cash's lips crashed into mine. His fingers cradled my face roughly, but not hard enough to actually hurt me.

Prior to this kiss, every touch had felt electric, like a shock of static after rubbing your feet on the carpet for too long. But this? This was like touching a livewire.

My heart sped up for just a breath before Cash's innate magic began to slow it down, and just for a second, I could hear the distant hum of music.

A groan left my body, muffled by his soft, seeking lips as I settled deeper into the kiss.

This was the kind of kiss that girls in my dorm used to gush about. The kind that I never understood because kissing Mike was comfortable at best, even when he was hiding his true self from me.

But now I got it. This was the kind of kissing that I never wanted to end.

Without thinking, my hands began to slip under the hem of the dark shirt he was wearing. His skin was cool to the touch and it jumped from the sudden assault of my warm fingers before calming under the flat of my palms.

A tongue that was sharper and more pointed than my own slipped into my mouth, reminding me of Cash's inhuman nature. His hips rolled against mine and I could feel something hard in his jeans that was definitely not his tail. No, that had wrapped around my wrist as if it had a mind of its own, keeping me from exploring any further underneath his shirt.

Cash was definitely all gargoyle and instead of scaring me, it just excited me more, sending a thrill straight to my core.

Then Cash's cell began to ring.

He begrudgingly broke away from the kiss, resting his forehead against mine.

"Do you get it now?" he rasped, his silver eyes on mine as his tail finally released its grip on my wrist.

I nodded silently, touching my lips with the tips of my fingers like I could contain the bolts of sensation in them even though we weren't kissing anymore.

"Got it," was all I could manage to say.

Cash pulled his cell out of his pocket and grumbled to himself before answering. "Art, this had better be real fucking important."

He listened to whatever the, his lips turning down into a frown.

“Got it,” he said before hanging up and looking over at me. “We’ve got to get back to Port Haven as soon as possible, dragonfly.”

“Why?” I asked, a sneaking suspicion that I wasn’t going to like whatever he had to say next settling deep in my gut.

Cash looked pissed. “Your husband just rolled into town and apparently showed up at the tattoo parlor to try and talk to you.”

I was right. I definitely didn’t like that.

EIGHTEEN

CASH

“And what else did he say?” I asked everyone gathered in the waiting room at Monstrous Ink. We’d driven through the day, only stopping for food and coffee on the way back to Port Haven.

Daphne had retreated back into herself after the phone call, her whiskey eyes clouded by the return of her ex and cutting off any discussion about what had occurred right before Art called me.

We would have to talk about it, though, and soon. When Ronan and I were left alone in the trailer he told me that gargoyles experienced a mating heat when we found our heart songs and the desire to mark Daphne as mine would grow stronger the closer we got to the equinox.

I was already starting to feel the pull before we left for Las Vegas, and now that we’d kissed, all I wanted to do was drag her back up to the farm and not let her leave until after the equinox was over in two weeks.

And then Mike had to waltz back into the fucking picture.

Fiero had been at the desk when he walked in asking after Daphne and showing her old picture. We hadn’t looped any of the other employees at the shop into what happened to Daphne, so Fiero didn’t know that he needed to keep his mouth shut.

“He asked when Daphne would be back and I wasn’t sure, so I said as much,” Fiero replied apologetically. “I wouldn’t have said anything if I’d known.”

“It’s okay, Fi,” Daphne reassured him, though there was a haunted quality to her face that wasn’t sitting right with me.

Heath was quick to step in to defend his best friend. “It’s not Fiero’s fault. If Ambrose hadn’t said anything to that P.I., we wouldn’t even be in this mess.”

At the mention of the elf, a low growl rumbled out of my chest. He at least had the decency to make himself scarce by the time we made it back, so I wasn’t going to rip him limb from limb... yet.

Apparently Mike had hired a private investigator to track Daphne down and when he walked into the shop with her picture, Ambrose had confirmed that she worked at Monstrous Ink as our receptionist.

Now all of our carefully laid plans had been blown up and we were going to have to figure out what to do next.

“We weren’t downstairs either or we’d have turned him away,” Effie piped up from where she was sitting next to Daphne. “But we can assume he’ll be back.”

“And I’ll kill him when he does come back,” I bit out, my tail lashing behind my back and nearly knocking one of the framed pictures off of the wall.

“You can’t,” Dallan reminded me, giving me a clap on the back. “The human government doesn’t take kindly to monsters offing their own, even if they deserve it.”

“He’s right,” Daphne finally said, her eyes meeting mine for the first time in an hour. “We just have to keep with the plan. Mike is in town, so we can serve him with the divorce papers and the restraining order.”

“Do you seriously think that will keep him from trying to hurt you?” I asked incredulously. If human men had one thing, it was the audacity of an untouchable god. Especially human men like Mike who had been handed everything in life on a silver platter.

Daphne shook her head. “No, I don’t, but it’s all I’ve got.”

“We’ll protect you, we won’t let him take you anywhere,” Heath promised and reached out to give her hand a squeeze.

Heath’s love language was physical touch. It was nothing new to see him offering a comforting touch, but seeing him do it to Daphne made me want to rip his arm off.

“Back off, pup,” I growled, making everyone in the room jump.

Heath pulled his arm quickly back to his chest and there was hurt in his blue eyes when he looked at me again. “I wasn’t doing anything, Cash, I swear.”

“Yeah, chill the fuck out,” Fiero said, stepping in front of the other man, his hooves making loud clacking noises on the tile floor.

“He literally can’t, he’s protecting his mate,” Dallan said, his golden eyes moving between Daphne and me thoughtfully. “Anyone touching her who he perceives as a threat is liable to lose an appendage until the bond is finished, however the hell you gargoyles do it.”

Effie’s gasp filled the waiting room, her worry over Mike’s appearance in the shop momentarily forgotten by pure excitement.

“I fucking knew it!” she crowed, giving Daphne a little shake before enveloping her in a back-cracking hug.

I slanted a glance at Dallan. “Are you going to tell all of my business or is nothing sacred anymore?”

Dallan shrugged. “Not telling the rest of the staff about Daphne already got us into this mess, so I figure transparency is more important at this point.”

Even though I hated to admit it, he was right.

“Congratulations, I guess,” Heath mumbled, still clearly hurt by my earlier harshness.

“Does that even work with humans?” Fiero asked, seeming more curious than anything.

I didn't have time to give the rest of the staff at Monstrous Ink the ins and outs of gargoyle mating, especially seeing as I was still trying to figure it out myself.

But apparently Daphne had found her spark again because she was glaring at Fiero now. "Of course it works. We have all of the appropriate parts to make it work, so why wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, what she said," Effie said, quickly coming to Daphne's defense, then she leaned in close and whispered: "Remind me to get you that enchanted oil I mentioned before."

Daphne's surreptitious nod to the nymph made my entire body throb.

I really needed to get this conversation back on track before everything dissolved into questions about a sex life I hadn't even had a chance to think about yet.

"Enough." My voice boomed in the waiting room, effectively silencing all conversations about whether or not Daphne and I could successfully mate. "I'm going to get in contact with the lawyer handling Daphne's case. He's local so he should be able to serve Mike with the papers tomorrow. Fiero, did he say where he was going to be staying?"

Fiero's expression drooped. "He did. He said he's family friends with Mayor Arsenio and is staying with him."

Fuck. That was not what I wanted to hear.

The fae held no love for us and that would make it especially hard for us to kick Mike out of Port Haven.

"How the hell does he know Arsenio?" I asked.

"I have an inkling, but you aren't going to like it," Dallan said, his tentacles twisting with displeasure. "Arsenio doesn't usually care for any humans except for a select few."

I cursed under my breath. "You don't mean...?"

Dallan nodded. "Aye, I do. Mike's family line must have been fae blessed by Arsenio at some point."

There was an audible gasp of air from everyone in the room. Everyone except for Daphne who was frowning with

confusion.

“What does being fae blessed mean?” she asked, glancing around at each monster in the room.

“The fae are some of the oldest supes on earth next to the Greek monsters. They used to exchange their young for human babies to be raised in the human realm. They’ve always been pretty secretive about why, but once that occurs that family line is fae blessed. Meaning they have better luck than typical humans and the fae who blesses them will go out of their way to help them, like Mayor Arsenio is doing with your ex,” Effie explained, twisting her green hair nervously in one hand.

“It’s not confirmed, though, Arsenio rarely gets involved with humans so I can’t imagine him fae blessing any family line,” I interjected with a shake of my head. If it was true, though, it made shit a whole hell of a lot harder for us.

“Eff, if anyone can find out if he is fae blessed, it would be you,” Dallan said quietly, his gold eyes locked on the tree nymph.

Effie straightened in her seat, her expression pinching with anger. Dallan had touched on a taboo subject and was about to bear the brunt of her anger. “No, I cannot find out.”

“Why not?” Daphne asked.

“He’s trying to get me to ask my father who just so happens to be a warlock working for Arsenio,” Effie stood up abruptly from her seat. “But I haven’t spoken with him in a long time and don’t plan on starting now.”

With that she stomped toward the stairs. Dallan reached for her, but her vines slithered out from underneath her shirt and pushed the Cthulhu away as she stomped up the steps and disappeared.

“I tried,” he told me, before quietly following her, probably to try and calm her down.

The sound of a door slamming upstairs muffled their words, but with my sensitive hearing I could hear her ripping him a new one for bringing up her father.

Turning back to face the rest of them I sighed. “For now, Daphne goes nowhere by herself.”

“I don’t need to be babysat,” Daphne protested, but I held up a hand.

“Please don’t argue. For my sanity please just make sure you are always with me or someone else from the shop,” I pleaded with her, hoping she could see the fear in my eyes.

With Arsenio getting involved, I was worried that Daphne could be spirited away at any moment and I’d never be able to get her back.

Daphne looked as if she wanted to continue to fight me on it before her shoulders finally sank in surrender and she nodded. She stepped in close so she could weave her fingers through mine, the contact making my skin tingle.

“We’ve got it, Cash, we won’t let anything happen to her,” Heath said, reiterating the point he’d been trying to make earlier before I’d nearly bitten his head off.

I had one more request for Daphne. “I also want you to work with Effie to see if you can control your ability to see through glamours. The fae are the best at it and I wouldn’t put it past them to try something to lure you out of safety.”

“I don’t know if I can control it, it kind of comes and goes as it pleases, but I’ll try,” Daphne agreed, giving my hand a squeeze.

I wanted to get Daphne back to the farm and get all of the cameras set up before the end of the day.

Gently tugging her toward the door, I turned one last time to Fiero and Heath. “And one last thing, keep Ambrose away from me for a while. I know he didn’t know any better, but I might just try to knock his head off of his fucking shoulders if I see him right now.”

The elf had no lost love for Daphne because she was a human and I was half-convinced he’d exposed her on purpose.

Once we were outside I inhaled a lungful of crisp night ocean air and worked to calm myself down.

“You’re too tense,” Daphne said, reaching up to rub at the furrow in my brow. I’d been worried she’d pull away from me completely now that her past had caught up with her, but that didn’t seem to be the case. “Shouldn’t I be the one stressed about everything?”

“Your stress is my stress now, dragonfly,” I reminded her gently. As soon as I found out that her lifespan would match mine, I was all in.

I think even without the mating magic behind it all I would have eventually come to love her. From her gentle interactions with my animals to her ability to stand up for herself against monsters twice her size, she’d enchanted me from day one.

“You know my mom used to always tell me not to look for a husband but a partner, someone who would shoulder all of my troubles with me,” Daphne said, her lips tilting up into a thoughtful smile. “I always thought I was disappointing her in whatever afterlife she was in because I let Mike walk all over me. But now I think she’s finally proud of me for finding someone like you.”

Warmth spread throughout my chest at her words and I couldn’t help but duck down and capture her lips again. This kiss wasn’t desperate like the one this morning had been, but it was soft and full of promise.

“Get a room!” a drunk vampire said as they stumbled out of The Dive, ending our sweet moment.

“I swear, if we get interrupted one more time I’m going to hurt someone,” Daphne muttered against my mouth before pulling away.

A chuckle rumbled out of my chest and I suddenly felt lighter than I had all day, my worries about Mike and Mayor Arsenio temporarily forgotten by the feistiness in Daphne’s tone.

“I know one place we won’t get interrupted,” I told her as we began to walk hand-in-hand back toward the parking lot.

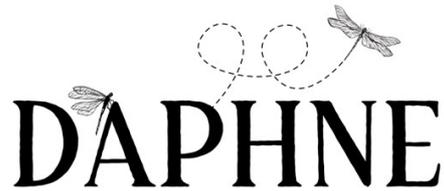
“Oh yeah? Where?” she asked.

I grinned. “Home.”

I could feel her pulse stutter in her wrist as she blinked up at me, her expression shocked but pleased.

She finally nodded, a wide smile lighting up her face. “Home sounds really nice right about now.”

NINETEEN



DAPHNE

I thought it would take Mike days to show his face again at Monstrous Ink, but it only took less than twenty-four hours.

The bell over the door dinged, just like it had all morning with clients and I didn't even look up before greeting them. "Hi there, walk-in or appointment?"

"Neither," Mike's familiar drawl met my ears, immediately sending a shiver of fear down my spine.

Don't let him know you're scared, I told myself as I looked up and met his eyes.

The last time I'd seen Mike he'd been crumpled on the floor bleeding from his head. Today, he was dressed in one of his well-pressed suits, not a hair out of place. He must have been paying someone to take care of his clothes, because one thing I'd learned very quickly about my soon-to-be-ex-husband was that he'd never done a chore in his life.

His mother had done everything for him, and then once we were married it became my responsibility.

On the outside he looked completely healthy, but I could see that the suit hung oddly on his thinning frame and there were bags under his eyes that I'd never noticed before.

It must be the drugs that I had no idea that he was taking, I told myself.

Anger sparked in my chest, replacing the bolt of fear that I'd initially felt when he came into the shop.

“You are not welcome here,” I told him, pretending like his presence hadn’t shaken me to my core.

“I’d beg to differ,” a different voice said from behind Mike. I’d been so focused on him that I didn’t see the even more imposing presence just behind his shoulder.

The voice belonged to a creature that was human in shape, but one look at the shimmering glamour and his lavender eyes that seemed to hold thousands of years of knowledge, and I knew that this was Mayor Arsenio. He had hair the color of spun gold that was perfectly coiffed around a chiseled tan face. He looked to be around thirty, but I knew that he’d been alive much, much longer.

The desire to curl in on myself and agree with anything they asked for fear of being punished rode up my spine, like an invisible hand pressing into my back encouraging me to ruin two months of work in thirty seconds.

“So do I,” my voice squeaked as I spoke, but I still managed to get the words out. “You must have gotten my papers earlier, the ones that included my request for a divorce *and* a restraining order signed by a judge.”

Mike’s lips puckered as if he’d just sucked on a sour lemon, and he opened his mouth to say something but Arsenio stepped in, smoothly interrupting him before he could say something stupid.

“An order that has since been rescinded, the judge didn’t have all of the facts of the case and felt that you didn’t have enough for an order of protection, Mrs. Campbell.”

The use of my married last name was like a slap in the face and suddenly Daphne Clarke disappeared, replaced once again by the weak-willed Mina Campbell.

“Her name is Daphne Clarke now.” As if reading my thoughts, Cash’s voice came from behind me, low and dangerous.

I wasn’t sure when he’d come up to the front, but the relief I felt at seeing his looming form and silver eyes was instantaneous and I melted back into my seat.

“And who might you be?” Mike asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Cashiel, this has nothing to do with you,” Arsenio said, unbuttoning his suit jacket like he was gearing up for a fight.

“Everything with my mate has everything to do with me,” Cash growled, crossing his arms over his chest.

Last night as we sat together on the couch with the dogs curled around us, Cash explained that mates held a heavy weight in supernatural society. He was hoping that because we were mates, it would overshadow Mike’s claim.

Judging by the way Arsenio’s eyebrows rose at the mention of the word, I knew he was right.

“When did this development come about?” the mayor asked slowly, glancing between Cash and Mike and seeming to weigh just how much he wanted to support a human, no matter how blessed he was.

“She is *not* your mate, she’s my wife!” Mike sputtered, his face scrunching with disgust. Every single disparaging comment that he’d made about monsters and supernaturals rose in my mind. In New Hampshire, humans reigned supreme, but in California it was a totally different world. Mike’s prejudice wouldn’t win him any favors here. “She would never willingly fuck a monster.”

I’d had enough. I didn’t know where I summoned the courage, but I stood from my seat and slapped my hands on the desk in front of me. The noise drew the attention of all three men in the room. “Your soon-to-be ex-wife. You should have just let me run away, Mike. It’s not like you ever even really liked me.”

Saying it out loud made me realize just how true that statement was. I was a payday for Mike, and once he’d used up my inheritance he treated me like a servant.

Mike had seemingly had enough of behaving himself. He stepped forward, as if to tower over me the same as he always did when he was about to scold me like a child. “It doesn’t matter. You belong to *me*, Mina, you can’t just unilaterally decide to end the marriage.”

That was the crux of it all. Mike thought of me like a piece of his property, a doll that he could whip out for his friends and make dance on command. Someone who he viewed as moldable enough to turn into a miniature version of his mother. Gag.

Cash's growl filled the room, a subtle warning for Mike to take a step back.

"Actually, Mike, that is exactly what I can do. Both California and New Hampshire are no-fault states, meaning I can dissolve our sham of a marriage whenever I want to. I don't want any of your assets, so it should be simple. Sign the papers, Mike, and get the hell out of my life," I said, feeling braver than I ever had before. The seven-foot-tall gargoyle at my back definitely helped with that.

"Then I'll just have to have you arrested for attempted murder. The gash you gave me on my head can attest to that," Mike spat, his face tomato red with rage.

Then my view was blocked by a broad, flannel-cladded back. Cash had seemingly had enough. "Try it, human, and I will make you wish you were never born."

"And we will help him," Dallan's voice came from the hallway as he and the rest of the Monstrous Ink employees, sans Ambrose, stepped into the waiting room.

Arsenio, who had taken a step back at the mention of mates, put a hand on Mike's shoulder. "We should go for today."

"Why? I'm not in the wrong," Mike said stubbornly, but his eyes had widened at the sudden plethora of monsters stepping in the room. As much as he hated them, it all stemmed from a deep-seated fear.

"You need to get the fuck out of our shop before I hex your ass until your dick falls off and runs away," Effie shot from behind Dallan's arm.

Arsenio glanced over at her. "Always good to see you, Euphemia, you should give your father a call. I know he misses you dearly."

Effie scoffed. “I’d rather pull my teeth out one by one than have anything to do with that man.”

“Pity,” Arsenio replied loftily before snapping his fingers at Mike. “Michael, let’s go.”

Mike looked as if he wanted to argue and he even turned to do just that, but whatever he saw in Arsenio’s eyes made him change his mind.

“This isn’t over,” he told me as he followed Arsenio out of the shop.

“Just sign the papers, Mike, and go find someone else to terrorize,” I called as the door slammed behind them.

As the echoes of the bell faded, the room became quiet.

With a heavy sigh, I was the first to break the silence. “He’s not just going to give up.”

“Neither will Arsenio, in my six hundred years I’ve never met another being as slimy as him,” Dallan said, shaking his head as his tentacles curled with displeasure.

Cash tugged me into his chest and banded a protective arm around my back. “The same rules apply as before, she doesn’t go anywhere on her own.”

Heath held his hand up in salute. “Aye, aye, Captain, Operation Scooby Gang is well underway. She won’t leave our sight.”

I grimaced. “Please don’t call it that.”

“Why not?” Effie asked and whipped her cell phone out of her pocket. “I’m the one who came up with the name. Look, I’ve even renamed the group chat to match.”

“It does have a ring to it,” Dallan commented thoughtfully.

I shot him a glare before looking at Cash, hoping he would back me up.

The storm cloud expression that he’d been wearing ever since Mike and Arsenio walked into the shop was gone now, and his silver eyes sparkled with mischief.

“As long as they protect you, they can call it whatever they want, dragonfly,” he said.

“Traitor,” I muttered, mostly to myself as the rest continued to chatter back and forth until the bell over the door signaled the arrival of a customer.

As Effie greeted what looked to be a fish man, Cash tugged me back down the hallway and into his tattooing suite.

“You were very brave back there,” he murmured into my ear as he pressed my back to the wall.

“It helps to have a gargoyle boyfriend backing me up,” I said, my lips tilting up into a grin.

“It was attractive as hell,” Cash growled, one of his big hands cupping my jaw. He then began to rain kisses on the tender skin on my neck, over the tattoo that I’d finally decided to stop covering up this morning.

It had only been a little over twenty-four hours since our first kiss, but it felt like ages had passed since that moment in his truck.

Cash mentioned last night that he was already feeling the urge to mate, and judging by the nip of his teeth, he was feeling frisky.

Without thinking, I lifted my hands to his curved horns and gripped them tightly, holding his mouth to my neck. Cash made a noise that I’d never heard before and it took me a second to realize that it was one of pleasure.

“Are your horns sensitive?” I asked, my voice husky.

Cash nodded wordlessly, his teeth grazing my pulse.

I was just about to start stripping his clothing off, fully intending to go further than we ever had before, but then a knock on the door interrupted us.

Cash cursed under his breath, leaning his forehead on my shoulder. “What?” he snapped at whoever had decided now was a good time to intrude on our moment.

“Hey guys,” Fiero’s muffled voice came from the other side. “I know you’re busy, uh, getting jiggy with it in there, but the customer has some questions about their tattoo and Dallan said to get you.”

Cash just sighed, his eyes still hazy with lust.

“Later,” I told him as I reached blindly for the doorknob.

Cash pulled me in close again and gave me another blistering kiss. “Later,” he promised before yanking the door open.

“This had better be really fucking important,” he told Fiero before stomping back up the hall to the waiting room.

Fiero looked at me, his thick brows lifting with surprise. “A horny Cash, I never thought I’d see the day.”

My face flushed and that seemed to thrill the satyr who stomped one hoof into the tile.

“Man, if you and Cash ever break up, I’m first in line—”

“Fiero if you like having your hooves attached to your body, I highly suggest you don’t finish that sentence,” Cash’s voice boomed from the front of the shop, cutting Fiero off.

“Ooh, yikes, angry gargoyle alert,” Fiero said, his grin still wide despite the threat. With a little wave he turned and headed across the hall to his own room. “But if you ever *do* want a Shaggy instead of a Fred...”

“Hooves, Fiero, hooves,” Cash called again. “Get your horny ass away from my mate.”

Fiero’s laugh was muffled by the door as he shut it. “Your hearing is as impeccable as ever, Cash.”

Leaning against the doorframe, I decided to test that. “If you can hear me, knock on something,” I whispered to the air.

Knock.

The sound of it was sharp and clear.

I grinned. “I liked the way your lips felt on my neck, it kinda makes me want to bite you back,” I said it so quietly that

I wasn't sure if even Cash's supernatural hearing could pick it up.

A knock, harder than the one before, echoed down the hallway.

“Focus, Daphne,” Effie scolded as we sat cross-legged on the beach. “Try to imagine the shimmer of the glamour disappearing.”

We'd been sitting in the sand for nearly an hour and I still couldn't see past the glamour that Effie was wearing. Her face and body features still looked like her, but her skin, hair, and eyes had turned a bright shade of purple with the magic.

This was our third session since Cash and I returned from Vegas and I wasn't any closer to being able to do more than see the shimmer of the glamour.

Effie swore up and down that I should be able to do it, but I was starting to not believe her.

“Why are we sitting on the beach doing this? Can't we do it in the shop?” I didn't mind being at the beach under normal circumstances, but I was growing increasingly paranoid as the days went on.

Mike had been radio silent for nearly five days now, and instead of making me feel better, it just made me feel worse.

As far as we could tell, he was still in town and staying at the mayor's mansion. He hadn't signed the divorce papers and hadn't even retained his own divorce lawyer yet, telling me the battle was far from over.

“Because it's meditative, a good way to help relax your mind,” Effie said, her purple eyes glued to my face.

“I don't feel very relaxed,” I muttered, squinting even harder to try and see past the magic she was wearing. Unfortunately, all that did was start to give me a headache.

“Did Daniel LaRusso question Mr. Miyagi about his training methods?” Effie, leaning forward to give my knee a light smack.

I frowned, wondering if we’d watched the same *Karate Kid*. “Yes he did. That’s, like, the entire plot during literally all of the movies.”

This wasn’t even Effie’s first *Karate Kid* reference. For a supernatural being that would live nearly forever, Effie sure loved movies from the Eighties. If it wasn’t *Karate Kid*, she was quoting lines from *The Goonies* or *Dirty Dancing* in her lessons.

“That is beside the point, Daph. I’m trying to get you to *focus*,” the tree nymph insisted before she shot me a mischievous smile. “You know, I bet the reason you can’t focus is thanks to a certain tall, stony drink of water.”

I frowned at her, wanting to deny her words but knowing that would be a lie.

Truthfully, there wasn’t much to report on that front. Ever since that day at the shop, our kissing had grown hotter and hotter... and yet we hadn’t gone any further than that.

Wendy and the other girls used to talk about being sexually frustrated during our college days, but I’d never understood it.

But now I most definitely did.

Every time things got too heavy, Cash pulled away or stopped just before taking things to the next level. It made me want to scream and pull my hair out.

I couldn’t even be angry with him about it. He was an annoyingly good communicator and had made it clear that he was waiting for the equinox.

Never before had I so actively wanted to have sex with another person. It had always been another one of my chores on an already long list. But now I was stuck daydreaming about it more often than I cared to admit.

Effie snapped her purple fingers in front of my eyes. “Yo, Earth to Daphne,” she said, eyeballing me. “Gosh, I don’t even

have to mention his name and you go all doe-eyed.”

My face flushed hot. “Sorry,” I apologized sheepishly.

“Just try to focus, think of me as your Yoda and you are my padawan. When you squint, I want you to imagine the shimmering of the magic parting like curtains,” she said, clearly pleased with her *Star Wars* reference.

“I think I prefer *Karate Kid*,” I muttered under my breath.

“*Focus*,” Effie repeated.

Huffing a sigh, I looked at her again. She was still purple, but it was easy enough now to pick out the edges of the glamour. It shimmered around her like a glowing heatwave.

Just think of it like opening a curtain, I told myself silently and tried to imagine it.

Effie’s body shimmered for just a split second, the purple draining out of her skin and hair to reveal their normal green shade.

Then my cell rang, breaking my concentration and the purple snapped fully back into place. I’d finally upgraded from the burner phone to an actual smartphone, so Wendy’s picture popped up on the screen showing that she wanted to video chat.

Effie snatched the phone up before I could answer it myself and greeted the other woman with an exasperated smile. “Hey, Wen, you’re interrupting my training time.”

Effie and Wendy got on like a house on fire. They were instant friends and Wendy had been roped into the Scooby Gang group chat almost as soon as they were introduced.

I pulled the phone from Effie’s grasp. “My training is going fine, in fact I think I’m starting to get the hang of this glamour thing.”

Wendy grinned at me from the screen. “Yeah, are those magical eyeballs of yours finally paying off?”

One of the few benefits of Mike finding where I’d run away to was my friendship with Wendy going back to normal

again. She was still worried about me, but all of our conversations didn't revolve around whether or not I was safe anymore and it was freeing.

"She's still got a long way to go, she's not going to be catching flies with chopsticks anytime soon," Effie grumbled as she crowded in next to me so that Wendy could see both of us and dropped her glamour completely so that she looked normal again.

"What's that reference from again?" Wendy asked, her brow furrowing with confusion.

"Only the greatest movie series ever created, *Karate Kid*," Effie said, clearly shocked by Wendy's lack of movie knowledge.

Wendy shrugged. "I was born in the late Nineties, so I was always more of a slasher movie kind of girl."

"You younglings just don't understand how good movies were in the Eighties," Effie grumbled, mock-offended by Wendy's lack of appreciation.

"Maybe we can watch it together when Reg and I come to visit?" Wendy offered.

They were supposed to fly to California after the equinox to celebrate mine and Cash's bond sealing.

It was definitely strange to, in essence, have a wedding reception when I was still *technically* married to Mike. But sealing the mating bond would give us one more line of defense in the eyes of the supernatural society's law.

And besides that, I wanted nothing more than for Cash to claim me as his as soon as possible.

"A girls' movie night? Sign me the fuck up," Effie crowed excitedly. Effie loved anything girly and it had become obvious that she'd spent so long around the guys at Monstrous Ink that she was sorely lacking any kind of female friendship.

"It'll be fun," I said, giving her shoulder a playful nudge.

"Definitely, I'll even kick Reggie out."

“What’s that about kicking me out?” Reggie’s voice came through the speakers from somewhere else in their house.

“Nothing!” Wendy called over her shoulder. “Well, I’ll let you two get back to your Force training or whatever.”

“You can make a *Star Wars* reference, but you don’t get the *Karate Kid* ones?” Effie asked incredulously.

Wendy just shrugged. “I watched the ones that came out a couple of years ago, they were pretty good. Okay, bye!”

“They were *not* good,” Effie huffed as she settled back down across from me and the glamour snapped back into place. This time her skin, hair, and eyes were blue.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a giant nerd?” I teased.

Effie frowned at me, her false blue eyes unamused. “You only get to talk shit when you can see past my glamour, now tell me, how many vines am I holding up?”

“You’re holding up vines?” I asked, squinting to try and push through the curtain again like I’d done earlier, but failing entirely. Clearly, it was going to take more of Effie’s training sessions before I got the hang of it.

I idly wondered if she was going to take us to the mountains and make me stand under a waterfall next.

TWENTY

CASH

I *tchy*. That was the only way I could describe the feeling that I'd woken up with two days ago. No matter how hot a shower I took, or how much I ran on the treadmill at the gym, I couldn't seem to get rid of the feeling of *itchiness*.

It wasn't even my skin that was feeling this way. It was like the itchy feeling was deep inside of my chest, cradled right next to the constant hum coming from my heart.

And the source of my itchiness?

The human woman currently working with Cocoa the temperamental mare. Cocoa still had trust issues with most things, but she at least let us, or more specifically Daphne, put a harness on her now.

"That's a good girl," I could hear her cooing to the horse as she led her around the yard in smooth easy circles.

Nothing about this should have been sexy, and yet I was staring at her like one of those ridiculous cartoon wolves, jaw dropped and tongue lolling out like an asshole.

Ronan had sent me an email that he'd titled 'everything you need to know about gargoyle mating.' It was largely illegible, full of rambling sentences and misspelled words, but the gist of it was: the closer a gargoyle gets to the equinox with a potential mate nearby, the hornier he gets.

He was definitely correct about that.

I'd been attracted to Daphne before, almost painfully so, but it was nothing compared to how I was feeling now.

Every single thing Daphne did turned me on. From the way she walked to how she typed on her computer at the shop. Hell, even just watching her load the dishwasher last night had made me imagine, in detail, bending her over the countertop and licking every inch of her skin to see if she tasted as good as she smelled.

And to top it all off, we were still two days out from the equinox. That meant that whatever I was feeling today was about to get much, much worse.

Dallan had even banned me from work until after it was over because I'd nearly beat the shit out of a goblin that was hovering just a hair too close to her.

“Come on, Cocoa!” Daphne called, dropping the lead and kicking up into a run. The mare followed her closely, as if they were still tied together, and the two ran around until Daphne was huffing from the exertion.

I watched from where I was leaning against the gate, my eyes catching each droplet of sweat as it rolled down the side of her neck and down underneath the collar of her shirt.

I hadn't seen Daphne fully naked, not yet, and I was now regretting the decision to wait until the equinox.

As if feeling the heat of my stare, Daphne's whiskey-colored eyes found me and crinkled in the corners as she shot me a quick smile.

“I'm almost done,” she called with a wave before she made a clicking noise with her tongue. For someone with little practical farm experience, Daphne had taken to everything like a duck to water.

Cocoa couldn't tolerate me on her best days, but she was like a puppy with Daphne, following close on her heels as she was led back to the barn and into the stable without any fuss.

Upon her entrance, Marshmallow greeted Cocoa with a pleased nicker and the two got to work on the hanging feeder in the corner of their stall.

“Do you think we'll be able to saddle her soon?” Daphne asked, coming to stand next to me. The scent of her strawberry

shampoo wafted up into my nostrils and my tail gave a frustrated lash as I turned to answer her.

“Maybe, though I wouldn’t be surprised if she never takes to a saddle again,” I told her honestly. Marshmallow was a couple of years younger and would probably be all right, but Cocoa would always be an unknown variable.

Daphne sighed, resting her chin on the top of the stall door. “At least she’s not trying to take me out with her hooves any chance she gets.”

I didn’t tell her that there had been more than once that Cocoa had started to lift said hooves, but one look from me had made the mare think twice about kicking my mate.

Without thinking, I ducked down to steal a kiss from her, my entire body humming with anticipation when a little noise leaked from the gap in our lips.

“Out here?” Her question was muffled as I began to kiss my way along her jaw and down the side of her neck, inhaling her scent deep into my lungs.

“Just a little bit,” I purred against the thrum of her pulse, feeling it jump against my lips. She left her tattoo uncovered all of the time now, but it was still faded.

“Are you ever going to let me touch up your neck, dragonfly?” I asked, giving the spot a light nip with my teeth. I always had to remind myself to be careful because my teeth were sharp. My claws I could trim, but I couldn’t do the same to my teeth.

“Whenever you have time,” Daphne gasped, her hands gripping my horns. It was hard to describe what having someone touch my horns—especially at the base—felt like. It felt almost as good as if she’d reached down to stroke the length that was already hardening in my jeans.

Sliding a hand underneath the hem of her shirt, I was just inching towards the lining of her bra when we were once again interrupted by the ringing of a cell phone.

“Fucking hell, it’s like they can sense a disturbance in the universe whenever we kiss,” I growled, straightening and

patting at my pockets looking for my phone.

“It’s mine,” Daphne said, pulling her cell out of her pocket and reading the caller ID. “Hi, Liam.”

Liam Donovan was the divorce lawyer handling Daphne’s case. He was a wizened old werewolf that worked in an office uptown and the only person who was willing to go toe-to-toe with Arsenio.

Not that Arsenio was doing anything to prevent Mike Campbell’s divorce at this point.

I’d heard through the grapevine that Arsenio had judged Mike to be not worth the effort. Apparently, he was still letting the asshole stay in his mansion, but there wasn’t going to be anymore throwing his weight around.

Or that’s what they wanted us to believe at least. Arsenio had been too quiet, which made me half-believe he was cooking something up behind the scenes to separate me and Daphne.

We needed to seal the mating bond as soon as possible, but I also wanted it to be special for both of us. We would only seal a mating bond once in our, thankfully, long lives and I wanted it to be memorable.

“Uh-huh, yes I understand,” Daphne said, her expression strange. “Yes, thank you, Liam, just let me know when you fax the papers over to me and I will sign them. Okay, you have a wonderful rest of your afternoon.”

“What?” I asked as soon as she’d hung up.

Daphne just shook her head. Her lips, still rosy from our earlier kissing, pulled down into a confused frown as she finally looked up at me. “Mike signed the divorce papers.”

I blinked once, then twice, trying to process her words.

“Come again?” I asked, afraid I hadn’t heard her correctly the first time.

Daphne held her arms open, her face lighting up. “He signed the papers. I’m free.”

I scooped her up and twirled her around the barn, listening to her laughter and noises of the very confused animals watching us.

She was still smiling when her feet reached the floor again, but worry was already creeping back into her eyes. “What are the chances that this is some kind of a diversion or ploy?”

I leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. “Probably pretty high, but either way, you’ve got a set of signed papers and that’s step one, dragonfly. Don’t let what could happen ruin this moment.”

Her smile came back in full force.

“You’re right,” she said and gave the collar of my shirt a tug, bringing me back in for yet another tail-curling kiss.

I pulled her in close, feeling each soft curve of hers mold into my chest. I was ready to get back to what we’d started before her phone rang, but Daphne eventually placed her hand over my mouth, blocking my lips.

“I have to go and call Wendy and Effie,” she murmured apologetically. “Raincheck?”

With a sigh I nodded, letting her slide down my body until she was standing on her own again. “Raincheck, but just know that once the equinox kicks in, I’m not letting you leave my bed for a week.”

Her cheeks flushed adorably and her teeth pulled her lower lip in. “Maybe I don’t need to call just yet...”

A laugh rumbled out of my chest and I gave her backside a little swat with my tail. “Go, dragonfly, before I change my mind.”

Daphne shot me one last glance before turning and hurrying out of the barn, already calling Wendy and Effie on her phone.

I stood alone for a long time, trying to breathe through the pounding waves of lust that were getting harder and harder to tamp down whenever Daphne was nearby.

An annoyed huff came from the stall where Cocoa and Marshmallow were.

“She’s not coming back,” I told Cocoa, earning myself a baleful glare from the mare. “No matter how much you glare at me, she’s not going to come back and spoil you.”

With one last whinny from the mare, she turned and headed through the door to the outside paddock attached to her stall.

Marshmallow, who was about as sweet and soft as the treat she was named after, leaned over the stall door for scratches from me.

“We should have named Cocoa Sour Patch instead, huh, Marshmallow?” I asked the mare, running my trimmed nails through her forelock and mane. She made a noise of agreement before following her sister outside.

As soon as she was gone, I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed Art’s number.

“You’ve reached the bullshit voicemail of Art Nagathe,” Art answered cheerfully, clearly not a voicemail. “If this is Cashiel calling to bug me about stupid shit, please leave a message at the beep... *BEEP.*”

“Cut it out,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I need you to look into some things for me.”

“What else is new, buddy. You know, between you and Dallan I have to wonder if you’re only friends with me because of my computer talents.” Art’s voice sounded pouty through the speaker.

“That’s exactly why I’m friends with you,” I responded, a grin on my face when I heard the naga give an offended gasp.

“You’re lucky you’re one of my only friends, you big ass stone bat, or else I’d drop you like it’s hot,” Art quipped. “Now what can I do for you, Oh Needy One?”

“Mike Campbell signed his divorce papers out of the blue today, I need you to figure out why.”

There was a beat of silence. “That’s fishy as fuck, Cash.”

“I know it is. That’s why *you* are going to figure out what’s going on. Preferably by the time I come out of the equinox,” I said, gripping my phone tightly enough that I could hear the metal buckle a little bit under the pressure.

“Ooh, that’s in two days, right? *Bow-chicka-wow-wow*,” the naga sang.

“Just figure it out, bye, Art.” I hung up the phone before he could get anything else out, shaking my head.

The one drawback of explaining why Daphne and I needed time off for the equinox was that everyone knew what was going to happen during said equinox.

The group chat that all of the guys shared had been lighting up all week teasing me about it.

Everyone seemed happy for me and Daphne. Well, everyone except for Ambrose. He was still avoiding the shop, either rescheduling his tattooing appointments or canceling them altogether.

I still wasn’t happy with the elf, but even I could admit that his usual snarkiness was missed at Monstrous Ink.

Stepping out into the yard, my eyes were immediately drawn to where Daphne was leaning against the fence talking on the phone. Her ass looked far too good in the pair of jeans she had on and I was, yet again, reminded of the itching urge to tug them down to her ankles and explore every inch of her right out in the open.

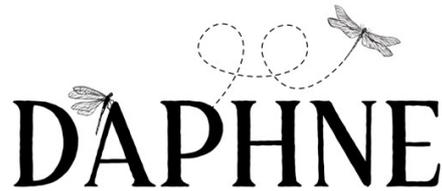
Just two more days, I told myself as I hurried toward the house. *Two more days and then you’ll never have to hold yourself back again.*

As I climbed the steps of the porch I briefly wondered if the ice-cold showers that human men took to check their lust worked on gargoyles. I’d bet not at all, but I was willing to try anything at this point.

But two hours later after a long, icy cold shower, I was just as horny as I’d been before.

Human men were so lucky.

TWENTY-ONE



DAPHNE

I could tell that Cash had reached his breaking point the morning of the autumnal equinox.

He'd been lethargic throughout our morning chores and had barely gotten inside the house before collapsing onto the couch and falling fast asleep. I'd never actually seen Cash sleep before. He usually lay with me in the guest room upstairs until I fell asleep and was gone long before I awoke, so I wasn't sure how much rest he got during the night.

"Cash?" I murmured softly, brushing the stray lock of long, dark hair off of his brow. He didn't stir, but the furrow in his brow smoothed at my touch so I flattened my palm against his forehead, watching his stiff frame relax even further.

"Can gargoyles get fevers?" I asked out loud to myself.

Cash's typically cool stone skin *did* feel warmer than usual.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket I tried to google whether or not gargoyles could get sick, but nothing came up. Not surprising considering how secretive gargoyles were about their species.

So my next best bet was Effie.

She answered on the third ring, not even bothering with a greeting. "How goes your mini-vacation, are you guys banging yet?"

"No, we are not. Are you sitting at the desk asking me that question?" Effie was covering the desk for the shop while I

was out.

There was a pause.

“...no,” Effie lied.

“Yes she is,” Dallan’s voice came through the speaker of the phone. “And there’s a horrified selkie sitting in the waiting room.”

“Snitch,” I heard her hiss at him. “The selkie is fine, isn’t that right, Mirella?”

“Actually—” a shy feminine voice began but Effie quickly cut her off.

“See? She’s totally fine, besides Dallan is here to take her back to her appointment.”

“Ask her when she’s coming back,” Dallan said, sounding completely exasperated.

Effie snorted. “She’s not coming back until after she and Cash defile every surface of their house and seal that bond of theirs.”

My nose scrunched at her words because, while it would probably be true, she didn’t need to say it out loud. “Not in front of the selkie, Effie,” I scolded.

“Mirella already went into the back to get the scariest skull tattoo I’ve ever seen. She looks like something straight out of a Barbie movie, and yet she has the insides of a serial killer,” Effie said with a laugh and I could almost hear her shaking her head as she spoke.

Cash made a noise in his sleep, reminding me of my reason for calling Effie in the first place. “Hey, do you know if gargoyles can get fevers?”

“Is Cash okay?” Effie asked, her tone shifting immediately to that of a worried mother hen.

“I think so, but he’s been pretty groggy all day and he’s taking an actual nap on the couch right now,” I told her, trying not to let the worry I was feeling seep into my voice.

“Hang on,” Effie said and I could hear her standing up from the desk. “Dallan! Question!”

“I’m kind of in the middle of stenciling Mirella’s back, Eff, what is it?” Dallan asked, clearly annoyed by the interruption.

“I’ll finish the stencil, you talk to Daphne,” Effie said and the sound of the phone being passed around filled my ears. “Wow, Mirella, that sure is an interesting skull. What’s supposed to be coming out of the eyes?”

“Maggots,” I heard the selkie’s sing-songy voice reply before Dallan’s deeper timbre blocked them out.

“What’s going on, Daphne? Everything all right over there?”

“I’m not sure, Cash is asleep and I think he might have a fever? Can gargoyles even *get* sick?” If so, I wondered if human cold medicine would work on him. I was pretty sure I had a bottle of it upstairs if so.

“Can you explain what’s been going on?” Dallan asked, not sounding nearly worried enough about his best friend.

I pressed the back of my hand to his cheek, finding the stone skin to be nearly as warm as my hand. Usually his skin was a bit like incredibly soft granite and it took my own body heat to warm him up in any significant way.

“He’s warm to the touch and he’s been lethargic throughout the morning feeding. I don’t think I’ve actually *seen* him take a nap before,” I explained, my voice peaking with worry.

There was a chuckle on the other end of the line.

“Dallan, are you laughing at me right now?” I asked, irritated by the Cthulhu’s nonchalance over what could potentially be something very serious.

“No, lass, I’m not. Cash is all right,” Dallan said. “He’s just, ah, preparing.”

Confusion filled me. “Preparing?”

Another chuckle came through the speaker of the phone before Dallan sheepishly explained himself. “Yes, preparing. For many supernatural beings, the act of mating, especially during times such as the equinox, takes a lot of energy for, y’know, *activities*. So sometimes they go into a sort of short hibernation to prepare themselves.”

At his round-a-bout explanation of Cash’s sudden narcolepsy, my face warmed. “*Oh*,” was all I managed to say.

“Yes, *oh*.” I could hear the smile in Dallan’s voice and I was half-tempted to hang up the phone and stew in my own embarrassment for a bit.

“So he doesn’t need any medicine?” I asked, just to make sure.

There was a beat of silence before Dallan said, rather gleefully: “No, Daphne, I’m afraid that in about eight to ten hours, *you* are going to be Cash’s medicine.”

“Oh,” I repeated again, hoping Dallan didn’t think I was an idiot.

“Have fun and take it easy, I’ll be out in the morning to take care of the animals like Cash asked me to do while you both are, uh, busy,” Dallan chuckled one last time before hanging up the phone, leaving me alone with a softly snoring gargyle and a heap of anticipation.

“Does that mean I also need to take a nap?” I asked out loud, glancing over at Oscar and Saoirse who were asleep in their beds.

Oscar lifted his head and let out a plaintive whine.

“I don’t speak dog,” I told the canine as I pulled one of the soft blankets over Cash’s massive form. “But if I did, I’d assume you just answered yes to that question.”

Cash had given me the basics of what was going to happen once night fell, but it was hard to wrap my head around.

There would be no interruptions this time. No phone calls, tattoo appointments, or friends to get in the way.

It would just be me, Cash, and a mating bond that would change my life forever.

No pressure, right?

As it turned out, Cash didn't need a full eight hours in order to wake up.

“Dragonfly,” Cash's voice roused me from my long nap. The sun was still out, though it was starting to shift in color as it began its descent. Soon the three-quarter moon would rise in the sky and the equinox would truly begin.

“How was your nap?” I asked groggily, trying to blink the sleep from my eyes.

Cash didn't answer, his lips already too busy nibbling on the soft skin of my neck.

Before climbing into bed for my nap, I'd changed into a comfortable nightgown. It was quickly shredded by Cash's imploring hands and left to hang off of my shoulders so he could tweak each of my already peaking nipples.

“I liked that nightgown,” I grumbled, but tilted my chin to give him better access to the sensitive spot behind my ear anyway.

Cash's lips paused, but still he didn't say anything else. His body felt strange as he pressed me into the mattress. A near constant vibration rippled across his skin, like the static electricity that usually snapped between us when we first touched had changed into a buzzing current.

“Cash?” I whispered, using my hands to tilt his chin up so I could see his face.

The first thing I noticed was that the silver in his irises had completely retreated, being replaced by only his inky black pupils. Cash's breathing was also slightly ragged, like his lungs were struggling to pull in enough air to keep him moving.

“Are you all right?” I asked, brushing his now wild mane of dark hair out of his eyes.

Cash nodded before burying his nose in the crook of my neck. “Hurts,” he muttered against my skin.

A few days ago when I’d asked him about what it would feel like, Cash had admitted that he wasn’t sure about all of the details but that the urge to seal our bond would push him so hard that it probably would be incredibly painful until it was done.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, combing my fingers along his scalp before gently gripping one of his horns in my hand. The contact made the gargoyle on top of me shudder.

The flat of Cash’s long tongue lapped up the side of my neck, over my faded tattoo and then back down to the top of my collarbone.

It was at that moment that Cash seemed to remember that he’d torn the front of my nightgown nearly down the center, exposing the rest of my body to him for the first time ever.

Propping himself on one elbow, his dilated eyes skimmed from my face, to my neck, and finally to the rest of me.

“Beautiful,” he grunted. It was yet another one-word response, probably due to the heightened state he was in. He was all instinct, and according to his earlier explanation, he would remain this way until our bond was sealed.

The rest of my nightgown was torn away from my body until I was completely naked underneath him. I’d been too sleepy to realize it before, but apparently somewhere between the couch and my room Cash had shucked his own clothing and he was just as naked as I was.

The same tattoos that covered his arms climbed up his biceps until they curled into an intricate pattern on his chest. He also had a few on the tops of his thighs, all in some kind of Gaelic writing.

My eyes perused the deep gray skin, trying to memorize how it looked in the increasingly dim light of my bedroom.

Then my eyes caught on the stiff length in between said thighs.

It was longer than anything I'd ever seen, and rather than veins, it had little ridges. I wasn't sure how something like that could ever fit inside of me, but Effie swore up and down that her magic oil would do the trick.

Cash didn't give me much time to look at him before he pressed his entire body along mine, using my skin to warm his as he slipped an arm underneath my back.

"Mine," he growled in my ear, his teeth nibbling on my ear lobe as his hips bucked.

There was absolutely no way he was going to put his cock inside of me right away. I needed to slow things down as the only rational person in the room.

"Yours," I agreed, giving him a gentle push and was pleased when he obeyed. Once he was on his knees, I got onto my own and tossed the remains of what was once a very nice nightgown onto the floor. "But we need to take it slowly, okay?"

Cash stared blankly at me for a moment before nodding. "Slowly," he repeated.

Reaching for my bedside table, I pulled out the bottle of oil Effie had ceremoniously gifted me with wrapped in paper covered in fake penises. It was clear in color, but I could see the magic wafting off of it as I grabbed Cash's hand and poured a generous amount into his palm. Then I poured the same amount into my own hand.

With my free hand, I gently drew his hand in between my thighs. I was glad to find that I was already starting to get wet, something I never thought was possible with another partner. I always thought that I was broken, but it turns out that it was the man that had been the issue.

"Touch me," I instructed gently, pressing the tips of his fingers in between my wet folds.

Cash didn't need to be told twice and his fingers slipped up and down exploring the length of my slit for the stiff nub of

my clit, which he quickly found. The sensation was immediately tingly, like he had live wires at the end of each of his fingers. It drew a gasp from my lips that was quickly swallowed by his hungry mouth.

I reached for him next, wrapping the hand that was coated in the magical oil around the base of his cock. My fingers barely managed to touch around the thickness of it and I was struck again by the fact that, very soon, Cash was going to push this behemoth inside of me.

The ridges, which were harder than they looked, shifted under the silky skin of his length and I wondered how they would feel moving in and out against my most sensitive places.

I drew my hand up and down the entire length once, listening as Cash made a garbled noise, his tongue slipping into my mouth and entwining with my own.

As we explored, the room began to fill with a heady scent that made my brain start to feel all fuzzy, like we were in some kind of a fever dream conjured up by my own mind.

I continued to listen to the noises that my gargoyle made as my hand moved in slow, even jerks. Every time Cash grunted or growled, his big thumb would press into my clit, sending tiny shockwaves of pleasure up my spine.

Then one of his thick fingers slipped inside of me, stretching the entrance of my pussy. I was worried at first that it would be too tight, but then the oil seemed to do its job and he began to slip a second finger in almost immediately.

Not wanting him to get the better of me, I gripped his cock tighter and reached up to grip one of his horns.

His hips jerked once, telling me that he was probably close to coming, then his tail was wrapped around my wrist and pulled my hand away.

“Not yet,” Cash rasped as he broke away from our kiss, pulling his fingers free from me and bringing them up to his mouth where he licked each of them one-by-one, his eyes widening at whatever he was tasting.

With a gentle push, I was on my back again, Cash's tail wrapping around one of my thighs this time and pulling me down underneath his bulk. My mind briefly wondered what else he could do with the dexterous appendage and I felt a blush creep up my neck at the thought.

A rattling sound came from Cash's chest and it took me a second to realize that it was a purr of sorts. Pressing my hand into his skin, I felt the same vibration as earlier along with the heavier stutter of the noise.

Cash reached for the bottle of oil and poured it in between my already glistening thighs. At first it was cold and my hips jerked with surprise at the sudden onslaught of sensation.

Strong hands lifted my hips and the thick head of his cock came to notch at my entrance.

"Go slowly please," I whispered, hoping that somewhere in the mist of instinct that Cash was listening.

The first push was painful and for the briefest of moments I wasn't sure that it would fit even with Effie's magical oil. Then warmth began to spread out from my core as the spell on the oil kicked in, and suddenly, he was sheathed completely inside of me without much resistance.

We lay together, seemingly both frozen at the abruptness of it. Cash's tail, which was still wrapped around my thigh, tightened as he slowly withdrew himself.

"Tight," he grunted, his face hovering over mine as the tendon in his jaw tightened with concentration.

Cash continued to move with agonizingly slow strokes and I swore I could feel each and every ridge along the length of his cock as he did so.

"Faster," I pleaded, reaching up to grip both of his horns and giving them a hard squeeze.

That seemed to get the gargoyle above me going because his hips slammed roughly forward, sending a thrill of pleasure through my body.

My back was up off of the bed as he hugged me to his body with strong arms. I tried to move my hips to match his thrusts, but quickly found that he moved too quickly for me to keep up with.

It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before and to top it all off, the tip of his tail snaked in between my thighs, brushing along my sensitive clit and sending me barreling into nirvana.

"Oh god, Cash," I gasped, my eyes flying wide open as I spasmed around his still thrusting cock.

But he didn't stop. In fact, my convulsing seemed to spur him on even more.

Then I felt them, his teeth sinking into the side of my neck that was opposite of my dragonfly tattoo.

Many other species of supernatural creatures bit their mates in order to mark them. Vampires, werewolves, beast people, the list was endless, and gargoyles were no different.

But the thing that made gargoyles unique was their song. As soon as Cash's teeth locked into the side of my neck the low hum of music, which I'd started to feel whenever we touched, swelled into the sweetest aria I'd ever heard.

I couldn't believe this is what Cash heard all of the time. Ever since I found out that I was his heart song I was plagued with doubt and insecurity, wondering how he could know for sure that I was the one for him.

There wasn't a lot about me that I felt was worth it. I always seemed that I was more trouble than I was worth to the gruff, but kind gargoyle.

But now? Now I got it.

Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes as the sound of string instruments met with woodwinds, and the image of standing on an emerald green hill filled my mind. Wind whipped through my hair as the music echoed through the air around me and it was like I was actually there.

If Cash felt this every time we touched, then I finally understood why he knew I was meant for him.

Then my heart rate began to slow the way Ronan said it would, and instead of speeding back up like it usually did, it synced with the slow, steady beat of Cash's heart. It was proof that our lives had been sealed together forever, for better or for worse.

It wasn't as extravagant as the ridiculous wedding that Mike had thrown only six months after my mom's funeral despite the fact that we'd already eloped, but in my mind it was infinitely better.

Cash's hips jerked a few times against mine as he also came, sending little aftershocks of pleasure from where we were still connected.

His teeth remained locked into the flesh of my neck for another few moments until he finally released the tender skin and began to lap at it with his tongue.

After what seemed like forever, Cash finally lifted his face to look at me again. His eyes were silver once more, the sheen of them glowing in the dim light. He was completely back from the precipice of instinct now and I could tell he was feeling a little guilty.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, his voice filled with worry.

I shook my head. "Not at all. I liked it."

Cash's worried expression melted into a brilliant smile.

"Is the song always this loud?" I asked, cupping his face in my hands and pressing a soft kiss to his forehead.

Cash shrugged. "It's never been this loud before the bond, so I'm not sure. The violins are new though."

As if his words brought them to attention, the strings crescendoed into a heart-wrenching melody. "Has it changed? What did it sound like before?"

"It was just the flutes," Cash explained, frowning as he seemed to be trying to find the words. "And it was much sadder than it is now. I guess the best way to describe it would be that my song was lonely before you."

My lips pulled up into a smile. “Are you saying that you needed me to complete your song, Cashiel Windheart?”

Cash mirrored my smile before lifting one shoulder in an easy shrug. “I suppose I am, as cheesy as it sounds.”

I pulled him in close, wrapping my arms around his neck as the music continued to play in my head. “I could get used to a cheesy gargoye,” I said, my words punctuated by a yawn.

“I’ll work on my material,” Cash whispered softly. “Now get some sleep, dragonfly, because I have a feeling I’ll be waking you up soon enough for another round.”

I wanted to respond to him, but Cash’s voice was already far away as I drifted off into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

TWENTY-TWO

CASH

Sunlight streamed through the gauzy white curtains in Daphne's room, filling the air with warmth and waking me up from the deep slumber I was in. One whiff of the room made my cock stiffen impossibly again as the thick must of sex hung heavy.

I wasn't sure how many times I'd woken up already hard over the past day and a half, but I'd lost count after seven.

The mating urge had faded almost immediately after I sealed the bond, but that didn't keep me from wanting to taste Daphne's body over and over again, and for the most part, she was a good sport.

Every time I woke up and began to slide my hands along her velvety soft curves, she would respond enthusiastically, her lips, hands, and teeth ready to give as good as she got.

Even when she'd gotten up to take a quick shower I couldn't help but follow her in and take her against the glass wall, hot water pounding down around us as I nibbled on every inch of her wet skin.

My cock jumped at the memory, reminding me that I was ready to do it all over again.

My hand slid along the bed, searching for her but quickly finding that I was alone.

Lifting my head I glanced groggily around the room and saw that my mate was nowhere to be found.

Then the sound of someone shuffling downstairs in the kitchen met my ears and told me that she was definitely still in the house.

Rolling out of the bed I walked, still naked, down the stairs to find Daphne cooking something at the stove. One sniff told me it was eggs, bacon, and pancakes.

My stomach growled and I realized that it had been days since I'd last eaten.

I was about to reach over her shoulder to snag a piece of bacon right out of the pan... then I got a better look at my mate. She was wearing the flannel I'd discarded on the stairs, the red plaid material hanging down her bare thighs as she shuffled around humming to herself, unaware of my presence behind her. Her pink hair was piled messily on top of her head, baring my fresh mark on her neck.

"Is that bacon for us?" I asked, making her jump a bit when I wrapped an arm around her waist and rested my chin on her shoulder.

"It's for me, but I'll share if you behave yourself," she said cheerfully, her whiskey-colored eyes sparkling as she stirred the eggs.

I chuckled, knowing that she definitely felt my stiff length against her back. "I'll behave... for the meal at least," I promised.

"You'd better," she replied saucily. "Now stop waving that thing around and go put some pants on, or no bacon for you."

"Aye, aye, Captain," I said, straightening and giving her a mock salute.

Ten minutes later we were sitting together at the dining table. I was still hard as a rock, but my desire for food had won out over my lust for the time being and I was busily shoveling food into my mouth.

"Did Dallan come by and take care of the animals?" I asked once I'd finished.

“Yeah and apparently dropped off a whole crate of that oil. He and Effie must have done it as a joke because there is no way we’re going to go through that much,” she said, nodding to the wooden crate filled with enchanted oil bottles.

I didn’t say anything, knowing it wouldn’t be nearly enough if I had my way. I’d gone decades without sex, and in retrospect the people I had slept with hadn’t made me feel even *close* to how I felt when Daphne and I were together.

We were supposed to be back at work in a couple of days, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever get a fill of my mate.

Daphne, oblivious to the heated turn of my thoughts, stood and began taking dishes to the sink. Everything in my home was built for my height, which meant that the countertops were higher and the kitchen sink was deeper. This forced Daphne to stand on her tiptoes and lean over to set dishes inside, giving me the most perfect view of her ass.

All of my rational thought snapped and I was up and across the kitchen in a blink, sliding my palm up her back.

“Cash,” Daphne scolded, her voice already breathless with anticipation as she glanced over her shoulder at me. “I need to finish washing the dishes.”

“I’ll do them for you later,” I purred, nudging her legs apart and sliding the shirt up to find that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

“This?” she asked, groaning when my fingers slid inside of her slick folds.

“Bending you over the counter and fucking you in broad daylight,” I replied, leaning over to snag one of the bottles of oil.

We probably didn’t need to use it at this point, the bond having changed Daphne’s genetic makeup in an effort to make us completely compatible, but the oil definitely made things easier.

Shoving the loose pajama pants I’d thrown on down and kicking them away, I poured a liberal amount of the oil on the

crack of Daphne's ass and watched it dribble down to meet my fingers.

Leaning over her back, I pressed her into the counter and brought my mouth up to one of her ears. "Can I?" I asked, gently prodding at her warm entrance with the tip of my cock.

"Yes," she answered simply, her hands coming up to grip the edge of the countertop as she turned her face so that she could press a blistering kiss to my lips.

The first push inside of her was always the best, her insides spasming to accept every inch of me until, somehow, I was completely sheathed from tip to base.

Despite the size difference, which normally would have been impossible, the combination of oil and our bond smoothed the way for me.

"This position feels different," she moaned, her head dropping to rest on the counter as I gripped her hips on either side and began to push slowly in and out of her.

"It's similar to when we were in the shower," I pointed out, my voice tense from the effort of trying to take it slow until she'd fully adjusted to my cock again.

"It's—" Daphne paused, letting out another unintelligible noise, "Deeper than it was in the shower."

"You can take it," I encouraged, kissing the nape of her neck as an idea popped into my head. "In fact, I think you can take even more than this."

She'd eyeballed my tail more than once while we were making love over the past day and a half, and I figured this was the perfect time to show her just what it could do.

Uncorking the bottle of oil, I once again applied it liberally to the crack of her ass.

"If anything hurts, just let me know," I said, my tail snaking up her thigh and coming to a rest at the tight rosebud between her cheeks.

Daphne stiffened.

“Are you sure it’ll be okay?” she asked, hesitance in her voice.

“Just relax, I’ve got you, my dragonfly,” I assured her gently as the tip of my tail pushed past the tight ring of muscles, eased by the slick oil.

Daphne made a gurgling sound as she gripped the edge of the counter for dear life.

It only took a couple of strokes of my cock to change the tightness of discomfort to one of pleasure again, even the shockingly rough vice-grip of her ass loosened as she acclimated to the new sensations.

“How does it feel?” I asked with a grunt as we began to rock together again.

“Odd, very full,” Daphne managed around a gasp, her insides twisting and warming up. She was close enough that I could probably brush a finger past her clit and make her come.

But I wasn’t ready yet and I’d found that one thing I liked more than making Daphne come on her own was being able to coming with her.

“Just hang on for a bit,” I said through gritted teeth as I picked up the pace. Every single ridge on my cock tingled with pleasure as she tightened with each and every stroke until I was half-convinced she was trying to snap me in half.

The symphony of our song, which had quieted some over the past couple hours, began in earnest again as proof of our complete bond.

As the music quickened, swelling with emotion, I felt my hips stutter as every muscle in my body seemed to tighten up.

One of my hands slipped around to Daphne’s clit, giving it a gentle pinch. With a shout, muffled by her hands, Daphne tumbled over the edge, pulling me with her as I spilled deep inside of her.

My knees felt like rubber and Daphne’s must have too because as soon as her limbs began to untense as she came

down from the high of her orgasm, she nearly crumpled to the floor.

“I’ve got you,” I said, scooping her up into my arms and carrying her into the living room.

Once she was settled on the couch I sat next to her, my fingers smoothing through her pink hair as we lapsed into a comfortable silence. Then I felt her hand reach up and touch the tattoo across my shoulders, above where my scars were.

“Wingless,” she murmured, her fingers tracing the letters. “Isn’t having that tattooed above where your wings used to be an awful reminder of everything?”

“No, not for me,” I said with a shake of my head as I grabbed her hand and gently guided it to the mound of scar tissue where one of my wings used to be. “It’s a reminder of surviving. Most gargoyles who become Wingless go crazy or go into a stone sleep forever. I refused to do that.”

There were many times over the past two hundred and fifty years that I wanted to give up. Especially before the Accords had been written, allowing the supernatural to step into regular society as equal citizens.

But something kept spurring me on through the years, keeping the madness of being alone at bay.

I always thought it was finding my people. Dallan, Effie, and the rest of the artists at Monstrous Ink had become my family in many ways, so I figured that the secret to keeping Wingless from going crazy was having people around.

Then again, I’d known and supported Ronan for a long time. Though he wasn’t completely mad, my presence in his life didn’t alleviate the symptoms at all, no matter what I tried.

“Why do you think you didn’t go mad?” Daphne asked around a big yawn.

“I think I was waiting for you,” I told her honestly as I gathered her into my arms again. Reclining back into the couch, I tucked the blanket up around us and relished the feeling of her head on my chest.

Exhaustion was also settling in for me again, a feeling that was completely new to me. In my nearly three hundred years of life, I'd never felt as drowsy as I had since the equinox started. I wondered if it was because my mate was a human, I'd changed the way her body worked, so it stood to reason that she'd changed me in some ways too.

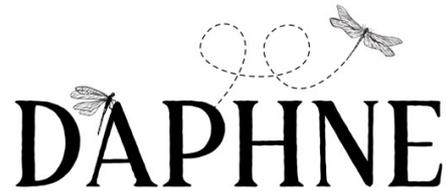
"Me?" Daphne mumbled, her eyes drooping shut and then she was asleep before I could even reply.

I pressed a kiss to the mess of pink curls on top of her head. I'd have to explain to her later that finding her had been a one in a million chance.

The way Daphne made me feel was almost the exact same way I felt when I used to be able to fly. Like everything in the world was light and airy.

"I love you, dragonfly," I whispered to the quiet room. I'd repeat it again when she woke up, but for now I finally surrendered to the drowsiness and fell asleep with her tucked safely in my arms.

TWENTY-THREE



DAPHNE

“Congratulations!” The table cheered as they clinked glasses of beer together.

After four blissful days, Cash and I had finally reemerged from our self-imposed isolation and returned to work.

Between the innuendos and rapid-fire questions from Effie, my first day back passed in a flash, ending with our celebration at the Dive.

Wendy and her husband had flown in while Cash and I were, ah, busy, and she was busily chatting with Effie about whatever they had done last night while they waited for us to come out of hiding.

Apparently, it had included getting ridiculously drunk and wandering around on the beach until both Dallan and Reggie were forced to come and find them.

Now the two were giggling to one another, Wendy’s beaded braids covering her face as the two whispered about something.

“Introducing you two to one another was the worst thing we could have ever done,” Reggie commented dryly. “At least Daphne behaves herself.”

“Not if you ask Cash,” Fiero chimed in from the end of the table earning himself a high five from Heath but a glare from my gargoyle.

Everyone was in good spirits. Even Ambrose had finally made his reappearance while we were gone. He still wasn’t

overly friendly to me, but at least he wasn't giving me the stink eye anymore.

Something about a permanent mating bond must have made him realize that I really wasn't going anywhere.

"You may not ask Cash," I answered primly. The bubbles in the hard cider I was drinking were starting to make my head feel fuzzy.

The satyr didn't seem to mind, instead he just threw his head back and cackled before chugging the rest of his beer. It was his fourth of the night and when he was done he slammed the glass down on the table and stood. "And with that, I see a lovely nymph across the bar that I'm sure behaves about as well as Daphne does."

With one last salute, Fiero was ducking and dodging his way through the packed crowd to the bar where a pink woman was waiting for him. She didn't waste any time wrapping her arms around Fiero's shoulders and the two began to sway to the music that was blaring through the speakers.

"I swear that satyr has more game than the wildest incubus," Wendy said, fanning herself. "As soon as I walked in the door yesterday he had me blushing, right, Reg?"

Reggie seemed less than enthused by his wife's words and slung a striped, furry arm over her shoulders. "Yeah, not my favorite moment of the trip. The guy almost lost a hand when he went in for a handshake."

Dallan's chuckle rumbled from his place next to Ambrose. "Fiero's all talk. He's harmless."

We all glanced over at the satyr in unison only to find him already heavily making out with the nymph before we turned to look at Dallan again.

"All right, he's mostly harmless, but he definitely doesn't go after married women," the Cthulhu amended, his tentacles twisting as he grinned at us.

The song on the speakers ended and suddenly the slow, romantic music changed into something more upbeat.

“*Oh*, I love this song!” Effie gushed as she jumped to her feet. “C’mon, Dall, let’s dance!”

Her vines snaked out to snag Dallan’s wrist as she practically dragged him onto the dance floor. Most of the time the two bickered endlessly, but not tonight. Tonight, something must have been in the air, because the two moved together easily, Effie’s fingers laced behind Dallan’s neck as she chatted up at him.

Wendy and Reggie were next, the two in complete sync as they strutted amongst the couples. A few of the monsters in the bar did a double take when they realized that a tiger beastman was dancing with a human woman, but just as quickly they all went back to minding their business as the pair twirled around the dance floor.

Heath looked longingly at the people dancing before turning to Ambrose.

“Don’t look at me, pup,” the dark elf muttered before getting up to head to the bar.

My heart squeezed for the werewolf and I glanced up at Cash, silently asking my question.

“You’re going to leave me for the puppy?” Cash asked, his silver eyes twinkling as he leaned in close.

“Just for one song,” I said, pressing my hand flat to his chest in order to listen to the symphony that only we could hear.

Cash glanced between me and Heath, his eyes taking in the kid’s dejected demeanor.

“Fine,” he finally surrendered before pressing a lingering kiss to my mouth. “But I get the next song.”

I gripped the front of his shirt and dragged him down for one more kiss. “I adore you,” I whispered before turning to face Heath.

“Come on, Heath, let’s dance,” I said, holding my hand out to him.

Heath's blue eyes widened and he looked over my shoulder at Cash. Whatever he saw there must have convinced him that I wasn't joking because his face broke out into a broad smile.

He looked like every quintessential football jock on TV, all golden curls and dimpled smiles. If I didn't have a handsome gargoyle mate that slowed my heartrate down, his smile may have made my heart flutter just a tiny bit.

"You're the best, Daph!" he shouted over the music before taking my hand and practically dragging me onto the dance floor.

The song was fast, and the bodies on the floor were gyrating like they were in a club rather than a dive bar. But Heath quickly changed the tone as he performed some of the cheesiest dance moves that I'd ever seen. The chicken, the snake, and the sprinkler were all whipped out and soon he'd distracted the other couples enough that they broke away from each other to do the same.

Suddenly, instead of a sultry song with a fast beat, there were monsters showing off their worst moves, dance battle style. I'd never seen a vampire perform the worm before, but now I could definitely check that off of my bucket list.

By the time the song had ended, my sides hurt from laughing so much and Heath's forlorn look was completely gone as Dallan put him in a playful headlock and marched him over to the bar for more drinks.

Then a gray hand was gripping mine and whirling me around. "My turn," Cash growled into my ear as the music started up again.

This time, without our werewolf to silly things up, the thud of the bass brought everyone to the floor in a gyrating mass of bodies.

There was still a ring of space around Cash and me, and I was pretty sure that it was because Cash was glaring at anyone who came close. I didn't mind, I liked the possessiveness. It thrilled me to my very core.

Cash's arm whipped me around so that my back was to his front, his arm wrapped around my middle and his tail wrapping around my wrist as we moved together.

All day today I'd been distracted by thoughts of my gargoyle. I hadn't realized how hard it would be to return to work after four days of constant sex. Every time Cash came up to get a client, his silver eyes had practically burned a hole in my head, and I knew mine had done the same to him.

Cash's hands skimmed up and down my torso, his fingertips tracing my belly button and the curve of my breasts through the thin fabric of my shirt.

Reaching up, I gently drew his face close to mine. "What do you say we get out of here early?"

Cash's expression shifted into hunger. "What about everyone else?"

I glanced over to where the rest of our group was happily back at the table. Well, everyone except for Ambrose who seemed to have bowed out early. While this was *technically* a celebration for us, I couldn't help the heat starting to pool in my core.

"They'll survive without us for the rest of the night," I reassured him, grabbing his hand and tugging him through the crowd. The door was thankfully close by and with one last glance at our celebrating friends, I pulled him out into the night.

It was freezing outside, the air so frigid that I could see my breath as it curled in front of me. We strolled together back toward the parking lot, enjoying the relatively quiet night on the Wharf. The end of the tourist season had come, so only a few still milled around outside as the last of the non-alcoholic spots closed their doors for the night.

"This is nice," I commented, letting my fingers weave through Cash's as we walked.

"It'll get even nicer in the dead of winter with no tourists to be had at all," Cash said, his silver eyes reflecting off of the

light coming from the overhead lights. “And a lot of the monsters who spend their summers elsewhere start to return.”

“It’s like the opposite of Florida. Instead of leaving for warmer climates during the winter they come back here once it gets cold,” I said.

Cash’s lips pulled up into a smirk. “Most of us supes avoid Florida as a rule. Too many gun-toting hunters ready to mount our heads above their fireplaces. Texas is the same.”

“New Hampshire too. I almost never saw supernatural creatures there, though to be fair we also lived in a smaller town.” I didn’t add that Mike preferred it that way. With the way he spoke about supernatural creatures, I never thought in a million years that he would be a fae-blessed human.

If he’d been a more coordinated teenager he probably would have ended up just like the trigger-happy hunters that traveled in packs throughout the country despite federal laws in place protecting supernaturals.

But Mike could barely stomach touching a pistol, let alone firing one.

Shaking thoughts of Mike out of my mind, I gave Cash’s hand a squeeze. “Enough about hunters, I can’t wait to see what winter looks like here. Does it snow in these parts?”

As Cash told me all about what winters in California were like—wet, mostly with snow fall every couple of years—we made it to the parking lot where his truck was parked.

“I guess Ambrose is still here,” Cash commented, nodding to the black Harley still parked in the motorcycle parking spots. “I guess he must have gone back to the shop after slinking out early.”

Cash still hadn’t quite forgiven the elf for confirming to Mike’s private investigator that I did, in fact, work at Monstrous Ink.

“At least he came,” I reminded him, tugging him in the direction of the truck. “Now enough about that prickly elf, let’s get home so I can show you exactly what I was thinking about back there.”

Cash's eyes darkened with unhidden lust and he opened his mouth to reply, but then his gaze drifted from my face to something behind me.

I turned, curious what had caught his attention. The air shimmered, telling me that something was glamoured to be invisible in the distance.

Squinting I remembered Effie's training about opening the curtain and eventually the shimmer rippled and faded, showing me a group of humans who were walking in our direction. They were all dressed in dark clothing and ski masks. Well, all except my ex-husband who was still dressed in one of his expensive suits.

It was as if my earlier thoughts had magically conjured him out of thin air.

There was no time for me to react beyond recognition, though, because one of the men held up what looked like a crossbow.

Cash yanked me to the side and then behind him, turning to look at me. "Daphne, I need you to ru—"

A whistling sound filled the air, cutting off Cash's words. It was quickly followed by a wet thud.

Cash frowned looking down, and there, in the center of his chest, was the point of a crossbow bolt, covered in thick, black blood. In the nearly three months that I'd known Cash, I'd never considered what color his blood would be. Horror filled me at the realization that he'd been hit.

"Cash," I gasped, reaching up to put my hand on the wound.

"Run, dragonfly," he managed to say through gritted teeth as his gray skin began to darken and so did the clothes he was wearing. He removed my hand, pressing it into my own chest.

"What's happening Cash?" I asked, not wanting to leave him behind.

Cash's silver eyes were wide as he winced in pain, each of his muscles seeming to lock up as the darker color spread.

“Stone sle—” he began, but stopped, his face completely frozen.

Every part of Cash had turned into a statue, his face still twisted in agony.

I put my hand on his chest, but instead of the soft gray skin that it usually was, it was completely hard. “Cash? Cash wake up.”

Was he dead? He couldn't be dead.

My mind ran through everything I knew about gargoyles. Cash had mentioned that most gargoyles only go into stone sleep during the solstices, but also that if they were gravely hurt that it helped them to heal.

He's just healing, I told myself silently as the sound of footsteps came closer to where Cash had huddled over me before he'd been hit. *He's not dead. He just needs to heal.*

Cash may not have been dead, but I was on my own now.

“*Mina,*” Mike sang, sending chills down my spine.

I didn't want to leave Cash here, but I knew that if I could just get back to the bar I could get help from everyone.

Turning, I ducked out from under Cash's arms and began to sprint back towards the Wharf.

Another whistling noise filled the air and I mentally prepared myself to be hit by another crossbow bolt. Instead, something else wrapped around my ankles, sending me tumbling into the asphalt.

Pain lanced through me as my skin scraped against the ground. My chin, knees, and elbows were undoubtedly bleeding as I groaned and rolled onto my back.

Get up, get up, get up, my inner-voice chanted at me as I sat up and tried to untie the rope with two weights that they'd thrown at me, only to find that it was hopelessly tangled.

“Daphne?” a familiar voice came from behind me.

Ambrose was standing ten feet away, his hands buried in the pockets of his leather jacket. It looked like he was coming

from the beach as his boots were still covered in sand.

Out of all of the people who worked at Monstrous Ink, Ambrose was the last person I wanted to see right now. But he was all I had.

“Help us,” I pleaded.

Ambrose glanced between me and the crowd of men closing in, and for just a split second, I thought he was going to turn and leave me.

But then I heard him curse and begin running towards me. At first, I wasn't sure what a dark elf could do against such a large group, but then he reached into his waistband and pulled out a black pistol.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Ambrose fired at them, the sound ringing in my ears as two of the men dropped to the ground.

Then Ambrose was next to me, hauling me up by one of my elbows which was still screaming with pain.

“Can you run?” he asked, before glancing down at my still-tied ankles. “No, of course you can't,” he muttered to himself.

He held the gun up again, but froze.

“Why aren't you firing?” If there was ever a time to fire a weapon with abandon, this would be it.

“Because if I do, your boyfriend will meet the wrong end of that,” Ambrose told me through gritted teeth, nodding in the direction of the men.

I followed his gaze to where one of the masked men was holding a sledge hammer above Cash's head.

“Do I have your attention now, Mina?” Mike asked, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets as if Ambrose hadn't just opened fire at him and his cronies.

“My name is Daphne,” I hissed, glaring at him.

“Daphne, Mina, whatever, it doesn’t matter. If you don’t want your monster shattered into a million tiny little pieces, I highly suggest you tell your elf to put the gun down,” Mike said before picking a piece of lint off of his suit jacket, like he was in a business meeting rather than a parking lot shootout.

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’ll do that,” Ambrose spat, his grip tightening on the gun.

Mike shrugged and turned to the man still holding the hammer, “Donavan?”

“My name is Garth,” the man grumbled.

“Does it really matter?” Mike asked with a scoff. “I’m paying you a lot of fucking money, so if I say your name is Donavan... then it’s fucking Donavan.”

Tension hung in the air, but the man finally just sighed and lifted the hammer high above his head.

“No!” My shout filled the space between us. If they broke him, Cash would be gone forever. I turned back to Ambrose. “Please just drop it, I can’t lose him.”

Ambrose glanced between me and the gun, his hard expression softening with something that I’d never seen on the elf’s face: understanding.

“*Fuck*, fine,” Ambrose said and dropped the gun to the ground in front of him. Then he put his lips close to my ear. “Pull off my earring,” he whispered, his lips unmoving.

I wanted to question why he wanted me to pull one of the purple dangly earrings he was wearing, but now was not the time for that. As slowly as I could, I lifted my hand from where it was clenched around his shoulder and slid the hook from his ear, dropping the earring behind us.

“Kick the gun towards me, elf,” one of the men barked as they started to approach.

Understanding dawned on me as Ambrose used the tip of his boot to send the black pistol careening across the asphalt. “He has nothing to do with this, leave him alone,” I said to the

men as one of them yanked me away from Ambrose and hauled me over his shoulder.

I watched upside down as the other man planted a fist into Ambrose's stomach, making him drop to the ground with a grunt.

"They can't," Ambrose said to me with a groan. "Elves, light, dark, or otherwise fetch a pretty penny on the black market."

Horror filled me as a white van rolled up and the backdoors opened. The men who'd been shot were loaded in first and then I was dropped unceremoniously onto the metal floor.

I glanced out to where Cash's stone form still stood. The man with the hammer was lifting it again.

"No, leave him alone! You promised!" The words were a scream that was ripped from my very core.

Mike turned from where he was observing everything like a king overlooking his kingdom. "And you promised until death do us part. Guess we're both liars, huh?"

He nodded at the man who swung back.

I watched with horror as the hammer started to move forward. The desire to close my eyes and look away filled me, but I couldn't. I was frozen.

"Hey! What are you doing to him!" someone shouted nearby.

I hadn't had time to go into the coffee shop over the past few weeks, but I would know that voice anywhere.

Farrow was standing at the entrance to the Wharf, his glamour on as he held his cell phone to his ear. No doubt already calling 9-1-1.

"Shit!" one of the men cursed. "Get in the van!"

They climbed in, practically dragging a still protesting Mike in with them. The sledge hammer that had very nearly

killed Cash was left abandoned on the ground as they slammed the doors to the van and squealed out of the parking lot.

Cash was safe, for now, but that didn't mean much now that we were separated.

“What direction?” I heard the driver shout.

“Head East,” Mike told them, his gaze dropping to me. “Well, my darling, it's time for you to sleep. This should feel pretty familiar.”

His fist connected with the side of my head, sending it ricocheting into the metal floor of the van.

Then everything went black.

TWENTY-FOUR

CASH

“Run!” I shouted as my stone sleep melted away from my body, giving me full use of my body again.

The sunlight above blinded me as I tried to regain my bearings of where I was.

I was still in the parking lot in front of the Wharf, but it had been completely cleared out and taped off with yellow caution tape.

The sun was high overhead which was odd, because when the stone sleep overtook me, it had been completely dark.

Immediately, I began to pat at my chest for the crossbow bolt that had been lodged there. Most likely it had disintegrated with the healing magic of the stone sleep. They must have used a fucking diamond tipped bolt in order for it to penetrate my skin, which meant that the men that had surrounded me and Daphne had been well-trained.

“Cash?” A female voice came from behind me.

“Daphne!” I turned with a roar, looking for my mate, but only found Effie standing by herself.

She looked exhausted, all of the light in her green eyes that I’d seen last night was completely gone now.

“Where is she?” I asked, my legs nearly buckling underneath me. “And how long was I out for?”

“About twelve hours. Farrow called the police and they called us,” she said, answering my first question.

“And Daphne?” I needed her to be okay. I could tell she wasn’t close, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t just at the shop waiting for me to wake up.

Effie nibbled on her lower lip and shook her head. “They took her before Farrow could stop them.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, the world around me wobbling as I tried to calm my inner panic. Leaning down I put my hands on my knees and pulled in another lungful of air before shouting, “Fuck!”

“We’ll get her back,” Effie reassured me, placing a hand on my back. “Besides, she’s not alone.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked with confusion.

Effie jerked her head in the direction of the Wharf. “Come with me, everyone is busy at the shop, I only left because my magic sensor was tripped when you woke up.”

We hurried through the crowd of people who seemed to all be staring at me as we passed. I sure hoped they considered themselves lucky to have seen my stone form because gargoyles rarely showed it to anyone outside of their clans. It didn’t matter though, I didn’t care how many people saw me if it meant I could get Daphne back safely. I’d stone sleep in front of a million fucking people if that was what it took.

The waiting room at Monstrous Ink was buzzing with people when we walked in. There were several police officers, both monster and human, huddled in circles where they spoke quietly to one another. They were probably busy trying to decide who took point in this kidnapping.

“There you are,” Dallan said from behind the desk. “It’s about time your ass woke up.”

He was kidding, but whatever he saw on my face made the Cthulhu rethink his next words. “Sorry, bad joke. Come on and see what we’ve got so far.”

“We’ve been trying to track Daphne’s location for the past few hours, it took me a bit to get all of the ingredients for the spell,” Effie explained, her expression odd as she led us up the stairs to her apartment.

“If you’re trying to do a tracking spell, why were you the one to come and pick me up?” I asked once we made it to the top of the landing.

“Because she’s not the one casting the spell,” a voice I hadn’t heard in nearly a decade said from inside of Effie’s apartment.

The man standing over a map on the kitchen table looked a lot like Effie. They both had similarly sharp facial features, with high cheekbones and slender noses, but instead of Effie’s green coloring that she’d gotten from her tree nymph mother, the man had a head full of dark hair that was slicked back away from his face.

“Alexander,” I growled, “what the fuck are you doing here?”

“Now, Cashiel,” Arsenio said from where he was leaning against the far counter. I’d missed him in my anger towards Effie’s father. “Don’t get angry at the warlock that is currently in the middle of helping you.”

I turned to advance towards the fae, not caring that he was a thousand years older and infinitely stronger than I was. “You’re no better than him, it’s your fault that her piece of shit ex was even able to stay in this town. I bet you gave him that damn glamour too.”

Arsenio held his hands up in front of him in defense. “I did not do either of those things. I backed off from all of this as soon as you uttered the word *‘mate.’* What Michael did afterward was none of my business.”

It may not have been his business, but he could have done a lot to prevent what happened last night. Instead he’d just ignored it until it became a problem.

“You let him operate in town limits, and now because of that, Port Haven was infiltrated by hunters for the first time since its founding,” Dallan pointed out, clearly not amused by the mayor’s excuses.

“Which is why I am helping you now by loaning you my chief warlock,” Arsenio said magnanimously, gesturing to

Alexander who was busily sprinkling powders on the paper in the middle of the table. “Something I do not have to do.”

“Why aren’t you running the spell?” I asked Effie, who just glanced guiltily at her feet.

“Because, while I’m sure she’s a wonderful witch when it comes to bespelling inks and creating glamour objects, Euphemia has a lot to learn about true spellcasting,” Alexander said, disappointment dripping from his voice.

Effie seemed to shrink in on herself.

“I tried most of the night, but we needed help faster than my skill could keep up,” she explained quietly.

“She did the best she could,” Dallan said, stepping in to defend her, his golden eyes blazing with anger at the warlock.

Effie had refused to speak with her father for over a decade, even going so far as to move into the apartment that we were all currently standing in to get away from him. For her to break that silence was telling of how much she’d tried to get the spell to work on her own.

“Thank you,” I whispered, hoping she understood just how much it meant to me.

Tears gathered in the corners of Effie’s eyes as she nodded. “Of course. I’d do anything for you two.”

I nodded, giving her shoulder a pat before returning my attention to Alexander. “Have you got a location on her?”

The warlock nodded, glancing down at the map on the table. “Yes, but just barely. They must have some kind of magic blocker with them, but I’ve got an approximate location.”

I watched as he lifted a crystal on a chain and began to chant under his breath. The corners of the map, which had four clear beakers of fluid sitting on them began to glow and soon the crystal also lit up too.

The crystal moved in circles until it finally pulled in one direction, the tip pointing to somewhere in Utah. They had

made progress in the twelve hours since taking Daphne, and if I had to bet, Mike was taking her back to New Hampshire.

If I still had my wings, I could have closed the gap in a couple of hours. My back ached at the thought. “How the fuck am I supposed to get there before they get any further away from us?”

We could use a teleportation spell, but those took hours to prepare and needed at least a half a dozen witches and warlocks to make it work. By the time we teleported, they could have moved her again.

Dallan smiled for the first time since I’d walked into the shop. “I’ve got an idea. Just because you don’t have your wings doesn’t mean you haven’t got any wings at all.”

I wanted to ask what he meant by that, but then another thought occurred to me. I turned back to Effie who was standing quietly in the corner. “Effie, you said that Daphne isn’t by herself right now, what did you mean by that?”

Effie stepped forward and reached across the table, yanking the crystal out of her father’s fingers. She unhooked something from the top of the chain and held it up to my face.

“We looked back at the camera footage from the entrance and it turns out that one of our own either has the best timing in the world,” she said as my eyes zeroed in on the hooked earring with a purple stone dangling in front of my face. “Or the absolute worst.”

“Who’s earring is this?” I asked, taking it from her so I could get a better look at it.

Dallan snorted. “That sparkly bit right there belongs to none other than our resident sour puss.”

“Ambrose?” I gasped, shock filling me.

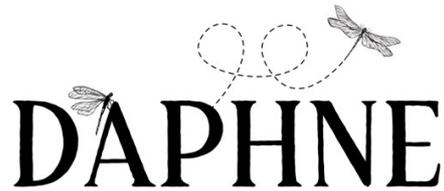
“Yep, it looks like he came upon them mid-abduction and stepped up to help, only to get taken in the process,” Dallan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

I shook my head in disbelief. If I was a betting monster, there would have been no way in hell that I would have ever

thought Ambrose capable of helping a human. Especially a human who he'd spent the past three months hating.

“You have *got* to be fucking kidding me.”

TWENTY-FIVE



DAPHNE

My first thought as I woke up was that my head hurt. It throbbed dully as I tried to figure out where I was, but only found confusion amidst my half-asleep brain. For just a second, I thought maybe I'd fallen out of bed because Cash was taking up too much space on the mattress again.

I quickly dismissed that though as my body wasn't on a smooth hardwood floor. Instead, I was lying outside on the cold, hard ground.

This was definitely not my home. The sound of arguing in the distance only confirmed that for me.

I groaned, trying to sit up but a familiar voice stopped me.

"Don't let them see that you're awake," Ambrose whispered, giving me a nudge until I flopped back down.

At the sound of his voice, everything that had happened came crashing down around me.

I'd been kidnapped by Mike and a bunch of men. Ambrose had been taken with me. Cash was hurt. No one knew where we were. *Shit.*

"My head is killing me," I groaned, wishing I could bring my hand up to rub the sore spot, but both of my hands were tied behind my back.

Finally, I managed to open my eyes enough to find Ambrose's own black eyes on my face.

We were both lying on our sides, practically nose-to-nose. It was dusk outside, the sky darkening from blue to a deep

purple. The assholes who kidnapped us must have driven through the night and nearly through an entire day before I woke up.

Panic fluttered in my chest. How far from Port Haven were we? And where the hell was Mike taking us?

“Yeah, I bet. You sure know how to pick them, human, that asshole was kicking you around even after you’d already passed out. It took one of those hunters to get him to stop,” Ambrose whispered, looking pissed.

As he spoke, I realized he was right. My head was the worst of my injuries, but the rest of my body didn’t feel that much better either. I was pretty sure that at least one of my ribs was broken as it hurt to breathe in and out, but I didn’t have time to think about that.

I shifted slightly, the pain becoming so intense that a whimper slipped from between my lips. “Where are we?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“I dunno, they shoved a bag over my head at some point, but the van broke down ten or so hours in, that’s why they put us outside and are currently busy arguing,” he explained.

“What are they arguing about?” I whispered, trying to listen in vain as the words were muffled by the distance. It was clear that Mike was pissed about something and I wished that I had Cash’s hyper sensitive hearing.

Ambrose shrugged. “Same shit that humans always argue about. Apparently your asshole ex paid them to grab you and drive both of you across the country. I put a twist in those plans though, and the van breaking down was just the cherry on top.”

Effie had once off-handedly mentioned that elves fetched some of the highest prices on the black market. Something about their blood and organs being used as drugs amongst other things. Now that Ambrose had been taken with me I was afraid that we’d just handed these assholes an even bigger payday.

Guilt sat heavy in my gut. I'd pulled him into this. "I'm sorry for getting you involved," I apologized. Ambrose never liked me much, but that didn't mean I wanted him to be captured by hunters.

Ambrose sighed heavily, his pallid skin seeming to flush. "I owed you one for giving away your location to that P.I. Doesn't mean I like you, but I respect Cash enough to not want him to be hurt."

"Thanks... I guess?" I said, unsure of what to respond to that with.

"Save your thanks for when we get out of this. Remember that earring? Effie should be able to track me with it. Which means that, hopefully, the cavalry is already on its way with guns blazing," Ambrose said, his shoulders moving up and down as he did something behind his back. "In the meantime, you and I need to get the fuck out of here before they figure out what's wrong with the van and we're on the road again."

Ambrose's hands, which he'd somehow freed from his restraints, flipped me over and began untying me. I bit back a groan at how much his jostling hurt, and started to gear up for a run that was undoubtedly going to be much more painful.

"When I tell you to, you need to get up and run. I'll be right behind you, but don't look back," Ambrose instructed softly, glancing over his shoulder at where Mike and the men were still arguing.

"Ambrose?" I asked, turning to look at him again.

There was a huff from the elf. "What?"

"Before we do this, can you tell me why you hate humans so much and why you helped me yesterday? And no bullshit about owing me one." If I was going to trust that Ambrose had my back, I needed to know more about him.

There was another heavy sigh, but this time it sounded less annoyed and more resigned.

"How much do you know about elves?" he asked.

I shrugged, wincing as the movement tugged on an ache in my shoulders. “Not much.”

There was a short pause. “Elves, like gargoyles, have a true mate. Our *fylgja* is what we call them. But it’s a little different than most supes. Elves’ souls don’t die, but are reborn. This means that our *fylgja* could be born a thousand years after us or before. It just makes finding them extra special.”

“And did you have one?” I asked, already seeing where Ambrose’s story was heading.

“Yeah, I did. I’m a pretty young soul compared to some of the other elves, so most of my kind told me it could take a couple of centuries to meet them... but it didn’t. She was right next door,” Ambrose said and I could hear the smile in his voice. “Her name was Astri, my star. Everything about her was perfect and we spent a hundred years in bliss. Then, in 1985, we were in New Orleans and she was taken by a group of hunters while I was out buying groceries.”

Ambrose paused to take a shaky breath.

“By the time I managed to find her, barely anything of my star remained. They’d cut pieces of her body away like she was a fucking barbie doll and had drained her of every drop of blood she possessed. The only thing substantial left of Astri was her earrings,” Ambrose said, his voice tight like he was trying not to cry. “And it’ll be those earrings that save our asses.”

“You said elves reincarnated, will Astri come back?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Another pause.

“Honestly? I don’t know. Souls that have a traumatic end may never leave *Álfheim* again to return to the earthly plain. I haven’t felt her in almost fifty years, so I’m not holding out hope that she’ll ever come back to me when I’ve failed her so miserably.”

“You didn’t fail her,” I told him quietly, feeling the conviction of my words with every bone in my body. “The

world failed her.”

Silence swelled between us for what felt like forever before Ambrose finally spoke again.

“Regardless of my sordid past, you can understand why I don’t want Cash to feel the way I did. I’d also like to not end up as a black-market scientist’s next dissection, so let’s do this.” Ambrose said before giving my shoulders a push. “As soon as you are on your feet, make a beeline across the road to the tree line. I’ll be right behind you.”

Without saying anything else, Ambrose had me up on my feet and I was off running. Every inch of my body hurt, as the rapid motion pulled at scabbed and sore muscles, but the shouts from behind us spurred me on across the paved road and into the thicket of trees.

As I ran, I could hear Ambrose crashing through the woods behind me, his footfalls heavy as a whistling noise began to fill the air.

“They’re shooting at us, start to zigzag, human, or else you are going to be a crossbow pin cushion in no time!” I heard Ambrose shout.

I used to hike with my friends once upon a time during my university days. We’d get dressed up in our cutest athleisure wear and hike up a semi-steep mountain before taking cute pictures at the top for Instagram. We always stuck with the ‘beginner’ hikes and I always remembered huffing and puffing regardless of the difficulty.

But those hikes had nothing on running through pure forest. There was no beaten path in front of me, just underbrush that snagged at my ankles and trees that whipped out to try and pull me off my feet if I didn’t pay close enough attention.

A bolt glanced off of a tree trunk that was next to my head, sending bark flying everywhere and pulling a surprised scream from my mouth.

“Less screaming, more running!” Ambrose barked as he bypassed me, grabbing my hand on the way and pulling me

along with him.

My lungs burned from the effort, but soon we came upon a wide creek that stopped us in our tracks.

Ambrose cursed under his breath. “We’ve got to go through it, it’s pretty shallow,” he said, already pulling me forward.

“Wouldn’t it be better to skirt along it to find a thinner crossing?” I asked, gasping as the frigid water came up to my knees.

The elf shook his head. “No, these assholes are trained to spread out. If we go left or right, we’re bound to run into one of them eventually. The only way is forward.”

We managed to get halfway across the creek before the sound of bodies crashing through the underbrush came from behind us. I glanced back, trusting Ambrose to keep pulling me through the creek, just as one of the men stumbled out from behind a tree.

“Got ya now, you elf mongrel,” one of the men said as he lifted his crossbow, aiming it straight for Ambrose.

“Get down!” I shouted and dropped fully into the water, dragging Ambrose down with me as the bolt sailed over our heads.

My head went under and ice filled my veins as I came up sputtering.

Glancing back to the shore, I saw that the man was already starting to reload.

“Up, up,” Ambrose barked, half-dragging me up the opposite bank of the creek and then we were off again. “Thanks, by the way,” he called over his shoulder, his long dark hair flying behind him as we ran for our lives.

“You’ve got my back, I’ve got yours,” I managed to gasp, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

But just as quickly as we got away from our captors, our luck had just as quickly run its course.

Another whistle filled my ears, this time coming from a different direction.

Ambrose's eyes widened and he turned to look at me as the bolt jammed through his neck, spraying greenish blue blood in an arc that covered me.

For a moment, I couldn't register what I was seeing. Ambrose went down on one knee, a gurgling noise coming from his mouth as he looked up at me before he flopped down onto the ground in a heap.

I knelt down next to him, pulling him into my lap. "Ambrose, don't you dare die," I said, giving him a vehement shake.

He frowned up at me and gestured for me to run.

"A little wound like that won't kill an elf," one of the hunters said as they approached. "Elves are sturdy bastards, and every inch of them is worth a pretty penny."

He moved to grab Ambrose's arm and I swatted his hand away.

"Back the fuck off!" I yelled, hovering protectively over Ambrose's still bleeding body.

The hunter looked down at me like someone would look at a new puppy. "Ain't that cute," he guffawed before turning to yell over his shoulder. "Yo, Campbell come get your girl so we can bag and tag the elf!"

Mike appeared from the underbrush, every inch of him disheveled by our jaunt through the woods and he tried in vain to straighten his suit before speaking. "You couldn't have caught them before they ran half way across the fucking forest, Peter?"

The man turned with his crossbow, "The name's Rad, Campbell. You better get it right or my next bolt goes through you."

Mike held his hands up. "Fine, fine, got it, Rad," he said, his voice wobbling.

Rad glared at my ex-husband for another beat before turning back to us. “God, she’s wearing half of the product at this point. We’re going to have to strip her to salvage what we can. Boys,” he said with a snap of his fingers.

Two of the other hunters stepped up and I skittered back, making Ambrose groan in pain.

“S-stay back,” I told them, wishing I still had Ambrose’s gun from last night.

“Oh, don’t worry sweet pea, we’re not gonna hurt you. You’re just carrying ’bout ten grand worth of elf blood on those clothes of yers,” one of them cooed as he knelt in front of me.

“Yeah,” said the other, “we just need you to wear your birthday suit for a bit, and if you’re good maybe we can find you some clothes at the next rest stop.”

Ambrose tapped my hand, bringing my attention away from the two oncoming men back down to him.

He looked lucid despite the amount of blood that was coming from his neck and he gave my hand a squeeze. “Run,” he mouthed.

I didn’t want to leave him here to the same fate that Astri faced. Everything in my being wanted to fight the men off and drag the dark elf with me.

But despite my sealed bond with a gargoyle, I was still only human.

“I’ll come back for you,” I promised him in a whisper.

Ambrose’s dark eyes blinked with surprise before he mouthed for me to run again just as a hand came into my vision.

“I said,” I growled, jerking my chin up to face the man. “Get away from me!”

Opening my mouth I bit down on the man’s hand as hard as I could.

He howled and stumbled back, yanking his fingers from my teeth. “The little bitch bit me!”

I didn’t stick around to hear what anyone else said, shoving Ambrose off of my lap as gently as possible, I got back up on my shaky legs and I was off and running again.

This time I didn’t bother to avoid the branches and they scratched at my face, hair, and neck as I tumbled blindly through the forest.

“Mina!” Mike called, his footfalls heavy behind me.

I didn’t respond, keeping my eyes in front of me.

Then a hand was gripping my hair and yanking me off of my feet. Mike fell with me and together we crashed into the ground.

My hands grabbed his face, my nails finding purchase on his nose as I worked to push him away from me. “Get off of me!” I screamed, dread filling every inch of my body at being captured by him again.

“Stop! I just want you to come home with me, then it can all go back to the way it was,” Mike’s voice took on a whining tone as he fought to grab my wrists.

“I don’t want to go with you, you never even liked me,” I snapped, trying to free my arms from his burning grip.

“That doesn’t matter,” he growled, finally managing to pin me to the ground. His blue eyes were wild and crazy and he glared down at me.

“You and me? We have to be married,” he said with a finality that told me that he knew something I didn’t.

“Why? Why can’t you just let me go?” I was ashamed of the whimper that came out of me. “Why can’t you just let me be happy?”

“Because your fucking mother put clause upon clause in your inheritance. If we divorce or you die, I lose all access,” Mike blurted without a hint of remorse.

Confusion filled me. “There is no more inheritance. You told me it was all gone. The house, the stocks, the real estate portfolio. All of it. Gone.”

It was one of the reasons he’d gone from mentally to physically abusive over the past year and a half. Always screaming in my face about the fact that I brought nothing to our marriage. That I was useless.

“No,” Mike said, pushing my sore face into the ground. “The only thing that was gone was what I could access. Your mother was one of the richest women in the country and despite hiring me to handle her estate, she put safeguard after safeguard on the money. It took me ages to figure it out, and just when I did you whacked me over the head and ran for it.”

“What...?” I began, almost afraid to ask what he meant by that.

Mike’s face, which had been pinched with rage, smoothed into a self-satisfied grin. “The only way to access the inheritance is as a parent to a child with your bloodline, Mina.”

Horror filled me with the implications of what he was saying. That was why he’d suddenly started pushing for us to start trying for a baby. Why he’d thrown my birth control pills a few weeks before I escaped.

“So, we’re going to be Mike and Mina again, who everyone says is the perfect couple. Then we’ll have little baby Campbell and everything is going to be just the way it was. I’ll even forgive your affair with that fucking abomination,” Mike cooed, his thumb brushing down my cheek with a sick sort of affection.

Bile filled my throat as the image of the rest of my life was conjured in my mind. Being trapped in that house while Mike had free rein over the money my mother had left. I needed to get away from him or else that future would become a reality.

I didn’t know where I found the strength, but somehow I managed to bring my knee up as hard as I could between Mike’s legs, nailing him squarely in the nuts.

Mike howled and slumped down on top of me, his body curling in on itself as I rolled him away.

“See if you can have kids now, asshole,” I spat and turned to leave.

The sound of a gun being cocked echoed off of the trees around us.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Mike said through gritted teeth. When I turned to face him again, Mike was now holding up Ambrose’s pistol in his shaky grip. “I was trying to be nice, but you don’t need working kneecaps to have a baby, Mina.”

This was it. The end of the road. I’d fought so hard to make it even this far, and it would all be in vain.

I wondered if Cash would ever be able to get to me if I was trapped in New Hampshire. The local authorities were all human, so they wouldn’t hear him out about mates or anything of the like. Would he be all alone again? I’d promised him forever, but looking at the gun, I was sure I’d rather die than go back to Mike and live a life of hell.

I was just about to open my mouth to tell Mike to fuck off when the sound of something flapping in the distance caught my attention. A screech filled the air, loud and mangled as Mike and I looked at each other with mirroring looks of shock.

It was Cash. It had to be. I couldn’t see him, or hear him, but I could *feel* him deep in my chest. My mate had come for me, and if the sounds I was hearing were right, he’d brought the cavalry with him.

“That abomination is named Cash,” I said, pointing at the sky. “And he’s about to kick your ass.”

Mike frowned, looking up at the sky before lifting the gun in my direction again.

But Mike never got the chance to shoot me or anyone else for that matter.

Another screech vibrated through the forest, shaking the trees. Then a gray blur fell from the sky, directly onto Mike’s

prone body, causing him to scream in pain.

“Hey, dragonfly,” Cash said as he casually stepped off of my ex. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

TWENTY-SIX

CASH

“Magnus, bank left that way. Her location is moving pretty quickly through the forest,” Effie said as she held up the map that had taken her and five other witches and warlocks to enchant. Daphne and Ambrose’s dot had stopped for a few hours, but as we approached it was on the move again.

Magnus, the giant rock dragon that I’d given a back tattoo of a Catholic saint, followed Effie’s directions and tilted to the left. Dallan and several of his other contacts were suiting up toward the back of the large leather saddle that Magnus had brought with him.

Riding on a dragon, especially a rock dragon, was a rarity. They were stubborn and tended to avoid people, but as soon as Dallan had put the call in Magnus was in Port Haven within an hour. Apparently he loved his tattoo so much that all Dallan had to say was jump and Magnus was ready to go. If things went well I was prepared to give him free tattoos for the rest of eternity, just so long as I got my mate back.

Dragons covered much more space than most winged creatures, so it only took an hour and a half to close the gap between Port Haven and Daphne’s location.

“All right,” Dallan said, adjusting the ammunition strap across his chest. He was dressed in all black and his usual colorful beanie was replaced by a black one. “You are faster and stronger than these hunters, but they have been trained to look for your weak points. Shoot to disable, not to kill. The human authorities will deal with them later.”

“Roger!” They all said in unison.

It was sometimes easy to forget that Dallan had been a huge presence in the supernatural underground before the Accords had been written, and was at his core, a soldier.

There was a nearly forty-year gap between supernatural creatures being exposed to society and the Accords that were put in place to protect them. Humans had treated it as a free for all to get rid of as many of us as possible, and Dallan and the rest of his people had worked to keep supernatural society safe, no matter the cost. Effie said it still gave him nightmares sometimes, but Dallan would never really talk about it.

“We’re close, nearly on top of them,” Effie said, glancing up from the map. She was dressed similarly in all black like the rest of the group, but had been told by Dallan that under no circumstances was she to leave the saddle.

Peering over the side, I squinted at the tree line, looking for Daphne. She’d been dressed in light clothing the last time I’d seen her, so it should have been no problem for my eyes to find her.

Then, my chest gave a rough thump, like it was trying to let me know that my mate was in my vicinity again. Daphne was my true north, and our bond would always point me in her direction and that direction was directly below us.

“I’m going first,” I shouted over my shoulder.

Dallan shook his head. “No, Cash wait for—”

But I was already off the side, the air whipping around me as I hurtled down towards the forest. A fall from this height would barely faze me, so I focused on trying to find where my heart song was.

Then I found her standing in the forest looking beaten and battered.

Time seemed to slow as I watched her ex lift the gun in his hand, and without thinking, I made the decision to use the motherfucker to soften my landing. Mike screamed as I felt something crunch underfoot.

Daphne's eyes were wide as she took me in. Bumps, scrapes, and bruises seemed to cover every inch of her along with more blue-green blood than I'd ever seen before. One sniff and I realized it was Ambrose's blood that she was wearing like a second skin.

"Hey, dragonfly," I greeted her softly. "I've been looking all over for you."

Whiskey eyes began to fill with tears and her legs buckled underneath her, forcing me to rush forward to catch her and sweep her off her feet.

Her entire body shook as I held her close and she let out a wail that just about broke my heart.

"I've got you, sorry it took me so long," I whispered, carrying her away from the still groaning Mike. His back was definitely broken, but he'd probably live. I was half-tempted to go back and finish him off, but I was sure the human authorities wouldn't look too kindly on me if I did that.

The sounds of gunshots filled the forest as Dallan's men did their jobs and by the time I made it to where the scent of Ambrose's blood was the strongest, all of the hunters had been completely subdued.

A few people were huddled around Ambrose as Effie busily poured concoctions from her bag into the wound on his neck.

"Will he be all right?" Daphne asked quietly.

"He'll be fine, elves are pretty resilient," I told her, squeezing her even closer to my chest. I was afraid that if I put her down, she'd disappear again.

Daphne glanced down at her bloody hands. "Not all of them are."

"I see he finally told you his story," Dallan said from the left of me as he joined our small circle.

Daphne nodded, her eyes sad.

"Can you take care of her for a second?" I asked Dallan, who nodded and held his arms out so that I could transfer my

mate to him before approaching Ambrose.

“How is he doing?” I asked, kneeling down next to Effie.

“He’ll live,” Effie answered brusquely as she prodded at the wound making Ambrose wince in pain. “But the bolt sliced through his vocal chords, so those will take time to heal. A silent Ambrose might be an improvement though, so I say we should keep him this way.”

Ambrose shot her a dry look as if to say *‘ha-ha, very funny.’*

“Thank you,” I told him, leaning in close so he could see my face better. “Thank you for not leaving her alone and protecting her when I couldn’t. I’ll return the favor one day.”

The elf’s dark eyes swam with emotion before he nodded and looked away, seemingly embarrassed by the praise.

“All right, everyone, once the human authorities get here to deal with these assholes we’ll get loaded up and head home!” Dallan barked as the sounds of sirens echoed in the distance.

Daphne reached for me as I approached again, the tenseness in her shoulders melting away as soon as she was in my arms again.

“Let’s go home,” she murmured, burying her face in the crook of my neck as she let her eyes flutter shut.

“You got it, dragonfly,” I said, relief over having her back in my arms again almost palpable as we climbed back up into Magnus’s saddle.

Three weeks later...

“She always meant for you to have this place,” Hal, the head groundskeeper of Daphne’s mother’s estate explained. “So, when you never came back after getting married I started to get worried.”

It had taken Daphne three weeks to completely heal and start to put together the pieces of the life she'd left behind on the East coast.

Thankfully, she seemed to heal much faster than normal humans did now that we were bonded, and Effie had sped up the process even more with her potions. The tree nymph seemed to be taking Daphne's kidnapping the hardest, throwing herself into her work and hardly leaving her apartment except for when my mate or Dallan managed to drag her out.

I was pretty sure Effie's father had said something to her before he left, but she wouldn't tell us what it was.

"I didn't even know it was still owned by me," Daphne said as she walked next to Hal, her arm tucked in the crook of the old man's elbow.

"Well that ex-husband of yours made it nearly impossible for me to contact you at all," Hal muttered with a frown. "He blew through every year or so, trying to see what he could filch to sell and I'm sorry to say that I didn't have enough staff to keep everything safe."

"You've done more than enough, Hal," Daphne assured him, shooting me a soft smile over her shoulder before turning back to Hal. "And I hope you and your children stay on as caretakers of this place for as long as you like. My mother thought of you all as her family."

The man seemed to sag with relief, like he hadn't been sure whether or not Daphne would come in and kick them out of the home they'd lived in for nearly thirty-five years.

The rest of the real estate portfolio, and the stocks would be sold off as Daphne had no desire to manage any of it. She'd already made the decision to donate a large chunk of her inherited fortune to various charities helping women out of situations of domestic violence and also animal sanctuaries that desperately needed the money.

When we'd discussed it, she'd told me that she'd basically written the money off a long time ago, but if we ever had

children she wanted them to be able to one day play on the estate we were currently walking through.

It was an idyllic place, buried deep in the mountains of western Massachusetts, like something out of a fairytale. It wasn't as large as some mansions, but it still boasted several bedrooms, bathrooms, and a full stable.

I wouldn't have blamed her if she asked me to move from Port Haven to here, as it held so many fond memories of her childhood and her mother. But Daphne had set me straight about that as soon as I brought it up.

"Port Haven is my home now, no matter how much I love the Mass house, I love it here more," she'd told me firmly, smiling fondly at my small kitchen which we were eating breakfast in as we discussed our future. "It's the place I met you. No other place could hold a candle to it."

So I'd just raised my hands in surrender and let her take the lead. We'd flown out to Massachusetts a few days ago so she could show me everything about her childhood.

I'd spent very little time on the East Coast since immigrating to the United States in 1925. The West had always been more monster friendly, after all, but one thing that the East coast had on the West was their autumn. I would never forget how the world seemed to explode into a million shades of red, yellow, and orange around us.

For his part, Mike was still in the hospital with a broken back and legs. He was lucky to be alive, but would most likely need to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. I didn't feel bad for him, especially once Daphne told me the real reason behind his kidnapping of her. Frankly, the bastard was lucky I didn't break into his hospital room and crush his skull like a watermelon.

There would be a trial for him and the other hunters. The supernatural side of the government was pissed that they had attacked me within the limits of a classified sanctuary, not to mention kidnapping Ambrose. Elves were a hyper protected class, even in supernatural society and that meant retribution was in order.

On the other hand, the human side of the government didn't want to risk pissing the council of elves off even more, so the hunters would probably receive pretty hefty sentences when all was said and done.

Ambrose, for the most part, was back to normal. He still didn't have full use of his vocal chords again, so most of the time he just glared and pointed at his clients when he wanted them to do something.

The only difference in the elf was that he was infinitely nicer to Daphne now. She still didn't want to talk about everything that had happened that day, but something had bonded the two together forever.

It wasn't a romantic bond. Had it been I would have torn the elf in half and tossed him into the ocean. No, if I had to put a finger on it, it seemed more brotherly.

Sometimes I caught Ambrose hovering over her while she worked like he was some kind of guardian angel.

"Do you and your man friend want a tour of the stables?" Hal asked, bringing my attention back to the pair strolling in front of me.

Daphne turned to me, her whiskey-colored eyes dancing as she reached out to link her fingers through mine. "What do you think? These horses have nothing on Cocoa and Marshmallow, but they're still lovely."

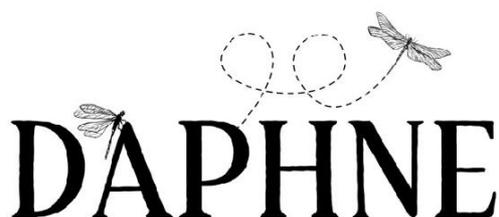
My chest sang from the contact, and every inch of my body felt warm and sun-drenched, like it was spring rather than nearly winter.

"Anywhere you go, I go," I told her, earning myself a blindingly bright smile.

I'd spent two hundred and fifty years feeling so alone, but now, with my dragonfly at my side?

I didn't need wings to fly.

EPILOGUE



DAPHNE

“Are you sure you don’t mind keeping an eye on me?” Cash asked nervously as he watched me decorate the living room for Christmas.

“I already told you a hundred times, Cash, it would be my honor to watch over you for your solstice stone sleep,” I said to him, holding up a rope of sparkly silver garland. “Now, can you please hook this up there so I don’t have to go and get a ladder?”

Cash obediently took the garland and did as I asked.

“Is that good?” he asked once we’d stepped back to observe our work. I’d insisted on decking the entire house and barn out for our first Christmas together and the living room was the last spot to finish.

“Perfect,” I said with a grin. “Now, tell me why you’re so nervous about going into your stone sleep?”

We’d been discussing it ever since we returned from Massachusetts. Gargoyles used their solstice stone sleeps to rest and refresh for the year to come, it made them healthier in their minds and their bodies. There was also a spiritual component that made them more in tune with the spirit world around us, but that was always harder for me to follow.

Cash had confessed that the last time he'd succumbed to the stone sleep had been when he was hurt doing something with Dallan. Dallan had protected him, but it was still a source of anxiety for my gargoyle.

But I was here now, and while I didn't possess super speed, strength, or anything else that I could use to defend Cash, I had a 12-gauge shotgun that would dissuade most people from our property on the slim chance that something did happen.

Cash sighed and sank down into the couch, pulling me with him.

His fingers traced the still tender tattoo on my neck that he'd spent the morning touching up as an early Christmas gift to me. Now, my pink dragonfly looked just as vibrant as the day I'd gotten it with my mom.

Cash laid his head on my chest, listening for our matched heartbeats, our song whispering between us.

"Tell me," I prodded, wrapping my arms around his head and holding him close.

There was a beat of silence before he replied.

"The last time I went into stone sleep you were kidnapped," he said quietly.

It had only been a few months since Ambrose and I were taken, and it still seemed to hover over everyone at Monstrous Ink like a perpetual storm cloud.

Ambrose was still recovering, though he was mostly back to normal. But he didn't seem to go out with everyone as much as he used to.

"I won't get kidnapped this time," I promised. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

"In my head, I know that," Cash said, lifting his face so that I could look into his worried silver eyes. "But every instinct in my body is rebelling against it anyway."

A sigh spilled from my lips and I leaned down to press a kiss to his frowning mouth. "I promise that when you wake up

tomorrow from your stone sleep, that I will be right here waiting for you. Then we'll go out and take care of the animals just like we always do, okay?"

It took another thirty seconds or so before Cash finally surrendered with a nod. "All right, you win," he said, throwing his hands up into the air.

"I always win, you as my mate should know that by now," I teased with a mischievous smile. "Now, what do you say we have a little fun before the sun sets?"

Cash's silver eyes darkened as he sat up, his hands propped on the back of the couch on either side of me. "What kind of fun do you have in mind, dragonfly?"

I looked up at the mistletoe that I'd secretly hung up while Cash was outside feeding the animals this morning. "A kiss?" I asked, pointing up at it.

"I'll give you a hell of a lot more than a kiss," he growled, giving my shoulder a nudge so that I slid sideways down the couch until I was lying flat on it while he hovered over me. "Open up," he instructed.

Then Cash's mouth covered mine hungrily, our tongues dancing together as his weight pressed me deeper into the cushions.

I could already feel him hardening against my thigh and I fondled him blindly looking for the waistband of his jeans.

"Get these off," I demanded, my skin tingling with need as Cash gave my jaw a gentle nip.

"Your wish is my command," he rumbled, sitting up on his knees and removing the dark shirt he was wearing, exposing the expanse of his chiseled gray chest.

As always, it struck me with how perfect he looked. Like a statue that was handcrafted by an artisan—which I supposed he technically was.

His pants came off next, but he didn't give me enough time to admire his naked form because he was already tugging my pants off while I shucked my shirt.

“Beautiful,” he purred, his tongue drawing a long line down my body until he reached the apex of my thighs. “Every inch of you.”

I sucked in a sharp gasp as his tongue found its way in between the folds of my pussy. He was slow at first, exploring what points made my hips jump with sudden pleasure, then he began to taste me in earnest.

Cash’s tongue was longer than a human tongue and pointed at the tip, making his push inside of my already clenching entrance easy.

My fingers pressed on the top of his head for a moment before I used both of my hands to grip his horns, listening as he groaned from the pleasure of having them touched.

Hands gripped my hips tighter as he dragged my lower half even closer and withdrew his tongue from inside of me for a moment. “I’m going to make you come, dragonfly, and I want you to watch me carefully as I do, understood?”

I nodded, my fingers tightening on his horns as I steeled myself for what I was sure was about to be a mind-bending orgasm.

And I was right because Cash’s tail snaked up the side of his body to join his mouth, the smooth gray appendage sliding in between my slick thighs.

Cash’s tail pushed inside of me with ease, occupying the space his tongue had just vacated. This left his mouth free to explore other places, namely the throbbing nub at the top of the folds of my pussy.

“Wrap those pretty thighs around my head,” Cash instructed, his strong hands moving my body until my hips were tilted up and I was completely at his mercy.

Then he dropped his lips to my clit and rolled it gently in between his sharp teeth. Little lightning bolts of electricity sparked out from my hips as I let out a moan that was punctuated by a ragged gasp.

Between his tail and his teeth, Cash was already well on his way to making me come.

His fingers dug into the flesh of my ass as he pressed my pussy even harder into his face, his tail continuing its slow ripple inside of me. It wiggled and curled, as if he was also busily stretching me out for when it was time to take his cock, all the while still continuing on his quest to make me see stars.

Suddenly, we were moving, Cash's impossible strength making the shift in position so easy that his tail didn't even need to pull out. Now I was straddling his face, my clit pushing into the tip of his nose as he continued to lap at the weeping juices leaking from my body.

"Can you breathe like that?" My question was asked in a ragged puff of air as my hips rolled involuntarily against his seeking mouth and wiggling tail.

Cash gave my thigh a firm squeeze, telling me that he could, and then another squeeze as if he was trying to get me to continue moving.

I'd never ridden on anyone's face before, but now I was pretty sure it was going to become one of my favorite things to do, especially when I began to move back and forth.

Cash's tail, tongue, and nose provided the sweetest kind of friction that sent me careening over the edge within a minute or two.

The muscles in my thighs tensed as I arched my back with a scream and came. Cash's tail froze as my insides constricted around him and a gush of liquid dribbled down his jaw.

"Oh god," I managed to say as I fell backward, letting the fluffy pillows on the couch catch me.

Cash's face shone with my wetness and I watched through half-lidded eyes as he licked every drop of it up.

"Did you like that?" Cash asked with a purr as he leaned down to kiss me. I could taste myself on his lips and it sent a bolt of lust straight through me.

"Yes," I whispered, my hands still shaking from the pleasure of it as I gripped his face to pull him down for more. "But we're not done yet, there's still something else I want to ride."

Cash's cock had been rock hard the entire time I'd been grinding on his face, each ridge standing out against his gray skin like it was just waiting to be sheathed inside of me.

Placing my palm on his chest, I pushed Cash until he was sitting with his back to the couch this time.

"Oil, dragonfly," Cash reminded me as I straddled his hips.

We'd taken to keeping a bottle of it in most places in the house as there was no telling when the desire to rip each other's clothes off would strike us. In the drawer of the side table next to the couch was a smaller bottle and I grabbed it.

Carefully, I poured the fluid over the tip of Cash's cock and watched it dribble down the sides. The enchanted oil allowed what should have been something too long, to fit inside of me like a glove.

"You're going to have to hang on tight," Cash instructed as he lifted my hips until the head of his cock was slotted just inside of my still fluttering entrance. "It's going to be a rough ride."

I grinned down at him. "You know our sanctuary motto is, Cashiel, save a horse, ride a gargoyle."

Cash's laugh filled the room before being abruptly cut off as I slid slowly down his length. The ridges had to be my favorite part about Cash's cock, they always stimulated sensitive spots inside of me that I didn't even know that I had.

Once I was finally at the hilt, I leaned forward to sprinkle kisses along Cash's jaw and throat, listening to the little noises he made as I clenched down around him.

I was still sensitive from my first orgasm, so each lift and drop of my hips made lights dance in my vision as Cash's tail wrapped around my waist and took over for his hands.

My original intention had been to be the one moving, as a special treat for my gargoyle, but Cash didn't seem to have the patience to let me control our thrusts today. Even his tail didn't seem to be moving fast enough because his hips still came up to meet mine, his cock going impossibly deep inside of me.

This was always one of my favorite positions because it took almost no time at all to bring me back to the crest of another wave of pleasure.

The fingers of one of my hands left Cash's shoulders and drifted down in between my thighs so that I could touch my clit, the constriction of my insides making Cash grunt as I played with myself.

"That's it, love," Cash moaned, his stony features twisting with his own pleasure as his cock jumped within me.

"Are you almost there?" I asked, letting my weight drop into him as he continued to thrust.

I felt him nod and decided that it was time to help him along. Inhaling deeply, I tensed around him as hard as I could and was immediately rewarded with a spurt of his cum as he growled.

"It's your turn to come for me, Cash," I reminded him in a ragged whisper as I repeated the motion again.

Finally, with a roar, Cash came. Warmth spread out from where we were connected. Cash cursed under his breath as I continued to grind down onto him, twisting my hips.

I wasn't that much further behind him, my fingers pinching my nipples as Cash's fingers took over on my clit. Soon, I was also panting my way through another orgasm, tightening on Cash's quickly softening cock like a vice grip.

Once it was over, a yawn filled my mouth and I melted against his chest, relishing in our closeness.

"Get some sleep, dragonfly," Cash whispered.

"What about me watching over you in your stone sleep?" I asked, my eyes already drifting shut.

"I trust you to keep me safe," Cash said and I could hear the smile in his voice.

I nodded. "Kay, I love you, Cash."

There was a beat of silence and I felt Cash's chest rise and fall as he pulled in a deep breath. "And I love you, my mate.

Happy Solstice.”

Sleep found me quickly after that and when I awoke again, Cash was already standing next to the Christmas tree in his stone form.

When Cash had been forced into his stone sleep after being shot with the diamond-tipped crossbow bolt, his face had been twisted in pain and fear. But now he looked completely serene, a soft smile on his face as he stared blankly at where I was sleeping.

Wrapping a blanket around my shoulders, I crept through the house and up the stairs to grab the early Christmas gift I'd prepared for my gargoyle.

I'd been trying to figure out how to tell him my news for a couple of weeks now and had finally settled on the little wrapped box shoved to the back of my closet. It was covered in festive Christmas paper that looked ridiculous when I put it on top of his folded stone hands.

“For when you wake up,” I whispered to his frozen form before pressing a hand to my stomach.

This time next year, things would be very different in this house. Cash would never be alone as long as I was around, but soon enough there would be another person for both of us to love.

COMING SOON...

Daphne & Cash will return in *Bombshell*, coming early 2024.

A halfling witch, a lonely cthulhu, and the tattoo parlor that brought them together.

Dallan

For over six-hundred years Dallan Cuan has lived his life the way he wanted to. As one of the last remaining members of the Cthulhu race, Dallan is used to being alone.

That is, at least, until he founded Monstrous Ink. Now he has a family to protect, which includes the green-eyed halfling Effie.

Dallan wants nothing more than to claim Effie completely as his, but he had never been able to get past her tough exterior and the business-with-benefits box she's firmly placed him in.

Then Effie's past rears its ugly head and Dallan is suddenly faced with losing her forever.

Effie

Born as the halfling daughter of a tree nymph and a warlock, Euphemia "Effie" Finch has always straddled two worlds. Never enough for either side, she finally broke away once she met them: the monsters that worked at Monstrous Ink.

Now, years later, she works as their in-house witch, spending her days enchanting and, uh, *collecting* ink from the shop owner Dallan. Effie insists their time together is strictly business, but finds herself wanting to give in to the Cthulhu.

But when Effie's closest friend is put in danger, she will have to turn to the one place she vowed to never return to in order to help them.

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