



# HEARTS OF STONE



SAM HALL

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## **Hearts of Stone**

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# Stalk me!

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# Author Note

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This book is written in Australian English, which is a weird lovechild of British and American English. We tend to spell things the way the Brits do (expect a lot more u's), yet also use American slang and swear more than both combined.

While many people have gone over this book, trying to find all the typos and other mistakes, they just keep on popping up like bloody rabbits. If you spot one, don't report it to Amazon, drop me an email at the below address so I can fix the issue.

samhall.author@gmail.com

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# Trigger Warning

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A whole bunch of triggers in this one, so read carefully.

## **Triggers**

- In this book, a side character is the victim of domestic abuse. It takes place off screen, but the after effects require hospitalisation. We don't see or get flashbacks of what happened, but still, it's apparent. The character also denies they are being abused and goes back to the abuser at least once.
- The FMC has just gotten out of a relationship with a guy who was unfaithful to her. They don't get back together. There is no redemption for him.
- There is sort of some low level other woman drama. The FMC doesn't want her ex or to get back with him, but the side chick is bitchy and annoying.
- The history of the house includes some dark stuff. One ancestor is a total hedonist and will pursue literally any activity for pleasure, and discusses raising his son the same way.

- Another ancestor is deeply sadistic. I've included the least amount I can on the page, mainly in the forms of references, glimpses, but if you're someone who fills in the gap with your mind, I'd be wary.

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# Chapter 1

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The week I found out I had inherited a mansion started the same way my weeks had started for months. Terribly.

One: when I woke up, I realised I was sleeping on the couch. Not because I'd fallen asleep binge-watching Disney cartoons like I would've liked, but because the couch was my bed, and would be for the near future.

Two: it wasn't my alarm that woke me up. It was the sound of *him* clattering around in the adjoining kitchen.

Him being my ex—Trevor.

My head jerked up off the pillow and I blinked, then blinked again, pulled from a deep sleep by the noise of cupboards creaking open then banging shut, and the kettle boiling. As I woke up properly and remembered why I was sleeping on the couch, the pressure in my head started up, increasing as the sound of the kettle got louder. I felt as though I'd only just gotten to sleep, and now... I popped my head up over the back of the couch to see Trevor, dressed smartly, busily getting himself a coffee, and I wondered how the hell we'd gotten to this point.

This was not the way we'd started. When we arrived in the city as childhood sweethearts, we hadn't lived anywhere as

swanky as this. We certainly hadn't been able to afford single origin coffee that came in gold bags. I watched Trev portion out coffee beans that clattered into the grinder, then winced at the abrasive sound when he pressed the button and the smell of fresh coffee filled the air. After high school, we'd both been supposed to go to university, but Trevor'd talked me into working at the local supermarket to support us, so he could study law full time. He'd explained that it would mean he could get through faster; that when he was done, he'd set us up somewhere nice, guarantee our financial security and then I'd... I sighed to myself. There was no point thinking about those promises because they'd all been broken.

"Aren't you getting up?" Trevor asked me, as he looked in my direction, and I saw his face had taken on that dissatisfied, pinched expression again.

It still struck me with a strange kind of horror to see disgust in his expression, rather than love. Those once warm eyes now hard and cold, the lips I'd kissed a thousand times pressed into a thin line. But, to my shame, I did as I was told, clawing my way out from beneath the blankets I'd been nestled under.

"I don't start work until eleven," I said, walking into the kitchen while he looked me up and down.

I was wearing one of his old band t-shirts, from back when he was a nerdy guy who liked to listen to old school metal like Iron Maiden. He took in the faded cotton, the cracked print on the shirt, and his eyebrows jerked down into a severe frown. No band t-shirts for Trev any more. He wore a sharp suit, personally tailored to fit him, with a crisp white shirt and a tie with a subtle design embossed upon it.

"Then you can spend the morning looking for a place to move into." He poured the coffee into a travel mug, not offering me one, then pushed a sheaf of printouts towards me. "Here. These seem like they'd be in your price bracket. I've been patient, Jade. I've let you stay here because it would cause dramas between our families if I simply evicted you."

And that's when I felt a flash of red hot anger. I wasn't the one who got us here. It wasn't my fault it'd all gone to hell. It was a tale as old as time. He'd been working late more and more before we split, telling me he was putting in the hard yards to try and build a future for the two of us. Turned out the only hard thing he was doing was screwing one of the paralegals on his desk once everyone else had left for the night. And I'd found out in the worst way possible. I'd opened the door to his office with a smile on my face, then stopped dead in shock, dropping the takeaway containers I'd brought to surprise him, leaving the Thai curry to seep into the expensive carpet. And she'd watched me over his shoulder, holding my gaze as those perfect brows had creased and she'd let out a helpless little moan as she came. All I could manage was a low groan of pain, as if I'd been punched in the guts, the sound a pathetic echo of hers. My attention came back to my current situation as Trevor pointed impatiently at the pages on the counter. I picked up the printouts of rental listings and flicked through them quickly.

Some stupid, deluded part of him seemed to think I hadn't moved out yet because I still wanted to be with him. It seemed incomprehensible to him that the real reason might possibly be the fact that we were in the midst of an economic downturn, that everyone was struggling to find money for rent and food and, on top of that, there just weren't enough places available. We hadn't seen a shortage of rental properties like this in thirty years, the newscasters had said. Some blamed immigration, some pointed the finger at Airbnb, and others said it was due to interest rate rises. All I knew was what it meant for someone like me.

Every time I'd gone to an open inspection of a rental property there'd been thirty, forty, sometimes fifty people—couples, singles, families—all looking at the same place. The government had ended up having to put legislation in place to stop rent-bidding, because people had been offering to pay more than the stated rent, all just to secure a place to live. As I thought about how hard it was proving to find somewhere, I had that feeling again, that crushing sensation in my chest, right as my heart began to flutter. My ribs felt like hands

closing around the butterfly wings of my heart, even as it kept trying to beat harder and harder... I took a deep breath, trying to find calm.

“Trevor...” I said his name the way I always said it these days, so carefully, as I laid the papers back down on the counter. “I’ve been to every single one of these properties—”

“You can’t have.” The tone of voice and attitude told me that I wasn’t dealing with Trevor, my once dorky boyfriend: this was ‘Mr Davis’, big shot property lawyer. He stood taller, his suit looking like an impervious wall of black wool, making him seem all the more intimidating as his eyes drilled into mine. “It’s not *that* hard, Jade. We found that place out at Elizabeth easily enough.”

I felt a sudden rush of shame, triggered by his condescending tone, but then I rolled my eyes, internally. That had been seven years ago. The thought fought its way past my initial reaction to his patronising attitude. A few things had changed in that time. We’d had a pandemic, a meteoric increase in property values, and immigration had started again. I wanted to protest that the world had changed; that it wasn’t so easy these days. But I kept my mouth shut, because I knew that once I started talking, all the horror, all the fear, all the terror of potentially being homeless would come rushing out. And arguing with a lawyer? Nothing they liked more. He was already puffing himself up, readying his counter arguments, ready to tell me how it would be easy if I just tried harder.

So that’s when I pulled out my own secret weapon. Something much more powerful than the formality of a bespoke suit.

It was the nuclear option and it’d blow my life up, just as much as his, but it was all I had left. I sucked in a breath and then forced the words out.

“I’m considering moving back home.”

I watched him deflate... no... *collapse* in on himself. All the arrogance and fire died out of his eyes, leaving him just an ordinary man in a nice suit looking furtively around the room, as if his parents or mine would jump out any second. They all

thought we were still together. They didn't know about the affair, or the fact Trevor was bringing Susan back here some nights to fuck enthusiastically, while I tried to sleep on the couch. I hated it. I hated him, and, by extension, I hated Susan and her baleful looks whenever she entered the fancy apartment Trevor had made us sign the lease for. But, most of all, I hated myself. When I'd discovered what he'd been doing, I'd screamed, raged, cried, screamed some more, then picked up some god-awful expensive vase he'd bought and thrown it at his head. But then... right when I should've been striding out of his life to pick up the pieces of mine, he'd laid out the economic reality.

*“And what're you going to do, Jade?” The sneer that appeared, it was the first of many. And I'd never, ever expected to see that look on his face. “Pay for this place on a checkout chick's wage?” I'd made it to assistant manager, but, still, the situation was basically the same. I'd balked at the cost of this place when he'd found it, my Spidey sense leading me to recognise I was in over my head. “You can stay here until you get on your feet—and then you can get your shit and move out,” he'd said with finality, the smug bastard looking like he was congratulating himself on his rational, benevolent way of dealing with the situation.*

“Moving home?” he asked, no sign of a smug smile on his face. He swallowed, then seemed to try for a sneer but failed, so he resorted to mocking me. “You're just going to scuttle back home to Mumsy and Daddy?”

His barb was well-aimed. I didn't want to go back there. Getting out of Daysborough was the best thing I'd ever done. It was a cute town to raise kids in, but there was little to do once they were teenagers. Every time I thought about what it would be like to live there, my chest got tight, just like it was now, making it hard to take a full breath, my lungs burning.

*It's better than putting up with this shit,* I reminded myself.

“You want to move Sharon in here,” I said.

“Susan,” he corrected tightly.



“And all I want to do is get the fuck away from you.” The words came out tight, through clenched teeth, because that was the only way I could express my anger. *Keep it all locked down*, that was my daily motto, the only thing that seemed to get me through one catastrophic event after another. “I can’t find another place. I’ve tried and tried—”

“Try harder.” He shoved the papers back towards me. “Sharon, I mean Susan is coming over tonight. Ring your ‘bestie’ and let him know you’ll be camping out in his lounge room. And get your shit together, Jade. You used to be smarter than this.”

I still was. I knew that, despite his continued put-downs. I’d got great grades in year 12 and I’d had my pick of universities to attend, but I’d walked away from all of them for him. I stared at the perfectly shaved jaw, those dark eyes and tried to see why. It seemed not that long ago that he’d been my best friend. We’d shared our hopes and dreams over countless bowls of two minute noodles, because we couldn’t afford anything else. We’d talked about how it would be when he made it. He’d be wearing the kinds of high end clothes he was wearing now, we’d be living in a place like this and then, finally, it’d be my turn. Everything I’d done to ensure his success would be repaid in full and I’d...

“I *am* smarter than that,” I replied firmly, feeling my spine lengthen. “I’ll take a look and see if there are any new ads for places I can afford, but if there aren’t...” I pulled in a breath. “Then I’ll move home by the end of the week.”

He spluttered inarticulately, because I think he’d realised what I’d just worked out. I’d still been covering for him, still carrying him, even if, now, it wasn’t financial support. But I didn’t have to do that anymore. I didn’t owe him anything. I nodded to myself as I turned on my heel and walked away from my ex.

UNDER THE EXPENSIVE WATERFALL SHOWER, as I scrubbed myself clean, it felt like all the bullshit I’d been carrying for months went swirling down the drain along with the soap and shampoo. I felt lighter, brighter, and yet somehow naked as I stepped out onto the bathmat and dried off. I got

dressed in my supermarket uniform, applied a full face of makeup, before catching the train into work. As I walked in through the doors of the store, I saw a familiar face.

“What’re you doing here this early? You shit the bed?”

Daniel, my best friend and my rock through all of the Trevor bullshit, walked away from his supermarket register and threw his arms around me, much to the consternation of the customers waiting in line to check out their groceries. They shot him daggers, but Danny boy never gave a shit about other people’s reactions. My eyes went wide as I heard the last bit, though, and I shoved an elbow into his ribs in retaliation.

“Jesus, Danny!”

“I’m glad you’re finally acknowledging me as your lord and saviour,” he said, going back to the checkout and scanning Mrs Hamilton’s groceries at lightning speed. “Because I have a proposal for you.”

My teeth sank into my lip, remembering what Trevor had decreed I needed to do tonight instead of sleeping on ‘his’ couch.

“I’ve got one for you, too.”

“Yeah?” He shot me a wild smile as crazy spikes of bright blue hair fell in his eyes. Mrs Hamilton was glaring even harder, as if the colour, which I believed was called Arctic Blue, was somehow more offensive than her own lavender-rinsed locks.

“Does yours involve ghosts?” he asked, with an impish grin, “Because, bitch, I got us two tickets for a ghost tour of that old psych ward. I’ve been telling you about it for weeks and they had a last minute cancellation...”

He had been talking about this tour ever since he’d heard about it. He’d told me about it in an excited rush, then mentioned it at least once a week and I’d tried my best to match his energy. Danny was my best friend, ride or die, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to put the ‘die’ part to the test. The thought of a ghost tour did not fill me with joy. While Danny was fascinated by the paranormal, I couldn’t even watch

horror movies without having nightmares for weeks. But then he delivered the coup de grâce.

“We’ll head out after work and go and ghost hunt—it only goes for an hour—then on the way home we’ll grab pizza, and you can crash at my place.”

Z Ward was the old jail for the criminally insane. It’d been empty since the 1950s, the building left to moulder on the edges of some fancy estate. Apparently people paid good money to go there after dark, where, with nothing more than torches, they hunted for signs of ghosts while hearing stories of how people died there. Personally I’d rather scoop out my eyeballs with a rusty spoon. While Daniel loved horror movies, I would spend almost the entire time we watched them with my face buried in a pillow, and then I still couldn’t sleep afterwards. Going to a haunted psych ward sounded like hell, but when I compared it to another night listening to the dulcet tones of Samantha faking an orgasm in Trevor’s bedroom, I decided a ghost tour was infinitely preferable.

“OK,” I said with a firm nod of my head, “you’re on.”

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## Chapter 2

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“So, what does one wear when ghost hunting?” I asked Daniel, later that night, when we made a stop at Trevor’s apartment to find something suitable for me to wear.

We were both pawing through the boxes of my stuff that were lined up along the side of the living area. Trevor hated it, saying how messy it made the open plan apartment look but, as he was the one who’d shoved all of my worldly goods into boxes the minute we’d split up, and then pushed the boxes out of the bedroom that we’d shared until that night, he hardly had grounds to complain.

Didn’t stop him though.

“Those black combat boots I gave you a couple of years ago,” Danny said, looking me up and down. “The jeans that make your arse look amazing.” He threw a pair at me, forcing me to catch them. “Something cute but warm on top.” He waved a finger around in the air. “Maybe that hoodie with the little cat ears on it, but keep it zipped low.” He cupped the air around my breasts. “Gotta let the girls breathe a little.”

“Are we hunting ghosts or guys?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

He had tried to set me up a few times since my split from Trevor, and each attempt had been disastrous. One guy had actually been there to try and get with Danny. Another had looked me up and down the moment I'd said hello and then he'd turned to Daniel, telling him I looked fatter than I had in the photo Danny had shown him, so he'd pass. And the last one? Clint had tried to launch himself at me the moment the lights went down in the movie theatre, his tongue lashing about wildly in his haste to get it in my mouth.

"Both, duh." He shot me a withering look, then started cackling. "There's nothing hotter than a guy who can put a scare into you and then follow that up with something big, long and throbbing."

"Jesus, Danny..." I gave him a shove.

"Don't knock ghost hunters until you try them. I met Gary when I went on that big ghost hunting tour in the cemetery."

"The one who tried to sneak out of your place with your wallet after you fell asleep?" I asked.

He waved that small fact away.

"Then there was Neil—"

"Gave you crabs," I reminded him.

"OK, what about Jared?"

"The big guy who had a wife and kids at home, who used ghost hunting as an excuse to go and pick up gay guys on the downlow?"

Daniel winced at my tone. My words had come out far frostier than I'd intended. But I'd hated the fact he'd slept with a married man the first time it had happened, let alone the second. Back then my displeasure had come from what I felt was a position of security. I'd said piously that if Jared was bi or gay, of course he needed an opportunity to explore that, but that he needed to be transparent with his wife about it so she could make her own decisions about what she wanted from the relationship. I'd doled out the advice blithely, unaware that my life was about to implode, in much the same way as Jared's wife's.

“OK, point taken.” Daniel nodded, conceding that he didn’t have the evidence to support his theory. “Wear whatever you like.” But then as he looked down at the box I was still rummaging through, he wrinkled his nose and snatched up a t-shirt I’d pushed to the side. “But nothing that belonged to Pencil Dick, OK?” He held up the old band t-shirt, which, like so many damn things in this apartment, brought back memories.

I couldn’t help but think of when we’d got that shirt. We’d travelled to the city for a one-off concert. I’d stuck close to an eighteen-year-old Trevor, feeling low key terrified by the walls of older men uniformly wearing denim and studded black leather.

*“You OK?” he’d asked me, holding my hand tight. “We won’t go anywhere near the mosh pit, so—”*

*Anything he’d had to say was drowned out by the roar of the crowd as the band took to the stage and that was when I’d felt it. It wasn’t just me or just Trevor or just the older guys standing in a row before us, black patches with the names of their favourite bands sewn onto their fraying denim jackets. The energy of the crowd was electrifying, spiking along with the plumes of fire that shot into the sky. The opening riff of the song rang out across the stadium, reverberating and growing louder and more powerful, as though pummelling you into submission. We weren’t fans any more, we were supplicants at a demonic altar, whipped up to take part in a dark rite.*

*I’d felt a part of something I hadn’t quite understood, and when he’d tugged me closer, cradling me in his arms like I was precious, I’d felt like I understood the music so much better. The raucous vocals, the loud guitars, it was all a giant ‘fuck you’ to the worries, the hassles, the on-going shit of the world and I’d been ready to get lost in it.*

I blinked, coming back to myself, seeing the apartment with fresh eyes. Back then I’d thought I had the whole world at my feet; but now...? I grabbed the t-shirt from Daniel, screwed it up and threw it into the corner of the living room, something that would no doubt drive present-day Trevor nuts.

Everything needed to be perfect, tidy, preserving the persona he fought hard to maintain.

“Nothing that belongs to Pencil Dick,” I agreed and then got dressed.

WE JUMPED in the car not long afterwards, making our way across town and into the leafy suburbs. It wasn't an area I frequented often, as I didn't need to go there for work, and I always felt too out of place to hang out in the nearby cafes or bars. But the suburb we were headed for, Burnside, was a strange one. As we drove, we passed beautiful house after beautiful house, typical of the monied side of town, all illuminated by the harsh street lights. Then, set back from these big homes on their big blocks, and dwarfing them all, was this place.

When I'd first come to the city, these kinds of houses had freaked me out because they'd seemed so incongruous. In a suburb full of normal house blocks, you'd find remnants of a grand colonial past. Estates, mansions, they'd once been stately homes far on the outskirts of when Adelaide had been a much smaller city. But as the urban sprawl had crept further and further out, these estates could no longer stay hidden gems out in the countryside. They'd become besieged on all sides by much smaller house blocks, swallowed up by suburbia, yet somehow remaining apart from it. I stared out the window as we approached the towering wrought iron fence and then turned to Daniel, my eyes wide.

“Here? Z Ward is here?!”

Suddenly, ghost hunting was looking a whole lot more appealing. Creaky old psych wards weren't my jam. But beautiful old houses had a certain appeal. I didn't know if it was because I was so over going to one shitty rental open inspection after another, but the prospect of traipsing through a stately home, seeing how the other half lived? Yeah, I was down with that.

“It was built on the grounds of The Eyrie,” Daniel said, braking gently to bring the car to a stop and then letting the engine idle as he nodded to the hulking Gothic mansion that



lurked beyond the gates. All fancy old places seemed to earn themselves a name. “The mansion has a weird enough history all on its own. The components for this house were bought up, back in England, in a literal fire sale when a mansion called Wildfyre Hall was destroyed. The original building burnt down in a very suspicious fire. Ghost hunters love the original site back in the UK, because the original owner was involved in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He was one of those rich people titillated by occultism.” He shot me a sidelong look, eyes sparkling in a way that only happened when we were talking about the paranormal. “I’m fairly sure it was all just an excuse to throw wild orgies of drinking, eating rich food and fucking anything that moved. Can you imagine?”

“Considering people’s personal hygiene back then?” I wrinkled my nose. “No.”

“Bitch, you’d be riding the face of some guy with really bad dental work, with a glass of champagne in your hand. Just like the rest of us,” Daniel cackled, but when he turned back to the house, he grew more serious. “But, all good things come to an end. Wildfyre was burned to the ground, some say by a jealous husband or something.” He shot me a wild grin. “Because the lord of Wildfyre; he was a bit of a rake. Fairly sure he took ‘any holes the goal’ to a whole other level.”

“So does that mean we’re going to see ghosts of the horny past?” I asked. “Because getting groped by incorporeal beings is not my idea of a good time. Consent matters.”

“I would’ve thought some demon lover who was prepared to enact all your wildest fantasies would be right up your alley.” Daniel shot me a sly look. “At least a ghost would have you screaming, unlike Pencil Dick Trevor.”

I flushed then, not from what my friend was saying, but because of what it meant. I’d unloaded one drunken night, telling Danny all about what a shitty lover Trevor was, and how I knew Sabrina-Sharon-Susan *had* to be faking it, because how could anyone get off from a few furtive clit rubs and then three pumps inside you? But the problem with telling Danny about it was that by damning Trevor, I’d damned myself. I’d

been the one to put up with that kind of bullshit. I'd been the one to let him treat me that way and I'd— A sharp knock on the passenger side window had both of us jumping. Instead of a horny ghost, though, we saw a sweet-faced older woman standing there, waving.

“You're here for the ghost tour?” she asked, after Daniel hit the button to put the window down.

“Sure are!” he said, leaning across to show her our digital tickets.

WHICH WAS how we came to be standing on the grounds of The Eyrie estate. The woman had directed us where to park then unlocked the gates and led us all through, a group of about ten or more people. A strange kind of hush fell over us all as soon as we were inside the grounds, because the darkened vista gave off perfectly creepy vibes. The lawns seemed to be perfectly uniform, rolling off towards the house like a green carpet, and I found myself taking a step forward, wanting to see more of where they led, but the tour leader stopped me.

“We're not heading up to the main house,” she said, in a firm tone. “We only have access to Z Ward.” She held out an ancient looking ring of keys and rattled them. “But I think, with its history, everyone will find the tour fascinating. If you'll come—”

“And that's because someone lives in the house, is that right?” Where the hell had that question come from? It was out of my mouth before I could even think and, when the whole group turned to stare, I felt a rush of embarrassment. “I mean, that's someone's home and we—”

“The Eyrie is currently unoccupied,” the guide replied stiffly, “but, yes, the only people allowed to go inside are members of the family.” She turned to the rest of the group and smiled brightly. “And it's the fascinating history of the Whitely family, the one that built The Eyrie from the remains of a grand house in England, that we'll learn more about tonight. Luther Whitely built Z Ward back at the turn of the last century. Privately funded sanatoriums were a rare thing,

though sometimes well-to-do families invested in them, often to create a place fit to house some afflicted relatives—although Luther’s motivations were not quite so altruistic.”

She pursed her lips in disapproval, even as her eyes sparkled.

“The burgeoning field of psychology drew quite a lot of interest from some sectors of society, including amateur theorists who put forward ideas about mental illness being linked to a sensitivity to the world beyond ours. Luther’s decision to build an asylum for the criminally insane on the grounds of his stately home drew considerable criticism, but the state government was happy to offload that responsibility onto someone else, washing their hands of the inmates once they stepped inside the ward. That,” she emphasised, “was a mistake. Given free rein to do as he wished to the inmates, Luther engaged in acts of depravity which only the most hardened would fail to be shocked by. Now, if you’ll follow me...”

I jumped when Daniel grabbed my hand, and he grinned at my response.

“Everyone loves a bad boy. Let’s go!”

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## Chapter 3

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“Turn your torches on now,” the guide instructed us, as she unlocked the front gate of the separate fence enclosing the former asylum. As I heard the heavy tumbler turn over in its lock, I fumbled for my phone and tapped at the torch icon. Spots of light from our group’s torches moved across the facade, revealing the majesty of Z Ward.

I’d expected it to be a much simpler building than the main house and, although it was built with basic red and buff bricks, the simple building materials had been used to create an imposing facade. Arched windows were ringed with buff bricks, contrasting against the predominant red brown, and the two colours had been intermixed to create elaborate patterns on the pediments. As we stepped through the massive iron gateway, we could see a small tower of some kind, perched on the roof of the asylum, with a tall lightning rod attached to it.

But that wasn’t all that we could see on top of the building.

“Are they...?” one of the men in the group asked, trying to train his light up at one of the shadowy shapes on the roofline.

“Ghosts of inmates past?” the guide said and then shook her head. “Unfortunately not. The Whiteleys were known for their idiosyncrasies before Luther took control of the family

fortunes. What you see there are gargoyles.” Everyone’s torches were now pointed up at the figures on the roof. Some of those on the tour had brought high powered night stick torches that illuminated some of the features of the beast closest to us. “The Whiteley family imported all of the gargoyles that survived the destruction of Wildfyre Hall and more besides.”

She smiled tightly.

“You’ll see them on the roofs of every building on the estate, including the groundskeeper’s cottage, of all things, and there’s some grand specimens inside.”

At that, she walked forward to the double front doors of the building to undo the massive lock hanging there. As she removed the heavy chain, the rattling sound had everyone looking around nervously. Sound seemed to travel so much further in the still, open space, echoing around the massive empty grounds. The doors creaked with a theatrical air as she pressed against them, and then she threw them open, leading us inside.

Which was initially a bit of a disappointment.

On the outside, it was as if the architect had strived to make sure the asylum was in keeping with the other buildings we’d caught glimpses of on the grounds, as if to disguise what it was. But when we stepped inside, it was very different. Whitewashed walls had turned grey over the years, with dust and spiderwebs adding to the grimy, institutional look that was compounded by heavily worn concrete floors, cracked glass windows, steel reinforced doors and...

“Oh...!”

My little gasp was echoed by the rest of the group as our collective torch light converged on the same point. There, so much closer than the figures on the rooftop had been, was another gargoyle—dark, muscular, frozen in a stiff crouch, fangs bared.

“This one is a particularly grand specimen,” the guide said, walking over to the beast and smoothing her hand down his

impressive back. On closer inspection it became clear that a set of two gargoyles had been placed either side of the grand staircase that led upstairs, presumably to more cells. Our guide was hardly a small woman, but she looked tiny next to the sculpture. “It was an odd choice, that’s for sure, putting gargoyles inside a mental asylum, but no one could ever have called Luther Whitely a rational man. Some have wondered if he deserved to be made an inmate himself. Now, if you come through here, I’ll show you some of the ‘therapy rooms’, which will have you wondering what on earth he was trying to achieve...”

As she spoke, her words washed over me, but I didn’t really take them in. My eyes were transfixed somehow by where her hand rested on the gargoyle’s shoulder blade, catching the way she patted the stone flesh, then stroked it absently as she spoke about the creator of Z Ward. Luther was a bad man. Luther did terrible things to inmates. Luther was probably freaking bonkers, from what she was saying, but none of it seemed to penetrate. My heart rate began to pick up and I knew it because I could feel it throbbing in my ears, getting louder and louder.

“Coming?” I was jerked out of whatever spell I was under by Daniel grinning down at me. “Or you wanna take your chances with Goliath and Hudson over there.” He nodded to the gargoyles which had been left alone to moulder, just like they had been before we entered the building. And why did that feel wrong? I took a step towards the sculptures, when I was meant to be following the tour. “Jade...?”

His voice, like that of the guide, seemed to just fade away as I took another step forward, then one more. Daniel had a whole lot more to say, it appeared, but I couldn’t seem to focus on his words. I kept walking toward the statues and that’s when I truly saw them.

I’d seen other statues positioned similarly to the way these two had been placed: Chinese dog sculptures or dragons, carved in stone and placed outside shops or temples to protect them. But none of those carvings had seemed to possess an individual spirit, not the way both of these two did.

My feet moved forward and as I came closer I saw the differences between them. The one on the left was far bigger, something you didn't notice right away as he was curled up tighter, long claws digging into the plinth he crouched upon. Long tumbles of stylised hair partially obscured his face. And then there were those wings. Curled around him like a caul, he glared out from behind those sharp pinions, lips peeled back in a snarl. He looked like at any moment he'd leap forward, ready to attack. But the other one? His wings were far more expansive, wrapped tight around his body. His face was almost completely obscured by them, which was strange, because the point of gargoyles was to create a fierce facade, to scare away evil spirits. This beast looked like he was shrinking back in the face of evil.

And that had me feeling sorry for him.

The sculptor's work was incredible, displaying a skill I wasn't sure could be matched by artists of today. Not only was the whole creature rendered in believable proportions, the detail was such that I could see the veins running along the thin membrane of the wings, the curve of those claws, wrapped around the edges of his wings as if to tug them closed. I caught the harsh slope of his nose, the deep wrinkles of his frown, the flash of his eyes...

Hang on, what?

“What the fuck was that...?”

Daniel didn't say that in the way anyone normal might, in horror or surprise. Rather his phone was up and he tapped on his camera, recording the sight before us. Both gargoyles were made from a matte grey stone, but the longer we looked at them, the more those eyes seemed to glow. Just a lighter grey at first, then pearly grey, then silver. I was stepping backwards, not sure what the fuck was happening, when the guide reappeared.

“I'm going to need everyone to keep up. Oh...” We spun around to look at her, but she was staring past us at the gargoyles. “Are they...? Were they...?”



The fact that she'd arrived just then made me sure that this was all an act. These gargoyles were probably a recent addition, powered by some simple animatronics, like one of the attractions at Disneyland. And the guide was very good at her job. Her mouth fell open, her skin going pasty white as she stared, adding to the whole ghostly vibe. We twisted back around. Daniel had his camera in hand, ready to record his first paranormal event. And me? I frowned, my usual sceptical attitude intact. Then I had to blink, because I wasn't sure what had happened.

Had they moved? My eyes raked across one gargoyle, then the other, trying to analyse their poses, their expressions. The big guy on the left, the one I was now calling Goliath: were his wings pulled back further to reveal more of the severe planes of his face? Had the other one, Hudson, shrank back further? Had his frown drawn down further? Was his tail lashed tighter around his ankles? Had they—? I blinked and then grabbed Daniel's arm. This was ridiculous. We were standing around in an old creepy psych ward. Of course we were going to start seeing things that weren't real. The power of suggestion and all that.

"We're holding up the tour," I told Daniel. "You wanted to know what Luther Whiteley got up to here. Let's go."

"Hm...?" the guide said as she dragged her eyes away from the gargoyles then shook her head. "Yes, yes, we need to get on with the tour. The caretaker only allows us an hour in here and... Anyway, the therapy rooms are through here."

She pointed to a room where the others all roamed, their torches sweeping up and over the contents.

"The tour...?" Daniel asked dreamily, then he seemed to come back to himself. "Oh shit, yeah, the tour." He bumped hips with me, his eyes gleaming. "Luther Whiteley? He was kinky as fuck. Some of my friends in the community say that if you're into medical kink, this shit is the bomb. C'mon." He grinned. "You might not be up for a demon lover, but I am." As we walked towards the therapy rooms, he mimed speaking into a microphone. "Paging Dr Whiteley. Paging Dr Whiteley.

A thorough cavity search is required in examination room one.”

The guide shot us a dark look.

“If you come through here, we can look at what Luther Whiteley actually got up to during his days as owner of the asylum.”

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## Chapter 4

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“Holy Hellraiser, Batman...” Daniel breathed as we entered one of the therapy rooms. He stared at the cluster of ‘therapeutic’ devices with frank fascination tinged with revulsion. I was just going with disgust.

Whoever the hell Luther Whitely was, he was a damn perv.

I peered at a particularly vicious hook. I wasn’t completely sure where it was supposed to go, but none of the places would be good. The metal point was rusted and corroded now, but on the point I saw something had dried on the end. I jerked back, turning to Daniel and muttering, “Is that human flesh?”

“Maybe. What I’m trying to work out is what the hell would you do with it?” Daniel asked, snapping a few shots. “I’ll put some pics up on some of the extreme BDSM forums I’m on, but, fuck!” His fingers formed a similar shape. “Like this?” He hooked his finger into the hollow of his clavicle. “Or like this?” He hooked it into his cheek. “Though I have seen videos of people using hooks to suspend themselves from the ceiling, but they’re blunt ones that are inserted in their—”

“Are you quite finished?” the guide asked, and it was then we realised we had a little audience. People were listening to our frantically whispered chatter, not hers. “Now, as I was

saying, letting Luther Whiteley run a mental asylum was neither wise nor therapeutically sound. Left to his own devices, with a captive audience, he performed... experiments of a sort that would not have been supported by mental health professionals of his time, let alone now, but..."

She sighed.

"Knowledge of mental illness was nowhere near as advanced as it is now," she continued. "Society was very good at identifying those who differed from the norm, but few had a sound awareness of how to treat someone suffering from severe mental illness successfully. Bear in mind, that every single person who was confined to Z Ward had committed a crime that shocked the entire city. Violent murders." Her eyes scanned the crowd. "Brutal rapes. Horrifying rampages on the streets. Some would even be classified as serial killers by contemporary psychiatrists."

Her eyes slid over the cluster of contraptions, although I wasn't sure I wanted to know how they worked.

"But what happened here..." Her voice dropped an octave. "Even by contemporary standards, no one could suggest what Luther was doing as therapeutic. He didn't seek to heal the damaged minds of these criminals, but to tear them apart."

The guide seemed to come into her own, swelling up to her full height and staring at each one of us, but her grave demeanour gave way when one of the other members of the group muttered, "Wooo..." She frowned, then turned towards the next room.

"And through here you'll see some of the adjoining cells. These are where Luther kept the inmates whose treatment he was focussing on, for easy access. Some other tour members have reported feeling cold spots in the corner of the cells, and others have heard the disembodied screams of those poor souls."

"But why the gargoyles?" I asked, turning my torch towards the open doorway, but the darkness was too impenetrable to reveal them again. "Why would they install gargoyles *inside* a mental asylum?"

The guide's lips thinned.

“Who can say? Perhaps it was a primitive impulse, to try and dispel the dark energies Luther's experiments raised.” I fought the urge to raise an eyebrow at her pat answer. “But if you come through here...”

The rest of the tour was kind of a let down. Just cell after cell to peer inside. I didn't feel any cold spots, although some people on the tour shivered theatrically, nor did I hear anything other than the skitter of possums on the roof. Other people whispered fiercely amongst themselves, until we came to the last room.

“I'm pretty sure I felt something...” Daniel started to say as we entered a massive room, but when he stopped in the doorway, so did I. “Oh my god, Daddy...”

As his voice trailed away, it was replaced with a ringing in my ears, one that got higher pitched as I stepped forward. Everyone else hung back. Perhaps it was the rusting fetters, hanging from the ceiling, shifting slightly in an unseen breeze, that kept them from entering.

Or maybe it was him.

He was massive, standing on a plinth in the centre of the room, the bars over a skylight sending moonlight cascading over his massive form.

“Ah, yes...” The guide came to stand beside me. “You've found Luther's crown jewel.”

“He doesn't look like a jewel,” Daniel said, appearing on my other side. “He looks like a MILF. A monster I'd like to —”

I jabbed my elbow into his ribs, hearing the breath rush out of him, but not letting that stop me. I moved towards the huge creature, standing tall on the lump of rough hewn stone he'd been carved on. The other two had been all crouched over, full of coiled power. But this one? He stood about six and half feet tall, his massive wings curled around him, but not enough to hide that barrel chest. He was a picture of masculine power, the artist depicting him not as a beast, but an exemplar of

perfect human musculature. That's what had my hand reaching out, ready to touch.

The guide had something to say about that. I could hear her voice getting louder and louder, but it didn't stop me. There was something about him that drew me closer. Like a child reaching out to touch flickering flames, or the need to step closer to a cliff edge, I took another step then another, before my hand touched stone.

Stone that was silky smooth. Stone that had been chilled by the night air, not errant ghosts. I felt the cords of muscles in his arms, then, as my fingers swept upwards, the veins that wrapped around them. He was hard, completely impervious to my touch, unable to reciprocate the caress or knock it away, and somehow that was alluring. He was a gargoyle, a beautiful, inanimate sculpture, but that's not how he felt. Maybe it was from my body heat, maybe from the latent warmth soaked in from the sun when it was still up, but it felt like the stone of his arm lost its chill under my touch. Why? I was about to find out.

"Holy fucking shitballs...!" Daniel yelled and so did others, their voices growing louder and louder, but I paid them no mind.

I stepped into the shadow of the massive sculpture and felt like a tiny, vulnerable thing in his presence. But that wasn't a scary thing in this context. For some reason I was soothed by it. I stepped closer, into the gap between his wings, almost able to hear them rustle. I wanted to throw my arms around his thick waist and bury my face in that perfect chest. Somehow I knew those wings would go around me, that they'd form a wall between me and the world, and at that moment, I didn't want anything more. And when I tilted my head up, I saw the gargoyle was staring down at me.

He hadn't been before, that was what was getting everyone so excited. I'd caught his stare across the expansive cell. I'd stared into those stony eyes as I got closer. I'd lost eye contact the closer I got, so I hadn't caught the moment his head tipped down.

Except statues didn't do that.

My gaze was jerked back over my shoulder as the sounds of the tour group got louder and louder. Phones were out and recording and everyone was talking at once. But all of that came to a stop as a tall man wearing a uniform of beige work clothes shouldered forward.

"The tour's over," he announced, staring at everyone with a vaguely bored expression. "Should've finished ten minutes ago. Ms Jennings..." Everyone wanted to say something and I watched them suck in breaths, but he just clicked his fingers, resulting in the big keyring being handed back over to him. "Thank you all for coming and I hope you enjoyed your visit, but it's time for everyone to leave now."

"But, Harry—" the guide began to splutter.

"Now," Harry said, much more firmly.

Part of me expected the gargoyle to move, to stop me from leaving, but when I looked up, I saw he was exactly as I had first seen him, staring endlessly at the door. My cheeks flushed hot as I yanked my hands down and walked hurriedly away from the statue.

"Ohmigodohmigodohmigod..." Daniel hissed as we beat a hasty retreat, our feet fairly skimming across the grass as we rushed towards the car. "That gargoyle. It moved!"

"It did not." I jerked the car door open and slipped inside. "It can't have. It's—"

He just looked at me, then held out his phone and tapped on the video he'd last taken. There I saw the grainy footage of the room. Of me walking towards the gargoyle like it was a long lost lover. And the statue? The footage wasn't especially clear, because it was super zoomed in and Daniel wasn't exactly holding it still. But I saw it. The moment that thick stone neck bent so he could look down at me. And somehow I knew.

That look, the way he stared down at me while I stood within his arms. I knew what it was, because I'd felt it before. Back when we were still young, and Trevor had long stringy



hair rather than a close cropped short back and sides, he'd looked at me just like that. As if I was his whole world and nothing else mattered. Daniel and I stared at the screen, and as we watched the video unfold, we were forced to consider the impossible.

That gargoyle wasn't made of stone, it was alive.

HARRY

I stabbed my finger at the screen of my phone. I had the Whiteley family lawyer on speed dial for just this reason, though I'd never fucking thought I'd be forced to call him.

"Hello..." James Mellors answered in that posh voice, that small hint of irritation that spoke volumes, but I pushed past it. The snotty bastard would lose the attitude real quick in a second.

"I found her."

"What?" The prick's voice sounded like he'd come to attention right then, all sleepiness driven from his tone. "The heir? How do you—"

"Walked into Z Ward on one of those ghost tours you sanctioned. Waltzed up to Wulfstan, bold as brass—"

"And?"

There he was. The imperious bastard was back.

"And Wulfstan moved. Just enough to get a whole pack of ghost hunters' panties in a bunch. You'll need to throw some estate money at them to keep them quiet."

"Yes, yes, but get to the point. Wulfstan moved for this woman?"

"She stepped into his arms like it was the one place on earth she was supposed to be, and he let her in, like that's what he wanted."

"Gods above..." I heard the rapid sucking in of his breath. "I need you to contact the tour guide, Mavis Jennings?"

"On it," I said, shooting the woman a sidelong look. She looked far too pale and was all fidgety.

“Find the contact details of the heir and forward them to me,” Mellors said crisply. “I expect them within the hour. Jennings knows she’s to keep accurate records of all tour attendees.”

“Will do, boss,” I said, ending the call and then turning to the woman. “I need the name of the girl, the one who went up to the gargoyle.”

“You’re not going to hurt her, are you?” she asked, her lips moving so fast she was falling over the words. “She seemed like a nice girl.”

“Hurt her?” I snorted. “That girl? She’s the heir of this whole estate and I just need to find her to let her know the news.”

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## Chapter 5

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“Clean up on aisle five,” I said down the PA microphone.  
“Clean up on aisle five.”

After a night of paranormal hijinks and many wines and pizza slices, there was nothing like a child getting sick in a supermarket aisle to bring you rocketing back down to earth. Thankfully my days of being on the end of the mop handle were over and I nodded to one of the girls gratefully as she hustled down the aisle with a bucket in hand.

“Did the kid projectile vomit green pea soup?” I turned around to see Daniel had sidled up. “Did their head turn around and around? Did they start cackling in a really deep voice and calling for the Dev—” I pressed a finger to his lips and then scowled at him, looking warily across the floor at the customers slowly pushing their shopping trolleys around. “—il.” He finished the word as soon as I pulled my finger away and then grinned madly. “I don’t have any holy water or a cross, but there was this hot seminary student who filled me with the holy spirit.”

“Oh my god...” I said, between gritted teeth. “Shut the hell up.”

“Or... and stick with me on this, we could go back to Gargoyle City.” He started to sing and swivel his hips around sinuously. “Where the grass is green and the girls are pretty—”

“Stop.” He jerked away when I tried to physically stop him. “Seriously, Daniel. Jackie will make me write you up again and—”

“Jade?” We both spun around to find the store manager, Jackie, standing there. She was an older woman with iron grey hair and a no-nonsense attitude. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she took in the sight of the two of us. “Can I have a word?”

“You’re i-in trou-ble...” Daniel muttered under his breath in a sing-song manner, as I pulled away from him.

“Yeah, of course. What’s up, Jackie?”

She gestured for me to follow her. When we went to her office, I knew whatever she had to say was serious. And so, when she instructed me to shut the door, I did so with every muscle locked down. Office, closed door: that meant she had something to tell me she didn’t want anyone to overhear.

“Take a seat,” she said, gesturing to the chair with thinning upholstery on the other side of her desk and I did so quickly.

“What’s this—?”

“The store is getting automated,” she said, with little fanfare. She sat back in her office chair and leaned her elbows on the arm-rests, lacing her fingers across her stomach. “That means we’re looking at cutting some positions.”

My back went ramrod straight; my heart pounding in my ears. More and more stores were installing self-serve checkouts, a cost-cutting exercise reducing the need for staff down to just one person, who was supposed to run around and see to all the errors that inevitably happened as people scanned their own groceries.

“A lot of positions, actually.” Jackie’s lips thinned. She leaned forward, picked up a piece of paper from the desktop, and handed it to me. I looked down at it with a frown. “I need you to have a chat with each of the people on the list and then...”

She had a whole lot more instructions, but they all seemed to fade away. I was running my eye down the list to see who'd got the axe, feeling sick at seeing way too many people I'd worked long and hard with. I wondered what they would do with this sudden news, what that would mean for them and their families. I sucked in a breath, ready to ask just that, when...

Daniel Ross.

His name was written about two thirds of the way down the list, and I couldn't bring myself to read any more. I looked up at her.

"Daniel...?"

"I know you two are close," she said, with a sigh. Then she shook her head. "I told you not to do that, didn't I? We've got a tough job and it only gets harder when we start making friends."

I didn't bother looking at her any longer, instead looking back at the list to finish scanning the names of all the people I'd need to talk to. I skimmed down another couple of names. Isabel, who'd had a baby only six months ago and was just off maternity leave. Nelly, who'd quit university for the meantime and was trying to make some money before going back. And me. My name was there, too, clear as day, almost at the bottom. I looked back up at Jackie, narrowing my eyes.

"So, this is easier for you, because we're not friends?" I asked, seething.

"Look, Jade—" she said, leaning forward.

"No, it's fine." I got to my feet, feeling like every cell in my body was quivering as adrenalin pumped through me. Working at a supermarket had never been my dream. There was nothing wrong with it as a job, except for the way people treated you.

People assumed you were replaceable, expendable, not worthy of respect, because your job was so 'easy'. If it was so easy, why was it always so hard to find long term staff? Dealing with pushy customers or demanding ones, people who

openly stole shit off the shelves, and the guys who refused to look for a single thing themselves, assuming you were their unofficial personal shopper. We were an essential fucking service and no one seemed to recognise that. But why would the general public do that, when our own employer didn't?

"I'll let people know," I said.

"At the end of their shifts, please, Jade," Jackie said, with a warning look.

"Sorry, Jackie, I don't think I can sit on important news like this."

"Jade..." Jackie jumped to her feet. "Jade, I know you're angry..." Oh, she had no idea. "But the writing's been on the wall for some time. Automation is in, people are out."

And as a result, theft was rife, with people scanning avocados as carrots, or just walking off without paying, while the distracted team member was dealing with something else. I didn't even care about that with the way the economy was going.

"Well, if people are out, then you won't mind if we finish our shifts now," I said.

I was burning some serious bridges. I'd worked for the same supermarket chain since leaving high school. It was the entirety of my work history on my resume. But I didn't even think about the potential consequences of my actions as I turned on my heel and walked toward her office door.

"Jade!" My name echoed down the hallway as I strode away from Jackie's office. "Jade!"

But I didn't stop. The list of names flapped back and forth in my clenched hand as I stalked back out to the main part of the store, a pennant heralding the battle that was to come. Jackie didn't manage to overtake me out to the floor, and I marched straight up to Daniel, still standing where I'd left him, waiting for me.

"What's going on?" he asked, then looked past my shoulder. "Ol' Vinegar Tits looks like she's fit to blow a gasket."

“We’re getting the sack.”

“What?” His keen brown eyes searched mine and his brow creased, then smoothed over again. “What? We can’t...” He turned around and gestured to all the people lined up behind the checkouts, customers he should’ve been serving. “They can’t.”

“Automation,” I said, shoving the piece of paper in his face. “Everyone on this list is losing their job.”

He snatched it from my hands and I watched him scan it in disbelief, just like I had. And, like me, his response was to spring into action.

“Izzy!” Isabel turned away from the customer she was chatting to and faced us. “We’re getting sacked.”

“What?”

But Daniel didn’t wait for her response.

“Nelly! George!” He kept going and each person he named turned around as he ran down the front of the shop. “You’ve lost your jobs.”

“Jesus Christ, Jade!” Jackie marched over to me, her face crimson with anger. “You’re an assistant manager. It’s your job to manage this situation.” As she fronted me, the others who’d just found out they’d been fired moved up behind me.

“Except I’m not any more, am I?” I stared her down, no more scared of her than I had been of the spooky gargoyles. “I’m not anything anymore.” I grabbed my name badge and tore it off my shirt, then tossed it onto the ground.

“You won’t be after this, that’s for sure,” she said, with narrowed eyes. “You call the company for a reference, and I’ll tell them exactly what you’re like.”

“If you’re still here, that is, Jackie.” Daniel was panting lightly as he came back to stand beside me, more and more of the staff joining us. Other name badges were thrown away, hair was pulled free and piercings were reinstated. “If they’re going to sack all of us and automate everything, how long before they automate what *you* do?”

I put my hands on my hips and leaned forward, past caring about her petty vindictiveness.

“I was about to give my two week’s notice anyway.”

“You’re quitting?” Jackie looked furious. “After everything the company has done for you?”

I let out an ironic laugh, shaking my head.

“So you’re allowed to fire me with no notice, but I’m not allowed to quit?”

I turned on my heel and strode away, wanting, needing, to put some space between me and her, because as soon as the words had come out of my mouth, I regretted them. Jobs were much easier to get than housing, weirdly enough, although that was part of the problem. People were pouring into the cities, ready to work, and while there were jobs to be had, there weren’t enough places for people to live in order to do them, which drove up wages. Housing. Wages. The two words seemed to reverberate over and over in my head as I realised that now I had neither. I was going to have to go home to the apartment and...ugh, go back to Trevor’s. I closed my eyes as I shook my head, still thrown by the fact that the place I automatically thought of as home wasn’t that any more. I needed to pack up my shit and ring my parents. I needed—

“Oh my god...” Daniel breathed out. “That was fucking amazing. You went postal on her fucking arse. I knew you had it in you all this time. And that...” he paused for effect, “was glorious.”

“I need to pack all my stuff up,” I told him. I’d opened my eyes to look at him when he started praising my verbal takedown of Jackie, but I needed to focus on moving forward.

“You’re moving into my place?” Daniel instantly flipped from worshipful adoration to ready-to-roll.

“I can’t. You have a one bedroom studio and a very active sex life.”

He smiled happily as he tilted his head to the side and twirled his finger in his hair. “I do, don’t I?”



“I’m moving back home,” I told him, watching as his smile faded.

“Like... *home*, home?” He stepped forward. “Jade—”

“Who’s for the pub, then?” George was a short, gruff man who’d been working in supermarkets all of his considerable life. We all knew, because he reminded us of it regularly. “I think we deserve a beer after this bullshit.”

“Well, I’d like something that doesn’t taste like used jockstrap,” Daniel said, with a wrinkle of his nose. “But, yeah.” He looked me over speculatively. “I think we *all* deserve a drink.”

“Well, I’m having a whole bottle of wine to myself,” Isabel said, with a shake of her head. “That bitch... She put it on you to tell us?” I nodded slowly. “Bugger her, and her cat’s bum face. I’ve got kids to feed and rent to pay and—”

“And we can talk that over at the pub.”

Daniel steered me out of the store and led me through the main part of the shopping complex. It was probably just as well we were leaving, because as we went we saw Jackie talking rather spiritedly to the complex’s security guards, with a lot of gesticulating in our direction. When she stopped, they started a slow amble towards us. Given that we were already on our way out, they didn’t put too much effort in. I rolled my eyes at her antics as I looked back at Daniel. Alcohol probably wasn’t going to help my situation, but it definitely couldn’t hurt. I smiled and wrapped my arm around his waist.

“Let’s go to the pub.”

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## Chapter 6

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Getting drunk and then staggering back to your ex's swanky apartment? Not smart. But after several rum and Cokes, a few beers and I wasn't sure how many shots, I didn't know or care what smart was. I could barely feel my face, or my feet.

"Oof!" I said, as Daniel and I stumbled out of the lift.

I felt like my body still wanted to float up, up, up, as if it hadn't registered that we'd stopped. Danny boy was just as bad, staggering after me, then into me, with enough force to send the two of us careening across the expensive lobby. Our arms and legs flailed around as we struggled to regain our balance, until we ended up slapping our hands against the wall across from the lift. Daniel looked at me and I looked back at him before we both burst out laughing.

"Whoopsie doodle," he said with a sloppy grin. "Now, where does Pencil Dick live again? Pencil Dick...!" He shouted out the epithet, his voice echoing around the lobby. "Oh, Pencil Dick!"

"Shhhhh..." I went to put my finger up to my lips, missed, poked myself in the eye and then started laughing again. "Ow! Why am I laughing?"

“I dunno.” Danny started laughing too, and the two of us dissolved into giggles like a pair of school children. “Now your eye’s all puffy.” His hand swooped through the air, aiming for my eye, but he poked me in the cheek.

“Ow! What the fuck! If you’re gonna poke anyone, poke Trevor,” I shot back.

“Oh, honey.” Danny pulled himself up to his full height. “Not even with someone else’s dick.” His head swung wildly towards my door. “I wonder if Pencil Dick and Salmonella are here?” He stumbled sideways towards the door, grabbed the handle and worked it back and forth, then shook it. When that didn’t achieve anything, he began to pound on the door. “Hey, Salmonella! Put your hairy flaps away. My girl needs her shit. Not to do a shit, though.” He looked at me. “You don’t, do you?”

“And sully Pencil Dick’s porcelain throne?” I said, sniggering. “I wouldn’t dare.”

“Fucking dickhead thinks he shits gold now he’s a big shot lawyer. Hey, Pencil Dick! Open up!” To my surprise, the door jerked open and there was Pencil Dick, I mean Trevor, looking thunderous. “Oh my god, I think I want to puke,” Danny groaned.

“What the bloody hell are you two doing here?” Trevor asked, in clipped tones, but then I saw who else was there. His body blocked the doorway, stopping us from getting in but also trying to block our view of...

“Who’s at the door, Big Daddy?” came a simpering voice.

Danny’s eyes swung my way as mine lifted to meet his, and we both stared at each other before erupting into a raucous burst of cackles.

“Big...?” Danny stumbled back, pointing to Trevor’s groin, then lifting his little finger. “In what world is four inches ‘big’?”

“Four...?” came the outraged huff from Big Daddy himself as he glared at Danny and then at me.

Uh oh, Trevor's ire was redirected at me and I just knew inside his head he was correcting Danny to 4.5 inches. I knew that size didn't have to mean anything. It literally was how you used your dick, not the size, but still... When you were a weaselly little fuck who didn't give a shit about feminine pleasure, who walked around like he was giving off Big Dick Energy, even though the reverse was absolutely true, I knew exactly how he was feeling.

Inadequate.

Something I knew all too well. I walked up to my ex while he was still huffing and puffing and pushed past him, determined to make the experience quick and painless, but, of course, Syphilis couldn't let that happen.

I didn't want to hate her. She might be the equivalent of an STD inside my head, but she wasn't the one who'd committed to a monogamous relationship with me. That'd been Trevor. He was the one who betrayed me. He was the one that broke my heart. She didn't know me from Adam, but Trevor sure did. So I tried to avoid her as I walked in, even as I felt her eyes boring into my skin, while I made a beeline for my boxes. Danny and I had worked out a plan. I'd take my stuff around to his place until the end of the week. He could keep his dick in his pants for that long, he'd assured me, or he'd make sure his hookups could host.

But Sphincter couldn't let that happen.

“What're you doing here?”

She strode across the floor, full of righteous fury, which was her first mistake. Then she stabbed a finger in my direction. Mistake number two. Without me even thinking, my hand was up and grabbing that stabby digit, bending it backwards until she let out a pathetic little whine.

“I'm here because my name is on the lease,” I told her, pushing the joint a little further and feeling a small pop. “I'm here because when Pencil— I mean, Trevor, rented this place, it was to provide the two of us a home. But I don't want him, or his new aftershave that smells like cat's piss, or those stupidly expensive suits, or his fancy coffee press.” My smile

had long faded but as I looked around me, I felt my spirits plummet. I let go of Sebum's hand and shoved her away from me. "I don't want him. I just want to get my shit and go."

"Finally," came the snarky comment from behind me.

Have you ever looked at someone and wondered how the hell you ever saw any good in them? That was how I felt as I turned to look at the man I'd once loved. I might have been wavering on my feet, standing there in my work uniform, shirt untucked, blouse buttons a little crooked, no doubt looking like a complete mess, yet somehow I felt superior to Trevor. Take away his degree and his fancy suit and he was still just a self-centred dick who didn't give a shit about anyone else, and I realised that Smegma had actually done me a favour, seducing him away from me, because now I was free.

"Yeah, finally." I nodded, my head bobbing way too fast. "Finally, I'm getting out of here. And I'll be ringing Mum and Dad, asking if they'll help me move back and then..." My lips twitched as he went pale. "I'll be telling my parents and yours exactly how you treated me. Gonna make for a hella awkward Christmas lunch."

Trevor was about to say something, maybe promising legal action if I told on him to his mummy, but he didn't get a chance. The door to the apartment was still open, so the stranger who appeared merely knocked on the door frame and then peered in.

"Hello," he said, his voice that smooth mid-Atlantic tone newsreaders used to adopt in old, old newsreels. "I'm James Mellors. I'm looking for a Jade Barlow."

"She's right here, Mr Tall, Dark and Sexy." Danny moved closer and then turned to me. "Is this your letter to Hogwarts? Is this when you find out you're a wizard?"

"A wizard?" One elegant eyebrow rose. "No. But heir to the Whiteley estate? Why yes, Jade, I believe you are the sole inheritor of the entire fortune."

"Fuck..." Danny hissed. "That's so much better."

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# Chapter 7

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“Heir to the Whiteley fortune!” Danny shouted, bouncing around in the back seat of a very fancy car. One I was going to throw up all over if he didn’t tone it down.

“Why the hell did I go drinking with you?” I groaned. “You’re like a meth-addled squirrel.”

“That’s just what the heir to the Whiteley fortune would say,” he said, jabbing a finger in my direction before collapsing back against the plush upholstery.

“Yes, well, perhaps some coffee is in order.” The lawyer bloke, aka Mellors, produced a silvery looking thermos from god-knew-where. When he unscrewed the lid, I leaned forward, and was rewarded with a great cloud of the richest, most seductive aroma. “Coffee?” he inquired, pouring a cup and holding it out to me.

“I’d step over my own granny to get a cup of that,” I said, reverently holding the cup in my hands and inhaling the aroma again before taking a sip. Oh god, yes. Rich, dark, with just a hint of milk, I took another sip then another, as the fancy car we were in took a left. When I looked up I saw those same massive gates we’d walked through the other night swing open. We were being driven onto the Whiteley estate.

“But...” Back at the apartment, that was what I’d said, and so had Trevor, both of us looking at each other for just a second before I pushed my way past him to the man standing just inside the doorway of the apartment. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack,” Mellors said and then he produced a sheaf of papers from a goddamn briefcase. Trevor had floated forward, seemingly summoned by the presence of legal documents like the ghost of my love life past, but I’d fixed him with a steely gaze.

“Bugger off,” I snapped. “You do not get to horn in here once something good happens to me.”

“Whatever this is, you’ll need legal representation,” Trevor said.

“And I’d rather drink a tall glass of my own steaming hot piss than have you look at any legal document pertaining to me,” I told him.

That seemed to drive the message home and he took a step backwards.

Mellors had explained the situation on the way down in the lift. He’d directed the big burly caretaker guy who’d wound up the ghost tour, Harry, to bring my boxes downstairs and then Daniel had lingered, saying he’d give him a hand. And that was how we’d ended up in some luxury sedan, gliding up the driveway to a house so big, so fancy that I couldn’t believe my eyes, because my bestie was right.

This may as well have been Hogwarts. Mellors was saying something, but all I could focus on was the house as it came into view. Spotlights revealed part of the facade. The mansion had several storeys, more windows than any one house had a right to, and in the centre was a tower of sorts. And gargoyles. I squinted hard, as if that would make their shadowy features clearer. I was still staring at them as I stumbled out of the car, on much steadier feet, because adrenalin and coffee helped sober a girl up.

“This...” Danny’s finger kept stabbing into the air. “This is yours.”

He turned and stared at me, wild-eyed, and I knew why. The place he lived was the same as the ones I’d been trying to rent: tiny, with air conditioning ducting exposed on the roof of his apartment, with a lobby that always smelled faintly of cat’s piss. The stately home in front of us was imposing as fuck, the grand facade saying, oh-so-clearly, *this is not for you*. This was a house for a lady with a long, flowing gown that she was forced to gather up in her hands, so she could run out into the moors and then throw herself down onto the heather to weep.

Yeah, *Wuthering Heights* may or may not have played a formative role in my development.

It was not the kind of place a glorified checkout chick named Jade called home.

“The entire estate, which includes a quite considerable fortune, is yours, Jade,” Mellors said smoothly.

“Considerable fortune?” Daniel came over and punched my arm. “Oh my god, bitch, you’re rich! You can wake up late and get mani pedis and those weird vampire face masks. You can brunch on gold dusted croissants and that coffee that civets shit out.”

“Only if *you* want to drink that, too.” He stared at me, eyes wide, his lips moving, but no sound coming out, which was such a rare state for Daniel that it was clear just how shocked he was. I glanced up at the massive house and then back at him. “I’m not living in a fuck-off big house without you, Danny.”

I said that in a small uncertain voice, because I wasn’t completely sure how he’d respond. We’d started out with a normal relationship as work buddies who laughed at the same things, and then it had evolved into something else. He’d caught me crying over Trevor one day in the break room and he’d wrapped his arms around me and held me tight until it was over, then made me spill the tea until Jackie came to reprimand us both. He’d told her to piss right off, been written



up for it, and had been completely unrepentant about it. And so a best friend was born.

“You want me to...” He stared at the house anew. “We’ll...”

I shrugged. “You offered me a place to stay at your apartment.” I waved at the house. “I’m returning the favour.”

“Well, perhaps the two of you would like to see your new home?” Mellors produced an ornate key, but instead of slotting it into the door, he handed it to me.

The brass key was warm to the touch, like it’d absorbed some of his body heat in his pocket. My hand shook slightly, my muscles forced to clamp down hard to put the key in the lock. But when I turned it, the tumblers moved smoothly, the lock clicking audibly, and then the door swung open. The light from outside allowed me to catch a glimpse of marble floors and dark wood, but I was barely able to see the interior due to the darkness. But I walked in, running my fingers across the scratchy wallpaper, hearing a small hush of sound before I found the light switch and then all was revealed.

Oh my Bridgerton.

It couldn’t be real. The whole day had to be one long fever dream. No, the last few days. From the ghost tour, to the gargoyle, to this. The floor was indeed marble, several different colours cut precisely, forming intricate patterns. But I couldn’t stop and take it all in. My eyes felt like they were tugged from one thing to another, struggling to absorb it all. The finely carved newel post at the bottom of the stairs, the thick carpet that covered every step all the way up, the subtly patterned wallpaper, the gilt frames. Everything about this place screamed old world, old money, so how the hell had I ended up here? I was a scruffy Australian girl, the product of a nice, solid, lower middle class family, who’d gone to the local public school. None of that had prepared me for such a place.

“Come through,” Mellors said, following us in. “We’ll go into the kitchen and I’ll outline the details of your inheritance. The recommendation you get legal advice about this is a sound

one, though I can understand why you would not want that legal advice from Trevor Davis.”

“You know Pencil Dick?” Daniel asked.

Mellor’s full lips thinned, but a small quirk up at the corner let us know what he thought.

“Mr Davis and some of his clients have been very interested in the Whiteley estate. This much prime land so close to the city centre has many a developer salivating over the prospect of turning part of the property into luxury apartments,” he replied.

“Apartments?” I looked out the huge windows that would let all the natural light in during the day, but only caught shadows of the perfectly manicured grounds outside. “Oh no, that’s not going to happen.”

“Too right, love.” Harry appeared with several of my boxes and set them down on the floor. “Property developers are bloody parasites, preying on the unwary so they can make the big bucks. Don’t let the pricks within ten feet of the place.”

“Harry...” Mellors said.

“Just calling a spade a spade,” Harry said.

“I’ve got a spade he can call whatever the fuck he wants,” Daniel muttered, coming closer to me. He didn’t mean for anyone else to hear that, but Harry’s eyes jerked up and I braced myself when their gazes locked. Harry had that big, burly, Aussie tradie thing going on, and homophobia was real in some aspects of that part of the community. Instead I saw the opposite, just a brief flare of heat, there and gone again in those blue eyes, right before Mellors stepped in.

“But, in essence, the property and entire fortune of the Whiteley family belongs to you, Jade. We’ve been looking for you for some time. When the last master of the house died without issue, he made clear in his will that a distant relative, the great, great granddaughter of his ancestor’s mistress, would inherit everything. We have been going over genealogical records, trying to find a trace of the person he meant, when we discovered you.”

There was something as warm as the coffee he'd given me before in Mellor's gaze.

"Your ancestress was a beautiful woman who came to a much smaller British colony in Adelaide. Madeline took up with the then master of the estate, Kenneth Whiteley, and oversaw a lot of the additions to the gargoyle collection. They never married, but the master always promised that The Eyrie would become hers upon his death."

He shook his head.

"Unfortunately they had a falling out and your ancestress left the estate, taking with her an unborn child. The heir. When the master died, his wishes were disregarded after a cursory attempt was made to find Madeline, but they didn't look very hard, not when Luther Whiteley was poised to inherit everything. He took control of the estate until his death, and his descendants afterwards, but..."

I watched his brows crease and smooth and wondered at it.

"The family seemed to founder over the years, their number dwindling down until there was only Master Ashley left. He made clear in his will that the house was to remain empty until the heir was found."

"But..." As I thought it through, my hands smoothed over the marble countertop before I snatched them back, before belatedly remembering that Mellors was saying they were mine. "If one of my ancestors was a Whiteley, shouldn't Mum or Dad be the one who inherits?"

"Your mother." Mellors nodded. "She was Madeline's descendant, but, no, the youngest unmarried female member of the family is the one who inherits." He pushed the papers towards me. "It's all here."

"Johnny is gonna be so pissed about this," I said, leaning over to peer at the documents. My big brother could never understand why I left Daysborough anyway and definitely not to live with the likes of Trevor. He warned me about my ex, growled in Trevor's direction that if he did anything to hurt me, he'd have to answer to Johnny, but... I fished out my

phone and tapped on my contacts, bringing Mum and Dad's number up despite the late hour. I'd intended to call them tonight, to say I was coming home, but...

"Jade?" Mum sounded perfectly alert, wary and on edge. "It's late, honey. Is everything OK?"

"Mum, do you know anything about an ancestor called Madeline?"

"You rang me up at 10 PM for a family history project?" she asked, a slight trace of irritation in her voice. "I'm not sure. I could talk to your nan if you like."

"Can you?" I gripped the phone tighter, staring at the tessellated tiled floor of the kitchen. "Because I'm standing in a fancy old mansion in the middle of Adelaide with the people that look after it. And they say it belongs to me."

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## Chapter 8

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An hour later, a long, rambling, vaguely hysterical phone call to my parents was finished, Mellors was gone and Harry let us know he was not far away in the caretaker's cottage. The only ones left were the new residents: me and Daniel. We stood at the base of the stairs that led to the first floor, dead on our feet, but still...

"It's right about now I'm wishing I didn't watch all those horror movies," Daniel said, then looked at me. "You know that if this was the start of one of those movies, this would be when a gang of organ harvesters would burst in and slice and dice us in our sleep."

"Danny—"

"Or a coven of reclusive vampires would slink out of the shadows."

"Danny—"

"Or witches that needed virgins to perform dark rites." He wrinkled his nose. "That rules me out. And just because you haven't had good dick, that doesn't mean you haven't had any dick."

“For fuck’s sake, Danny,” I said, right before he shot me a wicked grin. “I don’t know about you, but I’m trashed.”

“Totally. Walking out on my job, drinking my rent away, confronting Pencil Dick and finding out you’re the owner of a goddamn mansion takes it out of a boy.” He yawned wide, forcing me to do the same. “So, shall we see if they have clean sheets on the no doubt fancy arse beds upstairs?”

We both nodded, then together we made our way upstairs.

It was easy to see why old houses made such good settings for horror movies. If they were all like this one, they were too big, too creaky and also too quiet. We heard a scraping sound and both jumped out of our skin, only to flick the lights on and see that at the end of the hall, branches had been allowed to grow long and brush against the window glass.

“OK, maybe we should grab an Uber back to my place,” Daniel said hurriedly. I gave him a look before I walked down the hall and he scooted along behind me.

There were so many doors, but all were closed, except for one. I walked through the doorway, my footfalls swallowed by the thick carpet, but went still when I flicked on the light. Daniel didn’t get that message, forced to come to an abrupt stop when he collided with me.

“Holy whore’s bedroom...”

I got what he was saying, but, damn, any sex worker living here was living the high life. The room was massive, no scooching past the cupboards in a tiny gap between the bed and the doors. And the bed was bigger than a king. Emperor-sized maybe? It was covered in a thick, richly brocaded quilt, pillows, so many pillows mounded perfectly at the head against a thick upholstered velvet and gold bedhead. But that wasn’t even the main feature of the bedroom, that was on the ceiling. There was no ceiling rose, nor a painted mural to rival that on the Sistine Chapel. Instead there was a massive gilt framed mirror.

“It looks like your ancestors liked to watch themselves as they fucked,” he said.

“So, you’re taking this bedroom,” I said hurriedly, able to see him there, reclining in luxury. I beat a hasty retreat towards the door, but Daniel grabbed my shoulders and steered me right back towards the bed.

“Like fuck. You’re the lady of the manor now. You need to sleep in the super, massive fucky fucky bed.” I stumbled forward when he gave me a shove.

“But what about—?”

“I know what you’re thinking.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re wondering when this is all going to be yanked away. And I know why.” He sighed and then looked around the room. “You’re out of your comfort zone.” I nodded emphatically at that. “So damn far out you couldn’t find your way back to said comfort zone if you had a compass and a map, but…” Those brown eyes swung back to meet mine. “Think about this. You get to sleep in your own damn bed, not on a couch. You don’t have to be serenaded by the sound of Spitoon faking her orgasms. You don’t have to wake up to Trevor’s passive aggressive bullshit.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You don’t even have to wake up and rush to catch the train to get to work on time. Maybe we’ll wake up tomorrow and they’ll say that Ancestry.com made a huge mistake and some other girl gets to go to the ball, but that is not tonight.” He backed away toward the door, scanning the room, then giving me a satisfied nod. “Tonight you sleep in the bed that your distant ancestors had sex in, because, whatever the future holds, we’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

I shook my head, then smiled.

“OK, fine. So you’ll find another room to sleep in?”

“I’m fairly sure the toilet in this place is bigger and nicer than my whole apartment,” he replied, “so, yeah, I’ll be fine. If I get scared, I’ll scurry down the road to see if that big caretaker of yours can look under my bed and see if the boogie man is there.”

“The one that’s into you?” I asked.

“You got that too, huh? Yeah, my gaydar was going off, babes, and that arrow was pointing at him. Mellors was giving me vibes too, but I’m not sure if it’s because he wants to suck my dick or he’s just posh.” Daniel winked at me. “We’ll find out tomorrow.” Then he moved in and pressed his forehead to mine. “But we’ll get through this together, right?”

It was that assurance that helped me to pull away finally, close the big heavy door to the massive bedroom and stop myself from staring at all the decadent decor so I could move towards the shower. Those familiar night-time rituals helped settle me down: getting undressed, checking the water temperature then searching the bathroom cupboards for and finding some brand new cakes of lemon-scented soap. I grabbed one of those and some thick, thick towels and I was set. The other morning I’d washed away my sense of responsibility for Trevor, but now...? So much felt like it went swirling down the drain, that when I stepped out of the shower afterwards and stared into the mirror, I almost didn’t recognise myself.

Wide eyed and too pale, that was what I saw first, with my hair plastered flat to my skull. Juxtaposed against the tiles of the bathroom, the beautiful fittings, I felt like a fish out of water. But I was determined to learn how to breathe in this atmosphere. I’d find a lawyer in the morning, one that wasn’t connected to Trevor and his cronies, and I’d clarify if what Mellors had said was right, but for now...

*Could* this be mine? I wondered, staring at the mirror, the basin, the painted porcelain soap dispenser, the plush hand towels and felt a tug of longing. I wanted it to be, all of it, every glorious inch of this place, with a fierceness that kind of took me by surprise and that need followed me into the bed. I nestled down in all those pillows, sighing at the feel of a perfectly firm mattress rather than a couch, and let my muscles relax one by one, dropping down into sleep.

I WASN’T ALONE in the bed, I became slowly aware of that. A finger slid up my spine, making me twitch and then when I moved, a whole palm rubbed across one arse cheek, the fingers sinking in. Another hand slid up my ribs, moving



slowly, so slowly, forcing me to guess where it would end up. There, I panted, when a hand sought to cup the swell of my breast, but failed to contain all of it. A thumb rubbed across my nipple, slowly at first, as if to test the swollen point, then more surely when I moaned. I shifted under the covers, the silken slide of the one million thread count sheets doubling as his caress.

“There you are.”

My eyes flicked open and that’s when I saw where I was. In the same bed, that was clear, but what was different was that the covers were all thrown back. And then there was him.

I knew then that I was dreaming. He was so fucking beautiful, there was no way he could be a living, breathing man. Those razor sharp cheekbones, that proud nose, those full lips, quirking up now under my inspection. A thick mane of red hair spilled over the pillow like a nest of snakes. And that chest. Heavy with muscle, the power there barely deployed as he pulled me over to sit on top of him.

I’d gone to bed in my shirt, but now I was naked as I straddled his bare hips, shifting slightly back and forth. I let out a small sound of frustration, the hard wall of his taut stomach going some way to stroking the itch I felt building inside me, but not doing anything to resolve it. He chuckled and shifted me further down and that’s when I felt the slide of his thick cock separating my folds.

“Ohh, fuck...” I hissed at the feel of that sudden, much more direct pressure.

Usually getting off took an industrial strength wand vibe, a whole lot of lube and some choice monster fucker porn to get me off long after Trevor had rolled over and fallen asleep, but not now. Whoever this dream lover was, his touch was like fire and all I wanted to do was burn. I rubbed, rubbed, like a person trying to ignite a scrap of tinder, but I was the one I wanted to set alight.

“That’s it,” he crooned in a low voice, only the slight tremor to his tone making clear how he was taking this. “Take what you need, my love...”

I'd spent my life waiting for a man to use a tone that reverent, to stare at me with that kind of intensity. His dark eyes felt like they burned all the way down to my soul.

As did his touch.

My mouth fell open the moment his did and I dropped my head down, our lips colliding. I kissed him like he was all the oxygen left in the world and my lungs burned for a taste. I kissed him with teeth and tongue, with my nails burying themselves in his chest, and he matched my intensity. One hand gripped my hip, holding me right where I needed to be, the other buried in my hair.

“That’s it...”

My hips tilted further forward and he surged up, the head of his cock grazing my sopping entrance. I felt it slip, slide, and then I shoved backwards, letting out a little whine of frustration.

“Never fear.” His voice was deep, rumbling, feeling like it vibrated all the way through me, from my head to my toes. “I’ve got everything you need.”

I couldn't tell if that was a promise or a curse, but then I felt his cock, thick, so much thicker than I was used to, working its way in. Long, slow rocking movements, the two of us working as one, forcing me open, the stretch making me shiver. I wasn't used to this, feeling so damn full, having everything I could possibly need and then more. I couldn't even get out words, sitting there, like a queen on her throne, pierced through and panting like a bitch in heat and that made him smile.

It was a cruel thing and a sweet one, at the same time, as he stared up at me.

“We’ll never hold a thing back from you.”

And, with that, the room seemed to come alive. I felt the bed dimple and then shift, as others climbed on as well, appearing from the shadows to cluster around us. Hands went to my breasts, slid under my chin and held me in place as yet more went between my legs. My clit was worked back and

forth as I began to move helplessly. Someone spat on their fingers and then rubbed that around the entrance of my other hole, then pushed in. And with each new caress the pleasure seemed to multiply, over and over, growing greater and greater, until I finally achieved my goal.

I was hot, so hot, sweat prickling across my brow as I threw my head back, my hips moving in earnest now, snapping up and down, working him harder and harder. But as I got hotter, he got colder, the delicious difference in temperature making me shiver, right before I looked down.

It was too late and he knew that, because this was somehow all part of his plan. The man from before wasn't lying beneath me. It was that gargoyle. The massive beast from Z Ward, he lay beneath me, his long hair silvery grey as it lay across the pillow, but it was his mouth that drew my attention. That cruel smile was still there, partially marred by a growing snarl that tore through his chest as he erupted.

His cum was scalding hot, burning me from the inside, forcing the flames of pleasure to flare so bright I screamed. But his cock, it was ice cold and impervious. Not hard like a man's, but hard like stone. This beast fucked me through one wave of orgasm and into the next, roaring his victory as I just screamed.

When I sat straight up in bed the first thing I saw was I was in a strange room I didn't know and sun was streaming through the windows. My shirt was hanging off my shoulders, unbuttoned in the night and what else was different? I stared up at the bleary sight of my morning bedhead, peering at my reflection in the mirror on the ceiling, when I saw it. A small, grey, polished pebble, left in the indent of one of the pillows.

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## Chapter 9

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“Are you OK?”

Daniel came at a run, slamming the door open, wearing only a pair of very tight Lycra boxers.

“Oh my god, I’m not now,” I said, putting my hand over my eyes. “For the love of god, put your dick away.”

“That’s what my hookups say after a long night of multiple orgasms.” He completely ignored my plea, flopping onto the bed next to me. I pulled a pillow over my face in response. “So, WTF? I heard that scream all the way down the hall.”

“All the way down the hall?” I peeled the pillow back. “What were you doing down the hall?”

“Checking out your fucking killer pad, duh. Like holy fucking shit, have you seen the bathroom?”

I recognised that look, wide-eyed and with a gleeful grin, and felt myself tense up.

“I’ve seen a bathroom. This room has an ensuite.”

“So does mine. I christened it last night, if you know what I mean.” He gave me an exaggerated wink. “But fuck, you gotta see this...”

Before I could protest he was up and off the bed, tugging me free of the covers and that's when I let out a little yelp.

“Fuck’s sake, Danny! I’m not dressed.”

“No, you’re not.” He took in the way my shirt was hanging open and then grinned. “Looks like someone had a good night’s sleep. First time you could play fishy fingers...” He held up his hands and flickered his fingers through the air. “Without the risk of Pencil Dick walking in on you? Girl, I get it, but we need to get you dressed.”

He let go of my wrist to stride over to the wardrobe and fling the doors open.

“There’s not going to be anything in there for me to wear,” I said from between gritted teeth. I yanked my dirty clothes off the floor and started pulling them on. “The last ‘master’ was a guy—”

“With 44FF tits?” He spun around, holding a very nice lacy bra against his chest.

Damn. I froze in place, my eyes widening.

Only women who’d been overly blessed by the Boob Fairy could appreciate the majesty of this undergarment. While people relentlessly sexualised big breasts, the reality was most bras for larger sizes looked like some kind of beige support garment your granny might’ve worn. But this? It was sheer, was made from exquisitely pretty lace, the champagne colour relieved by tiny stitched roses. The cups had enough coverage that the bands wouldn’t cut across the breast to give you the dreaded four boob, and the straps were wide so they wouldn’t slowly burrow into my shoulder muscles as the day wore on.

“Gimme that,” I said, snatching it from his grip. I felt like Arthur must’ve felt when he pulled the sword from the stone, destiny throbbing through me as I eased it on. “Oh my god...”

“OK, whatever else happens today, you’re keeping that,” Daniel said, with a definite nod. “Like, you actually have two tits, rather than just one squishy uniboob. Whoever makes that bra, you need to buy like ten of them.”

“Bras like this probably cost \$150 a pop,” I groaned. It fitted perfectly. Danny was indeed correct that it gave me the kind of definition I needed. The band was firm, but not tight, the straps barely even noticeable. It was the Cadillac of bras and I never wanted to let it go. “But these aren’t my clothes.”

“I think they were bought for you.” Daniel leaned forward and yanked a tag, showing me it hadn’t been worn. “It’s not like Master Ashley was into drag.” He turned back to the wardrobe. “Not unless...” He flicked through the racks faster and faster, then pulled out a garment with a frown. “Like, you know I love you.”

“Yess...” I sighed, knowing somehow I was gonna hate what was coming.

“And you’re amazing, so amazing, and way too smart to be an assistant manager at a supermarket.”

“That’s not a problem anymore,” I replied, with a wince. “Jackie’s not gonna give me a reference any time soon.”

“But I think we can both agree that a style icon you are not. Like, usually, you’ve got that whole ‘just became homeless’ vibe going on.”

“Thanks?”

“So, explain this.” He tossed the piece of clothing he had in his hand onto the bed, then another and another, until I started to see a pattern. My fingers twitched as I stepped closer, because somehow the clothes of my dreams lay across the bed.

Silky soft vegan cashmere jumpers and well broken-in jeans that somehow I just knew would hug my form. Babydoll tops made from gossamer light fabric, that would nip in at the waist, then flare out over my ample arse. Then there were the t-shirts. Made of cotton that felt like it’d been washed many times to eradicate all stiff scratchiness, I was pulling one over my head before I could even think about it.

“Of course.” Daniel crossed his arms. “You have a massive wardrobe full of clothes that are apparently made to your exact size, and you choose the ratty old band t-shirt.”

“It’s not ratty,” I said, smoothing my hands down the sides of the shirt and loving the way the cotton felt.

“Oh, it’s ratty. But if we’re going for the rock chick look, again, let’s make it bougie.”

He flicked through the rest of the wardrobes (yes, there were a few) and tossed me a pair of jeans, boots, underwear and even some bangles, until every trace of Jade Barlow, assistant manager, was gone. I stepped towards the full length mirror, my appearance drawing me closer.

I was plus sized, something I’d since accepted, even if Trevor hadn’t. I’d fought this reality hard in high school, using incredibly restrictive eating patterns and that’s when we’d first got together. But it had been hard to look at myself in the mirror, see the body that so many people seemed to like better, and feel that endless roil of hunger in my stomach. I’d been hollow, empty of food, but filled with people’s expectations, until the stress of year 12 exams resulted in me throwing in the towel and just eating three meals a day, like the majority of my classmates.

Weight had seemed to rush back on, like a tide that had been held at bay, my body swelling, swelling, but Trevor... I’d hated him and loved him in turns. Loving him for the way he was a constant supportive presence at my side, but also hating him for only having been drawn there due to my thinness. I’d pushed him away, anticipating his rejection as my jeans size increased, but, contrary to what I’d expected, he’d held my hand, squeezed it tight and told me he wasn’t going anywhere.

Of course, some years later, he bought me a gym membership for Christmas and told me to get my act together. That was the first death rattle of our relationship, because I’d left shame and disgust about my body back with my senior year study guides.

I blinked, bringing myself back to look in the mirror, and as I did, I realised the freaking genius of whoever had made these clothes. The t-shirt fitted my shoulders and my bust perfectly, then it flared out slightly from the waist, skimming over my stomach and hips, but not ballooning out, which

would have created even more mass. The jeans were bootcut, tight around the thighs, as this was a comparably narrow part of me, then flaring out slightly, helping balance out the weight around my middle. But the sight of me wearing my rock chick regalia, against the reflection of the posh bedroom behind me? It seemed an incongruous juxtaposition.

“How’re we feeling?” Daniel asked me, appearing at my shoulder. Those keen eyes were practised at taking in everything. I could reply, spill out the complex mess of fear, relief, incredulity and... unworthiness that I was feeling, all at the same time, or I could just smile and brush it off.

“Like I could murder a coffee right now.”

“Oh my god, me too,” he said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Do you think they have any painkillers in this fancy-arse house of yours? I don’t need the hard stuff, just something to take the damn edge off because, fuck... I’m never drinking tequila shots again.”

“If I lined up a row of them on the kitchen bench downstairs, you’d be knocking them back before I’d finished pouring,” I said.

“Fuck yes, I would.” He slung his arm around my shoulders. “Should we go and see what kind of top shelf liquor they have in this place?”

“We’ll find something to drink,” I assured him.

And when we got downstairs, we found someone had anticipated that need.

“SO THIS IS how the other half lives.” Daniel went over to the thermos that was sitting on the counter and unscrewed the lid, sniffing the contents and then groaning. “You have people that anticipate your every need and... damn.” He grabbed two cups from one of the many, many cupboards, pouring out two coffees and then handing me one. “This is so good.”

But I ignored the coffee for the moment, even though the dark aroma drew me forward, because under the thermos was a small card. White, with scalloped edges, the kind that fancy people used in period movies as a calling card. I picked it up,



thumbing the thick card stock and then read the curiously looping script.

*For the lady of the house.*

Not Jade, not even Ms Barlow, but ‘the lady of the house’. I frowned slightly, but then took a sip of the coffee, finding it to be the perfect mix of coffee and milk.

“You think your people could rustle me up a bacon and egg sandwich?” Daniel asked, looking around the kitchen, as if someone would appear to fulfil our every wish. “With some hash browns?”

“Pancakes...” I groaned.

“Fuck yes, pancakes and crispy bacon and some mushrooms fried in butter with lots of salt.”

“You need to put a list together.” We both spun around to find Harry standing in the doorway. He snorted at our look of surprise. “We’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

“Like good coffee?” Daniel lifted his cup. “Are you the awesome coffee fairy? Because if you are—”

“The house provides,” he said, ending that line of conversation, but before we could explore that further, Mellors walked into the kitchen.

“Ahh, everyone’s up? Good, good. Now, I took the liberty of contacting a firm of specialised probate lawyers that I know have a good reputation. While my firm typically handles all of the legal issues for the family estate, I thought you’d appreciate the advice of someone independent. The estate will pay for any legal fees that are incurred.”

“And what if these guys are in your pocket as well?” Daniel asked, eyes narrowing.

“Danny...” I turned to face him. “What’s the ulterior motive here? He’s offering me a lot of money and this house.”

“You can select any lawyer you like,” Mellors replied, calmly. “But I have a breakfast meeting set up for us with one of the senior partners at Jameson and Sons this morning, if that suits.”

I'd seen the name of that firm in the city. It occupied a massive building, many floors high, with an imposing facade. I blinked and shook my head.

"I don't need to select my own lawyer. I'll take the meeting with your contact. I just want to find out how the hell I ended up here," I said.

"Understandable." Mellors nodded and then jerked his head at the doorway. "If you meet me outside, I'll escort the two of you to the meeting."

"Ready to meet destiny?" Daniel asked, as we followed him out.

I smoothed my hands down my hips.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

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## Chapter 10

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“You are about to become a very rich woman, Ms Barlow.” The man speaking was Gerald Jameson, one of the Jamesons in the title of his firm. He wore an iron grey suit, which matched his hair perfectly, the stiff lines of his face shifting as he looked up from the paperwork at me. “If you’re looking for a legal firm to deal with the estate—”

“Gerald...” Mellors said in a gently chiding tone.

“That’s what Mr Mellors does, doesn’t he?” I asked.

“Yes, well, historically that has been the case, but—” Jameson said.

“Can we stick to the inheritance details, please?” I said.

Jameson nodded slowly.

“There is no provision for multiple heirs. Everything goes to one member of the Whiteley family,” he explained.

“But I’m not a Whiteley. I’m a Barlow. My mother was a Grant. She said she’d speak to my grandmother, but she has never heard mention of Madeline...”

“Davenport,” Mellors added.

“Madeline Davenport.” As soon as I said this so-called ancestor’s full name I felt a strange quiver inside me. “I had to do a family history project in primary school, but I don’t remember that name being there.”

“Because she went by another name.” Mellors’ lips thinned. “She left the house with Master Kenneth’s son growing within her. At the time she wanted nothing more to do with the family, but by the time Luther Whiteley took control of the estate... She had fallen on hard times, had a young son who needed support and she thought to ask Eric for her son’s share of the estate but... Luther’s father held the position as master for only a short time before dying of a heart attack. And so it was that she met with the son, not the father.”

I found my hands tightening around my cup of coffee, seeing Z Ward in my head and all of those horrific devices.

“She hadn’t held out hope of receiving a warm welcome, but Luther’s attempt to forcibly inter her in the brand new Z Ward was completely unexpected. Madeline escaped Luther’s clutches and she and her son went underground. They changed their names, left South Australia, creating a new life in New South Wales. She married, had more children and...” Mellors produced a tablet and with a few taps, he brought up a genealogical site. “This is her direct line of descendants. From her son, whose name had been changed to Nicholas, down to here.”

It was a thin line, and one I was familiar with. When most people’s family trees included ancestors that had four, five, six or even seven children, mine on my mother’s side had few. Congenital birth defects, that’s what my grandmother had said was the issue. I had PCOS, so I wondered if that was a factor.

“Nicholas Grant,” I said, with a slow nod. I’d only ever seen one scratchy looking photo of him in a Grant family history book, but as things stood, I owed him a beer.

Because that proved it was real.

When I looked up, Mellors and Jameson both seemed to catch my moment of realisation: Mellors looking more relaxed, Jameson all too alert. He was like a hunting dog

who'd picked up the scent of prey and to engage with him was a strange experience. If he'd walked into the supermarket I'd worked in, I would've moved subtly closer, made sure whoever was serving him did so swiftly and politely. He was a man of obvious power and wealth, so in the world I'd known up until yesterday, that meant he was to be pandered to.

But if what they were saying was true, the same could be said of me.

“So what exactly have I inherited?” I asked. “The house —?”

“The house and the considerable landholdings attached to it.” Jameson's words came out in a rush. “Land that has been gaining a lot of attention in the last few years. You could easily subdivide—”

“No.” I surprised myself with that, my voice perfectly flat.

“Excising even half the block would still leave you—”

“No.” I looked over at Mellors. “I don't need to, do I?” Jesus, was I really having this conversation right now? “Like, the estate isn't in any trouble, is it? I don't need to sell off some land to pay taxes or get a new roof?”

“The estate is not in any trouble,” the lawyer confirmed. “Quite the opposite. While Master Ashley inherited quite a lot of wealth, with some savvy investments he managed to use it to significantly expand the family fortunes.” He shot Jameson a cool look. “There's no need to sell anything if you don't wish.”

“But the land... Ms Barlow, you could—”

“I think we're done here.” Who felt like a girl boss right now? This bitch. I got to my feet and then held out my hand. “It's been lovely to talk to you, Mr Jameson. Thank you for confirming the terms of the inheritance for me. I needed an independent set of eyes to look over the paperwork, just in case this was some kind of set up for an incredibly shitty reality TV show, but it sounds like Mellors has been the family lawyer for some time. I'll be retaining his services until I find a reason otherwise.”

“Yes, well, take my card, just in case you change your mind.”

Watching Jameson get all flustered, finding his wallet and then pulling out a business card? That was worth the price of admission at this swanky cafe, but I took it with a smile and a nod, before turning to go.

The hyperventilating started when we got back into the car.

“I need to ring Mum and Dad...” I said, slapping my hands down around my head. “I need to get their mortgage details from them and pay that off. Or maybe they’ll want a new house. Mum always wanted a greenhouse and Dad—”

“Jade.”

Daniel leaned closer and took my hand.

“Danny...” I stared at him. “We’ll get you somewhere too. Better than the place that smells of cat’s piss.”

“Pretty sure that’s Mr Franklin whipping it out when he comes home late from the pub,” he muttered, then shook his head sharply. “You’re not buying me a damn place.”

“But—”

“No.”

“You need—”

“To see you take a big deep breath. In...” He demonstrated how, and my lungs inflated obediently. “And out...” I blinked as he smiled at me. “You’ve inherited a fortune and the first thing you want to do is make sure everyone else is OK.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. “Just enjoy the moment.”

“But Isabel...” I remembered my workmates, not expecting to feel a vicious stab of guilt, but it came anyway. “She’s got a family and George—”

“They have families and support networks to pull from. And, even if head office is short-sighted enough to sack experienced customer service officers, other people are screaming for workers.”

“The desire to be altruistic is an admirable one,” Mellors said. “But providing assistance to all and sundry can bring its own problems.”

“Mel Mel has got it right.” I watched the lawyer wince as Daniel gave him a nickname. “Remember when we were obsessively putting in Lotto tickets?” God, did I ever. He was going through a low spot right when I broke up with Trevor and we’d spent way too many nights fantasising about winning the lottery, because that was the only way we could see our way out of our current shit. “Well, I watched a documentary on the lives of people who actually won it and...” He wrinkled his nose. “It can get pretty ugly. People see that massive amount of money and can’t help but think about how to get their hands on it. Maybe we should just keep a lid on it for now?”

“Right, right...”

I watched my hands turn back and forth with a growing sense of unreality, one that I carried with me, right the way up the driveway as we returned to the house.

My house.

We walked up my drive, past my neatly clipped hedges, the sweet smell of roses thick in the air. We crossed my porch and entered in through my front door, to the smell of fresh baked bread, and when we got to the kitchen, we saw an open pantry stuffed with food.

“Do rich people have house brownies?” Daniel asked, when he looked inside the fridge. “Is that how this shit works? Like you don’t need to break a nail doing the dishes or whatever. The ‘house’ just does it for you.”

“Something like that,” Mellor replied. “Now, as the question of whether or not you are the heir has been resolved, how would you like to proceed? I can take you through a very long, very boring overview of your estate. That will need to happen at some point.”

“Or we could explore the house.”

Daniel shot me a hopeful grin and, I had to admit, his enthusiasm was infectious. This was mine. This was all mine. And I couldn't help but want to see exactly what that entailed. We'd only seen the house at night, dark, shadowy and impressive, but right now the sun was shining.

"I think we're just going to hang out here and get a sense of the place, Mellors," I replied.

"Of course. I'll give you my contact details. As the Whiteley heir is our only client, we provide a twenty-four hour service." Did the lawyer's eyes linger on Daniel for just a second? "Please call if you need anything."

"I'M NOT sure if he wants me to call him about what I'm thinking," my best friend muttered as Mellors left the house.

"Ohh, I dunno. I'm pretty sure he was thinking of picking up what you were laying down there," I replied. "So, are you going to bone everyone associated with the house, because you know that shit's gonna get messy."

"Ugh, well, I'm not going to now..." He rolled his eyes dramatically, then laughed. "So, are we gonna plumb the depths of this mansion or what, bitch?"

"Lady of the house, thank you," I snarked, holding up the piece of card.

"Milady..."

He performed what I thought was supposed to be a bow, holding his arm out as he rose. I shook my head and took it.



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# Chapter 11

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“Wow...” I said. “Just...wow.”

We stood in front of yet another palatial room, this one containing a beautiful old fireplace, huge overstuffed antique chairs and a goddamn piano. Danny sprinted over, launching himself at the piano stool and then spinning around to run his fingers across the keys in a theatrical, if not especially musical, way.

“I can see it now.” He gestured to the room. “You could have killer parties in here. The champagne would be flowing. I’d be doing my best Liberace impression.”

“Can you play the piano?” I asked.

He proceeded to tap out the beginning of Chopsticks, though not particularly well.

“OK, we hire someone who can play jaunty tunes as we get tastefully wasted with the pretty and the powerful,” he replied.

“More like I’d be holding back your hair as you vomit in what is probably an antique vase.”

I approached a large porcelain vessel that sat over the mantelpiece, ready to touch it before jerking my fingers back.

*It's your vase*, I told myself, as if that would make it more real. But if it was mine, I didn't want to accidentally break it, so I pulled my hand away, but as I did, I saw that it was not the only thing sitting on the shelf above the fireplace. A small round pebble sat there.

Have you ever seen perfectly smooth rocks on the beach or by a riverside and just had to pick them up? My thumb rubbed against the smooth surface, feeling the slight pitting. It felt curiously heavy and... warm, like someone had just been running a fire in this room, though all evidence said otherwise.

“What's that?” Daniel appeared at my shoulder and peered at the stone. My fingers went to close around it, as if to shield it from his gaze, and why would I do that? “All this fancy shit and you pick up a pebble?” He went to pluck it from my grip, but I held it hard. “Is that your liddle pet rock?” He pulled a face, speaking to me like I was a small child. “Do you want me to draw a cute liddle face on with texta?”

“No.” He was being an idiot, I was being weird, but my reply came out so definitely. I shoved the rock into my pocket, feeling the loss of it as soon as I did and then made for the door. “C'mon, let's see some of the other rooms.

But of course, Daniel couldn't let it go.

“Are you gonna get all weird and eccentric now that you're rich?” he asked me as we strolled down the hall. “Because if you start bottling your own urine, I'm out, just so you know.”

He bumbled something else about a Howard Hughes documentary he'd seen and right when I was about to point out that the man obviously suffered from an extreme case of OCD, we heard a crash. Our eyes jerked up.

“What was—?” I started to ask.

“Let's find out!” Danny grabbed my arm and pulled me towards another set of stairs.

I'd always thought that if Danny was a character in a horror movie, he'd be that idiot that blundered into the darkened room or creepy basement, easy pickings for the

monster to tear apart. And I was about to have my theory proven correct. He hauled me upstairs, and we found ourselves not on yet another floor of rooms, but heading toward the tall central tower I'd noticed when we'd arrived last night. It was situated in the middle of the house and as we walked up the spiral staircase inside it, I saw glimpses of the grounds below, the sunlight, the bright green grass, the pretty flowers going some way to reassuring me that we weren't walking towards our imminent doom. Then Daniel flung a small door open.

“Holy crap!”

I stumbled out after him and that's when I saw what he meant.

We were on the massive roof of the house. A gangway had been built along the top, ringed by a wrought iron fence and while the breeze whipped at my hair up here, it wasn't what drew us further. We'd seen their shadowy shapes before the night we came for the ghost tour, but that was just a hint of what was to come. Massive gargoyles sat on the roof, glaring down at the grounds below, which should've kept us back, but instead Daniel hoisted himself over the fence.

“Danny!” I yelped.

“OK, just hear me out.” He straddled the broad back of the nearest gargoyle and I wondered why that felt wrong as well as bloody dangerous. “But did you get a weird feeling in your private parts as a kid, when you watched Disney's *Gargoyles*?” He caressed the cheek of the stone sculpture. “Because I did.” He ran his hands over the chest of the beast. “Massive, super strong, ready to do anything to protect me. I wanted to be Detective Maza so freaking bad.”

“I really don't want to have to have real detectives here investigating why you became a bloody smear on the concrete below,” I ground out between gritted teeth. “Get your arse over that fence.”

“Honestly, this is my only chance to get my hands on something this big,” he said, stroking the gargoyle's arms. “Because this boy is jacked.”

“Danny, for fuck’s sake!”

“Like could you imagine? Riding something this big up into the sky.” He held out his arms as he wrapped his thighs around the beast’s waist, as if he was on the prow of the Titanic or something. “Then riding him a whole other way.”

My friend was being a bloody idiot, again. He was the kind of person you had to tug out of the path of dangerous animals, because otherwise he’d try to go and pat them. But as his hips flexed in a sinuous movement, my mind stuttered between last night and now. An ache deep inside me, left by my dream, connected to a cruel smile and a cold, hard body. The scream that had built up inside me last night was matched by another right now, and they twined around each other in a weird mix of arousal and panic, until I heard Danny let out a sharp yip of fear and I focused back on him.

“Jesus, Danny!”

I was forced to lunge across the fence, the sharp points pressing hard into my abdomen, as I grabbed the back of his shirt, because the bloody idiot had slipped. Not far, but enough to put a scare into both him and me. I hauled him backwards, listening to the sound of the seams groaning.

And that of pebbles showering the concrete below.

It wasn’t until I had my friend over the fence and standing shaking beside me, both of us sucking in breaths, that I was able to look more closely at them.

“Fuck!” I punched him in the arm. “Fuck, Danny, what if you fell off the roof?”

“Live fast, die young, leave a pretty corpse?” he said, smiling weakly.

“Pretty?” I stared over the edge of the house and felt a dizzying sway of vertigo, forcing me back. “You wouldn’t be real pretty after being smashed to a million pieces. We’re going inside, somewhere with four walls and—”

“Looks like your pet rock has some friends.”

He crouched down and pushed his fingers through the railing, scraping a pebble towards him before showing it to me. It was the same bluish grey rock, that same slightly pitted texture, though the warmth could be explained by the sun overhead. I tossed it around and around in my hand and then shoved it in my pocket.

“If we go inside now, I’ll let you draw faces on them,” I said.

“Yes!”

He threw his hands up in the air and then made his way towards the staircase, leaving me for a moment to stand alone on the roof. My eyes were drawn back to the gargoyles.

Because Daniel was right, that cartoon series had been a pivotal one for me when I was young. At first I’d just been drawn to the sight of such strange creatures having adventures, then I’d been entranced by the scenes set in the Scottish castle. Vikings, wizards, magical creatures. I’d always felt the world of history was a mystical place and when I watched the cartoon, reality just fell away. But then I’d followed the story of Goliath and Detective Maza.

I’d loved how strong and tough she was, but, despite that, or to complement it, he was this hulking presence by her side. Always watching to make sure she was safe, but never stepping in and trying to dictate what she did, he had been the template for what I wanted in a guy. One that had been destroyed when I started dating actual men. I blinked now, seeing the roof again, not my childish dreams and I shook my head. I’d long since faced the fact that there was a reason why creatures like that were mythical. Nothing that strong, that good, could exist in our actual world. And spending my time dreaming about fantasy creatures was something only a child could indulge in, not an adult. I stepped into the stairwell and shut the door firmly behind me.

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## Chapter 12

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“I’ve gotta sleep at my place tonight,” Daniel announced as the sun started to go down.

We’d ordered food from a very fancy Thai restaurant and then had it Ubered over, and were now left with the remains of the meal spread across the kitchen counter. Although there were dining rooms, plural, in the house, one formal and one for the family, we couldn’t seem to bring ourselves to go and eat in there.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’ve got to water my plant.”

My eyebrow jerked up. “You were complaining it died.”

“I need to empty the bins and put them out. It’s bin night tonight.” I started to peer more closely at him. Daniel was getting all fidgety, twirling a lock of blue hair and then pushing his fork around in his leftover fried rice. I knew all of his tells, and multiple were going off all at once. “OK, fine,” he huffed. “You remember that guy I was talking to you about?”

“I remember guys plural. So, so many guys.” He gave me a straight-armed shove. “I need some more details to narrow

down which one.”

“The...” He swallowed hard. “The mysterious daddy type.”

“Ohh...” Yep, I remembered him. Daniel could barely sit down for a week after messing with him, and he was curiously reluctant to share many details. Usually my ears burned with so, so very many tales of his sexual exploits. Dick size, stamina, positions, whether they were tops, bottoms or vers, I got it all, except for info about Mr Big. This was in reference to his dick size, not his bank balance, but apparently the guy was pretty cashed up as well, taking Danny out on dates that made his head spin. “Mr Big.”

“Yes.” He sighed theatrically. “I haven’t heard from him for ages and he messaged me and—”

“You want to go and get your brains fucked out.” I smiled. “Of course. So mi casa su casa and all that, but you don’t have to feel like you have to stay here.”

“I want to.” He looked around the kitchen. “If only to see what kind of confections I can create on a coffee machine that looks like it costs more than my yearly rent.” Those brown eyes met mine. “And I will, in the morning, I’ll—”

“Need a couple of Nurofen and a lie down, if you’re like you were last time.” I grinned to soften my words. “As long as you’re safe and happy, I’m cool.” I walked into the pantry, retrieving a set of keys. Harry had acquainted us with the kitchen facilities. “Take these. Want to come back here afterwards? Feel free. Want to sleep the night away in the arms of a massive-dicked hot guy—”

“That won’t happen.” He plucked the keys from my grip with a tight smile. “I’m fairly sure my Big is just as emotionally unavailable as the one on Sex and the City. But the sex—”

“Cool. Great. Good.” He snickered as I forcefully cut him off. “Do you need condoms? I can get someone to get some. I must have people, right? Or I could get people.”

He moved in and pressed a kiss to my forehead, then pulled away.

“Shut up. I have a lifetime supply and PrEP, thank you, Mother. Go upstairs and draw yourself an amazing bath with all the expensive bath salts I saw in the main bathroom and take it easy. We’ll find some minions to serve us in the morning.”

I wanted him to go. He was my best friend and while I envied the freedom he had to do shit that I didn’t dare do, because he was a guy, I never wanted to get in the way of that. But as soon as he swung out the door, the amazingness of the massive house turned into something else.

Empty buildings are creepy as fuck. Sometimes I’d been the last one to close up at night at the supermarket and the huge space, the echoing aisles, they’d all just felt weird, so completely devoid of life. They were made to be packed with people and felt somewhat haunted when they weren’t. Which was why my heart started to pound, filling the silence that seemed to grow and grow. I made myself move, pack up the takeaway containers and put them in the fridge. I loaded the dishwasher, wiped down the countertops, willing myself to work through these familiar rituals to settle the jumpy feeling.

I was probably far safer here than Trevor’s—

On an estate that contained a haunted psychiatric ward.

The place had to have considerable security—

Which would mean nothing against a freaking ghost or a zombie.

I was fine, safe, alone in a massive, massive house with unfamiliar rooms and so much space that felt like it was slowly getting filled by the spectres I conjured in my mind. My eyes darted around, finely honed evolutionary instincts kicking in, ready to detect threats, but I couldn’t here, not while—

*Knock, knock.*

“Fuck!” I yelped and spun around, not to the sight of ghoul or a goblin, but to a wide-eyed worried-looking Harry. He



waved, then shot me a nervous smile.

“Sorry.” His voice was muffled by the glass door, so I walked over and opened it, glad now for the sight of another person. “I was just coming around to make sure everything is locked up and the security system is armed.

“So there is security here?” I asked, sucking in breaths far too fast.

“Best there is,” he said with a wink. “Trust me, now that the heir has been found, everyone here will make sure you’re kept safe.”

“So you run a security team as well as look after the place?” I asked.

“Sure,” he replied with a nod, “you could say that.”

“Well, did you want a coffee to take with you?” I was stalling, trying to keep the big, friendly man in my kitchen, because then I didn’t have to face the prospect of an empty house.

“Ah, sure.” He eyed the massive silver coffee machine. “If you’re having one.”

Caffeine right before bed wasn’t smart, especially when I was already jumpy, but I moved over to it, taking in the different buttons and then moved to make a coffee.

“Are these the amazing beans Mellors brewed for us?”

“One and the same,” he replied. “He won’t tell me where he gets them from, but he has some kind of contact that means he gets bags of them.” We fell into a companionable silence as I ground the beans, then brewed the coffee. He nodded and smiled as he took the coffee cup from me. “So you’ll be all right in the big house by yourself?”

And what if I wasn’t, I wondered. What was he going to do, crash in one of the bedrooms? I almost offered that when he continued.

“I saw that friend of yours had left...”

“Daniel?” I asked.

“Is that his name?” I smirked as I took a sip, because Harry was trying to play it cool. “You been together for long?”

“Friends,” I corrected. “We’ve been friends for a while. We met when I moved to a different store as the new assistant manager. I was told to write him up early on, but ended up sitting around talking shit in my office instead. I then got reprimanded for that, but...” I put the mug down. “It was worth it. Danny... he’s amazing.” Harry nodded a little too emphatically at that. “He’s also gay, so besties only.”

“Gay? Right, right.” Harry seemed to come alive then. “Well, love is love, right?”

“Right,” I replied.

But once we were done drinking the coffees, Harry said goodbye, showing me how to operate the security system in the house and how to get help, both of which made me relax a little. I walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs feeling a little more at home. Even if I had to face down a zombie apocalypse tonight, Harry would be within calling distance to pitch in and help. But when I walked down the hall, I saw why Danny had suggested I have a bath. The main bathroom door was open and inside curls of steam swirled up into the air. The dickhead had run me a bath.

I walked into a room filled with the scent of night-blooming jasmine. The bath salts had to be expensive, as usually jasmine scents were cheap and harsh. This smelled just like the flowers themselves, and I couldn’t help but take in a series of slow, deep breaths. The air was warm, humid, feeling like it caressed my body as I moved closer, licking across my bare skin as I stripped off. And beside the bath was a bottle of wine and a single glass, along with a thick stack of plush towels. God, just what I needed. I lifted a foot without thought, about to dive in when I realised the door was partially open.

Which didn’t matter.

I was all alone, with no one to flash accidentally as they walked past. Harry had made it clear he wasn’t going to be coming back to the house unless I called him, so I shrugged and eased my body into the water.

Oh. My. God.

The bath was deep, deep enough that the water covered even my ample tits, coming up to my chin as it swallowed me in its sweet scented depths. My head fell back, finding a folded hand towel there to protect me from the cold porcelain. I would have to thank Danny in the morning, I thought sluggishly, right as I closed my eyes.

The exhaustion of the last few days hit me like a ton of bricks, and I fell down, down, down into the bath's embrace. My muscles felt like they slowly unwound, all of the tension washing away along with the grime. I took a slow breath in and then let it out with a whistle, moving my hands in the water because I liked the way the warmth lapped over my skin. If this was how the rich lived, I got why they were so damn smug, because this was bliss.

I should've got out of the bath as my eyes grew heavy. Falling asleep in a pool of water was not smart. But the longer I soaked, the less I wanted to move. The heavy perfume of the water felt like it was drugging me, making my head hazy, my thoughts fraying the moment I had them. So when I heard the door creak, I didn't respond, because all the paranoid fears of before were gone. My hazy brain told me that a breeze was passing through the room. It became apparent the gap between the door and the frame was widening. The creak was persistent, nails raking down a chalkboard, right when I wanted to float away, but I forced my eyes open.

I expected there to be some kind of draft and failing that, perhaps Harry had come looking for me again and then was horrified to find me bathing. What I didn't expect was what I saw. The languor was shoved to one side, my heart rate picking right back up to the previous rapid beat, then surpassing it, because what was pushing the door open was a huge grey hand the colour of granite, long claws clicking against the polished wood as it pushed the door open.

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# Chapter 13

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## *Graven*

There was nothing like coming back to yourself after a long hibernation. One of my masters, many moons ago, had compared the experience of coming back to flesh a bit like blood rushing back to human extremities. I would never know if the analogy was apt or not, but I knew this.

The master of The Eyrie had claimed my stone and, so, I was summoned.

Stone gave way to flesh and I stretched on my plinth, claws raking across the base yet again, then I gave my wings a flap. The sun was no more than a slight reddish stain in the sky, so I was free to see to my new master's wishes.

Or mistress.

My nostrils flared, my muscles stiffened as I caught a scent on the breeze. Not of roses, though Harold kept the garden full of them, not even of the night blooming jasmine he grew on trellises just for us, but... My ears pricked, my hair shifting across my shoulders before I flung myself off the roof.

“What is it, Graven?”

Carrick, one of my brothers in stone, landed on the ground beside me, tucking his wings into his body as both of us turned towards the back door. Lights were on inside the house and we heard voices, unfamiliar ones. That meant we needed to keep a low profile. The new master should know of our existence, but I knew she wouldn't, yet. Our labour was owed to those that possessed the power to command us, due to our link to this house, built from the ashes of Wildfyre Hall. Not all of our number were the original inhabitants of the hall, others having been brought here over the ages, bound to the new house, but we were united in our service, so we pressed closer.

“A woman?” I saw the gleam in Carrick's dark eyes, caught the spread of his wild grin. “So it is as Master Ashley said it would be. Finally a female mistress to serve. Perhaps she'd like me to work out some kinks with my...ahh!”

Carrick being lost for words was always a welcome and rare thing, something I would normally treasure, but not now. Any thoughts for my stone brother were shoved aside as we crept closer. We only caught the silhouette of *her*, a mere glimpse through a window, past the darkened sitting room and into the kitchen, but that's all it took.

Since the first gargoyles, there have been fated mates. Powerful human women had always drawn our kind closer, but, this... I sucked in a breath, almost able to taste the subtle floral scent on my tongue. I shuffled closer and so did Carrick, the two of us glaring at each other when we collided, before we had a realisation.

“She's—” Carrick started to say.

“Mine.” That word took on a whole other meaning, a savage possessiveness rising from nowhere, drowning me in its intensity, my complete unpreparedness for this moment meaning I had none of my usual boundaries up.

“Mine too.”

Carrick's eyes glittered like obsidian in candlelight and when he stepped closer, so did I, our chests pushed out, our wings rustling. But the moment we collided, we heard a low, throaty laugh. She was in there, talking to some man. A man

who made her laugh. The ability of human men to woo women with levity was well documented in literature, but...

“Ours...” I said in a hushed voice, a pain starting up in my chest.

Humans had spoken to me of this experience before too. Masters that were old and their hearts were failing talked to me of their bodies’ betrayal. Young masters, pining for a woman, would eloquently speak of the more spiritual pain of being separated from the object of their desire, but this... My brows drew down. Was this what it was like? A curious mixture of longing so sharp, yet so sweet, I could only crave more, a need that throbbed hard and true in my heart.

And in my loins.

My hand strayed down lower, noting that my member was now rigid and pulled up hard against my stomach, weeping with need.

“Gods...”

Carrick’s hand slammed down on the closest wall, his fangs locking together. “I need her. I fucking need her. You create a diversion out here to lure the male away and I’ll—”

“Do nothing.” I stared hard at him until he was forced to meet my gaze. “If she is our mistress, we must serve her and if she is our mate...” The servitude gargoyles had been bound to since the Fall would become second nature if she was the one who now owned our house. We would do anything, everything to fulfil her every whim.

“...go upstairs and draw yourself an amazing bath with all the expensive bath salts I saw in the main bathroom and take it easy,” we heard the male in the kitchen say. “We’ll find some minions to serve us in the morning.”

Carrick looked at me and I stared at him, before the two of us nodded, flapping our wings to launch us back into the sky, only to land back on the roof where the rest of our brethren slept.

“She has not claimed the rest of our brothers’ stones,” Carrick noted as he stared into the blind faces of the still

frozen gargoyles, but his expression quickly changed. A wicked smile crossed his face. “But I cannot regret that I will only have to share this moment with you.”

“Our mistress wants a bath,” I told him sternly, because the male was always one of the more reckless members of our flock. “We must serve her, always.”

We opened the roof door and slipped through a doorway made to be large enough for us to pass, making our way downstairs and to the grand bathing chamber. The room smelled slightly musty, the air still, which would not do. I opened the French doors that led out onto the balcony, letting the cool night air sweep in, stirring the curtains. Carrick went to the bath, switching on the taps and filling the massive tub with steaming water, adding a generous amount of the strange chemicals humans called bathing salts. The desire to bathe in minerals made sense to us. We enjoyed similar experiences, the nutrients gained from soaking in mineral rich water made us ever stronger, but this... The room filled with a pretty floral scent, but it wasn't the right one.

“Some of this,” I said, after sticking my nose in many jars of heavily scented salts, finding one that was floral, but with a woody, almost wild edge to it. “Just a little.” Carrick did as he was told, which was a miracle in itself, but I guess even he could be motivated to do the right thing when his mate was involved. “And some of this.”

I handed him another jar and he added a little more, both of us taking a deep breath in when we were done.

“That's it,” he said, in a voice as close to reverent as he could muster. “That's her scent.”

And it would be the one sweetest for me going forward. But before we could discuss anything further, we heard the front door slam and footsteps come up the stairs.

Traditionally, what we were supposed to do was stop and introduce ourselves to our new master, initiate them into the mysteries of the house, if they had not been taught by their forebears, but Master Ashley had made clear our new mistress would know little about us.

*“She was not raised a Whiteley,”* he said, as he lay old and feeble in his bed. *“She does not understand how this all works.”* He patted my arm then. *“But you’ll show her, Graven. You’ll show her.”*

I would, I felt that now, throbbing in my chest. I stared at the door, heard her footsteps, felt her presence and for some reason, that had me moving towards the balcony.

“Graven,” Carrick hissed, shooting me a panicked look.

It was always a nerve-wracking thing, to answer a new master’s call. Would they be a gentle master or would they...? I pushed those darker, chaotic memories to one side, because I needed to drive them deep every day if I was to be able to continue to serve, but... This was different. She was ours as much as we were hers.

If she accepted us.

I remembered Master Ashley’s words.

*“You’ll need to tread carefully, Graven. Most humans remain blithely unaware of the world of the gifted and the gargoyle. It will be a terrible shock...”* He’d smiled weakly then. *“But you’ll manage the situation. Tell her about the house. Tell her about me.”*

His brows had creased then and he’d started to cough, forcing me to rush forward. I scooped him up in his bed, holding him at just the right angle to ease his pain, and he coughed and he coughed until finally he pulled the handkerchief away. I saw the spots of bright red blood like it was yesterday.

“Our mistress does not know about us, about our service,” I whispered back tersely. “We must proceed cautiously. Away!”

I swept out onto the balcony, hoping that he followed, but when I leapt out and into the air, I was relieved to hear the whoosh of his own wings as well as mine.

“So how the hell do we convince her that she’s our fated mate from here?” Carrick asked, once we landed on the roof. “She’s our mistress. We belong to her!”



“And she has no idea what the hell we are, nor the nature of our bond with the house. You heard them before.”

During the day, we slept, but we still caught snippets of the conversations had around us. Nothing she said made me think she knew our true nature.

“So? Then we’ll educate her,” Carrick snapped.

“Not yet. We take things slowly.”

“Why on earth would I do that?” Carrick stepped backwards, listening to my frantically whispered instructions and doing what he wanted anyway. “I’ve waited thousands of years to find her. I’m not waiting another night to be in her presence.”

My mouth fell open as he dropped off the side of the house, his wings opening with a flap.

“Carrick!” I rasped hoarsely. “Carrick!”

I caught sight of the male’s tail as it disappeared through an open window and then he was gone.

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# Chapter 14

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*Carrick*

Graven liked to think of himself as the leader of our flock, but I knew better. He ruled because we allowed him that privilege, and I was content to go along with his orders.

Most of the time.

We had so little choice about what we did when the moon rose, what matter were a few more orders? Graven did the hard work, interpreting whatever our masters wanted and how to deliver this, which was fine by me. But now... That scent was in my nose, my fangs aching along with my cock. Every muscle was locked down tight, ready to... I slipped through the window, dark as a shadow and blending in with them as I re-entered the house.

If I'd listened to Graven, I wouldn't have heard her pleased little gasp. If I hadn't crept up the hall I wouldn't have caught a glimpse of her.

Mother moon...

I shoved my fist into my mouth when I saw her, my fangs sinking into my hard skin, the pin pricks of pain helping centre me.

Did she know how beautiful she was? She had to, such a woman. She was built like the goddess herself, with wide hips ready for my claws to sink into, flesh as soft and sweetly rounded as I was angular and hard. I slunk closer, lured by the sight of her removing her clothes. Breasts, gods, I'd almost forgotten what a wonder they were, it being so long since we'd served a mistress rather than a master. I watched them sway, hypnotising me like pendulums, as she removed the rest of her clothes. I was glad she did, my claws had become fists as I forced myself not to stride in and tear the rest of those flimsy garments away for the sin of covering such perfection. Then she turned to face that bath.

Goddess...

That beautiful curve of a stomach, soft and full now, but it would grow when she accepted the bond. I'd pump my seed into her over and over, until it took. Our sons would take after me, become gargoyles as soon as they reached puberty, our daughters would be witches like their mother. Strong, powerful. I could feel it rolling off her in waves as she took a step forward. One dainty foot pierced the water's surface, followed by the other and then she sank down into the swirling heat.

And I had to join her there.

Graven would've hung back, waited, but I pushed that realisation away as soon as I thought it. I had waited for so damn long. Every gargoyle was blessed with a fated mate, but the process of finding her was always a difficult thing, due to the actions of some of the first of our kind. They'd killed their fated mate with their recklessness, barely grasping her in their arms for the first time before she died, and so all other gargoyles were cursed to struggle to find the other half of their heart.

Which is why I wouldn't be hanging around like a hatchling, still wet behind the ears, waiting for her to notice me. I put my hand out against the door, my claws clicking on it as I pushed it open.

"Oh my god..."

Did my mate say that with reverence or fear? I couldn't tell, but I'd only find out by getting closer. I stepped inside the bathroom and that's when it became clear. She scrabbled back in the bath, her hand going to her breasts, so of course my eyes followed their path and stayed there. Her hands couldn't contain that bounty so I moved forward, ready to take the job on.

"What...? What the fuck...?" One hand lifted in the air and I liked the view so much better. Then a shaking finger appeared, pointing at me. "What the fucking hell are you?"

"Yours," I said, honestly, shifting forward, flicking my wings back in the kind of powerful display that would cower weaker gargoyles and impress females, and her eyes just widened. "Yes, all of this."

She seemed to struggle to take me in, eyes wide, but they slid across my chest, forcing me to puff it out just a little, and down over my abdomen. Then I saw a perfect ring of white around her beautiful pupils when she got to the evidence of just how much I was affected by the sight of her. I reached down, hissing as I gave my cock a tug, the feeling all the sharper because it'd been so long since I'd felt anything like this. All of our masters had been male for over a hundred years, and despite the commands of some, I could not muster desire for them. They did not have the beautiful softness of women, that sweet scent, drawing me closer. But each step I took, she cringed backwards in the bath, before she made clear how she felt about my presence.

"I'm having a dream," she babbled. "All of this." Her eyes flicked around to take in the beautiful architectural features of The Eyrie. We were all very proud of the house, having worked with each master to perfect and refine it. "I didn't inherit a fabulous mansion. I lost my job and must be drunk in a ditch somewhere."

My head jerked back at that, unable to understand this shift in mood.

"That's it." She nodded furiously. "I'm going to wake up tomorrow, half dead, or worse, on the couch at fucking

Trevor's place.”

“Who is this Trevor?” I growled, my tail flicking back and forth.

“A douche,” she replied, which had me tilting my head to one side.

“He washes semen from the vaginas of women?” I shook my head. “I know some things about men, but I’ve never heard of that as a profession.”

“It’s not his job,” she hissed in frustration. “He’s a lawyer by trade—”

“Grr... filthy parasites,” I snapped.

“On that we agree, figment of my imagination,” she said, seeming to collect herself. Her chest wasn’t heaving quite so fast, which I wasn’t sure was an improvement, but here we were. “Trevor is a prick.” My fangs locked tight. “An asshole, a bastard.” They started to grind together. “He was my ex-boyfriend who leeches off me until he hit the big time, and then he left me for dust, fucking some stupid bitch paralegal on his desk when he told me he was working late.”

“This man left you for another woman?” I asked with a frown, scouring her face for the truth of the matter, because while humans were relentlessly stupid, they couldn’t be that mentally impaired. “Impossible.”

“It seems like if I was going to conjure a seven-foot-tall demon—” she stammered out.

“Gargoyle,” I corrected. “I am Carrick.”

“Of course you are,” she said, smiling for just a second, but it quickly faded. “Then it tracks that is how you’d react. Are you going to offer to bring me his head?”

“I’ll have his bloodied corpse laid before you within the hour,” I promised, thumping my hand on my chest.

“Don’t do that,” she said, frowning slightly, but any protests I might have made died in my throat as she stood up in the bath. My keen eyesight caught every single trickle of water as it ran down her perfect body. “But, if this is a

dream...” I watched her take a step closer, then another. “And I created you from some obscure childhood imprinting via a cartoon...” I followed the hypnotic sway of her hips, my eyes unable to look at anything else, until she came to stand at the end of the bath. “Then I guess it doesn’t matter what I do right now, right? This is my dream...”

Did gargoyles dream? I never remembered mine if I did have them, the day often feeling like a haze of heat and light, my mind unable to hold onto the details, but I felt some of that warmth right now. A flame burned in my heart and in my cock, getting brighter as she reached out a hand.

“Then I can do whatever I want with the massive grey man with the monster cock,” she said finally, stepping out of the bath.

Her first touch was like a firebrand, searing my hard skin and she snatched her hand back, making me long to force it back, but I wouldn’t. She had to come to me, want me, need me. She was my mistress as well as my mate and I would ever be her slave.

Her hand returned, bolder now, caressing the broad span of my shoulders, then where my wings grew out from my body. It was a terribly sensitive spot, so my wings began to rustle, forcing her to stare up at me.

“You... fly?”

I did a lot of things and I wanted to tell her about every single one of them, but for now I shot her a sly smile and expanded on what I could do using my wings.

“I do, mistress. I can fly both of us high up into the sky, beyond where any human could see us. You could wrap your arms around my neck, lock your legs around my waist and I could take you up to touch the stars. Or...”

“Or?”

Her hands twitched, smoothing over my skin restlessly now.

“Or I could carry you in my arms, my wings working hard as I lowered you down on my—”

“Carrick!”

The door slammed open and Graven ruined all the progress I’d made, as our mistress jumped back, snatching her hands away. I could feel the hot trace of them still on my skin, like the shadow of the sun, but that pleasure of the day was nothing compared to the feel of her. Graven burst into the room, taking in me, our mate and the pools of water on the floor with a look of concern, before focussing solely on her.

“There’s two of you...” Gods, she was back to babbling again and looking scared, damn Graven’s eyes. “I dreamt up two demon—”

“Gargoyle,” I corrected patiently.

“—lovers.”

Lovers. Both Graven and I jerked to attention at that, but I was the one moving closer.

“That you did, lass. Now.” I smiled slowly, flashing my fangs. “What’re you going to do with us?”

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# Chapter 15

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*Jade*

“What’re you going to do with us?”

OK, I revised my theory on what was happening. Inheriting the house, meeting James and Harry and the lawyer in the city, that was all a fever dream, culminating in not one but two massive gargoyles in my dream bathroom. They were inside my dream house, one looking at me like he was willing to do all the things I liked, with the way his eyes raked across my naked body. And the other? He looked concerned, protective, as he rushed forward, flaring his wings to prevent the first gargoyle from giving me the fuck-me eyes.

“Mistress, I apologise for this interruption to your bath,” he said in a low, rumbly voice. “Carrick is a reckless and foolhardy beast.”

“If you can gaze on such beauty and remain unaffected, Graven,” Carrick snarked, “then I don’t know what is wrong with you.”

“I am not... unaffected.”

All three of us, the new gargoyle, Carrick, and I all looked down and saw exactly what he meant.



Dear god, they were both huge. Like comically so. After my break-up, Daniel had taken me to a sex shop, trying to make sure I had a battery operated boyfriend who'd look after my needs far more than my ex had. We'd had sword fights with some of the massive dongs, until the shop attendant had forced us out, but even those anal intruders seemed like nothing compared to him. If this was real, I wouldn't have stared at a stranger's erect cock, but it wasn't. I was having hot, hot dreams that made clear I needed to google gargoyle porn when I woke up, but that's not what had me reaching out now.

I was sheltered from the rest of the room by a wall of his wings, the breeze no longer forcing my skin to prickle into goosebumps, and that made me feel safe. And his gaze, it held mine as I went to touch him. His full lips fell open, revealing two sharp fangs and those black eyes, they felt like pools I could fall right into.

And I wanted to.

It was obvious what all this was. A very intense, all too real bout of the most glorious escapism, taking me away from my dreary life and putting me here.

"If this is a dream..." I whispered and Graven leaned in closer to listen, "then I can do this." I spanned my hand across his rock hard abs, feeling that curiously cool flesh, the way the muscles shifted as he took a breath. "And it has no consequences."

"You'll never suffer repercussions for touching me, mistress," he rasped, then dared to cover my hand with his. He felt like sun-warmed stone, reminding me of the pebbles I'd collected and left in my pocket, yet another part of this complex delusion. "I am yours to command in every way. I live to serve you."

And that was the most seductive thing of all. My eyes jerked up, searching his face, clinging so hard to this dream I was sure to wake up, but I didn't. I could live without the fancy house and the massive bank account. What the hell

would I do with such things? But to have beautiful beasts like this at my beck and call...

“Really?” I sounded like a child and that had me flushing, my head ducking down, but Graven reached down to tilt my chin up again.

“Really. I am Graven of Wildfyre.” His wings flicked back with a flourish, making me jump. “And this is my brother in stone, Carrick.” Graven dropped down onto one knee then, bowing his head. Carrick shook his head and performed the same gesture, though much less solemnly, shooting me a wink before forcing his head down. “You are mistress of The Eyrie. We are yours to command whenever the sun sets. We will keep you and your land safe. No one shall be allowed to trespass on the grounds without your say so. Whatever it is you desire, we will make it so.”

“Anything?”

I reached out with one foot, toes pointed, somehow making the movement elegant in my dream, whereas in real life I’d be teetering around, losing my balance and falling flat on my fat arse.

“Anything...”

Graven was about to make more declarations, but when he looked up he saw my foot, my leg and the way they parted, a greyish pink tongue flickering over his lips, making me wonder how that would feel between my legs. He swallowed hard, a lump bobbing in his throat, as Carrick shifted back on his heels, his hand sliding lower. He gave that very impressive cock a tug, as though to draw my attention to how hard he was, which was unneeded. I was pretty sure satellites could see what he was packing from space. Like, his dick and the Great Wall of China... I shook my head, trying to stop that hysterical train of thought and bring my focus back to what was in front of me.

“Anything, my...” Carrick started to say, then Graven shot him a dark look. “Mistress. Anything at all. Just make a request of us, any request, and we will see it done.”

“Request?” I cocked an eyebrow. Dreams were fun. You could be far bolder, far braver than you would ever be in real life. “You’re my dream lovers. You should know exactly what I want, shouldn’t you?”

Apparently they did.

They surged to their feet, clustering around me, my body feeling tiny sandwiched between theirs. That was a very nice feeling. Trevor and I were the same height. No, he was slightly shorter than me, and while it made it easy for kissing, it wasn’t my fantasy. This was. When Graven tilted my mouth towards his, moving in, but not kissing me, not yet. When he swept me up into his arms like I barely weighed a thing, then wrapped my thighs around him as he backed me up against Carrick. The other gargoyle’s hands slapped down on my arse, his claws pricking my skin, before his mouth brushed the nape of my neck.

“Gargoyles are made to serve, Mistress,” Graven said in a low voice. “In every way you wish. If bestowing every pleasure upon your body, leaving you gasping until the sun comes up, is what you wish...?”

“Yes...” I panted, “that...”

And with all the confusing blurriness of dreams, I was whisked out of the bathroom and down the hall.

I’d worn a shirt to bed last night, not wanting to see my dimpled arse reflected across the whole ceiling, but that was not what I saw now. Something I’d seen before, I recalled briefly, before being distracted by the sight. Massive grey bodies prowling across the bed like caged lions. And me? I was their prey. Carrick sprawled across the bed, wings flung wide in invitation as Graven laid me down in the space between the other gargoyle’s legs. Carrick tilted my head back, then smoothed a clawed hand down my throat, the coiled power there enough to tear it out if he wished. Instead he thumbed my pulse and then bent down to kiss me.

“I’ve been forced to iron one of my master’s French cuffs to his satisfaction,” he told me with a lazy smile. “I was made to run off poachers trying to hunt down an old master’s deer,

the poor bastards driven to it from hunger. I've spent a millennia doing their bidding, but I can say, with all confidence, none have given me as great a command as this. If this is a sign of your reign, Mistress," and that grin turned wicked, "then I approve."

I had something to say about that, questions to ask, but all of that was silenced by his kiss.

The first few times I'd kissed Trevor it had been like this, a thrill of excitement rushing through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. The touch of Carrick's lips was like touching an electrical wire rather than cool, hard stone. And when his hand went around my throat, holding me right where I was, as if to stop me from thinking of pulling away, I just groaned. But I had no intention of moving, not when his lips masterfully took mine, his hard, mine soft, as he teased them open. And when my lips parted, he let out an animalistic little growl, right before his tongue slipped past.

His tongue gave me a sense of how it would feel, if that massive body slid down mine and licked between my legs. His tongue was slick, mobile, but also textured slightly in a way no human man's would ever be. It had a slightly pebbled texture, one that had my tongue twining with his to explore it. But he forced himself back, gasping as he smiled down at me, then turned his focus to Graven.

"Have pity on him, lass." Carrick's fingers smoothed down my shoulders as Graven watched every movement hungrily. "He's a good male, if a little too hidebound."

"And you play fast and loose with our traditions," Graven growled, but his brow smoothed out when he looked at me. "This is... This is a great honour for us, Mistress."

I blinked at that. "You make it sound like a burden, not a pleasure."

"Never that." He took my hand and placed it against the severe plane of his cheek and I found myself stroking it, much like I had those pebbles. "This is... important to me."

Dear god, I couldn't just conjure up sexy demon-gargoyles, could I? I couldn't just get boned relentlessly in this dream. I had to create one that had somehow caught feelings, but that didn't explain why something tugged in my chest as I moved forward.

"If this is important, how should it go?" I asked him gently. He might be imaginary, but somehow his feelings mattered. "Perhaps we should—"

But whatever I was about to suggest, it was quickly forgotten as Graven slammed his mouth down on mine.

Well, alrighty then.

Mr Prim and Proper was a beast when he let himself off the chain, picking me up and pressing me into Carrick's arms. The other gargoyle took everything he was given, his hands sliding up my ribs, then raking across my soft belly with cruel, clawed hands, right as Graven claimed my mouth. His kiss was fierce, furious, taking my bottom lip and scoring it with his fangs, then kissing the pain away before his tongue thrust in. I opened my mouth, my legs, my arms, feeling like I was caught between a hammer and an anvil, and all I wanted was to be hammered. Graven kissed and kissed me until my mouth stung and my lips throbbed in time with my heart, then pulled slightly back so he was hanging over me.

"Command me to please you," he said between pants.

"You must please me," I replied diligently, not sure who was the master now.

"Command me to wring every possible pleasure from your body."

"Yes, that, I want that."

His brow creased then as if in pain.

"Command me to treat you in the way you've always deserved, as a queen amongst women."

As I stared at him, my eyes ached, feeling a pain I hadn't wanted to re-experience, because I knew now what this was. Wish-fulfilment. These two massive beasts were everything

Trevor was not and that's why I had created this dream. The dating world was vicious. I'd had little luck with dating apps, getting ghosted, rude messages or no response at all, making me wonder if I'd ever find anyone who'd actually love me, so instead I dreamed of the perfect males, in place of men.

"Treat me like I'm special," I said, my voice breaking on the words. "Like I'm precious to you. Pretend like I'm the only woman in the world."

"No need for pretence, lass," Carrick said, that cheeky smile fading. "We just need permission to do the exact thing you need. Now grab the big idiot's hair and drag him down for a kiss, if this is really what you want and I'll..."

His voice faded away as I plunged my hand into the silky strands of Graven's hair, pulling him closer, his kiss so much gentler now. It was as if he knew just how tender he'd left them, brushing his lips against mine, a featherlight touch, but not for long. One brush led to another, and another, each one growing incrementally in pressure.

The kisses came faster, the gaps between simply tiny little moments to suck in a breath before we went back for more. More, that's what I wanted, as my aching heart throbbed along with my mouth, more of this. More of all of this fairytale dream, even if it was one that would break my heart when I woke up. But Graven scooped me up and away from Carrick, holding me in his arms as he kissed me, the other gargoyle surging up, not to be forgotten, peppering kisses up my spine, then he pushed aside my hair to reveal the sensitive skin of my neck and claimed that too. Both of them clamoured for my attention with one caress, then another, layering them on top of each other until my head began to spin and I was forced to pull away. Sucking in breaths, I said the thing that lurked inside my heart.

"More," I begged. "More."

And more was what I got.

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## Chapter 16

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*Jade*

Do you know what it's like, to be touched by someone else, after such a long time? I hadn't had sex since I broke up with Trevor. No, before that. Sex had dropped off the radar for both of us some months before. And those little signs of affection—touching the other person's hair, grabbing their hand when we were out, dancing in and out of their space for kisses—they'd fallen away even earlier.

The last time anyone had touched me sexually, it was an awkward, passionless thing, Trevor swearing when he'd been forced to find the lube because I was dry as a bone. His dick was barely able to work its way inside me before my whole body seized. He'd hissed something in frustration, stabbing his lubed fingers inside for just long enough for me to start to feel something, before he pulled away and worked his half soft cock back up to hardness, then he'd been trying to push it inside me when his eyes had met mine. He'd been forced to look at me, and it was only then that I stopped being a hole to masturbate in and became something else altogether.

The girl he'd first had sex with. The person he'd discovered the breadth and depth of his own sexual desire,

while helping me do the same. The same woman he'd stared at, wide-eyed, the first time we'd had sex, the wonder of what we were doing taking our breath away. Yet somehow I had become so much less in his eyes. A means to an end. Something bigger, softer, usually wetter than spitting in his own hand, but I was so much more than that and I was only just realising it.

I'd had my first orgasm, shuddering on top of Trevor in his childhood bed, both of us breathless and elated at what we'd done, but that moment and those feelings had been lost long ago. All I'd felt lately was confusion about how bad things had gotten. He'd rolled away from me that time, hadn't tried to keep going, flushing with embarrassment, his throat working to say something, but failing to get the words out. I felt a pang for the me who'd had to deal with being treated the way Trevor had treated me, because she had no idea of the heights that the dream lovers in her future would take her to.

My gargoyles held me cradled between their hard bodies, like I was a precious thing to be protected. Massive hands gripped my wrists and then pulled them back to lace my fingers at the nape of one of their necks, leaving me open to their ministrations.

“Just like that, lass,” Carrick rasped. “Just like that.”

Claws trailed across my ribs, making me squirm, wanting to lower my arms, but one gargoyle's hands kept me where I was, open and vulnerable, while the other gargoyle's hands moved. Skimming across the sensitive skin, but getting higher and higher, until they encountered the soft part when my breasts met my ribcage. That fold of flesh was traced, then a single claw drew a line up the curve of my breast, the hand on the other side doing the same.

Being touched by a claw was so much different to a fingertip. There was no soft glide of flesh on flesh, nor that strange kind of electricity that comes touching another person. Instead there was something alien, almost cold about the process. But those blunt talons drew strange shapes across my skin, as if signing a contract of which pleasure was the price. Graven watched me intently, right as his claws contracted.



Five points scraped across my nipple, forcing the hard bead to pull tighter in anticipation, my breath coming in faster and faster, because I wasn't sure if it would hurt or not.

Not.

I looked down as did Graven, to watch those hard tips dig in just under the nipple.

“No pain, only pleasure,” he said, as if I needed reminding, and at his words, his prediction came true. It was a sharper, edgier pleasure than a mere tug or caress, and in response my mouth fell open. But was it to protest or moan? Moan, I decided, my thighs beginning to rub together of their own accord, because when those claws closed tight and tugged, the pleasure seemed to set up all across my body, filling me with this strange kind of warmth.

“No need for that,” Carrick said, sliding his hand between my legs. “Not while I’m here.” And with all the skill of a dream lover, those brutal fingers slid through my folds, just skating through the embarrassing slickness there before rubbing back and forth on either side of my clit.

Holy shit...

For it to be someone else's hands touching me just the way I needed, teasing my clit to life, the pleasure expanded exponentially with every caress, for them to not need to be told or shown. To just know exactly how I wanted it. Sweet, sweet bliss with just a touch of bite, as their fangs scored my throat, then my breast, digging in right before soft, soft lips trailed down, claiming my breast as his. And that guttural growl, sending vibrations of sensation through me, that was just fucking perfect, so I unlocked my hands from around Carrick's neck and then tangled them in Graven's hair.

“Mm...”

The gargoyle made a strange sound of satisfaction as I pulled him off, my nipple popping free, red and slick now. He stared at me with heavily lidded dark eyes, hazy with lust. But the beast pulled against my hold and I could feel the tension

on his scalp, wondering if he felt a pin pricking sensation of pain as pleasure, as I did too.

Carrick was done teasing my clit, instead scraping over it ever so lightly with a single claw. The sensation had me writhing, but I was forced to stay so very still, lest those talons slice into me. My chest felt tight, my lungs burning, as I took tiny little breaths in, but right as I felt something wind tighter inside me, he pulled his claws away. His other hand tilted my head back so I could see him smiling down at me.

“Take a deep breath.” There was no question of doing anything other than obeying him. He nodded as my lungs filled and then emptied. “And another one.” But as I was sucking in another breath, it stuttered in my lungs as his fangs flashed and he clipped the claws on several of his fingers in several neat bites. Those fangs were revealed fully as Carrick grinned at me. “No pain, only pleasure for you, lass.” He wriggled his now blunt fingers before thrusting his hand back between my legs, my whole body stiffening as he coated the fingertips with my slick and then pushed them inside me.

“Fu-uck...” I hissed.

“That’s it...” Carrick crooned to me like I was a child or a restless animal, but that didn’t fit what we were doing. It was bestial in a way, elemental, but entirely adult. I was full, full, that tiny pinch letting me know I was struggling to take two of those thick fingers, but right as I went to yelp out a protest, claws on the other hand pinched at my clit, forcing my body up off the bed. “Shh... shh...”

I heard the sound whooshing in my ears, but dimly, because something seemed to unlock in Graven. At the sounds of my pleasure, his grew. His claws dug into my breasts, almost to the point of pain, but not reaching it, instead forcing all the nerve endings to sit up and pay attention as he lavished his attention on me.

“He’s feasting on you.” Carrick’s voice was a sly thing, twisting around me like a silken rope and I just wanted it to tighten. “He’s so fucking hungry for you.”

The gargoyle in question heard us, drawing a small noise of complaint from me when he pulled back, sucking in breaths as he stared at the two of us through the fall of his hair.

“Mine...” he growled, fangs bared, but this was a dream, my dream, so I just smiled in response.

“Ours,” Carrick reminded him crisply, right as he shoved his fingers deeper.

He made his claim clear as his fingers pulsed wetly in and out of my body, my cunt snapping tight, trying to cling to them and hold them inside me, but despite the fact they called me mistress, they were in control. Carrick drew me up, up, up, the waves of pleasure spiralling tighter, harder, as the pad of his claw rubbed persistently at my clit.

“Ours to please. Ours to toy with. Stop holding yourself back, Graven. She’s everything you could possibly want and she’s right here.”

This dream was getting away from me, the logic of it lost. They were having a conversation with each other that I didn’t understand and had no hope of trying to, as my body arched. I felt like a bow pulled taut, all the power they stirred inside me ready to be unleashed.

In more ways than one.

“Look at you, my beautiful lass,” Carrick said in a tone damn close to reverence and that’s what had my eyes flicking open to look down.

Graven was sucking my nipple with greedy swallows, the powerful roll of his tongue squeezing every drop of pleasure out of me, but that’s not what caught my attention. Right as I teetered on the edge of something magnificent, lights started to glow. One between my breasts, another at my belly and another further down. The one in my groin flickered, like a fire just getting started, pulsing in time with every thrust of Carrick’s fingers. I spread my arms wide and saw answering points of light on my palms.

“Your power is rising,” Carrick explained, but that told me nothing, “and you with it. Come on my fingers and we’ll give

you more. Come for me now, so you'll be soft and slick and sated, and when we push ourselves inside you, there'll be only pleasure, no pain."

That last bit tugged at me, insisting that I pay attention to it, but I couldn't. I was held close, stroked, words of encouragement whispered in my ears and that's what did it to me. Not that someone or someone's were getting me off, but that all of their focus was on that.

Like I mattered.

I threw my head back and felt it cushioned on Carrick's shoulder, his voice soothing now, right as my whole body jerked. Graven was still feeding on my breasts, as if he could absorb my pleasure that way, but that's not how it worked. Because when the final shudder passed through me, a low chuckle starting in the base of my throat at the delirious feeling pulsing inside me, Carrick reached past me and pushed the other gargoyle backwards.

Graven fell back on his hands, revealing his entire body. Before, I'd found his massive size overwhelming, but now my eyes trailed down the broad chest, those comparatively narrow hips and then zeroed on the cock that arced up hard against his stomach. It'd changed during all of this, growing harder, the head an angry red, not pink, but that's not what caught my attention. Carrick pulled his fingers free, licking them like a cat as I moved forward.

"What..."

I was being far too brazen, clambering over Graven's body like it was just a thing, then sliding my finger up the length of his shaft. Because under the skin, small protuberances had formed.

"Ah...!" Graven's hand jerked in reaction to my touch before he closed it over mine and he pushed it gently away, his whole body working as he sucked in breaths. "I'm too close, lass."

"She's looking at your pearls, brother," Carrick said, moving so his body hovered over mine. "But you're welcome

to look at mine.” He winked at me. “My control is perfect.”

“Perfect, my—” Graven growled, but Carrick took my hand and settled it around his cock.

What he called pearls seemed like just that, small, smooth, hard balls just under the skin of his shaft, they rolled back and forth as I moved my hand experimentally. Carrick’s smile faded, something desperate replacing it.

“Perhaps I overest...” he groaned.

“Struggling, brother?” Graven said, moving closer. He seemed to have gained some control back, but there was still something wild in his dark eyes. “Work your hand up and down, lass. Feel the pearls shift under the skin.” Carrick seemed to feel every bit of that, his fangs digging into his lips. “Trace every single one with your fingertips.”

I did just that, marvelling at how they moved, each one trapped it seemed in a small pouch under his skin, until I reached this one.

“What’s...?”

I was almost afraid to ask, the ‘pearl’ here the size of a large marble. Carrick let out a strangled sound as I toyed with it.

“That one?” Graven settled in behind me, tugging me back so I sat pressed against him. “That one is a special one for every gargoyle. A woman takes that one, stretches herself to fit it inside her, well, it triggers something magical. All of the pearls will rub over the spot she needs it the most, and right when she reaches her peak?”

I squeezed my hand around Carrick’s shaft on instinct, somehow knowing what would happen. The gargoyle’s whole body stiffened as a helpless little spurt of cum escaped him.

“Goddess, just like that, lass...” Carrick moaned. “Just like that.”

His hips worked in time with my strokes, each one drawing a strangled sound from the beast.

“What’re you going to do with him?” Graven paraphrased my own question, putting it back to me. “He won’t take long —”

“My control is like iron!” Carrick protested, right when it was becoming clear it wasn’t. Pearly grey liquid, like quicksilver, formed at the head of his cock, then slid down his shaft to lubricate my palm. “But I can think of a far better use for my pearls.”

He grabbed me with an animalistic roar, Graven’s protests going unheeded as Carrick threw me down on the bed and covered my body with his.

“They’re made for your pleasure, not mine,” Carrick said, his eyes like black fire right now, as he bared his fangs. “Once you feel them inside you, lass, you’ll be ruined for human men.”

I could well believe it, because that was the problem with dreams. They were like fairy gold. You could spend them on anything you liked during the day, but by the time morning came, the glamour was gone, and all you had left was a pocket full of acorns, not coins.

“Jade,” I insisted, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Not mistress. Not lass. Jade.”

If I was going to have the best dream sex of my life, I wanted to do it with someone who saw me, was with me, not some amorphous title that could be applied to any woman.

He pulled me under him, his wings snapping out, the claws at the top of each pinion stabbing into the soft bed, resulting in a small flurry of feathers escaping the quilt.

“Jade.” Those inhuman dark eyes stared into mine. “Sweet girl, I need you to reach down...” But my hand was already there. Just as he knew what I needed, I knew what he did, brushing the broad head of his cock against my slick folds. I felt a thrill of fear over how big he was, even as my cunt spasmed in anticipation. “Ah yes, just like that. Take a deep breath, Jade.”

I sucked one in, my whole body feeling like it was inflating, ready to float away, but he was my anchor.

“Now, let it out.”

Right as my body went limp, he stabbed forward, piercing me in two.

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# Chapter 17

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*Carrick*

Goddess...

I understood now the curse of gargoyles. We were damned to love only one woman, to only feel complete at her touch, and while the need to ram every inch of my cock into her was burning inside me, I knew I couldn't. Instead I rocked back and forth inside that delicious heat, forcing myself to mentally recite back an old prayer to a long forgotten god, to stop myself from coming undone. But when I mastered myself, my eyes flicked open.

"Jade..." She was the only goddess I'd pray to now and I took in the flush of her cheeks, those pretty bee-stung lips, her shining hazel eyes, right as I edged forward. "You can take more of me, can't you?"

Her breath came in a stuttering little gasp as I edged forward.

"Be bloody careful with her," Graven's voice was muffled by the shroud of my wings. "Jade, when you've had enough, you say so."



“I’ll pull out—” I started to say, doing just that in a teasing fashion, but when she clawed me back closer, I grinned. She’d just shown me my suspicions were right. Jade might be feeling a little pinch right now, but she was made to take us.

“No! No...”

Her last negative came out in a little whine.

“That’s not what you need? Then perhaps this will help.”

I knew Graven had to be watching me like a damn hawk, sure I’d hurt Jade, but I never could. I gritted my teeth, grinding my fangs against each other as I pushed my cock back into her. It felt like she swallowed me up, enveloping me in all her hot, velvety softness. I wanted to sink into her, rut her, push and push until she’d take the last of my pearls and then... Instead I slipped a hand down between us, using one of the fingers I’d clipped my claws from to stroke furiously at her clit, and sure enough, her legs spread wider, her hips tilting up. That change of angle was enough to force the first of my pearls in and damn...

There was nothing like this in the world. Flying on a warm thermal on a summer night. Dragging my power from the stones of the house itself and then expelling them in great plumes of fire. Serving my original master well and feeling his hand on the back of my neck. Catching the first rays of the dawn, right as the stone took my flesh, entombing me for the day, forcing me to stare out as the sun rose, until oblivion sucked me down. I’d give every single thing away, just to re-experience this.

“Uh...uh... Carrick...!”

My eyes snapped open in time to see my mate writhe beneath me, her hips instinctively pushing up to meet me. She knew what she needed, and she was ready to take it.

“Hook your leg around my waist.” She blinked at my command, looking much like she did when she woke in the morning, I’d wager, but when I urged her to obey, she did as asked. I could feel her open just a little right now. My thumb

moved faster, the claws on the other hand digging into the bedding. “Open yourself up to me.”

I meant so much more by that statement, but right now I’d take a physical connection, if that’s all that was on offer. There was more to come, I was sure of it, as I worked myself deeper. Each thrust took her to the edge of the next pearl, each slightly bigger than the last, and that’s where the magic would begin. I’d be deep enough for one of them to start pressing up into that swollen spot inside her, the one that no mere man could reach.

“That’s it,” I ground out, every muscle locked down to stop myself from just shoving myself into her. “Just like that. You’re so damn perfect.”

She went to reply, to say something, but the minute her mouth opened, the next pearl popped in.

“Oh!”

Her mouth formed a perfect O as she panted quickly, brow creasing, trying to process what she was feeling, but I didn’t give her time. I began to move in earnest now, rubbing the pearls back and forth over a place that made her squeal.

“You... I...”

“I know, Jade, I fucking know,” I said, staring into her eyes, willing her to feel it.

I’d spent an innumerable amount of hours studying humans. I’d had little choice in it due to my servitude, but I had learned this. While humans might feel serendipitous connections with others, they weren’t like us. They needed time to develop a bond with another, but right now I felt like one was slotting in place. It didn’t make sense, didn’t jibe with what I’d been told about the way we found our mates, but still. When she stared into my eyes, as her body flexed around mine, clamping down tight, then urging me forward as she relaxed again.

Goddess...

“Carrick...” Her expression was one of wide-eyed wonder, her little nails doing their level best to score my stony flesh.

“That’s it, lass, just a little more.”

I rubbed back and forth, feeling the spot inside her bloom under my pearls’ ministrations, and when I felt her whole body convulse again, I stabbed deeper. Her moan was choked off, her hands clapping down on my shoulders, trying to hold me off and bring me closer, all at once.

I wasn’t going anywhere.

She’d always have me by her side, no matter whether or not she decided to accept the mate bond. As her servant or as her mate, I’d be there to serve her to the end of her days. I held that vow inside my heart, letting it warm me all the way through in a way I rarely felt when awake, and then I shifted angle.

“Oh my god, Carrick!” she gasped as I pulled her into my arms.

We’d hold this position as we fucked amongst the stars, my wings pulling us higher and higher. She’d ride me like this when she finally accepted all of my pearls and then my claiming bite, but right now she squirmed experimentally, some instinct kicking in, telling her exactly what she needed to do. As her hips flexed, my claws sank into that ripe arse of hers, the plushness there making my cock jump inside her. She let out a little cry at that, then moved faster.

I was thrusting up into her as she was slamming down, another pearl forced in at that, but I wouldn’t get much more. She was stretched to her limits and she seemed to relish in that.

“So full...” she moaned, wrapping her hands around my neck and using that as a tether to lean back. “Oh god... Oh god...”

At this angle my pearls would’ve been pressing all the harder against her sweet spot and, sure enough, slick ran down my shaft to bathe my balls, and that had me grinning fiercely.

“Your god isn’t here to help you,” I replied when her eyes met mine. “But I am.”

I took over then, gripping her hips tight and began to thrust faster and faster, a red flush spreading across her whole décolletage. She was glorious as she took her pleasure. No more words now, she wasn't capable of them, only small little desperate sounds. My fangs locked together as I forced out each one, striving like I would when flying into an incoming storm, every muscle working, right up until this.

“I'm coming!”

My wings snapped tight around her, locking her in my grip, and, at the first flex of her cunt, I came undone. *Goddess of love, thy name is Jade*, I thought dimly as my seed was wrung from me.

Her cunt was like a velvet vice, dragging every drop of pleasure out of me, the way the pearls were now crushed into my shaft helping milk out all of my seed. My body burned with a feeling I'd so rarely had before. Bliss. I felt like I wasn't in this damn bed, in Master fucking Luther's playground, but... in heaven. What else could it be, this terrible feeling of lightness that seemed to wash away everything else but this. My head dropped down and I gazed into her eyes to see that she was just as overcome. I stroked her through the last of her shudders, my own following hers, before I dared to lay her down.

“Tired...”

She was nestled into my chest now, lying sprawled across the bed. I could've loosened my wings' hold on her, but I didn't want to. If I did I'd see Graven's disapproving face and right now I didn't want that, just her. My fingers found her hair, and I pushed it back behind her ears in long strokes.

“This was the best dream ever.” Her words sent a chill through me, forcing my eyes to open fully and stare down at her. “Will you come to my dreams every night?”

“Every night,” I promised, “tonight and every one going forward.”

When she was asleep I released my wings to find Graven sitting there, but not with a look of anger on his face, but

concern.

“She believes we are but a figment of her imagination?” I whispered fiercely.

“Perhaps,” he replied. She stirred slightly against me, but I stroked her back until she settled again. “But come tomorrow night, we’ll show her just how real we are.”

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# Chapter 18

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*Jade*

I woke up to the worst sound, that of my phone ringing. The buzz... buzz... buzz... made clear I needed to get up, but I just curled up tighter in bed. I knew what was coming as I returned to reality. At first it'd be the couch, the cushions pressed into my face, then the irritated sound of my ex in the kitchen, then when I picked up the phone, it'd be Jackie, calling me back into work because they were short-staffed and, as I had no other job to go to, I'd end up going in. I grabbed handfuls of the bed coverings and pulled them over my head and that was enough for me to realise none of what I'd assumed was true. Not today.

When my eyes flicked open I saw I was on a bed, a big one. No, make that massive. Like, you'd need custom made-sheets to fit it, massive, and not only that. My fingers rubbed at the sheets because I knew a high thread count when I felt it, but while I hadn't expected to feel heavy cotton slipping through my fingers, I really hadn't anticipated this. My fingers poked through a long slash in the bedclothes and as I wiggled them in the hole, I wondered several things.

Where was I? How the hell had I gotten here? And what the hell left holes in my bedding? But as if summoned, memories of my dream from the other night swum up from the depths of my subconscious. Massive grey men with long manes of silvery hair. Black eyes with no whites. Oh, and wings? Did I remember that part right? Wings, fangs, claws.

Gargoyles.

I sat up straight in bed and saw that I was naked. Weird, didn't remember doing that. Actually the last thing I remembered— My thought process was derailed by my phone buzzing again. It was sitting on a very elegant white bedside table, plugged in and charging, underneath a lamp. None of that belonged in Trevor's apartment. I looked around me, saw the room, the massive wardrobes, the mirrors on the ceiling, and... If I blinked I saw more than one figure sitting on the bed. Shadowy, cast gold by the lamplight, they moved, one dragging me forward to straddle him as the other watched, then his wings snapping out.... I shook my head, dragging my focus back to the bed, frowning as I took in the long rents in the sheets. The persistent buzzing of the phone didn't allow for any more meandering thoughts. I grabbed it and then hit *answer call*.

“Jade?” The husky male voice was vaguely familiar so for a second I just stared at the phone. “Sorry to wake you, love, but...” I heard a terse sigh down the phone line. “Your friend, Daniel, was it?”

“Daniel?” I was up and out of bed and that made me aware of a whole lot of other things. My body ached, not in a painful way, but something else entirely. It was that low down ache of a body well used and I— “What's wrong with Daniel? Is he OK?”

“Well... Can you come down to the front gate for me?”

“I'll be right there.”

I ran over to the very big wardrobe and pulled out clothes willy-nilly, each item exactly my size. I pulled on the plushiest pair of track pants I'd ever felt and a jumper and then threw the bedroom door open.

OK, the super grand house was still here, so either I was still delusional or...? I shoved that idea to one side, racing down the steps and out the front door.

The dew was cool and damp on my feet and the morning sun bathed rose bush after perfect rose bush in its golden glow, but I was only focussed on one thing. Harry, that was who'd rung me, was standing at the gates, but he wasn't alone. He held someone in his arms.

Daniel.

My bestie lolled there like a broken doll and that had me increasing my pace.

“What happened!” I rushed towards them, hands out to pat across Daniel's face, his arms, his chest. “What the hell happened—?”

“I found him like this, slumped against the gates,” Harry replied. “As soon as I realised who it was, I rang you.”

“We need to take him to the hospital!”

“No hospital...” Daniel flipped a limp hand at me, shifting in Harry's grip, but not for long. He tried to get free, but quickly realised he didn't have the strength, collapsing back against Harry's chest.

“If you don't want a hospital, the Whiteley family doctor might be your best bet,” Harry told me. “Bloke's on retainer and looks after the family and the staff. Might be quicker than a hospital.”

“Yes, that,” I replied.

Which is how we came to be sitting in the back of that fancy car James had picked us up in, Harry behind the wheel as he wove through traffic like a madman.

“YOU'RE Daniel's next of kin?”

Doctor Foster was an older man sporting a thick head of white hair, his glasses perched on the end of his nose as he stared at the two of us. Harry and I had sat in the man's waiting room as he examined Danny.



“Yes,” I said, jumping to my feet. He had a mum and dad, brothers too, but they’d never been especially supportive of him once he’d come out.

“Then...” The doctor’s brows creased slightly. “Then I’ve got some unfortunate news to share with you.”

I sucked a breath in, stepping forward, ready to hear about whatever the hell had messed Daniel up, but the door to the doctor’s examination room was flung open. Daniel came staggering out, obviously intending to barrel into the room, but he went white as he was forced to grip the doorway to stay upright.

“Mate, if you need a hand—” Harry said, moving forward.

“No, you’ve done quite enough.” Daniel said that through gritted teeth, but I moved as I saw his arms quiver with the effort.

“Daniel—”

“I’m fine,” my bestie told me, not convincing anyone.

“If you’re gonna try and bullshit me, you might want to get better at acting like it,” I told him gently.

“Yes, well, Daniel shows all the signs of sustained sexual abuse,” the doctor said stiffly. “I’m sorry, but even though you’ve refused to be treated, I’ll be forced to take this further.”

“You’re not kink shaming me, are you, Doc?” I watched Daniel force himself to smile. “I told you already, I consented to everything that happened.”

The doctor breathed heavily out of his nose, then went to his desk and scribbled out something on an old fashioned paper prescription pad, before handing it to me.

“Some strong painkillers and anti-inflammatories to try and hasten the healing process.” He looked past me to Daniel. “And if you’re interested in speaking to a mental health professional, just let me know.”

“Medical kink isn’t really my thing, but thanks anyway,” Daniel replied, but that’s when he lost his grip on the door. I rushed forward and so did Harry, catching him before he fell.

“I’ve got you.” There was a rough tenderness in Harry’s voice as he picked my bestie up and hoisted him into his arms. Daniel winced at that, making me wonder if this was hurting him all the more.

“Jesus, Daniel...” I hissed. “Are you OK? Do you want to lie down? Do you need—”

“Take me to your big fancy house,” he said in a weak voice, eyes screwed up in pain. “Put me in that massive bath of yours with some Epsom salts and I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll need more than that.” Both Daniel and I looked at Harry, but he only had eyes for Daniel as he gazed down at him.

“Is this when you lecture me about being a good little boy, Daddy?” Daniel snarked, but he seemed to gather himself up, his eyes glittering. “I loved every minute of what happened.”

“Sometimes it’s like that,” Harry agreed, the two of them sharing some moment I didn’t really understand. “But anyone who gave the slightest shit about you wouldn’t have left you dumped at the gates once they were done. If anyone needs aftercare, it’s you right now.” But before any of us could speak, he nodded to the doctor. “I’ll see that the scripts get filled and he takes his medication.”

AND SO WE were swept back into the car, taken to the house, but when Harry pulled up outside the front door, he was there, ready to carry Daniel inside.

“I don’t need—” my best friend protested.

“Yes, you do.”

And with that we climbed the stairs and headed to the main bathroom.

I wasn’t sure what I expected to see when I walked in the door. My clothes scattered across the floor, that made sense, the French doors open, the filmy curtains shifting in the breeze. I guess when you were rich you didn’t need to worry about people breaking into your house. But the room felt curiously empty, even though the bath was still full.

“Leaving your bathwater for the help to sort out,” Daniel said when Harry set him on his feet. “I aspire to that level of luxury.”

“How about settling for me running you a fresh bath,” Harry said. He pulled the plug, then fussed with the taps, getting the temperature just right before filling the bath again. “Sandalwood, right?”

“You noticed?” Daniel affected an overly flirtatious tone.

“I noticed,” was all Harry would say in response, pouring a healthy amount of bath salts into the bath. The room filled with a woody fragrance and somehow that felt wrong. I frowned slightly, remembering a pretty floral scent instead, one that was a complex mix of several different layers of perfumes that mixed to create—

“A little privacy?” Daniel said in a waspish tone, staggering towards the bath, but his wobbly pace meant we moved closer, not towards the door. “I’m fine,” he insisted, then sat down heavily on the lip of the bath, hand trailing through the hot water.

And that’s when I saw the bruises, just under his collar.

“Danny…”

“Don’t.” His hand stilled and then he slowly turned to look back at me. “You don’t get it.”

“But—”

“You liked your vanilla little life with Pencil Dick just fine, right before you caught him railing his secretary. The inadequate foreplay, the feeling of him pumping away on top of you three, maybe four times.” His eyes met mine, glittering with challenge. “The premature ejaculation was a relief in a way, because at least you didn’t have to put up with hours of passionless, pleasureless sex.”

I jerked back as if slapped.

“Jesus, Danny.”

“I want more than that.” He bit the words off, not looking away for a second. “I want more, Jade.”

And that's when I heard the echo of my own words in his, ones I'd uttered inside this very bathroom, but... That was a dream, right? My hand slid down to come to rest on my stomach. It had to be, right? Danny mistook my movement, his smile turning to acid as he shook his head.

"And you should too."

"How about a nice bath instead?" Harry stepped forward. "Unless you've got some objections, I'm gonna strip you off, put you in this bath, go down and grab several bottles of water and you're gonna drink every single one of them."

"Mm... bossy." Daniel's eyes slid up the other man's form. "You wanna see me naked, big boy?"

"I want to see you feeling better," Harry corrected. "Talk this out between yourselves. I'm grabbing the water bottles."

We both watched him walk out the door, but when I turned back to Daniel, he pushed himself off the lip of the bath, splashing as he fell into the water, clothes and all and I think I knew why. His face screwed up as he settled back against the cool porcelain. The mask was dropped and something vulnerable, something pained rose up in its place, but with the water splashed on his face, I couldn't tell what were tears and what were droplets. He dropped his head back against the bath with a clunk and then sucked in a shuddering breath.

"Danny—"

"I'm just coming down," he explained, his voice corroded with tears. "Your minion is right, surprisingly. Mr Big is always shit with aftercare, but..." His breath hitched in his throat and then a shaking hand went to his eyes, one I reached out and grabbed as I squatted down by the bath. "He's never dumped me at a fucking gate before." When he opened his eyes I saw the tears running freely now. "Like how did he even know I was staying here?"

But neither of us got to answer that question, because Harry came walking in through the door.

I'll give it to the man, he took in the drama that was taking place and didn't back down. Instead he set up a chair beside

the bath, put one bottle of water on it and then cracked the other's lid and handed it to Danny.

"Drink it," he ordered. "All of it."

"Yes, Daddy."

But I think both of us felt a moment of relief when Daniel took a long swallow of water.

"Could I have a word...?" Harry asked me, moving towards the door.

"If you're going to talk about me, do it here," Daniel said. "Don't go whispering behind doors about me."

"OK then." Harry turned towards the bath. "Daniel is obviously engaging in some pretty heavy BDSM stuff." My friend held his bottle of water up in a salute. "There's nothing wrong with that, as long as he plays safe. That means being clear about what he wants and doesn't want."

"Oh, I was very clear about what I wanted," Danny snarked.

"And choosing someone who'll deliver in a way that doesn't cause lasting harm to your friend." Harry's eyes locked with Daniel's. "You know that, right? No matter what crazy shit the two of you get up to, he's supposed to be there, to look after you once the scene is done, and help get you through the come down."

"Come down?" I asked. It felt like the two of them were speaking another language.

"Whether it's from the head fuck of it, or the physical response to impact play," Harry said, his words so at odds with his gruff Aussie accent. "Endorphins get pumped into the sub's system, making them feel euphoric for a while, right before they drop off. It can feel like you're falling through the floor. No, several floors, over and over and right when you think you're at the bottom, an abyss opens."

All the spirit seemed to go out of Daniel then. His long fingers raked through his damp hair as he frowned.

“But whoever did this, they’re supposed to catch you when you fall.”

“I don’t do relationships,” Daniel growled.

“No one said you had to. Think of it as a transaction. They did this to you and that has consequences. They need to deal with them responsibly, not dump you at the fucking gates for me to find.”

I watched the muscle in Danny’s jaw flex, his eyes narrow, but when he jerked them up, it was to gaze into Harry’s, not mine.

“Fine.” His focus shifted to me. “Have a shower, Jade, and get dressed in something other than trackies, because, girl, you’re rich now. Time to start dressing like it.”

“If you could rustle up some breakfast, that’d be great,” Harry said. “Something with a lot of carbs, protein, salt.”

“Yeah, sure...”

I BACKED out of the room, unable to get that small sliver of bruised flesh out of my head as I went to my bedroom, but whatever Danny had gotten up to last night, I had my own aftermath to deal with.

I did as I was told, stripping off in the en suite of my room and when I did, I caught my reflection in the mirror. Not unexpected surely, but something about it had me pausing. I stepped closer, peering at the glass, before I saw it. My fingers went to my lips and found them swollen, redder than normal and around them was a rash. Beard rash? The skin on my chin and around my mouth was slightly rough to the touch. Then there were the marks on my neck. Not hickeys, but... as close to that as you could get without actually leaving anything permanent. But upon seeing those marks, I saw Danny’s overlaid on top of them and that had me jerking away.

But this was not the end of my odd discoveries. As I stripped off my bra, my breasts felt heavy and swollen, like I was about to get my period, and my nipples? They tingled as I pushed the bra cups down. They were pulled tight by the cool temperature of the morning, but that was normal. Sometimes

the bastards felt like they could cut glass, especially on the way to work, but that wasn't what I felt now. They were... tender. Like they'd been touched—

—*sucked, claws pinching tight as they*—

My hands jerked away as if my tits had turned scalding hot and a red flush spread across my cheeks. I frowned and then yanked the rest of my clothes off, ready to have a shower, but that's when I found yet more strange things.

Bruises on my hips, just small things compared to the kaleidoscope of sickly colours on Danny's neck, but when I spread my fingers out to try and match them, I saw my hands were dwarfed by their span. Then as I began to twist and turn, to see if there were any more, I felt it. A deep down ache that wasn't so much pain as...

Remembered pleasure.

*"Your god isn't here to help you."* I heard my dream lover's voice inside my head, like he was here with me in the room. *"But I am."*

The tears in the bedsheets, the fact I was still in this house, the 'beard rash' that wasn't. The gargoyle's skin was hard, almost as hard as stone, and smooth as polished marble, but I was far softer. I bruised, could be abraded, bitten, have claws rake over my skin, and I'd show every single mark, like fruit that was just a little over ripe, which meant...

I shoved my hand between my legs, my fingers sliding all too easily through my sodden folds. This wasn't from arousal. Any thought of sex, ever, was driven out of my head after seeing Danny, but... I pulled my hand free, separating the fingers to see a silverish fluid there. Either this was the world's weirdest yeast infection or...

Last night I fucked a gargoyle.

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## Chapter 19

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*Jade*

I couldn't dwell on that for long. With my shower done, I pulled on the jeans from yesterday and a top I was fairly sure even Daniel wouldn't complain about before going down into the kitchen. By the time the two of them reappeared, Harry was looking somewhat damp, and Daniel was wrapped up in the biggest, fluffiest robe I'd ever seen.

It was also entirely daggy, which had my eyes widening.

"Don't say a fucking thing," Daniel said, stabbing a finger in my direction. "The guy that takes his sartorial influences from the Crocodile Hunter insisted I pass over some hand painted silk kimonos and a bloody vintage Chanel robe for this monstrosity." He patted the plush pile. "It is super comfy though."

"So are tracky dacks," I shot back as I turned some bacon rashers over to sizzle in the pan.

"Wash your mouth out with soap," he said, before settling gingerly on a stool.

"Staying for breakfast, Harry?" I asked airily.



“I need to get changed and then back to work,” he said with a rueful nod towards Daniel. “But keep this one inside, do something quiet, relaxing.”

“Fairly sure I’d be the most relaxed with a glass of champers in my hand, sitting in the dressing room of a swanky boutique, as my girl spends some damn money to look like the queen she is,” Daniel said. I pushed a coffee his way and he cupped his hands around it. “Mother of God, yesss...”

“We’ll have a lazy one on the couch watching TV,” I told Harry.

“Not Disney.” That was said between noisy slurps.

“OK, we’ll watch whatever the hell you want,” I replied, putting thick slices of bread into a gleaming silver toaster that looked like some kind of spaceship.

And so we did.

After a leisurely breakfast where I kept slyly adding things to Daniel’s plate until he threw a sausage at my head, we retired to the lounge room. It took a whole lot of playing with the different remotes set out on the coffee table, but we finally got a massive flat screen TV to appear from the floor and then worked out how to turn it on.

“OK, maybe this is just as good as watching you try on couture,” he said, snuggling into my side as we lay down on the massive couch.

“They don’t make it in my size, so that was never going to happen.” I flicked through the different entertainment platforms, aghast at just how many there were.

“Idiot. For the right amount of money, they’d make whatever you damn well want in your size.” But then his eyes went to the TV. “Stop bloody scrolling and put the Disney channel on.”

“But—”

“I don’t think I can cope with anything more complex than that right now. Take me to the most magical place on Earth.”

“Your wish is my command,” I said, clicking on the Disney + icon. “So did you want to watch—?”

“You pick,” he said, his eyes growing heavy. “Something easy. Something... comforting.”

I knew just what to put on.

I watched him, not the screen, as the first stirring strings of *Cinderella* started up. He liked to mock me on my kids’ movie watching habits, but Daniel perked up the minute he saw the opening sequence.

“What?” He shot me a sidelong look, but his eyes trailed back to the screen. “This isn’t a real Disney movie. It’s a classic.” He sighed as he watched Cinderella wake up, looking way too put together, then sing as she went about her dreary morning. “They don’t make them like this anymore.”

“Because they’re boring,” I said, with a smirk.

“Philistine. You know they used to use orchestras and everything when composing these songs and they hand coloured every cell.”

“So it’s well-made but boring?”

His eyes narrowed as I started to grin.

“You should love this movie. It’s your fucking story! You started the other day as a pumpkin and you became a beautiful princess.”

“Is that how it works? I thought the pumpkin became a carriage?” I made a show of considering that before he punched me in the arm.

“Of course you love *Beauty and the Beast*,” he said in an exaggeratedly disgusted tone. “And *Gargoyles*...” Daniel always caught every bloody reaction, so when I stiffened, a wild smile spread across his face. “You’re a monster fucker.”

“Shut up.”

“You are! You’re one of those girls who gets all horny for the weird dudes with the horns and the skull heads and shit. Oof!”

He had more to say, but I shoved my elbow into his ribs, before remembering what he'd been through.

“Shit, are you OK? I didn't hurt you, did I? Daniel?” His low cackle made clear he was fine, dragging a growl of frustration from me. “You bloody prick.”

“So you're not gonna hang around here and wait for your prince to come?” he asked, flopping back on the nest of pillows he'd created. I'm sure he thought I didn't see that wince, but I did.

“A prince? Why would I want that? Apart from the whole ‘social inequities created by accidents of birth’ thing.” My words came out in a big rush.

“Oh my god, if you start reciting that speech from Monty Python again, I will literally kill you,” he said, shoving a pillow over his face.

“But a beast, or a monster...” The pillow was pulled back slightly so he could peek at me from behind it. “Well, he'd be loyal, loving, strong.”

“You're describing a dog,” he said. “A literal dog. You know that, right? You could have any number of dogs now you have this place.”

“Oh my god. Puppies!”

Why was I more excited about that than the fancy rooms upstairs? My parents had never been pet people and Trevor had made it clear there was no freaking way he was allowing a ‘mutt’ into our living areas. I realised that was the first significant crack in our relationship. How can you love anyone who doesn't like dogs?

“You idiot.” Daniel snatched the remote from me and fumbled the buttons until he stopped *Cinderella* and then switched over to *Beauty and the Beast*. “They don't make them like this one either... Remember when Hermione was dancing with some CGI-ed Beast?”

“I don't like to think about that,” I said primly.

“Fine, we’ll watch your monster fucker movie, but...” He fluttered his eyelids at me. “D’ya reckon you could rustle me up some hot buttered popcorn? Harry, the very handy man, told me I need lots of carbs and salt.”

“Ugh...” I pretended to moan, then scrambled off the couch to see if there was anything as prosaic as a popcorn maker in this schmancy place. Of course, there was. I returned with a massive bowl, filling that several times over throughout the movie until finally Daniel’s eyes started to close. It was right at the scene when Gaston leads the villagers on a rampage against the Beast. I grabbed the remote back, about to turn it off when he startled awake.

“No, leave it on.”

His eyelids fluttered as he forced them open, but the skin beneath his eyes looked paper thin and bruised.

“You should go to bed,” I insisted.

“After this,” he said. “Gaston is about to fall from the building.”

“Spoiler alert.”

He shot me a tired smile.

“And right now, seeing someone big, strong and hunky fall to their probable death is just what the doctor ordered.” He wriggled so he was sitting up straighter, widening his eyes deliberately before staring at the screen.

“Are we ever going to talk about this, Danny?” I asked.

“What do you want me to say?” He shot me a sidelong look, but only for a second. “I can’t explain something I don’t even understand myself, so what’s the point of talking about it?”

To share an experience, I thought. To have someone else, someone human and receptive and caring, hear about what you’ve gone through and hold your hand as you talk. I knew that because that’s what he’d done for me when my relationship died. But I also knew people didn’t talk about shit until they were ready and he wasn’t ready.

Daniel watched the Beast and Gaston fight it out without throwing popcorn at the screen and cheering Gaston on like he usually did. Instead, the bright colours of the screen were reflected on the surface of his eyes, the Beast's fight replayed out in miniature.

"You were disappointed when the Beast transformed into a prince, right?" he asked me with a sly smile and I felt like I was seeing some of the old Daniel starting to return. "You wanted him to stay furry."

"More than anything," I admitted with a sigh.

"Dog fucker," he said with a snicker.

"You pant after Gaston because he has biceps the size of his head," I shot back.

"Pretty sure that means his dick is just as big. I mean Le Fou's gotta be panting after him for some reason, right? Oh, shit, there he goes..." We both laughed as Gaston fell from the building, his arms and legs pinwheeling through the air as he fell into the crevasse below. "Right, I'm off to bed."

Daniel grabbed a plush throw from the couch and wrapped it around him like a toga, somehow looking regal with it.

"But the beast is about to transform," I said.

"I'll let you have your little monster fucker moment all to yourself," he replied with a wink. "And tomorrow, couture."

"Puppies," I countered.

"Couture and puppies!"

"Couture for puppies?" I asked and he just shook his head.

"Fine, but look, the monster is about to become a boring old man."

He swept out of the room, leaving me to watch the end of the movie, but I had other ideas. I turned the movie off, the monster there nowhere near as compelling as the ones on the roof. I shoved my hand in my pocket, pulling out those two stones, then rolling them around in my palm.

Each one was warm to the touch and the texture had me wanting to stroke my fingers across it. But touching them just had me remembering my own little monster story. I shoved them back in my pocket again and then got to my feet, slinking up the stairs to the first floor, then opened the door to the stairwell to the roof. Despite it being the middle of the day, the stairwell was dark, creepy looking, the whistle of the wind coming in through the vents setting my teeth on edge, at least until the point that I flicked on the light.

Then they were just stairs, just walls that were constructed before my grandmother was a child, just steps that took me up, up, up until I was back in front of the door that led out onto the roof. I paused in the doorway, no longer so bold now that Daniel wasn't with me, but I took in one breath, then another, and forced myself to step out onto the walkway that ran across the spine of the roof.

The wind buffeted me, making me stagger towards the railing, but as I gripped it I realised it wasn't so much the strength of what was actually a fairly gentle breeze, but rather that my muscle tension was locked down so tight that it hadn't taken much to overbalance me. But as I clung to the railing and tried to get my arms and legs to relax, I saw him.

You know when you see someone on the street and their face seems so familiar, but you can't place where you know them from? Like, did you go to school together? Were they a regular customer for a while? Were they a friend of a friend? You get that weird little niggly feeling inside your head until it comes to you who they are, hours or days later. Yeah, I didn't need that long to determine where I'd seen this face before. The gargoyle grimaced at the grounds below, as if the rose bushes themselves offended him, but that stylised sweep of long hair, those knife cut cheekbones, those muscular shoulders.

Those bat-like wings...

This was Graven, the gargoyle from my dreams, and somehow he was crouched on top of my house.

I moved more nimbly now along the walkway, moving from gargoyle to gargoyle, peering at the face of each one, looking for the other one that I knew would be familiar. Carrick. I remembered it, felt it again. The way he touched me, the claws and the tips of each of his wings stabbing into the bed.

The feel of his pearls rubbing hard inside me.

My breath came faster and faster as the same feeling that I was having a psychotic break washed over me, and I slid down to sit against the fence railings. Pebbles, more pebbles littered the roof top and I found myself reaching for one. This one was a greenish grey and slightly smoother than the other two. I put that in a hollow I created in the hem of my shirt, grabbing more stones, more. Dark grey ones and others so light as to almost be white. Polished ones or one heavily pitted by the weather. I couldn't explain what the hell I was doing, just that I needed to, and by the time I was finished, my shirt sagged low with the weight of all the pebbles.

*Now what?* I asked myself, knowing what I should be doing. I should've gone downstairs, used all that food in the fridge to whip up a meal that was warm and satisfying, because Daniel would no doubt wake up starving.

I didn't do that.

I could've found out how I could access all this money I was supposed to now have and ordered us food through Uber Eats.

I didn't.

I could've gotten on social media, skited about my sudden rise in social stature, snapped shots of the house grounds or...

I could stay right where I was, until the shadows grew longer and the sun dropped lower, the bright cerulean blue of the sky darkening to a deep indigo. Because somehow I knew that when the sun finally dropped beneath the horizon line, I'd hear the grating sound of stone on stone as the statues in front of me shifted.

And then the dark shapes against the night sky, they moved, stretched, straightened up, until I wasn't the only one on the roof any more.

“Holy fuck...” Daniel said, as he stumbled out onto the roof. “Gargoyles!”



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## Chapter 20

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### *Seneca*

When I was a boy, my friends and I used to plunge into the big lake just outside our mothers' homes and see how long we could stay under water. In the dark, stillness of the waters, all sound was muffled but the ones your own body made. My mouth would be closed tight to stop the water getting in, my limbs moving gently in the water to keep me afloat, but I'd hang there in stasis until the other boys were forced to surface. At first it was a competition between them and me, to see who could last the longest, and once I was the last one floating underwater, the only challenger left for me to face was myself.

My lungs would burn, my body growing heavier by the second, but I'd stay down until the very last minute. Then, when my nerve broke and the need for air grew too great, I'd swim up to the surface. Sounds like a simple thing, right? The only sensible course of action. Something I should've done well before this. Because that burning need to breathe, it grew more and more persistent and as I pumped my limbs, struggling against the heavy pull of the water to rise above. And then the real challenge would begin.

I had to open my mouth to take a breath.

But if I did, I'd just swallow water and drown.

I needed to get to the surface.

But my limbs were heavy, so heavy now instead of being strong, my head aching with a heavy throb.

This was when the fear kicked in.

I'd start to struggle in earnest, the adrenalin that should've had my arms and legs thrusting through the water minutes ago coming too late. I'd claw my way towards the surface, seeing it get closer but not sure if I'd make it, black starting to cloud the edges of my vision. I'd need to breathe, scream for help, my hands clawing at the water, not swimming, as if a helping hand was just in reach, right before...

I'd pop above the surface to the sound of the other boys' cheers, but all I could hear was my noisy whoops as I sucked in the sweet, sweet air.

That's what I did now, but I wasn't surfacing above the waters, rather I was coming back to flesh after such a long time. I remembered. Master Ashley had died and I... Then all thoughts were shoved to one side as I smelled her.

Goddess...

That was the only word for her, in the way the breeze teased the ends of her long dark hair. I'd bury my face in it and smell the scent of night-blooming jasmine, I was sure. And that body. I'd never really seen the appeal of women before, knowing that one day I would find my fated mate and all else would pale by comparison. I was glad for every time I'd pulled away from one of my many master's playthings when I caught sight of her. She was wearing those damnable pants that seemed to outline every curve of her voluptuous body, the swell of her arse, those sweetly rounded arms making me ache.

But then I saw him.

"Holy fuck..." he said, this stranger with hair the colour of a summer sky. "Gargoyles!"

I moved and so did my brothers, surging forward to protect our mistress. We clawed our way over the fence, flapped our wings to take to the air, then dropped down around her.

“Protect your mistress!” Graven growled, like we hadn’t already assembled. I dropped down onto my hands in the gap between her and this man, then bared my fangs in a snarl.

“Fuck... fuck! Call off your fucking beasties because—”

“Stop!”

Her voice cut through the night air and even the birds stopped to listen to it. It vibrated with command, a golden collar placed around my neck. I was both proud to wear her bond and desperate to pull against it. He might be a threat. He might hurt... her.

My mate.

I turned around, searching her face, seeing the concern and the fear and the need and the desire there and I swore then I would allay or satisfy each one. My chest ached so damn much when I took her in. She was so very beautiful and—

“Don’t hurt Daniel.”

She wove her way awkwardly between three different gargoyles, not to rush towards us, but to walk to him. I watched her stand between him and us, like she needed to protect him with her body, rather than us do the same for her.

“This Daniel,” Graven said, rising up to his full height. And the quivering fool behind her? His eyes went wide. “He is important to you.”

“Um...duh,” the man said in an insulting tone. This drew growls from all of us and I stalked forward.

“Can you keep your fucking mouth shut for a second?” she hissed at him before straightening up. “He is. He’s my best friend and if you hurt him...”

Her voice trailed away as Graven stalked forward, then offered the man his hand.

“Any friend of yours, Mistress, is a friend of ours.”

“What the actual fuck...?” This coward pulled himself out from behind our mistress and shrank back, eyeing Graven’s hand, then each one of us, as if our leader wasn’t offering him a hand of friendship.

Something I wasn’t sure he deserved.

I saw the white of his eyes clearly, smelled the stink of fear upon him and could not see what she saw in him at all.

All while feeling a pang of jealousy at how close he was to her.

I had heard about this before, our mates making connections with other men before we got a chance to meet her. Tales were told of the lengths gargoyles went to prove they were the better option.

But not all were success stories.

I dimly wondered if an ‘accident’, where the man was knocked over the fence, not to die, but to be injured sufficiently he’d need to be whisked away to hospital for some time, leaving us free—

“Mistress?” this Daniel said. “You’re their mistress?”

“Yes, no, maybe...?” She looked around her wildly, but her fear was like acrid smoke in my nose, something I would do anything to assuage. I rose to my full height, ready to go to her, to soothe her when she spoke. “I dreamt of them, two of them last night.”

“Last night?” The man put a finger up and then circled it around in the air. “Like last night, last night? So I was out with Big and you were...?” His eyes slid down, taking in Graven’s tumescent state and then mine, something that had me growling anew. I was not his to inspect. “Oh my god, bitch, when I said you were a monster fucker, I was joking, but you...”

Anything else he might have to say was no longer relevant. His hand rose, ready to slap my mistress’ arm and that would not do.

“Seneca!” Graven barked, but it was too late. I rushed forward with a savage snarl and then collected up my mistress, yanking her away and setting her behind me, before turning on him.

“You. Will. Not. Lay. A. Hand. On. Her.”

He should’ve been shaking in his boots, this little man who thought himself strong enough to strike our mistress, but he just looked me up and down before smiling.

“Holy crap, you’re super protective of Jade.”

Jade, that was her name? That of a precious stone, it made sense, because that’s what she was to us.

“I will lay waste to this entire city if that’s what it takes to keep her safe,” I told him in no uncertain terms.

“Ah... Seneca?”

A hand on my forearm, that’s all it took to destroy my focus. To be touched by her... My cock lurched, seed brimming inside me only to spill a few drops, something the man seemed to take in with rapt fascination. I whirled around, spreading my wings to block Daniel from looking at either of us, and I may or may not have let my tail swipe wildly, colliding with his legs.

“Ow!” came his muffled retort, but I didn’t care.

“I am Seneca.” *Mate*, I added silently. “Any wish that is within my power to grant is yours.” I took her hand as my mother had instructed me to do and pressed a soft kiss to the back of her hand. “My mistress.”

“Oh, I’ve got some ideas—” Daniel started to say, but Jade hissed at him for silence.

“Seneca,” she said, shifting to take my hand in hers and then give it a squeeze, there and gone again as she pulled back. “I’m going to need you to back up a bit.” I took a step backwards. “A whole lot more than that. Daniel is very precious to me.”

So it was true? This boy with the blue hair was her chosen mate? I felt like I was sinking down into the lake again, but

this time I made no attempt to rise above it.

“Aw... bestie!” the man said, moving in to give her a squeeze.

“A very precious, very annoying little brother,” she amended, shooting him a dark look.

Brother. So there was hope. My mood lifted at that word.

“And you’re about to fulfil all your monster fucking dreams,” he said gleefully. “This is the house that keeps on giving. You’re finally wearing clothes that suit you. We can spend the day lolling around on that fabulous couch of yours and at night...” His eyes twinkled. “You’ve got a goddamn harem here of gargoyles at your beck and call.”

“Ah... no—” she started to say, flushing a very pretty pink.

“Yes.” I took a step forward, as did Graven and... Carrick? *Gods above, please don't let him be a part of my flock*, I thought furiously. He was reckless, stupid, irritating and—

“We already have.”

Urgh, the smug bastard smiled then.

“You did!” As soon as Daniel squeaked that out, she slapped a hand over his mouth, silencing him. Good, perhaps she could do the same for Carrick, because he was edging closer.

“Jesus, Danny, your voice is so high only dogs can hear it,” she said, then she let him go. He brushed his robe down, then straightened it, as if he was wearing one of the hand tailored suits Master Ashley favoured. “And thank you for your input, Carrick.”

“You seemed to like my ‘input’ a great deal last night,” he replied with a smirk.

“Did he just ‘that’s what she said’ you?” Daniel asked, his head spinning from one direction to another. “He did, didn’t he? Oh my god. Oh my god! You got railed by that!” He stabbed a finger in the direction of Carrick’s cock. “Like,

damn girl, I thought I was a size queen, but...” He peered closer, but Carrick put out a hand.

“My endowments are none of your business, little man,” he said, firmly, but gently.

“But there’s lumps on it,” Daniel said in a whispered aside to my mate. “There’s no such thing as gargoyle STIs, right?”

“These are my pearls,” Carrick explained. “They exist to give my mistress much pleasure.” He held out an arm for Jade to take, something that had me starting forward. Why should he—? “Something we could be doing right now, Jade.”

Daniel let out an explosive snort, ruining the mood entirely, but Jade gave him a hard shove. Watching him stumble made something inside me very happy. This friend of my mate’s was a lover of men, I was sure of it, yet still I could not tamp down the flames of jealousy that burned in my heart. I wanted to stand next to her, to be able to take for granted that closeness.

“No, no, no.” Each word grew firmer with repetition. “That’s not what’s going to happen. We’re all going to sit down and work out what the fuck is going on because...”

I saw the yearning in her eyes as she scanned the lot of us, along with something else. Fear, but a strange kind. The one that comes from being hurt over and over and not being sure how to stop it. Daniel noted my attention, his smile fading before he nodded slowly to me.

“Because I thought all of you were some kind of hot dream and now...?” She shook her head sharply. “I need to know what the hell is going on.”

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# Chapter 21

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*Jade*

So I now knew this wasn't a dream, because I never would've added Daniel to any dream scenarios involving me and a bunch of gargoyles. But that just made watching three massive gargoyles tramp into my new kitchen all the more surreal.

This was real.

This was all fucking real.

I busied myself by putting the kettle on, a time-honoured technique for dealing with stressful events in my family, and once it was boiling I turned around and asked, "Tea?"

Daniel snorted, stared at me and then snorted again.

"Because this situation totally calls for a cup of sleepy time tea." He leaned over the bench. "Got any tequila in this bougie place of yours?"

He started to open cupboards with gay abandon, exclaiming at some of the contents, when one of the gargoyles, Seneca, I think it was, stepped forward.



“We will drink anything you care to prepare for us, Mistress.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to do?” I asked. Jesus, Daniel and I had talked about getting a puppy, but did I inherit a bunch of gargoyles instead? Except they weren’t pets... My memories of the other night came roaring back now that I accepted the reality of the lot of them, making clear just how un-pet-like they were. “Do I need to prepare food for you? Drinks? Is there something specific you need, like lots of calcium?” I waved a hand in their direction.

“When we are in stasis, we have no nutritional needs,” Graven said, pushing forward and that brought up a whooole lotta memories. My eyes traced the line of those massive wings, folded up behind his back, then down along those broad shoulders and his lips curved slightly at my attention. “But when we come back to flesh, we must eat.”

“But you didn’t eat last night.”

“So eating pussy doesn’t count...” Daniel snickered, producing several bottles of alcohol and plonking them on the bench top.

“Shut. The fuck. Up,” I hissed.

“After you fell asleep, we went to Harold’s house and he provided us with food,” Graven replied.

“I’d worked up quite the appetite,” Carrick said.

Lemme just say that the sight of a gargoyle sporting the kind of smug smile dudes get when they’ve gotten lucky was weird, but it didn’t stop me glowering at Carrick. His smile only widened.

“So you need to eat now?” I asked. “What kinds of food do you consume?”

“Pretty sure I know who to ask about that, the bastard.” Daniel pulled his phone out and put a call through.

“Who the hell are you ringing?”

“Harry may or may not have given me his number, for ‘just in case’.” He straightened up as the call went through.

“Hey, Harry.” Daniel twined a lock of his hair around his finger. “Yeah, just calling to find out what fricking gargoyles eat. You’ll be right over? Coolies, see you soon.”

He leaned across the bench and stared at the lot of them with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

“Soo... you’re gargoyles and you live on the top of Jade’s house. Have you been there since the moment the house was built or some time after that? Are you like magical? Like, does someone carve you out of stone and then bippity boppity boo you into existence, or are you, like, born in a stone egg or something? And what’s with the porn-worthy boners everywhere? Like, believe me, walking into a room of massive hard wangs is my idea of a good time, but you seem to be very, *very* happy to see our girl Jade. So, what’s that about?”

Graven’s brows had drawn down by increments after each question, but just as he went to answer, the French doors to the kitchen were wrenched open.

“So you found them.”

Harry was sucking in breaths, obviously having run over here from his cottage, as he scanned the room to try and read our responses. I’m fairly sure my artificial calm and Daniel’s blatant fascination were not what he expected.

“If you mean the gargoyles on my roof?” I asked. “Yeah, we found them, much to my surprise. But you aren’t shocked at all by that.”

“Um, well, no. I wasn’t sure if you’d meet them straight away. I thought we had a bit more time.” Harry’s voice grew more and more gruff. “I mean, it’s always something that each heir to the house discovers. That gargoyles exist, and whether or not they can command them.”

“We have made clear we will do anything in our power to ensure our mistress’ happiness,” Graven told him.

“OK, I’m getting the appeal now,” Daniel said, as he sidled closer. “I mean damn, not only do they have dicks with built in G-spot attachments, but, fuck, they’re all grr, arrgh, I will protect you with my dying breath, and shit.”

“Want me to see if any of them are into dudes?” I asked.

“No need, honey. My gaydar was activated the moment I saw them move, and I’m not even getting a little wobble. I mean, you might be able to command them to...” He wrinkled his nose then and shook his head. “Actually, scratch that. Gross.”

“Honestly,” Harry said with a rueful look. “This was kind of a test. If the gargoyles didn’t wake for you, if you couldn’t command them, then a ‘mistake’ would be found in the legal documents and—”

“And the beautiful house woulda gone bye-byes?” Daniel asked. “Shit.”

“A generous stipend would’ve been paid to you for being a member of the family...” Harry’s voice trailed away.

“OK, fine, whatever,” I said, because nothing he said surprised me. I still couldn’t believe they’d put me in this fancy house, so the idea it could all be taken away made sense. My focus shifted to the gargoyles. They were what interested me, not this place. “Tell me what you like to eat and we’ll sit down for a meal.” I turned to Graven. “And you... You can explain everything.”

“As you wish,” Graven said with a slow incline of his head.

After talking to Harry, I let him and Daniel loose on the Uber Eats menu, ordering up a storm. Apparently gargoyles were omnivorous, eating meat and fruit and vegetables, but they preferred spicy foods. But while they sorted that out, Graven moved forward.

“Perhaps a walk before dinner?” he asked.

Seneca and Carrick moved to join us, but a small shake of Graven’s head stopped them where they were.

“Right.”

He offered me his arm and I took it. I had to reach up to place my hand upon it and it was dwarfed by his massive

forearm, but he led me out of the chaotic kitchen and into the grounds.

“You are feeling overwhelmed,” he said.

We’d walked in silence for a few minutes and the further we got from the house, the easier it was to take a full breath. I ended up letting out a long sigh, then looking up at him.

“Yes, but that’s a pretty normal response, right? Weren’t all of your previous masters or mistresses the same?”

“Most of my masters knew what to expect when they came into possession of The Eyrie,” he replied, somewhat grimly. “They were taught how to awaken and command us by their fathers or their grandfathers.”

“The Whiteleys,” I said and he nodded.

“The lore was closely guarded, and so were we, until Madeline.” He stopped then and gazed down at me. “You’re very like her in some ways.”

“What was she like?” I asked.

“Fierce, full of life and joy, until she wasn’t.” His brow creased. “Master Kenneth loved her very much, right up until she was forced to flee.”

“With their child?” I shook my head. “Why did she leave?”

“My master was never one to deny himself any pleasure. Food, wine, drugs, women, men, he gorged on them all until he was forced to sleep, then started again the moment he awoke. The vice he loved most to indulge in was Madeline. But when she fell pregnant, she saw how things would be. Her child would be raised in a similar environment, with no boundaries, no sense of what was appropriate for a child. My master made clear that he would enjoy having an heir to initiate into his world.”

“Oh my god, that’s sick!” I said, pulling back. “So how did you guys fit in with that?”

“We did as we were commanded.” There seemed to be so much in that statement that I was reluctant to push further, and

he nodded slowly in recognition. “But as his prized possession, Madeline was given the gift of being able to command us as well. She was a talented witch, her gifts something she discovered in this house, so when she discovered she was pregnant, she asked us to make it impossible for the master to find her. We did what she requested, and that’s how she was able to slip free.”

“But how did *I* wake you?” I asked. “I’m neither a rich man’s plaything, nor a witch.”

“Perhaps.” He reached across and grabbed both my hands in his, mine like a child’s in his palms. “But you are powerful.”

When he took a deep breath in, I found myself doing the same, and that’s when magic happened.

I’d awoken three gargoyles, so surely that was magic enough, but as we stood there, the wind played with his hair, brushing it back against his face and we both started to... glow. It was subtle at first. I was staring at him, so freaking tall, massive and inhuman looking so to see him turn from grey to silverish, that made sense. But when he smiled as his eyes moved across my body, I looked down.

My skin was getting paler and paler by the minute, not because I looked sickly, but due to a glow that seemed to come from within. I let out a little gasp, ready to pull away, but he held my hands more tightly. The glow got brighter and brighter all over my body, but it all seemed to radiate out from my heart.

“What...?”

It was more than just an optical effect. Something swelled inside me, almost like a wave of happiness, but somehow more tangible than that. I felt like I had when I’d led the walk out at the supermarket; like I could do any damn thing I wanted. Like I was shucking off the arsehole attitude of Trevor along with the ignominy of being forced to sleep on the couch in my own apartment; like everything bad in my life was burning away. When I pulled away from Graven’s hands, I half expected the light to fade, but it didn’t diminish for a

second. Rather it grew as I held my hands together, growing brighter and brighter until it took shape.

If you know what a Patronus is, it was kind of like that. But I didn't conjure a brave stag or a powerful eagle. Instead, a butterfly made of light formed in my cupped hands, flapping its wings before it took flight. I let out a little laugh of surprise as it fluttered upwards, then dissipated, turning to sparkles bright enough to rival the stars.

"This is your power," he said. "And why do I think you've never seen it before?"

"No one's ever seen me as powerful before."

Saying that out loud was both sad and cathartic, at one and the same time. It was as though only now was it safe to articulate what I'd been feeling for months, maybe years. More golden light drifted off me, swirling in the breeze and up into the air, taking my pain with it.

"They will now," he replied solemnly, as if his words had weight. "No one will ever mistake you for anything other than someone to be respected." His arm went carefully around my shoulders and he pulled me close, wings snapping out to encase me again. "We will ensure the world knows your worth."

And that was the most seductive thing anyone had said since the moment all of this crap had started.

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## Chapter 22

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*Carrick*

“What is Graven doing with her?”

I paced back and forth across the kitchen floor, my tail flicking as I went. Each time I passed the open doorway, I turned my head to stare out across the grounds. Pretty flowers and the dark of night were not enough to obscure the two figures out there. I watched my stone brother lead her away, talking all the while, no doubt having a sober, rational conversation with our mate about our kind, whereas I...

I wanted to show her the much more elemental side of our nature.

She belonged to me. The knowledge of that burned in my chest like a brand. I needed her close, to touch her, feel her, breathe in her scent. When that little bastard, Seneca, rose from the table and drew near, I saw that he was staring out of the doorway as well.

“What do you w—?” I was about to send him on his way. Our kind knew better than to get between a gargoyle and his fated mate, but when he turned to face me and I saw his expression, I stopped. “Gods, you’re...”

“She’s mine,” he snapped, staring at me with blatant dislike. Impudent little pup. I had served this house for centuries before he ever took to stone, something I was about to remind him before his words sunk in.

“She’s... ours,” I said begrudgingly, even though I knew that most gargoyles formed flocks around their fated mate. A mate was always a woman of power, and we were a conduit to it. By taking multiple mates, she would never risk draining us completely, and we would ensure she was always safe. But forming a flock with the likes of one such as Seneca... I curled my lip, and he looked at me hotly.

“You tasted her last night.”

Oh ho, now it came out—the seeds of this whelp’s discontent. I smiled slowly.

“That I did, and she was sweet as honey—”

“Ohh-kay, I’m gonna need you to dial back the talking about my bestie’s ‘honey’,” Daniel said, walking over to join us, and we both frowned down at him. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger here. I’m not gonna cock block you two.” He looked out the doorway. “Umm...three. I’m Team Jade-getting-it-in-every-hole-from-the-monsters, trust me. You look after me and, during the day while you sleep, I’ll be your biggest cheerleader.”

“And what do you want in exchange for this service?” I asked, folding my arms. “This one.” I looked past him to where Harold watched the conversation unfold. “He is a lover of men like you.” My eyes narrowed as I focussed back at the blue-haired man next to me, my nostrils flaring. “You smell of sex and pain.” I nodded to Harold. “You are strong, capable, for a human. You can provide this kind of experience for Jade’s best friend. If you need tuition...”

Seneca flinched at the same moment I did, because we had had some experience of this ourselves. In Z Ward. Some of our kind remained trapped within its walls, but none of the rest of us would go anywhere near the place. We couldn’t. Luther Whiteley had sealed the place away from us, locking some of our stone brothers inside. Whiteley had been particularly



insistent that Wulfstan remained trapped there, separated from the rest of us. I shook my head, as if that would dislodge the memories: of sex, of pain that went on and on, of screams of agony and screams of pleasure, too similar to differentiate between.

“I don’t need teaching,” Harold replied stiffly, “and the food is about to arrive. I’ll go down to the gate to grab it. In the meantime, Carrick, stop fucking meddling.”

Despite that growled response, Daniel watched the other man go with a steady gaze before his focus finally shifted back to us.

“I don’t need any quid pro quo to do the right thing by Jade. She’s amazing,” he said.

“On that, we agree,” Seneca said.

“And having super protective monster boyfriends? Yeah, I think she deserves that, and more. The only one you’ll have a hard time convincing is her. She’s just got out of a relationship with Pencil Dick—”

“Pencil. Dick...?” I asked.

“Ohh, you don’t know?”

Daniel waved us towards the table that was set up in the kitchen, sitting down on one chair and then gesturing for us to do the same. I gingerly sat down on one spindly thing, hearing the wood creak in protest, then moved forward, putting my weight on my feet.

“Explain, friend of Jade’s,” I demanded.

“Jade has only ever had one guy.” Both Seneca and I growled at the same time, our eyes meeting, then our focus shifted back to Daniel. I had thought him a threat, but now I saw him for the resource he so obviously was. He knew our mate well and could tell us about her history. “Trevor, aka Pencil Dick. Like, no human dude is going to be able to compete with you fuckers...” I frowned slightly as Daniel waved at my now flaccid cock. “But even compared to most men, Jade’s ex is... lacking.”

He held up a pinky finger to illustrate his point. The looks Seneca and I traded then were self-congratulatory. No wonder our mate had struggled to take much of me the previous night. She had not been properly serviced before, something that would now change.

“But hey, just because a guy has a micro peen, doesn’t mean he’s a bad lover. I knew this guy with a wicked tongue —”

“Focus, friend of Jade’s,” I prompted.

“Right. So, the thing about Trevor is that he’s a little man. Like, literally and metaphorically. He tried to say he was taller than Jade, but she could never wear heels around him, not even a small one. Said it ‘emasculated’ him.” Daniel rolled his eyes and his scorn for Jade’s former lover created a bond between us. “He’s the kinda guy who likes to push people down to make himself feel bigger.”

“Tell me where this man lives,” Seneca demanded. “I’ll fly to his home tonight, and tear his head from his body for the sin of harming our mate.”

“Mate...?” Daniel looked at him, then me. “I’m assuming you don’t mean that in a ‘tie me kangaroo down’ kinda way.”

“Why would someone wish to bind a kangaroo like that?” Seneca asked, frowning, but I shook my head.

“Mistress,” I corrected. “What the fledgling meant to say was ‘Mistress’.”

“Fledgling...” The pup’s wings flared out with a snap. “I am no—”

“No, you didn’t.” He was a canny thing, this Daniel. He regarded me steadily and then leaned forward. “Is this one of those fated mates things? I’ve been reading these porn books where like fourteen werewolves rail some unsuspecting guy behind a dumpster, and they talk about shit like that all the time.” He scanned the two of us. “Is that what you are to Jade?”

“And if we are?” I countered.

“The way it works in the books is that once the werewolves scent their mate, they’ll do anything to claim them and keep them.” He wrinkled his nose. “That usually means drowning them in buckets of cum, but, whatever.” His gaze sharpened as he turned it from Seneca back to me. “So that’s how it is with you guys?”

Seneca made a strangled noise, the pathetic little fledgling. For all his posturing, I was fairly sure he’d expire on the spot if our mate looked at him for too long.

“More or less,” I replied, with a shrug.

Daniel smiled slowly, then nodded. “Niiice. OK, here’s the plan. I’m gonna scarf down the amazing food we ordered, because, damn, I’m starving. Haven’t eaten all day.” I sat there patiently, waiting for this man to finally come to his point. “Then I’ll slink off to bed early, because...ouch.” He moved gingerly on his chair. “I mean, guys like me talk about getting someone to wreck our holes, but the guy I saw last night really did a number on me.”

At that information, I sat forward. I’d seen this kind of thing before, men who seemed to get pleasure from pain. Under Luther’s not so benign rule, the inmates of Z Ward had been forced to endure it, whether they liked it or not. But as Daniel noted my attention, his cheeks flushed red.

“But I’ll make myself scarce as soon as I’ve had something to eat.” As Daniel said that, Harold walked back in, toting many plastic bags of food. When we all turned to look at him, he paused, his eyes touching on the colour in Daniel’s cheeks, but he simply raised his eyebrows without comment before moving forward to set down his load. “Alone,” Daniel clarified, before turning back to us. “You’ll have free rein to woo my bestie, but...”

He was a small man, this Daniel, even by human standards, but, as he defended his friend, he didn’t look it. He drew himself up as if he came from a long line of kings, and considered the two of us down the slope of his nose.

“But you’d better put the effort in. No ‘wham, bam, here’s your monster dick, ma’am’.”

Though he was but a human, he seemed to see everything that I was struggling with. That my desire, my *need* for my mate was so strong that in my haste to get to her I might be at risk of losing my control, ignoring my duty to protect her first and foremost. She was like a long draught of water to one who has wandered lost in the desert. I wanted to gulp her down, swallow everything she was, because that was the only way I'd be satisfied. But he was right in issuing his warning. Daniel was only saying what my mother and the other women of my village had always said.

*“The world treats women like things,” she'd told me, as she stroked my hair. I was just a boy, a child who hadn't discovered the other side of his nature yet. “Things to be used as a man sees fit. Don't be one of those men, Carrick.” I'd snuggled in tighter into her side.*

*“Never, Mother.”*

My lips moved now to make the same vow, even though my mother had been returned to the earth many hundreds of years before now. When I blinked, I came back to The Eyrie's kitchen, and I met Daniel's gaze calmly.

“You can count on us to treat your friend with every courtesy,” I assured the man.

“Grub's up,” Harold said, dropping the many bags on the benchtop, just as Graven returned with Jade. Like the precious stone for which she was named, she gleamed as she entered the kitchen, her shining beauty worthy of a crown, totally at odds with the menial tasks she busied herself with, as she found plates and bowls and cutlery.

“All is well?” I asked Graven in an undertone, when he drew closer.

“As good as can be expected,” he told me. “We have a long way to go to convince our mate that we are worthy of her.”

“I, for one, am up for the challenge,” Seneca said, coming to stand by Graven.

“Of course you are, fledgling,” I said, grinning when he started to growl. “You’ve never known a woman’s touch before. But...”

I looked across the counter and watched Daniel and Jade squabble over the food with a closeness and familiarity that I envied. Harold hovered, a step away from the two of them, a satellite to their twin planets. But he wanted to get closer. I knew that because I felt the same urge. She was the sun I never got to see. She warmed my skin, drove out the cold of night, the same way that she drove the ache from my bones.

And my heart.

“Whatever it takes,” I replied honestly. “We know she belongs to us, but Jade does not possess our instincts.” As I stared at the woman in question, she seemed to sense my gaze, looking up from the process of dishing up food, her cheeks growing pink at my attention. “So we must show her how good it can be.”

“Are you guys hungry?” Jade asked. When I stepped forward, so did my stone brothers.

“Always,” I replied, remembering the taste of her on my tongue but not really wanting to replace it with food. “For whatever you have on offer.”

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## Chapter 23

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### *Wulfstan*

I have always preferred the stillness, the silence of being one with stone. Though not when I was young. The first time my body turned to stone I was caught frozen in a scream, something the younger boys mocked me for the next night when I came back to flesh. I'd flapped my wings and bared my fangs at them, and that had put an end to that. But since then, I craved the perfect unending nothingness of being stone, because it was my only escape from the memories.

The walls of the asylum still echoed with the screams of inmates, long dead. If I didn't apply my energy to block it out, I still heard Luther's insidious voice inside my head.

"For me, Wulf," he would say, right before he'd ask me to do something despicable. "For me."

As if I'd had any choice in the matter. His command over me had been absolute, a collar around my neck, a whip struck against my flanks to make me move faster to do his bidding. And so, the moment I came back to flesh this time was akin to torture. It meant that he was back. My claws lashed out without thought, but raked only across empty air. My fangs snapped together hard, the impact rattling all the way through

me because my bite had failed to tear out the bastard's throat. But once I came back to myself completely, I found that I stood alone in a damnable cell, my chest heaving.

This had to be another of Luther's torments. I was like a caged bird, my great wings flapping, carrying me up the metal grid that allowed the moonlight in, but the moment I touched the bars, my skin sizzled. I jerked them back with a silent cry, staring beyond the grate at the moon.

"Who has dared awaken me!" I shouted, my voice echoing all the way across the damnable estate. "Who has dragged me from my sleep?"

But just as before, no one answered. The rest of my brothers trapped in this building remained perfectly still, frozen in their moment of terror. Their bodies stayed as they had been, shrinking back from a cruel master and an even crueller fate. But it was one that I would have preferred to this: I was trapped within these walls, every damn brick of it reminding me of the horrors that had taken place here, over and over, until I was forced to my knees.

"Let me rest..." I whispered. "Please... Let me rest..."

But the walls of Z Ward had never listened to the pleas of its inmates in the past, and they didn't listen to me now.

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## Chapter 24

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*Jade*

“Well, I’m for bed,” Harry said, picking up his plate and taking it over to the kitchen.

“A man who picks up after himself?” Daniel said, raising his eyebrows as he got to his feet. “I’m impressed. Want to show me how to use that fancy arse dishwasher?” He paused to look down at me, as though he had something important to impart. “Then I’m going to sleep, too.”

“Already?” That came out way squeakier than I’d intended. “I meant, um, we could watch another movie—”

“I’m tired.” Daniel yawned so loud and long I instantly regretted my suggestion. “I’m gonna be asleep ten seconds after my head hits the pillow.”

“OK.” I jumped to my feet way too quickly. “I’ll give you a hand with the dishes.”

“No, sit down.” Daniel waved a hand at me, then yawned again. “We’ve got this.”

Right.



I sat down with a sense of trepidation. Although Daniel and Harry were still in earshot as they moved around the kitchen, I was basically on my own facing the three gargoyles across the table. My hesitancy wasn't only because I was still adjusting to the fact they existed. It was more that their eyes had been following me every time I moved. They seemed transfixed. Even when I took a bite of my food, they continued to watch me eat, until I started to blush. Unfortunately, it was something I was used to. Some people seemed to have a radar for noticing a fat person eating. Such people appeared to feel like they needed to visually supervise the whole event, complete with frowns, whispers and grimaces, as though your body shape dictated whether or not you should be allowed to determine what or how much you ate.

Before too long, however, I found out that that wasn't what was happening.

As they watched me take another bite, each set of obsidian eyes glittered with an unholy light before their eyelids grew heavier, and my level of discomfort grew proportionately.

“What?” I asked, in irritation.

“Try this, mistress,” Graven said, spiking a mini spring roll on the end of what looked like a comically small fork in his hands. I looked at it, questioningly.

“They are very good,” Seneca said, before picking one up between his claws and crunching it in one big bite, then nodding. “Crispy, with a good meat to vegetable ratio.”

“Ah,” I said, displaying the powers of my intellect. On the periphery of my vision, I noticed Daniel pause from what he was doing and peer over the counter to watch what was going on, looking away when I turned to look at him. I turned back to the gargoyle still holding the fork out to me and smiled tightly. “Well. Thank you, Graven...”

I was about to say ‘thanks, but no thanks’, but my blue-haired Cupid was having none of that.

“Jade loves a good spring roll. Don't you, Jade?”

When I shot him a look that made it clear I would murder him in his sleep, Daniel just smirked in response. But he'd manoeuvred me well, making it so I'd just come off looking like a rude bitch if I didn't take Graven up on his offer.

"Of course. Thanks." I plucked the fork from his hand, then made a show of enjoying the bite I took, wondering why on earth I was going to so much effort to please three monsters I barely knew. Setting the fork down again, I wiped my mouth with a serviette. "It's amazing, but I'm completely stuffed."

"Not completely..."

While Carrick had similar silvery looking hair and angular features to the others, his physique appeared leaner, and his face was definitely more mobile than Graven's. As I looked at him, a devilish smile danced across his lips, and I noticed Seneca frown in confusion.

What did he...? Ohhh. Memories of last night came flooding back, making this ten times more awkward. His skin, so much cooler than mine to the touch. His hands, sliding over my entire body, like he wanted to memorise every curve. His cock— My cheeks burned bright red as I remembered how I'd behaved. I'd thought it was all a dream, that was my defence, but... I gripped the edge of the table, taking in one shuddering breath, then another, before I sat straighter.

People kept telling me that this was my house, that everything here was mine. I might be sharing it with some really annoying roommates, and I looked back at Daniel as I thought that, or some really strange ones, and my focus shifted back to the gargoyles, but still, this was to be my home, so I needed to start treating it like that.

"So, I might—" I started to say.

"Well, if you're finished—"

Graven and I stopped and looked at each other, then smiled as we waited for the other to finish speaking.

"It's been a long time since we've taken flesh," he informed me. "Our wings are tight and we need to take to the air to work out some kinks." Daniel, who perennially had the

maturity of a twelve-year-old, snorted at the word ‘kinks’, then went back to stacking the dishwasher.

“Of course,” I said. “Though I’m not sure how this works. Do you need permission or something?”

“What we need is you.” Seneca said, bluntly, as he leaned forward. The other gargoyles shot him a look that said they thought that maybe, just maybe, he was being a little too frank, but he ignored them. “Come flying with us.”

Flying?

Flying!

Seneca held out his hand for me to take and everything inside me clamoured, because of how much I wanted to accept his offer. He was so big that his hand was massive and that in itself was enough to draw me closer, because that was what I wanted. To experience the uniquely feminine pleasure of feeling small, fragile, precious, while held tight in a man’s grip. Trevor was my height. No, just slightly shorter, and that had always made me feel like some kind of lumbering giant beside him. Did Seneca realise what he was offering? He couldn’t know. They were gargoyles, not beasts with psychic powers. But I couldn’t help but wonder about whether they had some kind of psychic radar, because I’d had fantasies about just this sort of thing more times than I could count.

The reason why I loved the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, and the massive creatures in *Gargoyles*, was because the idea of being swept up into the arms of some massively muscled creature was deeply appealing. That sense of being thrown onto the Beast’s back to ride him as he strode across the palace gardens or clinging to Goliath’s back as he swooped across the city. To feel like I was being held, being protected, that’s what I wanted and the thought of it happening in real life made my heart beat faster and faster, my eyelids fluttering as I considered their offer. But then I brought my butterfly heart back down to earth before I’d even lifted off, as pragmatism hit hard.

There was food to be put away and Danny hadn’t taken his medication...and how would it even work, anyway, going

flying with them? Would I plaster my body against one of theirs? And then what would *that* mean? Last night, I'd had sex with one of them; got naked with two of them. Were we going to just pretend that hadn't happened? I needed to work out what the hell I was getting myself into before I went anywhere.

“Ahh, I—”

Before I could stammer out an excuse, Daniel swept past me and cleared the table with a flourish, like a magician doing the reverse of the old trick of removing the tablecloth but leaving everything else on the table. He deftly closed up all of the containers that still had food in them and put them in the fridge, before rounding the table again to collect the empty containers and put them in the sink to be washed. As I stared at him in amazement he then popped his pills and swallowed them.

“Go.” His eyes held mine. “This is what you've always wanted.” He nodded to the gargoyles. “Now's your chance. Take it.”

“Mistress?”

Seneca was still standing there, his hand held out to me, invitation plain in his eyes, but as I looked back at him, I saw an element of vulnerability in his expression. I would never have expected to see that in one so powerful, and yet I couldn't deny that it was there. Because no matter how big and strong he was, he was still putting himself out there, ready to be rejected, and it was that which helped me to make the right decision. There was still that feeling of touching a sun-warmed pebble as I slid my hand into his, but no stone would have been able to grasp my hand tight and pull me after him in the way that he did. Out of the kitchen, away from the house. The other two gargoyles followed us out and when we reached the vast expanse of lawn, gleaming pale grey in the faint light of the stars, we all came to a stop to take in the vista before us.

“I always miss the stars when we go into hibernation,” Seneca said, still holding my hand as he stared up at the sky,

but when he looked back down at me, his eyes twinkled. “They’re almost as beautiful as you.”

“Uhh...” I made a strangled sound in the back of my throat, taking a step backwards, but Seneca’s grip just tightened.

“Our mistress is uncomfortable when we express our admiration for her,” Carrick said, with a smile, coming to stand before us. “Now that she knows we are real.”

“Enough banter.” Graven’s tone was firm, then his voice took on a note of yearning as he continued. “If we are to fly, we must do so now, rather than waste the whole night chattering.” His focus shifted back to me. “We also need your permission, Mistress.”

“To fly?” I frowned as my gaze roamed over their wings, already unfurling more than I had seen before. That seemed cruel, to make such creatures have to ask permission to do something that was an innate part of themselves.

“Not to simply fly. But, yes, if we are to fly *beyond* the estate’s borders.” Graven stared steadily at me, then nodded. “Gargoyles are pledged to protect the house we are bound to. We belong to the stones themselves that the house is built from, but...”

“If you give your permission, we can fly further, go beyond these lands, to somewhere...” Carrick smiled, “magical.”

Magical? Yeah, I wanted that a whole lot, and I squeezed Seneca’s hand with excitement.

“OK, so how do we—? Ohh!!”

Seneca picked me up with as little effort as one might a cat, holding me in his arms with ease. He smiled down at my shocked expression, some of the intensity in his expression lightening as, for just a moment, it felt like the whole world held its breath. The cool stillness of the night grew quieter. All of the faint night-time noises dropped away, and even the wind seemed to still as Seneca pulled me close until I was cradled against his chest. I put a hand out tentatively, feeling the hard

muscles there. He bent his head and his lips twitched, as though he was about to smile, when a ragged scream cut through the air.

“What was that?” I asked, twisting around in the direction of the sound.

“Nothing of note,” Graven said. “This is an old house, a strange one, and sometimes you will hear odd noises.”

“But we will protect you at all times,” Seneca said, his expression becoming serious once more. “With our very lives.”

“So gargoyles can die?” I asked, frowning. That thought set off a series of questions in my mind. “And how does this all work? Were you born this way?” I imagined tiny little baby gargoyles with grey skin and tiny wings. “Were you once cute baby gargoyles?”

“We will answer all of your questions and more when we get to our destination,” Graven replied, before turning to the others. “To the city. We fly to the pavilion on top of the Whiteley building.”

“Now?!” I squeaked, taking in a sharp breath.

It was a stupid question, but Seneca just smiled down at me.

“Hold on tight, Mistress.” My arm instantly went around his neck. His hair was soft, so soft, compared to the solid mass of his body.

“Because otherwise you might drop me?” I asked in a tremulous voice.

“I’ll never drop you,” he assured me, before beginning to move. “I just like the feel of your little hands on my body.”

Before I could respond, his legs bent, his wings flapped out to display their full span, and he leapt into the air.

I’m ashamed to say I let out a strangled scream. Going flying with three gargoyles had sounded so romantic. I’d imagined gliding through the air, but the reality was quite different. The force required to go from standing on the

ground to rising into the air was intense. It felt like gravity tugged at us, trying to pull us back. Wind whipped our faces as Seneca's every muscle strained while he sought to gain altitude. I was half afraid he wouldn't, and half afraid he would. Then the three gargoyles let out whoops of excitement as their wings raked through the air. Because they possessed a confidence that I didn't have.

They knew that they would climb higher and higher as they swept their wings through the air, that their bodies would do exactly as they wished. But by the time I looked down to see that the house had fallen away, becoming nothing more than a toy-shaped thing beneath us, I shared it too.

“We're flying?” I asked.

“We're flying,” Seneca said with a nod, before gliding forward.

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## Chapter 25

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*Carrick*

The little bastard had our mate in his arms.

I half wanted him to fall face forward like the fledgling he was, but the thought of Jade tumbling with him was too much for me to take. Although, perhaps if I arranged it so that I caught her as she fell...?

“You’ll have your chance,” Graven said as he drew closer, wings vibrating in the warm updraft. “Some would say you had yours last night.”

I grinned then with the remembered pleasure of it, although I wanted more. Having her once wasn’t enough. It’d taken some firm words from Graven to get me out of her bed after she’d fallen asleep, once her velvety cunt finally released me from its grip. I’d wanted to tease her awake, just to hear her sounds of pleasure again, but Graven, last night, and then tonight her friend Daniel, had both made clear what needed to be done. I couldn’t rut my mate into loving me, more was the pity, and so I would need to prove I was more than just a cock ready to rise for her.

“I’m making a little detour,” I said, as we flew over the city. It’d been some time since we’d been this far.



“What? Where?” Graven protested. “We agreed—”

“We agreed that Daniel said we must woo our mate.”

I didn't bother explaining further, swooping down low as I saw a long stretch of parkland. The roses there drew me closer, their sweet scent the closest thing I could find to hers. I heard Graven's far-off splutters, but not for long as I dipped closer to the earth. Humans were always making useless things. Expanses of parkland for no other reason than to look pretty. Lakes no one fished or swam in. Buildings with architectural features that were just for decoration. But I was about to take advantage of such uselessness.

I glided across a long line of rose bushes, raking my hands through to collect up bloom after bloom, before taking to the air again. So, we were to woo our mate? I would bring her jewels and gold if I thought that would turn her head, even dig up the raw materials from the ground itself with my own hands, but I had a feeling Jade had little interest in such things. She was heir to the Whiteley fortune, so she had no need for material possessions, but perhaps other things of beauty might charm her. My heart lightened as I saw the others reach the stone pavilion set on the roof of Whiteley House. Seneca set Jade on her feet, but her hands still clung to him, as if she couldn't trust the stone below her and Graven moved in to steady her. I pulled up sharply to drop the bulk of the roses down onto the floor of the pavilion, before coming in to land.

“A bloom for my mistress,” I said as I landed beside her, offering her one rose. “And if that one isn't satisfactory, I have many more that you can pick from.”

She closed her eyes as she breathed in the flower's scent, and her eyelids fluttered just like they had when she—

“Mmmm. It's lovely,” she said, opening her eyes and smiling in appreciation. “But, the whole ‘mistress’ thing...? I don't want or need you to call me that, to treat me like that.” I took a step closer, feeling hope flare hot within my chest. “I know what it's like to be at the beck and call of someone, and I...” She said, shooting me a sidelong look. “I don't want that for any of you.”

“Then accept this as a gift instead, Jade.” Her name rolled off the tongue, the sound of it sending shivers through me. I stooped down to the other roses I’d gathered, selecting only the most perfect before handing her a bouquet, leaving the others where they lay. “A symbol of my regard for you.”

At that, a pretty pink flush rose in her cheeks. As she took the roses from me, she smiled then murmured, “Thank you, Carrick.” I’d liked the sound of my name on her lips when she’d gasped it out last night, and I liked it when she said it again now, but I kept my thoughts to myself and just nodded in acknowledgement. Cradling the bouquet in the crook of her arm, Jade seemed to become more confident. “So. That was exhilarating,” she said as she walked forward, looking around. “But...where are—ohh!”

She’d walked to the edge of the pavilion, not knowing that it sat at the very top of a many-storeyed building, and that the lip at the edge gave way to a drop of several metres. I did. My arm shot out, wrapping itself around her waist, before hauling her back. Her heart was racing like a rabbit’s, fast and light, reminding me again of last night, and how it had done just that.

“Careful, Mistress...Jade,” I said, in a low growl. “If you fall, we’ll catch you, but I’d prefer that we didn’t have to.”

Eyes wide as she stared down at the street below, she slowly pulled free of my arm, before carefully stepping backwards and turning to look at the three of us.

“Where the hell are we?” she asked.

“On top of Whiteley House,” Graven replied, stepping in between her and the edge, his wings partially unfurled. “You may know that when Britain first set up the colony of South Australia, a small number of families were granted massive tracts of land by the Crown. The Whiteley family was one of them. They made a great deal of money from farming the fertile land, land that had been taken from the First Nations people who had inhabited it for so long. And some of the Whiteleys spent their money here, creating the grand buildings of Adelaide city.” He gestured towards the examples of classic

architecture that lined the quiet street below. “But some of these buildings...they were created for a special purpose. Hold out your hand.”

“Why?!” she asked, still clutching the bouquet against her, while keeping her other hand resolutely by her side.

“You needn’t be afraid,” I said, reaching out and taking her unencumbered hand, rubbing my thumb over the back of it.

“You wished for answers,” Graven continued. “Well, many of them are recorded within this building, and in other sites around the city centre. The original colonists brought rabbits and foxes and guns and smallpox with them when they travelled over the waves,” he said, “but they also brought something of great value.” He moved slowly towards her. “Knowledge. And that knowledge can only be revealed to those with the power to see.”

At first, rather than seeing her power, I felt it, a pulsing sensation, deep within me, that flared out with a burst of heat as light appeared in the palm of the hand I held. I wanted to keep her hand in mine, to feel that warmth drive away all of the night’s chill, but I couldn’t allow myself that luxury. Light illuminates, that was what the adepts had always told us, even as we lurked in the shadows. And as Graven took her hand from me and raised it high, I saw the truth in it. The verdigris bronze of the pavilion roof, the polished green and white marble of the floor all came to life.

“What...?”

She couldn’t even put her question into words as she stared up at the incised markings that came to life all over the domed ceiling. Stars were drawn there, with mathematical precision. Clouds were illustrated, too, but it was the falling gargoyles that caught our attention.

“You have questions and we have answers, if you are brave enough to hear them,” he told her.

I was so damn proud of Jade as I saw her back straighten, her chin lift.

“What do I do?”

“TOUCH THE MEDALLION in the centre of the floor,” Graven instructed. When she did, the power pulsed out, washing over us all, taking our breath away. The pulsating power engaged a mechanism which began to whirr, lowering us down into the upper levels of Whiteley House.

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## Chapter 26

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*Jade*

What in the Indiana Jones *was* this shit?

What I'd thought was the very solid floor of an unusual little stone gazebo, located on top of a beautiful old building I'd walked past many times, had become some kind of clockwork lift, sinking down through the roof of the building and bringing us here.

“What...?” When the platform came to a stop, I couldn't help but stare, so much so that I stumbled off the podium, misjudging the distance, or perhaps it was just the impact of the massive room, which had to be the length and breadth of the building, and its gleaming parquet floors and elaborate polished timber moulding. But where the usual historic building might have had oil paintings on the walls, complete with gilt frames, this had a massive mural that spanned the entire length of the room.

The roses fell from my fingers, left discarded on the floor as I moved closer. The mural was designed with the angular precision of the Art Deco movement, and was coloured in deep burnished tones. War-like gargoyles raged across the walls, wings flung wide, the sun behind their backs.

“The sun—?” I asked.

“This is *before* the Fall,” Graven informed me as we all moved closer. “We were a warlike race, a careless one. What European cultures recorded as demons was probably the best way to describe us.”

At that, I looked him and the others up and down.

“Well, you don’t seem especially demonic now.”

“My mother would’ve torn strips from me if I had dared try that kind of thing,” Carrick said, nodding towards the images of gargoyles swooping in and lifting screaming women in their arms, women who just happened to have their breasts bouncing free, as seemed to happen so often in paintings of historical events. “That is not how we were taught to pay court to our mate.”

“Mate...?” I said the word cautiously.

“That was the ‘curse’ of the Fall,” Graven said, stepping closer to the mural, looking just like a Sunday gallery goer peering at a painting by one of the Old Masters. “One of our forebears killed his fated mate before he even knew what she was to him. Not deliberately but...”

He nodded at the next panel, where a fierce looking woman hunched protectively over the fallen form of her daughter.

“In her fury, she turned the gargoyle who had killed her daughter to stone. She wept for her child for days and nights. Then, when she calmed down...”

In the next panel, the woman now stood, hand outstretched with great streams of what looked like lightning shooting from her fingertips.

“She made sure no gargoyle would ever hurt a woman again. They would turn to stone during the day, return to their true forms at night, and all of their considerable power would be tied to the witch that bound them.”

Graven walked much closer to this part of the frieze. A stylised picture of a woman had been painted on the wall, but

around her were three massive gargoyles. The skill of the artist was such that I could feel the intensity between them.

They were clustered around her, their wings partially unfurled to create a barrier that surrounded her and shut out the rest of the world. I knew somehow that this was both to keep her safe but also... I swallowed hard, my eyes beginning to sting... because they couldn't bear to have her more than a foot away from them. They wanted her, needed her, with passionate intensity, that's what I read in their dark gazes. It was the sort of passion I'd never experienced, only ever read about, and it had me staring at the painting with a pang of longing. And then, when I considered what and who my experience of romantic love had been, that set me frowning.

When I was growing up, I'd thought I'd experience the same sort of devoted love, because I thought that all adults did. I fully expected that it was my destiny for some guy to turn around and just... see me, to know that I was the only woman for him, and that it went without saying that he'd be the only man for me. The world would fall away and everyone else in it and we'd stare into each other's eyes and feel it: that soul spark, where one recognises the other, even though you've never even spoken a word, knowing that somehow every step you'd taken thus far was to bring you closer to them.

I was shocked but not surprised when I caught Trevor balls deep in Septicaemia. I mean, watching someone else endure his subpar sexual performance created a strange kind of sisterly bond, right before Staphylococcus made clear that she knew exactly what she was doing: taking my man. But what the hell was she taking?

He'd never looked at me like this, or if he did, it was only in the moments when no one else was looking. Trevor always seemed to be looking out for who was watching us and he'd flush bright red, his smile fading when he caught someone doing it. And then the comments would start.

*“Are you sure that's what you want to wear? Maybe you should try something more flattering. My mum thinks...”*

*“Do you have to talk that loud? I’m pretty sure he didn’t want to hear every thought you’ve ever had about...”*

My frown got deeper as I stared more intently at the painting, because I was experiencing something entirely ridiculous: I was jealous of a woman I’d never even met. Worse, jealous of someone who probably didn’t even exist. I wanted what she had, the kind of blind, deep, overwhelming love that drove a man—or a monster—to want to protect you, to cherish you at all times. But I forced myself to shove that feeling to one side, plastering a smile on my face before I turned to Graven.

“But how did you guys come to be bound to The Eyrie? A witch bound you to it?” I blinked. “Did Madeline?”

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “The days of finding our true mate and protecting her house are long gone. There are just as many powerful warlocks as there are witches. It turns out that the curse allows anyone with sufficient power to bind us to a place.”

“But...” My eyes strayed back to the painting, focussing now not on the woman, but her gargoyle lovers. “How do you find your fated mates?”

“How indeed?” Carrick stepped forward, all his usual levity scrubbed from his face. His arms crossed his impressive chest. “You’re assuming that the warlock community would even want that. Allowed free rein, we would be competitors for the hearts of powerful witches. In the old days, such women would seek us out, strive to find their gargoyle mates, but as time went by...”

“Men have become more and more dominant in the community,” Graven added, much more mildly. “That is as true of the witching world as the human one.”

“Because a woman with gargoyle mates would become even more powerful...” I barely breathed that out, stepping closer to the mural, my hand going out to touch it without thinking. My palm began to glow the closer I got to it and it was only when I realised what I was doing that I snatched my fingers back. “She would not be ruled by any man.” I glanced



back at the three of them. “Or gargoyle. But why are you telling me this?”

The three of them shifted restlessly, reminding me of birds sitting on an electrical wire. Their wings rustled, but didn’t unfurl and their focus flicked to each other before coming back to me. Graven was obviously seen as the spokesperson for the group, and he came closer now, hands outstretched. Hands that had taken mine and shown me just how powerful I might become.

“Before you used your power, you found some pebbles.”

I shoved my hand into my jeans pockets and produced three of them, forcing my fingers to open to let them roll around on my palm.

“I found lots up on the roof,” I said. “I collected a whole bunch of them in my shirt and that’s when...” I shook my head. “That’s when you came to life.”

“But only us—not the others,” he said, taking a step towards me, and then another, then reaching his hand out to cover mine. Immediately, I felt a pulse of the most incredible warmth wash all the way through me. “You touched the pebbles of all of the gargoyles upon the roof of The Eyrie but not all of them awakened.”

“Because I’m not powerful enough, obviously,” I said.

“Not at all, Mistress.” Seneca’s voice sounded somewhat strangled as he moved nearer as well. “I can feel your power like it’s my own, and it’s not a small thing.”

I flushed at his words, feeling strangely embarrassed.

“So, then... what is this?”

I turned back to the painting, and then felt each of them draw closer. They surrounded me, the warmth of their bodies dispelling the musty chill in the room. But, more than that simple physical sensation, I had the feeling of something else. Hope.

Hope was like a small flame, newly lit. It could be buffeted around by the winds of reality, almost blown out by the kind of

pessimism that had become almost second nature to me. Why dare to hope when the weight of reality seemed to crush the life out of you? Like each time I went to another rental property open inspection, hoping to finally have something I had thought was a basic right in my country: a roof over my head. Letting myself feel a small little flicker of hope each time a new message came in from a dating app. Hoping that I could move up and out of the job that was crushing my soul, that I might have enough. I'd hoped and hoped and hoped, and nothing had happened. But, now...

I jumped when a hand landed on my shoulder, then another, then a third on the nape of my neck. I could feel their claws through my shirt, not sharp, but there, dangerous, a reminder of their capacity to protect me. As I stared at the painting, I couldn't help but feel an echo of the love so plainly depicted there.

"This depicts a witch with her true mates," Graven said, ever the didactic one. "With the gargoyles that would always own her heart."

"Just as she owned theirs," Carrick said, his voice turned low and husky.

"She would know them by the feel of their stone in her hand," Graven continued, his voice taking on the sonorous quality of a bard. "It was a small grace granted by one of our past mothers. We may be tied to a house, but the tiny pebbles from our stone? They can be disseminated far and wide..."

"Allowing you to find your fated mates."

I barely breathed that out, turning around to stare up into their faces and seeing that same intensity as before. No... it was something more. Something...

"You think..." I could hardly get the words out, the surge of emotion making my throat close down. "You think..."

My science teachers had always said to ignore thoughts, feelings, hunches and to judge things on the evidence before you, but I'm fairly sure they never anticipated me applying that in a situation like this.

I leaned forward, into the small space between the four of us. I'd stared and stared at their strange grey skin, but only now saw the faint stipple on its surface, like the pitting on their pebbles. My hand closed tight around those small stones, clinging to them like they were talismans to save me from getting hurt. Because that damn flame of hope, it started to burn higher. I could almost see that defiant little yellow tongue of fire shifting, flickering inside my chest.

"You think I'm..." I lifted my fist that clutched their pebbles and carefully opened my hand again, seeing each of the stones nestled in my palm as though it was made to fit there.

"Our fated mate." Seneca said the words urgently, leaning down, his eyes searching mine. "We belong to you, Mistress, by right of your ownership of the house, but also..." He let out a little sigh.

"We could be owned by the King of England himself," Carrick said gruffly, the muscle in his jaw ticcing, "but it wouldn't make any difference. No witch or warlock has a claim on us that you don't supersede. You thought we were there only in your dream last night? Perhaps a nightmare?"

My hand slid down to rest on my pelvis, feeling that deep throb start up again.

"A dream," I corrected. "Definitely the best of dreams."

"And that is what you are for us," Graven said. "I have dreamed of you since the moment I first became stone. It's a strange place, somewhere between sleep and full consciousness, but the stillness lets your mind reach far, wide. In the first days of my life as a gargoyle, you were just a vague and hazy thing, always just outside my reach. I saw the curve of your cheek, the slender length of your fingers as I grasped for them, but never more than that. Until the day you walked into the house."

He wrapped my fingers back around the pebbles in my palm.

“No matter what you decide, you will always remain mistress of The Eyrie, as we will remain yours to command, but maybe, just maybe, you might also come to call us by that most treasured of titles.” He nodded slowly. “Mate.”

“Mate,” the others said, with the same solemnity; with the same flicker of hope.

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## Chapter 27

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*Jade*

“You can’t...” My voice became a squeak as I tried to force the words out. “No. You can’t mean...”

My hand went to my chest as I felt my heartbeat stutter, then lurch back into action into a rapid patter, sending the blood surging through my veins. At the same time, it was as though that had opened the floodgates for a deluge of emotion that had been stuck, and that’s when it started to hurt.

I’d been numb for so long.

I didn’t have the luxury of expressing my rage when I found out what Trevor was up to, because I had nowhere to go if I walked out the door. I couldn’t even grieve the end of the only real romantic relationship I’d had, because if I’d let that bring me to my knees, I would never have got up again. I’d been forced to move forward like a boxer, unable to let them get me against the ropes, hit after hit after hit, until everything seemed like a blow.

And that’s what this felt like now.

Hope might have seemed like a flickering flame, something at risk of going out, that had to be protected and

nurtured. But now it felt like a raging fire, threatening to engulf me. My cheeks were red hot when I lifted a hand to my face. I was no doubt blushing like some giddy teenager when one of the hot guys at school says he likes her. But I wasn't a kid anymore. I couldn't allow the flames that flared up in my chest to get any higher, so I tamped them down ruthlessly.

"It's not real," I said, with confidence I didn't feel. "It can't be real." I flung my arm wide, half-turning to point imperiously at the depiction of the woman and her mates that I'd been so transfixed by moments before. "None of this can be real." I wildly cast my eyes around the room, looking everywhere but at the three gargoyles so close to me as I searched for some sort of visual evidence to support what I was saying. "I'm not..." My throat tightened again. "You're not..."

"You've been hurt," Graven said, in that measured, reasonable tone of his, as if I wasn't completely losing my shit in real time.

"Don't talk about that," I growled, shaking my head.

"Someone unworthy of you broke your heart," Seneca said, with a scowl.

"How do you...?"

My voice failed me altogether. Did I wear my heartbreak on my skin like other people did their scars? Could people see it? The taint of rejection, of betrayal, but so much worse, because I was a participant in Trevor's abuse of me. Other women, stronger than me, would've made a clean break and walked away, gone to a women's shelter rather than stay in the same apartment as him. Other women would have had a whole phalanx of supportive friends to take care of them and been set up in someone's guest bedroom, helped to get back on their feet. Other women would've gone back home if they had no other options, licked their wounds and then, once they'd healed, got back out there. But I... I'd felt like I couldn't do that; I could still remember Mum's look of concern as Trevor and I had said our goodbyes when we moved to Adelaide.

*“Are you sure, love?” she’d asked me in a low voice, eyes flicking between me and Trevor. “You don’t have to do this. We’ll scrape together some money and help set you up in a place on your own.”*

I’d waved away her fears, assuring her I’d be fine; better than fine. That everything would be amazing and she’d see then that I was doing the right thing. But she’d been right and I’d been wrong. Not wanting to face that fact and head home with my tail between my legs was what had kept me there, couch-surfing in what had been my home. I shook my head. I couldn’t afford to get stuck in all of that shit. Instead, I turned my gaze on the three of them.

“How do you know about... Trevor?” I asked carefully.

“Trevor?” Seneca said. “This is the name of the man who has shown himself to be completely unworthy of you.” He looked at the others. “We will find this man and tear his flesh from his bones.”

“How do you know he was unworthy of me?” I asked in a flat voice, but the other two were looking at Seneca with deep scowls. “How do you know? Is it some kind of gargoyle Jedi mind trick or—”

“Your friend, Daniel, informed us of your former lover’s betrayal,” Carrick replied, lips thinning. “He wanted to know what our intentions were and that—”

“No.” I stumbled back, away from them, away from the mural, putting my back to it as I felt my heart begin to race, again. “No, that’s no-one’s business but mine.” I felt like I had to get out of the place. Moving was good; moving faster was better. My feet felt like they skimmed across the wooden floor as I backed away from them. And why the hell was I running? Because I didn’t want anyone else to know the ugly details of what had happened with Trevor.

I’d allowed myself one little breakdown about his betrayal, and I’d tried to make sure I didn’t share it with anyone. I was rostered on for the morning shift the day after I’d discovered Trevor hard at it in his office, so I went in early just to get it all out, something I hadn’t been able to do at the apartment. I’d

worked it all out. I made sure I hadn't done my makeup. I knew Jackie wouldn't be in until the afternoon and that no one normally came in an hour before their shift. And so, I'd gone to work, walked straight to the manager's office, closed the door and just... cried.

Sobbing for what I'd lost and, apparently, had never really had. It wasn't just your relationship that died when you found out you'd been lied to. Compounding that loss was the death of the assumptions you'd made, as you realised that the man you thought you were in a relationship with hadn't actually existed. And in his place was somebody utterly repellent. I cried and cried, as quietly as I could at first, but as the enormity of my loss had hit me, I'd let it all out, figuring no one was around. After a while, though, I found out someone else had decided to come in ahead of their shift. The door to the office had clicked open and Daniel had appeared in the doorway. He'd taken everything in, wide-eyed, his gaze flicking rapidly from me to the half-empty box of tissues on one side of me, then the rubbish bin where those sodden tissues had gone to die, and finally to how I was clutching a bottle of water like a life preserver. Without a word, he'd walked straight to me, knelt down and wrapped his arms around me.

Which had been exactly what I needed.

Just to have someone give the slightest shit about me. That's all I'd wanted. And I'd cried into his shoulder until, finally, I was past the wailing, incoherent stage. When I pulled away and pulled myself together, Danny forced me to call in sick, and then we went back to his place, with a stop on the way at the bottle shop to get enough bottles of cheap wine for us to get messy drunk, in the process of which I let every shitty detail out. The next day, despite killer hangovers, we fuelled up on Panadol, Berocca, and bacon and egg rolls, and, still groaning, turned up for work, because we couldn't afford to do anything else.

Like the vast majority of people were forced to do every day.



And that need to just get on with it was what was motivating me now, forcing me away from the gargoyles; away from what they were offering.

“Jade, please,” Graven said. His brow creased, and a look of real pain crossed his face. I didn’t like being the one that caused it, but I couldn’t pretend that I was OK with just going along with what they were saying. Things like this didn’t happen in the real world. He opened his mouth as if to try to form an effective argument, but whatever he’d planned to say was interrupted by a noise on the other side of the room as a door was opened.

“Ah, Graven,” Mellors said, stepping into the vast room. His heels clicked on the polished floor as he strode across the open space. “Very good. You’ve brought Jade to Whiteley House, as discussed.”

“ ‘As discussed’?” I said. “Is this yet another test?”

“I’m assuming Harry told you about the test of power,” Mellors replied, with a tight smile. “And, to answer your question: yes. But it’s one you’ve already passed. Entrance to Whiteley House is strictly warded. Only those with the power to do so can get inside, and so it is that only those who gain entry can take their place at the table of the First Families.” He stepped forward and then gestured to the closest door. “That place is one you’ve now earned. Come through, Jade, and find out the true nature of your inheritance.”

There’d been a time, when I was a kid, when all I’d wanted in the world was the chance to respond to just such a call to action. But when faced with the opportunity in real life, I found myself hesitating.

Because of them.

I could see each one of the gargoyles wanted to say something. Seneca’s brows twitched together, his mouth falling open as he sucked in a breath. Carrick watched me steadily, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes, as his tail twitched back and forth. But it was Graven whose response affected me the most, his expression becoming as severe as his name as I watched the light of hope fade from his eyes.

I didn't like seeing that, not one bit, but given that I was all at sea about pretty much everything, I wasn't sure I knew how to reignite it. Instead, I did what seemed manageable, easy, and turned to Mellors.

"The true nature of my inheritance?" I repeated back to him.

The lawyer nodded once, slowly, then smiled.

"Follow me, Jade. There's a group of people in the next room who would very much like to meet you."

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## Chapter 28

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*Graven*

“The true nature of your inheritance...”

Mellors’ words rolled around in my head as my mate walked behind him through the doorway. We followed close, because where she went, so did we. Carrick and Seneca bumped into each other in their haste, then pulled back to shoot daggers at each other with their eyes before I pushed forward. They could play their little dominance games some other time, because James Mellors was not being entirely honest.

Jade was indeed the recipient of a great legacy; but was he going to tell her how much of a burden it would be, as well as a gift? I stared at both of my stone brothers, making clear my expectations, and was gratified to see them stand taller, and lose their competitive air. They needed to be able to look past their own selfishness and remember that matters were still not settled.

We were about to walk into the dragon’s den.

“MELLORS!”

David Savoy, head of the powerful Savoy witch enclave, pushed himself away from where he'd been leaning against the mantelpiece above the empty fireplace, a glass of whisky in his hand. As he approached Jade, he smiled the smile that some of his sons and nephews had perfected as they had moved into politics. I couldn't help but step closer, instinctively wanting to put my body between them, something the warlock noted. A silvery eyebrow curved upwards in question and when he met my eyes, I felt it. A push of power: his attempt to put me in my place. It was not strong enough to bring me to heel, but I couldn't let him know that. If he knew how impervious The Eyrie gargoyles were to the First Families' powers, he'd make moves to correct that. But instead of engaging with me any further, his focus shifted to Jade, and his crocodile smile widened.

“So the little lady made it. Looks like I owe you that bottle of twenty-year-old single malt, Adam.”

Adam?

It'd been some time since Master Ashley had deigned to bring us here before the other heads of families, but I had thought I knew everyone. I'd seen their great-grandparents grow from children to adults, marry and then have their own children, the process going down through the generations, so I'd assumed I was familiar with every single member of the sprawling witch families that ruled the city. My head whipped around, nostrils flaring as I pulled in a breath, ready to take in this newcomer's scent, when I saw a face so familiar and yet so painful to look upon.

It couldn't be.

“Wulf...?” I muttered to myself.

I blinked and blinked again, thinking the man I saw before me was a figment of my imagination, born from guilt and a misplaced sense of duty, but there he remained.

I stepped forward, unable to stop myself as the much younger man turned away from the group he was talking to and smiled back at David.

This was not this...Adam.

It couldn't be. I knew that angular face, that heavy brow, that long hair, though my brain did register that his hair was now auburn and shone like hot coals, his skin that tanned beige that young human men seemed to like so much, not grey like mine. This stranger, this human man, this warlock, looked exactly like one of my stone brothers, Wulfstan.

A brother I hadn't been able to stand before for almost a hundred years. He noted my attention, his smile faltering for just a second, something the others in the room caught as well. I felt their power swell, making the air feel thick, electrical, like that just before a storm. The threat was clear, that each one of these white-haired men would act against me if I did not pull my wings in. I forced myself to go still and silent as my stone form, every muscle locking down tight. My purpose was to keep Jade safe first, everything else was irrelevant. But as this Adam stepped closer, I smelled the stink of magic on him. Spicy, strong enough to make my nose itch, so that I was forced to rub at it as he drew closer to my mate.

"I'll be around to collect the Scotch on the weekend," Adam told Savoy, but he wasn't looking at the other man, his focus was on Jade. "I'm Adam Stuart." When he offered her his hand, I so desperately wanted her not to take it, but she shook it anyway.

"Jade Barlow," she replied. Her voice was all politeness, but when they touched something happened. She jerked her hand back, frowning as she stared at her palm, then took a step backwards.

"Jade Whiteley now!" Savoy said, shouldering his way forward bluffly. In his enthusiasm, he didn't see her slight wince. The three of us did, however, and we moved closer in response. Savoy frowned slightly, before turning his back on us and offering her his arm. "Now, come, come. We weren't sure whether you'd be joining us tonight or not, so I'm afraid all we can offer in terms of refreshments is whisky and a cigar."

“I’ll take the whisky,” Jade said. Her voice was quietly confident and I felt a swell of pride at her composure.

“Oh! Yes, well—” Savoy spluttered. Every single head of family in the room was a man and she was the only woman. The women of the family had their own club further down the road, one I had rarely visited.

“I’ll get it,” Adam said smoothly. “Single or a double, Jade?”

“That depends.” She took in the long boardroom table, installed here when the building was finished at the beginning of the previous century. Her eyes ran over the thick carpet, the paintings of former heads of family on the walls, and I wondered if she saw what I saw: the commemoration of a long history of old white men making decisions for everyone else. “I think I need an explanation of what this is, of why I’m here, before I can make a decision like that.”

Seeing Wulf smile... no, Adam, was a strange thing, for the last time I had seen my stone brother, his mouth had been twisted in a scream of pain. I shook my head to dislodge that memory. I couldn’t help the guardian of Z Ward, but I could help Jade.

“Jade, this is a council where the heads of all the prominent witch families meet,” I started to explain. The heads of the old blood witch families was what I really wanted to say. In over two hundred years of colonisation and immigration, practitioners from all over the world had landed in Adelaide. They might have found many doors opened for them here, but not in Whiteley House.

“Gargoyle...” That word was delivered with all of the suppressed menace only one of the First Families could deliver. This was their place, their turf, and they were not unlike guard dogs in their protectiveness of it. Savoy’s expression quickly shifted into a more genial one as he looked down at Jade. “Your servant is correct. We are the families that made Adelaide.” He stepped back and then gestured to the other men hanging back in the room. “Ours was a planned

colony, one formed by design, not through disorder and chaos, and we shaped it very deliberately.”

Did she see the tightness in his smile, the unnatural glitter in his eyes?

“Shaped it to become a strong member of the Commonwealth, one where progressive ideas might flourish.” His lips quirked up at the corners, as though he expected his listeners to find what he was about to say as amusing as he did. “As long as they are the right ones, of course. Many of our kind were burned, hounded, driven out of Europe, but we created a place here where *we* possess the power to determine who comes and who stays. Where *we* rule.”

He moved, then, to the head of the table, and the other heads of families took their designated places around it. Gerald Draper looked up at Jade and nodded to the seat beside him, indicating where she was to sit.

But she didn't take it.

She strode over to the end of the table, taking out the furthest chair, and when she sat down, somehow it became the head. All eyes were on her as she clasped her hands together and rested her chin upon them. Those same eyes narrowed as we drew closer, coming to stand a step behind her. Only Mellors was smiling, now.

No, make that Mellors and the mysterious Adam Stuart.

Bringing two glasses of Scotch with him, Adam took the chair Draper had indicated, sitting down as though he was relaxing on a couch in his own home, with his legs sprawling out under the table. He seemed highly amused by everything that was taking place, swirling his whisky in one hand before sending the other glass skidding across the tabletop towards Jade. I moved forward, ready to intercept it, but she caught hold of it easily, nodding her thanks before taking a sip from it.

“This is Whiteley House, right?” she said, looking around the room afresh. “And I'm the heir to the Whiteley fortune?”

“Well, yes—” David replied, shooting the others a dark look as they began to mutter.

“Like the place literally has my last name on it, or the one I’m supposed to take.” She made a show of tapping her fingers on her chin. “So what does that make you? The court to my queen?”

“I’m sorry?” Savoy ground out, his tone making it clear he was anything but; that rather he would make sure she was sorry.

At that unspoken threat, the three of us moved closer to stand directly behind our mate. No one at the table would say anything about that, because each one of the families had some sort of paranormal familiar at their beck and call. They used them, used us to ensure the other families didn’t move against them, so we made clear we would not tolerate any attack on Jade. My hands came to rest on the back of her chair, where our mate sat, exactly like a queen surveying her recalcitrant courtiers.

“This is *Whiteley* House,” she said again, making the point with emphasis, and Adam’s grin just got wider. “Not First Families’ House or even Savoy House.”

“Now, Jade—” Mellors was forcing himself to intervene from the sidelines, but I caught the gleam in his eyes. If we were her knights, he was her advisor and he needed to be seen doing his job.

“Am I wrong?” She leaned forward then, skewering each one of them with her gaze. “If I am, I’d appreciate the situation being explained to me. Because from my perspective it seems like it is exactly as I’ve described.”

“It sounds like you’re after a history lesson, then,” Adam replied, nodding slowly, before continuing, with a twinkle in his eye, “my queen.”



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## Chapter 29

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*Jade*

Right now I was doing my best to exude Big Wallet Energy. It was a vibe Daniel and I had tried to put into words, representing the people who swanned into the supermarket as if it was the catwalk, stalking the aisles and pushing past other shoppers to get what they wanted, then wrinkling their nose when they got to the checkout and were required to wait their turn, or worse, had to put their own stuff through the self-checkout. It wasn't a natural state for me, but still, you couldn't manage a supermarket without being able to go toe to toe with difficult customers some of the time, so that's what I designated each one of the men around the table.

Then Adam Stuart spoke up.

"It sounds like you're after a history lesson then, my queen."

Damn him.

You know how some people are so damn pretty, it's like a punch to the gut the first time you see them? Well, that's what it was like when I saw him across a not so crowded room.

Except this wasn't the first time I'd seen this man.

It'd taken me a second to realise where I recognised him from and then I flushed bright red in response. Under me, in my dreams the first night I'd slept at The Eyrie, those full lips parted as he urged me onto greater and greater heights of pleasure. His hands digging into my hips, forcing me to work harder, fuck him faster, right before he took over and held me still, rutting up into me. His eyes felt like they burned into mine as he said the words.

*“Never fear. I’ve got everything you need.”*

That's exactly what a dream lover should say. But the man here in the room with me? He looked across the table at me with a sly smile, long, sensitive fingers toying with his glass of amber whisky, as if he too was remembering what he had done with them the other night while I slept. Because what woman wouldn't want an insatiable lover who knew every single thing you liked, even the secret ones, then called you his queen? I blinked and forced myself to focus back on the issue at hand.

What the fuck was this place?

“A history lesson would be useful,” I conceded. “A heads-up about the nature of this organisation would be even better.”

“Is that entirely necessary?” One of the stuffed shirts sitting at the table directed the question to David, not to me. “Let the girl meet some of our lads and choose which one she wants to take as husband, then she can toddle off to the ladies' club and leave us in peace.”

“My Jonathon is newly single,” another said to the rest of the men. “That fling with the foreign girl didn't pan out.”

“Never does,” said another, with a shake of his head. “We do try to tell them, but they need to understand that we have certain expectations of our ladies. And, really, some girl from the Continent...?! What was it her father was involved in?”

“Shipping or something,” the father said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Very lucrative, which would've been a nice addition to the family fortunes, but I've got batteries in my kitchen drawer with more power than her. I told him no

suitable children would come of that marriage, but would he listen—?”

“Um... excuse me?” I said, clearing my throat, because that helped the growing feeling of hysteria.

“Of course, he sees himself as a modern man, says that his worth should come from what he achieves in the human world, not from his powers,” the father continued, talking right over the top of me. No, actually that would have indicated he was listening to me at all, which wasn’t true. He continued lambasting his son to the others, rolling his eyes as he said, “I asked him if that meant he was relinquishing his trust fund, which of course got him spluttering.” All of them had a little snigger then. “It’s all very well to put about that you’re a self-made man, but most of the younger generation have no idea what that actually entails.”

Oh my god, did I know what that was like. People seemed to do two things wrong in a supermarket. Some paid way too much attention to you, trying to hold you personally responsible for every single issue they were having, within the shop and beyond, asking too many personal questions or not even bothering to look for what they needed, thinking somehow you were there to be their personal shopper.

Then there were the others.

They treated you like you were invisible, just a piece of machinery doing the work they would never lower themselves to complete, even though they literally wouldn’t have any food to eat or toilet paper to wipe their own arses without us selling it to them. That’s what these men were doing right now, speaking like I wasn’t even there.

Except for one.

I cast an angry glare right around the table. When I reached Adam, his smile grew sharper. As I stared at him, he winked conspiratorially.

Which somehow was enough to get me moving. I jumped to my feet, slapping both my hands down on the table, loudly

enough to break the flow of conversation, making the old men turn from their gossiping to look at me in irritation.

“I don’t believe I asked for a date with dear Jonathon,” I said, through gritted teeth, my expression quickly turning to a grimace when one of the old codgers sucked in a breath to speak. “Nor with any of your sons, nephews, or brothers. Not even with your cousins three times removed. On top of which, I have *no* intention...” I swallowed hard to shift the lump forming in my throat, “of marrying anyone any time soon. James.” I turned to Mellors. “What are my legal obligations to this First Families club?”

“Now, hold on a minute...” David said, standing up at the other end of the table, and puffing his chest out, looking very much like the giant pigeon sculpture in Rundle Mall.

“No. *You* hold on.” I stared directly at him, and then at those nearest to him. “If your families were the ones who founded South Australia, then I know my history well enough to know that you’re all direct descendants of people who took the land from the indigenous people who lived here first. And you’re all beneficiaries of that bloody and disgusting dispossession.”

“You can’t—”

David was turning an unpleasant shade of purple.

“Your forebears would’ve been fleeing religious persecution in the UK,” I continued, “seeking to take advantage of the creation of a new colony in Australia, and grabbing as much land as they could, by whatever means possible. And because that advantage has put you all in a position of privilege, you somehow think you’ve got the right to dictate to others.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” one of the other men said, eyes narrowing.

“No, I don’t, and I’d politely asked for that information before this old prick piped up with his 19th century ideas that there’s ‘no point educating the girls, because they just get married’.” My nails dug into the table’s polished wood surface

and I saw several men wince at that, but I wasn't going to give them and their petty concerns any more attention. They didn't deserve it. I turned to James again, "So, let me ask again: what obligations do I have to the First Families?"

"Well, the Wildfyre Club has been meeting here since Whiteley House was built," he informed me.

"And there's a lease or an agreement in place that covers that?" I asked.

"We don't need such things," Savoy answered. "A man's word is his bond."

"Well, here are my words." I straightened up. "Whatever this is..." and I waved my hand around in a circle, indicating them all, before slapping it down again for emphasis, "it's not happening anymore in any building that belongs to me. In other words, pick up your shit and get out."

"What?" "No!" "You can't do that!"

"Can I?" I asked Mellors.

"The building does belong to you," he said, stroking his chin. "There might be some argument about a habitual arrangement becoming a kind of unwritten contract of sorts."

"That's exactly right," one of the men said, leaping to his feet. "We've always met here. This is our club—"

"Held in my building."

Each one of these old misogynists saw me *now*, didn't they? As that thought crossed my mind, I had a sudden epiphany.

Part of me had believed that it had been my fault all of these bad things kept happening, because I could've just stood up to Trevor, pushed back more, forced Septicaemia out or, better, done what Daniel had suggested and gone after Trevor's assets. We might not have been married, but in Australia, a *de facto* relationship could entitle the other partner to 50% of all assets. I'd thought of myself as weak because I just couldn't find the energy to do any of that, but the reality was that, like a lot of people, I'd been hemmed in, beaten

down and pushed into a corner by a string of shitty events I had little to no control over.

But those days were done and dusted.

Now, I had money, power, and the ability to do something about people who tried to push me around. And I was going to relish sending this old boys' club packing. With a growing sense of confidence, I stood there, my head held high and my spine straight and strong, waiting to see whether a coherent challenge would emerge from amongst the spluttering. But as I cast a glance around, I realised that they had stopped complaining and were simply staring at me in stunned amazement, and I realised why when my eyes were drawn down to my hands, resting on the table in front of me. My palms had lit up bright white and were glowing like the moon itself. That was what had the men around the table staring, one of them most of all.

Adam had seemed eternally amused by, well, everything, but for the first time tonight that smile faltered and he stared at me with the kind of rapt fascination men usually saved for women who did not look at all like me. And that added to the feeling of power within me. However good that made me feel, I still needed to deal with the problem of these cantankerous old men. I focussed back on the table, sucking in a breath and feeling something move inside me, like the tide going out. It was as though hidden forces shoved all of that energy, back, back, back, only for it to come rushing back in again in the form of a wave.

“Get out...” I said, barely even whispering the words, because I didn't need to shout them. I felt the gargoyles cluster closer, a faint hum setting up in my ears, right before the sound of many chairs being shoved backwards filled the room. When I looked up, each of the heads of the families was moving slowly, robotically, as they filed out of the room.

Except for one.

“You...” It felt like my voice echoed through the room, filling every corner; but the only person I needed to hear it was

Adam. "You can stay. You promised me a history lesson and you're gonna give it to me."

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# Chapter 30

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*Seneca*

I hadn't been around him for long, but already I hated this smug bastard, Adam. His face was that of a stone brother who I did my best to forget most days for I feared I would go mad from the memories, but it was more than that. Those knowing eyes, those smug smiles hinted at a hidden knowledge of my mate that the man couldn't possibly possess, so when she told the heads of the families to leave, I was happy that he would no longer be near her. But then my mate made her decree.

“You promised me a history lesson and you're gonna give it to me.”

Not him! I wanted to shout. Not him, not any of them. My mother had warned me of how it would be when I found my fated mate, and yet still I was unprepared for this feeling of possessiveness that overwhelmed me. I struggled to fill my lungs properly: my chest heaving with the effort of it, the breaths coming in harder and faster the longer this man remained in Jade's presence. I had a desperate urge to step between them so as to block her sight of the warlock and draw her eyes back to me, but I forced myself to keep my position by her side, because she was my queen and this was what she



wanted. The only indication of my inner turmoil was the way my tail twitched, then commenced swishing back and forth with such violence that Carrick stared at me with a frown. But I refused to be deterred: he wasn't my focus, she was.

"You heard my mistress," I growled at this Adam. "Speak."

"They won't like that," he noted to Mellors and Jade, shooting me a wary look.

"Who won't like what?" she asked.

"Letting the gargoyles act independently. The old pricks of the Wildfyre club, they come from the old days where people kept their pets on a short leash."

"Pets?" Jade turned to me and my whole chest felt like it was filled with a golden light. "They consider the gargoyles to be pets?"

"Gargoyles, demons, lesser fae... pretty much anything they've been able to bring under their command." Adam's mouth twisted into a rueful smile. "That probably seems rather barbaric."

"It's disgusting, is what it is," she shot back at him. "These are sentient people... or creatures?" She turned back to me. "What do you prefer to be called?"

I took her hand then, feeling that delicious warmth that came from touching her, and forced back a long shudder of pleasure before smiling down at Jade.

"Yours. I prefer to be called yours."

Carrick choked back a rude sound and Jade's eyes widened, revealing all of their many-hued beauty, before she blushed prettily. And Adam? He watched everything with a keen eye, nodding slowly to himself until Jade forced herself to turn back around.

She didn't let go of my hand though.

"So what's their deal then?" she asked, nodding to the portraits lined up along the wall, depictions of men I knew,

men I had served. “This is an old boys’ club for wizards or —?”

“You know what it is, Jade.” I didn’t like the familiar look Adam was giving our mate, not one bit, but I didn’t dare draw notice to my reaction, not even as he moved closer to her. “I can give you dates and names, events and places...but, you know.” His lips quirked up at the corners as his eyes bore into Jade’s. “You’re a woman in a man’s world. Feminism and modern social shifts have displaced some power away from old white men, but not much; not when you know exactly how much is being held back.”

“And who are you?” Graven asked. “Where do you fit in this world of old men?”

“I’m the descendant of one of Kenneth Whiteley’s bastard children,” Adam replied, with a smile. “I wasn’t born into this world, but I found myself in it when my gifts manifested. There were no witches or warlocks in our family, not for generations, until me.” His eyes were drawn back to Jade, as mine were. “I stumbled into this world, just like you did.”

“So we’re related?” Jade asked. As she took a step backwards, my hands snapped out to stop her from colliding with me.

I’d never touched a woman before. The feel of her, warm and soft in my hands? It hit me right in the gut.

Actually, a little lower.

My thumbs brushed against the soft cotton of her t-shirt and all I could do was wonder how much softer her skin was under it. I wanted to grip her tighter and pull her back against me. My cock was beginning to twitch against my thigh in response to that idea, when Carrick shot me a meaningful look. This one I took notice of. I let her go, patting her shoulder before taking a polite step backwards.

I patted her?

My cheeks felt icy cold as I realised I’d touched her the way humans do a cat.

“Every single one of us is related,” Adam continued, nodding to the portraits on the wall. “Every single one of these ‘First Families’ is hopelessly interbred with the other. They wanted to maintain the land holdings they were given when the colony began, then ensure they had powerful children to pass that onto, and so they created their exclusive little club.” He gestured to the room. “One where their stranglehold on the witching world as well as on the human world within the state could be maintained.”

“That’s why the guy with the cat’s bum face didn’t want me being introduced to them,” Jade said. “He thought there was little point because I’d just be getting married...” Her brow creased and smoothed. “They think I’m a...”

“Broodmare.” Adam at least had the grace to look discomfited by this. “And one they need rather desperately.”

I dragged my focus away from my mate to look across at my stone brothers. Because this...? Adam was saying something we’d known for a long time, but had heard none of them speak of.

“From what I can tell, witch families used the disruption caused by the European powers’ world-wide colonisation to spread far and wide across the globe. It’s well-documented that Christian religious dissidents sought the New World as a place where they could worship unmolested.” Adam smiled. “The witch families did the same, very successfully—until that whole thing in Salem in the US. But while the British colonies here adopted the same witchcraft laws as the mother country, no one’s ever been recorded as being convicted as a witch.”

He moved closer to Jade, holding her gaze, not looking away for a second.

“Australia is a country of unbelievers. In the latest census, atheists outnumber any single Christian sect and it is believed it will become the dominant mindset very soon. We are brought up to believe in what we can feel, see and hear, not the unseen and unknowable. And that has made it a perfect place for the first Families to flourish. They can use their powers to give them an advantage at every turn—”

“And no one will believe it to be anything other than good luck.” Jade nodded slowly. “So it’s basically the ultimate old boys’ club. Why do they need women?” She scanned the walls, no doubt looking for the female members of her family recorded there, but I knew she wouldn’t find them, not in this place.

“Because women are the most powerful. You are the wielder of the most primal magic: that of creating life where there was none.”

Adam lifted his hand, palm up, and moved it towards her, slowly, so she could pull away at any point. The only reaction from any of us was simply to stare. Because in his palm, there was a red glow.

I took a sudden breath that sounded like a hiss of pain. I didn’t mean to betray myself, but I couldn’t help it. Most witches had an elemental affinity, which showed itself in the colour of the light that glowed in their hands when they came into their power. But, fire? There weren’t many of them gifted with this power, probably because witch families always shied away from bonding with fire users. Fire wielders were tremendously powerful, but also had the capacity to be so destructive. Water might drown or flood, but it also fed the roots of plants, and was the giver of life. Earth might smother in an earthquake, but it also was the means to grow crops. Air filled our lungs. But fire...? It destroyed. I knew that all too well. And as soon as I saw that red glow, I remembered the consequences of that power in the hands of one not fit to wield it.

I was thrown back into the terrible memories of what it was like to be trapped inside the walls of Z Ward: the screams and wails of the inmates echoing in your ears, reddish smoke thick in the air, so that every breath caught in your lungs. Flesh burning and bubbling. Fire raging in old, metal drums, heating up iron implements of torture. And, reddest of all, his eyes. I blinked, coming back to the room to find that I was staring at the portrait wall. I found *his* portrait without thinking. But the brushstrokes revealed a mild-mannered man, nothing like the Luther Whiteley I’d known. My attention was drawn back to

Jade as she put her hand in Adam's and he turned her palm upwards, before sliding his fingers across it.

At that, I wanted to be him more than anything else in the world. I wanted to be the one that touched her, that introduced her to her power. Instead, it was his touch that caused the light in her palms to glow brighter. That meant that there was a compatibility there. That was what Vernon Britton had been referring to when he'd dismissed her plea to be introduced to the witching world. For, if Jade had been born at The Eyrie, if she'd known she was a witch her entire life, then the minute she was eighteen she'd have been pushed to touch hands with all of the eligible bachelors from the other First Families and see whose power flared in response to hers.

"What does this mean?" Jade asked in barely more than a whisper, all of her bravado gone as she stared from their joined hands into the man's eyes.

*Don't tell her*, I silently begged, sure that when she found out, it would be the beginning of the end for the hopes of me and my stone brothers, just as it had been for all other gargoyles.

In the time that I'd been born into, my family was one of several living in a tiny village, far away from the castle belonging to the lord that ruled our land. People grubbed in the dirt, making their living from subsistence farming. Tools were mostly made from timber, with the few forged metals so prized that they were treated like they were made of gold. I had now lived for almost a thousand years, and I was considered to be young for my kind. And in all that time, apart from the story in the mural, I had never heard of any witch choosing to accept the suit of her gargoyle mates. And so, although we had waited all this time to find Jade, if history repeated itself, she'd spend her life wrapped up in the arms of the likes of Adam, not with us.

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# Chapter 31

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*Jade*

“What does this mean?” I asked, referring to more than the glow in my hand.

I’d liked guys before; thought I’d known attraction in how I felt about Trevor, how I’d felt butterflies in my stomach when he looked at me. I’d even known the wave of white-hot fear if a popular boy caught me looking at him at school. But none of it had been like this. In my dreams, a man’s hands, maybe something like Adam’s, had scalded everywhere they touched, but that didn’t explain why I was feeling the same as he touched me. In dreams, anything could happen, but reality was usually so very different. I looked down at the matching lights in our hands and then reached out and touched his.

Fuck...

I could barely contain myself. Heat, tremendous heat, rushed through me. It was the feeling of sinking down in front of a heater on a cold winter’s day or the first sip of piping hot coffee as you were still waking up. It warmed me all the way down to my core. And as it did, I felt something strange. I was still a little... sore, after the other night’s hijinks with Carrick and Graven, but it felt like something secret deep inside me

flared to life. My fingers pressed down harder on the pulsing red light on his palm, seeking more.

“Bloody hell...” he groaned. His blue eyes sought mine, something soft and unguarded there for a moment, and he smiled hastily, before moving to grip my arms softly around the wrists. As he pulled away, I thought I caught regret in his expression. He shook his head. “These...” He held up his hands, displaying the glowing patches of red light clearly. “These are manifestations of our power. Mine’s red because my elemental affinity is fire.”

“So what’s mine?” I asked, glad for the change of topic. The glow in my palm seemed to brighten as I stared down at it. “Like, air or light or something?”

“That’s just it, yours has no colour,” he said.

“Oh.”

My fingers closed up into fists, but Graven stepped forward.

“That in no way means you are without power, Mistress,” he told me. “It means you are capable of performing all magic.”

“What?”

I’d had plenty of teachers tell me I had great potential, if I would just... But no-one had ever said anything like this.

“You’re not limited to one elemental affinity,” Adam agreed. “It’s very rare. So rare that I don’t doubt the heads of the First Families have all gone straight home to call together the single men in their family and let them know they’ll be required to present themselves at your gate in the morning.”

“Oh my god, no...” I said, recoiling at the thought.

I wasn’t imagining these prospective suitors as being young, and I didn’t think that any of them would be hot, either. Somehow my mental picture was that they would all be versions of their stuffed shirt fathers, with less wrinkles but more pompous attitudes. I would have to draw Daniel into the fray, to stand on the parapet of The Eyrie, trying to work out

which ones were gay and which ones were straight, all while pitching stale bagels at their heads.

“No?”

I was standing in a massive boardroom with several freaking gargoyles at my back who said I was their mate, a powerful warlock in front of me who'd caused a reaction that I hadn't expected, and a lawyer who seemed to be the epitome of a supportive family retainer. Yet it was the space between me and Adam that felt curiously intimate. As I watched, one arching eyebrow was raised, and then the twinkle started to shine in his eyes, heralding the return of that devilish smile. I'd seen that smile before, knew what it would be like when it fractured, when he became open-mouthed, panting as he... I forced my thoughts and my body away from him.

“Definitely not.” I turned to Mellors, who'd been patiently observing from the sidelines. “There's no clause in the will about the heir having to be married by a certain age.”

“None at all,” he replied smoothly. “If you do not have children, then the estate may pass to another distant relative upon your death, but that's the only clause relevant to that matter.”

“Perhaps it would fall to you, then, cousin?” I said, forcing myself to affect a neutral tone so as not to make clear the effect Adam had had on me.

“Cousin, is it?” His teeth gleamed as he grinned. “Yeah, I like that. So, in the spirit of bonding with new-found family, would you be interested in getting to know some of the...” he paused to look around the room, running his eye over those portraits again, “...shall we say, less stuffy elements of the witching world? There's a lot more than these four walls, not that the First Families would ever acknowledge it. There's a night market run by some of the fae that came over with the First Fleet, a biker bar out in the northern suburbs run by werewolves, or a high-end strip club that some lesser demons have set up.”

My little heart fluttered at every scenario he suggested, as his words turned what was considered to be the biggest



country town in Australia into something else, something magical. I wanted to see, feel, touch all of it, my life being completely devoid of magic until now, but before I could answer, Carrick had something to say.

“*We* had intended to introduce our mistress to the paranormal world tonight,” he replied in an oh-so-polite voice. The same hands that had stroked me, coaxed me, delved into me until I was screaming with pleasure, came to rest on my shoulders. Strong thumbs dug into the muscles, forcing them to relax. “But we were required to present ourselves here, first. Now, are there any further final conditions of the will?”

The lawyer shook his head.

“Everything Master Ashley outlined in the will has been fulfilled,” Mellors replied. “The Eyrie and the Whiteley fortune are yours, in their entirety. I will be in contact with you, Jade, regarding whether or not you wish to change your last name, but the inheritance is not contingent on that. If there is nothing further, may I congratulate you once more, Jade? And wish you all a good evening.” He headed towards the far end of the room, making for the door through which the heads of the families had gone. Before he left, he stopped for a moment then pivoted to open a tall window that faced out onto the street. The cool night air came in to circulate around the room and dissipate the still-prevalent cigar smoke. As he turned to exit the room, he inclined his head in our direction, and I was surprised to see a twinkle in his eye.

“Enjoy your night, then,” Adam said, apparently willing to depart the field, as he nodded to the gargoyles. Before he left, though, he plucked a business card from his pocket and handed it to me. It was a deep scarlet, not the usual white, but that wasn’t all that was unusual about it. The moment I touched it, the card ignited, drawing a little gasp from me and a growl from the gargoyles. “Just a little magic,” he said, with a wink. “If you ever want to go out during the daytime...” Adam stared the gargoyles down before continuing, “just whisper my name on the wind and I’ll find you.”

Before anyone could respond, he waved his hand and then disappeared in a cloud of smoke, like an old school magician.

And, to think, that wasn't even the strangest thing that had happened to me this week.

I shook my head, still trying to process everything I'd seen and heard, but that was just one smart part of my brain that wanted to pick it all apart, decipher how this brand new world worked. But the other part of me? It just wanted to experience everything. I turned around, feeling somewhat shy when I faced the gargoyles, but not for long. The intensity in their eyes made clear they were up for anything I could think of.

“Can you teach me more about magic?” I asked.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” Carrick said, with a smile.

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## Chapter 32

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*Carrick*

“Can you teach me more about magic?” Jade asked.

I wanted that. If I'd had any choice in the matter I would never, ever have brought her here. The whole place stunk of magic, but it was a sour, musty kind of thing and the heavy incense scent of it filled my lungs, making me want to cough it out. Not like her. She was sweet, so damn sweet, that my mouth watered. Her eyes were shining with excitement as she stood on the precipice of a whole new world. And she was asking if I'd be her guide into it? Gods, she had no idea how much I wanted that. But I couldn't spill my heart out to her, vomiting my need and my desire onto the floor, so I forced myself to smile, even as my heart ached, and said the only thing I could.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure.”

“We'd best go to the night market,” Graven said, moving into my field of vision, never one to let others make spontaneous decisions about these kinds of things, but his focus shifted quickly to Jade. “We can introduce you to the world you belong to.”

“Get pastries made from ambrosia,” Seneca said with a groan. “Or drink moonbeam wine.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Take you aerial dancing in the thermal drafts,” I said with a smile, moving to clasp one of her hands in mine, as I set the other at her waist. “The sylphs like to play amongst them, and some of the winged fae are quite the acrobats.”

“Dancing in the air?” she said, looking at me with some trepidation. “I can’t even dance properly on a dancefloor.”

“I can.”

She didn’t understand that whatever limitations she had faced before, they were gone now. I drew her forward so her toes rested on top of mine, then moved, swirling her around the room. Her little gasps were music to my ears because she smiled as she was taken by surprise, and her cheeks went bright pink. Her eyes shone even brighter and she tossed her head back, sending that beautiful mane of hair tumbling back over her shoulders as I changed gears. I flapped my wings, resulting in her little hands squeezing me tight at my hand, my waist. She clung to me like I was a life raft in a heaving sea, her body pressed tight against mine, my cock helpless to do anything other than rise. I wanted a million more moments just like this.

“We should meet with Mother Agnes.”

Bloody Graven. No sooner had I got us a few inches into the air, than he brought us plummeting back down to earth. The male was sensible, grounded, and the gods knew every flock needed that at times, but... the sad reality was that he hadn’t always been like this. I remembered a time when he was just as ready with a laugh and a smile, when he would have been tapping me on the shoulder to cut in and waltz our girl right out the open window and into the air above the street. But then... I pushed that thought away. That was the problem with coming to Whiteley House, the past pressed down hard here, as dense and heavy as the stone that had been used to construct the place. I wanted to leave it all behind, to build something much better.

“Mother Agnes?” Jade asked me, and reluctantly I lowered us back down.

“A wise woman,” I informed her as our feet hit the carpet. “What she doesn’t know about magic isn’t worth knowing.”

“A valuable contact in understanding your power,” Graven informed her.

“Oh...” She flushed as I came to a halt. “Well, yes, I think she’s someone we need to talk to.”

*Couldn’t we have just this one night?* That was what I wanted to ask. Couldn’t we just rejoice in the fact that the one woman in the world for us had walked in the door of the house we were bound to? That she hadn’t run screaming when we revealed ourselves to her. Instead, she... I sucked in a breath, then smiled. The night was still young. We could see Old Woman Agnes, get her counsel early on and then... I used the hand that was still clasped in mine to spin her around and then dip her backwards in the hollow of my arm. There was nothing to say we couldn’t have a little pleasure as well.

“Your wish is my command,” I said, hoisting her up into my arms, then starting off a dead run towards the long window at the end of the room. Jade buried her face in my chest as her hands went around my neck, doing her damndest to lodge her nails into my skin as I leapt free of the building and all it represented, flapping my wings out and beating them forcefully.

“I didn’t mean right this very second!” she yelled, but when I gained altitude, coasting over the top of the skyscrapers, she raised her head to peer past my shoulder.

“When dealing with witch familiars, you have to be very clear about what you want and don’t want,” I told her, with a rakish smile. “We follow the letter of your commands, not the intent.” My smile faded the longer I stared at her. “Anything you ask of us we will do, the moment you request it.”

“Because you have to?” I didn’t like seeing the small crease that formed between her brows. I didn’t like that searching look. “That’s how it works, right?”

“If you have the power to wield, you could force us to do many things,” I said, each word feeling sharp and spiky, cutting me as I forced them out. “But that’s not why we comply.” I dipped lower, to feel her hold onto me tighter, to hear the rapid beat of her heart pick up. “And you know why.”

Whoever this fucking Trevor was, he’d hurt our mate so deeply that she questioned anyone who’d do anything for her, but I would make it clear. We’d do anything and everything she wanted, over and over, proving ourselves worthy of her trust until the scars on her heart had healed over so that they were little more than faint silvery marks.

Starting now.

The night market had been built in the early days of the colony. Fae had come over on the First Fleet, along with the convicts and soldiers. An increasingly industrialised Britain had become too crowded, its skies fouled by smog from the mills and factories which ate up much of the green space the fae preferred. Many of them had sought something better by attempting the journey to Australia. Those that survived the voyage were forced to create uneasy alliances with the spirits that already populated the land, fantastical heroes and giant animals venerated by the Aboriginal people that lived here first. And so, they’d created spaces like these, that existed in the thin places between the human realm and the paranormal one. I landed at the gates of the markets, something no human would ever find by accident despite the bright lights and rich smells of good food.

“A slave does what is required of him because his master thinks him nothing more than a mindless thing and he has the power to coerce a slave into submission,” I told her as the sounds of the markets began to filter in. “A servant might do what was asked of him in return for money, a roof over his head or food.” I stepped closer to her than as the others landed behind me. “I am neither of those things. I serve you, Mistress, because the need to do so beats in my chest as hard and as true as my own heart. Now...” I offered her my arm and she took it, though not without a searching look. “If knowledge is what you seek, then that’s what you shall have.”

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## Chapter 33

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*Jade*

Holy Hogwarts, baby, I was in heaven. Just like millions of other kids, for a long time part of me watched the mailbox each time the mail was delivered, waiting for my letter to say I was accepted into the wizarding school. I knew that it wasn't real, but still... Knowing and feeling weren't the same things. As I held tight to Carrick's muscled forearm, I wasn't sure how I felt.

Amazed, for one. I stared at stalls filled with goods I neither knew nor understood, smelling the aromas of food I'd never tasted before, yet my mouth watered to. I stepped closer, half-expecting it all to be magicked away, keeping a tight hold of Carrick as I did so. I stared at everything around me, trying to take it all in, but when I looked at him to share my delight, I saw that he was staring at me. And that was the most magical thing of all. Those all black eyes seemed to take every part of me in, really seeing me, and that had me sliding my hand down to his in order to pull him forward with me.

"Something for the pretty lady?" a small, wizened man said, stumping forward, his hands resting on a stout stick. He used it to gesture to a wall of cages, but they weren't birds that

fluttered within, or at least not ones I'd seen before. Graceful creatures, with feathers of mint green, lilac or powder blue, shifted inside, staring at me with limpid eyes that betrayed no fear. "They fetch, carry, will have whatever you want brought halfway across the city before you can blink."

"Magical Fed-Ex?" I asked Carrick and he just smiled, drawing me along.

The next stall was filled with toys, but while I could see the cogs and gears of the various automata, they moved of their own volition. Birds preened their wings, then flapped them open to display them. A clockwork dog chased a clockwork cat, but then they turned on a dime and swapped roles, the cat chasing the dog back under the table.

"Best automata in the southern hemisphere," the arch-looking woman standing behind the stall informed us, before Seneca bounced into view.

"This way, m— Jade," he said hastily. He grabbed my hand and tugged me after him, over to a stall covered with glittering creations.

They looked like the blown glass animals my nan used to collect, that were created with a blow torch and stringers of glass. Here, though, a bubbling pot of molten sugar was the medium through which the sugar blower created her confections. She smiled when she saw she had our attention, and other patrons of the market clustered forward, as much to watch the show as to buy. She was slender, waving her long fingers through the air with the hollow-boned look of a bird as she worked her magic.

Sugar surged out of the pot in thin strands and the straw-coloured sugar became something between a liquid and a solid. Then it was stretched and twisted, spun and twirled until it was obvious what she was creating. Big, fan-like wings flapped slowly, as the antennae of the butterfly unfurled slowly, as did its body. A collective gasp went up around the crowd as it took flight, faltering at first. Hands reached out, though whether they hoped to snatch it from the air or to keep



it up, I couldn't tell. But as the flaps of its wings grew more coordinated, the little butterfly flew higher and higher.

"For the Whiteley heir," the sugar blower said with a slow nod, directing the butterfly towards us with a flick of her head. Carrick held his hand out so that it came to rest on his palm and as I looked at it closely, I realised just how skilled the woman was. You saw its jewel-like eyes, the segments of its body, the remnants of when such a creature was a caterpillar, not a butterfly, as well as the mottled patterns on the wings, indicating its markings.

"Open your mouth," Carrick said, his eyes resting for far too long on my lips.

"Oh, I couldn't." I held up a hand, unable to imagine destroying something so beautiful, but the woman shook her head, laughing.

"It'll become a lump of sugar in a minute," she said. "Tastes better when the magic is still pulsing through it."

Eating a sugar butterfly hadn't exactly been on my bucket list, but it seemed that it was a new addition. I opened my mouth and the butterfly flew over. If I was feeling a little worried about eating a sugar bug, I needn't have worried. It turned into liquid sugar the minute it touched my tongue, warm and sweet, but with a strange kind of sparkly sensation that was almost like eating sherbet.

"Oh my god..." I said, holding a hand over my mouth, because with the sugar rush came something else. A curious kind of lightness that seemed to fill me up, up, up, making me blink in wonder. The feeling was incredible, but then it faded away, as fast as it had come. "That was amazing!" I turned back to the woman. "Can we get one for each of my companions as well?"

"I don't need—" Graven said.

"I'll have a hare," Seneca said, stepping up to the stall, people automatically separating to let him through.

"Pretty sure you've got the stamina of one," Carrick said, winking at me when I looked up at him.

“A sloth then.” Seneca blushed as he watched a tiny slow-moving sloth claw its way along a wire strung across the stall front.

“Just as lazy as one.”

“OK, maybe I should choose the animals,” I said, shooting Carrick a dark look. “It was supposed to be a gift, not a means to tease each other.”

Space was made for me at the front of the table and I looked with delight at the menagerie gathered there. Tiny rabbits scratched at their ears, regal lions flicked their tails and an elephant swayed back and forth on the spot. But it was the birds that drew me closer. I knew it was a bit obvious for gargoyles, being that they were winged creatures as well, but there was something fitting about them. A sharp-eyed falcon sat perched on a wire and I knew who he should belong to. When I reached out a finger, the little raptor jumped onto it almost immediately.

“I think this one for Seneca.”

The gargoyle couldn't blush, but I saw the small flecks of dark grey that dotted the tops of his cheekbones grow darker still as I held it out for him to take and then I realised why. His tongue flicked out and across his lips and then he parted them for me to give him the sugary treat. All of a sudden this was terribly intimate. But as everyone was looking at us, I had to follow through, flicking my finger up to dislodge the tiny falcon so it fluttered, then soared into Seneca's mouth.

The strange dark depths of his eyes seemed to spin for just a second before they fell closed and his eyelids fluttered against his skin. A small sound of pleasure escaped him.

“Goddess, Jade, that was lovely.”

He licked his lips clean and that had me thinking about what other purposes he might put his mouth to, so I quickly turned around to face the others.

“And which would you choose for me?” Carrick asked, cocking an eyebrow.

There were pigeons and woodpeckers, kookaburras and galahs, but it was a proud peacock that was fanning its tail that drew me closer. When I offered it my finger, it stared for just a second, before hopping onto it and I offered it to the gargoyle.

“Vain, showy,” Seneca snickered. “Our mistress is nothing if not perceptive.”

But he got no reaction from Carrick. Instead the gargoyle stepped closer, grabbing my wrist in his hand before ducking down and licking the bird from my finger, then going back to suck any remaining residue.

The sound he made, a low and barely perceptible grunt of pleasure, I knew well, having been treated to it many times the other night. His hands on my wrists, pinning me to the bed as he... I jerked my hand free, much to his amusement, before spinning back to choose one more bird.

“Mistress, I don’t need treats,” Graven said, drawing closer. “To serve you is all I need.”

But the sugar witch flicked her hand and sent a small owl flying towards us and I knew it was the perfect creature for him.

Its wings flapped wide as it slowed its progress, big eyes staring into mine right before it landed, tiny claws digging into my finger. Its head swivelled around, looking at me, the crowd and finally at Graven.

“Looks like you’re going to get one anyway,” I said, offering up the sugar bird.

His breath came out in a rush and a small frown formed and was wiped away, right before he stepped in closer. Rather than touch me, he leaned into my space, almost offering me his mouth.

I took it. I brought the owl up to his lips and when the bird launched itself forward, Graven didn’t look at the sugar creature, but me. Those eyes didn’t look away for a second as the bird sailed in, then dissolved into nothing but sweetness. Our gazes remained locked as he closed his mouth and swallowed, but when he went to pull away my thumb went

out, brushing a tiny smear of sugar away. Some devil inside me had me bringing it to my mouth, perhaps it was because I got another little frisson of sugary pleasure.

Or perhaps it was something else.

I didn't get to sort that out because people surged in, wanting their own tastes and that left me to consider much more practical concerns.

"How much do we owe you?" I asked, pulling my phone out and belatedly hoping she took electronic payments.

The woman just shook her head, flicking her hand to send a flock of sparrows sailing through the air which the other members of the crowd snatched from the air.

"You are the Whiteley."

"Um... I'm the Barlow. Sorry, Jade Barlow." I offered her my hand and the woman stared at it, then smiled, before shaking it, a similar sizzling feeling running through me before I was forced to pull it back.

"But you control the Whiteley fortune," she insisted, nodding to the gargoyles. "All payment will be settled by those that represent your house. It is a pleasure to have served you."

What did that mean? I wondered, but Carrick took my hand.

"C'mon, Jade, there's more to see."

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## Chapter 34

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### *Graven*

They didn't understand. I watched Carrick and Seneca point out new and more exciting sights for our mate to see, but they didn't get it. If she was not strong, if she could not hold her own against the others of the First Families, we would lose her, our home, everything. We would keep her safe at night. Each one of us would fight until we were little more than dust, but... That could be our fate if one of the families saw her as weak, unable to stand against them during a daytime coup. I would talk to Harold, discuss what human technology could be deployed to keep The Eyrie safe during the day but... None of that was as important as helping Jade discover her own power.

The looks on the faces of those old bastards when they saw that white glow in her palms. I'd been too long out of this world, forgetting the avaricious ways of these men, and others of their ilk. They saw an opportunity, not a woman, a human being with her own wants and needs. Or, more likely, each of them saw a compliant vessel for his son's seed, enabling him to take control of the Whiteley estate. It was only Mellors' hard work and Master Ashley's foresight that had stopped the families from picking the estate clean while the search went on for Jade, but now... I pushed forward, forcing those around

me to make way, because I was my mate's herald, announcing her presence to everyone here and making sure she got where she needed to go.

"Graven, son of Merriam." When we reached Mother Agnes' tent, the flaps flipped open, and the woman herself appeared in the doorway. She was tall, strong, with a proud bearing, even though the years weighed heavily upon her. Her keen grey eyes took me in and then she nodded with a slight smile. "You come for my assistance."

"The mistress of The Eyrie has been found," I said, stepping aside to reveal Jade. "She is of Madeline's line."

"Just as Ashley predicted," Agnes said. She approached Jade, hands outstretched. That white light started to glow in Jade's hands instantly, each woman's power calling out to each other. "And powerful too. You've got quite a gift there, young lady."

"The gargoyles seem to think you can help me to wield it?" Jade asked.

"That I can," Agnes said, ushering us inside the tent.

I wasn't able to take a full breath until the flaps fell closed behind us. The wise woman's tent was filled with the incense-like stink of magic, but, as opposed to the overpowering odour in the Whiteley building, here it was all mellow amber and sandalwood. Lamps hung from the supports of the tent, filling it with a cosy glow. Mother Agnes sat down in a high-backed wooden chair. She directed Jade to sit across from her, then gestured for us to do the same. Seneca was about to take her up on her offer, but I shot him a hard look. We would stand at our mate's back, ready to assist her in any way she required.

"So you want to learn how to wield magic?" Agnes asked. "What training have you had?"

"Does watching Harry Potter count?" Jade replied, with a sheepish smile. That faded under Agnes' steady gaze. "Then none. Up until very recently, I didn't even know it existed."

"And you've been carrying this around the entire time..." Agnes seemed to be talking half to herself. She lifted her

hands and summoned the teal green glow of her power, gesturing for Jade to do the same. “Non-aligned power. Hmm. Let’s see what we’ve got to work with.”

She slid her hands into Jade’s, linking their fingers and that’s when I heard the sharp intake of my mate’s breath. I couldn’t help but move closer, to put my hand on her shoulder. To steady her, support her, lend her power, if that’s what she required, or just to make clear she was not alone in this. As their hands stayed connected the green of Agnes’ power glowed stronger, although the green became lighter by the second until there was an unexpected reaction.

Mother Agnes had set up her tent on this spot many, many years ago, back when the markets were first founded. Her tent then had been a simple structure made from heavy canvas laid over gum tree boughs she’d had to cut down and shape herself. In the years since, the fabric had been swapped over for the many coloured wonder it was now, each panel constructed from a wild variety of colours and textures, each piece of fabric stitched carefully, symbols of power inscribed into each one. I watched in awe as they lit up, one after another, the gold, copper and silver stitching brightening, but the power surging between them would not be contained there. Runes carved into the wood of the supports lit up as well, but that wasn’t all. The old wood was polished smooth with age, so that you could see every whorl and knot, making it obvious when they began to sprout.

“Whoa...”

Jade looked around her in amazement, and I admit we all did the same. I had served multiple adepts over the years, but never had I seen anything like this. Tendrils poked out of the wood, quickly becoming twigs, then branches, leaves quickly covering the tree. Agnes nodded slowly and then withdrew her hands.

“The goddess must’ve been smiling down on you, bringing you to me so early in your training. You’re the Whiteley girl.”

“Barlow...” Jade replied weakly before conceding. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“So you’re the heiress to a great fortune, the last of your family and you’ve got undesignated power that seems in a great rush to express itself.” Agnes shook her head. “You’re going to need to be very careful. My power is earth-based, with a bit of water affinity.” She pointed to a nearby branch and within seconds it was laden down with green gumnuts. “But yours... It seemed to grab the small suggestion I pushed and run with it, transforming my entire tent.”

Agnes sat back in her chair and stared at Jade.

“That alone will make you highly desirable to any warlock. Your power will be sympathetic to any of theirs, no matter their affinity. They’ll bloody love your ability to amplify theirs.”

“So, what does that mean?” Jade shrank back against her chair. “I’m some sort of magical battery?”

“Not impressed with that idea?” Agnes asked, with a wry smile. “Keep that energy, girl, because you’re only that if you allow yourself to be. You can use that power in the service of your own ideas, or someone else’s, but first, we’re putting my tent back to rights.”

“OK.” Jade rubbed her hands together, not seeing that the white light grew brighter by the second. “So you’ll—”

“*You* will set it back to rights,” Agnes corrected. “Were you raised in any particular religious tradition? Christian? Muslim? Jewish? Perhaps a New Age Buddhist?”

“Ah, no, none of that. My parents were agnostic, I think.”

“Hmmm. That makes things easier and harder. If you’re raised in a religious tradition, that helps shape your understanding of the world. Mystics of the different faiths create grimoires, spell books, sacred scrolls for performing magic, but they’re just props. At their core, all magic is made up of the will.” Agnes tapped her temple. “And the way.”

“So I’m supposed to Avada Kedavra the trees?” Jade asked, twirling her fingers in the air as if she was wielding a wand. From the expression that then crossed her face, I don’t



think she was expecting to see the branches shift in the breeze she created.

“You’re supposed to close your eyes and visualise the tent the way it was when you walked in. What did it look like? How many lamps were there? What did the supports look like? Were they smooth or rough? Visualise it as clearly as you can...” Jade’s eyes closed obediently as she did just that. “And then feel the power inside you. It’s there, like your breath, like your heartbeat. Feel it well up inside you like a spring, and then let it create the reality you’ve visualised inside your head.”

Jade didn’t open her eyes, so she didn’t see the moment the leaves fell from the branches as they retracted back. Perhaps that was a good thing, because I couldn’t keep the great rush of pride I felt from showing on my face. She turned the boughs to twigs again, then tendrils, and even that was swallowed back by the aged wood. It looked somewhat smoother than I remembered, as if she was only working with a fuzzy memory. Regardless, the tent had returned to its former state. Agnes nodded at me slowly, then turned to Jade when her eyes flicked open.

“Oh. Wow...”

My mate’s hands slapped down onto the arms of the chair, her knuckles going white as she gripped them, which forced us closer. We didn’t need to be asked. Both of my hands squeezed her shoulders. Seneca dropped down to take her hand and place his other one on her knee, while Carrick gripped her arm to keep her stable. I felt it then, something I had felt each time I served one of my masters: a pull of power moving from me to her. But this was so very different. My breath came from me in little pants as I felt something glorious.

Witches and warlocks had drawn power from me many times over the years, but it’d never felt like this. It was like the moment when my seed shot from my body, right as I felt swollen, bloated with ecstasy, so ready to burst. Added to that was that frantic feeling of wanting it to never stop and needing it too all at once, as I was completely overwhelmed. My cock rose of its own volition, the sensory overload too much for my

control, my fingers still digging into Jade's shoulders, only the knowledge I must be hurting her bringing me back to myself. I blinked, trying to get the tent to reinstate itself in my field of vision and instead found Jade staring up at me.

"What did I just do?" she asked.

"Found equilibrium," Agnes informed her. "Everything we do as practitioners has a reaction. If you do good with your power, you will attract more of that to your life. If you strike out against someone with ill will, or try to use the power you have to take from others, someone or something has to pay that price." Her focus shifted to me and my stone brothers. "And in the case of the First Families, that's usually your familiars."

"Familiars?" Jade tried to get up from the chair and found herself sinking back down into that pulsing feeling of pleasure as more of our power leached into her. "Is that why the Whiteleys... my family collected so many gargoyles?"

"Gargoyles are the sons of witches who have mated with gargoyles," I told her. "We have all the power of a warlock, but instead of using it for ourselves—"

"We save it for you."

Seneca stared up into Jade's face, begging her to understand. This was the first time it hadn't hurt when someone drew power from me, the feeling so completely different to when even Master Ashley took from us, as to need a new name. I wanted her to take from me, more and more, until she was stronger than any that could try and best her.

"The witch that cursed the gargoyles," Agnes said with a slight smile, "she did witchkind a great favour. Rather than dealing with the vagaries of elemental creatures with little control, she welded both witches and gargoyles together, creating a partnership stronger than any other before." Her lips thinned. "But it also made warlocks near irrelevant. Be very careful, Jade, daughter of Madeline. You are a powerful, yet untrained witch, in possession of a great fortune and..." She stared into my eyes, something sad rising in hers. "You've found the creatures destined to form a soul bond with you,

who will replenish your power reserves as quickly as you use them.”

She leaned forward.

“Let me share with you something I’ve noticed from walking this earth for more than two hundred years. When existing power structures are threatened, be they human or paranormal, whether they are systems that support men or women, or any other creatures that walk the earth, those with a vested interest in maintaining their power will do anything to preserve those structures and systems.”

For a moment we just sat there quietly, each one of us considering what that might mean, then Agnes broke the pensive silence with a clap of her hands.

“Which means I need you to come back here regularly, young lady. I’ll teach you everything I know, because, somehow, I think you’re going to need it.”

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# Chapter 35

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*Jade*

But the next lesson wasn't going to be happening any time soon, it seemed.

"You've exerted a lot of energy tonight," Agnes said, leaning forward and patting me on the arm. "That's something you need to be careful of. Don't get excited at home, thinking you can magic this or magic that. It's like starting a new exercise regime. You must start slow, and build up your stamina, but you will be fine. You are young and new to your power. Enjoy the night!"

But the whole 'you're a seriously powerful battery that can be used and abused by male witches' thing she'd dumped on me kinda dampened any interest in cutting loose.

Because I knew exactly what it was like to be manipulated by someone who had turned out to have no interest in my wellbeing.

Anxiety drove my fingers to pick at my nails, tearing off the white tips, then worrying at the cuticles. Because I'd been right here before, hadn't I?

My tertiary entrance rank had actually been better than Trevor's. He'd had to do a Bachelor of Arts first, then get his GPA up high enough so he could transfer into law. Mum and Dad had said many times that I should've been the one to go to university, not him. But he'd talked me round, promised that if I made this sacrifice, he'd... I shook my head. I might have been a naive little idiot then, but I would never get fooled like that again.

"OK." I forced my eyes up to meet those of the gargoyles and it was so hard to simply look at them. I wanted to feast on them with my eyes, get closer still. Something about them drew me nearer, like a moth to a flame, but I stopped myself from acting on my desires. It was endlessly seductive, the way they focussed entirely on me, but I'd be damned if I'd let myself get swept away by any man, male, whatever they were. I forced myself to smile. "This place is just about all of my Diagon Alley fantasies rolled into one. I want to see more."

And so I strode out of the tent and off towards the closest stall.

"Oh...!" A creature that looked like it was part man, part weasel looked up from the stool he was crouched upon, gold teeth flashing as he smiled.

"Something for the lady?"

He gestured to a series of very dubious looking jars, each one filled with murky fluid and... animal parts? God, I hoped that was what they were.

"Um, no, no thanks," I said hurriedly, stumbling backwards and tripping over my feet in the process, but I was saved from falling on my backside by a strong pair of hands.

"Whoa! Watch it there, sis." I spun around to see a tall Aboriginal woman standing there, her teeth gleaming white as she smiled at me. She set me back on my feet, then stepped backwards. "See something you didn't like at Old Barney's stall?" Her nose wrinkled. "Nasty stuff, that fulla has." Her eyes narrowed slightly as they went a little unfocussed, as if she was looking at me, but not actually seeing me. "Oh, you're a proper powerful one. Wrong kind of magic for my people,

but...” Then, as the gargoyles arrived, a wide grin spread across her face. “You looking after this one ’ere?”

“She belongs to us,” Graven said.

“You better keep a better eye on her then, ay?” the woman said, with a nod. “Strong magic like that; she’ll be attracting the wrong people.” She turned back to me and held out her hand. “I’m Rosie.” I took it and gave it a shake. “This isn’t my Country—just down ’ere seeing the mob—so I can’t point you to someone who can help—”

“We’ve just come from Mother Agnes’ tent,” Graven informed her.

“Ah, she’s a good woman, that one. She’ll look after you, but you better stick close to them big fellas while you’re ’ere.” Rosie looked around with a theatrical air, then burst out laughing. “There’s some bad people round ’ere, just like there’s good ones.”

“Right, thanks,” I said, with a nod, before letting the gargoyles steer me away. “Why do I think this place is a lot more dangerous than Diagon Alley?”

“I do not know this alley place,” Carrick replied, “but I do know somewhere safe that you will enjoy.” He moved in front of me, then held out a hand. “I said I’d take you aerial dancing.”

“I was kind of hoping you’d forgotten that,” I said, with a wince. “I really do have two left feet.”

“And I’d be proud to have both of them standing on top of mine,” he replied, not moving until I took his hand.

*Oh no*, I thought when we reached the ‘dance floor’. *Oh no, no, no, no*. The area was off to one side of the markets and the path we’d taken to reach it was lined with twisting jacaranda trees. Their purple flowers were strewn all across the cobblestones, only to lift up and swirl around in warm updrafts. And the dancers? None swept across the mosaicked floor, as they performed one elegant move after another. Instead these slender creatures before us spun within the

eddies of air, in something that was more akin to flying than dancing.

I turned to Carrick.

“I can’t—”

“You can,” he insisted, with a slow smile.

“I don’t have wings.”

His flapped open.

“I have enough for both of us, Jade.”

“But I...” I turned back, watching a woman so slim she was almost skeletal, yet elegant with it. Perhaps that was due to the wings that sprouted from between her shoulder blades. She needed to be built like a bird to perform like one. “I can’t \_\_\_”

“Can we try?”

He held out a hand, a completely different creature to last night’s demon lover. There was a need there, a desire for something completely different. Trust, I quickly realised. Didn’t he know how hard that was to give? I stopped myself from thinking about how much my trust had been betrayed, my jaw locking tight, right as I nodded and then put my hand in his.

I felt like I was terribly grounded, welded to the earth by my size, my stature. I’d never been little, slender, light. A group of my school friends had played a game one lunchtime when bored, working out what kind of animal each person was. Others got cute things like cats, or cool things like eagles. My friends turned to me and said I reminded them of a wombat: an Australian marsupial that had more in common with a bulldozer than a kangaroo. Short, squat and built like a rock, they were animals that tunnelled in the dirt and their poop came out in little cubes. As I looked up at the dancers, I could not see myself fitting in amongst them. Carrick tugged me so close that I could feel his slight chuckle rather than hear it, then he launched us upwards.

His wings, the drafts of air, they seemed of the same mind, pulling us upwards. The muscles in his back flexed as his wings worked, gaining altitude and I knew that because my hands clung to him. I was standing on his massive feet again, but that felt like a very small platform, especially when I looked down.

“Oh my god...” I yelped.

“Never fear.” His grip on me was iron tight and somehow that was reassuring. “I will not let you fall.”

“OK, cool, great, so...” My eyes flicked up to meet his. “Um. We’ve done this, so now can we—”

“We have not done anything yet,” he said in a softly chiding tone. “Take a deep breath, Jade.”

“Why?” I asked, my nails doing their best to dig into his flesh, but I couldn’t even dimple the tough surface. “What’re you going to do?” I glanced down again, but felt that dizzying wave of nausea that comes from being up high and forced myself to close my eyes. “We are not going to perform an aerial pole dance routine like those other creatures, are we? Because I do not have the core strength for that shit. Carrick —”

“I love it when you say my name,” he told me, his voice somehow deeper and more resonant when my eyes were closed. “I will sleep when the sun rises and hear the way it sounds in your mouth in my head until I rise again.”

“Jesus...” I was trying so damn hard to not get bowled over by these guys, but they were making it so hard. “I don’t think anyone’s ever said anything like that to me before.”

“Then all human men are bigger fools than I previously thought,” he said, right before he spun us around.

I let out a little shriek, sounding like a total girly-girl, but I couldn’t help it. I clung to Carrick like a monkey, and he just laughed. I could see why: for him there was no danger here. He was in his element. His wings swept through the air in gentle movements, keeping us exactly where he wanted us, before he changed the angle and sent us spinning. It was like



being a kid again, getting strapped into a rollercoaster with a combination of fear and excitement and not sure which would win, not until the ride started. But after you realised you were safe, you threw your arms up in the air, glorying in that feeling of weightlessness.

I wanted that, I realised, just to put my many burdens down and let go, so perhaps that was what had me prising my fingers off him. I didn't fall, didn't slip backwards, the gargoyle watching me closely as I relinquished my hold, then he carefully let me drop backwards slightly. My eyes went wide, my hands slapping down on his shoulders for a second, but when he smiled, I realised he'd only let me go so far. One hand was resting between my shoulder blades, the other was on the small of my back and sliding lower.

"Men have disappointed you," he announced, starting to swirl us through the air again and it was now I could hear the thin strains of a strange kind of music. "They have not followed through on their promises; have not treated you with the respect you deserve." His words were just as dizzying as the way he moved us through the air. "But that ends now. Each one of us will do everything we can to make you happy, Jade, in every respect."

It was hard not to believe him. Literal fairy lights twinkled around our heads as he spun us around, small disembodied points of light that brightened each time we drew close. My head was a whirl along with my body, and while we moved it was hard not to think of that mural. Of the three gargoyles clustered close to the witch who'd taken the creatures as mates. The cautious part of my mind scratched for attention like a cat at a bedroom door, but for now I was content to ignore it. Just like on a rollercoaster, I let myself smile then throw my arms up in the air.

Dancing was incomprehensible to me, a complex combination of hips, leg and arm movements, where I always struggled to move only one part of my body in time with the music. But this... If this was dancing, maybe I understood the appeal. I felt small, fragile, and yet that didn't make me feel weak. It made me feel precious, cradled within Carrick's arms,

my head spinning, right up until the point I curled up and stared into his eyes.

Those dark depths, they were lodestones, grounding me, keeping me anchored even as he moved us in more and more daring movements. Once he had my attention, he seemed to suck that in greedily, a small smile forming, right as his hand slipped lower.

“This feels like a dream,” I said, closing my eyes slightly to feel the way we swung through the air. “That’s what I convinced myself was happening the other night.”

“A good dream?” he asked, “or a nightmare?”

“The best kind,” I said, feeling laughter bubble up in my chest; and wasn’t that nice? It felt like it had been so long since I’d truly just let go and belly-laughed. “One where there were no consequences, no reality to hem me in.”

“And if there were no consequences when you were awake?” he asked. “What would you do?”

“Bloody hell...” I hissed. “That’s the most unrealistic thing anyone has said to me all night, and I’ve heard a lot of crazy things.”

“And, still, you haven’t answered me,” he replied.

“I’d...” I dared a look over my shoulder as we swept down, the angle, our trajectory creating a dizzying feeling that made my gut lurch. But the others had no such issues. Each of the other dancers moved serenely, twining with the updrafts of air, because they were in their element.

And what if it became mine?

Agnes had told me not to try anything more magical and I felt the yank that had come when I’d transformed the tent back the way it was, like a muscle that had been pushed hard, but I stared at my hands then, seeing the bright white glow.

“I’d have fun, chase pleasure, enjoy my fucking life for once,” I replied. “I’d be free.”

“Freedom?” He lifted my thigh, forcing it to wrap around his hip, the hitch of my body settling me right against his

hardness, making clear what he wanted to do. “I can’t think of a better dream to chase.”

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## Chapter 36

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*Seneca*

I was staring far too much.

My eyes followed Carrick's and Jade's progress through the air, unable to look away for a second, even as my wings began to flutter. I needed to be up there, swirling around Jade, ready to step in the minute she turned my way, making clear my intentions.

But I couldn't.

She was with my stone brother, my potential flock mate. Jealousy had no place in what we had, so when they landed, I focussed on the flush in Jade's cheeks, the way her eyes sparkled, the musical cascade of her laugh washing over me. Carrick had done well, pleasing our mate and I needed to do the same.

"More!" she said and I stepped forward. Surely it was my turn now, but Graven frowned.

"We do not have that many hours of the night left. We must be back at The Eyrie before the sun rises."

"Oh..."

I shot Graven a dark look. Didn't he see the light that burned inside her, even when she wasn't using her powers? Didn't he see that it dimmed when he spoke so severely?

"But there's a little more time," I said. "Perhaps a drink?"

"Oh god, yes," she said and I held out my arm, pleased I'd managed to identify something she wanted. My whole body jolted at her touch, feeling a strange kind of warmth that drove out the cold of night. "I'm dying for one."

"No dying needed," I said with a smile. "This way. I know just the place."

Did I? I'd spoken so confidently, but as we walked past the market stalls, I realised my problem. When we'd come to the markets before it had only ever been as servants, to be at our masters' beck and call. Kinder masters, like Ashley, would allow us drinks of our own, but he had been the one that did the selecting. I scanned various stalls, discarding each one as not worthy of her until I came to Silenus' bar. Master Ashley had spoken in great detail about the quality of the satyr's wine, so I looked down at Jade and then smiled.

"This one," I said confidently before leading her towards the stall.

"Whiteley gargoyle!" Silenus said, from behind his bar. The satyr's goatish eyes were half closed and hazy with drink. The creature was a sot, but he knew the difference between a good vintage and one that had gone to vinegar. "What can I get you?" He turned to take in Jade and his eyes widened appreciatively. "And who's the pretty lady?"

"This is Jade Barlow," I said, shouldering closer, making my body a partial barrier between her and the satyr. "Mistress of The Eyrie."

"Ohh... so that old pile has finally been claimed?" Silenus leaned forward to peer around me, waggling his eyebrows, his yellow eyes gleaming. "Looking for a lover to keep you satisfied?" His hands moved without him looking away for a second, pouring a drink and then presenting it to her. "I can, on many accounts."

“Oh, I don’t drink wine,” Jade said.

“Perhaps one of your fruit juices?” I suggested to the barman, feeling a growing sense of alarm. I hadn’t factored in Jade’s preferences in my plan, hadn’t even bothered to ask her. This was my chance to make an impression on my mate and I was failing miserably at it.

“Hmm. I think I may have a vintage that will please you, Mistress. Try this.”

There was an air of challenge in the satyr’s eyes, but not a dangerous one, I was fairly sure. Apart from being as randy as a goat, the bastard was mostly harmless. Jade looked up at me for direction, something I liked so very much, so I nodded. At first, Silenus didn’t want to let go of the glass, seeming to expect her to drink from his hand, but my instincts kicked in. A growl formed in my chest and my fangs were bared before I could think twice. Silenus snorted in amusement and relinquished the glass. Jade took a sip, then made a small sound of pleasure.

“That’s amazing!”

“Best wine in the state; nay, the country,” he said with a shrug. “Not that I’m allowed to participate in the human contests. I nearly had a deal going with one of the major wine distributors and then those pricks from the First Families stepped in.” He smiled when she drained the glass, then handed it back. “You could have all of this at your fingertips, Mistress Jade Barlow.” He shot me a knowing look. “I’d be there the moment you woke up, with a bellini in hand to greet you. I wouldn’t even mind sharing with stone boy here.” His hand slid across the bar. “You could get up to all sorts of naughtiness at night with him, and then I’d be there to...” He licked his lips suggestively. “Get you ready for the day.”

“I didn’t bring my mistress here for you to ogle,” I growled. “Jade, if you want another drink I can take you—”

“That’s an awfully prissy tone to take, especially for a Whiteley gargoyle.” What in all the gods had possessed me to bring Jade here? The satyr straightened up then, looking me up and down. “The orgies that took place in The Eyrie... I

attended a few and found myself blushing. They rivalled anything me and my kind have ever been able to stage.”

Gods be damned. Carrick had spun our mate around in the air, dancing with her between fairy lights; and I’d brought her here. I drew in a breath, then another one, before I dared to look down at Jade. What must she think of me? That I’d... That I would...

“I did only my master’s bidding,” I told her in a low urgent tone, “within limits. I made clear I would never do...” I tried to swallow as a stone the size of my fist formed in my throat, “...that with another woman.”

“That?” Silenus imitated my tone and then burst out laughing uproariously, pouring each of us another glass. “By the great Lord Pan himself, you’re untouched.”

I felt my cheeks heat and my throat worked. I wanted nothing more than for this conversation to be over. But as I was trying to think of a way to get us out of there, Jade set her glass down and put her hand on my arm.

“Seneca, are you OK? What’s he talking about?”

This was my chance to tell her, to make clear my sacrifice. I’d had master after master summon me forth, into the writhing nest of bodies, but I’d shaken my head each time. I’d do my duty, ensure my master was safe, bring him wine, food, pills, whatever it was that he wanted, but he, they, could never have the thing I held precious. They could never have me, because I could only give that to one person: my mate. But as I went to tell her, Silenus spoke over me.

“The house you inherited has a dark past,” Silenus told her. “Seen the inside of Z Ward yet?”

“Silenus...” Graven growled, coming closer.

“Z Ward?” Jade said, frowning as she took a sip. “What’s that got to do with anything? It was a prison.”

“It was the site of orgies of pain and pleasure that even my Lord Dionysus would’ve blanched at,” Silenus continued, holding up his glass in a wry salute. “Overseen by a madman who used those poor sods as fodder for all of his fantasies.

“That’s enough,” I said, which shifted the satyr’s focus to me.

“And, somehow, this one ended up untouched.” Those yellow eyes glittered, not so much with malice, but mischief. That was the nature of satyrs, stampeding in where angels feared to tread, and I’d forgotten that when I brought Jade to his tent. His lips twitched and I just knew I was going to hate what he had to say.

“Enough, Silenus—” I said sharply.

“Someone’s been saving himself for his fated mate.”

I felt rather than saw Jade’s focus shift back to me. I felt as if her eyes were burning into the side of my face, but while I was many things, I was no coward. I turned to face her, expecting to see amusement or surprise or even horror there, but instead I was greeted by something quite different. Her eyes were shining as her lips parted, and she was about to say something when that damn satyr interrupted again.

“Two things a satyr knows well,” he continued, undeterred. “Sex and wine. You should bring me in: I could work as an intimacy coach, help guide you through the process.” Silenus winked at me. “I’ll make sure you get it in the right hole.”

“I said enough!”

My hand shot out and grabbed the satyr around the throat, not tight enough to cut off his breath, but enough to stop his damn noise. His fingers scrabbled at my claws, trying to get me to let him go, but I did so only in my own time, and watched him fall back onto his stool in a messy slump that was very satisfying.

“We need to get you back home, Mistress,” I said stiffly, scooping Jade up into my arms, stalking from the tent and taking flight, not even bothering to see if my stone brothers followed. They would, I knew that. I tried very hard not to dwell on the way she felt in my arms, her warmth, her softness. I made myself focus on the journey ahead, following the lines of the city, now helpfully lit up with streetlights, my wings slicing through the air to take us home.



“Seneca—” Jade said.

“We’re nearly home, Mistress,” I said, forcing myself to smile, but I couldn’t look down, I just couldn’t. I was so damn hard just from holding her in my arms, it felt like my pearls were rubbing me raw with every wing stroke.

“Seneca, look at me.”

I couldn’t resist a direct order from whoever was master or mistress, but especially not her. As I gazed down at her, the moonlight bathed her face, somehow making her all the more beautiful. “That goat man, Silenus?” I went to jerk my eyes back to the cityscape, but she reached up with a gentle hand and pulled my focus back to her. “He told me things he shouldn’t have, private things.”

“I should’ve known better,” I said with a shake of my head. “Satyrs can’t let a bottle go undrunk, keep their dicks in their pants, nor their mouths shut.” I let out a sigh. “I should’ve taken you somewhere better.”

“But is it true?” she asked, her eyes searching my face. I loved how carefully she scanned my face, but I wished it was under quite different circumstances.

“All of it,” I admitted, unable to keep a single thing back. “Z Ward was a hellhole and Luther Whiteley deserves to burn eternally in the Christian hell for what he did, but I... A warlock cannot control a gargoyle sufficiently to ask him to commit a deed that goes against his nature. And touching another woman?” I paused, treasuring the way she felt nestled against my chest. If I could, I would carry her everywhere, never letting her feet touch the ground again. “It was not something I could ever do. I knew you’d come one day, Jade, and if you...” I forced myself to smile. “If you decided to accept the mate bond, I didn’t want to come to you sullied by other women.”

There, I’d said it, the one thing my stone brothers loved to tease me about, the thing that had made many of my masters leave me on the roof to stand vigil because apparently I was ‘no fun’. I didn’t wait for her reaction, focusing instead on the horizon. My mistress knew the truth about me and she’d make

her own mind up about it. I assumed that'd take some time. Who ever heard of a creature eschewing all sexual contact for nearly a thousand years? And what the hell could I offer her? No knowledge of pleasure, that was for certain. If she did decide to accept me, perhaps I would need the satyr's—

Her hand on my jaw stopped my train of thought dead and when she slid her fingers around to tug my head down, I blinked. Carrying Jade took no effort at all, but suddenly my breath was coming in fast and noisy. My mouth hovered over hers and I felt her breath fanning over my skin, forcing every nerve ending to come alive, then her lips touched mine.

My first kiss. I made a hopeless sound of pleasure, my flight path dipping suddenly in surprise. Because the feel of it, the sound of her breath, the way she clung to me, it derailed everything, including my internal compass. Jade let out a little gasp, pulling away to look over her shoulder in alarm, but I corrected our flight path quickly, then turned back to her.

“That was...”

There were no words to describe how that'd felt, kissing the one woman in the world that owned my soul, so instead I tried to show her. I pressed my mouth to hers, then, not satisfied with just that, I mapped her top lip, then her bottom with kiss after kiss, my wings working harder, faster, with each one. And then her lips parted. Hot, slick warmth and the sweetness of the wine, I tasted that as I took more and more, delving deeper into her mouth with each kiss. And the taste that was Jade, that was the sweetest taste of all, one I knew I'd become instantly addicted to. I'd lived my whole life waiting for just this but nothing compared to the reality.

“We need to get Jade to bed,” Graven insisted, the moment we landed on The Eyrie roof, bringing both of us right back down to earth.

“Let me,” I told Jade with a smile, carrying her through the door and down into the house.

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## Chapter 37

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*Jade*

I'd met the Adeluminati tonight, found out that my gargoyles thought I was their fated mates, gone and walked through a night market filled with fae, satyrs and other fantastic creatures and learned a little bit about using magic, but for some reason it was Seneca's revelation that had me undone. I just stared at that perfect angular face as he swept me downstairs and then into my room. Perhaps because when he laid me gently down on my bed, I realised he'd never done this for anyone else.

Was that why I stopped him when he went to pull back? Those dark eyes flicked up to meet mine as I reached up and placed a hand on that massive arm. Seneca looked down, staring at the place where I touched him, then back into my eyes. That thick throat bobbed as he swallowed hard and he was about to say something, but of course that was when Carrick and Graven walked in the door.

“Jade, we will... Oh.” Carrick's lips twisted into a smug smile, his whole demeanour changing as he drew closer. “And what do we have—?”

“We will wait outside, Jade,” Graven told me, grabbing the other gargoyle and dragging him backwards. “We will stand watch over your room while we sleep and see you again when the moon rises.”

And then the door was closed with a decisive click, leaving us alone.

“I should—” Seneca started to say.

“You don’t have to, not if you don’t want to.”

OK, where the hell had that come from? Oh, I knew. I’d been flown around the city, seen wonders and horrors and ended the night in the arms of a virgin gargoyle. Yeah, I knew exactly where that’d come from. I flushed then, realising that I wasn’t sure if this was even something Seneca wanted. Like could gargoyles be asexual? I’m sure they could and maybe—

“If you want me to stay, I’d...” When he smiled, his whole face lit up, that constant state of tension seeming to evaporate. “I’d like that very much.”

OK, so what now? I thought. The first time Trevor and I’d had sex, it was terribly awkward and kind of awful, but also amazing, because I felt like I loved him. We were doing this clumsy, stupid thing together. But Seneca... My hand smoothed up that massive arm, and that was the first time I really felt the differences between us.

He and the other gargoyles were so hard, as if they maintained some of their dormant stony state long after they’d woken up for the night. There was no softness in him at all, except for the little breaths he was taking as my hand slid upwards. Every muscle was on display; in fact they were popping as my hand moved over them, something which made me think he was growing more tense. But as I stared up into his eyes, I saw something else.

Excitement.

“Is this OK?” I asked him. It seemed like consent was severely lacking in the gargoyle/warlock relationship and I was never going to repeat those mistakes.

“More than OK,” he rasped out. “Jade...” His head dipped closer, his lips just brushing against mine at first, then going back for more, getting bolder and bolder until we were forced to draw apart to take a breath. “I am yours in every way it’s possible to belong to another person. You can do anything to me and that would be... OK.”

But his words had me drawing back. The satyr, his discussion of Z Ward, the things we’d seen there, the gargoyles... I frowned as I stared up at him earnestly.

“I don’t want to command you to do anything,” I said. “Or put you in a place where you have no choice. You have the freedom to come and go as you like, all of you.”

I was trying to do the right thing, but he just smiled gently.

“Exactly as I like?”

There was a teasing note to his voice, one that had me about to protest that I was serious, right before his mouth slammed down on mine.

Was this his second kiss? I couldn’t tell, because either Seneca was a fast learner or he’d been taking notes during all those orgies. He plundered my mouth, forcing it to open up for him, his tongue sliding against mine in a way that had my thighs rubbing together, because it wasn’t hard to imagine it delving somewhere else. I wasn’t lightly touching him now, I was raking my fingers over impervious flesh, clinging to him like a limpet might a rock.

“How far can I go, Jade?”

OK, going forward I wanted any guy I was dating to sound that raspy, that needy. I pulled back and stared into his eyes, trying to remember that this was his first time.

“Isn’t that something you need to be clear about?” I asked him. “You’ve never done this before.” I knew his expression, the way his head dropped down and his eyes flicked away. I wasn’t trying to be a bitch, but I needed to be sure. There was a weird power dynamic to this relationship and the days of me blithely blundering along were long gone. “I’m not saying that

to rub your face in that fact, but to make sure you're making the right decision for you. I..."

I saw that painting in my mind, then forced myself to blink my eyes until I saw him instead.

"I don't know where this is going or where we'll end up. Today has been... overwhelming, to say the least, so... all I can offer you is right now."

Seneca went quiet and still above me, so much so I thought he'd pull away. He'd been waiting all this time for his fated mate, surely he'd want to keep waiting until— The sharp pinions at the ends of his wings stabbed into the bedding around me as he leaned closer.

"I'll take anything you have to offer any time you deign to let me close," he said. "So, Jade Barlow, Mistress of The Eyrie, what do *you* want?"

That look of challenge, that small smile, it had me launching myself at him, because what this stone boy didn't know was that I might not have been waiting for countless aeons, but it felt like I had been waiting since childhood for an experience just like this.

My hands sank into his hair as I kissed him hard, marvelling at the juxtaposition of his firm lips and soft, soft hair. I twisted my fingers in it, raking them across his scalp. But Seneca was no passive participant. It was as if he felt he'd been let off his leash as much as I had. He pushed my head to one side, his lips burning a path down my neck and he sucked in a long breath when he got to the curve of my shoulder, as if he'd store my scent away forever. Then strong fingers pulled at the neckline of my t-shirt, kissing the skin he revealed.

"Say yes, Jade. I need to hear you say it," he rasped.

"Yes." I cradled the back of his head in my hand. "God, yes."

"I'll have you praying to all the gods before I'm done," he promised in a dark voice, right before he moved down.

It was all hot and sweet, right up until his fingers reached the hem of my shirt and started to push it upwards. I knew I

was fat. There were nicer words, kinder words to describe it, but basically that's what I was. I worked with it as best I could, knowing which retailers would sell clothes I could fit into, first of all, and secondly, would suit me. But it was different when those clothes were being pushed aside. Everyone felt vulnerable naked, I rationalised, but it didn't stop that feeling of being doused by ice cold water when his lips pressed against my stomach.

“Jade...?”

He noticed I'd gone from hot and steamy to a cold fish. Of course he had. Those dark eyes looked up the line of my body and I felt instantly ashamed. This was his first time touching a woman. It should be perfect, special and I was just... me. Like, he was literally made of rock and I was— “If I have done something wrong, please tell me.”

The tone of his voice jerked me out of my own head and brought me back to being present with Seneca.

“Oh god, no, you haven't done anything wrong.” I stroked his face and he closed his eyes, leaning into the caress. “Quite the opposite. It's just...” I sucked in a breath. It was so easy to conjure up all the many, many ways Trevor had tried to make me feel bad about my body, but shoving them away took a little more effort. “It's just you're so perfect.”

“Gods, woman...” he growled, eyes flicking open, and there was something brutal, almost animalistic about him. “And what do you think you are to me?” He crawled up my body with panther-like grace. “I have seen thousands, if not millions of women, in all sorts of states within these walls and I can say with all confidence that not one of them burned their image into my brain like you have. You are so...” I sucked in a breath, not sure how he would end that sentence. “Beautiful. It's like touching a star. I'm sure it will burn me to dust, but I just can't stop myself. Please, Jade.” He lowered himself back down. “Tell me I can.”

If you've ever got the opportunity to have a great beast of a man kiss you on all the parts of your body you feel insecure about, with a kind of reverence most humans would save for

something sacred, I highly recommend it. I stroked his hair, then his neck and shoulders, feeling the muscles bunch as he went to work. Because I said yes.

To him pushing up my t-shirt and revealing my soft stomach. To letting him kiss it, map its swells and valleys, then higher up, kisses raining down over my ribs. Because when he pushed my t-shirt up and I wrestled it off over my head, there was only adoration in his eyes when he saw what lay beneath. He pushed my bra strap down carefully, thumbing the red spot it left on my flesh, then tried to peel the cup down before I moved and shoved it up and over a breast that felt fairly swollen already. From Carrick's kisses the other night and Seneca's now, his mouth curiously cool against my oversensitive skin, right up until he brushed his lips over my nipple, then sucked it in.

I gripped his head tight, not wanting him to pull off for a second, but I didn't need to steer him where I needed him. He just knew. To suck my nipple in long, greedy swallows, his tongue flattening the hard point out, forcing every nerve ending to burn in ecstasy. I felt hot, so damn hot, just from this, as I shifted restlessly against the bedding, calling his name out in truncated bursts, wanting something, but not sure what. And then he moved. He pulled me onto his lap, then tugged at the bra, barely letting me undo the clasp before tearing it off, then going right back to feasting.

"Jade..." he murmured, peppering my skin with kisses. "Jade, you're..."

"What?" I stopped him with a hand to his chin, watching him lick swollen lips before meeting my gaze. "What am I?"

I was being so fucking ballsy. I'd never dared ask Trevor what he thought about me, because deep down I knew. He didn't love me, didn't want me, had never venerated me, but Seneca... If that's how he felt, I needed to know.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said in a voice that sounded like rocks being ground together. "I know you cannot accept my claim for eternity, not yet, but will you accept one for just this night?"



I shouldn't, I knew that. This was a serious thing for him. He'd found the one woman he'd been searching for all this time, whereas I was still finding my damn feet in it all. But I'd been good, calm, rational, capable, for so damn long, and right now I wanted to be selfish with every breath in my body.

"Yes," I said, stroking his face, mapping it with my fingers. "Yes, Seneca. Yes."

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## Chapter 38

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*Seneca*

The goddess had indeed been kind to me in her choice of fated mate. Jade was... everything I'd been waiting for and more. I loved the way her body gave under mine, making me feel bigger, harder by contrast. Then there were those breasts. As she straddled my lap, they hung in my face, tempting me to bury my face in all of that plushness, never to come out. But I needed to hear it from her lips that this is what she wanted, not because she was my mistress, owed my loyalty due to the spell tying me to this house, but because of this.

She was mine, all mine and I needed to know if I was truly hers for this night.

“Yes.” She panted that out. “Yes, Seneca. Yes.”

I let out a pained groan, launching myself forward to take one nipple in my mouth, to feel that hard point pull tighter as I sucked. I flicked my tongue along the underside with each suck and felt her squirm in response. Her scent sweetened, becoming thicker, sharper as her arousal spiked.

And I was the one that caused it.

I needed more of it, that validation, so my free hand covered her other breast, plucking at that aching tip to get it ready for my ministrations when my mouth popped free.

And that's when I felt the beginning of the aching coldness in my bones.

The sun was rising.

We had time, I bargained with myself furiously, some time, but not a lot and that had my hands, my tongue moving faster. It was as if I wanted to squeeze every drop of pleasure I could from her as fast as I could, but that's not how it worked. She had her own pace, just like the sun did. And I had to try and work with both. I moved from one breast to the other, pulling back to blow over the sensitive flesh, to watch the way her areola crinkled in response, until Jade pushed backwards.

“Seneca...”

Her hands slid down my chest and, I admit, I might've popped the muscles there a little, to try and impress her with my strength. But whatever abilities I thought I might have, I lost track of all of them the minute her hand circled my shaft.

Dear gods...

My head was thrown back as I was lost in the sensation of it: her small fingers, unable to wrap entirely around my shaft, trailing up and down my hardened length. The pearls ached furiously, not easing as she worked them back and forth, and they wouldn't, not unless I was buried within her. But I felt my seed rise, the pleasure spiking way too sharply, so that I was forced to grab her hand and stop her caress.

“Jade, I can't... I'm too close.”

“So come,” she said, imperious as any master and that had me looking up at her with eyes that burned in my skull. “Don't you want that? Seems like you've been waiting for it for so long.”

She was right of course, but the beastly side of my nature roared to the forefront, laying her on her back, my hands going straight to her pants.

“What I want is far more than spilling in your hand like a fledgling.” I flicked open the button and peeled the fabric down, but of course, once I had her jeans and shoes off, there was yet more clothing. “I need more than that.” I traced the line of her sweet underwear with my claw, unable to appreciate the confection of lace and satin, not when my goal was what lay beneath. “What I need...”

Words failed me as she shoved her thumbs into the waistband and then shimmied the scrap of fabric down and then all I could do was sit back on my heels, devouring her with my eyes.

Move, you idiot, I shouted at myself. I could feel the chill of stone rising, knew I didn't have that long, but as Jade lay back on the bed, all I could do was watch her thighs part. Pink, sweet, glistening with a dew I knew I needed to lick away, she was so perfect.

“Um... everything OK there?” she asked, in a thin voice.

“A man might stand for some time before an artwork of some brilliance, yes?” I asked, but she just giggled in response.

My hands snapped out, holding her open when she went to close her legs. My thumbs pressed into the softness of her inner thighs and pushed them wider. I wanted, needed, to see everything. But as soon as I looked, I needed to touch, one claw grazing the little bundle of nerves the goddess had gifted to her purely for pleasure. Jade's brows knitted, first with a touch of fear, if the slight souring of her scent was to be believed, then in pleasure, and her head fell back.

“Seneca...”

I wanted to slow this down, treasure each moment, but I couldn't. The sun was rising, and my limbs were moving more slowly, my joints were stiffer. I bit off the claws on two of my fingers and one thumb, then slid them through the slick mess between her legs. She was wet for me. Something inside me wanted to crow that to the steadily lightening sky, but for once I had a task to perform for a master that I was dying to

complete. I felt her soft entrance, my fingers sinking into her opening as though sucked deeper, and then pushed in.

I knew what I was looking for, but not exactly where it was. It took some effort not to lose myself in the velvety suck of her cunt, but as I angled my blunt fingers up, I felt it. A swollen, rougher patch of skin, I raked my fingers across it and heard her moan in response. From Carrick's smug expression throughout the night, I was willing to bet his pearls had pressed hard against it the previous night, rubbing and rubbing until Jade fell apart, which made her all the more receptive now. Her thighs widened, and her hips moved in time with my strokes, which had me moving down, keeping up the pace as I settled between her legs, my tongue snaking out and flicking across her clit the moment I got close.

Heaven, that's what this was. A sweet, soft, slick warmth that I felt a need to bury myself in so deep, it almost drove out the growing cold of stone. I didn't have much time so I pushed her, rather than be led by her reactions, testing her depths before pushing in a third finger.

“Ohh...!”

I felt her hips jump off the bed, heard her raspy breaths, but when she settled back down again, I knew I hadn't given her too much; that it was just enough. “Seneca...” Her hands in my hair, I'd feel that long after the sun had risen. “Seneca...” Her moans would fill my ears as I drowsed. “Seneca!” My tongue moved of its own volition, flicking across her clit, faster and faster. Because each time I did, her body tightened, like a clock being rewound. Her thighs quivered, shook with each flick, right up until she shoved me away.

“Jade, you haven't—”

I knew she was close. I could feel it in the way her body opened to me, welcoming me in with everything I did. I needed more, to feel her burst all over my face, but she had other ideas. I was shoved back onto my heels again, my wings flapping out in response and she moved into their safe harbour,

wrapping her arms around my neck. She sucked the taste of herself off my lips, right before she asked for more.

“Seneca, if this is too soon, you need to let me know.” Her hand was back, toying with one pearl, then the next, until I was chanting the alchemical periodic table backwards. “Seneca?”

I knew what she wanted as she climbed astride me, my hands going out to grab her hips, then lower her down slowly.

“Gods...” I hissed at the first kiss of her cunt on the crown of my cock. “Gods, Jade...”

“Tell me this is what you want,” she asked, turning my own question against me.

“More than anything I’ve ever wanted in the world,” I assured her, “but...”

Whatever I had to say, it was driven out of my mind by the feel of her working herself down.

She couldn’t take me with one downward stroke, and I felt curiously proud of that. It ensured my pearls pressed right up against the place she needed them the most. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight for just a second to breathe in her beautiful floral scent. I could feel her heart beating in her chest like a moth caught in a jar, but when she began to move restively, I did too. Thrusting up and into the most glorious heat.

Was this what it was like to walk in the sun? I’d done it as a boy, but I couldn’t remember it clearly. Just long, hazy days that were little other than blurred images in my mind. But there was nothing blurry about this. Everything was sharp, clear, and so very desperate, the desire to shove her down on the bed and slam deep inside her riding me hard. But I wouldn’t. Not until she needed it, needed me to, so together we worked, pushing me deeper by the inch each time we moved until finally she let out a great sigh.

“Oh my god, I can’t tell you how glad I am that you aren’t dream lovers.” Her eyes flicked open and she stared down at me. Jade looked like a goddess, her hair a dark halo around her

head, her cheeks flushed red, her eyes shining with a light that rivalled that of her power. She was glorious.

And I was turning to stone.

I wasn't going to pull out of this position, I was sure of it. My limbs already were taking on that heavy feeling. But I couldn't surrender to the stone, not yet.

"Ride me, Jade," I urged, not sure I could move enough to please her now. "Take your pleasure. Take as much of me as you can."

Her smile lit something deep inside me, making me grasp at the here and now and refuse to allow the sun to still me.

She kissed my lips on each downstroke until they throbbed with the attention and my stillness was a welcome thing, because it helped me hold back. I ached, from the growing cold, from the feel of her, from the reality to finally, finally, being with the woman I'd been waiting my whole life for. My cock lurched inside her and she seemed to feel each pulse, making little cries, her brows drawing together in concentration as she picked up speed.

"Faster, lass," I urged, gripping her hips, but not too tight, lest we get stuck this way. She heeded my urging, her hips snapping up and down as she sought her pleasure and dragged mine from me.

"Seneca..." That helpless little moan let me know we were close, but so was the sun. I could almost feel its rays on my skin, even if the drapes were pulled closed against it. I was stiffening, in her, in my own body, and for the first time since I made my initial transformation, I felt trapped in it. In the change, in the lack of autonomy. Give me this moment, just this moment, I begged the sun, the gods, everything. Let me just have this. But the sun rose despite my pleas. I tried to tell her, to warn her, to pull her free, but she clasped my jaw in her hands and kissed me wildly, passionately, drawing the last burst of life out of me, right before I turned to stone.

"Oh fuck, I'm coming!"

That velvety clasp, wringing every last drop of pleasure from my shaft, right as the transformation began. My seed pushed through channels that were steadily calcifying, travelling faster in response. But I burst inside her, my whole body jerking up, my hands slapping down on the bed beside me, so as to not trap her against me, the last movements of my body making small jerks of my hips in time with the pulses of my cock.

“Seneca...?” I heard her voice dimly as I was sucked down into the soft, dark, stillness of stone. “Seneca...!”

I couldn't answer her call, not until the sun rose again, no matter what my heart wanted.



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## Chapter 39

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*Jade*

I'd heard horror stories from friends about guys that bailed straight after sex, others that snored, farted or even asked the girl to make them a sandwich. But I was willing to bet I could top all of them. It took me a second to realise it, but Seneca had turned to stone while still inside me. His skin had that damp chill to it that stone takes on except when it's baking in the sun, and his cock... It had already felt unyielding and hard, but now... I let out a little yelp of dismay, opening my eyes to search his now blind and unseeing face, shifting my hand to pat his stone chest, and as I moved I felt it.

My sex life had been pretty damn vanilla, but somewhere or other I'd heard about temperature play and now I was becoming more aware of it by the second. His length was cold and unyielding inside me and somehow... that wasn't a bad thing. I tried to pull free, but it was like there was a vacuum seal inside me. Something tugged so sweetly as I went to dismount, and that something had me pausing.

God, how had witches ever turned down monster cocks with built in G-spot attachments? I mean, damn. Those pearls seemed to know exactly where to run and as I was trying to

work him free, the same thing was happening. I was already dripping wet and feeling damn fine from coming so hard it felt like I'd pulled a muscle in my thigh, but... My body now seemed to see that as merely an opener, not the finale.

This is wrong, I tried to tell myself. This was the same as taking advantage of a man while he was sleeping. Worse, someone asleep would wake up for something like this, but... I actually couldn't just pull off, instead I found I had to rock myself back and forth to get free. But that kept those stone pearls rubbing, and my thighs started to shake, both from the effort and the stimulation. And at that moment there was a wild flurry of knocks on my door.

“Wakey, wakey, hands off gargoyle snakey!” Danny shouted.

“Ah... Daniel, not the right time!” I replied, my voice coming out all warbly.

“Bitch, you better make it the right time, because we've got visitors!”

“What?”

All sexy thoughts were gone now. I planted my hands on Seneca's chest and, with some straining, I popped free.

“Chuck a dressing gown, a negligee or some jarmies, because you wanna get out here, stat.”

Slick seed ran down my thighs as I grabbed a t-shirt up off the floor and yanked it over my head, then walked to the window. I pulled the curtains back slightly and saw a contingent at the gate. Harry stood firm, not letting anyone in, but, amongst the sleek dark cars parked there and the men in suits standing around, one figure looked very familiar.

Ugh. Trevor.

“Pencil Dick is here?” I shouted, right before my jaw locked tight.

“Damn straight. Reckons he's gonna serve you with papers.”

“For what?”

Why was I asking him? I quickly realised. Daniel was just an observer of the three ringed circus of my life. Because, of course, right when I was ready to sink into my bed and sleep the day away, my stupid ex would appear. I went into the bathroom and got cleaned up as best I could, raking a brush through my hair and pulling it back into a ponytail before flicking through the wardrobes for something to wear. No jeans this time, no t-shirts. I pulled out a sharp-looking suit and a matching cami. Pulling them on, I found they fitted me as if personally tailored to my form. Adding heels, I checked my look in the mirror and gave myself a nod before I went to the door.

“Power suit!” Daniel waved a hand in the air. “Oh god, yes, girl, that’s the perfect choice.”

He, however, was wearing a bright blue fluffy bunny onesie.

“So what the hell is going on?” I asked. “Trevor’s going to serve me papers?”

Daniel held up a two-way radio and when he pressed down the button, I heard a crackling voice come through the speaker.

“You don’t have to let me through—” Had Trevor’s voice always been this nasal or did it just sound bad in comparison to the gargoyles’ deeper tones? “But these papers *will* be delivered. We were in a defacto relationship for over ten years so that entitles me—”

I grabbed the radio out of Daniel’s hands, staring at it for just a second as I felt adrenalin go surging through me. He was going after me for money, when I’d held back from doing that when we split up? My eyes scanned the device, noting each of the nobs, before I set it down with a click and pulled out my phone. Mellors had insisted on me inputting his number the first night we met, so I found his contact easily.

“James Mellors,” he said smoothly.

“Tell me that Trevor has no claim over the Whiteley fortune,” I said without any introduction.

“That little...” Mellors quickly mastered himself. “Don’t say a thing. Don’t sign anything. I’ll be there in ten minutes at the most.”

But I wasn’t going to wait. When the line went dead, I marched down the stairs, ponytail bouncing, as Daniel shadowed me.

“You’re gonna kick his arse. You’re gonna, aren’t you? Please, PLEASE tell me you’re going to kick Pencil Dick right in those little raisins he calls balls.”

I was going to do something, because this bullshit was not going to stand.

People talk a lot about boundaries now, which I think is healthy, but sometimes I think there’s a piece missing to the ‘you need to be clear about your boundaries’ discussion. If you’d have told me, when I first left home, that in ten years’ time I’d be living with my adulterous ex, and pulling a pillow over my head as he screwed his paralegal in our bedroom, I’d have thought you were on crack. But that’s what had happened and that gave me some insight into what women all over the world were forced to deal with: in situations they didn’t deserve, made to put up with shit no one should have to. And all because of situations where they were financially dependent on someone else, suffered the toll of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, poverty, or were even socialised into believing that being abused was the right thing, so that sometimes it felt hopeless for them to want anything more.

But that was not going to be my lot in life.

I strode down the central footpath, seeing the small crowd waiting for me and that even Sala-mala-ding-dong was waiting by the car, no doubt in a professional capacity, to assist Trevor.

Fine.

The bigger audience the better.

“Look, mate, you can wave your fancy bits of paper round all you like,” Harry drawled. “But you’re not getting in, not without Jade saying so.”

“Yeah, well, then I’ll talk to her myself.” Trevor puffed himself up in his expensive suit, but the fact he had to do that at all revealed what a very, very small man he was. His eyes shone in the way they always did when he thought he had someone on the back foot, but I was about to correct the assumption. “Jade—”

“You’re here because now that I have money, you think you’re going to get your cut,” I said flatly, not moving to open the gate, just standing a small distance away to look him up and down.

“I’m entitled—” he started to say.

“To a kick in the fucking nuts, you pathetic little worm.” I pulled my phone out, bringing up my contacts and then found the one I was looking for. “We broke up months ago, before I inherited anything.”

“No, we didn’t.” He smiled at the other men standing around the gate, and I spared a passing thought to wonder who the hell they were. Other lawyers from his firm? “You left me, your long term partner, once you inherited a fortune, after me being a loyal and steadfast boyfriend. We signed a lease together.”

“One you were in the process of breaking well and truly before I inherited anything,” I shot back. “I have many, many text messages in my phone detailing your attempts to hound me out of the flat we shared.”

“Yes, well—”

“And what about you, Susie Q?” I looked past him to where Scaramouche stood by the car, her face going paler by the second. “You work for a legal firm. You know you’ll be summonsed to speak in court about the nature of your relationship with Pencil Dick... I mean, Trevor. You also know what the penalties are for lying in court.”

“I—” she started to say.

“Don’t say a thing,” Trevor hissed, pulling out a handkerchief before mopping his brow.

“Don’t want to say anything that can and will be used against you in court?” I replied. “Smart move.”

“OMG, bestie, if I could get it up for the bearded clam, I so would,” Daniel hissed, sidling up to me. “You’re so hot right now.”

I ignored him, focussing back on the man who was stopping me from sleeping the day away in a gargoyle sex infused haze. I thumbed my phone, and put the call through, waiting until the recipient picked up before I started speaking.

“You don’t get to do this shit anymore, Trevor,” I spelled out clearly. “You left me. You talked me into supporting you all the way through your very protracted university studies, to keep supporting you when you failed third year and had to do it over.”

“Jade?” a deep voice said through my tinny phone speaker.

“I put my dreams, my future, on hold, so you could pursue yours, ‘for us’.” I nodded sharply. “I thought I was making all these sacrifices ‘for us’.” Trevor started to splutter, but I spoke over him. “But when you got the fancy job and managed to start pulling in a decent income, what did you do?” I was the lawyer now, as well as judge, jury and executioner, as I stepped right up to the gates. “What did you do, Trevor? While I worked hard and made sure to keep the flat to your exacting standards of cleanliness. What did you do while I was doing my best for us?”

“I...” Trevor always tried to have the last word, and his throat was working as he fought to find a way to spin his shit, but I could see when he realised that this wasn’t going to go the way he’d expected. Obviously he’d thought he’d have his moment when he tossed those papers at me and then waltzed away with half of the family fortune.

“Jade, is everything OK?”

That masculine voice came down the phone line, so warm and full of concern, and I smiled when Trevor realised who it was. His dad was on the other end, a completely lovely man,

evidence that sometimes mothers should eat their young, because sometimes nice people have truly awful children.

“Let me outline, for everyone here, just what you did.”

“Look, Jade—”

Trevor held his hands up, ready to ward my words away, but what the hell did he think would happen? Did he think me that weak that I’d just lie down and accept his bullshit? The reality, of course, was far from flattering.

“I was coming to your office to bring you your favourite takeaway,” I said, only sheer will stopping my voice from wavering. I was tired, so tired, not only from the lack of sleep, but also from carrying this shit around.

“Jade, we—”

“You’d been ‘working so hard’, and had been coming home less and less, but I thought you were doing the extra hours ‘for us’.”

My eyes started to burn in their sockets.

“Look, I might’ve—”

“Imagine my surprise to walk in and find you balls deep in your paralegal.”

Susan had been full of triumphant glee that day, but now she seemed to display some post-nut clarity that made her flush bright red with embarrassment.

“You didn’t apologise when I found you, didn’t say it was all a big mistake. As beef massaman leaked into the carpet, you finished what you were doing and then yelled at me to get out.”

“Jesus, Trevor...”

His father’s voice was filled with all the horror, all the dismay I’d been waiting for someone to feel.

“But when you returned to our flat, this place we’d both signed the lease on, what did you do?”

“Jade—” Trevor said.

“What did you do?!” My voice rang out across the quiet street, the commotion enough to give everyone in the fancy houses around us a show. “Tell them what you did, Trevor, or I will.”

“I told you to get out,” he finally ground that out. “That I didn’t care that you’d caught me, because we were over for some time.” The dark-suited figures that had been standing back moved slowly closer and Trevor seemed more worried by them than anything. “That I...” He swallowed hard, then crumpled the papers in his hands. “That I didn’t find you attractive anymore.” Silence reigned for just a moment, and when he continued, it was in a much smaller voice. “That I’d give you some time to find your own place, but that you were to get out of the apartment as soon as possible.”

“Jade?” I lifted my phone at the sound of Trevor’s dad’s voice. “Jade, sweetie, are you OK?”

“I’m fine, Jim,” I told him, forcing myself to smile, even as tears filled my eyes. “I inherited a massive house and a fortune *after* we broke up. But I woke up this morning to find Trevor here, trying to get half of it because we’d been in a de facto relationship.”

“Shit...”

I don’t think I’d ever heard a man’s heart break before. With a lot of older men in Australia, it was always jokes and bullshit, keeping a stiff upper lip and not letting emotions get the better of you. But I heard it now, in Jim’s long, shuddering sigh. “Look, love, I’m gonna get off the phone now and call your parents. You should give them a call before they ring you, and I’ll... I’ll be having a chat with that son of mine, even if I have to drive down to Adelaide and kick in his door to make that happen. He won’t go through with this, I promise, love.”

“No, he won’t.” James Mellors approached us with his phone in hand. “We have quite a few witnesses here, including some from the Dorian Corporation.” He frowned as he looked at the shadowy men, some of them beginning to shift restlessly. “All of whom, I’m sure, would be prepared to give



evidence under oath to the nature of this pathetic plan. Jade, I urge you to consider taking legal action against this man. We will institute a restraining order, of course, but there's also the matter of him trying to coerce you out of half your fortune, which is illegal under the state's new coercive control legislation." He smiled at Trevor tightly. "And something that the estate has iron-clad protections against."

My ex was about to say something, but right then his phone began to ring. He pulled it out and saw who it was, going pale in response.

"Dad?"

I heard the little boy right then, not the big, bad lawyer, and somehow that was enough. I walked over to open the gate and usher my lawyer inside.

"Holy crap, Mellors." Daniel looked James up and down. "Who knew you had that kind of big dick energy going on under that whole tightly wound, prissy bitch facade? I wouldn't have put you on my Do Not Fuck list if I had any idea."

"Something tells me your lack of perceptiveness means you walk through life constantly surprised by the most pedestrian of things," Mellors replied, before turning to me. "Jade, if we could have a word inside?"

"Are you being mean to me, Lawyer Daddy?" Daniel asked, bounding beside us as we walked back to the house. "Do it again! Do it again!"

"With someone who doesn't even have the wherewithal to put in place some protective measures?" James' eyebrow rose slowly. "Out of the question. Now, Jade, about your former partner. I took the liberty of drawing up some documents that I think are necessary for your protection. You might balk at some of them, but hear me out."

I had no intention of protesting. As I walked back into the house, the shadow of the gargoyles fell over me. I might have stone guardians to look after me at night, but I'd use whatever legal protections I could to keep me safe during the day.

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## Chapter 40

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*Jade*

“I need to set up a charity to help women leaving their abusive husbands or partners,” I announced as we walked into my kitchen. The bright white walls, the shining tile, the massive expanse of marble countertop shouldn’t have had my heart racing, but it was, rapid as a rabbit’s. “Millions of women experience sexual, emotional and physical abuse every day and they can’t leave.” My voice broke on that, my brows knotting. “They can’t do anything about it.”

“Jade, did you get any sleep last night?” Daniel asked as he put the kettle on. “You’re looking a little—”

“Coffee,” I said, my heart feeling like it skipped a beat, forcing me to hold my breath until it started beating again. “I need a coffee, please.”

“Chamomile tea for you,” he said decisively, grabbing out cups and mugs and setting them on the counter, defiantly plucking out a herbal scented tea bag and putting it in my cup.

“Other women don’t get chamomile tea,” I said. “Other women would be forced to just give in to get arseholes like...” I swallowed hard, but the lump in my throat wouldn’t move. “Like—”

“Trevor Davis will not be allowed to come within three metres of you in any public space,” Mellors said smoothly. “I know a judge who’ll approve the restraining order once we get the balls rolling. Trevor will not get onto the grounds of the estate.”

“Too fucking right,” Harry growled and when my focus shifted to him, I half wondered if he was part gargoyle. It wasn’t just the massive frame, clad in Crocodile Hunter khaki, but that deep scowl and the way his blunt teeth flashed as he grimaced. “Though we could do with more security.”

“Something we need to action immediately,” Mellors agreed with a sharp nod before typing himself a note in his phone. “I’ll have a company liaising with you, Harry, before the end of the day.”

“But other women don’t get that.” I felt a bone deep heaviness in my body, one that made it hard to move, hard to breathe, to do anything, because they didn’t get it. While domestic violence happened at startling rates to men as well, I was willing to bet Harry and Mellors had never been a victim of it. “Too many women have...” My voice broke, but I forged on. “...have nothing. No friends...” Daniel moved closer, grabbing my hand and giving it a squeeze. “No caretakers, no lawyers, no nothing. They’re forced to try and navigate the entire process on their own, right when they’re at their lowest and I—”

The kettle began to whistle, the high-pitched sound cutting through my words and that was OK. I was out of breath now anyway. I sucked one long breath in, then another, forcing my lungs to inflate because that might help take the tight feeling in my chest away. But as the whistle got louder and louder, my breathing got faster, right up until the point that Mellors flicked the switch to turn it off.

“You need to help,” he said simply. I nodded. It seemed so unfair, that I was now obscenely wealthy and able to skate free of all of the shit with Trevor, when most women couldn’t. “I understand.” He couldn’t really, but he was coming on board and that’s what mattered. “I know you may have gotten a negative impression of the Wildfyre Club last night and I’m

not even saying that's wrong, but the ladies... They may have been born to privilege, may live a kind of life that most could never dream of, but they do help people with their charitable works: many people. I could make some introductions if you like..."

And just like that, the air whooshed out of me. I couldn't pull myself to meet with the ladies that lunched in this town right now, but later... Yeah, that was enough to let me slowly unwind muscles that had become clenched tight, so that when Daniel set that bloody cup of chamomile tea in front of me, I sipped at it.

"Thanks," I told him, looking up over the rim of my cup, the hot porcelain connecting me back to my body, to the aches and pains that would only be eased by sleep. Tears pricked at my eyes and I didn't know why. I'd kicked arse out at the gate, but now...? I forced myself to smile, because no one in here deserved to deal with weepy Jade. "I'd appreciate that."

"But we focus on getting a security team together today," Harry insisted.

Sip. I heard them talk, but not the words. Sip. Their gruff, masculine voices washed over me as I listened to my heart rate starting to slow down. Another sip of tea, the weird herby taste rolling around on my tongue. Daniel moved around the kitchen, then appeared by my side, taking the cup from my hands and setting it on the sink before turning to the others.

"Jade's been up all night, partying with gargoyles," he told them, "and now she needs her beauty sleep. You guys have got this, right? Capable men are sexy men."

Both Harry and Mellors stopped talking right then, glancing at each other before flushing bright red and then nodding.

"Sleep well," Harry told me. "We've got this. We'll keep you safe until the gargoyles rise, don't you worry."

Trusting the confident certainty that both of them possessed helped me head up the stairs under Daniel's care, my feet dragging through the thick carpet as I walked down

the hall to my room. But when his hand went to the door handle, I remembered suddenly why I hadn't wanted him to come inside.

"C'mon, let's get you to bed."

"No, Daniel. Stop....!"

He frowned slightly as he pushed the door open, but that smoothed away when he saw the state of my bed. His mouth fell open as he stared at Seneca's stony form.

"Oh my fucking god..." he hissed, eyes widening.

"Daniel, you—"

"Damn, girl, no wonder you look ridden hard and put away wet, because..." He peered closer to Seneca's dick and that had me bristling.

"Daniel, you need to—"

"You took that?" He glanced across at me, pointing at Seneca. "All of that? Because that requires the highest of—"

"Daniel!"

He jerked his hand down at my sharp tone, blinking, a pinkish stain starting to glow in his cheeks, but he shut his mouth and kept it shut.

"Look, Danny, gargoyles are vulnerable in this state. They can't permit or give consent for anything. Seneca—"

"Seneca?" He looked up into the gargoyle's face. "This is Seneca. I figured Graven would be the first one you'd bang."

"Um.... no, and Seneca wasn't the first," I stammered out. "I mean I was his first, but—"

Daniel made a strangled sound, his eyes bulging, his face going bright red until finally he exhaled a great gust of air.

"OK, enough. You are completely trashed. You've got the look of those poor kids they put on the child sponsorship ads on TV," he said, waving a finger around. "And I'm trying really hard to respect that, but..." His jaw muscles flexed and he nodded. "This is to be discussed later, when you wake up,

in detail, over tequila and you have to take a shot for every single one of those...” He waved his hand around vaguely in the direction of Seneca’s cock. “...that you took, because, damn, girl! Though, should you sleep in here?” He eyed the bed critically. “I mean there’s still plenty of room on the bed, but usually I like them to fuck right off out the door when they start getting all sleepy, so—”

“No, I’ll sleep here.” I finally let myself look at Seneca, hating how he looked exactly like himself, and yet at the same time was rigid, unyielding stone. “This is my bed and...” I let out a sigh, “he’s my gargoyle. It doesn’t feel right to bail on him.”

That was somehow easier to admit while Seneca ‘slept’. I didn’t have to look into those fathomless dark eyes and admit that I was starting to feel something for him and the others. Danny just nodded, moving closer to wrap an arm around my neck and place a quick kiss on my forehead, his lips there and gone again.

“Then sleep, bitch, until your stone boys rise again. We’ve got things sorted until then.”

I thought I’d struggle to sleep. Once I stripped my power suit armour off and collapsed down under the covers, I found myself rolling towards Seneca, his stony weight creating quite the depression in the mattress. But even as I felt his cold stone through the covers, my eyelids felt heavier and heavier until I couldn’t keep them open. And after a while, the side of his leg, where I was pressed against it, started to warm slightly, as if I was the sun beating down upon him. I nestled in closer to all that unyielding stone and just let go.

I’d had this dream before, I realised. I was inside Z Ward again, though there was no Daniel, no tour guide this time. Instead flames flickered against the impervious walls, their crackles punctuated by screams that seemed to be torn from the depths of someone’s soul. I told myself that was what I was going to investigate, but as I walked past one writhing person, then another, I knew that was a lie.

I knew my way, despite having only been here for the ghost tour. My feet moved slowly, surely, past the cells where people sobbed, screamed or just cried softly. I never actually saw them, just heard the echoes of their pain, a terrible chorus that marked my progress, right up until I reached my destination.

This was the room where the massive gargoyle had been housed, I remembered. The grid on the roof allowed the moonlight to stream in and its cool light bathed the figures that stood just beneath its bars.

He was the same as I remembered, tall, so freaking tall, with a massive span of shoulders, every muscle standing proud as he moved. It made the man with him seem so much smaller, even though I knew logically he wasn't. "No..." he sobbed. "No..."

"No?"

I'd heard that voice before, and it was velvety soft and yet full of iron as he asked his partner the question.

"No..." the smaller man said.

"You know I never do anything you don't ask for," the gargoyle reasoned. "And I won't now." And so he went to pull away.

"No...!"

That frantic edge to the smaller man's voice, the way he clung to the gargoyle's claw, it had my jaw clamping down tight. I wasn't going to like this, somehow I knew.

"No?" the gargoyle asked again.

"No..." The smaller man's voice was softer, plaintive now. He pawed at the gargoyle's chest and I knew exactly what he was doing. They were so massive it was hard not to do that, to map the expanse of their chests, to learn the terrain of them like a rock climber might a cliff face. Because both those things were just as grand, just as impassive, just as unknowable. "No, Luther, please. I need..."

Just like any other nightmare, I wanted to pull free of the dream, escape what I was about to see, but I couldn't. Because the smaller man, he turned from some nondescript human into someone I knew well. It was Daniel's blue hair I saw the gargoyle sink his fingers into, then use as the means to wrench his head back and bare his neck to the beast's fangs. He scored them across the soft flesh there, leaving red marks in their wake that I knew would turn greenish purple later. He seemed to mark every inch of Daniel's neck as his before turning to face my best friend.

"Yes?"

"Yes, Luther," he said, trying to tug the gargoyle down for a kiss, but the beast wouldn't move, not until he was ready. "Yes, please, Luther, please—"

"Well, when you beg so prettily." He hoisted Daniel up into his arms, and Danny's legs wrapped around the gargoyle's waist. "Don't worry, I'll give you everything you want and just a little more."

"More," Daniel agreed with a frantic nod of his head. "More."

But when the gargoyle gave him just that, I heard a scream, that same horrific scream that had sent goosebumps prickling all over my body, a scream that cut through my dream and jerked me out of it, forcing me upright, panting as I drew in breath after breath.

"Jade...?"

Seneca's voice sounded like rocks being ground against each other, his movements slow, sluggish as he pushed away his stony form to come right back to himself, but he wasn't my focus. I heard another scream cut across The Eyrie's grounds and that had me scrambling out of the bed and shoving clothes on. When I stumbled out of the bedroom, I saw a wild-haired Daniel standing outside his own room at the end of the hall, looking just as spooked.

"Danny," I said, walking to him, feeling a rush of gratitude that it had all just been a dream.



Except for the part that wasn't.

Our heads whipped around as we heard another ragged scream. Seneca appeared in the doorway of my room, his brow furrowed.

“Jade—”

“That's coming from Z Ward,” Daniel said. “Fuck, Jade, you've got a truly-ruly ghost on your grounds.”

“Jade!” Seneca shouted, but when Daniel went flying down the stairs, I took off after him. That dream... Somehow I knew that I needed to protect Daniel from whatever lay within Z Ward, so when he slammed the front door open and ran out into the night, I followed.

We ran across grass cold with dew that soaked into the cuffs of my track pants and chilled my feet to the bone, but I didn't care. I was too busy cursing myself for never joining Daniel in the gym because he was sprinting faster and faster, the gap between us widening.

“Danny!” I shouted. “Daniel!”

But he just skimmed across the grass, past rose bushes and graceful willows, like he was the gargoyle, not Seneca.

“Mistress!” the gargoyle said from above me, before he swooped down and grabbed me, picking me up in his arms before flying me over to the haunted prison. He landed heavily, wings flaring, right in front of the gates.

“What's in there?” Daniel demanded as he arrived, panting, shoving a finger in the direction of Z Ward. “I did some reading while Jade was asleep and, fuck, Jade, your... ancestor?”

“Jade was not born from Luther's line,” Graven growled, landing heavily beside Seneca, Carrick doing the same a heartbeat later. “She carries none of his taint. He—”

But whatever he was about to say, it was cut off by a guttural cry from within the building.

“Free me, Graven!” The prisoner's voice felt like it echoed through the entire grounds of the estate and beyond. “Free me,

brother!”

“Brother?” I asked, looking squarely at Graven. “Anyone want to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

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# Chapter 41

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## *Wulfstan*

It had been a long, long time since I had been woken by the rising of the moon. For a moment I stayed motionless, my eyes closed, finding something peaceful in the cool night air. As I took a breath, though, I felt something tear inside me. It had been a small scratch when I was first installed in Z Ward, bound to a brand-new building with magic like ropes of steel. But when humans didn't tend to their wounds, they festered, growing putrid and rotting them from the inside. I had assumed that, as a gargoyle, I was impervious to such injuries, until I came to this place. But as I opened my eyes and took a deeper breath, the wound Luther had left inside me was ripped wide open.

And the pain was so overwhelming that I could do nothing other than scream.

Not that it did much good. If screaming had any effect, this place would've been reduced to rubble. Instead it was as if the residue of Luther's malevolent form of magic grew with each sound of pain, becoming bloated, like a tick feeding on a dog. Despite that, I was never able to stop myself. The sounds that were rent from me were the rawest expressions of pain: of

being awake, being alive, yet caged within this hell hole, trapped within the sight of all of the worst agonies I'd suffered...

And those that I'd perpetrated. That was the worst pain of all.

As my mindless screams were torn from me they echoed through the peaceful grounds of The Eyrie.

I didn't expect to be heeded. I never had been before. Master Ashley and all the others that had come before him had slept on peacefully, no matter what I did, so why would anyone answer now? I screamed until it felt like the flesh was torn from my throat, only to be answered by the sound of voices; one in particular that was known to me.

"Jade was not born from Luther." My stone brother's voice carried me forward, from beyond my cage, the door so helpfully left open by the last humans in here. "She carries none of his taint. He—"

He was here? Graven was here? What the hell would bring him forward? Years, more years than I could count, had passed since we'd last shared the horrors of this place, then, after Luther was deposed and the doors of Z Ward were locked tight, I'd seen him but rarely. In the early days, he'd come to try and talk to me, to reason with me, to be a silent witness to my pain, but the gaps between those visits had grown longer and longer until the next master was installed in the house, then another. Each one of them was weaker in power than the last, no longer able to wake all of us. And when they were forced to choose, why would they select me? A bound gargoyle, trapped like a bird in a cage, I was no use to anyone, so one morning I had sunk down into the silence of stone, not to return.

Until now.

It wasn't my stone brother's voice that kept me moving forward, though. The need to scream at him, shout out my complaints about my continued existence was still there, but it was pushed aside by something else.

Jasmine, night-blooming, heavy and narcotic and clogging my nose; I caught the scent of it, but no flowers grew here. Z Ward itself stank of dank stone, mould, rotting leather and rusting iron and little else. It wasn't even the ever-present rose scent that came from the gardens around The Eyrie. There was a singular scent in amongst a sensory carpet of others, the only bright note in any of it.

And that wouldn't do.

My tail lashed as I strode through the central foyer of Z Ward, past the frozen forms of Caraxes and Axton, two of my brothers who'd been forced to share my incarceration. My wings flexed, not able to fully extend in the space, the ache in my shoulders a reminder of that. But I shoved all of that aside as I walked up to the gate.

Graven, Carrick and Seneca all stood between me and whatever it was that drew me closer. No, not what: who. My heart felt like it stuttered in my chest, then beat faster and faster, the strain making the whole area ache, right as I saw her. Just a tiny glimpse, in the gap between my brothers' wings. She was pale as the moon and twice as lovely. Eyes that shone like stars, lips like rubies that begged to be kissed, skin that would show every mark if not touched with care...

And that's what had me throwing myself against the gates of Z Ward, despite the power of the magic that pulsed against me, making every muscle jerk and convulse. My heart began to beat erratically, unable to continue when subjected to the power of the wards Luther had so carefully built into the foundations of this place.

I didn't care.

"Free me, Graven!" I shouted, wings working, tail lashing. "Free me, brother!"

Because *she* lay beyond. I'd spent thousands of years tied to the castles and houses of men, bartered and sold like a slave by rich warlocks, sought after for my power, hated for my recalcitrance, and in all that time, I'd never felt something so strongly as this.

I needed her.

Whoever this woman was, she was like the air in my lungs. No, like the currents under my wings, sweeping me up into the blessed night. She was the waters of an ice-cold loch, right before I dived down under its surface. She was the moon itself, life giver, making the blood pump through my veins.

“Brother?” she said, her voice the sweetest of music. “Anyone want to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

I would. I’d tell her anything she wished. Of the days when the great cities now were little more than small hamlets, of the ways the world had changed. Of when the dragons retired back to their caves, never to return. Of magic and betrayal and fiercely fought wars and—

“We need to go, Mistress,” Graven said, his words a knife turning in my chest. I could feel every inch of the blade as it was driven deep. “Mistress—”

“No!” My claws wrapped around the bars, but even though my fingers were forced open as the wards pulsed through me like a bolt of electricity, I clung on. “No, Graven, brother, you can’t!”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Her voice was as crisp and clear as any highborn lass and her bearing was that of a queen as she pushed past the three of them. I saw then just how lush and beautiful she was. Her form was sweetly rounded and would grow fuller when she was heavy with my child, because now that I saw her, I dared to hope. Perhaps everything I’d endured was for just this moment. She was my mate, I felt that pulse hot and hard in my chest, something that felt like pure agony after such a long time, but I was used to confusing pleasure with pain. “Who...?” she said, staring up at me. “Who are you?”

But that’s when I felt it, that steady pulse of shame that beat inside me, outpacing my own heart. My brows drew down as I felt it rise, like a poison that had been injected into my core. This was the moment I’d been waiting for my entire life and I... I wrenched my claws away from the bars, the feeling of relief turning suddenly to a sense of wrong. What

right did I feel to feel any sort of reprieve after what I'd done? I stared down at my hands, seeing the blackened marks that came from clasping the bars of my cage, now and all the nights I'd been awakened since the death of Luther Whiteley. They criss-crossed my palms, my mark of Cain. Because there were no other signs of my sin, none that I didn't make myself.

Then my focus shifted back to my beautiful mate.

"Jade, you need to come away now," Graven said, grabbing her arm, but she planted her feet defiantly. She was a queen amongst women, she would not bow to anyone.

"Jade, is it?" I rolled that name around in my mind, the word becoming more beautiful by the second. She nodded sharply. "I am Wulfstan," I told her in my gentlest tones, pain clogging my throat. "And your mate is correct."

It had to be why Graven walked again. A new mistress rather than a master, she awakened only the gargoyles that belonged to her, not all of them, because a gargoyle wouldn't grab the arm of his mistress, but he might his fated mate's. I'd screamed the night I was awoken, coming back to life with a pain that still reverberated through me, but it paled into insignificance in comparison to the pain I felt now.

"You should go." The words came out far more gruffly than I intended and when she jerked back as if slapped, my resolve faltered. I sucked in a breath, an apology on my tongue, ready to be said, but instead I frowned. "There's nothing here for you, lass, nothing but evil."

"I will when you tell me who you are," she said. I went to argue, but the command in her voice, in her gaze, it had my mouth opening anyway. "Tell me why you're here, why you're locked up in this place. Tell me why you scream. Then I'll go."

I didn't want to. I knew why Graven still kept hold of her arm, because I would've done the same if our positions were reversed. Z Ward was a cesspool of muck that she should never get close enough to or it would taint her, but I could see that it was in her nature to persist in poking it with her toe.

“Just that?” I bargained, unable to keep the hope from my voice. I wanted more, so much more, but I refused to even entertain the idea. “Just that and you’ll go with Draven afterwards?”

“Just that,” she agreed and that’s when she pushed her hand through the gap in the gates.

It was so tiny, little more than a child’s hand and that had me drawing mine back. I’d hurt her if I touched her; I’d stain her with my muck. But I couldn’t deny the offer even as I heard a low hiss from each one of my stone brothers as I reached slowly, so slowly out to take it. I gripped her hand, feeling the sizzle of her power against my skin, before jerking it back.

“The deal is done...” My mate, I said silently. “Mistress.”

“Get Harry,” she said, looking behind her. “Open the gates.”

“Oh my god, yesss!” said a man with hair the colour of the sky, clapping his hands.

“No!” Seneca shoved himself forward, wings fluttering before catching himself. We didn’t order our fated mates around ever and Carrick looked like he was about to remind the boy of just that. “I’m sorry, Jade, but it isn’t safe...” He tossed a look behind him. “You don’t want to go in there, not ever.”

“Too late,” she said, crossing her arms. “I’ve already been inside the place on a ghost tour and lived to tell the tale. We need to find Harry—”

“Right here, love.”

The caretaker came forward and when I saw the big iron ring of keys, my muscles tensed and when I heard the clang of one of them being put into the lock, I took several involuntary steps backwards.

“No...” I said, over and over. “No, no, no...”

Because it wasn’t Harry’s hands I saw as he opened the gates, nor his voice I heard, but Luther’s.



“Hello, my splendid beast.” I saw his knife blade of a smile flash inside my mind. “What mayhem shall we wreak tonight?”

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# Chapter 42

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*Jade*

What the hell...? My mind struggled to put two and two together. Or make that fifty-five plus two hundred and sixty-three thousand together. I'd woken from a dream, come running out, then heard someone screaming, only to find... My mind stuttered as I struggled to take in the dimensions of the massive gargoyle. Wulfstan, I corrected myself. As Harry moved forward, opening the gate, my eyes went up, up, up, trying to take all of the gargoyle in. He was just as massive as I remembered from when I saw him on the ghost tour.

When I'd stepped into the curl of his wings.

Something inside me had known that was the right thing to do, some hitherto undiscovered instinct rising, but when Harry had unlocked the gate and I'd walked through, Wulfstan jerked back. Back into the shadows, his eyes gleaming in the darkness, that handsome face twisted into a grimace.

One I was somehow familiar with.

But when I moved forward again towards this strange creature, wanting his answers, he cringed back once more.

“No...” I saw his lips move without a sound, only making out what he was saying after he’d made the word out again. “No, no, no...”

It was the sound a child might make, pleading with a cruel parent, or what a broken down man might say to his assailant. But whatever Wulfstan saw, it wasn’t us. His eyes were wide open, staring into a space that nothing occupied, until I started to believe the ghost stories told about this place. It wasn’t haunted by the gargoyles, but by something else. But the tone of the next declaration Wulfstan made had the others pushed closer.

“No!” The massive gargoyle rushed forward then, fangs bared, claws outstretched, only for Graven and the others to leap forward, so that when Wulfstan struck, it was them, not me, that he hit.

“No, brother...” Graven’s voice was low and reassuring. “Not like this.”

“Jade, you need to get out of here,” Harry said, shooting a wary look at the gargoyles. “We can tell you—”

“No!” Wulfstan seemed to come back to himself with a blink, those dark eyes focussing on me, his eyelids creasing in concern. “I mean, yes, that’s perhaps for the best.” It was as if he donned a mask then, covering up whatever the hell was going on and providing us with an intimidating facade to look upon. “Graven can tell you... what happened here.”

“I—” the gargoyle in question went to say.

“No.” I stepped forward, daring to get closer and seeing the moment Wulfstan flinched. “You said you’d tell me. Tell me what happened...” I swallowed, realising how intrusive that command was. “I mean, tell me what you can and then I’ll go. You promised.”

A tiny little smile, barely more than an involuntary twitch of his lips that was gone before I could even properly register what it was, seemed to herald some sort of calm in him. All I got was a small nod in acknowledgment before Daniel came up to me.

“Jaaade...” he said, in a shaky voice. “You don’t need to do this. I might have said I wanted to know what the deal was, but ghosts are usually a whole lot less corporeal and they don’t look like they could crush your head with just a forefinger and a pinky.”

“It’ll be OK.”

“Pretty sure Fay Wray said the same before King Kong... y’know...”

“It’ll be fine,” I said, not sure which of us I was trying to persuade. “I’m supposed to be some sort of witch.” As I stepped forward, the light in my palms started to glow. “So, surely I can do this.”

“Tell your story, brother.” Carrick moved in and swept me up into his arms, not moving forward until my arm went around his shoulders. “Tell our mate what she needs to know and then let us be done with this.”

“Mate...?” I looked at him, then Wulfstan. “You’re also my—?”

“Mate,” Wulfstan confirmed, with a strange kind of resignation. “I’ve waited for you for thousands of years, lass, and now here you are.” He settled down on the steps that led up to the other cells on the next level and that seemed to relax everyone. “If you’d only come before this place was built. Before...” Those dark eyes fell to the floor, boring into it now. “Before that bastard tore everyone and everything inside these walls apart.”

I already knew about some of the exploits of Luther Whiteley, because the tour guide had described some of his more... objectionable... pursuits in detail. Cruelty in the early days of the mental health field was not a new thing, but what had set Luther apart was the level he’d gone to. He’d abandoned all pretence of therapeutic goals inside these walls, indulging instead in an orgy of pain for his own pleasure.

Using Wulfstan as his weapon of choice.

“Magic takes energy,” Wulfstan said, in a quiet voice. “Witches, warlocks, they have to get their energy from

somewhere, and in the old days it was from the land. Performing rituals at the solstices and equinoxes, harvesting potent herbs and plants to produce potions.” His focus shifted up, his eyes staring into mine. “Even gathering together to create a coven, with the power of everyone involved becoming more than the sum of its parts, using the collective to raise a different kind of power. Emotions are a very real, very potent well for a witch to draw from, so they might inspire greater depths in each other. For a practitioner of white magic, that well might be filled with love, loyalty, fealty, compassion.” His eyes slid sideways towards the room with all of the terrible apparatus inside it. “For followers of the dark, any emotion is useful.”

Everyone followed the line of his gaze, all of us easily able to imagine what those pieces of equipment might’ve been used for.

“But human beings aren’t all light or all dark,” Danny said, with a frown. He looked at the room, then back at us. “There’s plenty of people that do shit with gear far worse than that.”

“And no good can come from it,” Wulfstan muttered.

“What in the puritanical fuck?” Daniel replied. “I don’t know about gargoyles, but every human being hates as well as loves, feels sadness as well as joy. You can’t separate human experience into good and bad baskets.”

“No?” We all tensed when Wulfstan leaned forward, but it was just to rest his elbows on his knees. “What if you were to dive deep into that darkness, never bothering to come up for anything good? What if you allowed others to be dragged in by that undertow, without their consent? As they screamed, ‘No!’, begging to be spared from such things. What if you gloried in such violence and depravity, so that the act was not what helped to raise your power but the violation of it? There are some who take pleasure from pain, it is true.”

He seemed to see Daniel clearly now, his eyes narrowing.

“But people like that rarely lasted long in Luther’s world. He didn’t want willing victims, because they weren’t the most potent fuel.” His eyes flicked around the massive lobby of Z

Ward. “This place was built to be hell on earth and he ensured that the people locked up in here would not be missed by those citizens on the outside. Quite the opposite. If they died, well, good riddance to bad rubbish, most would’ve said. Rapists, murderers, child killers, not one of them was without sin, but... Luther didn’t trust the Christian hell to punish these sinners. He created this place and...”

Wulfstan’s eyes searched mine and there was something fragile there. Hope, I realised. But it died quickly and I felt a pang of loss.

“...he made me its Devil. He was a cruel and unyielding god and I was his means to punish the sinners. Over and over. I...”

When his voice caught on the words, when his claws flexed, as if he would tear the words he had to say from the air, I moved forward.

“But you didn’t want to,” I said, and somehow I knew that was true. The other gargoyles muttered to themselves when I got closer, but I kept moving. “That wasn’t what you wanted to do.” I climbed the steps, even though every muscle in my body quivered as I moved, until I reached him, seeing, feeling just how massive he was.

“Jade...” Graven growled.

“Watch yourself, brother,” Carrick said and, from the sounds behind me, I could tell he was moving slowly closer. This was confirmed when Wulfstan’s eyes jerked up, his whole body tensing. His wings partially unfurled and rather than sitting on the step, he crouched, ready to leap into action.

“Wulfstan...” I said, hands outstretched, but he wasn’t seeing me. He wasn’t even seeing the others, I didn’t think. Something else was playing out in his head as his tail flicked back and forth. “Wulfstan, everything’s OK. You’re going to tell me your story and then we’re going to leave you in peace, remember?”

“Jesus, Jade!” Daniel sprinted forward, grabbing me by the arm, ready to drag me back down the stairs. “I know you love

a project, but a gargoyle the size of a mid-sized truck is not the right one.”

And that’s when it all went to hell.

Wulfstan went from a thinking, feeling creature to a reactive one. His eyes dropped down to where Daniel’s hand gripped my arm, and his fangs were bared a moment later.

“No, brother!” Carrick shouted, leaping forward, but that just made everything worse.

A growl the sound of about a thousand angry pit bull terriers filled the lobby. Danny let out a yelp, dragging me backwards by my arm, but we didn’t get far. A massive clawed hand snapped out, grabbing me by my other wrist.

“NO!” Wulfstan’s response echoed throughout the hall, the word getting larger with each reverberation, but people had been saying no for some time within its walls and not getting far with it.

“Let her go!” Seneca cried, leaping forward, but he was too late.

Claws pricked my skin, not enough to make me bleed, but enough for it to hurt. I thought of the marks I’d seen on Daniel’s body in my dream and then pulled in a breath.

“Wulfstan...” My voice was a string pulled too tight. “I need you to let me go now, please?”

When I saw the look of horror on his face, I questioned my ancestor’s sanity, for if that had been the expression Wulfstan wore as Luther forced him to do more and more diabolical things, then Luther should’ve been the one locked away. But rich psychopaths were able to maintain their habits in ways poor ones weren’t, so of course, that wasn’t what had happened. Wulfstan sucked in a breath and then let me go so suddenly that Danny and I stumbled backwards and into the arms of the other gargoyles.

“Get Jade out of here!” Graven ordered, then spun around to confront Wulfstan, or perhaps to fight him to the death if that was what was required. I didn’t get to see which, because his wings flapped out, creating a barrier between us and the

rogue gargoyle. “Get her back to the house now. Wulfstan is bound to Z Ward, not The Eyrie, so he cannot leave its walls without permission. I’ll hold him off...”

But whatever Graven had to say, it was cut off as Seneca tossed me over his shoulder, then leapt into the air, flying up, up, up until we landed on the roof of the main house.

“You can’t ever go back there,” he said, the minute he set me down on my feet. “Promise me that, Jade, promise!”

But I couldn’t. I knew why he needed to hear me say it, but my eyes were drawn across the grass, back to the hulking shape of Z Ward. Carrick and Graven landed not long afterwards and stepped forward.

“Wulfstan was a great gargoyle once...” Graven said in an overly calm tone. “But the master...” His eyes flicked to look at each one of us. “He left his mark on every gargoyle in the flock, but he was obsessed with Wulfstan. His ability to withstand the master’s will, to resist him right up until he was forced to do something completely dire. It was a game the master relished. They became tied together in a way a warlock rarely is with a gargoyle.” He shook his head slowly. “We save our hearts for our fated mates only, but Wulf... Through Luther’s persistence in trying to break him, he managed to do something else entirely. Something we still don’t completely understand.”

As if in counterpoint to his speech, a ragged scream cut through the air, but this time I didn’t jump in fear. A sob rose in my throat, one I tried to swallow back down as I straightened up.

“I know what it’s like, to find yourself in a relationship so terrible you can’t see a way out of it.”

“Jade, no—” Carrick started to say.

“When you become something else, something the old you would never even recognise.” I stared at the black outline of the building. “Where you wonder if he’s the monster, or it’s you that’s become one.” I shook my head. “We have to find a way to free Wulfstan.”



“And if you do, then what?” Graven stepped forward, wings starting to unfurl. “He’s only bound to Z Ward, not the estate. What if he hurts someone? Worse, what if he hurts you?” He darted a sidelong look at the others, then shook his head. “That male’s head is scrambled by everything he was put through. There’s nothing in him that would want to hurt a single hair on anyone’s head. No one except for Luther, that is. But deprived of his vengeance, his mind plays tricks on him. He’s attacked masters before who’ve tried to rehabilitate him, thinking to bring him back into the fold. But when the devil rides him, all he sees is Luther.”

Graven moved closer, his hands feeling heavy, weighted down with his concern, when they landed on my shoulders.

“A dreaded enemy or a lover he must hold close: I don’t think Wulfstan knew which towards the end. He screamed for days when Luther died, after he’d killed every single inhabitant of Z Ward. Their bodies were buried somewhere off the property in paupers’ graves, with little fanfare. He didn’t stop screaming until Luther’s body was lowered into the family plot. Because when Luther was laid to rest, so was Wulfstan. He took the solace of the stone more and more until he couldn’t be roused again; until now.”

Until I’d woken him, that went unspoken. I hadn’t meant to do it, nor to cause the gargoyle such pain, but now that I had, I couldn’t ignore it. I had all of this money and power now. There had to be a way I could help...

“Take me to Mother Agnes,” I said, staring into Graven’s eyes.

“Jade—”

“We agreed that I need to develop my powers to keep myself safe and to learn how to defend myself. Well, I can learn how to heal as well. Take me to Mother Agnes so I can learn how to wield all this power I’ve been gifted.”

Graven stepped forward and hoisted me up into his arms, but did he do that because he agreed with what I was saying or because I was mistress of this house? I couldn’t work out which, but that didn’t seem to matter.

“Bitch, you’re going to magic school?” a familiar voice asked, as Daniel appeared on the roof. “You’re taking me with you!” When he took a running leap at Seneca, the gargoyle was forced to put his arms out to catch him, or risk Danny going tumbling off the edge. “Alright then, gargoyles, let’s make with the flappy flaps. Fuckery awaits!”

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# Chapter 43

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## *Graven*

Doing the right thing for the wrong reason, that's what my mother would've called what we were doing, I thought to myself as we landed outside of Mother Agnes' tent. I could barely remember my mother's face, recalling instead the soft burr of her voice, the scent of the lavender and rosewater she always wore that hung around her like a cloud, but she would have thought this a bad business, that was for certain. A feeling Mother Agnes seemed to share when we walked back into her tent.

"Back again?" She arched an eyebrow at that. "I can't teach you unless your energy is..." She set down the knitting she'd been working on and then got to her feet, peering at Jade. "What's been happening? Your energy and theirs," she waved her hand around, "it's all chaotic."

"Wulfstan," I replied, because there was no need to explain further. Everyone in the magical community knew his fate.

"The Beast of Z Ward?" When she said that, Jade flinched. "What, is he...?" Her eyes, green like a cat's, swung to me and then Agnes smiled. "Oh no. No. Well, that's a pretty piece of poetic justice, if there ever was one."

“What does that mean?” Jade asked. “What does any of this mean? I feel like everyone talks in damn riddles all the time.”

“Helps with the woo-woo aura of the place,” Daniel said, but he shrank back against Jade when Agnes’ focus shifted to him. “Apologies, your witchy-poo-ness. Don’t turn me into a toad, please. I’m too pretty to become a reptile.”

“Transfiguration requires far too much energy to achieve,” she said, narrowing her eyes as she stared at him, then Jade. “You’ve brought a human into our world? That rarely goes well.”

“The human decided he was coming,” my mate replied. “Try and keep him away.”

“So this is your McGonagall?” Daniel asked me. “She’s going to help you free the mad gargoyle?”

“You want to free The Beast?” Agnes said, in alarm.

In some ways it was gratifying to hear an echo of my own response. It meant that my fears weren’t completely unfounded. Seeing Jade step forward and into Z Ward... Beyond the fact I saw the ghosts of that place, heard their screams with every step, it was moreso the reality that Wulfstan was the biggest of us and the least controlled. When she’d stepped towards him I’d thought my heart would burst from the sudden surge of apprehension. But gargoyles don’t show fear. We are sought after for our stoicism, our strength and so I had forced myself to silently watch her step right up to Wulf...

“He’s been locked up in Z Ward for nearly a hundred years,” Jade said.

“Because he’s a danger to himself and others.”

“I would be too, if I was forced to live within the walls of the place where I was violently abused and where I’d been forced to abuse other people.” Jade took in a steady breath, consciously forcing herself to calm down. “He’s been forced to re-experience his trauma over and over. Each time he wakes up, he’s traumatised again by what was done to him and what

he did to others. I'm assuming there aren't any gargoyle therapists around—”

“No, it's not a field our stone brothers tend to get into,” Agnes replied with a tight smile.

“So then I need to fix this.”

“Jade...” I sighed out her name, wanting to warn her to curtail her ambitions, all the while knowing we'd move heaven and earth to help her achieve them. The fact she would work so hard to try and save our brother made my heart swell, but an equal and opposite sadness rose with it. “Lass, not everyone can come back from—”

“Don't.” My mate didn't carry herself like any of the other masters I'd had, but at that moment her aura of command rivalled the power of any of them. “Don't write him off. Don't say ‘this is the way things are’, otherwise what's the point of having all this power and money?”

“Gucci,” Daniel said, ticking off one finger. “Dolce and Gabbana—”

“I'm gonna Dolce your Gabbana in a minute,” Jade muttered, shooting him a dark look. “I thought the point of having more money than God was to make changes. If I can't help people, make things better, then...” She blinked at me. “I don't want to be heir to the Whiteley estate.”

And that's when I realised how serious she was. It felt like a cold knife sliding into my guts, the idea of her rejecting her position as heir. It wasn't just that another would be found to take her place, like that Adam, or that The Eyrie would be broken up, sold off, with the proceeds of the sale going to the other First Families.

We wouldn't be able to keep watch over her.

She would be out there in the world, living her life exposed to all manner of dangers and we'd be tied to this house or another, doing the bidding of men who didn't deserve our loyalty, protecting those who had no business being protected. My wings rustled, as if in readiness to snatch her up, and for just a moment I fantasised about it. Of flying her

far, far away from all of this. We could find a nice cave to live in and she'd—

“Goddess, you're like Madeline.” Agnes' voice cut through my reverie. “I knew her well. Did you know that?”

“No,” Jade said, as the other woman steered her towards the back of the tent.

“I helped her to determine the nature of the Whiteley curse before she performed it because the things are notoriously tricky to put in place. All those fables about heroes working out a way to get around the curse conditions have people getting very creative in their attempts to avoid its restrictions.”

Agnes sat down in her throne-like chair.

“I told her to include this: that if the Whiteley family didn't recognise the true heir to the family fortune, they'd be cursed to see all of their fortunes and their influence wane with each generation, until one who shared Madeline's blood and theirs would see them restored or...” Jade leaned forward and that icy blade slid deeper into my heart as Agnes continued, “...it would be lost forever. It took some time for the Whiteleys to realise Madeline's curse had come true. And as fewer and fewer gargoyles wakened for each new master of the house and the Whiteley fortunes and power waned, so did those of the other First Families.”

The witch grinned toothily.

“I admit, that was an unforeseen little moment of triumph. The lot of them are so closely intertwined, you can't bring down one without the other.”

“So that's what I have to do to help Wulfstan?” Jade asked. “Bring down the First Families?”

“You can if you like—I certainly won't stop you—but no. What you want to do is the hardest thing of all, and that's to heal that gargoyle. Nature, ageing, entropy, they're all natural forces that create disease and injury in a body.”

“But there's nothing natural about what Wulfstan went through,” Jade insisted.

“No, and that will help you. Trying to cure someone of cancer? You need to remove all of the cancerous cells in someone’s body, otherwise it’ll just come back, but what might you be removing at the same time? Brain cells? Liver cells? You can kill someone by trying to help. But magical injuries are something different again. We use energy to create magic.”

She flicked her fingers and a small green glow appeared in her hand.

“It’s supposed to be used for good.” Agnes nodded to Jade. “Just like you said. If we can’t use it to make the world better, what’s the point? But some don’t.” The green ball grew darker, the healthy green turning to a vile poisonous shade. “Some use that energy to disrupt that which lies within another and that creates illness, sickness, even death.”

She leaned over and blew the green ball forward, and Jade’s friend, Daniel, skittered out of the way, but it wasn’t him that Agnes directed the ball at. It sailed through the air, zeroing in on a small plant in a brightly painted pot. The plant’s green foliage gleamed all the brighter for just a second, right before the ball hit it. The sphere of energy didn’t smash the plant to pieces. Rather the light shivered, then dived down into the soil, into the roots.

The effect was not instantaneous, but when the first brown spot appeared on a leaf, Jade and Daniel gasped. It was almost as though their reaction encouraged the spell, because soon another formed, then another. The stalk of the plant started to wilt and all of the vitality left the leaves. It was dying.

“That plant is from a cutting,” Agnes told us with a wry smile. “A tricky one to get to strike as well. It’s a new plant, full of energy, but I’ve used that same energy to corrupt it. Energy helps it draw in oxygen through its leaves. Energy helps it to turn that sunlight into starch through photosynthesis. The circulatory system transports that energy around the plant to fuel it, but the poison I’ve exposed it to is transported around by the same system. I’ve expended some power to create the poison, but it would require much more power for me to kill it outright in one blow.” She turned to

Jade, still smiling slightly. “Better to use an organism’s own system to do the job for me.”

“Like Wulfstan...” Jade’s brows drew down deeper the longer she stared at the plant. “It isn’t just the fact he was brutalised and forced to brutalise others. He’s kept within a cage that reinforces that initial abuse over and over until...” Her eyes suddenly flicked up to meet Agnes’ gaze. “Fix it.”

“What?!”

I took a step forward, as did my flockmates. One didn’t come into the abode of such a powerful witch as Mother Agnes and start ordering her around. The witch’s expression changed in an instant, all trace of gentleness gone. But my mate stared the older woman down with the kind of defiance that was both exhilarating and terrifying to see.

“Fix the plant,” Jade clarified. “You grew it from a cutting and—”

With a twist of Agnes’ wrist, the process of decay we’d watched was completely reversed. Well, almost. The stalk wasn’t quite as tall as it had been, and a leaf or two were still a little limp, but it had been brought back from the brink of death. However, that wasn’t my mate’s focus, I was sure of it. She got to her feet, walking over to the plant and studying it closely, reaching a hand out to touch it. A protest formed on my lips. It could still be poisonous. I never would’ve brought Jade here if I hadn’t thought Agnes was a trustworthy teacher, but I dreaded the thought that I might have put her in danger.

Could any of us trust the witches and warlocks of this world? They were powerful creatures, ruled only by their own moral codes. I moved quickly to Jade’s side, and Agnes laughed.

“I won’t harm your lady love, Graven, son of Merriam. There aren’t enough witches left in the world, with the way things have gone. And Jade...” She let out a sigh as my mate stroked the leaf of the plant. “Well, suffice to say that we’ve been waiting for her for some time. Almost as long as you have.”



“What does that mean?” Daniel hissed at me, having sidled up to me, careful to keep my body between him and Agnes. “If Jade is some kind of chosen one, we need to know what prophecy is in motion, what role she’s supposed to play.”

But before I could consider any of that, Jade turned to Agnes.

“Show me.”

Gods above, I needed to talk to her urgently about the appropriate etiquette to use when addressing a fellow witch. I turned to Agnes, ready to make the necessary apologies, to see that this time the older woman smiled wryly.

“No, Jade, daughter of Mandy, I cannot show you how to heal the Beast of Z Ward’s injuries.”

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## Chapter 44

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*Jade*

“What?” I said, blinking with surprise at Agnes’ formal rejection.

“I’m not going to show you—” she began to repeat.

“No. Sorry, I heard that part but...” I blinked again, as the feeling of hope that’d started growing in me the moment I’d watched that plant begin to die, then come back to life, seemed to perish in the plant’s place. “Why not?”

“How badly do you want to free the Beast?” she asked.

“Call him Wulfstan,” I insisted.

“Uh... Jade, maybe tone that shit down a bit,” Daniel hissed, dodging around Graven and putting a warning hand on my arm. “The lady is like a walking bottle of Roundup and I’m fairly sure she could take us out with about as much effort as she did the plants.”

I shook him off.

“Wulfstan, then,” Agnes said, nodding regally to me. “I cannot show you how to heal him, *yet*.”

I'd drawn in a deep breath as she started speaking, ready to launch forth with all the reasons why she should do exactly that, when I heard the last word.

“Yet? Why not now?”

She let out a long-suffering sigh, something I remembered well from my Year 10 maths teacher, but Mr French had been nowhere near as elegant in his demeanour. As Agnes swept forward, Daniel took a cautious step backwards. Hands knotted with age took mine, squeezing them. Graven muttered something, and I could sense all three gargoyles on high alert, but Agnes simply smiled gently at me.

“You are brand new to your magic and powerful.” I took a hopeful breath and held it, before letting it out in a sigh as she continued. “But inexperienced with it. It's all too easy when healing to give and give of your energy until you have nothing left to support your own systems. You could die healing Wulfstan in your current untrained state.”

“Jade, please...” Carrick stepped forward. “Wulfstan is our brother, but in his lucid moments, he wouldn't want this for you. He deserves to be freed.”

“Finally,” I growled, shooting everyone a dark look. “Someone agrees with me.”

He shot me a rakish smile in response.

“Of course, my mate, in all things.” But that sly wink of his made me think that was not entirely true. “But Agnes is a widely respected practitioner of magic. If she says not yet...”

Then it really meant not yet, that went unsaid. Agnes squeezed my hands again in sympathy.

“If it makes you feel any better, all neophytes are anxious to learn, to come into their power. You can use that passion to help you focus on your studies.”

“Fine.” Why did it feel so wrong to cede that point? Because of guilt, that's why. It was bad enough that I was lolling around in a mansion as other people struggled. I was now doing so knowing that there was a jail hidden amongst the pretty gardens of the estate, one where an undeserving

prisoner was being held. “So how do I start? You said to visualise what I want—”

“Not yet.” A little pat on the hand, that was all the dismissal I got. “I would not attempt to work with you with the way your energy is right now. And when you have come into your power, you must be sure to be aware of your energy and not work magic unless you are sure you are balanced.” Agnes tapped her sternum. “When your energy is chaotic, the results of your spells will be too. We need to be calm, centred before we try to do anything. Emotions are an unruly form of energy. They can be very powerful, but hard to direct. Go, rest.” She smiled as she looked across at the gargoyles. “Spend some time with your fated mates. You’ll need to decide whether or not you wish to accept the bond.”

“But I can’t be with all of them.”

Taking a step away from Agnes was rude, I knew that, but that’s what I did. My eyes raked across everyone in the room, taking in their individual expression. Seneca, full of hope. Carrick, suddenly serious. Graven, worried, that’s what that small frown meant. And Daniel, wide-eyed and full of wonder, but also worried for me. I was surrounded by people who cared about me, which normally would have lifted me up, but I couldn’t stop thinking of Wulfstan... I closed my eyes and saw him again, hiding within the shadows of Z Ward, then I shivered as I heard the echo of his scream. Opening my eyes, I asked them, straight out.

“Wulfstan’s my mate too, isn’t he?”

I almost wanted them to say no, to help shift the immense feeling of responsibility that was crushing down upon me.

“Jade—” Graven started to say.

“He is.” Carrick shot the other gargoyle a dark look. “There’s no point pretending otherwise. He wouldn’t have woken if it wasn’t for Jade. He belongs to you.”

And that was the problem. My hand found my breastbone, rubbing at the skin there beneath my t-shirt. An itch had started there, a sort of nervous rash that only got worse each

time I worried at it. Before I had been given the news of my inheritance, I'd been wrapped up in my own pain, my own fall from grace. Although coming into possession of the house had alleviated so many of those problems, there were others that had taken their place, and these were inarguably weightier. Money and power might allow you to make greater changes, but that meant your responsibilities grew, too.

"I need a drink," I said.

"Jesus, fuck. Me too." Daniel appeared by my side, a gleam in his eye, then thrust his arm out for me to take. This was normal, familiar, although a little odd in this context, but I forced myself to smile.

"I think I know just the place." And when I considered what might happen with the combination of Daniel and alcohol at the satyr's bar, my fake smile turned into a smirk.

"Well, well, well. Look who's back!"

SILENUS STOOD up from behind his stall and that's when I saw for myself exactly what he was. His goat-like eyes with their vertical slit of a pupil had been a sure-fire hint the first time I'd met him. But having a vague idea of what he might look like and seeing that his legs were totally the hindquarters of a goat were two very different things. And then there was the cute little tail that swished as Silenus watched us look at him, while we tried not to make it obvious we were staring.

"Decided to take me up on my offer, Mistress?" Those alien yellow eyes glinted with mischief, then swivelled to take Daniel in. "And who do we have here? The more, the merrier, I say."

"He..." Daniel was jabbing a finger at the satyr. "He..."

I grabbed his hand and pulled it down.

"Daniel, this is Silenus. Silenus, this is Daniel."

"*Chairomai pou se gnorizo,*" the satyr said, offering his hand. Still relatively speechless, Daniel took it with a kind of rapt fascination. Silenus didn't shake his hand so much as slide his palm slowly across Daniel's. "Aren't you the pretty one?"

“He’s a faun!” Daniel whispered, not so quietly, finally coming out of his reverie. “Like, I admit to reading some Mr Tumnus smut—”

“What? That’s a character from a kid’s book!” I shot back.

“Rule 34, bitch. Look it up,” Daniel said.

“Satyr,” Silenus corrected. “Fauns are ridiculous little nature spirits that haunt Roman woods, whereas I am a whole lot more...”

His hand slid down and I made the mistake of letting my gaze follow its path. Whoa! *Eyes up top, Jade*, I told myself. *Eyes up top.*

“So, Silenus, I told Daniel all about your amazing wine.” I had actually told him about it, on the walk to the tavern. “And we thought—”

“Say no more.” The satyr moved behind the bar. He had poured three glasses and was handing ours to us with a flourish when the gargoyles arrived. We’d lost them in the crowd, as we were able to weave between people with far more ease than they could.

“Jade—” Graven said, in that grumpy tone of his.

“Your next words better be: ‘get as drunk as you like, fated mate, because I will fly you home to your bed when you’re done’.”

Daniel looked at me as I imitated Graven’s deep voice, then burst out laughing.

“Well, if he won’t, I will,” Carrick said, stepping forward. “And I’ll have one of those too, while you’re at it, Silenus.”

“A party?” The satyr’s eyes gleamed. With a broad smile, he grabbed a brace of wine glasses in one hand and then tucked a couple of bottles of wine under his other arm. “This is the kind of occasion I can rise to.” He shot Daniel and I a slow wink as we sat down with our drinks in our hands. “Yamas!”

I had no idea what that meant, but I raised the wine glass in salute before putting it to my lips and tipping my head back. The sour sweet flavour of the wine slid over my taste buds and

down my throat, and I wanted to get to the point where I could forget the look in Wulfstan's eyes: imploring, blank with trauma, shining with a manic light that frankly terrified me. With each sip, I swallowed down every image etched in my mind of the gargoyle.

Several glasses in and I could barely feel my face, which was just the way I wanted it.

"Soo..." Daniel was leaning way too far across the table as he peered down at Silenus' lap. "How does that work? Because Jade has gargoyles with these stone things in their dicks."

"Exactly as you think, pretty one," Silenus replied, smiling slowly. "Though perhaps a hands-on demonstration might be more... illuminating than verbal instruction?"

"So, they're totally gonna fuck tonight," I announced, my head swinging loosely on my neck as I turned around to address the gargoyles.

"Licentious creatures..." Seneca said, his eyes narrowing.

"Probably." Carrick shrugged before smiling in a quite licentious way across the table at me. His dark eyes held mine as something long and prehensile slid up my leg. "Though, as much as I like your friend, it's not the way *he* will spend his night that interests me."

"What? Oh!" I twitched on the bench seat as something... his tail? Whatever it was, it wended its way higher and higher up my leg until it slid against the crotch of my jeans. "Carrick!"

"Show some self-control," Graven growled at the other gargoyle, then cast his dark gaze across the other tables. I looked where he did, seeing each one filled with a cornucopia of creatures, all drinking, laughing, chatting with each other.

"I am." Carrick's growl dragged my attention back to him. "I haven't spread my mate across this table and poured wine over her naked body, have I?"

"You could do that?" Seneca asked, peering more closely at me.

“Pour it straight into that cute little belly button of hers, then slurp it out with your tongue. It’s the best way to drink wine,” Carrick replied with a wink. “Of course, together we could have even more fun.”

“Carrick, that’s enough,” Graven growled.

“Whyyy?”

Where the hell had that come from? Oh, me. The head of Carrick’s tail inched up higher and as I squirmed, I felt a rush of wetness. A gasp escaped my lips, because I’d never done anything like this.

All around us, beings were caught up in their own little worlds, unaware of the fact that mine had narrowed down to a steady throb between my legs. Part of it was the ache left behind by both Seneca and Carrick, part of it was a need to repeat that experience and become lost in that same bliss.

Because otherwise I’d dwell on everything that happened tonight.

I shoved the more recent memories away. It was just for tonight, I promised myself. I couldn’t help Wulfstan right now, as Agnes had made clear. Instead I could... Carrick’s smile widened as his tail started to rub me right where I needed it, his rhythm only faltering a little when he saw my lips fall open on another gasp, and my eyes half-close as my head dropped back.

“Undo your button,” he urged, his voice suddenly deeper, gravelly.

“Gods, Carrick,” Graven hissed. “You’d debauch our mate in a public place?” His tone and his expression were the same: furious.

“Debauch?” Carrick’s lusty expression shifted to one that was darker, almost malevolent, and I didn’t like it one bit. “Debauching is for satyrs.” He nodded to where Silenus and Daniel were shifting closer and closer to each other. “Jade is no tumble in the grass for me. She is my world and I would do anything to keep her happy.” His dark eyes burned as they



flicked back to meet mine. “So undo your button, sweet mate. I smell your desire and I would satisfy it.”

I looked around me and saw no one was looking our way. We were tucked away in a corner table, the only thing close to me was the bar itself, but... Daniel was at the table and Graven was staring down at me with a forbidding expression.

Which was perhaps why I did what I did.

Graven wanted to protect me, I knew that. He'd made that clear in everything he did, which was so refreshing. To be cared for? That was something I felt like I hadn't experienced in such a long time that my soul sucked it up greedily. But along with my need to be nurtured, there was a desire for pleasure, to lose myself in the sort of ecstasy I'd only found with these gargoyles.

The pain of not knowing how to change Wulfstan's fate was a familiar thing. I felt powerless, useless, but also strangely responsible and that was all part and parcel of a heavy yoke I wasn't prepared to put back on, not just yet. So, I reached down under the table, my eyes on the crowd around us, but then only on Carrick and Seneca. My lover of last night leaned forward, those massive arms that had held me so tight flexing as he watched my every move, and I knew he was eager to learn more.

*Yes, that, I thought. Keep watching me. Keep seeing me.*

Biting my lip, trying to appear as if there was nothing untoward going on beneath the table, I flicked the button of my jeans open with quivering fingers, and his tail slid along the zipper before easing it down.

Leathery, slightly roughened skin against mine, it felt insanely intimate right now, a little gasp escaping me before I could stifle it. Oh, god, his tail moved like a tentacle, wedging itself in between the denim and my skin, each little wiggle sending dull waves of pleasure that I knew would get so much more intense if he worked it lower. With another quick look to check on the other patrons, I put my hands behind me and straightened my arms so I could lean back and enable easier access.

“Gods above...” Graven growled, then his wings flapped outward, creating a kind of tent around us that shielded me from being seen by any of those at the other tables.

My cheeks flushed bright pink as I stared up at him. I knew that many people would judge this behaviour as bad, shameful even, but any thoughts I had about impropriety were driven out of me the moment the slender tip of Carrick’s tail parted my folds. The feel of it rubbing against my clit was tantalising, despite being a little clumsy and imprecise to start with, due to the constricted conditions he had to work in. But the promise of what it could do, the prospect of endless pleasure, had me staring up at Graven, mutely pleading for him not to stop this.

His jaw flexed, his full lips now a thin line as he stared right back. Galaxies could’ve been formed and destroyed in those dark eyes while he considered what I was asking. when he nodded, I let out a great sigh.

“Quietly, little one...” he said in a very low, rumbly voice that reverberated right through me, making me shudder and ramping me up even more. “You’re going to need to be very, very quiet.”

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## Chapter 45

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*Carrick*

I knew Graven would take me to task for this later, but as I felt the liquid slip of my mate's slick as my tail rubbed against her most tender flesh, I couldn't bring myself to regret it. Her little pants of pleasure, they were what had been missing from this night. I mourned my brother Wulfstan's fate, but what Agnes had said was true. We couldn't do anything about the situation immediately, or perhaps for some time. Not until our mistress was strong enough to control the power inside her. That did not mean we couldn't enjoy the night.

Fuuuck...

My cock was so hard, seed was leaking from the end. I remembered just what her tight little cunt had felt like as she'd squeezed all of the pearls she could take and I needed that again, so much that my balls were aching with it. But first I needed to tend to my mate. She had her own pearl and I knew when I found it, because she shot up to sit ramrod straight on the bench seat, her eyes wide, before looking nervously around.

"Perhaps we should take this back to The Eyrie?" Seneca said, swallowing hard.

“We will. But not yet,” I told him before turning to Jade. “You look so beautiful when we please you, my mate.”

“Ohh...?” Jade said, her response more a gasp than any sort of coherent reply.

She swayed on her seat, eyes shut tight, her little mewling breaths turning heavier. Graven’s wings tightened around us all to keep that beauty for our eyes alone.

“What the hell are you doing to our mate?” Seneca hissed.

“I don’t need to tell you which hole it goes in, do I, fledgling?” I said with a smirk.

“You arrogant bastard,” he shot back. “Do I need to remind you that I was the one Jade chose last night. Me.”

“And you turned to stone while still inside her, didn’t you?” His cheeks darkened slightly. “No matter: we left things too late, but that will not happen tonight.” I focussed back on Jade. “Come for me, beautiful girl, just once and I’ll take as many bottles of wine as we can carry back to the estate and demonstrate exactly what can be done with them.”

My focus narrowed back down to just her and the way she felt against my tail: the slippery feel of her folds parting, the way her little pearl hardened as it peeked out of its hood, showing how it needed this, just like she did. But as I began to set up a good rhythm, I found I wasn’t the only one that wanted to be part of the action.

“Fledgling...” I growled as I felt another tail slide against mine. It couldn’t be Graven. That male was quietly losing his mind at such a public disgrace.

“We need to learn to work together,” Seneca said, eyes bright, completely unrepentant. I winced as his tail shoved mine against the teeth of Jade’s zip, but then it wriggled lower.

“Oh god...” Jade whispered, her hands slapping down on the table.

“You OK, Jade?” Daniel asked, the satyr’s spell over him breaking for a moment and I wondered then how my mistress would respond.

“Fi-i-ine...” she managed to get out, continuing, with an indrawn breath. “I-I’m fine.”

“Let’s all have another drink.”

Silenus’ smile made it clear he knew exactly what we were up to. As he leaned over to fill our glasses again, he inhaled deeply. His nostrils flared and his pupils grew wide then he turned to Daniel.

“I think we should begin our lessons now.” The satyr nodded to the tent at the back of the bar area.

“So, you want to show me...?” The blue-haired man’s eyes slid down Silenus’ body, then he blindly grabbed at his wine and downed the lot. “OK, let’s go.”

“Wait. Danny...?” Jade slapped a hand down over her crotch, making clear we were to pause what we were doing. “Are you sure? I mean, you’ve been drinking.”

“So’ve you, babe, and you’re gonna get ploughed by special peen for the rest of the night.” He laughed then winked at Jade. “Don’t blame me for wanting the same.”

And with that he got to his feet, weaving only slightly before taking Silenus’ hand, and they sauntered away.

“So, where were we?” I said, beginning to move my tail again.

Gods, I’d never get used to this feeling, like I held Jade’s pleasure in the palm of my hand. But now it was not just me. That little prick, Seneca, was a quick study. The end of his tail delved lower, then pressed inside her. I knew exactly when because her whole body stiffened, vibrating in response, like a tuning fork after being struck. And, if Seneca’s ragged breath was anything to go by, she then clenched around him.

“Quietly,” Graven ordered us, before turning to Jade. “You can do that, little one. Don’t alert the world to what we share.”

“Can’t...” Her voice sounded high and thready, and the sound made my smile widen with the knowledge that we were the ones to destroy her composure.

“Then I’ll need to help you.”

I looked up from my focus on Jade to see the stiff-necked bastard unbend for just long enough to brush his lips against hers. Jade flung her arms around his neck, clinging to him like she was a drowning swimmer and he was her only means to survive the waves. The shift in position partially lifted her ripe little bottom off the bench, which gave us greater access. Seneca let out a helpless little sound as his tail pushed deeper, and I couldn't even bring myself to mock him, because I felt the same.

Everything about her drove us mad. I couldn't wait until we were back at The Eyrie to have her. I needed her now, my cock throbbing in protest. I wanted to rub the pearls along my shaft hard and fast, force myself to come on the dirt floor beneath the table, just to ease the ache inside me. But I didn't. I would not spill my seed until I was seated deep inside her. Instead, I focused on her pleasure and started to flicker the tip of my tail against her, creating a strange kind of vibration that must've hit the spot, because she convulsed against Graven, kissing him wildly. But our flock leader, he kissed her right back with a passion that matched hers, then surpassed it, his claws closing around her throat, as if to hold her right where he wanted her as he took her mouth.

"Gods, she's so wet," Seneca rasped and I knew exactly what he was talking about. I felt her gush against my tail, right before it happened. Graven's wings tightened, right as he swallowed down her moans of pleasure, her nails raking across his back in time with the paroxysms of pleasure that rocked through her.

"Grab the wine, fledgling," I ordered, rising from my seat, making clear to anyone who bothered to look what we were about.

I was monstrously hard in response to my mistress' pleasure and I was determined to provoke more. I pulled her from Graven's arms, eliciting a low growl from him, but I ignored that as I leapt up, beating my wings with all my power, taking for the sky in great sweeps as she let out a little yelp.

“I need you, my Jade,” I told her in a ragged voice, my control shredding with each flap of my wings. “Tell me I can have you.”

“Yes. Yes, but...how?”

Her question was silenced as I tore a hole along the seam of her jeans, then settled her against my hips.

“Just like this,” I said, my lips to her ear, her body pressed against mine. “I’ll fly you home to your bed, but you’ll ride me the entire way.”

“God, yes...”

That was all I needed to hear. My arm wrapped tight around her chest, wanting never to let her go, as my other hand worked to rip her pesky underwear free, to push through the ragged gap I’d created in her jeans, then into her. The feel of that delicious, hot, slick channel had my eyes rolling back in my head, right before my groan echoed through the sky.

“Carrick...!” She clung to my arm, only just realising her legs dangled free.

“Never fear, lass,” I told her. “I’ll never let you go, not after this. You don’t have to fear falling, but you may need to fear flying.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, this was like being in rut, a maddened state where a gargoye and his mate tear at each other over and over until a child is conceived. I needed her so damn much it tasted coppery and red like blood. Probably because my fangs were grinding against my lip as I bucked upwards.

“Carrick...” There was no fear in her voice now, only moans of wanton pleasure as, the little minx, she pressed down against my upward stroke, forcing me in deeper. I wanted to beg for mercy, because each time a pearl popped inside her, seed seeped free. I was so damn close. But she was my mistress and I would serve her to the end of my days which meant staving off my own pleasure until she took hers.

“More, love,” I pressed. “You know you want more.” My voice cracked as she did just that, and I groaned as another

pearl popped inside. “You want all of me, don’t you, lass?”

“More,” she agreed, with a frantic nod of her head. “More!”

That was all the incentive I needed. My wings worked without me having to consciously control them, because I’d been flying for over a thousand years and I would for another thousand, if the gods took pity on me. Their force pushed me up and into her silky, wet heat, a small moan escaping my lips each time I pulled back. I hated the feeling on the downstroke, of pulling back from her even the slightest amount. And so, each time, I stabbed upwards again moments later to recapture the feeling of her, of being buried so deep inside her that she might never dislodge me. And the whole while, my fangs ached, instinct pushing me to take the natural next step.

To bite into her neck, to leave a savage brand that would declare the truth to the world. That she belonged to me and I her, from now until the end of time. Instead I nipped at her neck, a faint imitation of the real thing. Jade reacted by turning her head sideways, baring that creamy slope to my mouth, an instinctive surrender.

Fuck, when I considered the torture of the near-constant temptation I felt whenever I was around her: to touch her, drag her closer, bury my face in her hair and taste her sweet lips. It was *nothing* in comparison to this. My mouth might fill with saliva at the thought of tasting her, my hands ached with the need to caress every inch of her body. But this? I wanted to strike like a snake, staking my claim, making her mine in every way. Instead, I pressed the gentlest of kisses there. Soon, I promised myself, soon. But as if in response to that, her whole body jerked, her cunt snapping down tight around me, pressing the pearls right down into the core of me, forcing me to erupt.

No matter what might happen in the future, I’d never forget this moment, ever. We landed heavily, the other two with us seconds later.

“Oh my god...” Jade groaned as I held her to balance her and pulled myself free.



My seed gushed down her thighs, but my mate did not recoil in shame. Instead, she stood running her hands through the mess, laughing.

“More?” I asked her.

“God, yes, more,” she said and that was our cue.

“Bring the wine, brothers,” I told them, my smile wide, my fangs flashing in the moonlight. “Because tonight we celebrate.”

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# Chapter 46

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*Seneca*

Gods, the sweetness of the satyr's wine had nothing on our mate. I flew downwind of Carrick as he carried her home and caught her scent on the wind, the sounds of her moans. Graven muttered dire threats about what would happen to our brother if any harm came to Jade, but I knew he would never chance that. Carrick allowed himself to be free as he carried our mate back home, to bury himself in her as he went, to take her over and over as we all ached to do, right up until we landed on the roof of the house.

"God, yes. More," Jade cried out, a greedy smile on her face, and I'd never been happier to hear that word. It was a battle cry, summoning all of us to serve beneath her banner.

"Bring the wine, brothers." Carrick looked understandably smug. "Because tonight we celebrate."

But I wasn't about to worry about wine, not when she was in front of me, ripe to be tasted. I dived forward, collecting Jade up into my arms and she let out an excited squeal, wrapping her arms around my shoulders as I carried her downstairs. She was a picture of lazy satisfaction as I laid her down on the bed, but when I started trying to wrestle her

clothes off, something else rose. Her eyes went wide as I tore those damn trousers in half, using the hole Carrick had already made and enlarging it.

“Oh my god...” she hissed, looking down in alarm, but just as I feared I’d done the wrong thing, she laughed and drew my head back down to her mouth.

“Seneca...”

“Yes, my mate?” I got that out in between kisses that deepened each time I went back for more.

“You turned to stone on me.”

“I didn’t want to.” I tried to pull back, but she demanded my lips. “Never that.” Another kiss, then another. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“*You* were the hardest thing I’ve ever done...” I blinked, saw her eyes sparkling with a manic light brought on by the wine. “I mean, I wasn’t completely finished and...”

My claws slammed down on her thighs to stop them closing as she went to rub them together. I spread her wide and feasted my eyes on what lay between them before directing my gaze up to meet hers.

“Did you ride my stone cock, Jade?”

Her cheeks stained bright red.

“I mean, I felt bad about it. You weren’t awake to consent to it and, oh...!” I pushed inside her with the two fingers I’d already clipped the claws from. She was slick, so slick, from her arousal and from Carrick’s seed. I didn’t care. It was all that much easier to find the sensitive spot that was already raised and firm to the touch. “Oh, god! Keep doing that. Just like that...”

“You are always welcome to take your pleasure from whatever part of my body you wish.” My breath fanned over her lips that were swollen from my kisses. “I’ll go to stone, hard and wanting, if that’s what you need.”

“Not right now, I don’t.” Her hands raked across my buttocks, dragging me closer. “I need you, Seneca, now, before

the sun rises.”

“We have some hours before that happens.” Carrick stood in the doorway, hoisting the bottles of wine before him, wearing only a devilish grin and our mate’s scent. “And I have some ideas about how to spend it.”

“Jade asked for me,” I growled, hunching over my mate like I was a lion and she was my prey.

“Then get down on your knees, fledgling, and worship our mate for the goddess that she is.”

I could feel the claws of the command in his voice digging into me, shifting me on the bed, but only a scant few inches.

“That’s not what she asked for.”

“Do you want to be the predictable one that pulls his forelock and does whatever our mistress asks for?” Carrick asked, his voice taking on that familiar mocking tone. “Or do you want to give her pleasure beyond her imagining?”

My fangs ground together, but I was sliding off the bed and out of Jade’s grip before I could think twice, and when I was on my knees, it made sense to me that I take that position before her.

I knew that I would always bow down before her any time she asked and sometimes when she didn’t. I had never wanted to touch another woman, seeing their limbs, their curves pleasant, in the way that a vase or a fine painting might be, but they did not stir me. It was that fact that had persuaded my more insistent masters that I was not to be included in their feasts of the flesh. My cock would not rise for a single one of them, none but her. Now it ached, throbbing in time with my heart as I knelt before my mate, every fibre of my being pulsing with need, only for her.

Propping the wine bottles up against the bedhead, Carrick climbed onto the bed. He knelt up to yank the cork from one of the bottles with his teeth, spitting it across the room before moving down the bed to gather Jade in his arms. The twitch of his lips as he looked down at where I knelt on the floor made it

clear he knew he was ruffling my feathers by making me feel like he was stealing my time with our mate.

“What do you think, my love? Should we give the fledgling his moment?”

“Seneca...” Jade’s voice had none of his mocking self-assurance. My beautiful mate simply reached her hand out for me, which made me start to rise to my feet. But Carrick smoothed a hand down her arm, pushing a bottle of wine into her hand before plucking another from the bedhead. That cork was removed as well.

“He’s looking terribly thirsty. Perhaps we should give him a drink, first.”

As she put the bottle to her lips, Carrick moved her closer to the edge of the bed, revealing all of that pink sweetness to my starving eyes. To taunt me, I was sure, he slid the second bottle down Jade’s body. She jumped at the feel of the cold smooth glass, rather than our warmed flesh, but when the heel of the bottle came to rest against her pearl of pleasure, her thighs widened.

“Mmmf...!”

That little sound told me everything. She was opening herself to us again, the coals of her lust now fanned back to life. And we would burn with her gladly. “Mmm...!” Her moan started to become one of complaint as her hips moved in time with the bottle’s caresses.

“Too smooth?” he asked her. She pulled her mouth from the other wine bottle and nodded.

“Carrick—”

“If you need something more, just ask for it.”

When he shifted his gaze to me, hers followed. The two of them stared at me. I didn’t care about Carrick, but if this was the way I caught at her attention, I’d take it.

“More,” Jade said, her gaze holding mine so intently I felt she was peering all the way down to my soul. “More. Please, Seneca?”

As I lunged forward, Carrick turned the bottle around, sending a slow, steady stream of wine trickling down her mound. I realised that this had been his plan all along and that my mouth was to be the cup it was poured into. At first there was only the summer sweetness of the grapes, but as he continued to pour and I sucked and slurped, I caught the accent notes the wine was missing.

Jade: earthy, sweet enough to make my fangs ache. I lapped and lapped as fast as I could, but still trickles of wine splashed down onto the carpet below me.

“The mess...!” Jade gasped.

“You own a mansion,” Graven said, stepping in through the door, and I realised he’d been leaning there, watching us. “You can afford to rip the carpets up and replace them every night if this is what pleases you.” His hand landed on the back of my head, pressing me harder against the slick folds of her cunt and holding me there. I had no need for him to encourage me. My own claws were pressed into her thighs to keep her close as I gorged myself on her, gulping down the wine and her together, the sweetest of flavours. I lashed my tail back and forth at his sudden intrusion before, succumbing to the mesmerising taste on my tongue, I resolved I could deploy it better elsewhere. I began to move it in slow undulations towards her. Graven continued, “Do not worry about the house, the wine, the mess, anything. Nothing matters other than your pleasure.”

The moment her head fell back in surrender, I struck. My tail speared back inside her, the sensation of having part of me in my mate sending shivers down my spine. Helpless little spurts of my seed mixed with the spilled wine on the floor beneath me. My tongue moved faster, focusing on working her sensitive pearl so as to make her swell up and burst all over my face, treating me to a far sweeter drink.

One I was desperate to taste.

Jade’s cries of pleasure were muffled by my stone brother’s lips covering hers, his tongue sliding into her mouth,

as mine flicked faster. The wine was set aside now, but not before Graven gave an order.

“Lick up every drop, brother,” he told me, staring into my eyes as I looked up. I answered him with action, not word, wrapping my lips around her pearl, my fangs digging in either side, but not breaking the skin, right before I began to suck.

Jade’s hips lifted off the bed, turning her body into an altar for me to worship. And I did, with tail and tongue, but she was the one intoning the wordless litany, over and over, a savage prayer to bliss, until the point that her lips formed one word.

“Seneca!”

Her hand slapped down on my skull, grabbing my hair cruelly, but I leaned into that prickling pain, using it to ground me, keeping me from erupting all over the floor. My tail delved deeper as she flexed, opening up, then clamping down.

Her cries of pleasure and the pulsing of her body were like badges of honour for me that I’d wear proudly. But I didn’t stop until she finally fell limp and gasping against the bed. I sat back against my heels before surging up to lean over her, my hands either side of her head.

“Still want more, my love?” I asked.

She answered me by tugging my head down, pushing her tongue into my mouth, while my aching cock hovered, poised just outside the gates of heaven between her legs.

“More,” she whimpered. “More, Seneca. More.”

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## Chapter 47

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### *Graven*

I wondered if my brothers knew how desperately jealous I was of them both. Carrick, for his easy carnality, Seneca for that eagerness that allowed him to step forward without a thought. But as I stared, watching the three of them create something wild, something beautiful, I wondered why the hell I was holding myself back from joining them.

It was the wine talking. The grape was ever persuasive, something I knew well. I'd seen more masters than I could count do reckless things under its influence, only to regret their actions the next day. But it was only now that I understood the self-destructive urge that alcohol could inspire. I'd sworn to myself that I would stand firm, keep watch and do my job—to keep Jade safe—but that was overpowered by the way I felt: that if I didn't touch her, I'd die. I knew the desperate feeling in my chest to be a lie, but it was not one I could deny.

“There you go...” Carrick said, from where he was lying next to Jade, his head propped up on his hand as he stroked her hair, her face, caressing her while Seneca filled her below. He continued speaking in a low voice as he spread a possessive



hand across the soft swell of her stomach. “Seneca has exactly what you need.” His eyes sparkled with the particular mix of malice and amusement that characterised the male, as, without lifting his head, he looked lazily at me from under his brows. “And so does Graven.”

“Graven...?”

Jade’s eyes flicked open and she turned her head to find me, right as she gasped with pleasure. Every muscle in Seneca’s body was taut as he fought to take things slowly, easing his pearls inside her. I knew each time one popped in because her breath caught in her chest and her brow creased, then smoothed out.

“Graven.”

Her voice was a command this time as her hand reached out for me, and that was my undoing: I would never resist a request from her, no matter what it might be. Her eyes held mine the whole time as I knelt on the side of her wide bed, dropping down onto all fours to stalk my way across to her, past the wine-dampened bed coverings, not stopping until I was leaning right over her. Jade’s body still moved each time Seneca thrust into her but that didn’t worry me. Now that I was close enough, she was able to rest her hand on my chest. Her heated touch felt like it burned, but I relished the sensation to have my mate’s hand on me. She slowly stroked across the expanse of my pectoral muscles, getting lower to my abdominals, then lower still, until...

Argh. Fuck.

I’d touched myself last night, stroking my cock harder and harder as I listened to the sounds of our mate finding her pleasure with Seneca. Carrick had laughed at me as he had retired to the roof, but I couldn’t pull myself away. My hand hadn’t felt anything as good as this. Her fingers were tiny, unable to even wrap themselves around the thickness of my cock, making me long for the more enveloping tightness of her cunt, even as my hips flexed, pushing me into her palm. Jade had something to say about it, a breath sucked in, her lips

parting, but instead the sound came out as a long moan as Seneca stabbed deeper.

“Does he please you, my mate?” I asked, forcing my voice to evenness. She nodded sharply. “Are you taking all of him?”

Her brows frowned at that, the next gasp one that seemed to bridge the gap between pain and pleasure and I knew what to do to assist her to find her pleasure. I pulled regretfully away from her touch, lifting her up so that Seneca could wrap his arms around her, so that I could slot into the space behind her. She relaxed back, her body almost limp as my hands dared to stroke up her sides.

That enabled me to map the span of her ribs and count every bone, take the swell of her belly and cradle that bountiful part of her in my hands, then move up to cup those abundant breasts. Once there, I stayed focussed on worshipping that part of her, her moans confirming that my instincts were correct. Her thighs widened as I plucked each nipple until they no doubt ached from the attention, although her ripening scent told me that she only wanted more.

“Deeper, brother,” I urged.

“She’s already taken more of me than she did last night.”

His voice sounded strangled as his arms shook with the effort of holding back. He had my respect, because I knew that he wanted to plunge deep, force himself inside her, making sure every pearl popped into that tight sheath, then locking her down tight.

“Deeper,” I urged him.

“Yes...” Jade sounded lazy now, almost as though she could fall asleep, but her body wouldn’t let her rest, and she squirmed against me. “More.”

She didn’t know what that meant. She couldn’t, having no experience with a flock of gargoyles, but I did. I shuffled lower, feeling my cock slide between the soft mounds of her plush arse.

“Oh...!” she said, a note of surprise in her voice as I began to move, her tone turning sultry in response. “Ohh, Graven...”

Her back arched and Seneca surged forward then, pushing another inch in. Then Jade began to move in earnest, her buttocks rubbing against my aching length, her cunt testing its limits as she bore down on Seneca.

“Gods...” my flockmate hissed. “I’m so deep. She’s going to take me. She’s going to take me!”

Carrick and I cast a glance at each other on hearing the tinge of fear in his voice.

“And if she does?” My fingers worked my mate’s body to build her pleasure, one teasing her nipple, the other plucking at her clit. She thrust her pelvis faster and sharper. “What will you do, brother?”

But all three of us knew. The instincts were impossible to resist, and we could see that he was well on the way, by the intense look on his face. His fangs were bared in a grimace, ready to strike, for if she took all of him, he’d feel a need to claim her that could not be denied. I tipped her head my way to have her attention for a moment, to ensure she could understand the significance.

“If you take more, he’ll make you his, Jade.”

“Yes...” That insistent rub of her softness against my hardness was shredding my control.

“Forever, Jade. He’s already yours for eternity, that goes without saying, but this... You’ll be choosing him as well. You need to decide.”

She looked down then, reaching out to stroke Seneca’s face, the fledgling leaning into her caress. He was where he needed to be, and she was there with him.

“Yes.” At her breathy answer, Carrick shot me a dark look, one part wariness, one part envy. “Yes, Seneca, I need...”

But she didn’t need to finish the sentence, because he knew.

He rose above her like a cobra about to strike.

“What do you need, Jade, my mate?” The male’s brow creased as if he was feeling indescribable pain, not pleasure.

“Is it me?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him down, before her body did the most marvellous thing. It undulated like a wave and somehow that’s all it took. I knew the last pearl popped in because the two of them broke apart, wide eyed and staring as they tried to process the sensation.

And at that, the knife of jealousy twisted hard in my gut. I wanted Jade to accept Seneca. He was young, but a good male, and would do right by our mate, but... I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d ever be in his position. But I resolved not to focus on that now.

“C’mon, fledgling...” My voice was as rough as gravel. “Don’t make our mate ask twice.”

“Jade, you’re the only woman for me. The world can go cold and turn to dust and I’ll still carry you in my heart,” he told her.

“I know.” Her voice broke as she acknowledged her trust in his words. “I don’t know how. It doesn’t make sense, but I know. Just as I know I need to...”

She tilted her head sideways, and, gods, I wanted that so much that coppery saliva filled my mouth. My fangs ached, and Carrick must’ve felt the same as he shuffled closer. He linked his fingers with hers, then stroked her hair with his other hand.

“This is the first step, lass. The first step towards something grand.” His eyes narrowed as he glanced up at Seneca. “So what’re you waiting for? Your mistress is giving you the most perfect gift and you’re—”

Whatever he’d been going to say, it was cut off as Seneca struck. A low, animalistic growl, his tail whipping back and forth, her body arching into his as he bit her throat, just one tiny trail of blood seeping free as a result. As Seneca marked Jade, I heard a far-off scream and it was a twin of the one inside me.

“Graven,” Carrick hissed.

“I’ll see to it.”

I pulled myself regretfully from the bed, letting the two of them fall down onto the mattress, each step away from her feeling wrong, so damn wrong. But that was The Eyrie. Usually the site of polymorphous perversity, this was a wrongness of a completely different kind, and I was willing to bet Wulfstan felt the same.

“Brother—”

“He marked her!” he shouted, lunging at the gates, ignoring the spray of power that went up, like sparks of electricity, as the wards responded each time he touched the bars. “He marked my mate!”

“He marked our mate,” I corrected, mildly. “The same woman who this night was in Mother Agnes’ tent, trying to find a means to help free you.”

“She did?” He withdrew back into the shadows, but still close enough that I could see his eyes glittering in the depths. “Why would she do that? I can’t leave this prison. I can’t. The master said I must stay and he must go. I must stay and he must go.”

I was well used to Wulfstan’s babble when his mind left him, but this recitation was something different.

“The master did go,” I corrected. “He was removed from the prison when he died.”

*At your hands*, I wanted to say, but I didn’t dare press him. Wulfstan was already unstable.

“I must stay and he must go...”

Wulf muttered that over and over as he backed away, retreating into the depths of his prison until I could no longer hear him.

I stared blankly into the darkness of Z Ward, mulling over how much I hated the place; hated everything that had happened there and the scars it had left upon all of us, most of all Wulf. I hated the Whiteley legacy, but with Jade... I’d dared to feel a moment of hope when she pressed Mother Agnes for a means to heal my brother, to erase the mistakes of the past. Perhaps...

Whatever grand ideas might have been about to germinate, they fell dormant as soon as I saw the very first rays of the sun begin to stain the sky. I leapt into the air, beating my wings firmly to land on the roof, standing tall and ready to face down the sun's glow. I would bear its fiery rays, anything for my mate. Because while I might envy my flockmate viciously, I also hoped that one day all four of us would persuade her to make the same jump with each one of us. If she did, we'd be ready to catch her no matter what might befall her.

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## Chapter 48

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*Jade*

I woke up in a world of pain. My head throbbed, my stomach roiled and my neck...

My neck?

My hand slapped down on it, wincing when I felt a little flare of pain. After a moment, though, it turned to something quite different: a heavy, slow, sensual feeling, like a dark tide sweeping over me. A tsunami of sensation forced my thighs to part, my back to arch, and my nipples to ache so sweetly. Trailing my hand down my body, I was chasing the feeling of imminent ecstasy, but then my brain woke up a little more and I started asking myself what the hell was going on, because going from zero to 100 kilometres per hour in three seconds flat was not something that had happened before. Like, ever. I snatched my hand away and forced my eyes open. In the mirrors above, I saw the reflection of a grand mess that looked like the morning after some sort of Bacchanalian rite.

Stained sheets were strewn over the bed and the bed cover was half on the floor. All of the bedclothes and I could verify this because I was lying on top of them, stank of wine. And there, right in the middle of it all, was me, naked, swollen with

pleasure and sporting a very large bruise on my neck. After blinking at my reflection for a little while, very slowly turning my head this way and that, I decided I needed to be able to see it better. Sitting bolt upright, I instantly regretted moving so suddenly. I massaged my fingertips against my temples and when my headache was back to a dull throb, I cautiously made my way to the side of the bed. Wary of making any kind of sudden movement, I stood up very slowly then gingerly waddled towards the bathroom, a little bow-legged, feeling like I'd been riding a horse drunk. I made it to the bathroom mirror and squinted at my reflection, then just stood there like a stunned mullet, my eyes getting bigger and bigger as I stared at myself.

I was paler than normal, and I had the classic panda eyes that happen when you forget to take off your mascara after a big night on the turps. But what had my attention was the mark on my neck. It was a bite. A great big bite. It wasn't a really enthusiastic hickey or even just a miscellaneous bruise, either of which I would have been able to cover up pretty easily. No, this was an actual bite mark. You could see where incisors had broken the skin and how the puncture wounds were lightly scabbed over. I lifted my hand up to the bite, tracing my fingers around the indentations, then I was overwhelmed by the same sensations I'd had earlier. I had to slam my hands down on the counter just to stay on my feet. I dropped my head back as I rode another wave of pleasure so sharp it made something inside me clench, hard. And all of a sudden I remembered feeling the same way last night. And then I remembered who with...and what he'd said...

“Jade, you're the only woman for me. The world can go cold and turn to dust and I'll still carry you in my heart.”

I heard Seneca's voice like he was standing right behind me, his massive body sheltering me from the rest of the world. I shivered as I remembered how it had felt as his claws raked across my skin right before he tugged me closer. And how he held me like I was the most precious thing in the universe. And...



Oh, boy...I'd formed a mating bond with a gargoyle last night.

I started blinking a mile a minute while I tried to process that idea. I searched my emotions for signs of unhappiness, of fear, but found something else instead.

Love.

I shook my head, struggling with the idea. It seemed like everything was happening too damn fast. What if this was some kind of rebound thing and I'd wake up in a year to realise that what I'd thought I was feeling wasn't real. The thought of that terrified me. I took a deep breath, then realised that the moment my mind had concocted these ideas, my heart had rejected them. Trevor and I had broken up months ago, but that wasn't all. That relationship, the one I'd put so much of myself into? The truth was that I'd been in it on my own. Trevor had really just been along for the ride, ready to take everything he could get. And when a better offer had come along, he'd taken it. But what I'd shared with Seneca... I looked back into the mirror, staring past the puffiness in my face and my bloodshot eyes, and saw something else entirely.

A woman who was loved.

Recognising that helped dull the pulse of my headache, as did the regulation Panadol and glass of Berocca. I jumped in the shower and scrubbed myself clean. By the time I'd dried off and was dressed, I was feeling good enough to deal with the bedroom. After picking up wine bottles and stripping the bed, I realised that the rest of the mess would require more experience and equipment than I had at my disposal so I resolved to call a carpet cleaner and get them to sort it out. Bundling the sheets up to take down to the washing machine, I bounced down the hall to Daniel's room to tell him the news.

"Rise and shine, mother..."

My voice trailed away when I saw the room was empty, the bed undisturbed. I frowned and grabbed my phone out, juggling the sheets as I put a call through.

"What...?"

His voice was little more than a croak.

“Jesus, Daniel, where are you?”

“Hey, babe. Where am I?” His tone turned lazy, satisfied, like a cat lying in a pool of sunlight. “Pinned underneath a satyr, a dryad, and a minotaur with the most prodigious dick.” I heard a rough snort in the background. “Damn, girl, I came so fucking hard I saw literal stars.”

“Oh, well, cool.” I forced myself to smile. “So you’re OK?”

“Yes, Mother. I’ll be back later.” A rumbling sound in the background made it clear that whatever he’d been up to, he wasn’t done. “Much, much later. Kisses.”

And with that, the phone line went dead.

I wanted to share my news, but yeah, even I knew that the middle of a multi-species orgy wasn’t a great time for that. But then, as if in response to my wish to have someone to tell about it, I heard the front door open.

“Jade?” Mellors’ smooth tones floated up the stairs. “Jade, are you around?”

“Coming.”

I dropped the sheets before heading downstairs, feeling that the relationship I had with my lawyer wasn’t quite at the stage where I could explain the state of my bed linen by sharing drunken sexcapades.

“Ah, there you are!” Mellors looked the epitome of professional elegance in his suit, whereas I was in my whole lot more casual garb. “I’ve made some progress on the matter we spoke about before.” Before? Although the headache had dissipated, my brain felt like tar: squishy and sticky and difficult to navigate. My blank expression obviously clued him in that I had no idea what he was talking about, and he smiled before continuing. “Your desire to get involved in some charity work?”

“Oh yeah, right! I’m sorry, my head is a mess this morning. I’m just about to have a coffee. Did you want one?”

“Thank you. I’d love one,” he said, following me into the kitchen. He sat down at the kitchen counter when I waved a hand at the stools there, and I busied myself with getting the coffee going while he told me a few details about an event that he thought could be useful.

“A charity auction?” I said, once the kettle had boiled and I’d filled our cups and put out milk and sugar.

“I know. It seems all terribly frivolous, but it’s actually an excellent opportunity to network. And as the head of the Whiteley estate, you’re automatically entitled to a ticket.”

“I’m not sure I’m the charity auction type,” I said, clinging to my mug of coffee. A few sips in and my head was starting to clear, but my stomach had that grumbling acidic feeling that came from not eating enough and drinking too much.

“Perhaps, but some of the heads of the more prominent charities will be attending. There are some that focus on domestic violence, others that are involved in women’s shelters—”

“OK,” I straightened up. “I’m interested. I’m gonna have to go stag though. Daniel’s... otherwise occupied.”

When Mellors raised an elegant eyebrow, I wasn’t sure if that was in curiosity or condemnation, but then he just smiled.

“Well, if you require an escort, I’m happy to step in at a pinch.”

“Yeah?” I set my mug down. “So what does one wear to an event like that?”

Uncomfortable clothes, that became clear. The requirement was for formal day wear, whatever that meant, so I flicked through the wardrobe that kept on giving and finally pulled out something that I hoped would work. The main component of the outfit was a pink and grey tweed jacket that looked like it was inspired by classic 1960s Chanel suits. I’d found a black blouse and a tailored skirt that complemented the jacket beautifully. I accessorised with a length of what I assumed were real pearls and felt that at least I had suitable armour to get me through whatever might befall me.

As I took Mellors' arm to walk into the charity auction, I forgot about tugging my skirt hem or readjusting my jacket, because the place where it was being held was amazing. It was like a huge birdcage. We stepped through two glass sliding doors featuring swirling brass designs into a wide circular ballroom. A huge round skylight let the sun filter through onto tall tropical plants in large pots set out in groups of two and three all around the parquet floor. Brightly coloured birds flitted between the plants, drawing my eyes as we entered the room.

"Mellors!" exclaimed a beautiful older woman with iron grey hair as she walked towards us. "And this must be Jade Whiteley. I'm Deidre Draper."

"Deidre," Mellors said, with an amused nod of his head.

"Lovely to meet you, Deidre," I responded, as the manners Mum had tried so hard to instil kicked in. "And it's Jade Barlow, actually."

"Keeping your old name, are you?" Deidre said, taking the hand I'd held out to her and squeezing it genteelly. As she continued speaking, she kept hold of my hand, deftly transferring it to the crook of her elbow and giving it a couple of pats. "Well, good for you. Now, Mellors spoke with me on the phone this morning and he mentioned you are interested in getting involved in charity work?"

"Ah, yes, I—"

"Good, good! It's important that we use our positions of privilege to help the less fortunate. Now, I'll introduce you to some of the ladies. The kind of work you're interested in is right up their alley."

I had a sinking sensation, although I kept a polite smile on my face as Deidre led me off to sit at a formal dining table surrounded by elegantly-dressed women. I'd hoped to be introduced to the actual CEOs of several charities. I didn't doubt that they would be just like the ones running the supermarket chain I'd worked for, but it'd be a foot in the door for me to feel them out, see which organisations were actually

helping people and then start funnelling money there. Instead, I'd ended up with a bunch of high society matrons.

The table was exquisite, covered by a snowy white tablecloth which was set with elegant glassware that looked like it was spun from sugar, and porcelain plates with a sky-blue glaze, edged in gold. I stared at the pattern, seeing tiny satyrs and fauns capering around the edges as the women chatted around me.

“And who are you?”

I turned to my right at the sound of those posh tones and saw a perfectly coiffed and made-up woman smiling tightly at me.

“Jade Barlow,” I said, offering her my hand.

“Barlow?” She seemed unaware that I was waiting for her to reciprocate. Instead, she stared off into the distance. It appeared as if she was trying to frown, but the muscles didn't seem to respond, making her look slightly constipated instead. After a moment, she said, “I don't believe I know of a Barlow family.” I realised that she'd been going through some sort of mental Rolodex, unable to work out why she couldn't find my family name in the B section. I pulled in a breath, ready to explain, but I didn't get the opportunity. She already had her back to me and was directing a question elsewhere. “Meredith. Meredith, do we know anyone named Barlow?”

Meredith turned away from the woman she was chatting to, with a slight frown. “Barlow? No. That is not one of the First Families.” Her eyes found mine and I resisted the urge to shrink down in my chair. This was like high school all over again. The queen bee had me in her sights and that was never good. She pursed her lips before turning back to the woman on my right. “Jade is the heir to the Whiteley fortune.”

I'd never met this Meredith, and I knew nothing about her other than her first name and the fact she was wearing the most amazing shade of crimson lipstick, one that made her look fierce and fabulous, all at the same time. The fact she evidently knew all about me set my teeth on edge. But then I quickly found out that while the mysterious Meredith was

keeping her thoughts about me under wraps, the rest of these ladies who lunched had no such qualms.

“Whiteley...?!” A woman with stark white hair turned her head around to look at me so quickly that I was scared she might have whiplash.

“So, this is the Whiteley girl?” queried an ancient-looking woman, who was dressed in what was definitely an original Chanel suit. Peered across the table at me, she continued to address her neighbours, rather than speaking with me. “Good child-bearing hips by the look of her. And are those Madeline’s pearls?”

“You’ve inherited the Whiteley estate?” asked the woman beside me, her manner completely different now. An acquisitive light danced in her eyes, and I found myself pulling away from her and positioning myself firmly against the back of my chair. “That must’ve been a wonderful surprise. Tell me, which university did you attend?”

“I... didn’t?” Once the words were out of my mouth, I realised I should’ve spoken with much more confidence. Most people didn’t go to university, so it was nothing to be ashamed of. But, apparently, the women of the First Families hadn’t got that memo. Eyes widened and pearls were clutched, while a few of them audibly gasped. I continued a little more strongly. “I mean I got 94 on my ATAR—”

“Oh, well, there’s still time then, isn’t there,” the woman beside me said, finally offering me her hand, with another tight smile, and I realised that, whatever her anti-aging routine was, it had rendered her unable to show expression. “I’m Corinne, by the way. I’m a Draper by birth, but a Savoy by marriage.”

“And I’m still trying to work out what the hell that all means,” I said, leaning over to shake her hand. It was like a mannequin’s, stiff and immobile, so I pulled away. “I only just found out—”

“You’re the girl that drove the men from the club,” the elderly woman in the Chanel suit said, her pink lips thinning.

“Ahh—” I started to say.

“Oh yes,” another woman said, with a frown. “My David said something about that. Came home in a terrible snit.”

“Right. So—”

“The Wildfyre Club has held its meetings in Whiteley House for over a hundred years, young lady.”

“Sure—”

“And some girl who’s barely even come into her power shouldn’t be throwing her weight around, tossing her betters out on their ear.”

“So, Jade,” a soft, almost mumsy-looking woman said, leaning over the table. “Have you put any thought into marriage?”

“Oh shut up, Phyllis,” the ancient woman said. “This girl could be more powerful than Merlin himself and it’s not going to help the Junipers become the power they once were.” She shot me a dark look. “Her son’s a pervert who prefers the company of the dolls that he animates, rather than real women, anyway. You’d be much better off with my Gerald. He knows how to use a firm hand.”

“Oh my god—!” I muttered.

“All of this arguing won’t get anyone anywhere.” Meredith’s lip curled, discreetly, of course, ensuring the others saw as her keen eyes slid down my neck, and past the foundation I’d slathered across my skin and underneath the double loop of pearls to the bite mark Seneca had left. When she noted it, so did others, and the Savoy-by-marriage woman beside me pulled back as if I had cooties or something. “You accepted a mating mark.”

The way she said it was as if she was accusing me of eating human excrement for fun. There was the same kind of confusion, curiosity and revulsion. But suddenly I found my backbone, straightening up to sit tall and meet the gaze of every woman at the table.

“I did, just last night,” I announced.

“So you’ve decided to sleep with the help,” sneered the elderly woman across the table, turning away with a sniff.

“I knew we should’ve approached the estate before now,” Phyllis muttered to the person next to her. “With no one to teach her, she didn’t know any better.”

“Did you think about your children?” another woman snapped at me, disapprovingly.

“What children?” I asked in alarm, as if they might materialise from the air at the mere mention.

“Any children you might have,” she said, drawing back with a grimace. “You can’t expect them to be accepted.”

“Accepted where?” I snapped. “I haven’t had any children, and if I do…” My hand dropped low, to a place that still hummed with the remnant heat of pleasure. It felt like a fire I could warm my hands around, warding off the chill of the scorn of these women.

“You’re intending to bear *them* children?”

The tone was how one might speak about a woman determined to have puppies with her pet dog, and I guess in their minds there was a similarity. They obviously treated gargoyles and other creatures in a similar way. I shook my head, unable to work out how I’d made it back to the ‘nerd’ table in the school yard, with the alpha bitches staring at me from their perceived position of social superiority.

At the thought of how all that hierarchical bullshit was still being played out by these adults, I felt the weight of everything that I’d been dealing with—along with the double whammy of my hangover and lack of sleep—hit me with a wallop. Rather than feel overwhelmed, I reminded myself I wasn’t in high school anymore and I didn’t have to talk to any of these people. With a sense of relief, I pushed my seat back from the table, ready to find Mellors and book it out of there. As I was about to get to my feet a masculine voice cut through all of the female twittering.

“Jade, can I borrow you for a second?”



I looked up and had a disconcerting moment when Adam's face came into view, because superimposed over his perfectly formed face was an identical one. Adam's was flush with life, his lips quirking up at one corner in barely suppressed amusement, whereas Wulfstan's... But before I could follow that train of thought, Adam offered me his hand.

“Yes,” I said, sliding my palm into his. “Yes, of course.”

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## Chapter 49

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*Jade*

“You looked like you needed rescuing,” he said, moving my hand to his arm so we could promenade around the room.

“You have no idea how much,” I retorted. As we walked, I scanned the ballroom, looking for Mellors. Any hope I’d had of this event actually being useful had been well and truly dashed. “I need to find Mellors and bail.”

“He was the one who sent me over,” Adam replied, smoothly. “He’s a little caught up.” And sure enough, the estate’s lawyer was engaged in an earnest conversation with several stuffy-looking types. “But if you wanted to get out of here...?”

“More than life itself.” I stared up at him. “If you have a magic broom, or a flying carpet or, shit, I’d even jump through a magical portal, I’ll take it, if that’s what it takes to get out of here.” My hand went to my neck, resting over the top of the bite without pressing down but still feeling a shadow of the pleasure we’d shared last night. But this time, it came with a flush of shame and I dropped my gaze. “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Why ever not?” At his question, I looked up at him again, wondering if I should tell him. Then I saw that his eyes had followed the path of my hand, and I watched as his pupils flared slightly at the sight of the mark on my neck. “Oh.” His eyes flicked around the room, narrowing slightly. “And let me guess, you’ve set the old biddies a-clucking because you’ve dared to do the one thing all of them are forbidden from doing.” Those blue eyes met mine. “Yet all of them have wished they could.”

He reached across to where my hand still hovered over my neck and his touch burned hot. My cheeks heated as he gently lifted my fingers up to reveal the mark, rubbed the knuckles with his thumb before letting go.

“You needn’t have bothered with makeup to hide the mark, if that’s what you were doing?”

“I was.” My eyes dropped down as if I’d become fascinated by the design of the perfectly patterned wooden floor. “It looks a mess. There’s the bite itself, and then a bunch of bruising—”

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Adam was suddenly all seriousness, stopping and turning to me to stare intently at me until I lifted my gaze to his. “That requires an answer, you know that, right?”

“No, he didn’t hurt me.” My body tightened, remembering just how unhurt I was. “Well, only when I asked him too.” This conversation felt insanely intimate, a feeling exacerbated as he stepped closer. It was only now that I saw that the broad sweep of his shoulders, perfectly outlined by the excellent cut of his suit, was almost wide enough to block out the whole room. “It was consensual, everything that happened.”

“Was it, indeed?” His voice had dropped to a low purr that set off a dangerous throbbing deep inside me. He stood so close, his head bent down to mine, all his attention on me, and in turn he filled my field of view as though no-one else existed. If I half-closed my eyes, the similarities between Adam and my gargoyles became more obvious. I couldn’t help but think of how my gargoyles had used their resonant voices

to such effect, how their bodies had similarly become my whole focus, and that made me think of each one of them. Carrick, certainly, he'd have relished keeping me all to himself in this grand room, or even dour Graven, but Seneca... I forced myself to push past his name, because as soon as I thought of him, memories tumbled in like waves and I had to take a few quick little breaths to keep my head above water. Adam's voice broke through my reverie, startling me, and I looked back up at him as he spoke. "Now, then. I assume you don't want to heal up the actual bitemarks themselves, so..."

He reached out, one hand coming to rest on my shoulder, the other going to the opposite side, where the mating mark was, and ghosting over my skin to slide underneath the silky strands of pearls near the bite. The loop tightened just a little around my neck to accommodate his fingers before the pearls moved past each other to loosen, and the pressure eased. Then, he brushed his fingers across the bite. Shivers of pleasure washed through me, forcing me to hungrily pull breaths in as I rode each wave. When he moved his hand away and settled it on my shoulder, I wanted to snatch it back. I wanted to press his fingers against the mark again, because when he touched me, it was entirely different to what it had felt like when I'd done it. His strong, masculine fingers had slight calluses on the fingertips that sent up small explosions of pleasure every time they snagged on my skin. Although I hadn't got what I'd come here for, I knew what I wanted. I didn't want judgemental bitches judging me by a yardstick I didn't respect, I wanted this.

"I..."

His voice had changed entirely, becoming deeper, raspier, as if that urbane facade of his had cracked; as if something else—something that lived beneath—was rising.

Something dangerously enticing.

Adam moved closer until his suit coat brushed against my jacket, as though our clothing was ready to get the party started before we were. But as our proximity increased, a belated voice of caution sounded in my head. Despite the magnetic effect he was having on me, I wasn't looking for

anything like that with him. I didn't have... anything with Adam. I barely even knew him and—

“Don't let anyone here stop you from doing what's right.” His hand was firm under my chin as he tipped my eyes up to meet his. “You owe no one an explanation. You have been declared queen of your little domain. Act like it.”

I studied his face, unable to look away, because, of all the witches and warlocks in the crowded room, it felt like those penetrating blue eyes of his were the only friendly ones. I was vaguely conscious of other people moving around, talking, eating, drinking or whatever. For a moment I wondered about who might be watching us, but I shut that thought down. They were all a backdrop to what was happening between the two of us.

As though Adam was the Wulf I dared to touch, I wrapped my hand around his wrist and felt the rapid beat of his pulse under his skin that told me he was affected as much as I was. He was the one who stared into my eyes and saw me. Although, it was more than that. Every woman at that table had seen me as well, dressed in clothes that weren't me, at the sort of event I wouldn't choose to come to, both of which made me feel uncomfortable. But those women had seen me through the lens of privilege and snobbery, judging me for being me. Adam, on the other hand, pushed past that. He saw to the core of me and declared me queen. And that was so seductive.

As we stared at each other, a sudden feeling of heat rose within me. His gaze dropped to my lips as they fell open. I took in short gasps of air, clinging to his wrist with both hands now as sensation rushed through me. My clothes felt too heavy, too constrictive. And the room no longer seemed spacious and fresh; instead it was as though the air had become thick with humidity. I felt hot, far too hot, and he was the one who'd made me feel that way. His eyes were still on my mouth as I continued to gasp in air, and he rubbed the backs of his fingers along my jawline. Then turning his hand over, he traced his thumb across my skin, his gaze moving to watch its progress towards my lips. When he reached the

corner of my mouth, he smiled and his eyes flicked back up to mine as he lifted his thumb from my skin. But before he could run it across the slick of lipstick on my lips, someone broke the spell.

“Adam, I need... Oh.” A woman in a power suit had approached, looking up from a clipboard as she reached us to see as we pulled apart and turned towards her. She smiled apologetically. “I’m so sorry, but, Adam, we need you up on the stage.”

“Of course.” Whatever the hell had been going on between us, Adam managed to pack it away behind a congenial facade. He turned to me, a pleasant smile on his face. “My apologies, but duty calls.”

“Right, yeah, go,” I said, trying too damn hard to be cool and failing miserably. I forced myself to shut my mouth tight and take some very slow breaths in and out, managing to calm my racing pulse and feel a little less heated.

“But if you decide to hang around, maybe we could go for a drink after all of this?”

When I’d been newly single, I’d day-dreamed about something similar: for some amazingly hot guy in a suit to see me across a crowded supermarket and ask me if I wanted to go out sometime. Adam’s question pretty much ticked all the boxes of that scenario. So why was I feeling so guilty? The gargoyles seemed perfectly happy to share me with each other. But would that extend to including a warlock, especially with the way the Whiteley warlocks had treated them? I couldn’t answer that question, which made clear to me that I couldn’t encourage this.

No matter how much I might have liked to.

But, before I could answer, a voice boomed over the PA system.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen!” a woman said, as she beamed out at the congregation. “If I could get everyone to take their seats, then the fun can begin!”

“I’ve got to go,” Adam said, “but... if you decide you’re interested, remember: whisper my name on the wind.” And with a wink, he was gone.

“I acquired a paddle for you.” I turned to see Mellors standing behind me, an auction paddle in his hand. “I thought you might like to bid on some of the auction pieces.”

“I don’t think—”

“Winning them is considered very prestigious,” he continued. “It also drives the women here mad. They are all dressed so very nicely, but each one uses haute couture and designer perfume to cloak her ambition. These auctions are ostensibly to support a range of worthwhile charities. But, really, they’re an opportunity to get one over on the others.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of game I want to play,” I told him sternly.

“The reality is that their competitive need to win helps to ensure that the charities that help women in crisis, that seek to build more women’s shelters, get a lot more support than they would otherwise.”

“Gimme that,” I said, snatching the paddle out of his hand before consulting the program Deidre had given me at the start of the event. “Now, which items are for charities that are worth supporting?”

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# Chapter 50

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## *Jade*

Mellors' background information helped me make sense of how the auction proceeded, though, as the first item was paraded past, I still found the zeal in the eyes of the women bidding to be a little unnerving. Like, what did they care about a hand-painted silk scarf by a reputable local artist? None of them needed more stuff. They all wore the subtle, refined clothes of those with an abundance of inherited wealth. What's more, a king's ransom in jewels adorned their assorted wrists, necklines and ears. But as the bidding was finalised for the first item, I realised it was exactly as Mellors had said. What was up for auction wasn't important. The real game was all about bumping up your status to show that you were better than everyone else.

When Corinne Savoy-Draper walked away with the scarf, the look of triumph on her face said everything. She posed elegantly for a photo, draping the scarf over her shoulder, with a representative from the charity that did horse therapy with kids squeezed into the edge of the shot. It was obvious that the charity side of things was just a pretext for good old-fashioned clout-chasing. And whatever Jasmine had 'won', it was soon dismissed as they bid for the next item, and the next.



“SO, do I want to bid on this one?” I asked Mellors, as I peered at the program to try to work out what was coming up.

“And, next up, we have an amazing item,” the compere gushed, her teeth gleaming as she regarded the room. “A very eligible bachelor.” She gestured to a suave looking man in a suit, like he was Henry Cavill’s hotter, younger brother. “Bid on him for your daughters, nieces—”

“I’m bidding for myself!” one old duck shouted.

The titters around the room had me cringing, especially when I looked over to check out Suit Guy.

Ick.

He stood there with a smug smile on his face. The little fucker looked like he was born with a silver spoon right up his nose, and he was lapping up all the female attention like it was his birthright.

“OK. I take that back,” I told Mellors. “I don’t want to win that. I’m pretty sure my vagina just shut up tight like one of those underwater clams.” The lawyer’s eyes went wide, right as he let out a most ungentlemanly snort. “Like, I would pay for him to go the fuck away. Can I make a donation instead?”

“You could.” Mellors recovered very quickly. “Or you could do something else that might be more effective.” I glanced up to see a wicked gleam in his eyes. “You can see how competitive these women are. Imagine how they’d react if you started bidding?”

“OMG, so I’d force them to bid higher and higher, but then lose, because, damn...” I glanced back at Mr Suit. “Not even with someone else’s vagina.” I shot Mellors a sidelong look. “But if you were interested...?”

I had no idea if James actually liked guys, but I figured it didn’t hurt to ask.

“Far too vanilla for me, unfortunately,” he replied dismissively.

“And why is it I think you have first-hand knowledge of that?” I smirked as I waved my paddle around. “Hidden

depths, Mell Mell, hidden depths.”

“And we have ten thousand dollars over here with Ms Whiteley,” the compere said smoothly, pointing in my direction.

“Shit...” I hissed. “Shit!”

“Twenty.” That ancient crone in couture who’d been sitting across from me at the table now peered across the room, then lifted her damn nose like some kind of *Downtown Abbey* wannabe.

“Thirt—” someone started to say.

“Fifty.” I managed to bid the right way.

“It’s customary to go up by five or ten thousand,” Mellors murmured into my ear.

“Fuck it. Go hard or go home,” I muttered back, before bidding against myself. “Sixty!”

“Ah...” The compere looked flustered. “We have sixty thousand over here.”

“Eighty!” a woman said, in a huffy voice. I was pretty certain it was the woman who’d tried to bid for thirty thousand.

“One hundred thousand.”

Mr Suit looked positively chuffed. It was probably the first time he’d ever had women battle over his bland charms. Prunella glared at me with glittering eyes as though daring me to continue, and I realised I knew exactly how to bait the old bat.

“One hundred...” It felt like the whole room hung on my every word. I looked directly at my adversary as I raked my nails across the mating mark that Adam had worked so hard to mask. Prunella’s eyes narrowed down to slits. “...and fifty thousand.”

“Gods above...” Mellors hissed. “What monster have I created?”

“Two hundred thousand!”

After shouting out her bid, Prunella leapt to her feet in victory. Well, she got up as fast as a woman of her age could manage. She looked about ten years younger as the elation of being the highest bidder hit her, which meant she appeared to be approximately one hundred and ten. But that joy quickly wore off. Her brow creased as silence reigned over the entire room, which meant the implications of what she'd done had time to sink in. I grinned like a loon, then tilted my head at Prunie by way of a salute, because the real damn winner was the charity. The representative said something to that effect, her cheeks positively glowing as she beamed at the camera as the obligatory photo was taken with the not-so-happy winning bidder.

“What the hell got into you, Nana?” Mr Suit asked, as he escorted her from the stage. “I’ll be over on Sunday for lunch like I am every week. You needn’t have bid for me...”

“Oh, well done,” Mellors said under his breath.

“I like this game, Mell Mell. I like it a lot.”

“Good, because if you call me by that name again, I’ll consider it notice of severance and I’ll be forwarding your file to someone else at my firm forthwith.”

“Not Grandmaster Mellie Mel?”

“Jade...”

“Jimmy Bob?”

“My middle name is Antony, not Robert,” he said.

“Oh, of course it is. How about...?”

My voice trailed away as the next ‘item’ was brought up to the lectern. Adam stood there with a completely different vibe to Mr Suit. His hands were behind his back and he wore a somewhat sheepish expression as the female contingent of the Adeluminati all turned to stare.

“Because the last ‘item’...” The compere winked dramatically. Gag. “...was so popular, we’ve roped in another one of our boys to step up and be ‘sold’.” She produced a gilt card, with a flourish. “An all-expenses-paid dinner at The

Mayflower restaurant in the company of the very eligible Adam Whiteley.”

His name was Adam Stuart. I knew that much about him. The woman beamed out at the crowd, but when I looked around, I saw a very different reaction than Mr Suit had got. They eyed him like he was a nag at market. There was none of the previous amusement and jostling, and I knew why. People like me and Adam weren't well represented at a place like this. While there seemed to be an infinite number of Savoy-Draper-Some Other Snooty Name type people here, there weren't a lot that claimed kinship with us. But it was more than that. I knew an outsider when I saw one. I was Jade Barlow, he was Adam Stuart, but for us to exist here we had to be rebranded as Whiteley. Rich enough to earn a place, but not good enough to be equals. I crossed my arms, the fabric of the expensive jacket pulling tight across my shoulders.

“Well...” The compere's smile dimmed a little. “If we're ready to start bidding, I'll begin at one thousand?” Mr Suit had started at ten thousand and he hadn't filled his suit anywhere near as well. “Anyone?”

Oh my god, the silence was what had my paddle whipping up, because a whole bunch of core memories were being dragged up as every awkward second passed by. Of being called last when teachers made us select our own teams for sport, because Jade was too gumby to catch a ball. Of having people shove me in the hall, yank my ponytail, and mock anyone who dared to be my friend. And when I found a group of misfits just like me in high school, then they were mocked as well. We told each other we didn't care, that at least we weren't as basic as those bitches, but... No one liked being put on the spot, only to have their true standing in the group laid bare for everyone to see.

“One hundred,” I said, flipping up my paddle.

“Surely we can start the bidding at a thousand, ladies?” the compere said, casting around for support.

“Thousand,” I amended. “You didn't let me finish.”

“One hundred thousand?” The auctioneer queried, peering closely at me.

“One—” someone else started to say.

“One hundred and fifty thousand,” I countered.

That started everyone mumbling. I’d seen this shit before. Once someone started bestowing value on something previously seen as worthless, some people, at least, would start to look at it differently, wondering why. I watched women whispering furiously to others close to them, and paddles started to rise.

“Remember, this is for the creation of a brand-new women’s shelter,” the compere said. “Out in the northern suburbs, of course.”

“Two hundred thousand,” I said.

“Bidding against yourself is *not* part of the process,” Mellors murmured, though with humour in his tone. But it wasn’t him I was focussed on, it was Adam. He straightened up, his smile fading, but something else replacing it. His blue eyes burned into mine, creating a strange kind of kinship that went beyond the very distant blood bond we had. Adam nodded to me just once as the bidding started to rage. Women were speaking over each other and hissing when someone else took their bid. The compere fought to create calm, but where she was failing, I was going to win.

“How much does the women’s shelter need for the new building?” I asked Mellors.

“2.2 million. But, Jade—”

“Do I have enough to cover that?”

He let out a sigh. “Enough to build many, many such facilities, if you wish.”

“Awesome.” When I raised my paddle, everyone turned to stare, so I held it higher, like the Statue of Liberty holding her torch. “2.2 million.”

The gasp that went through the room was so loud my ears popped a little from the change in pressure. I rubbed it with

my finger, then nodded to the compere to make clear I was serious.

“Well...” She almost staggered back from the lectern. “If there are no other bids?”

There weren't. Of course there weren't. No one else was mad enough to bid so high, but that suited me just fine. Mellors had egged me on in this little power play, but in the end I'd focused on the one thing that was most important to me: enabling someone to keep their dignity. Women brave enough to try and escape their abusers deserved somewhere relatively soft to land, and Adam deserved to be treated like an actual human being, rather than like Not One of Us, and if it took 2.2 million to do that, then I was cool.

Right up until we were forced to take a photo together.

“Oh my god...” the woman from the shelter said, her hands going to her cheeks. “I had no idea... I mean, I hoped, but... Oh my god, I thought we had months and months of fundraising ahead of... Oh my god!” She stopped her outpouring of emotion to introduce herself. “I'm Sharon, by the way.”

Her feeling of joy mixed with disbelief was one I knew well. It was that sense of something finally going your way. I'd felt it the moment Mellors had walked into Trevor's apartment with the news of my inheritance, and I'd felt it every day since. Letting someone else share that joy made me feel a little less guilty about my good fortune.

“I'm really honoured to help support your organisation, Sharon,” I said, offering her my hand, but she wrapped me up in a massive hug, squeezing me hard. Behind her, Adam approached much more cautiously, a wry smile on his lips.

“Let's get a photo!” Sharon exclaimed, nestling in close as the photographer approached. “This will go on the front page of the newsletter.”

“Are you ladies OK if I jump in on this photo?” Adam asked.

“God, yes. Get in here!” Sharon’s enthusiasm was infectious. She flung an arm around my waist and his, dragging us closer. The photographer asked us to smile and we did so obediently before they pulled back and looked at their LCD display.

“Perfect,” they said. “Now, if we can get the next one with Jade in the middle? We really should have the winning bidder and her prize next to each other.”

“Of course.”

Nothing seemed to faze Adam. He just shoved his hands in his pockets and sauntered over to stand on my right. Was he standing much closer to me than he had been to Sharon? It was hard to tell, because she’d embraced him with such gusto. The photographer was giving him direction, but he just looked down at me.

“Is this OK, Jade?”

His arm went out, hovering around my waist area but not actually touching me, not until I gave consent. I smiled at him politely: a social reflex. Holding someone around the waist meant nothing. People did it for photos all the time. Mr Suit had gripped his nana’s waist and beamed for the camera, so why would I object? But when Adam’s eyes met mine, I saw something there, an intensity, a recognition, that told me he knew what I felt because he felt it, too.

That to touch me, to hold me, wasn’t an impersonal thing.

He was giving off major vibes and... I’d had one bloody boyfriend in my entire life. When Trevor had indicated that he wanted to get serious, I’d taken myself off the market with a sigh of relief. No one else had been knocking down my door to ask me to date them. But as I looked at Adam, I had the feeling that he might.

*Note to self, I thought, find out what the hell this situationship with the gargoyles actually entails.*

“Yeah, of course,” I said with a little laugh, trying to make light of, well, everything. I turned back to the photographer, thinking that was a safer place to direct my gaze, but I was

mistaken. We had an audience filled with keen eyes and even keener commentary, if the whispered asides were anything to go by. They all watched as Adam drew closer to me, observing intently as his arm went around me.

Sharon was pressed enthusiastically into my left side, but she was nothing compared to him. His hand landed very demurely in the small of my back, but somehow it was under my jacket. The satin of my blouse felt all too thin, the heat radiating off him threatening to scorch me, and that's when that dream came back. My lips parted as I stared into the lens, but I didn't see the photographer, just the Adam of my dream. My hands balled into fists, because otherwise I felt like I would be planting them against his chest for them to anchor me as my hips rose and fell.

"One more..." the photographer said with a distracted air, their finger poised over the button. "Now smile."

But I couldn't, not when my whole body burned. Sweat prickled across my brow. My cunt clamped down, then flexed, like I was actually doing what I'd dreamed about, the well-used muscles reminding me of just how incredible that had been last night. And then, to my shock, I felt something slippery slowly sliding past those muscles.

If you have a period, you know exactly what that feels like, when that thick, heavy fluid slides out of you. I stiffened, then pulled myself away, not sure what the fuck my body was doing. It wasn't that time of the month and I...

"I'm sorry, I need to go," I told the photographer, feeling something heavy and dark pulse inside me. I turned to the compere. "Mellors can sort out the payment details for me."

I heard sounds, noises, people calling my name, but for the first time since I'd stepped into the place, I followed my instincts to get out of there. My heels clicked across the floor and I made a beeline for the sliding door, not even sure I knew how to open it.

"Jade!" A man's voice called out to me, and I was willing to bet it wasn't Mellors. "Jade!"



The sliding doors parted as I approached them. I let out a sigh of relief and continued, click, click, clicking as I walked through. Just as I burst out into the real world, a hand grabbed mine.

Oh my god...

It was like a sonic boom exploding inside me, reverberating outwards, and all I could do was withstand the aftershock. I couldn't move, couldn't do a damn thing as he turned me around to face him.

"Jade..." Adam stared down at me in concern, his hand rising, fingers flexing in the air, before he cupped my cheek. "What's going on? I know those women are bitches, but—"

"Can't..."

That's all I could manage. My eyelids fluttered and whatever the hell was going on with my body came to a head. Pleasure, pure pleasure, rushed up, ready to burn me whole.

And I knew if I stayed there, I'd step gladly into its blaze.

Every nerve ending felt like it was being licked simultaneously. I wanted to go back for more.

But I couldn't.

"I can't do this..." I whispered, turning on my heel and walking away.

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# Chapter 51

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*Jade*

“Jade?” Ignoring Adam’s shout, I lengthened my stride, making for where the building met the footpath. “Jade!”

But he would not be denied. He kept pace with me easily as I charged on, then he stepped in front of me as I turned onto the footpath. I had momentum up and couldn’t stop. When I realised I was going to collide with his chest, I threw my hands in front of my face. Next I knew, Adam had absorbed my impact by taking a half-step back into one of the alcoves that ran along the building and spinning me so that he was between me and the street. When I looked up at him, I had one hand on his lapel, with the other against the opening of his shirt. I could feel him: crisp cotton, finely woven wool, and man—warm, human, real. As skin touched skin, that intense feeling of sensual pleasure rushed through me, forcing me to start panting all over again. I needed to know what his reaction was so I took a step back, then froze when I looked up at him. Those full lips were parted, his brow was creased and he looked just as taken aback as I was by whatever was happening between us.

“I need to go,” I managed to get out.

“Then let me give you a lift.” He cleared his throat, then blinked, decorum returning. “You arrived with James, didn’t you?”

“You noticed that?” I asked.

“I notice quite a lot.” That rakish expression flashed over his face, but didn’t stay there. “It’s the only way to survive *that...*” He stared in the direction of the ballroom, then he turned his head to me again and looked into my eyes, his expression intent. “But I think you’re asking something else entirely.”

Adam had been so careful about touching me without permission, so it was no surprise that when he raised his hand, he moved it slowly towards me. I had plenty of time to dodge out of the way if I wanted to. But I didn’t. I stood stock-still, my chest heaving as those long fingers trailed along my jaw, then down my neck, to come to rest on my mating mark.

The sensations that had flowed through my body when I’d touched the mark myself had ranged from heart-pumping to mildly orgasmic. But as Adam touched me there... I was back to gasping like a landed fish, unable to take a full breath. It was as though oxygen wasn’t able to exist alongside this kind of pleasure; that I’d had to choose one or the other and I’d gone for pleasure. It bubbled up within me, the pressure rising and rising until I was wobbling on my heels, barely able to stand, as my knees threatened to give out. I grabbed his wrist and snatched his hand away. Immediately, the throbbing feeling dialled down to a much more tolerable level, then stopped as I stepped free of him.

“OK, what the hell was that?”

“They haven’t told you yet?” he asked, a wild grin, a real one, spreading across his face. “It’s a primitive instinct that all witches and warlocks possess. Your gargoyles might know their fated mate on sight, but we...” His fingers moved towards me, almost of their own volition, then he snatched his hand back, balling it into a fist. “We know whether or not we’re a compatible match by touch.”

“How the hell can you base a relationship on... Ohh, you mean physical compatibility.” I wriggled my fingers. “You mean just touching tells us we’d be able to make beautiful babies or something.”

“Exactly that,” he said with a nod. “It was why those old... men of the Wildfyre Club were so disinterested in educating you on this world.”

“Because all I had to do was shake hands with a long line of warlocks and see who could nearly bring me to my knees with a no-hands orgasm and I’d know who to marry,” I muttered in disgust.

“No hands, huh?”

Gods, were all men such smug bastards any time they pleased a woman? I tried to scowl at him but his wide grin was infectious.

“So, are you telling me that touching me doesn’t affect you the same?” My eyebrow cocked up as I questioned him. “That this only works one-way, on me?”

His grin faded abruptly, replaced by something much more intense, something familiar. Because I’d seen the same look on Graven and Carrick’s faces when I’d thought they were a dream, and again on Seneca’s face when I let him inside my bedroom. I hadn’t had enough of men staring down at me like I was their entire world, so I soaked in Adam’s attention, too. But I’d asked a question and he partially answered it by grabbing my hand and pressing it against the neat fall of his pants.

“Quite the bloody opposite,” he ground out, closing my fingers around something long, thick and hard. “The night you entered the Whiteley Building was by far the most stimulating I’d ever spent within those walls.” He moved in closer, surrounding my body, just like my gargoyles did, and his breath hitched as I moved my hand up and down, mapping his entire length. “The second you stepped into the room with those gargoyles at your back, I went from being bored out of my mind, to hard and aching. While those old pricks blathered on and on, all I could think of was you.”

He pushed a strand of hair away from my neck, and my whole body quivered in response. I knew if he just shifted his fingers to the left an inch, I'd be left a gasping mess again. The fact we were in an alcove on a busy street didn't seem to matter. Part of me felt greedy for that pleasure. Because all I could see in my head was long nights spent with my gargoyles, and then, during the day...

"And then you put every single one of those pricks in their place, and that was it. I was gone; done for. This isn't what I thought would happen when I found the one for me. I'm not in the habit of pining for someone else's fated mate, but you just had to be brave and beautiful and—"

I so wanted to lap up every bit of praise. I totally wanted to bathe myself in the pleasure that his touch brought. A very hungry part of me wanted to pull down his fly and feel his hot length as it filled my hand and bring him right to the edge I was teetering on. Instead, I forced myself to let go of him and step backwards with a regretful sigh.

"Look, Adam, it's obvious that I want to explore whatever the hell this is," I told him.

"But there's more than just yourself to consider." His fingers were featherlight as they brushed against the bite mark, then withdrawn. "Well, when you discuss this with your fated mates, remember this: it doesn't have to be either gargoyles and no warlock, or a warlock and no gargoyles. If a man really cares about you, he won't ask you to choose."

I felt like I might have something in response to that, but I wasn't sure what. But as I went to open my mouth, anyway, my phone started to buzz. I pulled it out and saw Daniel's name flash up on the screen.

"I'm sorry, I really need to take this."

"That's fine," he said, with a smile, "but... make sure you talk to your gargoyles. And then meet me tonight at The Mayflower restaurant." Somehow I'd already forgotten that was part of the 'prize' I'd won. "If you come, I'll know you're open to at least..." His hand slid into mine, stoking those flames again. "...exploring whatever this is between us."

Before I could say anything else, he turned and left, leaving me hot and bothered, with a buzzing phone to answer.

“Hey—”

“Bitch, what took you so long?” Daniel yelled down the phone. “Guess what happened? Guess what happened?!”

“What?” I asked with a chuckle. I was well and truly familiar with Daniel’s hysterics. He reminded me of one of those little yappy dogs that would spin around in circles when excited.

“Big called.”

My smile instantly faded. I hadn’t been a fan of Daniel’s mysterious lover before their last date, having watched my otherwise cocky friend shrink down into himself after too many interludes with someone who I assumed was a closeted man. But, now...? I forced myself to blink several times to stop seeing the bruises on his skin, the way he’d seemed so crushed, both inside and out.

“Danny, you can’t go out with him again. After last time —”

“Don’t worry, I had the same conversation with him. I told him that I couldn’t...” I went perfectly still as his breezy tone broke and something raw rose up, but Daniel mastered himself quickly. “That I couldn’t let him do shit like that to me again, no matter how good it felt.” I frowned slightly, then looked down at my own palm, able to feel the ghost of that pleasure Adam had inspired. “And he agreed.”

“What?”

“He said he knew he’d gone too far and that’s why he dumped me at the gates. He was terrified of what he’d do if he didn’t get me out of his place. He said he lost his shit, stepped over a line...”

Daniel’s words came out faster and faster and I knew exactly what this was. It was that frantic need to rationalise, to explain away the inexplicable. The origins of our friendship had come from trauma bonding: he’d cried on my shoulder just as many times as I’d cried on his, both of us devastated by

men that we thought would be everything we needed, and then made it clear they were anything but.

“Anyway, he said he was taking me out tonight on an actual date.”

“Daniel! Danny, is this smart?”

I didn’t want to pop his bubble, but I was terrified of what would happen if he didn’t take more care. He’d seemed to rally quickly after last time, but... I never wanted to see him like that again and, honestly, I needed for him to want that too.

“Love’s never smart, Jade,” he told me in a voice that vibrated with emotion. “Why would anyone bother to invest in another person that deeply? They can leave you at any moment, disappoint you...” He drew in a breath. “Hurt you. But there’s something inside us that wants to reach out for more. It has to. I need you to be excited about this, Jade.”

And there it was. Our friendship had been forged on the notion that at any point one person could require wholesale approval of the other, even if they secretly thought the plan, program or person was a bad one. He’d done the same for me when I’d told him I’d continue living at Trevor’s. So I sucked it up and forced myself to smile, so there’d be a positive note in my voice, before replying.

“I’ll be home shortly,” I said. “Then we’ll go upstairs and see what else is in those wardrobes. Maybe the perfect suit so you look amazing on your date. Or if there isn’t one, we’ll go shopping somewhere swanky and get you the best that money can buy.”

“That’s my girl,” he said with a sigh. “Do you think you can find me an etiquette coach at short notice? Where we’re going is really fancy and I have no idea what all those knives and forks are for.”

“Whatever you need,” I assured him.

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## Chapter 52

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*Jade*

“You’re going out with him again?”

Harry walked into the foyer of the house with a stern look on his face as I tweaked Daniel’s tie, making sure it sat just so. We’d found a double breasted suit in a deep charcoal that suited Danny’s slender frame perfectly. His bright blue hair looked darker now that it was slicked back and held in place with some styling wax, and gold cufflinks glinted at his wrists.

“How the hell...?” Daniel said and I hissed as he turned to face the other man. “You recognised the car.”

“Damn straight, I did,” Harry growled. “Pretty hard to forget the car of a bloke that dumped someone at the gates in the condition you were in.” He stepped closer, towering over Daniel. “Which will happen again if you go out with that dickhead.”

“Pfft...” Daniel said with a toss of his head. “We’re going out for dinner—”

“And I’ll be left to pick up the pieces when you come home.” Harry’s brows jerked down. “*If* you come home.”



“No one said you have to.” Danny went to shove Harry backwards, but his hand met a wall of muscle that wasn’t going anywhere. “Huh, someone’s been working out. Look.” He patted Harry’s chest before withdrawing his hand. “This big, growly, protective thing is kinda hot, but...”

“Why do you need to be protected, Daniel?”

My heart swelled as I heard that low, rumbly voice. I looked around to see that my gargoyles were on their way down the stairs, their eyes scanning the foyer as if to try and work it out for themselves. Graven frowned, like Mr Big was going to leap out from behind the antique hall stand and steal Daniel away. But Seneca’s eyes stopped when they found mine. His gaze felt like it scalded my skin, just as Adam’s had earlier that day, and then his eyes dipped to settle on the mark on my neck. A small smile formed on his lips, one of self-congratulation, before Carrick gave him a nudge.

“I don’t need to be protected at all.” Daniel was trying to be firm about his boundaries. But if I could hear the small waver in his voice, so could the others. “I’m fine.”

“Seems to me that if you *were* fine, you wouldn’t need to try and convince us,” Harry said. “Or yourself.”

For just a second I grasped at a thread of hope. Daniel stared mulishly up into Harry’s eyes, but the longer they gazed at each other, something seemed to soften in my friend. But it seemed that his mind was made up. He pulled himself away from Harry, from all of us, and headed for the door.

“Someone has hurt your Daniel?” Graven asked me. “I can follow him, ensure he comes home safe.”

“No, you can’t.” Daniel’s voice cut through the air as he looked back at everyone gathered in the foyer. “And thanks for trying to ruin this for me, all of you.” But nothing kept my friend down for long. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Jade, you have to stop him,” Harry urged.

“No, I can’t.” I watched Daniel walk out the front door, then down the central path. “This is his life. He makes the calls. All we can do is be there to support him if he needs it.”

“Fine... But don’t expect me to patch him up and put him back together.” Harry twisted away then went stomping out the door himself.

I didn’t expect Harry to do anything. It was something he was putting on himself for some reason, and that was the problem.

“Everything is alright, my mate?”

I knew it was Seneca, because the minute his hand landed on my shoulder, my body heated. It felt like there was an ache inside me that only he could appease, so I turned around to face him.

“It is now that you’re here.” I smoothed my hands up his grey skin, marvelling at the fact that this muscular glory was mine, all mine. “Did you sleep well?”

“I drifted in a cloud of the most perfect peace,” he told me, with a small smile. “A dream I almost didn’t want to wake up from. But when I did, I knew that it had been no dream; that nothing my subconscious summoned could compare with reality.” I shivered as a claw ran down the side of my face, I shivered. “What about you, Jade? Did you sleep deeply and recover?”

“Recover? Kind of.” My hand dropped down to my pelvis as I felt that ache flex and shift inside me. “Sleep? A bit. It’s kind of hard balancing everything happening at night as well as during the day.”

“Then a night of rest is in order.” Carrick stepped forward and lifted me into his arms. He smiled as I burst out laughing at suddenly being swept off my feet. “You can relax in your bed and we will take care of everything...”

I was about to ask exactly what the hell he meant by ‘everything’, but we were already up the stairs, and at my bedroom door. And then, when he kicked the door open and walked in, I was speechless.

All I could do was stare. The bed was made and the stink of wine was gone. The carpet looked clean and unmarked as did the bed covers.

“How...?” I forced Carrick to set me down as the other two entered the room behind us. I moved closer to the bed and leaned forward, smoothed my hand over the quilt cover, searching for any signs of stains or damp spots. When I didn’t find any, I flipped the bedding back and leaned on one hand to do the same thing. While I was bent over, Carrick walked to me and pressed his lower body against mine.

“Mmm...” He ran his hands up and down my bent back. “Perhaps we could start things just like this.”

“Carrick...”

I felt him shift closer, forcing his hips lower and pushing against me, but his hard length was only able to press into the cleft of my arse due to the nature of the skirt I was wearing.

“Just enough to take the edge off,” he said, in a low purr. “You can sleep for a time afterwards while we will keep watch, then we’ll wake you again...” His claws rucked up the hem of my skirt, revealing me inch by inch. “And again. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, lass. To wake up squirming on my tongue.”

“Or mine,” Seneca said, crawling onto the bed until he knelt before me. Those massive hands tilted my face towards his and I let out a helpless sound of need, melting into him as I kissed him.

Fuck. Yes.

Nothing in the world had felt as good, as natural, as this. They only had to touch me and my body turned to fire. My nails raked down Seneca’s front, scudding over his cobblestone abs, to curl my fingers around his rigid cock. He moaned into my mouth, his member jumping in my palm, as my fingers spread the slick of his precum over the head. But as Carrick shoved my blouse up and out of my waistband and then slid down the zip of my skirt, I remembered one of the reasons I was becoming aroused so easily. Someone else had been turning me to fire today, and that reminded me of what I needed to raise.

“Wait... wait...”

“There’s no need to wait,” Carrick insisted, his hand sliding up my inner thigh. “Not when we are dying to give you everything you need.” My underwear was pulled to one side and blunt fingers probed my entrance, then shoved in, the impact making me toss my head back. For a few moments, no thoughts were in my head as I rode his hand, pushing back to meet his every stroke, that vicious rhythm just what I needed. Then Graven stepped forward.

“Our mate asked us to wait.”

I blinked, trying to dispel the haze that hung over me. Bloody hell, I wasn’t usually this overheated, but then, Daniel had always said my world would change once I started getting good dick. I pulled in a breath, then let one out in a sigh as Carrick pulled his fingers free. That sudden emptiness threw me right back to what happened before, with Adam.

“Look, I need to talk to you all about something.”

“We are listening, Jade,” Graven said, moving into view. His very impressive arms were folded and he glared at the other two meaningfully until they moved back slightly.

“So, warlocks...” Each one of them stiffened, something I never would’ve noticed if I hadn’t become exquisitely attuned to subtle shifts in my lover’s moods when I was with Trevor. “Am I right in thinking that they actively try to get between gargoyles and their fated mates?”

“They have no use for us other than power reservoirs,” Carrick said, his voice bitter. “Women are a means to bind us more securely to their houses. Each one of us was lured into bondage by a pretty face, by promises of finding our mates, but it was never in their best interests for us to find her.” His hand slid much more gently now over my shoulders. “We would move heaven and earth to find her, break bonds that had for hundreds of years held us fast to a place, resist their dominion: none of which they like very much.”

“You’re a part of their power base,” I said, with a frown. “They don’t see you as sentient creatures with needs and wants.”

“After the Fall, our nature was to serve,” Graven said. “Warlocks have exploited that for centuries. Why would they stop now?”

As I stared down at the bed, it was Adam I saw, not the pretty coverlet.

“Because not every warlock was brought up in a system built upon the servitude of gargoyles,” I told them before I straightened up. “You guys seem happy to share me. What if warlocks learned the same?”

“Not warlocks,” Seneca said, his expression now very serious. “A warlock.” He cupped my face in his hands, tilting his head so he could stare down into my eyes. “Has one caught your eye, my love? Is there someone you wish to bring to your bed?”

“Our bed.” I gripped his wrists. “No one is usurping you from your position here in my room.” My hand shook as I slid one of his down and under the collar of my shirt, letting it come to rest on my chest. “Or in my heart.”

Although Seneca smiled at that, Graven stepped closer.

“Who?” he demanded, his tail flicking back and forth. “What warlock would be so willing to put aside the practices his kind have lived by for centuries? Who?”

I was regretting this terribly. We only had so much time together each night, but I was ruining it with this shit. I shook my head and then forged on, because there was no other way forward.

“Adam,” I said, and each one of them responded differently. “When he touches me it feels exactly the same as it does when you touch me. He said he would never try to get in the way of what we have and...”

“Adam?” Graven’s voice had changed utterly, becoming taut as stretched wire.

“I knew I didn’t like that little prick...” Carrick muttered, but it wasn’t his discontent that plucked at my heart; it was Graven’s. He nodded sharply, then those dark eyes of his met mine.

“If this is what you wish, Mistress...”

That, that was exactly what I didn't want and I pulled away from the other two and crossed the room to stand before Graven. His hands were limp in mine when I grabbed them and he stood there impassively, as if tolerating my touch.

“That's not how this works,” I said. “You'd never do anything to me without my enthusiastic consent and...” My thumbs rubbed across the backs of his hands. “And the same goes for you.”

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## Chapter 53

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### *Graven*

I had been shocked by Adam Stuart's appearance the first time I saw him, due to his resemblance to Wulfstan. Now, however, I held the memory of his face in my mind and cursed him with everything I had. No warlock would ever allow a witch as powerful as Jade to maintain anything with us, but I didn't know how to tell her that.

She wanted this: I felt that like a punch to the gut. Jade wanted this upstart warlock with his eye on her fortune. And, worse, she'd voiced that before demonstrating any sort of preference for me. I took a step away from her despite it tearing my heart in two, but I couldn't stop myself. It was either that or I'd snatch her up, fly from the estate and hole up with her in some cave, holding her close until all she craved in the world was me.

"Graven..."

Her hand stroked mine, but I couldn't let myself be seduced by the magnetic pull between us. Instead, I raised her knuckles to my lips and pressed a gentle kiss there, even as I wanted to tug her against my body and claim her mouth as mine.

“My whole purpose is to serve you in any way you deem right, Mistress. I will serve you in this scenario and all others.”

There, perfectly polite, making clear my devotion to her and—

“No!” Her words pushed me harder than her hands as she slapped them down on my chest and shoved.

“No?”

A knife blade can be so sharp that it cuts through your flesh faster than your nerve endings can register it—that’s how my pain felt.

“No!” She shoved me again and surprise, rather than her strength, had me stumbling backwards. “No, you don’t get to do that.”

“Do what, Mi—”

“Don’t say that word.” She shoved her finger under my nose and my fangs flexed, wanting to take a little nip from it. “Don’t. I told you not to call me that anymore.”

“Jade, then,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “I will serve you until my dying days, Ja—”

“No.”

I blinked, knowing now what this was. As I stared at her, my Adam’s apple bobbed in my throat, feeling as though it had suddenly grown twice the size. She was my love, my entire heart, and somehow it was about to get torn from me. Because while she might be my fated mate, she was not bound to accept my love, like I was hers.

She was going to reject me.

It had happened to other gargoyles. We were told about it when we were still boys, of gargoyles that had failed in their duties, who did not show their mate due care, or sometimes it had happened due to pressure from her family or her warlock husband. Gargoyles could be rejected, cursed to love a woman until the bitter end, never having received a single kind look from her, let alone her caress. When I was still a child, I’d



sworn it'd never happen to me, that I would do everything to serve my fated mate, but here I was, facing that very thing.

I was a warrior. I had fought my master's enemies, back in England, driving them from his land in the dead of night, leaving the survivors to run home and report being attacked by devils. I'd faced down longbow fire, ballista and everything a siege engine could throw at me, and not flinched for a second. And so, I drew myself upright and met her furious gaze. I'd do the same now, no matter what was said.

“You big, bloody idiot...”

Jade flinging herself at me, wrapping her arms around my waist was not what I had anticipated, so I moved slowly, unsure of how to respond. My hands hovered in the air, fluttering like butterflies, not at all the sure hands of a warrior. But my instincts helped me recover quickly enough. With her face pressed into my belly and her plush body against mine, I couldn't help but cradle her close. I looked down at the top of her head, and then closed my eyes so that nothing would distract me from the feel of my Jade in my arms.

“I won't do anything if you guys are against it.” Her words were pure magic, muffled by her lips pressed into my skin, so I felt them as much as heard them. “I'm not hurting any of you for some dumb warlock with pretty eyes.”

The increase of weight pressing into my body had my eyes flicking open to see Seneca had taken up position behind Jade, sandwiching her between us. Carrick shot me a knowing look, right before he shook his head and scrambled across the bed to join in. That was the moment when what I'd been dreaming of for so damn long would finally come to be.

“I know you're never going to stay late at work and screw your secretary,” she said, her grip on me tightening. My hand landed on the soft skin at the back of her neck, daring to stroke my thumb down the elegant slope.

“I'm not sure we're entirely clear on what a secretary is,” I told her.

“You won’t look me up and down in a few years and ask when I’m going to ‘do something about my body’.”

“Why on earth would we do that?” Carrick asked. “You are perfection personified.”

“And you’ll never expect to have sex whenever you want, make no attempt to get me in the mood, then pump away two, maybe three times, before blowing your load.”

“Well, the fledgling might...” Carrick said, right before I cuffed him at the back of his head.

“We can’t, Jade,” Seneca replied, shooting our brother a dark look. “Your pleasure is what matters most always. As long as you have need of us, we’ll rise again and again. We live to serve.”

“Then do this for me,” Jade said, as she pulled her face away from my stomach, and part of me wanted to push her right back where she’d been. Her eyes searched mine before she spoke again. “Be my partners, not my slaves or servants. Walk beside me, not in front or behind. Choose me not because of instinct or a curse or anything. Choose me because you have the freedom to do that, like anyone else has.”

She was still finding her power, learning how to use her magic, but as she spoke, I felt it. A working of great strength, rising up inside her, and before I could utter a warning, it rushed out like a great explosion.

I caught the back blast as did the other two, the three of us going completely rigid as something truly magical happened. I’d watched previous masters use fire, water, air or earth magic to create illusions, to transform people and places, but never anything like this. It was as if her words went to the core of us, rewriting something that had been laid down the minute we’d been conceived and turning us into something else altogether.

“We’re free.” Carrick stared down at his hands and I understood why. These were still our bodies and yet they now were something else altogether, something new, something amazing. “You freed us.”

“What?” she asked in confusion. And of course, there was the answer. Warlocks worked hard to school their daughters, wives, nieces and cousins to ensure that exactly this sort of thing never happened. The collar that had been around my neck since the moment I turned to stone was unclipped and left to fall free, leaving only me.

And I knew exactly what I would do with my newfound freedom.

I scooped Jade up into my arms, relishing the fact I could do that freely now, catching the way her eyes went wide, then when a smile spread across her face as I laid her down on the bed.

“If that ensemble has any sort of sentimental value to you, then you best get it off, lass,” I rasped.

“What?” Her eyes slid down to where my cock jutted free of my body, hard and waiting for her. “Oh...” Then she scrambled to get free of her clothes, my eyes watching for every inch of creamy skin that she revealed.

“But keep the pearls.”

Seneca stared down at her, before plucking at the strand, rubbing one smooth bead in between his fingers.

“I do like the way you think, brother,” Carrick said, moving in to take over, yanking her skirt down, then tearing her underwear off with a swift slice of his claws.

Then she was completely bare to each one of us, how she'd be every night if I had anything to say about it. Normally I'd check in with her, with my brothers and find a way forward that would make us all happy, but a foreign feeling that took a while to recognise, a savage selfishness, had me lunging forward. Her arms went around my neck and her thighs around my waist as I sank down upon her.

She was mine, for just this moment, or eternity, I wasn't sure, but I couldn't bring myself to stop in order to find out. My mouth found hers and her lips were soft, parting for me the second we kissed, my body rearing up as my tongue thrust past them. I needed her taste, all of it, but right now I'd settle

for finding my way around her mouth. I liked the way her nails raked across my shoulders, her hips bucking upwards so that sweet little slit rubbed against my aching length. But after a while, it wasn't enough, and the pearls along my shaft started to throb viciously.

“Jade, I need—”

“I know.”

She shoved me again, this time with an entirely different intent, and I fell backwards down onto the bed, a throne for her to mount. Seneca and Carrick moved into the space I'd vacated, their claws raking across her ribs, sliding down between her thighs to spread apart that enticing pinkness or to map the swells of breasts my hands itched to touch.

But I would get what I needed.

Because that's how this would be now, each one of us seeing to the other's needs, ensuring that the bonds that bound us tight were strong. My hands went up to help her as she moved forward, and as soon as she got close, I pulled her down upon my face. I pressed a kiss into her inner thigh, then looked up at her.

“I've dreamed of licking your hot little cunt since the moment we met,” I told her, even as my thumbs went to split her open.

“Well, far be it for me to stand between a male and his dreams,” she said, before easing her hips down.

Sweet, so sweet, and with an acidic tang that had my fangs aching with need. My tongue slid between her folds, collecting up her taste which I gulped down. After I made my tongue into a point, I conducted a very careful inspection of the terrain around her clit, the side of my tongue only just grazing the place that needed me most. Her hands went to my hair, tightening to the point of pain and I just grinned, relenting with a very slow broad sweep of her pearl, hearing her moans pick up in pitch right up until the point I flicked past it. When she let out a little sigh of disappointment, I went back again

and again, closing the gaps between pleasure and nothing until her thighs were twitching.

When she bore down on my face, grinding all that sweetness into it, I sent up a mental cheer. She needed me so much that she would cut off my oxygen supply. I didn't care about breathing, rising to her challenge by pushing my tongue right up inside the place that ached for me, wiggling it until I felt that hard ring that would come alive as each one of my pearls was wedged in. That had her hips shifting, jerking in time with my pulses, a rhythm that turned ragged and uneven when my thumb rubbed at her pearl, with it all coming to a head as her whole body stiffened.

“Graven...”

That, that's how I wanted her to say my name going forward, only like that. I greedily sucked down her juices as they flooded my mouth, feeling her cunt clamp down on my tongue, knowing she'd do just the same when I was inside her.

When.

I knew that for a fact now, my heart singing even as it beat far too fast, until she peeled herself off me.

“Graven...”

No, I preferred this tone of voice, shaky, needy for something only I could give her. I grinned as I cleaned my face off with my hand and then licked it clean.

“Something you need, m...”

“Don't you say it,” she said in mock outrage, holding her finger out.

“My mate.”

She let out a sigh as I settled down on top of her, pinning her to the bed.

“OK, you can say that.”

“I will,” I said with a slow grin, my cock nudging all of that softness, my breath coming out in a hiss at the first wet

kiss of it. “Over and over, because Jade...” She stared into my eyes. “That’s what you are now. Mine, all mine.”

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# Chapter 54

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*Jade*

“Mine, all mine...”

The low down, guttural growl, it felt like it vibrated through me, right down to my core. It went beyond the sexual and into something far more vulnerable. I couldn't help but search his face for the truth of it. I'd been hurt and tricked, and I couldn't bear to have that happen again. But where those dark eyes might contain stars, even galaxies, they didn't hide secrets. That tentative smile that grew bolder by the second; it made everything clear.

“And you're mine.” I traced down the severe line of his cheekbone, his head dipping sideways to press a kiss to my fingertips, right before he surged forward. “Shit...!” I was full, so damn full, and he'd only pushed the tip in.

“Breathe,” he commanded and my lungs obeyed, filling with air and then expelling it. “Now take a deeper breath in, until I say to stop.” My lungs felt like a balloon inflating, becoming fuller and fuller until he gave the order. “Now let it out.”

As the air rushed out, he stabbed in. One pearl then another forced inside me, making my whole body thrash. I clamped

down without thought and was instantly rewarded. Those hard little pearls started to rub against something that felt amazing, creating waves of deep, deep pleasure that threatened to drown me.

“Having difficulties taking our fearless leader?” Carrick asked, grinning down at me when I looked up hazily. “Perhaps you need something to distract you?”

He eased his cock down so the head brushed my lips. They parted in reaction, my tongue sweeping over the swollen head, collecting the salty taste of him as I was rewarded by the sound of his moan. And he was right: I didn’t think about how tightly I was stretched around Graven as Carrick eased himself deeper.

“Open up...” he crooned. “Just like that. There’s a good girl. You’ve let us in and you’ll never get us back out again. Now, Fledgling, get to pleasing our girl.”

“Already there,” Seneca snapped as he slid down on the bed beside me. I pulled my mouth free, panting as his hand roamed all over my body, then settled on my clit.

“Gods...” Graven groaned as I clamped down tight. “My pearls are pressing down...”

“And it’ll only get worse,” Seneca said before grinning. “Or better.”

“Eyes back here, lass.” My head swivelled around obediently and Carrick rewarded me with a smile. “Now, where were we...?”

I fell into a strange, timeless space made up only of pleasure. Sucking Carrick’s dick as Graven eased himself slowly deeper, panting each time a pearl popped in, that feeling of fullness multiplying. As my tongue traced the shape of every pearl down the length of Carrick’s shaft, Graven’s rubbed back and forth inside me with a maddening rhythm that was slowly driving me insane. Seneca’s fingers slid through my sopping folds, teasing my clit initially and then when I’d warmed up a bit, pinching down to force sharp explosions of pleasure from me that had my hips jerking and twitching. And



they rode every wave of my body with expert ease, until we were no longer the four of us, but one multi-limbed organism.

“Gods, you’re fucking taking all of me...”

“Your mouth feels like wet velvet, lass. I’ll be waking you every night for more.”

“She’s getting close. Bring her to her climax and then it’s my turn.”

“Got ideas, fledgling? That’s dangerous.”

“Jade needs pleasure, more pleasure. Everything’s been hurting her too damn much, but that’s not going to be us.”

“Not us,” the other two agreed.

“You’re going to come for me now, Jade.” I felt like I was swimming up, up to the surface, against a velvety undertow that wanted to suck me deeper. “Because when you do, for just a second you’ll open right up and then I’ll be as deep as I can inside you.” Graven let out a ragged laugh. “And then you’ll never be rid of me. I’ve held back all this time for good reason.”

My eyes flicked open then, meeting his, seeing his tense expression, the pleasure so intense it felt like pain in his eyes.

“But not anymore,” I whispered.

“Not anymore,” he agreed. “Now, my beautiful girl.” He moved faster, delved deeper and that deep pleasure started to swell. “Give me the one thing I need. You can do that for me. Give me that, Jade.”

My hand reached up, swivelling up and down Carrick’s length, his cock leaking seed on my skin that burned everywhere it hit. But that didn’t matter, because I was already on fire. Graven was the spark that set me off. But as I moved, they moved, the flames rose higher and higher, casting the room in almost hellish light. When I looked up, I saw us reflected in the mirror above the bed, one soft, pale body and three hard, grey ones, writhing, shifting, rutting against each other. I closed my eyes in bliss, and when I opened them again, I saw another image. Me, riding a different man, a male,

rather: Wulfstan's wings spread out like a banner across the bed, his hands forcing my hips to rise and fall. I could feel the spear of his cock deep inside me, even as I felt Graven's.

“Graven...”

There was something tremulous in my voice and he surged forward and over me, replacing the dream-like image on the ceiling with just him.

“Here, love, I'm always going to be here. I'll always be by your side, no matter what you choose to do, as long as you choose me.”

And that's all it took.

My hand clenched down around Carrick's pearls, forcing a roar from him, one that was a twin to Graven's as my hips tilted back and he thrust his hips forward again. My whole body fought that last pearl, even as I loved that stretch, my teeth locking together as I groaned right as it popped in. I tilted my head sideways offering my neck. Graven's claws raked across the bite mark Seneca had left, then he added his own beside it and the whole world fell away.

“Graven...”

I clung to him, loving the broad span of his shoulders, the weight of him as he snarled into my neck, not being responsible or deferential, just taking what was his for once. He was claiming me in the savage way gargoyles had since the Fall and like every witch before me, I felt my heart lighten to such a point it was almost painful. Graven lifted his head, licking his fangs, then raised himself up on his forearms to give one final, deep thrust. I watched Carrick erupt all over my chest, his cum feeling like a blessing as it fell upon my skin. Then, when Graven fell still, Seneca moved closer to my side, pulling me against him. There was pleasure, so much pleasure, but more than that, there was love. They hadn't been free before, so when they'd gifted me their hearts it had been almost predetermined. But now? I lifted my head and kissed Graven and let Seneca pull me closer again, before turning my head to do the same to him.

Graven hissed as he pulled free of my body, and Seneca timed his stroke perfectly. Before I could get used to that emptiness, Seneca thrust into me from behind, filling me back up. His progress was made easier by our combined lubrication, so he was able to seat himself deep before settling back against the bed.

“There you are...”

His voice was almost a lullaby and I knew why. My body felt heavy, my eyelids fluttering closed before flicking back open again, each time he pushed inside me. This was a long, slow, rocking fuck that had my head rolling back against his shoulder.

“Now doesn’t that feel good?” he asked me in a soft voice. His hand smoothed over my belly. “Just like this. Just like this.”

“And maybe a little something extra.” Graven was sitting back on his heels, his chest still heaving, watching as Carrick crawled along the bed like a big cat, with his black eyes focussed on his prey: me. “You’re tired, Jade. Just one more and then you sleep.” His focus shifted to Seneca. “So for once your lack of stamina will be a benefit, not a hindrance.”

“Stop flapping your gums,” Seneca snapped back. “If you’re going to move your mouth, then do something useful with it.”

“Oh, I shall.”

Carrick stared down, smiling each time my body moved in time with Seneca’s strokes, his lips trailing across my breasts, sucking rhythmically on one nipple, then moving to the other when I stiffened, his liquid, pulsing caress forcing my hips back harder to meet Seneca’s strokes. But he wasn’t satisfied with just that. As my body undulated, his kisses dropped lower and lower but not low enough. My hand shot out and I forced him between my legs. I felt the rumble of his laughter against my skin as he held himself off.

“Right here, Mistress?”

“*Not* Mistress, I—”

“My love.”

He said the words just before flicking his tongue out. I felt like it curled around the base of my clit, the sensation deeper, more intense, right before he flicked it upwards, making my whole body shake. He did it over and over again, Seneca moving in time, until I was drawn up again in a lazy spiral of pleasure I never wanted to come down from. Just as I reached my peak, I saw something shift in the mirror. Not Graven, nor Carrick or Seneca, or even me. It was a slight woman with bobbed hair. She gazed down at me with a smile filled with mischief, and then, as I hit the heights, she turned and walked out the door.

My orgasm drove all thoughts out of my brain. I could only feel one great galloping wave after another as my whole body shook with each one. Over and over. I'd feel like it was about to taper off, but Seneca would move or Carrick would, and that'd set me off again. It was only when I begged them to stop that Seneca thrust up hard, sending a scalding hot burst of seed inside me that gushed and gushed. He released so much that it began to seep free. I was dimly aware of thinking that it would need to be cleaned up before my head tumbled onto the soft pillow, and I lay there wedged between my males.

“Sleep now, sweetness,” one of them said, stroking my hair and all I could do was nod in agreement.

Today had been eye-opening, exhausting and confusing, but I'd realised that when I was home everything seemed to fall into place. And with that sense of contentment in my heart, I began to fall asleep. As I drifted into the half-world of dreams, though, I realised that she had come with me; was ahead of me.

I dreamed I was walking down the main stairs of the house and towards the front door, trailing after the woman I'd seen in the mirror. She turned and looked over her shoulder, smiling encouragingly as she opened the front door. Her feet seemed to just skim over the grass, but I followed her out of the house, the two of us making a beeline for Z Ward.

When I realised our destination, however, I stopped.

“Come on,” the woman said, gesturing me forward, and my feet moved of their own accord. “I set that bedroom of yours to rights, got rid of that satyr wine before it could stain anything, but I’ve got other messes to clean up now. These are old ones.” Her nose wrinkled. “So we can only hope they don’t stain.”

I didn’t want to go to Z Ward, not even in my dreams, but I seemed powerless to refuse. It was like we were tied by an invisible rope, one that pulled me along as she started to move. Past the moon-gilded roses and around the great willow trees we went, until we came to a stop, a short distance from the gates. She gazed up at the tall stone posts, not even flinching a bit when two massive claws wrapped themselves around the steel bars, little sparks of electricity exploding off the metal in response. That strange catlike smile of hers only widened as she drew closer, her steps long, slow and measured like she was in a wedding march, until she stopped just short of the gate.

“Hello, Wulfstan, you magnificent beast,” she said.

“Madeline?” he rumbled in response.

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# Chapter 55

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## *Wulfstan*

I'd heard other gargoyles describe that moment we turned from stone to flesh as coming back to ourselves, but it was never that for me. Consciousness, having a living, breathing body; it didn't bring me back to myself, but rather to hell.

Confusion.

I glanced around me wildly, saw deep shadows and harsh moonlight. What was real and what wasn't? I heard the sounds of screams, of the pathetic, sobbing pleas for this all to be over, for it to be done, but when I looked around, I was the only living creature in this cage. My stone brothers remained as they had been, frozen by the steps of the ward.

Disorientation.

Where was I?

I'd been fighting on the parapets of Tonbury Castle, that was the last clear thing I remembered, beating back the English hordes as they tried to overwhelm my master's demesne. My axe had sliced through the air, taking off the heads of many an enemy, my lord's men shouting with glee in response. I'd snatched a war club from the hands of a big beast

of a man, and used that with my other hand, smashing into skulls. I was a warrior, a fighter, used to the stink of blood and piss and shit, fragrant when mixed with the smoky scent of the fires burning in the fields. It was the wild scent of battle, which was my entire purpose, but as I blinked and stared around me...

Why was I here?

“Wulfstan...”

I stumbled forward, the clang of fetters hanging from the bars of my cell sending me jerking back, because there were more memories to be found there as well, ones I shied away from. But doing that sent me careening into a room that stank of stale blood and rusted metal. I saw devices there that had been used for pursuits no living creature should witness, and as my eyes flicked around the room, I remembered it all. Such casual cruelty, such pleasure gained from other's torments and I... I had performed every savage rite. The blood on my hands now wasn't that of a foe met on the battlefield, but of weak creatures trapped in a cage like a rat.

As I was.

“Wulfstan...”

My head jerked up then, as I heard her voice, calling my name, summoning me forward and out of this hellhole. I went gladly. It was a strong rope, thrown out for me to catch in this shifting sea of horror. I stumbled out of the room, into the main foyer of Z Ward, the name of this place, its purpose coming back to me all over again, because that was my curse. I dropped down deep into the stone each time the sun rose, because I didn't want to surface again. I wanted to stay an immobile carving, dead as stone, rather than face this again.

“Wulfstan...”

It was her voice. Not just any woman's, but hers... Her name was on the tip of my tongue, ready to be said, if I could just... Instead I walked into the courtyard that surrounded the building, and the irony that a winged creature of my power was being kept locked down in an open space hit me hard.

Because as I looked up at the moon and all its stars, I knew what would happen if I took flight. A great crackling net of electricity would make my muscles jump on my bones, my wings spasm and falter and I'd come crashing down.

Again.

“Wulfstan...”

She wasn't here, not yet. My keen eyes searched the beautiful grounds of the estate to no avail. In The Eyrie there was only one room lit up. I saw silhouettes move, shadows that seemed to shift and dance around her.

Was she the one that had called me forth?

I struggled to remember, my broken brain producing only tiny fragments. Soft eyes, softer hands and a body that fit against mine like a key in a lock. My wings moved instinctively to surround her and keep her safe, even though she wasn't there.

But she was.

When I breathed deep, I caught a tiny waft of jasmine on the breeze, and it seemed familiar. As I stood, trying to make connections between memories and sensations, something else altogether happened.

Every bird went still and quiet. It felt like the world was holding its breath. Even the far-off noise from the street died away. I looked back at the house for clues, but saw nothing untoward. And then it hit. An invisible hand shoved itself into my chest, sending me spiralling back, my wings flapping wildly as I tried to keep my feet. But this was no breeze to merely buffet me around, this was a silent force that would not be denied. It punched right into me and had me falling back on my arse.

When I rose again, I was an entirely different male.

I shook my head to dislodge the ringing sound that had started up, but once I got all the way to my feet, it was gone.

All of it.



I blinked, then blinked again, seeing the building as if for the first time. I saw the cracks between some of the bricks, zig-zagging along the wall and had a memory of when they were laid. Luther Whiteley had commandeered a massive team of bricklayers to work through the night to build the place rapidly, and I'd watched their progress from the roof of the main house. I looked at the flaking white paint on the gates, two spots worn back to the metal from where my hands had gripped it over and over. I looked down at the concrete floor, and I knew that it had once been kept meticulously clean by a silent crew of cleaners who came in during the day, for that was when Z Ward was at its quietest, when the inmates were left to sleep off whatever had been done to them. But as I looked at the now dingy floor, another memory came to me, one that was more crisp and clear than any others.

The master's face as he dragged himself across the floor. Or was that me? People who visited the ward thought that I was a sculpture commissioned for the master's vanity, because our faces were identical. I stroked my jaw. Had I always looked like this? Asking a question now actually resulted in my mind working more logically, but as I searched for the truth in its archives, I knew I would come up with nothing.

Because I was not complete.

It was as if I could see the entirety of my own mind now, and that made clear the gaps. The horror of living in this place had masked them before, but not anymore. I was no longer lost in memories of past torture. I was something I hadn't been since the first morning I'd gone to stone.

Free.

I strode forward, wings outstretched, eyes scanning the walls and the gates and everything else, searching for signs of the wards that had been cast over the building to keep others out and me in. I gave my wings an experimental flap, the muscles woefully weak, then leapt into the air.

I experienced just the briefest moment of elation, when I felt like I would make it out of my cage, but the intricate web

of wards came to life with a crackle, electrifying my body, sending me crashing back down.

My failure didn't deter me, because as I watched the wards flicker in and out of view above me, I saw where some were thin and weak and others were strong. My legs coiled under me, somehow feeling stronger as I tried again.

“Wulfstan...”

Her voice was like a call-to-arms now, like my old masters might have used when leading us onto the battlefield. I leapt and smashed into the wards and was dropped back down onto the ground.

“Wulfstan...”

I couldn't fail at this, I couldn't. She urged me to try again and again, until dust and dirt formed a thick crust on the spots where my blood flowed sluggishly, but even that didn't stop me. I leapt until my legs ached and beyond, until my pinions screamed from the effort, over and over, until the wards stopped disappearing and stayed glowing bright. I studied their patterns, a niggling feeling in the back of my head telling me there was something to that, right before I leapt again.

And she stopped simply calling my name. Instead, she was there, standing before the gates.

“Wulfstan...”

I lumbered over to the metal grate and as I peered out between the gaps, I saw a woman. Or were there two? I shook my head, narrowing my eyes, to try and make the image resolve and, sure enough, only one woman remained. She smiled so gently at me that I wanted to give up on my attempt to get out, on everything, and just gaze at her until the sun rose. Then I would stay frozen in place, staring out into the grounds as if that might summon her again.

“Hello, Wulfstan, you magnificent beast,” she said.

“Madeline?” I asked and simply saying that name conjured so many memories. Of being in the big house and watching her slip through the halls like some kind of sylph, always out of my reach. Of her laughter echoing through the halls as I

chased her in earnest, never catching up until she let me. Of sliding her hand down my cheek and then kissing me quickly, before slipping free again. “Madeline. What are you doing here?”

“I promised I’d free you.”

She did make that promise. She had said those words. I frowned as I remembered it, her vow whispered fiercely in the corner of a grand drawing room, where the masters disported themselves with all the strange creatures they drew to the house.

*“If you were mine, I’d let you go,”* she had said. *“Free you from this house. If you help me to get free, I’ll help you.”*

“Yes,” I’d said, over and over. It was always yes to Madeline.

“The time is drawing near,” said this Madeline, the one that couldn’t be standing on that grass. “Soon, Wulfstan, you’ll be free of your cage.” She let out a little sigh. “Of everything.”

“Free?” I wrapped my hands around the bars of the gates and stared up at the sky, though not for long. “The master said he must go and I must stay. He must go and I must stay, Madeline.”

There it was, that fog that had clouded my mind for so long, threatening to surge back in. She just shook her head with a smile.

“Not anymore. There’s a new master in the house now.” She looked over her shoulder, not at the house, but somewhere else. “One that comes from my line, not Luther’s. I couldn’t free you during my lifetime and I will always regret that. But in hers...?” She nodded slowly. “She will free you—free all of gargoyle-kind—and no warlock will ever be able to command your obedience again.”

“Free...?” I said in wonder as she grew thin and insubstantial, fading away like the mist on the moors when the sun rises high. “Free.” I stayed there, staring up at the sky until it began to lighten again, able to see it clearly for once. This would come to pass, I knew it, because Madeline never lied.

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## Chapter 56

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*Jade*

I didn't want to answer my phone. I could dimly hear it buzzing, but I just groaned, rolled over and buried my face into something that was big, strong and muscular. An arm went around me, holding me tight and wasn't that nice...? I felt like I was simmering in a haze of pure happiness, being held close, kept safe as I'd slept. I wanted to just drop back down into sleep, but that persistent buzz was stopping me.

*Who the hell would be ringing me now...?*

That one little thought, that was all it took for my eyes to flick open, because I knew. The last time someone had called me as I'd slept, it had been Harry telling me something had happened to Daniel. And that was what had me sitting upright in bed.

"Jade?" Seneca asked in concern.

I ignored him, ignored all of them, as I clambered over an obstacle course of studly bodies until I fell off the bed and found my jacket. I yanked my phone free and saw who was calling me.

"Harry—?"

“You gotta get down here.” His usually rough voice was positively ragged, and that in itself told me how bad things were. “I’ve called the cops, called the ambulance, but—”

I didn’t let him finish that sentence. I couldn’t. I yanked at the robe hanging on the back of the door and threw it on, shoving the phone in my pocket before bolting from the room.

“Jade?” one of the gargoyles called. “Jade?”

“Can’t.” I said, running down the hall, my feet slipping on the very expensive oriental runner. “Daniel.”

“Someone has hurt your friend?”

Carrick was there beside me, keeping pace before grabbing me in his arms and then throwing us off the top step. I yelped but then his wings flapped open, and we sailed down to the front door in seconds. He ripped it open, then we were back in the air as Carrick made for the front gate.

“NO...” I said, as we began to land. Harry was sitting there on the concrete just outside the gatehouse, a battered form in his arms. Together, they looked like one of those Pieta sculptures, where Harry was an atypical Mary, and Daniel... Daniel was the dead Jesus, pulled from the cross and given to his mother after the crowds had had their fill of him. “No,” I whispered, over and over. “No, no, no...”

But saying that made no difference as Carrick set me down on my feet and I stumbled closer, then was brought to my knees by what I saw.

“No...” I wasn’t whispering anymore, tears clogging my throat as I wailed, begged, pleaded, for my eyes to be playing tricks on me. “No...” I didn’t want any of it to be true—for my friend to be covered in such a dense criss-cross of bleeding cuts and bruises that it was hard to find an inch of skin unmarked; for his breath to be rattling in his chest; for blood to be bubbling between his lips.

But it had happened, because I’d allowed this to happen.

Big had dumped him like so much rubbish at the gates once before, with no qualms at leaving him pale, bruised, and battered, so why would this time be any different? A leopard

like him didn't change his spots. But he could love-bomb a guy who wanted to see the good in him, then use the moment when Daniel's guard was down to deliver his coup de grâce.

And we hadn't stopped him.

I hadn't liked the idea of him going out with the guy again, but instead of trying to stage a goddamn intervention, I'd helped him get dressed up on a date. My hands went out, shaking, as they reached for Daniel, but not bothering to touch.

"The ambulance is supposed to be on its way." Harry's voice broke on the words. "The police, everyone. I even called fucking Mellors." His head jerked up. "But where the fuck are they?!" His voice rang out into the street, demanding help where there was none; his tone anguished because we were stuck, helpless.

Someone had beaten the living daylights out of Daniel. My whole body shook because adrenalin was pumping so hard through my system but it didn't have anywhere to go. It was supposed to let me run the fuck away from danger or run towards it, to fight like the devil, but there was no fighting this. I put a hand out, but couldn't see any part of him that was uninjured; where I could touch him without hurting him more.

Tears filled my eyes, sparing me any more details of what had been done to Daniel, and I was ashamed to say I was glad for that. I shook my head, then stared blindly at Harry as more tears welled up.

"Where are they...?" I whispered. "Where are they?!"

I couldn't hear sirens. How could any ambulance be doing anything else other than racing to our address to help my friend? How could they ignore our plea for help? But I knew that people died every day, waiting for an ambulance to get there on time. I'd read about it in the paper, the columns of outrage meaning nothing to me then. But now...

It sounded like Daniel was fighting to take a breath, every inhalation noisy, every exhalation a shudder.

And those breaths were coming slower and slower each time.

I strained to listen, to catch a hint of something that would indicate help was coming, but there was still nothing. I blinked my eyes clear, and then I saw another tool I might use. My hands still hovered in the space between us and both palms glowed like the moon itself.

I heard Mother Agnes' advice in my head, warning of all that could go wrong when trying to heal someone, but I also remembered the way she had turned the plant from brown and shrivelled back to green and vital. The lights in my palms flared to life in response.

"Jade, you can't—" Graven started to say, crouching down beside me.

"I have to." I looked up at him while I stabbed my finger in Daniel's direction. "The ambulance has been called, but they're not here!"

"But Jade—" Seneca said.

"He'll die." I pulled my eyes away from them as I heard Daniel cough, his chest involuntarily lifting as a fine mist of blood sprayed into the air, before he collapsed back against Harry. "Daniel will die and I... I can't do this without you."

"Then you'll have our help." Carrick placed his hand on my shoulder, then gave it a squeeze. "I'll give you what I can, but the others will have more..."

I realised he meant that because I wore the mating marks of the other two, we were locked much tighter together. I looked up at Graven and he nodded slowly.

"Whatever you need, my mate." His fingers linked with mine. "My strength is yours to use."

"It goes without saying." Seneca's hand slid into mine. "We've been used by masters far less worthy than you. Use what power we have to heal your Daniel."

But how?

Why had I fluffed around going to charity auctions when I should've been learning about my power? Agnes had put us off the other day due to 'chaotic energy', but I could've been

reading texts, studying the nature of this power. Again, I felt the frustration that although all my immediate problems had been solved the moment I'd inherited the house, coming into wealth and magical power, new ones arose.

Well, necessity was the mother of invention, so I'd need to work out how the fuck to start using my powers for good, and that started now. I put my hands out and very, very gently placed them on his poor, abused body.

Visualise what you want to see happen, Agnes had told me, then release your power into it.

That part was easy, because this battered body wasn't Daniel, not how I knew him. My mind was flooded with all of the memories I had of him. Daniel, grinning at me from behind the counter, not doing his job properly, ignoring the customer who was complaining, before turning back to them to give them a mouthful so that I'd be forced to intervene. Daniel, bouncing along beside me as we walked to the pub, with all of the energy of ten Golden Retriever puppies. Daniel, sitting down next to me, taking my hand and just holding it as I cried; his silence everything I needed. No advice, no lectures, nothing but letting me feel seen. Daniel, flirting outrageously with several guys and then cackling when they started to get huffy about it. Daniel, leading me onto the estate, eyes wide, to go ghost hunting. Daniel, whole. Daniel, healed. Daniel, exactly as he should've been before this fucking bastard brutalised my friend. I felt a surge of something, then, manifesting as a rush of white light that went pouring into his body.

He jerked rigid in Harry's arms, and I was sure I'd fucked up, but before I could pull my hands away, Harry grabbed my wrist to stop me, his eyes wide.

"No, look."

Daniel became incandescent, glowing bright like a match when it's first lit, and the illumination made every injury all the more visible. But even as the bright glow drew attention to the damage, my power started to make repairs. At first, it was just small scratches fading and then disappearing altogether,



then bruises turning from black to green and then to yellow. Larger wounds closed up and his breath... That first shuddering exhale had me finally letting my own breath out. But every action has an equal and opposite action.

And I was suddenly hit, full force.

The world lost its solidity, spinning around me in a sickening spiral that made my stomach lurch. My bones ached and, across my skin, the shadows of bruises appeared. My hands shook and my fingers twisted in strange shapes. It was as if in order to heal his pain, I had to take on his.

“Jade!” Graven growled, but Carrick knelt down to catch me as I started to fall and, in doing so, my hands lost connection with Daniel.

The world had been going darker and darker around the edges, my field of vision pulsing in time with my heart. But as my hands were pulled free, I saw that woman again, standing off at the side and watching me with a sad smile.

“You’ve got to be careful, luv,” she told me. “As women we’re asked to give and to give and to give, with no mind paid to what it costs us. Your boy will be alright until the medics arrive. Best to cut this off now.”

And at her word, the light in my hands died away. Daniel slumped back against Harry, letting out the tiniest of moans, which had me scrambling forward.

“Daniel? Daniel?”

He couldn’t answer us, but the sound of ambulance sirens let me know that he’d soon be in safe hands.

“Jade, we must go,” Graven said. When I turned around, each one of them looked... darker, as if the light had been sucked from them. Seneca looked wide-eyed and drawn while Carrick tried to muster a smile but failed. “The medics are coming, so we cannot be seen. In addition, healing is the most energy-intensive of all magic. We must go to the roof, take stone—”

“Go,” I said, my brow creasing, my hand reaching for them, as if to make a lie of my words. I was just like everyone

else. I wanted the people I loved by my side during a crisis, but I was used to the fact that it couldn't always happen. I shoved any mawkish thoughts to one side as the ambulance came rushing up to the gates. I heard the gargoyles disappear up into the night sky with a whoosh, and then the vehicle came to a stop in front of us.

"WE FOUND him at the gate, beaten within an inch of his life," Harry explained through gritted teeth.

"The police have been called?" the ambulance officer asked as he scanned Daniel's body quickly. The way his brows drew down made clear just how serious this was.

"They have," Harry confirmed.

"Tell 'em to meet us at the hospital," the ambo said, with a sharp nod of his head. "Who's riding with him?"

"Me." My hand shot up like I was still in school and at the sudden movement I felt the borrowed pain ripple through my body. "Me, I'm coming."

"Alright, get in," he said with a sharp nod, before pulling a gurney from the back of the ambulance.

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# Chapter 57

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*Jade*

It was now I realised one of the major drawbacks of having monster boyfriends. I was standing in the waiting room in a pair of borrowed nurses' scrubs, just...waiting. And that's all I could do. I'd spoken to everyone who needed details of what had happened, I'd filled out all the forms required. I'd made clear I'd pay for whatever care Daniel needed. But... I didn't want to be standing there by myself.

That thought made me feel small, weak, pathetic, but I didn't have it in me to be strong. Seeing Daniel wheeled in on the gurney, then transferred to a hospital bed with snowy white sheets had driven it all home. No matter what I'd done, no matter what I had achieved, he was still so very hurt. They were working on him now, and I was just—

“Jade!” I turned around to see a flustered-looking Mellors with Harry in tow, whose khaki shirt was still stained with blood. Mellors rushed over, placed his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Are you alright? I got the news and —”

“Jade Barlow?” We all turned around to see two police officers approaching us, one with a notebook in his hand. “You

came in with Daniel Ross: is that correct?”

“Yes.” I walked over to meet them, then my words flooded out in a big rush. “He was hurt by this guy he was seeing. He was left at our gates like this once before, but never like this. He said he was going out on a date, but he...” Mellors squeezed my shoulder as my throat closed up. “But he...”

“Alright, let’s take this somewhere a little more private,” the officer said, “and start back at the start. So you believe Daniel is in a relationship with his attacker?”

THE STORY, or as much of it as I was familiar with, came out in chunks that felt like they fought their way free, leaving great rents in my throat, but I forced them out anyway.

And I wasn’t even the victim.

The female police officer offered me a tissue when I started to cry, but I waved it away. I didn’t deserve that or anything else; not while Daniel lay in that bed.

“So do you have any details about this...” The male officer consulted his notes. “...Mr Big? A name, anything?”

“Daniel was always really secretive about him,” I said, and my lips twisted in a mirthless smile. “The first red flag, right?” The officers just watched me impassively. “I know he was rich. He turned Daniel’s head by taking him out to glamorous clubs and restaurants.”

“Did he say which clubs? Which restaurants?” they pressed.

I listed the ones that I could bring to mind, kicking myself for not remembering more. I’d shrunk back from discussing Big, because the vibe felt so off, and Daniel wouldn’t hear any even tentative criticisms of him. He got bored easily, being unlikely to date someone more than once or twice, that anyone who caught his attention was precious indeed.

“So you’re saying this relationship was always abusive?” the cop asked.

“Not initially, as far as I know. Daniel’s pretty into kink—”

“BDSM, that kind of lifestyle?” the officer said, flipping through his notes. “Is that what happened here? A scene that went wrong?”

“A ‘scene’, officer, does not entail beating someone to within an inch of their life.” You could almost hear the air quotes as Mellors spoke, his tone vicious. “It should be safe, sane and consensual.” He enunciated each word perfectly. “Even if Daniel could’ve consented to such a thing, it was neither safe nor sane.”

“Something you have knowledge of, mate?” the cop asked, with a cocked eyebrow.

“James Mellors, King’s Counsel,” he replied, offering his hand. The officer just eyed it before turning back to me.

“Any reason why you’ve got your lawyer here with you today?”

“I—”

“Jade will answer that if the question can be shown to be directly related to the case,” Mellors informed him.

“Right.”

The rest of the interview went by in a tense environment, with both officers keeping their eyes on Mellors as much as me, but they asked all of their questions until I felt empty and hollow.

Then they turned their attention to Harry, and hearing his side of things filled me right back up again, with fear and anger. And guilt; so much guilt. If I’d just— I didn’t get to finish that thought, because a nurse walked into the waiting room to inform me I could see Daniel.

WHEN WE REACHED the Intensive Care Unit, we were told we couldn’t go in, but we could sit outside his room and see him through the glass window, so as to reduce the risk of infection. I thought fervently that I never wanted to see a loved one like that again: motionless on a bed, with tubes all over him, shoved up his nose, in his mouth. Monitors recorded his heart rate, blood pressure and respiration with clinical precision. I looked past them to Daniel.

“Poor little bugger...”

Harry rasped that out, leaning his hands on the glass separating Daniel from us. On impulse, I covered one of his with mine. Our fingers linked together and Harry gripped tight as we both watched, sitting vigil, waiting for those brown eyes to flick open and wink, making clear that this was all a big joke.

But he didn't move.

We sat there for god knows how long, time having lost its meaning. I saw the sun rise outside the window and knew the gargoyles would now be sleeping, while I sat here...

“I'm going to get coffee,” I said, standing up abruptly.

“I'll go. You stay,” Mellors offered.

“No. I need to...”

I didn't bother to explain, striding down the hall and out of the ward, then beyond that, down one endless white corridor, then the next. My heart was beating too fast, the ache in my bones reminding me of what I had been through, but I didn't want to think about any of that. It was easier to pretend. Pretend that Daniel was fine; that I was just here to visit a friend having a baby, something joyous. That my whole world wasn't imploding. But when I finally found the hospital cafe, I realised my mistake.

I'd forgotten I wasn't wearing my own clothes. As they'd wheeled Daniel away, a nurse had taken pity on me as I stood there in my bathrobe and nothing else. She'd ushered me out of the room and given me the scrubs. Walking into the cafe, I felt off-kilter, my nerves ragged, and the bright lights and the sight of people chatting over coffee just felt wrong. Then I patted my pockets and realised I hadn't brought my phone with me. Tears filled my eyes, then I berated myself: I was being pathetic. Daniel was breathing with a goddamn tube and here I was, having a sook because I couldn't buy a coffee. But it appeared that the universe wasn't done with punishing me, because as I turned around, I heard someone call my name.

“Jade?”

Adam stood there, not in a suit but well-fitting jeans and a t-shirt that somehow made him look a million times more approachable. His long hair was tied back in a loose man bun and a look of concern was on his face.

Fuck...

“Jade, are you OK?”

People really needed to stop asking me that. I wasn't the one hurting. Daniel... I blinked and surreptitiously wiped away my tears before forcing myself to smile.

“I'm fine. I'm...”

This was where I would give him some socially acceptable answer so that any concerns he might have would be brushed under the carpet. But my brain wasn't functioning and I couldn't come up with anything. I swallowed, tried to think, furiously, but just felt a growing sense of hysteria as a small frown formed on his brow. Then I spied a familiar-looking round white band-aid on his arm.

“What're you at the hospital for?” I asked.

“This?” He held up his arm. “Turns out I've got a rare genetic disorder. A lot of witch families are subject to them.” He smiled wryly. “Too much interbreeding.” The smile faded. “It might be something you want to check out yourself. If you ever decide to have children...”

That pregnant pause, I knew exactly what that meant, but I just didn't have the spoons to deal with that right now.

“Right. So—”

“Can I get you a coffee?” he offered. “I was just about to grab one.” I should've said no. Sitting down and drinking coffee with this man was exactly what I didn't need to do, but as my mouth opened to say no, he smiled. “C'mon, it's just coffee.” He threw his hands up in surrender. “No ulterior motives, I promise.”

“Sure,” I said, my need to be polite providing a response, even if it wasn't the right one. “That'd be lovely.”

SO THAT WAS how I came to be sitting at a table with a flat white in front of me, stirring a sugar through it with way too much care. Adam sat down opposite me and then placed two chocolate muffins in the space between us.

“I ordered one, but they ended up giving me two,” he said, with a wink. “You’re gonna have to help me out.” Or he could’ve just reported the mistake to the server, I thought, but I forced myself to smile. “I guess I figured not much in the world isn’t better with a chocolate muffin.”

“Some things aren’t,” I said, peeling off a piece of the muffin top and munching it so my mouth was too full to say much more. But lo and behold, after a few sips of coffee and a few more bites of muffin, I did let out a long, shuddering breath.

“Those shoulders are starting to come down from around your ears,” he noted. “Good. Now...” He leaned forward, long fingers tapping on the table. “You don’t have to say anything, not if you don’t want to, but... if you need a sympathetic ear, I’m here for you, Jade.”

He was trying to be helpful, but that was problematic in itself. We didn’t have the kind of relationship where we talked about stuff like this. Instead, his words forced me to remember what he’d put on the table the last time we’d talked, so I didn’t know if he was offering to listen to get closer to me or... He smiled ruefully, sliding his hand towards me then stopping himself from touching me. Instead he drew careless circles on the glossy tabletop, scattering the grains of sugar left there.

“It’s OK. I’ve got no ulterior motives. Did I sit at the restaurant for a while last night, hoping you’d come? Sure. But when you didn’t, I got the message.” Those blue eyes contained pain, but also empathy as they met mine. “I admit I’m disappointed, but if pursuing something romantic isn’t on the table, then... Let’s be friends.” He offered me his hand then. “If only because we’re the only Whiteleys left, and having a friendly face at one of the witch held events would be a very nice change.”



My fingers twitched, seemingly not content to stay where they were, around my mug. I felt like I shouldn't take up his offer; that I should thank him politely for the coffee, promise to pay him back and then return to Daniel's side, but... A breathtakingly selfish side of me just wanted this. A warm hand holding mine, an attentive audience, but someone that wasn't just as torn up as I was by what we'd seen. Someone outside of all of that, just a bystander to other parts of my life.

"Yeah," I said, finally, smiling for real now. "I'd like that too. So, I'm here because a friend of mine got hurt." His brows creased as his grip on my hand tightened. "Badly hurt. And I think it's my fault."

"That can't be true," he said, leaning forward. "I admit I don't know you that well, but from what I've seen..." His eyes met mine. "You seem like someone very focussed on ensuring those around you are happy. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

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## Chapter 58

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*Jade*

I'd been doing so much talking. It was all I seemed to be doing. As I started to tell the story again, I realised talk wouldn't help. My words died in my throat and I shot Adam a sidelong look before I shook my head. I had money, influence, so I needed to use some of that to protect Daniel. A private security guard at his door, an investigator to see if they could find anything the police missed.

A trip to Agnes to see if she or another practitioner could unveil who Mr Big was and bring him to justice.

I would happily use my entire fortune to bring that prick to his knees.

I blinked, coming back to the cafe, hearing the sound of the coffee machine and the clink of crockery. I got to my feet, wanting to talk to Mellors and put measures in place as soon as I could.

"I'm sorry. I need to get back."

"Let me walk with you." A refusal was on my lips, but Adam smiled as he continued, "Just until you're back with your support group. Harry and Mellors are still here?"

“I think so,” I said.

“I just want to make sure there’s someone there for you when you get back to your Daniel.” He looked down into my eyes. “Friends do things like that, right?”

“Right.”

Honestly, I was beyond arguing about this stuff. I had walked out without a thought, needing to get away. But having achieved that, I felt like there was a line reeling me back in. What if Daniel’s condition had worsened? What if he woke up without me there? But as I set off to get back to him, I realised I hadn’t taken note of what ward he was in. I looked around blankly until Adam provided some direction.

“He’s in intensive care?” I nodded and he pointed along a corridor. “This way.”

And suddenly it was all so much easier, and I walked past familiar wards, familiar doors. Even so, I felt a growing sense of trepidation, of anxiousness, with every step as we got closer. That was reinforced when I reached Daniel’s room and I found no one there. I looked around wildly, going back out into the hall, then into his room, checking the chairs, the little side table, but I didn’t find a note, my phone, anything but some outdated magazines. Then, as I was frantically searching, I heard the machine that recorded Daniel’s heartbeat start to pick up.

I turned around slowly to find Adam standing in front of the glass, staring at Daniel’s prone form with a sorrowful expression. That was natural, right? Could anyone look at the wreckage his abuser had inflicted upon him and feel otherwise? But as Adam stared, Daniel started to move. Only a tiny little twitch at first, then with much more emphasis, his body moving restlessly against the sheets. His hand raised up and knocked at the drip in his arm, which had me racing to the end of his bed.

“Nurse...” I called out in a shaky voice, as Daniel’s nails started raking up and down his arms, leaving red welts behind. Then he started to scratch frantically at the tape holding his drip in. “Nurse!”

“He’s coming out of his coma,” Adam said in an urgent voice. “We need to get a nurse, now.”

I ran over to the wall to the emergency call button that the nurse had shown us when we’d first come up to the ICU. I slammed my hand down on it, but when a nurse didn’t instantly appear, I ran out into the corridor to find one. I knew I wasn’t reasonable to expect instant care, but Daniel was hurting and he had no one to advocate for him except for me.

“Please,” I said as a nurse came running down from the nurse’s station. “He’s waking up and trying to pull his drip out.”

“Just let us do our job,” she said briskly but not unkindly. “I’m going to need everyone out of the room, now.”

I went over and stood near the doorway, trying to keep out of the way as other nurses rushed in, and the first nurse gave Adam the same request to get out of the room.

As he walked out into the hall, Adam’s eyes blazed bright blue and small red spots had formed in his cheeks, but my attention went past him to what was happening in the room. Daniel was sitting right up in bed, his bruised eyes barely able to open a crack. He was making some kind of noise deep in his chest, the words utterly muffled by the tube, which resulted in him coughing frantically, his hands going to his throat. All I could do was stand there and watch as a nurse pulled out a syringe and a vial before measuring off a dose of something, then injecting it into Daniel’s arm. He fell back against the bed like he was dead and I shivered.

“We’ve given your friend a sedative to keep him quiet until he’s out of the woods,” one of the nurses said, stepping into the doorway and blocking my view. “He needs to rest. Go home, take a shower, get something to eat and grab some sleep yourself. This isn’t a sprint, it’s a marathon, and you burning the candle at both ends won’t help Daniel.”

I was being dismissed. What she said made sense because I couldn’t do anything to help him get better, or protect him from harm, because this was as safe a place as any. Safer than

he was when he was out. I nodded sharply, then forced myself to smile.

“Jade!” A voice came from down the hall. God, was I sick of hearing my damn name. When I looked over, Mellors and Harry were approaching. “We went looking for you. You were gone for a while and...”

“Can we go home?” I sounded like a little girl right now. “Please?”

“Of course, love, but...” Harry looked past me to the now-closed door of Daniel’s room.

“We can’t help Daniel at the moment, only the hospital staff can. But there are some things I think could help put an end to all of this.”

“Really?” Mellors’ eyebrow slid upwards. “Consider my interest piqued.”

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## Chapter 59

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*Jade*

“A private security guard is a good idea,” Mellors said as we arrived back at the house. A storm was brewing and dark clouds roiled above our heads. And that seemed apt. They made everything look darker and lighter, all at the same time, and the clouds were the colours of Daniel’s bruises. “I know some reputable firms—”

“I know some boys who’d be real helpful,” Harry broke in. He was driving, his eyebrows drawn down in a ferocious scowl the entire way from the hospital. “Not exactly the legitimate kind but—”

“That is not going to help Daniel at all,” Mellors said in a crisp voice.

“And how do you know that?” Harry shot him a look in the rear vision mirror. “This Big bloke, he’s rich, powerful and just as likely as not to fob the situation off with the help of his lawyers. What’s the rate of successful domestic violence convictions?”

Mellors’ lips thinned. “About ten percent.”

“And for violence perpetrated against gay men?”

The lawyer shook his head slowly. “Far less, but...” Turning to where I sat beside him in the back seat, Mellors appealed to me. “Let me pursue this through the appropriate channels. I may be able to find out—”

“You can both follow up on security.” My voice sounded so damn flat. “By whatever means necessary. I want whoever did this to be brought to justice.” I eyed Mellors. “So, consider this a race against the clock. If we find out who did it first...” Harry’s laugh was dark and utterly mirthless. “...then we’ll deal with it our way. If you find Big first...”

Mellors let out a noisy sigh, then nodded as we drove up the driveway.

“You should stay here, Jade,” he said as Harry parked the car. “The house wards will protect you and it’s already late afternoon.” His eyes flicked up to the roof. “When the sun goes down, then the gargoyles can step in. We’ll go out and see what we can find.”

“And one way or the other, we’ll bring that prick, Big, to justice,” Harry promised.

He turned away, not letting Mellors say a thing more, and stomped over to the Range Rover that was kept for his personal use. Jumping in, he roared down the driveway, barely waiting for the automatic gates to fully open before pulling out on the road.

“Leave this with me,” Mellors said. “The thing is, from what you’ve told me, there’s only a relatively small pool of people to work through. My processes might be a little slower than Harry’s,” he continued, as he grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze, “but I have many contacts in the police force and in the courts. We’ll bring this bastard to justice, you wait and see.”

I had no intention of waiting and seeing. Daniel was my friend. I wouldn’t be able to ease the guilt I felt until I had found this Big character. As soon as the moon rose, I’d get the gargoyles to take us to Mother Agnes’ and see what she could find out. But to appease him, I nodded sharply, before disappearing back into the house.

Thunder rumbled as I walked up the stairs and it was the perfect soundtrack to my mood. Lightning flashed and then there was the crack of more thunder almost immediately. It was close. I walked down the hall and into my room. I stripped off the scrubs, folding them up and putting them on top of the hamper, ready to wash and return to the nurse who'd lent them to me, then went into the bathroom.

Only to find I wasn't alone.

I walked over to the bathroom sink and ran the cold tap, watching as the water flowed over my wrists, trying to alleviate the all-encompassing feeling of nausea that swirled in my guts. That choked-off sound of the breathing tube in Daniel's throat as he tried to speak—I could hear it over and over. I closed my eyes, feeling overwhelmed, but the cool water was helping and I drew in a deep breath. Letting it out, though still feeling maudlin, I opened my eyes and looked up into the mirror.

And the reflection there smiled out at me.

I blinked, then leaned forward, staring at the wrong reflection, and she did exactly the same thing.

There was no mistaking us for each other. Where my face was long and rounded, hers was small and elfin shaped. Her smile was puckish, something that had me stepping back from the mirror. I turned towards the bathroom door, hoping to make a quick exit, but there she stood.

The short bobbed hair, the glorious fringed shift dress, the Art Deco styled jewellery, she looked like a mannequin in an exhibition on the history of fashion. She was the one I'd seen in the mirror above my bed and in my dream.

“Hello, Jade.”

“You...” I had something to say, I was sure of it, but my throat was closing up. “You...”

“Me.” She held her hands out and then did a little twirl, the fringing flaring out at the movement. “I'm Madeline and I've been waiting for you for so long.”



A long, insistent buzz had both of us going to the doorway and looking out into the bedroom, but her reaction was quite different to mine. A crease formed between those perfectly pencilled brows.

“Oh bugger, I thought we had more time...”

There was another buzz, then another. I grabbed a t-shirt and some pants off the back of a chair and pulled them on.

“More time for what?” I asked, shakily, finally able to get out more than one word.

I could hear the note of hysteria in my voice, because I’d come to terms with the fact that this conversation wasn’t real. There was no way it could be. But, oddly enough, that gave me hope. Because that meant that maybe none of it was real. I wasn’t heir to a beautiful house, nor a fortune. But that would also mean that Daniel was just Daniel, not a battered body in the intensive care unit.

“Jade, I need—”

*Bzzzt.* Geez, whoever was at the front gate *really* wanted to talk to me.

“Sweetheart, you need to know—”

*Bzzzt.*

“He’s coming.” Those ominous words had me turning around and facing down this woman who could only be a ghost, even though she didn’t look it. She seemed corporeal and my mind catalogued the way she cast a shadow on the floor, how the beads on her dress caught the lights. Her lips parted and she was about to say something when—

*Bzzzt.*

My fingers found the button of the intercom, but I was still looking at her.

“What?” I asked, of the persistent person at the gate, of Madeline.

“Jade...”

They said my name exactly the same way, Madeline in a feminine voice, Adam in a masculine one.

“Jade, I went away and thought about Daniel’s situation,” Adam said, his voice crackling through the intercom speaker, “and I think there’s a spell we could cast together that will help find the culprit.”

“No...” Madeline said, with a sad look. “No, he—”

“Jade?”

I was obviously actually having that psychotic break I’d thought I was having before, but that didn’t change the fact I needed to help Daniel. Her hand went up to stop me, just as I pressed the unlock gate button.

“Come in, Adam,” I said through the intercom. “We’re up at the main house.”

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# Chapter 60

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## *Graven*

A gargoyle was cursed to be frozen in stone during the day, but sometimes we could push the limits of that curse. Not by moving, not by doing anything, but we would remain conscious, aware of what was going on, despite our static state. Most gargoyles avoided this half-awake/half-asleep state because it resembled too closely the feeling of sleep paralysis humans experienced. You were doomed to watch, to wait, and there was nothing you could do about it, but hope to drop back into sleep.

But not this time.

I stared out across the grounds of The Eyrie, not able to blink for even a second, so that's how I caught it. This Adam, who wore the face of my friend, he opened the gate cautiously, which was strange enough in itself, but when it became clear it would not hurt him, he...

I had spent so much time tied to this house, at the beck and call of my masters, that I had learned them well. Their quirks, their mannerisms, the tiny tells that alerted me to what I needed to do next, without them even having to verbalise it. So, as I watched Adam walk down the footpath, I saw it

instantly. That walk, that cocky stride, I'd seen it before. I hadn't seen it recently, and I hadn't seen it when I'd seen Adam at the Whiteley building. But I had been very familiar with it in the past. That slight hitch in his gait from a bad break that hadn't healed quite right.

Luther Whiteley.

My mind didn't bother trying to make sense of something that had to be impossible. A body had been removed from Z Ward, blackened beyond recognition, but we'd found his signet ring fused to its hand, the puckered scar on his hip intact. It'd been Luther we committed to the grave, a solemn service that all of witchkind had attended at the time. He had died and the estate had passed on to... My claws flexed, just slightly, the stone grinding against stone, because as he got closer to the house, his blue eyes flicked up, dancing with a hectic light, before he went to the door. Aghast, I watched him school his face to seriousness, saw him put on a perfect mask of concern the moment before Jade opened the door.

She was in danger.

That thought dropped inside me like a stick of dynamite thrown into a lake, exploding out. And all the terrible memories that I'd tried so hard to keep down came flooding through me. Luther had been the worst in a long string of masters that were bad, exploitative or, at best, banal, and now he was in the house with the one woman I loved.

I was going to lose her the moment I'd found her. As I realised it, my heart felt like it was being torn in two inside my stony chest. The pain was all the worse because I could do nothing about it. I saw images of her, over and over, stretched over one of Luther's many apparatuses, screaming in the same way so many others had. I'd hear the moment her voice broke along with her will, when she just begged him to stop. He loved that moment the most, that absolute surrender of hope. Where the one he abused gave up all pretence of fighting him.

Just like he had with Daniel.

That realisation hit me like a blow to the gut, but it was my mind that was reeling, not my body. My entire purpose was to

keep my mate and my flock safe and I'd failed utterly. I should've seen the signs. Who else would dedicate themselves to ruining human flesh in the same way as Luther? And why *would* the bastard lay down and die? If he'd found the secret to living forever, he could keep perpetuating all of his sadistic fantasies, over and over until...

Wulfstan.

They wore the same face for a reason and it went beyond the bond Luther had forced upon Wulf. "He must go and I must stay," the big gargoyle murmured over and over again when he was having a bad night. I realised with horror that somehow Luther had managed to fuse himself with the gargoyle, taking some of Wulf's strength, the speed, the determination of a gargoyle...

But with none of the limitations we worked within.

My consciousness bucked and reared inside me, commanding my body to relinquish stone and take flesh. Never before had I been needed so acutely. I cursed the first witch for dooming us to watch what went on during the day. I cursed the sun for hanging low in the sky, its glow muted by the shifting storm clouds, but still burning. And, most of all, I cursed myself.

I'd be too late to save my Jade, because the moment we awoke, Luther would take control of us and then the torture would all begin again.

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# Chapter 61

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*Jade*

“So, you think you know how to find Daniel’s attacker?” I asked.

The house had felt too big, too empty, when I came home, but somehow that was made worse when Adam stepped inside. He didn’t look around himself in wonder at the place, though I guessed that made sense. Perhaps he’d visited here with Ashley, the previous owner of The Eyrie.

“Not going to offer me a coffee?”

That catlike smile, the hard glitter in his eyes, I fought hard to decipher them. Did he actually have information that would help or...?

“Sure,” I said, turning away from him and that made my skin crawl. It felt like turning my back on an apex predator and that’s what started me thinking. He’d accepted that we’d just be friends very readily, but that had been said in public. Had he come here to—? I turned around to scan him more closely, only to find him standing behind me.

“That’s some coffee machine,” he said. “Must be a new one. There was never anything like that in The Eyrie before.”

“When you visited Ashley?” I asked.

His smile didn't reach his eyes. “When I visited Ashley. The poor old bastard. He was trying to drag this place into the modern day, but he was as much a product of a bygone era as the old kitchen.” His eyes met mine. “He did that for you.”

“Not for me exactly.” I stammered that out, finding myself pressed against the kitchen bench way too hard. “He didn't even know who I was.”

“No, more's the pity.” He reached over my head and plucked two cups down from the cupboard, then set them onto the benchtop. “I did ask him though, over and over.”

“About me?” I asked, my voice all high and squeaky.

“About the heir. He held his cards very close to his chest and had invested in some of the best wards money could buy.” Adam snorted. “He couldn't do it himself by then. Madeline's curse was well in effect.” His lips twisted. “The mighty Whiteley family, brought so low.”

“And what does that have to do with Daniel?” I pressed. “You said you had information about Daniel.”

“I did, didn't I?”

It was as he stood there, looming over me, that I saw the mask drop and something else altogether rise up.

Wulfstan struggled with sanity after all he'd been through, but when I saw the same wild look in Adam's eyes, it seemed to have quite different origins. Wulfstan saw what had been, what might be, but was unable to focus on the here and now for any length of time. Adam, however, had a look in his eye like that of a young boy pulling the wings of butterflies, or burning ants with a magnifying glass. The part of his brain that realised they were living creatures and that what he was doing amounted to torture not yet developed.

But in Adam's case, it never had.

That same thoughtlessness, carelessness in a child manifested entirely differently in a grown man. It turned into cruelty, or, worse, non-consensual sadism. As Adam bent

closer, I watched him lift those long, slender fingers of his. I had a sense of certainty that they would hurt much more than they helped, and then his hand gripped my jaw. I couldn't look away, not even for a second, as his eyes stared unblinkingly into mine.

“Do you know the sound Daniel makes when his heart breaks?” Adam asked me. “When he knows that none of the sweet scenarios he has projected on his partner are ever going to come true, but he comes crawling back anyway. He makes this helpless little groan.” Adam demonstrated for me and a sob caught in my throat, because I knew. I just knew what he was telling me. “But he can't stop himself from coming back for more. The boy's not just a pain slut, but something far more precious. A young man that is so very beautiful, yet completely without boundaries.”

Adam's face lit up, and my blood ran cold.

“Do you know, I'd given up hope of finding someone like him? A life partner who'd dive off the deep end with me, screaming during the freefall, but never pulling up.” Adam was like a magnet of the opposite polarity, repelling me with every breath. I went to move away from him, but he snatched at my wrist with his other hand, effectively pinning me to the bench. “It was all going to be so perfect.”

His head tilted to one side, as though considering that scenario, and then I had the horrible thought he was about to come in for a kiss. Bile flooded my mouth, and I felt sure that vomit would soon follow. I let out a strange high-pitched sound, a twin to the one ringing in my ears.

“You're Big?”

“Is that what he calls me?” I wanted to slap that delighted, boyish smile right off Adam's face. “I guess that makes sense. Yes, Jade, I was the one that took your little boy toy out and showed him a very good time.” His lips twisted. “Or a very bad time, depending on how you see it.” His head ducked closer. “And I did it all for you.”

“I didn't want that,” I growled. “You brutalised my best friend.”



“I gave him exactly what he wanted and nothing less,” came his short retort. “Just as I’ll do the same to you.” My whole body quivered as the hand on my jaw slid down my neck, thumbing my pulse. “But you don’t like pain.”

“No,” I forced out, my voice all shaky.

“And that’s why our little family will be so perfect.” A strange light lit up his face, one that forced a knife blade made of pure ice into my heart. “You will be at the centre of our coven, the one we love, care for, cosset. You’ll have everything you want, Jade, if you just submit. The two of us will lavish you with more pleasure than you could dream of.”

“Daniel’s gay...” I ground out.

“That doesn’t matter; not with our collective power. We’ll burn away the dross and make him the perfect submissive. You’ll finally be able to have the kind of relationship you’ve always wanted with him.”

Yeah, vomit was definitely filling the back of my throat and the burning acid was making my eyes water. I’d never had thoughts, ever, about Daniel like that. The idea of creeping on a gay man was completely abhorrent, but it was more than that. When you actually care about someone, then things like who they are and what they need are far more important than any kind of might-have-beens. Plus, if I was in a relationship with him and had to deal with his bouncy shit 24/7 I’d axe-murder him in his sleep.

But Adam would never understand any of that.

We weren’t people, with thoughts and feelings just as valid as his. Instead we were merely pawns to be moved around the board to suit him. Whatever we might have to say about those moves were at best irrelevant and, at worst... I pictured the ragged map of abuse that Adam had inked all over Daniel’s skin. And I spat the bile that’d been simmering in my throat right in his face.

“All I want is for him to be safe and happy; to find a guy or guys who’ll treat him the way he deserves to be,” I snarled, as his grip tightened to the point of pain.

“I treated him exactly the way he deserved.” Adam forced out through gritted teeth. “Most would’ve fought me, tried to hold me off, but he folded like a house of cards. He *wanted*—”

I shoved my free hand up and seized him by the throat, knowing it wouldn’t help; that it might make things worse. But I couldn’t stop myself. I squeezed and squeezed, and the white light in my palms flared to life.

“If you try and say he wanted what you did to him, so help me—”

But I was new to my magic, while Adam was experienced. A hidden force shoved me backwards, keeping me pinned against the bench as he stepped away from me. The storm started to pick up outside, but as the wind whipped the windows, a tempest grew inside as well. Dragging the chairs across the floor, forcing a calendar’s pages to flicker, it began to swirl around Adam.

“Or what, Jade Whiteley?” he asked me, his lips twisting in scorn. “You are new to your power, too concerned with disporting yourself with those gargoyles to learn how to wield it, which is fine by me. It’s all I really need you for. You could’ve been the mother of my child—”

“Like I was.”

Madeline appeared by my side, staring at Adam with a mixture of fear and longing.

“Together we could’ve brought forward a new age of Whiteley supremacy, clawing back the position we once had, then going forward and bringing all of the First Families to their knees.”

The wind in the kitchen seemed to coalesce around Adam, lifting him from his feet and leaving him hovering in the air there. His hands were held out to his side in offering, but I wanted nothing more than to break every finger that had touched Daniel.

Instead I settled for something more immediate.

I plucked a butcher’s knife from the block on the kitchen bench, then threw it through the air, the maelstrom around

Adam dragging it closer so it landed right where I wanted it to. I'd never forget the way the knife looked as it buried itself into his chest.

Adam sucked in a breath. The wind died instantly as he fell to the floor. I just stood there, shaking.

“Good girl,” Madeline said, “but this is not over yet. Out the door.” I threw myself over the kitchen counter with far more grace than I would have normally been able to muster, then wrenched open the French doors, running out onto the cool grass. The storm raged overhead, and the boom as the lightning cracked and illuminated the grounds forced me to move faster. I needed to get the fuck off this property, call the police and—

“This way.”

I shrieked when Madeline appeared before me. I followed the direction of her finger to see that she pointed to Z Ward.

“No, I need to get the hell away from Adam, call the police —”

“That’s not Adam Stuart in there,” she said, with a sad shake of her head. “Adam died when he was young and *he* stole his identity.”

“He...?” I glanced back at the kitchen windows, my thighs shaking with the effort of holding myself back from running.

“What’s in your house? That’s Luther Whiteley. Master of The Eyrie, a warlock of great power and my...” Her brows creased as she made a sad sound. “My lover. He is your great-great-grandfather and he—”

“Jade!”

I jumped as Adam’s, no, Luther’s voice echoed out across the property and that’s what got me moving. I glanced up at the sky as I ran across the grass, and saw the sun was starting to set.

*Hold out until the cavalry arrives, I told myself. Just hang on.*

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## Chapter 62

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### *Wulfstan*

Usually I fought the rise out of unconsciousness, but as the sun set I came to with a snap. My eyes stared out through the gates of my cell, unblinking but not unseeing. A woman, no, there were two of them came running up. A thin slip of a girl reached the gates first, slapping her hands down on the metal, but it did not shift in response. It was as if she was not made of anything at all. But the other woman...I drank in those full curves, the way her breasts heaved and knew her the moment she approached.

My mate.

The thought was sharp and crystal clear inside my mind, no haze of madness clouding it. In fact there was no haze at all. I knew myself, could see the two of them rattling the gates, and then the first one stepping closer.

Madeline.

That didn't seem right, the muscles in my brow wanted to crease in response, but they couldn't. The moon hadn't risen yet and so I remained pinned to the spot, but not them.

"I can't open it!" my mate yelped, giving the gate a rattle.

“Visualise the mechanism inside unlocking and then put your hand on the lock,” Madeline coached her with a sharp look over her shoulder.

“How is that going to help?”

“Just do it!” Madeline abandoned all pretence of politeness, then looked abashed. “I’m sorry, but there’s nowhere in the world safer than here.”

But that couldn’t be true. I’d seen what happened to humans that came inside this building, and I could still hear their screams. I fought against the stone in which I was still locked, wanting to shout those words at her. But my mate did as she was told, unlocking the gates, the sound of the chain being pulled free alerting everyone nearby as to what they were doing.

Including him.

Like a sore tooth your tongue couldn’t leave alone, or a bone that had healed badly, starting to ache as a storm brewed, my senses spread out across the grounds in an attempt to detect him. And there he was. Stalking across the grass, just like he had each time he came to play in my cell.

*No*, I thought furiously, willing my lips to move. *No, no, no, no—*

“Inside!” Madeline commanded and she and the other woman did just that, chaining up the gate and locking it behind them.

It wasn’t safe behind the gate, didn’t they know that? Here wasn’t safe for anything made from flesh and blood. One of my claws shifted against the ground, then another, just a tiny little flex of the knuckles. The sun was now a crimson red, and in that moment the world turned to blood.

Luther was a master carver, able to use his knife, his whip, his cauterising iron to take the base clay of someone’s body and turn it into something else altogether. Something that bore little resemblance to the person they had been or to... anything really. He would do the same to both of them and my scream rose at the thought but got stuck in my throat.

“We need to find it.” Madeline picked up one thing, then another, tossing it on the ground around her.

“Find what?” Jade yelled.

“The amulet Luther tied his soul to.” She raked through bags, flickered the pages of books before turning to the other woman. “My soul was bound to the house because I didn’t fulfil my promise during my life, but he... Luther was supposed to be dead. We saw the body.”

She swallowed hard, then went to take Jade’s hand.

“Master Kenneth swore the estate would go to my son, mine, not bloody Luther, because even he knew how twisted that boy was.” Her lips thinned. “Not on the surface though, of course. Luther could pretend to be the perfect gentleman and that’s what sucked me in. He was gentle where Kenneth was rough. He was considerate, where Kenneth cared only for himself, but...”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed.

“But he could never maintain the mask for too long, and when it cracked, you saw how much worse it was. Kenneth was like a child, unable to deny himself any pleasure, but Luther...” Her breath came out like a sob. “Luther was never a child. No mere boy could be so calculating, so cruel. He looked after me, cosseted me, until I got pregnant with his child and then...”

A sharp clang at the gates drew their attention away from each other and back to him.

It was a strange thing, to see another wear my face. Had I looked that mad when I’d raged across the battlefield? I liked to think that hellish flames didn’t burn in my eyes like they did in Luther’s.

“Open the gate, Jade,” he said, conjuring a ball of fire in his hand, making me want to shrink back. “Open the gate or I’ll make you.”

Luther moved with a deliberate slowness, bending down to brush his fingers across the dry grass that had been allowed to grow long within the courtyard of Z Ward. I heard the crackle

of the fire come to life and that dreaded sound dragged me out of the present and back a hundred years.

*“YOU’LL NEVER HAVE MY SON,” Madeline said, standing tall as flames licked the walls of Z Ward. “You can do what you like to me—”*

*“Oh, I will...” Luther said, prowling closer.*

*Blood adorned his skin, coating his hands.*

*“I’ve hidden him away, cast a ward on him that even you can’t break,” Madeline stammered out.*

*I growled where I was, pacing restlessly on the spot, not allowed free rein.*

*“That you think I can’t break,” Luther corrected. “What you know of magic could fill a thimble. I, however—”*

*But she didn’t deign to listen to his speech; instead she turned to me.*

*“Wulfstan, you promised.” I had, we all had. I remembered that clearly; but the master’s hold on me was absolute. “You swore you’d get me away from here and keep my child safe. If he finds my boy, you’ll never find your fated mate.” I heard the note of magical command in her voice, knew this would be the way of it, due to the working she was now unconsciously performing. “But if you keep me safe so I can raise him up right, you’ll—”*

*Her words were like those of my old master, back at the castle, stirring me and the other soldiers before a battle. She outlined an objective, one I felt I must achieve with my whole heart, that swell of pride a foreign thing in my chest. Gargoyles were wild, uncontained things before the Fall, so warlocks deemed us useless as familiars, right up until the first witch brought us to heel. But while this master, and those before him, could command our obedience, there was always a flaw in that control. We were not mindless creatures with no will of our own, and as I listened to Madeline’s words, something that had died in the heart of every inmate of Z Ward flickered to life.*

*Hope.*

*I roared my rebellion, grinning ferociously when I saw Luther's face fall, and while I no longer held my stone axe, I found something else that would do. I grabbed two of the meat hooks that hung from the bars in the roof then sent them slicing through the air.*

*"Wulf...!"*

*Hearing the sound of fear in his voice, rather than it coming from those around us, was music to my ears. It was only Luther's fast reflexes that had him ducking out the way of my weapons. I launched myself off the ground, gliding forward and cutting off his escape route.*

*"What, my master?" I asked, my lips twisting into a cruel smile—an approximation of the one Luther so often wore. "What on earth could you possibly want? To hurt others?" Frantic noises, like the sound of howling dogs, came from the cells. "Surely you've had your fill of that? Anyone with half a brain in their head would've before now. What on earth do you seek in the viscera of others?"*

*"Immortality."*

*The little bastard had stopped running and now stood there, facing me down, but he did so alone. Madeline had sprinted out the front door into the night. She'd come to fight for the birthright of her son, to try and put him in as master of The Eyrie. A boy raised by Madeline would seek to fulfil the promise she had made. But Luther didn't care, facing down my blow as my fist came hurtling towards him, hook wedged between my fingers. I saw it in my mind before I completed the blow: what it would be like to strike back at the one who had hurt so many others; to finally see him get his just desserts. But instead...his hand snapped up, glowing bright red as he grabbed my wrist, stopping the blow from falling. Then Luther let his power flood into me.*

*It had always gone the other way, with him draining me, over and over, a leech at my side. But now the tables were reversed, I liked the process even less. Everything burned: my muscles, my bones, the blood in my veins, every part of me as I screamed. And he laughed, just like he always did. I didn't let*



*it stop me. Adrenalin pumped through me, primitive instincts kicking in as I smashed my fist into the warlock's face and sent him flying.*

*"No..."*

*I whispered the same word at the same time as he said it, while he clawed himself backwards. The inmates all hooted. But as the sounds grew, so did the flames. They seemed to escape from him now, going spidering across the floor, finding seasoned timber, hardened leather, even stone itself to fuel its fire.*

*"No, Wulf..." Luther tried to inject command into his voice, but he failed utterly, so I merely tracked his progress, like a lion on the hunt. "Wulf, I command you..."*

*But he couldn't finish that sentence, not when my foot snapped out and landed squarely on his chest, pinning him to the floor as he had done to so many others.*

*"Do not try and command me again, little warlock," I said. "I feel the burning chokehold of your power and I don't care."*

*It felt like my chest was compressing. As I pushed down on him, my lungs were fighting to inflate. He let out a little wheeze of laughter that quickly devolved into coughing.*

*"You forget, Wulf, that we are tied together differently than I am with the other gargoyles."*

*"Through pain, torture and degradation," I growled, "and that ends now."*

*"More than that." He pushed himself up against my foot, his breath getting shallower and shallower. "I..."*

THE VISION FADED as the real world came rushing back at the sound of familiar voices.

"Wulf! Brother!" my stone brothers cried from beyond the walls. "Let us in! We have to get Jade out or she'll die."

But they couldn't see it, the look on Luther's face. As I approached the gate, his expression was one of pure victory

that grew as I got closer. The only indication of his desperation was how his knuckles whitened around the bars of the gate.

“Wulf...”

Jade’s voice rasping, coughing out my name as she staggered forward was what had me moving, ripping the lock free. Because like everyone else who’d ever come within these walls, her best hope lay beyond them.

“That’s my boy,” Luther purred as he pulled the gates open and strolled inside the walls of Z Ward. He looked about him with exaggerated care. “It’s been a long time, but I’m glad to be back. Now, let’s work out this sudden need for autonomy, shall we? I do so love it when you put up a fight. It makes your eventual surrender so much sweeter.”

“Surrender to the likes of you?” I snarled. “Never.”

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## Chapter 63

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*Seneca*

At the sound of Jade's scream, I threw myself off the roof of The Eyrie, and wing-tip to wing-tip with the others of my flock, we flew blindly towards her. But I realised that we didn't need to follow any sound or scent to find where she was, for some hitherto hidden instinct was yanking us forward. Then I saw the lazy spirals of smoke rising from the building and my heart felt like it was gripped in a massive fist. That fist clenched harder as I saw him.

Luther.

The disguise had been effective. We'd had no idea that the madness of our former master lay beneath a face that was an echo of Wulf's. We hadn't wanted to see it. We'd thought we'd escaped him and that he lay with the worms, like all of the masters before him. Instead, he was here, creating chaos and pain. I knew that it had been his fiery fingers that had set the grass alight; knew that Jade was still in there and I let out a roar of denial.

“Wulf! Brother!” Graven shouted. “Let us in! We have to get Jade out or she'll die.”

Reasoning with a half-mad gargoyle? That was no fit solution. But almost immediately, Jade came stumbling out. Carrick and I both swept down at the same vicious angle, stooping like an eagle might to catch his prey, and then I swept her up into my arms. I heard her gasping for breath, smelled her scent, now like burnt jasmine, rather than the night-blooming kind, but had never felt something so welcome.

“Jade...”

My voice broke, too full of emotion, of everything I wanted to say. But the screams and cries and warnings I’d hopelessly been unable to shout from the house roof were silenced the moment I held her. I cradled her close, my wings working to take us higher and higher, away from that damnable place. And then I heard her voice, still raspy from the smoke.

“Wulf...”

“He’ll be fine,” I assured her, my words strong, though my voice was not. “We’ll get you to safety and—”

“Wulf!”

Jade thrashed in my arms, as though she was pulling away from me as we walked along a garden path, rather than high in the air. My arms locked tight around her like a cage, as I descended rapidly to land safely on the lawns.

“Jade, stop—!”

“No! Wulf is in there with Luther!” She jabbed her finger in the direction of Z Ward. “With the man who tormented him over and over. With the man that broke his mind.”

“And we will bring that bastard down.” That was a promise I would die to keep. Luther had been a blight on the world during his time. But now? He did not deserve to live a moment longer. The marks on Daniel’s skin made sense now. I recognised Luther’s trademark brutality in every bruise. Though we were monsters, we had honour, and we all shrank back at his sadistic ways. “You stay here—”

“No,” Jade said.

I watched her cross her arms and a mulish expression form on her face.

“Call Harry. Call Mellors. Ring the police.”

“No.”

“Jade...” My wings rustled as I stepped forward, hands outstretched. “Let us do this for you. You are the most precious thing in the world to us and if we think you are in danger...” My fangs locked together momentarily. “Then we can’t do what we need to. We will free Wulf and kill Luther —”

I was finally getting through to her and making her see sense, when a ragged roar cut through the night air. Jade’s head whipped around and she answered it with a pained gasp before taking off at a run.

“Jade!” I went sprinting after her, ready to scoop her up and stash her on the roof, away from all of this. “Jade—!”

“I won’t hide away in that house while you fight the bastard that broke Daniel.” Her sobs came out in panting breaths as she ran faster. “I won’t let you leave Wulf to Luther’s tender mercies. This is my estate, you are my gargoyles, and we’re going to take that bastard down together.”

“What the hell is Jade doing here?” Graven snapped as we appeared at the gates. “Get her to somewhere safe!”

“Don’t you start,” Jade snapped, shoving her finger into his face, but when he didn’t respond, simply glowering back at her, she turned to the gates. “Madeline said that there’s a soul anchor somewhere, something that’s tied Luther’s soul to the body he’s wearing now. That’s what’s allowed him to live so long. If we find it and destroy it—”

“Then Luther will die.” I jolted back at Madeline’s sudden appearance, looking just as she had when she’d last been in this house. She shot me a rueful smile, then stared back through the gates. “You can tear him limb from limb, but it won’t matter. He’ll still live on in one form or another. Destroy the anchor and you destroy him.”

“Then we will keep our former master busy while you search,” Carrick said, cracking his knuckles. “Let us in through the wards.”

Both Madeline and Jade pulled in a breath to do just that, then smiled at each other for just a split second.

“Let us in,” they said together. “Let us in.”

As soon as we stepped through the gates, I knew this was a terrible idea, because I’d been here before in a situation just like this. The day that Luther had ‘died’, when all of those poor souls trapped in their cells actually had, it had started just like this. Witchfire licking the walls, creating a hellish heat. The stink of burning paper filled my nose, but then I heard, felt a ferocious thump, my wings spreading as I pushed Jade behind me. Our brother, Wulf, shoved Luther up against the walls he’d built, the mortar infused with his own blood. But that bastard just grinned through bloodied teeth.

“Together again, old friend?” he ground out in the face of Wulf’s roar. “Just as it always was. We’ll fill these cells again, together.”

My brother did not answer him with words, but with his claws, wrapping one around the bastard’s neck, the sharp points of his talons piercing the skin. But Luther remained completely unafraid, wrapping his hands around Wulf’s claws, but not seeking to try and pull them away.

And we soon saw why.

As he squeezed, Wulf’s breath caught in his chest, at the same time as Luther’s did, the two of them wheezing in sync, as if Wulf’s throat was also being crushed.

“You forget... when you hurt me... you only hurt yourself.” Although he could barely get out the words, Luther’s eyes gleamed maniacally.

And that’s when my brothers and I realised what Luther had done. Madeline had spoken of a soul anchor, something keeping his essence tethered to the mortal realm. We didn’t need to look any further, for we’d found it. Luther hadn’t simply stolen Wulf’s face when taking another body: he’d

been forced to. Luther loved to torment all of us, but he'd saved the worst of all for Wulfstan, and somehow for him, that had created a deeper, more satisfying bond. One he'd obviously extended with magic. Graven, Carrick and I all looked at each other, knowing then what had to be done.

“Go and search for the soul anchor,” Graven told Jade and Madeline. “Look for something that Luther might've thought was precious and...” His eyes flicked to Madeline. “Keep her safe. You promised you'd help us find her. Don't jeopardise the other half of my heart for mere revenge.”

Because we knew then that their search would be fruitless; that there was no need to search for an amulet or stone that Luther tied his soul to. He'd chosen a far grander vessel.

Wulfstan.

Our brother shoved the warlock away from him, sucking in breaths before he lashed out again, this time raking his claws across the man's chest, as if to test the theory for himself. Luther just looked down at the bloodied scratches and laughed. Because Wulf now wore exactly the same marks on his own chest.

To fulfil our destiny, and finally put down the madman who'd terrorised this city for over a hundred years, we'd have to kill our brother.

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## Chapter 64

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*Jade*

I was pretty sure I was in hell.

Z Ward was now a far cry from the place I'd visited with Daniel. The flames licking the walls created a close atmosphere that made it hard to breathe, but it was more than that. A sense of desperation also hung in the air as Madeline and I ran along the left-hand corridor. But in search of what? How would you recognise something someone might tie their soul to? As we went, we were met with a chorus of groans from the cells. When I'd visited before they'd been old but clean, showing signs of their age, but blessedly free of spectral visitors. But that had changed. I couldn't see past the bars now because something dark massed in each cell. Slender arms of dark mist slid through the bars, raking at the doors and potentially at us. I shied away as we hurried on, turning to Madeline.

“What the hell would Luther have anchored his soul to?” I asked. “Did he have some piece of family jewellery that was special to him?”

“Not Luther. He grew up with all of life's advantages. There was little value in material things because he had access



to all of them from a young age. He was groomed to be the next heir as Kenneth had not borne any children.”

I winced at the word groomed in the face of what I’d been told about Kenneth.

“So nothing from his childhood? A keepsake from his mother?”

She shook her head sharply. “The lady was like a ghost in her own life. She bore the children required of her in silence and ignored her son’s vagaries. I’m not sure if he could even remember her name if you asked him.”

“So, what then?” I came to a stop at the stairs, saw the frozen form of the two gargoyles at the foot of the staircase. “What did he treasure the most?”

“This place,” Madeline replied with absolute conviction. “He had his own blood added to the mortar used to make the bricks, because he was creating something for himself on the estate grounds. The house was the legacy he was given, but this was the legacy he was creating.”

“So...something in the building, then?” I asked, raking my eyes up and down the walls. “Some kind of architectural feature. A stone inset into the walls. Perhaps a ruby made from his blood...”

All sound theories, that was for certain. But I was about to have them all brutally disproved. We had made our way back around and were now looking down from the first level, to where the gargoyles faced Luther.

“You should’ve been drowned the moment you were born,” Graven snarled, approaching Luther with his claws held out from his body. “It would’ve been a mercy to end you then, before your poison could seep into the world.”

“Ahh, Graven, found your voice, have you?” Adam...ugh, Luther, laughed wildly. “Is that little bite mark on the girl anything to do with that?”

“Being around the true master of The Eyrie has always made me stronger,” my mate shot back. “She is a queen who understands the true purpose of power, but you... You’re just a

little boy tearing things apart because the only way you feel alive is when someone else is hurting.”

“Is that so?” Luther stepped forward, great balls of fire forming in his hands. “I’ll allow this display of insolence just this once, before I bring you to your knees.” He moved his hands and the fire merged together, then stretched into a flaming infinity loop. “Then I’ll force you to do the same to your pretty ‘soul mate’.”

The three gargoyles all snarled then and launched themselves at him.

It couldn’t be an even fight, that’s why I pressed myself against the railing to watch it all take place. I didn’t know enough about my own power, didn’t feel confident attacking Luther head on, but they were my proxies. They’d make Luther pay for every horrific thing he’d done in his miserably long life and...

So would Wulfstan.

The massive gargoyle rallied, readying himself to attack, but while my three gargoyles dodged and weaved between whips of fiery magic, something happened. Graven, who seemed to have the keen eyes of an eagle, dipped sideways, flying into a tiny space between Luther’s streams of fire, the thin membranes of his wings singeing, right before he dropped down, claws outstretched. Luther’s eyes went wide as one raked across his face, then another, the flames faltering for just a second, which the others took advantage of. But it wasn’t them I was watching. Wulfstan’s claws had gone to his face as identical slashes to Luther’s formed.

“Wulf is Luther’s soul anchor,” Madeline and I said at the same time.

We stared at each other, knowing what that meant, my lips already moving in denial.

“No... No—”

“Luther must die or many more will suffer the same fate as your Daniel,” she told me urgently, wisps of burning paper falling between us, the remnant of Luther’s magical fire that

had been fading as his focus turned to battling the gargoyles. “He will not stop. Isn’t this evidence enough for you?” She gestured to the fight below. Wulf struggled to right himself and join the fray, but each time he did, another slash from my gargoyles had him and Luther both staggering back. “He will do literally anything to prolong his reign of terror.”

Including having linked his soul to Wulfstan’s.

The gargoyles had told me that Luther had forced Wulf to perform many of the horrific acts on the inmates here, but now I wondered...was it Wulf that did them or was it Luther in Wulf’s body? Which brought me to the next question. I watched the battle taking place, all sense of victory scrubbed away, because yet again the innocent were suffering. I turned to Madeline.

“Why did he build this place?”

“To have a playground to indulge his worst impulses,” Madeline replied.

“But why? He could have exsanguinated small children in the drawing room if that’s what he wanted. He was richer than God, so he could’ve gotten away with it, back then. Why did he build this place and tie his soul to Wulfstan’s?”

I didn’t want to stand there watching, because now it was as if I felt every blow. The scratches, the bruises that formed on Wulf’s flesh, I felt every single one of them. Tears filled my eyes, blurring the scene thankfully, but I still knew what was happening. This was just like seeing the wounds that Luther had inflicted on Daniel all over again.

“Why would a warlock try to bind his soul to a gargoyle’s?” I forced out.

“Because Luther was different to the others. The First Families carried with them the prejudices formed in Europe. Gargoyles and other creatures they could bind to themselves as familiars were lower life forms. They had to be inferior otherwise why would they allow themselves to be put into such servitude? They were used as magical batteries for the most part, but Luther...”

She stared over the railing, her brows creasing.

“He was influenced by new ideas about technology, about universal suffrage and the rights of all, not to further that egalitarian philosophy, but to re-evaluate previously held views. He wanted to explore the limits of the human body, whether the highs and lows of emotion could be harnessed as power and...”

She swallowed hard.

“And whether we could transcend its limits. Only the greatest of adepts could extend their life spans, so Luther, for all his privilege, was limited to sixty, perhaps seventy years.” Madeline’s eyes narrowed as she stared at Wulfstan. “But gargoyles live for thousands of years.”

“He wanted to become as much of a gargoyle as he dared,” I said, starting to move now. I ran down the stairs and Madeline came with me. “They’re the sons of witches, just like warlocks are, but without the ability to do magic like a witch can. Imagine if you could be both: gargoyle and warlock. You’d have the world on its knees and—”

“ENOUGH.” Luther’s voice rang out throughout the foyer of the asylum, a slow smile spreading across his face. “I’ve entertained your little rebellion for far too long.” He sucked in one breath, then another. With each one, he seemed to swell bigger, taller. I could almost see wings at his back. “While I would prefer to keep our little family together, I only need one gargoyle to survive, and none of you three can match him.”

My breath seized in my throat as I saw three great whips of fire lash out. Despite my gargoyles dodging out the way, they found themselves with a whip wrapped around each of their necks. My hands clamped down around my throat. I felt the burning bite as if there was one around my own neck; my eyes watering from the pain.

“There is no closer bond than that between a gargoyle and his master,” Luther told me, moving slowly closer, dragging my monsters behind him, like recalcitrant dogs on a lead. “They live to serve your every need and you...” He cocked his head sideways. “You become infected with theirs.” He flicked

his wrist and I squeezed out a gasp, feeling the flaming whips bite deeper. “You’ll feel it the moment I tear their heads from their shoulders. It’ll be the last thing you feel as your own death comes. I don’t want to have to do that, Jade.”

“No!”

Wulf’s shout echoed throughout the whole foyer as he jerked himself to his feet and barrelled Luther, breaking the hold the warlock had on my mates, right before he drove him into the wall.

The impact would have been enough to break every bone in a human man, but Luther was not human. Instead, the wall buckled, cracks forming in the mortar, zig zagging their way all the way up until the joints broke free and the bricks tumbled to the ground. Electric blue wards sprang to life, crackling for a moment, before they sputtered and died. And that’s when something happened that gave me a sliver of hope. Wulf staggered back from the impact of the blow, but something more happened to Luther.

That pretty, pretty face went so pale that it was almost grey, and lines I hadn’t seen before formed around his eyes and mouth. He gasped, tried to conjure a ball of fire in his hands, but his power sputtered and then went out, just like the wards.

“It’s not just Wulfstan,” I muttered to myself and Madeline came to stand just beside me. “The anchor. It’s not just Wulfstan,” I told her.

“The blood in the mortar...” she said, her eyes widening as she looked around, as if seeing Z Ward for the first time. “He built this place as a twisted sort of chapel, a ceremonial space. *That’s* why he tortured all of those people. He was conducting savage rites in a building consecrated with his own blood. Whatever power could be taken from their pain went straight to him.”

“So what happens if we destroy it?” I asked, my voice low and urgent. “Madeline. What happens if we destroy it?”

She smiled sharply, with a dangerous light in her eyes.

“Let’s find out.”

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## Chapter 65

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*Carrick*

“Destroy the walls!”

My mistress’ command rocketed through me, my claws moving to do her bidding, even as my brain asked the question: why? But I got a clue when Wulfstan responded.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” His voice had the same sound of hopelessness and pain as an animal left to die in a trap. He’d tested every edge of it for a sign of weakness. But sometimes our mindset has us trapped in cages that have vulnerabilities we don’t yet have the capacity to detect. I nodded to Seneca and we both moved. Wulf had already started the work on one wall, so we both charged at the bricks.

To the sound of Luther’s scream.

Gods, that felt good, for him to be the one doing the screaming for once. A fiery sense of purpose flared all the hotter between us as our shoulders slammed into the weakened wall. Bricks fell like confetti on the grass. As the hole widened, we saw the wards come to life and then...fail, the tracery of bluish light giving way to the peace of night. I glanced over at Seneca and the fledgling grinned at me, mirroring my own expression.

“Looks like some demolition work is in order.”

We both nodded to each other and then shoved our feet against the remaining walls around us, sending them tumbling onto the grass too.

“We need to get Jade out of here,” Graven said, appearing beside us. He eyed the structure warily. “This place will collapse if you keep going.”

“Go.”

Wulf got to his feet, although Luther struggled to. Whatever weakness the felling of the building had caused in Luther, it hadn't done the same for my brother. “Take our mate —”

“No!” Jade shouted.

Some nights I loved the fire that burned inside my mate, but on others... My breath hissed through my teeth as Jade rushed over. She wrapped her hands around Wulf's arm to tug him down to her.

“I know what you're planning to do and I command—”

He reached over and pressed a claw to her lips, the flesh dimpling around it as he stared into her eyes.

“If we are truly soul mates, I'll find you again in another life,” he told her. “One where I wasn't brought to my knees over and over by madness and pain. I need to end this.”

“No!” She shook her head violently, gripping more urgently at his arm, as if that would be enough to stop him. “No, Wulf, please...”

“Wulf...” He nodded slowly and then smiled. “My name on your lips, I can carry that with me as I do what I must.”

“More than that.” I stepped forward and so did the others as we heard the pain in her voice, my eyes following the track of one silvery tear. She flung herself at him and his arms went around her tentatively. There had been only pain in Z Ward, no pleasure, so it took him some time to recognise it. I willed him to see the offer for what it was and his arms drew tight around her, clinging to our mate with everything he had.



Because this was goodbye.

We could destroy Z Ward and remove some of Luther's power, but that wouldn't be enough to make him take his final breath, not until Wulf did.

"This isn't the way it's supposed to be," she murmured into his neck. "You're the victim here."

"Not anymore." I heard the growl of determination in Wulf's voice, something that had been missing for so long. "I am whole again when I touch you, no matter for how short a time. Even if my mind frays again, I'll remember you."

"Remember this," she said, pushing her face into the long length of his hair and then sought out his neck.

I pulled in a breath so fast my lungs stuttered. The cry for her to stop caught in my throat as her blunt teeth sank down into his flesh. Wulf let out an incredible roar, not one of pain, but of triumph. He held her far too tight, my claws flexing with the need to pull her free of him as jealousy, a foreign emotion, rode me hard. She had claimed him, yet I... But when he pulled free of her, I saw the male glow with an unearthly light that found its twin in her and there was something he'd long lost shining again in his eyes.

This was the gargoyle that had been shipped here from Scotland, the warrior that had fought off the English. He let out a massive battle cry and then set her behind him.

"I wear your mark with pride, Jade of The Eyrie," he told her in a rattling growl. "I smelled the stink of the English soiling their breeches as I lopped off their comrades' heads. I beat back legions of soldiers at my lord's behest. This cage was never enough to contain me and I *will* break free!"

His fist slammed into one wall, then another, the damage apparent as the whole building shook, because it wasn't just the walls that were collapsing, but the roof, too.

"We need to get Jade out of here!" Graven snapped.

"No—" Her hands clawed the air as I collected her up, but I forced myself to hold her tight as I sprinted for the hole in the wall.

“He does this for you, lass. We’d all do the same, but this is a sacrifice only he can make. Don’t dishonour him in this moment, please.”

“But...” She started forward a few steps the moment I placed her on the grass, safely beyond the building. Dashing the tears from her eyes she turned to stare at me. More tears formed as she struggled to speak. “But...he’s the victim here. He’s the one that was forced—”

“And now he takes his revenge.”

Graven settled beside her, arms crossed as we watched the battle unfold.

Luther was like a little doll, tossed around the remains of the building, short flares of fire magic forming that were soon extinguished as Wulfstan smashed more walls. The torture room collapsed into a mess of bricks and mortar first. Wulf spent far too much time pulverising those bricks to dust, which gave Luther a chance to rally.

He staggered towards Wulf, trying to command him to stop, to obey him, but the old master would never regain the kind of control he’d once wielded. His day was well and truly over and now he was forced to see the evidence of it. The office was destroyed, as was the ablutions block. And at that destabilisation, the top floor started to shiver. It was a disconcerting thing for a building to do, so we scooped up Jade and took to the air where we had an aerial view of the final collapse of Z Ward. That entire building, an edifice to pain, torture and the worst of witchkind, it seemed to waver on its foundations and then it all came crashing down.

“What happened?” Jade’s voice was like a breath in my ear. “Is he...?”

As if in answer to her trembling question, a great roar heralded a shower of bricks, out of which emerged a battered and bleeding Wulf, an even more destroyed Luther in his arms. He pushed his hands high, holding Luther’s still writhing form up to the moon’s light, and that’s when they came.

A tour operator had approached Master Ashley some years ago about doing ghost tours of Z Ward. The man had been frank about it all being a hoax which had affronted the master. But while the financial incentive was not attractive to him, memorialising the story of Z Ward and all its horrors was. He saw it as a way of giving those restless spirits peace.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

Because it appeared that the wards had done more than contain Wulf. They'd also contained *them*. Thin, black shapes streaked past the now defunct wards, their screams and cries all too familiar. Everyone who'd ever been torn apart within those walls now rose from the wreckage. Jade gasped when she saw each black shape arrow in on Wulf, but I squeezed her tight in reassurance.

“Watch,” I prompted.

Because it wasn't Wulf that was their prey; it was Luther.

He'd taken away their liberty, their humanity and, finally, their lives. But they'd waited for a hundred years to get their revenge and now they had it. Luther's body jerked as each spirit slammed into him, squeezing small cries of pain out of him, to be choked off then repeated as another, then another swooped in. They massed like a school of feeding sharks, tearing off parts of him like those predators of the sea might do to the corpse of a dead whale, until his whole body shivered and then...

“Now I understand...”

Madeline stepped forward, over the wreckage of Z Ward and towards Wulf, whose strength was failing him. His arms shook, his knees gave out and he came crashing down onto the ground. But the spirits would not be denied.

“Take me down,” Jade said, patting at my arm as we watched Wulf fall. “Carrick—”

“You want to be with him in his final moments.” I nodded sharply and then flew us back down.

Her feet stumbled on the broken bricks and we all rushed to prevent her from falling. She gripped my arm tight as we

moved closer. A golden light bathed Wulf's form, even as Luther's was being swallowed by a swarming mass of black spirits. But that light was pitiless, illuminating all of Wulf's twitches and jerks as his own life force left him. His chest laboured as he fought to take each breath, but his eyelids flickered then opened when Jade dropped down beside him.

"Wulf..."

He tried to smile, but his lips could only twitch then form a grimace of pain.

"It was worth it, lass," he told her. "To be free... And you gave me that." His eyes rolled upwards. "To see the stars in the open sky again. To know that I could reach up and touch them." His hand rose, claws extending, and then fell limply, before he turned his gaze back to Jade. "I just wanted that and... you."

She dived forward, wrapping her arms around his neck. As she clung to him, I knew what she was doing. It was as if by holding onto his corporeal body, she could keep him with her, with us.

But that could not be: that was Luther's final act of abuse.

He could not go to the circle of hell with his name on it without Wulf going there with him. And so my brother nestled in closer to Jade, taking that small moment of comfort before it too was snatched from him.

"No. I won't let you," she ground out, lifting her head, then her hands, and I saw the white glow between her palms.

"No, Jade..." I started forward and so did the others, right as Madeline stepped closer.

"Into the light," Madeline said, holding out her hands, and, as we watched, an act of true magic took place. The black spirits that were devouring Luther seemed to still at the sound of her voice. "Let go of the pain, of everything, and move on to the next world. Move into the light and everything you seek will be found."

The spirits paled slightly, seeming to stare at her like lions disturbed while eating their prey. She persisted, staring up at

the moon, all of its cool glow focussed on her. The light in Jade's palms seemed to brighten as well, the two women's powers joining together.

"Into the light," Jade said, much more sadly, stroking Wulf's face, tracing its shape, even as his eyes failed him. They became more grey, stony, unseeing by the second, as a familiar grey scale mottled his flesh. When a gargoyle dies, he goes to stone one last time, leaving behind him a body, but not a soul to animate it. He let out one long shuddering breath, then another and then his breath stopped.

All of the fires that Luther had lit had been extinguished, as his strength had faded. But a new light flared to life now. Those former dark shades became motes of light, like fireflies, spiralling upwards. Madeline smiled, then laughed, the beautiful girl who had danced through Master Kenneth's ballroom right back here on the grounds. The little points of light seemed to mass in her hands, right before she threw them into the air to go flying upwards. To where? I wouldn't know, not until I took my last breath, but when finally the last bright mote floated away, Madeline turned to us.

"I've fulfilled my promise to you," she said. "You have found your fated mate, and so will gargoyles everywhere." We followed her gaze to where Caraxes and Axton's stone forms stood amongst the rubble. "You will be freed from the loopholes in the curse of the Fall that bound you to warlocks, not witches and—"

"What about Wulf?"

Jade's voice was so distorted by a potent mix of tears and anger I didn't recognise it immediately, but when she pulled away from the now stone form of my fallen brother, I saw it. The deadly kind of determination which the Whiteleys were known for, but in quite a different form. Hers made her glow from within, with the light in her palms growing brighter.

"You promised that all of the gargoyles of the house would find their fated mates," Jade insisted. "Not that one would find her and then..." Her voice broke as she looked down at Wulf,

her fingers flexing. “And then die. That wasn’t part of the promise.”

“Jade—” Graven started to say.

“No. No! I said it before and I’ll say it again, what’s the point of all this power?” She held her hands out like they contained an offering, the light within them getting brighter. “Like, sure, I don’t have to use the torch app on my phone anymore in the dark, but what good does it do?”

“Jade, you—”

“Power that doesn’t try to make the world better is worse than having no power,” she insisted.

“And you have, lass.” I took a hesitant step forward. She hadn’t claimed me, I wasn’t her mate, so perhaps that freed me somewhat. “You’ve allowed many restless souls to move on to a place that’s better—”

“And Wulfstan?” She searched my face, then Madeline’s. “What about Wulfstan’s? Where did his soul go? He said he’d find me in the next life—”

“Gargoyles and witches remain tied from one life to the next,” Madeline explained. “You’ll see Wulf again, though hopefully next time in much happier circumstances. You’ll get the chance to start again—”

“Why not *now*?” I saw both Luther and Madeline in Jade right now, in that determined tilt of her chin. “Why not? If his soul will return and he’ll be born again, why can’t that happen now?” She held out a hand to Madeline, the light glowing ever more fiercely and Madeline just stared as something grew from it. A small shape flittered through the air, a butterfly made from pure light magic, that floated towards the other woman.

“Butterflies are said to be conduits between the world of the living and that of the dead,” Madeline said in a low voice, holding out her hand so the butterfly could alight. She paused for a moment, watching its wings lazily open and close. “Some say they are the souls of the dead waiting to be reborn. I wonder...”

Both the butterfly and the woman seemed to glow brighter until it hurt to look at them and we all had to avert our eyes. And then I felt it. Something light, bright, that filled my heart and drove all the pain out.

It was the feeling I got each time I was around Jade, multiplied a thousand times.

I let out a sigh then, all my fears and jealousy seeping out of me, and as I exhaled so did everyone else.

Including Wulfstan.

The startled gasp was what had my eyes flicking open and I saw my brother's form had turned from stone back to flesh again, right before he sat up and stretched, then rose to his feet.

“Greetings,” he said, looking around himself in confusion. “I’m Wulfstan. Where the hell am I?”

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# Chapter 66

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*Jade*

“I’m Wulfstan. Where the hell am I?”

In the history of all the most beautiful words used, none to me were as beautiful as those. I rushed towards Wulf, his arms opening instinctively, and it only took a second before his arms and wings wrapped around me.

“You’re—” he said, in a voice filled with awe.

“Yup.”

“And I’m...?”

I reached up, searching his neck for the small bite I’d left there and I smiled when I felt the faint indentations in his skin.

“Yep.” I clung to him tighter. Even though it felt like I was trying to hug the side of a cliff, I didn’t let that stop me. “I’m your fated mate and you’re mine.”

“You’ve accepted...” His grip tightened on me. “Far be it for me to question a gift from the gods themselves but... may I know your name, milady?”

I looked up at him, feeling a brief flash of pain when, for a moment, his face seemed to be superimposed with the one I



despised most in the world. But not for long. Luther had stolen Wulf's face, not the other way around. As if he could have approximated even a tiny fraction of Wulf's bravery or his strength of heart. When I looked past that to the male who actually stood before me, I saw something else that was missing from his expression: pain. He'd told me that he'd see me again in the next life, but...

"Jade," I replied. "I'm Jade Barlow, but... what do you remember?"

"Of this place?" He looked over his shoulder, then beyond the rubble to the house. "Nothing, milady Jade."

"Just Jade," I corrected.

He smiled, and it was a natural, gentle expression, rather than a snarl or a twist of the lips.

"Just Jade, then. Nothing. I was a warrior on the walls of Tonbury Castle. I fought—"

"The English for the master of the castle," I finished for him and grinned. "Well, you're not in Scotland anymore." I flung an arm wide. "This is Australia."

"Australia..." His eyes seemed to take in every detail. "It seems a beautiful place, but those roses... I've smelled something similar in my lady... I mean, the master's lady's gardens. Perhaps they are the same varietal?"

Talking about bloody rose varieties under the moon's glow? I laughed at the sheer insanity of it all, but as he stepped back to discuss this further, I saw something else had changed. The three gargoyles watched on in wonder, but they were the only ones that remained. The spot where Madeline had stood was now empty, just a faint glow in the air marking where she had been.

Had I drained the last of her power? Had I sent her too soon from this world into the next? I'd never know. I did hear a small sigh, or maybe it was a breeze blowing past. Sending the leaves swirling, it whirled upwards and into the sky, to dissipate into the stronger currents that swept past up there.

“Forgive me, brothers,” Wulfstan said when he noticed the others. “I am Wulfstan of Tonbury Castle.”

“Graven of The Eyrie,” one of my mates said, nodding to the house. “My home, and now yours, for we are flockmates.”

“You are one of my lady’s fated mates?” Wulf looked down at me, a clawed hand curling around my shoulders and then scraping across the bite mark Graven had left, forcing me to shiver. “You look to be strong lads. It’d be a pleasure to serve amongst you to keep my lady’s lands safe.”

“And to keep her safe.” Carrick shot me a meaningful look. “Our Jade is beautiful as she is reckless.”

“So very reckless indeed?” One of Wulf’s eyebrows jerked up then as he inspected me thoroughly. “We’ll have to work very hard to keep her from making mistakes too terrible to rectify.”

“She seems pretty capable of doing that herself,” Seneca said, surging forward. “You...” His claws raked the air helplessly before moving to cup my jaw. “You...”

“I ensured our flock is complete,” I said, with a complete lack of contrition. “We’ve rectified some of the mistakes of the past, but there’s more to be resolved.”

I turned then to the two gargoyles I’d seen first when we went on the ghost hunting tour of Z Ward, picking my way through the rubble now with no fear at all. Whatever poison had lurked within these walls, it was all drained away.

“Jade...” Graven said as light glowed in my hands. “Jade, let’s...”

“Be free,” I said, slapping my hands down on each gargoyles’ chest. I watched the stone melt away with satisfaction, saw the two creatures come back to life, but their reactions were less satisfactory. One shrank back from me like a beaten dog, whirling around, wings clasped around him, as Wulf pushed forward.

“Beware, my lady. This male looks like the Devil himself is riding him. You don’t want to get within his grasp.”

But the gargoyle didn't strike out at us, he merely took flight, his wings raking through the air as he tried to get free of us as fast as he could, and to get as far from us as possible.

"Graven..." The other gargoyle stared at his claws, flexing them before looking up at us. I saw the tightening around his eyes, the pain there. "We're free?"

"Free, Axton." Graven's voice was full of sorrow and empathy. "Free of everything. You can remain here if you wish or—"

"I can feel Caraxes," Axton said, flapping his wings experimentally. "Thank you for the offer, but I must go."

And with that, he took off as well, and we saw several other gargoyles take off from the roof at the same time.

"I hope like hell no one is watching the skies with a telescope tonight," I said.

"A telescope? What is that?" Wulfstan asked.

"A device that allows you to see something from very far away," Seneca told him.

"Like a spyglass? One of my masters had one of those. A treasured thing it was, too."

As we walked towards the house, I felt that strange kind of tiredness that washes over you gently, letting you know it's time to rest. It came with a sense of satisfaction, I realised as we went inside the house, showing Wulfstan the light switches, then explaining what electricity was, which led to a discussion about electrical devices and us turning on the TV. I flicked through the channels and then smiled as I saw Disney's *Gargoyles* pop up. I pressed play and Wulfstan started, staring at the screen intently, then asking us a million questions about how it worked. After an episode or two, I made some popcorn and we all munched on that, my gargoyles transfixed by the storylines. It wasn't long after that Harry knocked on the front door.

"Jade, I..." He looked past me and saw the four gargoyles sprawled across the lounge room floor, the others explaining

genetic engineering to Wulf. “I saw the light on and I came by to say I found some lads who can fix your Mr Big situation.”

“No need,” I said, ushering him inside. “Wulfstan, this is the estate’s caretaker, Harry.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Harry,” Wulfstan said, bowing deep as he offered him a claw. Harry took it, dumbly staring up at the Beast of Z Ward.

“But... He...”

“Mr Big was Luther Whiteley,” I told Harry, but it was Wulf I watched. I needed to see if there was any sign that the name would provoke a reaction, but the big gargoyle just listened intently, like this was another nugget of information about modern life.

“Luther... But how—?”

“Come and have a cup of tea,” I said, directing him to the kitchen, “and we’ll ring Mellors and see if he’s still awake. I think I only want to tell this story once.”

“Then never again,” Seneca growled, having apparently decided to join us.

“We have a whole life ahead of us, blessedly free of that bastard,” Carrick agreed, and the kitchen suddenly seemed a lot more crowded, particularly when he shot me a saucy wink. “And I know just how I want to spend it.”

“This Luther was an enemy of the house?” Wulf asked, as he started looking through the cupboards.

“He was,” I said, feeling a small pang, then stifling it quickly. “And what’re you looking for?”

“Ale. All good war stories are better with a stout ale in your hand.”

“Something tells me I’m gonna need a beer too,” Harry said, plucking a six pack from the fridge, then cracking one can and handing it to Wulfstan. “Wrap your laughing gear around that one, mate.”

“Laughing—?” Wulfstan started to ask.

“Have a drink,” we informed him.

“So,” I said, half an hour later, as Mellors walked in the door, a frown on his face. “It turns out Adam was Luther and he was also Mr Big...”

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## Chapter 67

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*Jade*

Waking up knowing your evil nemesis is dead, torn to pieces by the souls of those he hurt? It's the best damn feeling in the world. It was mid-afternoon before I got up. I could have done with more sleep, but I'd set myself an alarm after I'd found out what time the ICU visiting hours started. Once I'd showered and got dressed, I caught an Uber to the hospital.

When I got to the ICU, I found Mellors sitting beside Daniel's bed, a pen in his hand and the newspaper crossword open in front of him. He smiled a little as I walked in, then set the paper aside and got to his feet.

"Harry and I have been taking it in shifts," he explained. "I've checked with hospital security and offered them financial aid to employ another guard outside Daniel's door, but..." He let out a breath. "That won't be needed, will it?"

I shook my head sharply, not sure why I felt tears welling, but I just smeared them away with the back of my hand. He moved in closer, giving me a hug, and I let myself feel the comfort and support that I now associated with the tight weave of his woollen suit.

“Not anymore,” I promised him, as much as I was promising it to Daniel. “No one’s going to hurt him again.”

“Well, he’s looking much better today.” Mellors steered me over to the bed and I saw with relief that the bruises had begun to fade, his breathing tube was out and the head of the bed was slightly elevated. Daniel was far too quiet and still and his blue hair was looking a little faded against the white pillow, but he was healing. With every breath, his body was repairing itself from the damage done.

But what of his mind?

“What will we do when he’s awake?” I asked in a tight voicer. “He was... He’ll need help getting past... that.”

“I know some very well-regarded trauma psychologists,” Mellors informed me, “who are experienced in dealing with queer clients and have a kink-positive approach.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “I know it probably doesn’t seem like it, but this could be a positive turning point for Daniel.”

Whatever else he had to say was quickly superseded by a cough from the patient. I moved away from Mellors to drop down beside the bed, scanning Danny’s face as he coughed, then coughed again. And then his eyes opened a crack.

“Jade...?”

That started him off into a coughing fit that got louder as he started really hacking his lungs out. Before I could hit the panic button, a nurse calmly walked in and adjusted the bed so that he was sitting up more, then moved his pillows so he could catch his breath more easily. She took a look at him, then busied herself with a jug on the cabinet beside the bed.

“Here you go,” she said, holding a cup to his lips. “You’re all dried out. Drink this down and it’ll help, I promise.”

As he sipped the drink, I slid my hand across the blankets towards him. As soon as it got close enough, he gripped my fingers. When I saw the red marks and bruises I felt bad for touching him, but he wouldn’t let go. Not when he finished the drink, not when he sank back against the pillows.

“You’re safe now,” I told him over and over, as his eyes fluttered closed. “No one will ever hurt you like this again. I made sure of it.”

“Good...”

That’s all I got, just a tiny exhale of a word, a little quirk of his lips that was there and gone again in seconds, but it felt like everything. I sat down beside his bed, holding his hand and watching him sleep until visiting time was over. Then I whispered that I’d see him tomorrow and I headed home.

Only to find out I had visitors waiting for me.

“Jade...!”

Mum came rushing towards me from the kitchen the moment I opened the front door and, as my eyes went wide, Harry appeared behind her with Dad.

“Jade, your parents arrived so I—”

“You haven’t called me. You haven’t replied to any of my messages.” Mum swatted me on the arm and I just stared at her, then at Harry, my eyes going wider still because the sun was almost setting. “We were worried, darling. We had to get the address for this place from the Google Maps.” She leaned in, looking around her nervously. “Are you sure this is all yours?”

“Ah, yeah,” I said. “So, you’re staying here?” I ushered them back into the kitchen and saw the kettle had already been put on. Typical Mum. She’d ignored the fancy-pants coffee machine and had found a canister of instant coffee instead.

“Well, love, we wanted to make sure you’re OK,” Dad said, shooting me a meaningful look, right before he pushed a folded-up newspaper my way. “We heard about what happened with Trevor from his parents and then...”

I scanned the article and then smiled. Apparently Mr Fancy Pants lawyer had got involved in some shonky deals with the... Dorian Group? I wasn’t familiar with them, but apparently when one member had been caught out using stand-over tactics to guarantee a sale, he’d squealed on the others. Trevor had been the one drawing up contracts and moving



funds around like a crazy person, trying to cover their tracks and now they had all been arrested. If convicted, he'd probably end up in some kind of cushy jail for white collar crims, but still... He could kiss that hard-won law degree goodbye once he had a criminal conviction.

“So what’s been going on?”

When Dad asked the question, I knew there was so much more to my answer than I could comfortably divulge, but right as I was about to open my mouth, I heard a thump on the roof. Dad frowned, looking up, then got to his feet. Mr DIY, he'd be diagnosing the issue in his head as he scaled the stairs, but as I started to babble out something, anything, to direct his attention away from the roof, the sound of footsteps thumping down the stairs drowned me out.

“Now, where is our mate...?” Seneca said, right before the four of them froze in front of my father.

“Oh!” Mum said, hand going to her mouth. Her eyes slid down, getting a very big eyeful of one significant way that gargoyles differed from human men. “Oh my!”

Graven frowned and Carrick’s lips twisted into a smile. And while Wulfstan looked around for sources of danger, Seneca tiptoed over to the side of the corridor and affected a pose resembling an ancient Greek statue.

“Seriously...?” I shook my head. “Guys, these are my parents. Mum, Dad, these are the gargoyles of the house. They’re my...” I couldn’t bring myself to pretend otherwise, not with the exhaustion of the other night still weighing me down. Everything we had could be snatched away at any point, so I forged on. “They’re my fated mates.”

“Fated. Mates?” Dad said.

“They’re soul bound to me, are unfailingly loyal, will never sleep with their secretaries and...” I smiled slowly, getting a lump in my throat. “They keep me safe.”

“And love you.” Carrick stepped forward and pulled me into his arms so I was facing my parents. “We will always love you, Jade.”

I traced my hand up his arm, marvelling at the veins that shifted under his skin, lying over all that taut muscle. I felt the slightly roughed stone texture of his skin and then smiled.

“And they love me,” I confirmed, “just like I love them.”

“Well, then,” Dad said, in his usual gruff ‘meet the parents’ voice. “You’re a damn sight better than that bastard, Trevor, that’s for sure. Wouldn’t find blokes like this sponging off you while they get a fancy degree, only to rip off honest people.” His eyes slid down though. “Could do with more pants though. Do you fellas fancy a beer?”

“A drink with the man that fathered the most beautiful woman in the world?” Wulfstan said with a smile. “I couldn’t think of anything better, though I do see where Jade gets her looks from.” He shot Mum a look that had her blushing.

And so, just like every other Australian woman who brought her boyfriend(s) home to meet the parentals, the occasion was marked by several beers around the kitchen table as Dad quizzed them on their intentions.

“So we’re all your fated mates, then?”

Mum had passed out asleep on the couch and Dad was having a very intense conversation with Wulfstan about the differences between freshwater vs saltwater salmon fishing. It helped that Dad had always wanted to visit Scotland and Wulfstan was happy to regale him with details of the rivers there.

Carrick pulled me into the corner of the kitchen, his mouth brushing across the tip of my ear.

“So you’ve decided to acknowledge that you are mine then?”

“Did I even have a choice?” I asked, looking up and seeing his eyes burn like black fire as he smirked down at me.

“None whatsoever.”

“So what’re you going to do about it?” I asked, glancing at the rest of the kitchen, wondering if anyone could hear us whispering.

“The only thing I can.” His low growl was all the warning I got as he picked me up and slung me over his shoulder, carrying me out of the room.

“Off to bed, love?” Dad asked, only looking up briefly.

“Jade is very tired after all of her exertions today,” Carrick informed him.

“Sleep well, then. After this beer, I’m gonna have to hit the hay myself. We drove all night from Daysborough—”

“This is the town Jade was born in?” Graven asked, winking at us. “Tell us more about her birthplace.”

“Carrick...” I hissed as we walked through the lounge room, past my snoring mother. “Carrick!” But he didn’t stop or put me down until he’d carried me upstairs and deposited me in front of my bedroom door. Once I was standing upright, he leaned in and pressed me against the wall.

“Yes, my mate?”

“You like saying that way too much,” I said, giving his chest a shove, but the male wasn’t moving anywhere. He just smiled as his head edged closer.

“What, my mate?” He stopped when his mouth was hovering over mine, so I caught the moment it curved into a smile. “I intend to say it many times tonight. Once as I kiss my mate.”

“But—”

Whatever I had to say, it was silenced by his mouth as he kissed me, hard and punishing and demanding entrance.

“Once again while I strip you naked and marvel at the fact that a woman so beautiful is destined to be mine.”

Without knowing how I’d got there, I found myself standing in the centre of my bedroom, his kisses raining down over my bared shoulders as he removed my blouse, my skirt and then my underwear. True to his word, he stepped back, his hand toying with his rigid cock as he walked around me.

“Carrick—”

“Don’t say another word,” he said. “I’m holding myself back by a thread as it is, my mate.”

Although Mum was asleep, she was a notoriously light sleeper, and Dad was still awake, although occupied downstairs drinking with the rest of my flock. To say it was not the most ideal time to be doing this was an understatement. But I couldn’t seem to bring myself to care. As Carrick walked around to face me again, I lifted my eyes and boldly stared into his.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?” His eyebrow jerked and a devilish light sparkled in those black eyes. “Oh, my Jade, you have no idea what you’ve done.”

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## Chapter 68

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*Carrick*

What Jade didn't understand was that while each of us was generally a gentle, domesticated monster, inside us still lived an aspect of the devils that had brought on the Fall. When my claws clasped around her sweetly rounded wrists and tugged her to me, I could feel a little of that nature within me.

“Carrick—”

“Worried your mother will wake to find you up here with me?” I asked as I stepped close. Her eyes were glued to mine and I loved every second of that. “Scared your father will learn of what I'm about to do to you?”

“Um. Carrick, maybe—”

“If you think I'm going to wait one more night before making you mine, you've got another thing coming.” I pressed my foot between hers, forcing those sweet thighs to part and with that came the heady scent of her arousal. Huh, she was into this as well. My grip on her tightened then as I raised her arms above her head. Her tits rose too, sweet, tempting mounds that I wanted to nip at and suck on and push myself between, but not yet. “You know there's only one solution to that.”

“That we do this tomorrow night?” Jade squeaked. Her next words came out in a rapid tumble. “I’ll send Mum and Dad to a hotel and—”

I silenced her with a brutal kiss, which distracted her, and me as well, because when I was kissing her, I was tasting her, nipping at her bottom lip and wanting to crawl right into that slick wetness. My cock ached, and I couldn’t keep from it rubbing against her soft thigh, and wanting something else snapped tight around it.

“You have to be quiet.” Our breaths were coming fast and noisy, making a lie of my words. “This has to happen. I need to make you mine tonight and we can do so with you screaming my name as loud as you can so the whole neighbourhood can hear us or...”

“Or?” she prompted, her eyes flicking up to meet mine.

“Or you can hold your responses back as I feed every one of my pearls into that pretty little cunt of yours. Tell me you want that.”

That pause before she responded? It clenched around my heart like an iron fist, threatening to tear it out. Then she nodded, just a little thing, almost as though she was feeling naughty. I smiled, because my girl knew she shouldn’t be doing this, and she couldn’t stop herself.

Because of me.

I pushed her towards the wall until her back hit it, then I held her wrists up against the wallpaper and told her to keep them there.

“But what if I want to scratch your back up and make it clear you’re mine?” she asked in a little voice that had a hefty dose of minx in it. I paused, mid-kiss of her clavicle. That idea, I rolled it around in my head and realised I wanted that very much, and I told her that.

“But next time,” I promised. “Because there will be many, many times. So either invest in some soundproofing in this room or be prepared to talk about how little gargoyles are made with your parents.”

“Little gargoyles...?”

I pulled back to check her response, then smiled when I saw the flush in her cheeks.

“If that’s what you want. I’d be proud to father any child you wish to have and I’m sure becoming a father would help Seneca do some much needed growing up. Graven would be insufferable...And Wulfstan will be making miniature shields and wooden swords before they can walk.” Her short burst of laughter had me pausing for a second. “Hmmm. But maybe we should just practise for a bit, yes?”

“Yes,” was what she said as I kissed my way down her sternum. “Yes.” Again as I traced the pendulous curves of her breasts, loving the way they swayed with every breath she took, growing faster as I traced circles around the nipples. “Yes,” she hissed as my claws pinched those hard points tight, squeezing sensation from her until her thighs started to rub together, and as I kept up the pressure with one hand while the other forced her thighs wide. I nipped off my claws and then slid them through her saturated folds with a groan.

She was so fucking wet.

And all for me, the beast that loved her. I gloried in the soft swell of her belly as I dropped to my knees, then the fragrant folds of her cunt as I forced her up and onto her tiptoes and settled her thighs either side of my head as I buried my face inside her. I didn’t really know if she was loud or quiet since all sound was cut off but for what came to me through her body. The rapid thud of her heartbeat as I licked at her and the sound of her moans vibrating from her chest as I took her clit gently between my fangs. The points pressed into the sensitive skin either side, before I sucked it into my mouth with long, slow swallows. I was barely holding the beast back as I gorged myself on her, pushing my fingers inside and finding the spot that would force her to come alive.

I would hit it over and over, with every one of my pearls, and her pleasure would increase with each one. Maybe she’d be unable to hold back her screams, all self-consciousness gone as she swept up in pure sensation. She was able to

conjure magic with her hands, draw a gargoyle's soul back to his body, but somehow it didn't seem as magical as this: finding the one person in the world you shared a soul with for eternity. And when I finally pulled away from her, hoisting her up against the wall, her lids heavy with pleasure and exhaustion, I told her that.

"There'll never be another woman for me but you," I said, as my cock grazed her swollen opening. She wriggled around, then let out a frustrated huff when she couldn't get me to pierce her. "You're all that I want, all that I need. The sun could stay down, the moon never rising, and I'd come back from stone every night just to be with you. Tell me you feel the same."

"Yes..." There was an impatient note to her voice, her brows creasing before she realised I'd gone perfectly still. Those pretty hazel eyes flicked right open and met mine, seeing my expression with at first wonder, then something far more profound. "Yes, Carrick, I choose you, today and every day forward. You're mine and I'm yours."

"That's what I needed to hear."

I leaned her hard against the wall, cradling her with one arm while the other shifted my cock head against her, then speared in. Several pearls popped in all at once, shredding my control, like my nails did to the antique wallpaper. I'd apologise for that in the morning, but gods above... My fangs ground together at that sudden exquisite feeling, like it was dragging my seed from my balls, right as I was trying to shove it back down.

"Mine..." I gasped as I delved deeper, her cunt flaring out over the next pearl, then as I drew back before pushing in the next. "Mine..."

I fed another and another inside her, and it was like she was sucking me in deeper rather than me pushing them in. My head lifted up and I held her gaze as another slipped in, catching the little O her mouth made, then her deep, heartfelt sigh as I shifted back and forth, milking that little spot inside her for all it was worth.



“Mine.” I said it far more confidently, because Luther Whiteley himself could’ve dragged himself back from the gates of hell and lurched into this room, and he wouldn’t have stopped me from my work. This was my life’s purpose, pleasing Jade. “Mine, Jade,” I growled, the beast slipping free of his collar. “Mine!

“Yours...”

She grasped my jaw in her hand and kissed me hard, right before bearing down in a way that had both of us groaning. The last pearl was always the hardest, stretching her to her limits.

And rewarding her for all of her efforts.

“Oh fuck!”

Her voice echoed around the room, an unabashed declaration of her joy for all around to hear. I laughed at it, feeling something loosen inside me. I couldn’t pull back too far, press too hard, but I moved as hard and fast as I dared. We were racing now, the feeling like skimming across the surface of the earth with just enough a current under my wings to keep us afloat, watching the miles tick by in a dizzying blur. Harder, faster, my instincts screamed. Make her feel like a queen!

And then she raked her nails across my shoulders and sank her teeth into the muscle to stifle her cry of pleasure. My fangs snapped down in response, burying them in her flesh, marking her indelibly as mine, for now and forever. Jade was my mate in reality now, as well as in my heart. Tears pricked my eyes as my seed jetted into her, because this went beyond mere fucking. I was emptying everything I had into her, in the hope she’d give it back.

“Carrick...” she gasped, kissing me blindly and that’s when I knew she had. “Love. I love—”

“I know.”

And then there were no words, only messy, feral, monster kisses. The sort that made your lips sting for hours after, reminding you of what you’d done. I lowered her onto the bed,

pushing back her hair so I could stare at her as she snuggled into my chest.

“My mate...” I said, barely audible now.

“Yours...” she agreed.

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## Chapter 69

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*Jade*

The day Daniel came home from the hospital, I went out on a date. It wasn't planned that way, but that's the way it worked out. Harry, Mellors and I had been taking shifts at the hospital, but the staff had remained vague about when he would finally be discharged.

"It'd better be soon," he'd said, sitting up in bed and pulling at his hair. "I look like Cookie Monster's ugly little brother right now."

"Soon," I said, marvelling over the fact this was a regular thing now. Sitting up, I meant. The first time he'd done it, I'd nearly fallen out of my chair and it'd just made him laugh weakly, then he'd collapsed back into bed, gasping. But each day he got stronger, the stroppier he got until...

"Oh my god, I don't need a wheelchair ride to the front door."

That peevish voice had my ears pricking up as I lay on the couch, watching reruns. A clunk on the front door, then a twist at the doorknob, had me leaping over the back of the couch and wrenching it open.

“Daniel...?!” I gasped, standing in the doorway, looking down at him.

“Surprise, bitch!” he said weakly, doing jazz hands before shooting Mellors and Harry a dark look. “I’d intended to make a better entrance than this, but my lovely assistants here seem to be having difficulties navigating this wheelchair.”

“You’re the one that took over and collided with the front door,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, and you’ll find I like to top from the bottom,” Daniel announced imperiously, before he grabbed the armrests of the wheelchair and pushed himself to his feet. “Look Ma, no hands.”

“Jesus, Daniel!” I yelped, rushing forward, only able to see the wobble in his legs, but he just cackled and pushed me away. He took a step, then another, getting faster and faster until he came to a stop, chest heaving.

“See. I’m not that much of a fucking invalid. I can walk, talk, shit, shave—”

“Be very high maintenance and difficult...” Mellors added, *sotto voce*.

“I prefer ‘discriminating in my tastes and not afraid to ask for what I want’,” Daniel informed him. “You got me that therapist that keeps telling me to be upfront with people about what I want. And what I want is to hug my girl...”

I stepped in and held him tight, trying not to notice how thin he was now. He’d never been the biggest guy, but there was a slippery kind of energy about him, kinda like a ferret.

“Stop worrying, Mother,” he said under his breath. “I’ll be lifting weights and making gains in weeks.”

“Months, I believe the physical therapist said,” Mellors added mildly.

“We’ll get bikini ready bodies for summer together,” Daniel assured me, “but right now, I need to go to bed.”

“Of course,” I said. “So we thought a bedroom downstairs —”

“But that doesn’t have the massive flat screen with surround sound speakers that will block out the most vigorous of gargoyle bonking sounds,” Daniel informed me, taking a shaky step forward, then wobbling theatrically. He smirked as Mellors and Harry leapt forward, catching him between them. “Take me to bed, boys, or lose me forever.”

“We already thought that had happened,” Harry said, stiffly. “Don’t put me through that again.”

“No...” Daniel stroked his face then, his usual manic demeanour settling for just a moment. “Perhaps not. I thought I knew what I wanted, but that put me in fucking hospital for weeks. Maybe it’s time to try something else this time.”

“Or to incorporate what you found thrilling about your past arrangement with Big in a safer and more considered environment.”

Mellors was a picture of perfect composure, but both my mouth and Daniel’s dropped open when we processed what he was saying.

“Oh my god, Lawyer Daddy, why are you so hot right now?” Daniel groaned.

“So...” My eyes flicked from one of them to the other, suddenly feeling out of place in my own home. “Did you want to watch TV or...?”

“I will, in my room,” Daniel informed me, “because you have a date.”

“What?”

The answer came as soon as night fell and a familiar thump let me know that the gargoyles had awoken. I felt stupidly nervous, reading the same line over and over in my book as I waited for them to come down the stairs.

“My mate,” Graven said as a greeting, leaning down to kiss my lips, Seneca and Carrick following suit, but they didn’t do their usual thing and lounge around me, working out what we would do for the evening. Wulfstan stepped forward with a bunch of roses in his arms. I was pretty sure they were

the ones Harry prized particularly for their unusual combination of snowy white petals with red edges.

“Milady...” he said, shifting the bundle in his arms, “these are for you.”

“Wulfstan, they’re beautiful.”

I got to my feet and collected the roses from him, only to find a wicker basket hanging from his arm, under the mass of rose stems.

“I... ah... found a place not far from here that’s quite pretty. I thought you might like to...” He hefted the basket in his arm.

“Go for a picnic?” My stomach rumbled as I smelled the delicious food within and I slapped my hand over it. “Oh my god, yes, that’d be amazing.”

“Well, then...”

Gargoyles didn’t blush, so much as their grey cheeks stained somewhat darker, which was what happened to him. The biggest gargoyle I’d ever seen blushed as he offered me his arm. I took it, knowing Daniel was safe upstairs, ordering his minions around and knowing they were content to jump to fulfil his commands and keep him happy, and because... sometimes when an unexpected opportunity comes up, you don’t question it, you just let yourself be happy.

Wulfstan led me outside and then wrapped his arm around my waist. I only let out the tiniest little squeak as he launched us into the air, his massive wings taking us above the house in seconds. We flew up, up and away from it all and into the night.

“So where are we going?” I asked.

“Somewhere special,” he informed me, very confidently. “You’ll see.”

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# Chapter 70

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## *Wulfstan*

My mother had told me that I'd know my fated mate, because I'd feel like I'd known her in another life, and as I flew us to the field the other gargoyles had told me about, that was exactly what I felt. Like I'd held Lady Jade in my arms, that her body had pressed tight against mine.

It hadn't after that first night. I had withdrawn when the other gargoyles indulged in their marital duties with our mate, because she had already accepted their mating bites, but I... I was left with feeling like I lived with an echo inside me, one that rang with her name, over and over in the hollow within.

But that didn't make sense. I felt full, not empty whenever I was near her. Full to overflowing. Like at any moment all that I felt would come rushing out and splash all over...

I cleared my throat as we started to spiral down. The moon wasn't fully up yet and there was the tiniest amount of reflected sunlight making the broad details of the field apparent to the naked eye. We landed in a field of flowers, and Jade sighed.

“Wow, Wulf, this is beautiful!”

I liked it when she shortened my name. Wulfstan was the warrior that fought atop his master's parapets, but Wulf... He was the secret side of myself that was tender and soft, and only dared to come out when I was around her. I dropped the basket to the ground and took her hands in mine.

"Not more beautiful than you."

This world was confusing, bewildering in its shift in technology. The others taught me something new every day to help me to become accustomed to it, but... That men nowadays were so blind that they weren't beating down the Lady Jade's door to recite odes to her beauty said to me that socially we had taken a step backwards. It didn't matter, for their loss was my gain. I lifted my hand to caress her cheek, but she was so small and fragile my fingers curled instinctively away. Jade didn't allow for that. She smiled and pulled my hand close, nestling her cheek into my palm.

My mother hadn't told me that the feel of my mate's touch would be like when a bolt of lightning struck my stone body as I slept, like that electric touch burning through me before going to ground in the earth. That I would want to memorise every tiny moment like this. My memories always felt like they were slipping away from me.

Sometimes I walked the halls of The Eyrie, and I saw things out of the corner of my eyes. People dancing, bands playing wild music, men and women rutting like animals while I... I'd shaken the feeling off several times before I spoke to Graven about it.

"You know how our souls are bound to our fated mates?" he'd said. I'd nodded. "If we don't find her in this life, we will in the next. And you..." There was something very focused and yet complex in Graven's gaze as he stared at me. "You were a great warrior and you fought to protect the house and Lady Jade from a monster who threatened to destroy us all."

"I... died?"

There was this great yawning gap between Scotland and here, where hundreds of years must've passed. I'd assumed I'd just sunk into the Great Sleep, unawakened all that time. It



happened sometimes, when no one with the touch inherited the castle, but... Graven had nodded slowly.

“For her,” he said earnestly. “You died for Jade and for that...” He offered me his hand and I took it, clasping it tight as brothers in stone should. “For that I will always be grateful. Whatever you decide, brother, I will do everything I can to support you.”

“Then help me with this,” I said. “I do not have the skills for wooing a woman of this world. How might I show the Lady Jade the depth of my feelings? You all seem at ease in her company, where I—”

“Want dating advice, Wulf?” Carrick said, landing beside us with a grin. “I can help out.”

“Help with the rutting part, you mean,” Seneca muttered, giving him a shove. “Pretty much whatever he says, do the opposite.”

“Like you’d know, fledgling. Our mate only slept with you because you’d never known the touch of a woman.”

“Enough,” Graven growled.

“So instead I should’ve whored myself out, like you?” Seneca shot back.

“Enough!”

Quiet fell over the roof of the house at Graven’s roar, and the male turned to me.

“Jade doesn’t need jewels or trinkets or pretty flowers. She is a wealthy woman, so she can get all of those things for herself. What she hasn’t had nearly enough of is males worthy of her making her the centre of attention. Make her feel special, Wulfstan. That’s the key.”

“If I was back in Scotland, I’d take her flying over the tors, to go diving in an ice-cold loch and then I’d build a fire and cook her a nice fat salmon for her dinner,” I said, mentioning the things my lord had done to win his lady.

“Perhaps not that,” Carrick said, but then he poked a claw in the air. “But a field...” he turned to the others. “Remember

that place Master Ashley took us to?”

“What, the...?” Seneca smiled slowly and then nodded. “Yes, that place is beautiful.”

“Where is this place?” I demanded. “Will I need to fly over several days and set my lady up at inns on the way?”

“Not so far,” Graven assured me. “In a field just beyond the city, up in the hills.” He consulted the sky. “And we’re at just the right time of the year for it too.”

“So, where are we?” Jade asked me now, looking around the field. The rhythmic creak of insects I didn’t know provided background music to what was about to happen.

“Just a field,” I said, feigning innocence. I plucked the picnic blanket from the basket and flicked it out over the grass. I’d practised the move many times before this and was pleased when it fell in a neat square. “Milady.”

She curtsied prettily and allowed herself to be escorted over, and I dug a small pillow out from the basket and placed it behind her back. Seneca and Carrick had squabbled over what to add to the basket, but I saw that we had wine, cheese and bread, which was the makings of any good feast. I arranged the food across the blanket and then settled down across from her.

“A drink, perhaps?”

I held out the bottle for her to approve the label and her eyebrows shot up.

“A Jim Barry The Florita Riesling?”

“This is a good drop?” I asked.

“It’s about eighty bucks a bottle, so yeah,” she said with a smile.

Modern corkscrews were fiddly, finicky things, so I’d been forced to practise using them too on cheap bottles of wine. I’d broken far too many until I was hissing with frustration, launching into a rant about the fact we used to smash the necks off our bottles, post-battle, back in my time.

“Yes, and you risked swallowing slivers of glass,” Graven had informed me. “Try again.”

But I managed to pull the cork free with a satisfying pop, then poured my lady a glass of a wine that smelled of grapes, the sun beating on granite stones and just a hint of the blossoms that sprouted on peach trees. I offered it to her with a flourish, unable to let a full breath out until she took it.

“God, this is so good...” she sighed, and that gave me hope. The way the lines of her body softened as she relaxed back against the cushion, her eyes heavily hooded as she gazed up at the night sky. Yes, that was the way I wanted her, right before I asked this.

“Did you know me before?” She paused, mid-sip, peering at me over the top of the glass. I frowned slightly, worried that she might take offence, but I looked steadily into her eyes. “Did you?”

“Yes,” she said finally, setting the glass down. “I did.”

“What was I like?”

I looked down, partially not wanting to know the answer, fearing the ideas she must’ve already had of me. Perhaps I’d been weak. Maybe I’d made a bloody arse of myself—

“You were very brave.” She sat up, then her hand came to rest on my arm and she gave it a squeeze. But a lady might do such to her brother, so I pushed on.

“And did you...” I lifted my eyes up to look into hers. “Did you care for me?”

She let out a sigh at that, and I feared I had my answer, and not the one I had hoped for. I went to pull away, but she held me fast.

“I didn’t get a chance to develop much of a relationship with you,” she said, “but...” A world could be held in that one word, all the hope and all the horror hovering there, ready to be unleashed. “But yeah, I cared for you.” She moved then to press herself into my side and my arm went around her, my wing spreading outwards to shield her from the night air. “You

died and I... I wanted to get to know you better, so I brought you back from the dead.”

“So that’s how it went...”

I let out a sigh, one that seemed to come and keep on coming until I was properly deflated, but not in mood. I could soften then, let her mould my body to hers, but that wasn’t enough. She let out a little yelp as I rolled her onto her back, my body pressed against hers, my wing keeping her from scrambling free. But she didn’t make a move, just stayed gazing up at me like I had hung the moon, when I now knew that it was she who had.

“So you liked me so much you couldn’t stand to see me dead?” I couldn’t keep the note of self-congratulation from my voice.

“Mm hmm...” Her amused nod said it all.

“Something you wanted more of then, lassie?” I asked with a grin, but she wiped that off my face as she tugged my head down.

Because then her lips brushed against mine and I’d die a million times over if I got to re-experience this. Her kiss became mine, because I couldn’t just let her take what she wanted, because I needed her so damn much. I slid my thigh between hers and felt her dress ruck up, my knee getting closer and closer to her hot little core. She sighed when I stroked her, though I’m not sure if she knew it, and again when I kissed her throat. The blasted insects’ song grew louder and louder, half muffling the sounds of our pleasure, right before it happened.

“Wulf...”

I groaned her name back, too caught up in her to remember why I’d brought her here, but Jade clawed at my back, then forced my head up so I could see it.

“Oh my god...” she said, sitting up straight to look at the night turned bright.

When I’d first seen neon lights, I had thought they were fireflies. How else could so many lights stain the sky? Even

out here in this field, I could see the far-off glow of the city, but it wasn't close enough to compete with this.

“What are...?” Jade rolled to her feet, her eyes scanning the whole field. The trees took shape as the fireflies went on across the field, as each blade of long grass started to glow, as the world was outlined by randy little bugs and she... Her mouth fell open before she sighed. “It's beautiful.”

“They're trying to find their mates,” I blurted out.

“What?”

I relished the moment when her eyes turned to meet mine.

“That's why they're lighting up like a million little candles at once. The males, they glow because—”

“They want the females to notice them.”

Her brow creased then, her happy expression fading a little, and I wondered if I'd said the wrong thing. It seemed terribly forward, but my new flockmates assured me I could be plain with Jade.

“They only mate once a year and so they do this dance, lighting up the sky, frantically signalling to the females to come hither.” I held out my hands and gestured her closer, my eyes widening when she came. “And then...”

“And then what?” she asked, smiling a little now, climbing onto my lap, her hands cradling my face in hers.

I nuzzled into her palms without even thinking, because that's the way it was for me. Every day was torture since the moment I'd awoken here in the kingdom of Australia, because when I was awake, I ached for my mate, to touch her, get close to her, to hear her voice, to breathe in her scent, but most of all.... My hand went up and grabbed the back of her dress, my wings snapping closed around us. To touch her. She was mine, I knew that deep in my heart, as sure as its next beat. I needed her like the air in my lungs, the current under my wings. I wanted to say that, tell her that, scream it to the heavens, but instead I blurted out something quite different.

“They fuck and then the males die.”

Gods, what the bloody hell was that?

Her face fell for a second, her expression overtaken by that shadow that seemed to fall over everyone's faces whenever whatever happened before was alluded to, but I couldn't bear for it to exist now. I clasped her hands in mine and then pressed a kiss to the knuckles.

"But what a way to go." I parted my wings slightly, so we caught a thin glimpse of the world around us. "To strive with everything you have to find the other half of your soul. But what if you didn't have to die from it?" I asked, my voice growing stronger, my words coming faster. "What if you didn't have to die at all? What if you lived for year after year, blinking your little light on and off, letting the girl firefly know that she was the one for you."

"Are you trying to tell me something, Wulfstan?" Jade asked and I swear I heard the smile in her voice.

I let out a big noisy sigh and then shook my head.

"I'll do whatever it takes to make you see that I'm the male for you, lass," I said. "I'll wait until you're ready, but consider this my firefly dance. Wine, food, or jewels, a brace of fine hunting hounds and the viscera of your enemy. Whatever you want, I'll lay it at your feet."

"Just like that, huh?" she said, reaching up and touching my lips. Oh, I liked that very much, and pressed a kiss to her fingertips. "And what if all I want is you, Wulf? I can buy my own wine, food and jewels, and Mellors would have a fit if I brought a dog home, but—"

I flipped her over for certain now, covering her body with mine. I had to be careful to keep my weight on my knees either side of her thighs, because she was such a tiny little thing. But she was mine, that was as sure as the sweetness of her scent filling my nose.

"You..." Her hands glowed, just like a firefly as she reached for me. "I used what power I had to bring you back to me, because you're mine, Wulfstan."

"Wulf..." I corrected, kissing her lips.

“Wulf? You prefer Wulf?” she asked, with a slow smile on her face.

“I prefer ‘Wulf, you’re the biggest and strongest of all of my mates and I can’t wait to bed you’ if I’m being honest,” I muttered.

“Wulf, you’re the biggest and strongest of all my mates—” she recited diligently, a little smile on her face, right before I kissed it off.

She squirmed like a fish on a line when my lips touched each of the mating marks the others had left behind, panting and raking her nails across my shoulders until I was forced to stop. I’d leave a nice big one at the top, where the whole world could see that she was mine. When it was my turn, when she accepted what I knew to be true. That we were meant to be together, in this life and the next. But for now, I’d enjoy this one. More kisses in the crook of her neck, where that pretty white floral scent of hers filled my nose, making me never want to breathe in plain air again. But when my claws moved instinctively to the neckline of that little frock of hers I stopped.

“Now?” I asked, pulling back, making clear that she was shrouded from the world’s eyes by the sweep of my wings. I tested the scooped neckline with my talon, but I wouldn’t go a step further until she said yes. Her answer came from a pair of clever fingers that undid the buttons of her dress one by one, making my claws itch with the need to tear them free. Instead I nipped a couple of talons off, just in case, but as she shimmied the dress down off her shoulders, I froze with a finger in my mouth.

“Are you—?” Her brow creased in worry when I stayed unmoving, and her scent soured.

“Give a man a chance, lass,” I ground out. “I’ve lived a long time, seen many a thing before, but you...” I wished I was like the bards that used to play at my lord’s court, singing pretty songs to pretty ladies and making them blush. But I was stone by day and warrior by night, so my words were clumsy at best. “The moon brings me back to flesh every night, but

you shine far brighter, so it'll be you that brings me to life going forward." She let out a surprised little gasp at that, right before I ran several claws down the slope of her shoulder. "I'm often going to be struck dumb in your presence, so if that's a problem—"

She cut off my words as she tugged me down and then all words deserted me. I didn't need them when I had her: her lips parting, her tongue tangling with mine, one kiss blending into another, then another, our hunger for each other rising each time we got a taste. A taste of heaven, that's what I was convinced this was. Maybe I had died and I'd found the Christian afterlife, because I'd never want to spend eternity anywhere else but here. The trouble was, now that she'd opened that dress of hers, I couldn't neglect the gift she'd given me, so I was forced to pull away from that hot little mouth I was dying to fill with so many things, and let my lips explore more.

Her skin was so soft, that was something I marvelled at constantly. It always looked soft, clear, perfect, every time I sneaked a look at her. As she moved about the kitchen, or walked with us in the gardens, or cosied up to the four of us on that capacious couch. Then that blue-haired devil, Daniel, would catch me at it and start cackling. Jade would ask what was up and he'd make up some ridiculous excuse, but none of them were here now. So they didn't get to laugh as I kissed every inch of the swell of one creamy breast, her little pants of pleasure growing more and more breathy by the second, right before I focussed on the main event. A proud little nipple, jutting into the air, pulled tight from the cold and aching, I was sure, for this.

"Fuck...!"

Her yelp echoed out across the field, letting the fireflies know it wasn't just them that was finding their mate tonight. I focussed on my job, not theirs. Stretching out all those sensitive nerve endings with my mouth, until her nails dug into my shoulders, then sucking her in. Long, hard demanding pulls, to make clear what she was getting herself into. I was the biggest of all of her mates, something I took no undue



pride in, and she'd have her hands full with me. Perhaps not tonight, but...

My tail had a mind of its own, wrapping itself around her ankle and then pulling her legs open, before sliding up her thigh, the sensory information it gained forcing my cock to twitch. My pearls felt like balls of molten hot iron, burning into my skin with the ache pulsing there, but I'd bear it, all it, to hear her like this. To feel her hands roaming wild across my shoulders as she made sharp little sounds of pleasure that I'd store away in my mind and replay when the stone took me.

“Wulf...” she moaned. “Wulf...”

I let that nipple pop free and then turned my attention to the other, my tail gripping her tighter as her hips bucked up off the blanket. My hands slid underneath her, scooping her up like she was a little doll and then brought her to my mouth.

I felt like a wolf gorging on his kill; my fangs aching to leave a mark. I wanted to mark her up, make clear who she belonged to. Instead I focussed on making that clear with everything I did, sucking those nipples until they were aching, as my tail slid higher.

The first flick of the tip of it against her sodden drawers? It nearly had me undone; seed seeping free of my cock. She was drenched, for me. But my tail moved quickly, sliding back and forth along the opening of her underwear, then spearing under them. Hot, wet, slick as velvet. At the feel of her, I pulled my mouth free to roar.

Gods, what would it feel like, to spear myself into all that hot sweetness? I could only consider that for a second or I would lose all control. Instead, I stared down at my mate as my tail slid between her warm, wet folds, setting up a nice rhythm that her hips matched, right before it speared inside her.

“Oh fuck...”

She was close, I could tell, from the rosy glow of her whole décolletage, to the way she writhed in my grip. Her

movements were getting restless as she twitched and her hands clawed at the air, reaching for me.

“Wulf...”

“Right here, lass,” I said, and that’s when I brought her up to my mouth like she was a cup I’d drink deep from and my tongue flicked out to lap at her sweet cunt.

She had a pearl of her own, I’d learned that from my mother when I was old enough to hear that without dissolving into boyish giggles, and I found it now, lavishing on it all the attention my own pearls ached for. I traced its shape, flicked at the sensitive nub and then laved the flat of my tongue over the whole thing until she started to scream.

“Oh god, Wulf, just like that. Just like that!” But her hips bucked restlessly, forcing the head of my tail in deeper. I made it curl up to rake across that sensitive spot inside her, but it wasn’t enough. Her eyes snapped open and she stared at me then. “Wulf, I need you.”

“You...”

Words failed me, because my instincts made clear what I needed to do. As I lowered her down, her arms went around my shoulders, clinging to me like a limpet before whispering the words I needed to hear.

“Now, Wulf. Make me yours now.”

My fangs locked together, my eyes shutting out the firefly splendour before me and I wondered if the little insect bastards felt the way I did. A moment of reverence for what was about to happen, right before her thighs came to rest either side of mine.

“Well, then, you best take everything you need, milady.”

Her eyes whipped up and met mine with a sparkle that threatened to undo me, right before I felt the brush of her wet little cunt against the head of my cock.

Gods, there could be nothing in the world as perfect.

She had to fight to take the head of me, her hips moving in teasing little pulses that threatened my control, but I couldn’t

just shove her on the ground and ram myself deep. I'd hurt her. Instead my hands gripped that plush arse of hers, helping her ease me deeper and deeper. I knew when she reached the first pearl, both from that pressure that forced out the heaviest burst of pleasure I'd ever felt, but because of her sharp little gasp, then a moan that sounded like half a growl, right before it popped in.

"That's one..." I rasped out. "You're doing so well, love."

"Already so full..." Her voice was a heady mix of trepidation and hunger and her brows creased as she looked up at me. "What if I can't take all of you?"

"You have all of me." I stared into her eyes and saw the moon reflected in them. "Can't you see that? No matter what you take or don't take into your body, I'm yours, Jade." I placed her hand over my heart. "This beats for you, lass, and only you. You brought me back from the dead for just this purpose. To serve you, protect you..." My voice broke. "To love you."

That came out as way more of a question than I meant it too, but she tightened her grip on my neck, pressing her face into my neck and holding me tight as she said the one thing I needed to hear.

"I love you too. My heart was torn out of my chest when I saw you die, and every night I'm terrified you won't wake again. That somehow you'll be snatched away from me, that all of it will. I don't know how I deserve this—"

"Yes, you do." I stroked her back. "Because the universe knows what I know. You deserve all of the happiness, lass, in this world and the next. Now..." I bucked upwards, feeling her limits, then slipping another pearl inside, to be met by her moans of pleasure. "Take my cock like a good girl, because I'm going to give you all the proof a gargoyle can that I'm not going anywhere."

And she did, in long, slow, aching strokes, one pearl, then another wedging inside her. My blunted claw rubbed at her little pearl, making her wetter, softer, opening up to let me in, until finally I was seated as deep as I was going to go.

“Wulf, I can’t...” she whined, needy now. All of this buildup was beginning to wear on her and I knew the feeling. The need to take her, to mate her and make her mine was riding me hard.

“There’s no more to do, lass,” I said, “Except for this.”

And then I began to move in the long, slow rocking pace of a horse at a walk. Her whole body seemed to ease at that, growing softer and more languid. Her mouth formed a small O, and coos of pleasure filling the night air as I picked up the pace.

“Fuck, yes...”

Her voice was the hiss of the breeze in my ears, her hands gripping at my shoulders as she began to move in earnest, setting her own pace. Faster, harder, and I liked that a lot, my lips curving into a wild grin. I feared I’d miss the heat of battle in this strange new kingdom. People seemed to solve their problems in the courts, not on the practice grounds, but now, I knew I wouldn’t. Not when I had this. That same blood-stirring, heart-pumping, wild, fierce feeling that made my whole body pulse with pleasure.

As did hers.

I fought to keep control, right as she lost hers, her bobbing hips shuddering, growing faster and more ragged in their pace.

“Wulf, I’m going... I’m going...”

“I know, lass,” I whispered in her ear. “Let’s do it together. We’ll make that jump, you and I. What do you say?”

“Yes!”

Some moments are seared on your heart forever and this was one of them. The moment her cunt clamped down, shoving all of my pearls deep against my shaft, causing the most perfect of pleasures, right before I buried my fangs in her neck.

Her blood in my mouth, her cunt wringing the seed out of my balls, the sounds of the insects screaming their alien song of mating frenzy... it was perfect; she was perfect. I held her

tight as our bodies shuddered, trying to process what had happened until the aftershocks fell away and all there was left was us. Her eyes were wild when they flicked open, staring into mine for a moment before she grinned up at me.

“You’re mine, now.”

“I always was, Lady Jade,” I said, stroking her hair back from her face. “This just makes it clear to the rest of the world. Anyone who sees your neck will know it now. This woman belongs to the warrior Wulfstan.”

“OK, so the whole Viking warrior thing is totally hot,” she said. “I am going to need to see you in armour and with a sword or an axe or something.”

“Anything you want,” I said as I laid her down against me on the rug. “We’ve got a whole lifetime ahead of us now.” She let out a sigh as she snuggled into my chest. “There’s nothing stopping us from fulfilling all of your dreams.”

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# Chapter 71

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*Jade*

Coming downstairs the next morning to the smell of coffee brewing, breakfast cooking and wearing the marks of all of my fated mates... Yeah, if you'd told me that was possible months ago, I wouldn't have believed you, because I didn't believe that this kind of bliss was possible. Yet here I was. But as I rounded the corner to walk into the kitchen, a smug smile on my face, I caught something else happening. Harry was snuggled up to Daniel, the two of them enjoying a little moment as a shirtless Mellors watched the two of them with a kind of possessive satisfaction that felt way too intimate for me to witness. I cleared my throat quickly, not wanting to hang in the doorway like a perv, only for everyone to look up quickly.

“Well, well, look what the gargoyle dragged in,” Daniel said, pushing Harry gently away before sauntering forward. Standing there in just his PJ pants, I could see he was still way too thin, but he was getting there. “And what do I spy here?” He winked theatrically. “Is that another bite mark on your neck? Looks like someone claimed the last one of her fated mates last night.”

He dragged me over to the kitchen table and pulled out two chairs.

“So tell me all the deets. Was it freaking amazing? The four of them squabbled over that picnic basket like they were preparing a meal for the Queen of Sheba. Like, serious conversations were being had about the quality of the food. Salami or no salami, because ew, garlic breath.” His eyes lit up. “Speaking of smallgoods, was homeboy packing or what? Because just because he’s big, doesn’t mean he’s ‘big’, if you know what I mean.”

“Daniel...” Mellors said, but rather than tell him off, he put a porcelain cup before my bestie, then one in front of me.

“Tea? I was going to have a coffee—” Daniel said, poking the milky liquid with a spoon.

“One, it looks like the two of you are going to spend the morning ‘spilling the tea’,” Mellors said, sounding about ten years older than he was. “So I thought this might be the beverage of choice. And, two, I’m not sure if caffeine is what you need right now.”

“But the therapist you made me see said that coffee would probably help calm me down and help me maintain an optimal mood,” Daniel said with a smirk. “So, make with the java.”

“Stimulation is what will help with your mood,” Mellors corrected, tipping his chin his way. “And I think between the three of us, we can find plenty of ways to keep you... stimulated until you have an afternoon nap.” Daniel just blinked, staring into the lawyer’s eyes, then letting out a little moan as Mellors rubbed his thumb against Daniel’s bottom lip. “Have a chat to Jade and eat all of the breakfast Harry prepares. I’ve got a little work I must get done this morning, but I’ll be back to see to you in an hour.”

And with that, Mellors sauntered out of the room.

“Um... why are we talking about the dick I’m getting, when you are apparently in a throuple?” I hissed at him, then looked over at Harry, catching the moment he smiled.

“Harem,” Daniel corrected, with a smug grin. “Mellors seems to think my ‘pathological need for novelty’ could be solved by a less conventional relationship pairing.” I could almost hear the lawyer’s tone as Daniel repeated his words.

“A harem? But that means more than two... Who’s the third?”

“Silenus.” Daniel sighed as he leaned into his hand. “Man, people say that they’re as horny as a goat, but they have no idea what that actually means, because that guy has stamina for days...” He took a sip of his tea. “We’re taking things slow for now, but when I’m back to full speed, he says he can bring players in and out of the roster to keep my interest piqued.”

“As long as it’s with us.” Harry put a plate brimming with food in front of Daniel, then placed a kiss on his forehead, before asking me what I’d like. I just stared openly. “We’re happy for Daniel to explore whatever he needs to,” Harry explained, his hand spanning Daniel’s shoulders possessively. “But we’re his safety net. We keep him from flying too close to the sun.”

“Which is actually way hotter than I thought it’d ever be,” Daniel muttered, his cheeks flushing.

“Danny, are you settling down?” I asked him.

“Shut. Up.” He pegged a bread roll at me, but I caught it mid air.

“Are you in a relationship?”

“Do not say the R word to me, Jade Barlow, or so help me...” He rose to his feet and so did I.

“Are you in—?”

“Do not start a food fight in here!” Harry barked, probably because we were looking around for ammunition for the fight that was about to happen.

“Don’t say that word!” Daniel snapped.

“Umm...some kind of loose collective, bound together by affection, but not hetero rules about monogamy and that



bullshit, where everyone works to get their needs met, and is flexible in how to achieve that?" I said, finally.

All the fire seemed to go out of Daniel, his hands dropping down by his sides.

"Yeah." He nodded sharply. "I think I am."

"Then I'm fucking happy for you."

"OK, bring it in." His arms went out and he gestured me forward. "Let's hug this shit out, bitch. Did we both just get everything we've ever wanted?"

"I think we did." I squeezed him tight, but not too tight. He was still fragile. "And I think..." My breath caught in my chest as that feeling of happiness just seemed to grow exponentially. "I think I know what I want to do with all of this power and money. I want other people, other gargoyles, to find this kind of happiness."

"Oh my god, count me in." He pulled back and offered me a fist to bump. "We're gonna form a Scooby Gang?"

"Scooby Gang it is," I agreed and tapped my knuckles against his.

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# What's next?

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I have another gargoyle cover, so if readers are into it, I can do more. Lemme know if you're keen!