



LILLIAN LARK

A LOVE BATHHOUSE MONSTER ROMANCE

HOARDED
BY THE
DRAGON

HOARDED
BY THE
DRAGON



LILLIAN LARK

Hoarded by the Dragon

Copyright © 2023 by Lillian Lark. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Editor: Ellie, My Brother's Editor

Proofreader: My Brother's Editor

Cover Artist: Lillian Lark

✿ Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

Content Warnings

1. Katarina
2. Kalos
3. Katarina
4. Katarina
5. Katarina
6. Katarina
7. Kalos
8. Katarina
9. Katarina
10. Kalos
11. Katarina
12. Kalos
13. Katarina
14. Katarina
15. Kalos
16. Katarina
17. Kalos
18. Katarina
19. Kalos
20. Katarina
21. Kalos
22. Katarina
23. Katarina
24. Kalos
25. Katarina
26. Kalos
27. Katarina
28. Kalos
29. Katarina
30. Kalos
31. Katarina
32. Kalos

33. [Katarina](#)

34. [Kalos](#)

35. [Katarina](#)

36. [Katarina](#)

37. [Katarina](#)

38. [Kalos](#)

39. [Katarina](#)

40. [Kalos](#)

41. [Katarina](#)

42. [Katarina](#)

43. [Kalos](#)

44. [Katarina](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Note From the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

*To all the badasses who became badasses with babies...
and who read books where the guy has two cocks,
I see you.*

CONTENT WARNINGS

Dear Reader,

Hoarded by the Dragon includes accidental pregnancy, debilitating pregnancy symptoms, struggles with self-worth, birth, pregnancy health scare, past loss of child and mate mentioned, and minor body negativity by side character.

As promised, he has two dicks.

Be kind to yourself,

L. Lark

KATARINA

I'M GOING to die today, and it's because of my amazing ass.

I wiggle my hips, but they don't budge from where they are stuck in the window. *Oh, this was so stupid.* In my defense, it wasn't my idea, but to my detriment... I still went along with it.

"Please, Katarina? They'll kill me if I can't deliver on this. It's a quick job, in and out. Only someone with your skills can do it." There were tears in Nemo's eyes. I'd never seen the imp who mentored me cry before.

Stupid stupid stupid, but Nemo had been the only one to support a no-name homeless witch teen. Yes, he did so by coaching me in cat burglary along with other skills that facilitated my life of crime, but he was there for me. And even though I've sworn off the life, how could I not help him this one time?

Even if he had made a passing comment about the added width of my hips as if I should have remained the size I was as a teenager. Probably because he had this window in mind.

But I still agreed.

That was before he'd told me who I was robbing, and even then, I was too determined to turn back.

And now my life is over. I'm stuck in a motherfucking dragon's window.

Breathe, Katarina. I coach myself to calm down and say a prayer to whoever is listening before trying again. The sill

scrapes against my hip bones, but the flesh of my body somehow shifts enough for me to slide in. I don't spend too much time gasping in relief and instead drop soundlessly into the room.

My gymnastic ability is a little rusty, but I've still got the touch.

And now to find this artifact. Moonlight cuts shapes on the floor and gives me enough light to navigate by without revealing too many other details. The space is large in a statement kind of way, high ceilings and sparse of furniture.

It feels empty, which bodes well for this job. I move silently anyway. The room I've dropped into looks to be a conservatory with a grand piano and a wall of windows.

Warding spells are interesting in how they function. Impenetrable most of the time, but loopholes exist. Glass is a challenging substance to ward and requires monthly recharging. The joint where glass meets the rest of a structure? Notorious for failure. A good ward master will place extra protections on those joints, but most still only focus on the ground floor.

Because even at weak points, the wards will hold against an intruder.

Unless the intruder is like me... and I've never heard of anyone else who can do what I can.

Usually, a job like this would require weeks of scoping out a location and checking each possible entry point, but luckily Nemo had done all the legwork required.

I orient myself and remember the blueprints. The left hallway is where I need to go. The lack of doors is both a pro and a con. I don't have to worry about creaking any open, but sound travels better and paranormal beings tend to have excellent hearing.

I make it to the gallery without getting lost. It's dark but filled with lit display cases. Each case holds something that is undoubtedly priceless. There are odd arrangements of pillows

around the room. The big kind that could double as beds. It's as if orgies take place here... and maybe they do.

The jewels in an intricate Fabergé egg wink at me from a display case, and I purposely look away. I've always had a weakness for beautiful craftsmanship. I check each case, keeping my steps as silent as possible and not stumbling over any of the illuminated treasures.

A medieval manuscript, a crown of jewels that looks familiar from my high school history class, a gold statue of what looks like a griffin, until—finally—a figurine made of crystal. The pink hue of it looks like rose quartz, but I'm sure it's the magical significance rather than the price of the material that determines the value.

Out of all the things I've ever risked my life for, this one almost looks ordinary. I lean in to squint at it, being sure to leave enough space between me and the glass case that I'll have to figure out how to open. The figurine is about as tall as my hand and feminine with exaggerated curves. A line of carved words in a language I don't recognize trails up the side. This is what Nemo needs?

Is it a devotional tool? An heirloom? Will the owner miss it?

The guilt that I've been sure to suppress starts to well, but I mercilessly push it down. This is about keeping Nemo safe.

I identify the latches at the bottom of the case just as *something* brushes against my ass.

I snap upright, flailing. Strong arms capture me against a hard body. A hand wraps around my throat and squeezes just enough to keep me from being able to scream. I can barely breathe.

I'm caught.

The growl at my ear causes a cascade of chills down my spine, freezing my gut.

“Awfully bold of you to try and steal from a dragon's hoard, *thief*,” he spits the last word.

Oh, fuck.

“By all rights, I should snap your neck.” The press of the speaker’s body has a sweat replacing the chill. Heat comes off him in waves. Do dragons really breathe fire?

I try to swallow but fail. My racing heart threatens to go over the edge, but the man holding me loosens his grip a small amount.

“You’re the dragon, I presume?” My voice is scratchy, but surprisingly stable. *Please let this just be a guard.* Anyone else other than the dragon that owns this house. But something about the presence of the man at my back removes all doubt. I still really hope it’s not him.

His snort kills that hope.

“We can work something out,” I say instead. Criminals evade capture not because they are smart, but because they can pivot. I may have forsaken the criminal life... but in my soul, I still am one. No matter how much I try to make amends.

“Why would I want to work something out with *you*?” His derision is heavy and biting.

“Because dead bodies are inconvenient?” I try.

“I could just eat you.”

My heart is ice, but for some strange reason, my body isn’t frozen in panic. The heat spreading through me and making me sweat is relaxing muscles that have very good reason to be tense. There are some other reactions lower down that I’m not thinking about right now.

“I think,” I whisper. “That I’d be terrible eating.”

His laugh is cruel, and something sharp drags against the sweating skin of my throat that feels distinctly like teeth.

“Maybe. And maybe not.”

Inappropriate sensations race over my skin. It only gets worse when he inhales my throat as if scenting me.

Why is he scenting me?

His body tenses and he pushes me sideways, away from him and out of reach of the figurine. The strength in that small motion leaves me sprawling on the marble floor before I bounce up into a standing position. I freeze when I come face-to-face with the man most only speak of in whispers. The man that people say is a dragon.

Kalos. I don't know if it's a first name or a last name, or if he is one of those one-name wonders in our world. The ones who are old enough and rich enough not to have to worry about the trappings of mortals. He's just as scary as I've heard.

And beautiful, in a terrifying way. Like how I'd imagine a fallen angel to look, if that angel had glittery black scales to accompany his cutting, light-colored eyes.

"An acrobat, are you? Is that how you got in here?" he asks like he doesn't expect answers.

I'm no stranger to adrenaline. My heart should be thundering in my ears now, my body preparing itself to run, but it's not.

My eyes take in the man in front of me like I'm at a buffet instead of on death row.

The robe he's wearing is black and silky and doesn't do enough to cover his body. He's mostly humanoid in appearance and the peak of masculine beauty with smooth skin and defined muscles. The glittering scales keep him from passing as a human. They cover talon-tipped hands and line the sides of his ethereal face, blending into his dark hairline.

I swallow. The pounding of my heart is a full-body sensation; a drum roll as the heat that caught in my core builds even higher.

"How did you make it past the wards?" The tone of that question makes it clear he wants my answer and snaps me out of whatever trance he's putting me in.

Alarm is a distant sensation, and I dig deep for survival skills I know I have.

Can I make a run for it? Kalos must catch me glancing around for an exit because he makes a sound with his teeth

that has me freezing. A warning.

I shiver, my body drawing tight and easing in a confusing way.

“Sometimes... wards don’t work around me,” I admit.

He narrows his eyes. “Sometimes?”

I shrug. “When I walk through them.”

“You have the ability to just pass through them as you wish?” His voice is a smooth roll that I want to touch even as his eyes narrow on me.

I shrug again, and the movement draws fabric over sensitive skin. A whimper builds in my throat no matter how I try to focus.

What the fuck?

My eyes widen. “You’re doing something to me.”

The accusation would be silly since I’m the one violating his space, but the way my body wants to approach the predator in front of me is alarming. I can admire a sexy man as much as the next person, but it’s never gotten in the way of my focus.

I’ve never been unmercifully aroused by a random guy, dragon or not.

“It’s merely a side effect.” Kalos’s lip curls in a snarl. “Only a portion of what I’m suffering with.”

A portion of what he’s suffering with? The heat that cascaded off his body when it pressed against mine. The burn of his scowl as if both annoyed and... hungry.

The observation is a shining light on the other side of a tightrope.

This is how I get out of this alive.

“That must be painful,” I say, my mind running through scenarios, working through and discarding each one until there’s only one left on the list.

He scoffs. “It’s enough to drive a mortal mad.”

“What is it?” I ask, breathless. “Some sort of spell?”

Kalos's eyes go unfocused, but his attention is still heavy in my bones. "Merely a phantom pain from a previous life."

A phantom pain that makes me horny as hell?

Do dragons go into heat? I don't dare ask that question, but... I think we can make a deal after all.

"Would it be easier if someone helped you?" I ask.

His gaze sharpens on me, and the power behind it has me flinching.

"You think I'd want help from the likes of you?"

The words shouldn't cut as deep as they do, but I'm nothing if not durable.

Kalos continues, "You belong in a Council's holding facility. I doubt I'm the first being you've tried to steal from."

My body freezes now. "Don't do that."

Fear that isn't flavored with heat licks at my mind. I'd rather him eat me than be trapped behind bars. The Council that rules the paranormal world is not known for being kind to those who disturb the peace... or are unique. Nemo always warned me that people with rare abilities go missing. The best protection is secrecy, and being brought forth by the Council and charged is anything but secret.

Kalos stiffens at my tone, and I push on. "I think you're in pain... and you like my scent enough to not have killed me yet."

I let that sink in before getting to terms.

"I help you in exchange for what I want." I keep my tone light, not wanting to offend him.

"An exchange?" he asks, his eyes narrowing. I have his attention now. His attention and consideration.

I swallow. "You let me leave, no involving the Council... and I get the figurine."

I might as well bargain for everything I need off the bat. Merely bargaining for my life doesn't solve Nemo's issue.

Kalos glares at me. “And what will you give me?”

“Whatever you want—tonight,” I add. “Whatever will assuage... your pain.”

KALOS

BREED HER.

The instinct of my beast, no matter that it's impossible, is ludicrous.

This is ludicrous.

Madness on every level.

Collect her. Keep her. Hoard her.

But my beast doesn't care about madness or the fact the woman propositioning us is a thief. The heat racking my body is bone-meltingly fierce. It's a pain I've suffered alone every year for the centuries since my mate's death.

I've had sex casually, but never have I wanted to have a partner to assuage this. This pain is to remember that I no longer have a mate, and I will spend the rest of my days that way.

I grit my teeth. It doesn't matter that the taste of this thief's skin intrigued my beast. That her subtle scent of blueberries and a touch of linseed oil has my mouth watering for more. I'd only wanted to scare her. Take whatever perverse pleasure I could in tormenting her for daring to trespass. Her fear was a brilliant distraction to the pain, and now the urges plaguing me are making everything worse.

The foolish woman takes a step forward, offering sweet absolution. I tense my entire body to keep from pouncing on her. I've never been so tempted.

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking for,” I say.

“I’m not naïve,” she says, snark making an appearance past her fear. “Or inexperienced. Sex is sex.”

My beast snarls audibly at that, and she jumps. I see the moment of hesitation in her eyes. The moment that she debates running. I’d let her. I’d let her escape because the balm of her presence against the never-ending torture of this heat is too tempting. But her eyes glance to the figurine again and determination takes the place of her fear.

Of course. She wants the exchange. This is a transaction, not an offering of old. My beast doesn’t want to let her leave with any of our hoard, but I placate him. Objects last longer than lives. The piece can be found again.

This is the price.

Somehow, a decision has been made—by me or my beast, I don’t quite know. We’ve decided to accept her proposal if only to quell the pain for a moment.

“You’ve never had sex with a dragon before,” I say, wanting the woman to at least be forewarned. “My kind are very rare, *thief*.”

She flinches at the title, and like the moment of real fear on her face from the threat of the Council, I don’t like it. I suppress the urge to feel anything but apathy for this woman. She’s a trespasser. A common thief foolish enough to risk her life for the figurine she covets.

“I may not have, but I’m willing, and I don’t see any other takers around,” she snaps.

I tilt my head and let the robe suffocating me fall to the ground in a last attempt to scare her away.

The way her eyes widen when they fall to my cocks is gratifying.

“Oh,” she squeaks.

“Still wanting to sell yourself to me for the night, thief?” I ask, mocking. I stroke my upper cock idly; the tip already weeps with the need to take everything that she’s offering.

I inhale and want to groan at the delicate scent of her arousal.

“Um”—she blinks before her senses return, her cheeks reddening—“of course, I’ve just never...” she trails off and I wait.

The demand that burns in my body calms in the face of her embarrassment. No doubt the promise of her presence already mollifying the need to overpower and breed.

“You have two,” she tries again, saying the statement as if I’m unaware of the fact. “A-And I’ve never had anything—” Her face gets even redder as her hand gestures get borderline graphic before she stills them. I finally understand her concerns.

She thinks she’ll have to take them at the same time. Though the idea of thrusting into both of her holes is arousing, that isn’t what this heat demands.

“I won’t do anything that you object to,” I say.

Her self-preservation is truly minuscule. Not only did she break in, she’s offering to satisfy my heat without even knowing if I’m the sort of male who will listen to her consent. I contemplate stopping this even as a wave of demand rolls through me like claws digging into entrails.

“Oh, okay.” The thief’s shoulders relax as if that were really the only thing to consider when making this arrangement. She starts to remove the gloves she wears. There’s a glint of stubbornness in her eyes.

Who is this woman?

That thought disappears like smoke when she pulls the black elastic shirt she wears over her head. The expanse of exposed skin continues as the sports bra she’d been wearing follows it. Her breasts are small, and I itch to suck on her hard nipples.

Her skin is pale in the low light, but there’s a flush to her skin. As she pulls the tight pants off with no hesitation, the scent of her need spreads in the air. She wants this as much as I do. I growl.

Her hands tremble as she takes a step toward me, but her shoulders are back and her chin is high, as if she's royalty rather than a criminal.

“Last chance to leave, thief.”

KATARINA

MY TONGUE STICKS to the roof of my mouth instead of responding to the gauntlet of Kalos's words.

You're out of your mind. What are you doing?

I'm about to get laid, is what I'm doing. The growl from the masterpiece of flesh in front of me travels through my whole body, and my core tenses with a deep-seated need I've never had before. This may technically be how I get out of this alive and not imprisoned by the Council, but at this very moment... this is for me.

It's been so long since I've had sex. Years of me trying to do everything I could to get my legit business afloat while taking on all the pro-bono I could handle to offset my wrongdoings.

I've been *busy*. Now, I have a man with two very large erections gazing at me like he wants to devour me. My sex life before this dry patch was okay, but not this wild-bounding spiral in my chest wanting to run and hide as much as I want to see exactly how it feels to ride a dragon.

The cocks are phallic in shape, with a spongy head like a man's, but the similarities end there. Barely visible iridescent scales gleam over his torso and legs. His skin darkens to gray near his pelvis and reddens into a deep purple at his genitals. White fluid drips from the head of the cock Kalos strokes, and my mouth waters with the need to taste it.

Kalos pulls his hand away, his facial expression torn between pain and regret. His body stiffens, and the clarity of

what he's going to do clears away my nerves. I've spent too long without responding to his last warning. He thinks I don't want to be at his carnal mercy.

He's going to retract our agreement. He's going to stop this.

I can't let him.

I stumble forward. My bare skin meets his, and he hisses at the contact. His sharp claws dig into the flesh of my arms where he grips me.

His tight hold loosens my tongue. "I'm not going anywhere."

Kalos must see something in my face that convinces him, or he's too close to the edge of control to reject me.

My hands slide up his body, and each moment I absorb the heat of him pushes my arousal higher. He squeezes my arms before cursing and loosening his grip. His cocks throb against my stomach, smearing wetness across the skin there even as my own wetness wells between my legs.

Fuck, these side effects are potent. With the dazzling way my body feels, I almost want to bottle this sensation and save it for a later day. A different time when I want to feel desired and alive. But then I'd have to deal with the twisting craving too.

I gaze up at him, my thighs starting to tremble with need.

"Please," I beg, and his eyes glow a gold color, hot like a flame.

"You will tell me if anything I do hurts you." It's not a question, but a demand.

I nod quickly, willing to agree to anything to feed the need he's inspired.

With speed I can hardly track, he grabs my hair, and his mouth is on mine. My gasp turns into a groan. He tastes like cinnamon and the scent of campfire.

My knees buckle when he presses my body hard against his. His erections dig into my stomach and make me weak. Instead of him holding me up, we drop. He slows our fall at the last moment, and I gasp into his mouth at the touch of the chill floor at my back. His sharp teeth rake my lip, and I whimper at the sting even as he laves his tongue over the spot.

When he pulls back, his eyes are still glowing gold.
“Spread your legs.”

I swallow and follow the order. The weight of him increases and crushes against my sensitive pussy. The unforgiving hardness of the floor at my back paired with the press of him has me shifting my hips in need. The continuing surges of heat melt away any inhibitions I have left.

When he lifts up, the absence of him against me has more blood rushing to my skin, to my exposed core. I reach for him, but the grip of my hands on his shoulders does nothing to direct his movements.

The kissing was nice, but I’m empty. I’ve always loved foreplay, but whatever his heat is doing makes me want to be filled more than anything else. A helpless sound escapes my throat.

“Patience, little queen,” he purrs, and the endearment stuns me. “I won’t be taking you just once.”

His hand goes to the back of my knee to spread my legs wider. “So wet already.”

My face burns at his tone. Measured, but hungry. He looks at my pussy as if I make his mouth water. Little old me. Katarina, the not-so-recovered cat burglar.

It only makes me need this more. This absolution where I can forget everything. My past, my precarious present, and the future of the cold morning that will break unforgivingly and end this.

He’s a stranger, but he wants *me*. His cocks are dripping for what *I* can provide him.

“*Please, Kalos.*”

Something about saying his name, begging for it, has his eyes flashing. Instead of being filled with him, like I expected, he drops down my body. His mouth coming to where I'm wet.

I yelp in surprise, coming up on my elbows as if I'm going to scramble away from the stimulation, but he grips my hips, a rumbling sound of warning traveling from where he breathes against my most sensitive area.

"Stay." The order is sharp, and he doesn't wait for me to obey it. He licks me. The flash of fire sliding against my folds has my thighs come up around his head on reflex as all the air leaves my lungs.

The groan of him when he tastes me thrums through my body, and I shiver.

Holy shit. I'm his new dessert and this dragon isn't going to let me get away. He changes the grip of his hands to behind my knees again and spreads me wide for his feast.

"Holy shit!" I repeat out loud as his *thick* and *pointed* tongue slides over my pussy, licking up every drop of my wetness. I've never been eaten as if my partner had the single-minded determination to taste everything. I squeak at the bright sensation when his tongue slides against my clit, but he doesn't stay there.

It feels *amazing*, but he's not licking me for my benefit. He's devouring me for his. When his tongue catches all the arousal caught in my folds, he moves on to where it's smeared on my inner thighs.

My fingers dig into his silky hair, but that doesn't slow him. When my thighs are clean, his whole face buries into my core and that tongue slides *deep* inside me.

I make a sound at the back of my throat like a plea, but no words come out. My hips rock against his face as he tongues me. Each vicious lap strokes parts of my insides I didn't think could be reached by this appendage.

It's too much. "I need to come, please, Kalos."

He must hear me through whatever vicious haze he's in because his tongue finally retreats and his mouth covers my

clit, sucking.

That's all it takes. A lightning bolt of pleasure has me screaming. My climax is a throbbing living thing that I'd beg for until my voice gives out, but it doesn't stay with me for long.

The world flips. The stone floor bites into my knees, and my palms press flat to keep my face from smacking into the surface. My thinking isn't clear enough for me to analyze the sensation of the touch of the supple head of cock nudging at my entrance.

He forges into me without pause, and my gasp turns into a yelp at the tight flash of pain. I'm so wet, but it's still a stretch to take him. The tips of his talons dig into my hips.

"*Fuck.*" The sound that rips from him is feral.

The powerful, intimidating Kalos is fighting for control. For me. The moment is surreal as much as it is slightly uncomfortable. But I want to give this dragon what I bargained for. I want to help him. I want to be the one to give him relief.

I focus on relaxing. The bright pain dissipates quickly.

"It's okay. I'm okay," I gasp.

Whatever crystalline control he has *shatters*.

The movement of his body into mine is a barrage of sensation that I can barely track. His thrusts are short and deep, as if he can't stand to slide his cock out enough to do a full thrust.

He's rutting into me. This is conquering of the flesh and it's as visceral as it is disconnected. He's fucking me like I'm a doll made to receive him... and I like it.

A moan builds in my throat, and each jarring smack of his hips against my ass frees a tiny portion of it.

Kalos makes a vicious sound and holds himself deep. His cock kicks as he comes, and I make a sound of disbelief at the quickness of it. An unforgiving heat spreads inside me, and I stiffen in shock at the sensation. I've never felt a man come

inside me before, but something tells me that this heat is unique to him.

The flood of hot warmth in my lower belly is followed by a race of tingles. We're both breathing hard. The sensation of his release filling me soothes the bite of discomfort and the disappointment at not getting to join him in climax.

That wasn't so bad. But he doesn't soften inside me. He does sigh and flex his hands, gentling his grip on my hips. The air isn't as thick with tension as before.

"Better?" I ask.

"A little," he responds.

I whip back to see him, my eyes widening. "Only a little?"

My mouth dries at the sight of him. Kalos's eyes are closed, and the lines of tension that held his body tight before have dispelled. I'd assume he'd be at ease if he weren't still hot and hard inside me. Watching him like this makes it easier to ignore the ache of my knees or the tremble of my arms holding myself up.

He opens his eyes and I'm caught. That golden glow from before is less now, a hunger partially satiated. His lips curve slightly, to describe it as a smile would be too soft.

"We've only begun. Regretting this, thief?"

I liked it much better when he called me little queen, but that may be the Kalos that's closer to losing control than the one filling me now.

"No," I squeak because I don't want to stop. I should. I just got pummeled. But even as I think that, the bite of discomfort from earlier is absent. Odd.

I must crease my brow because Kalos answers my unspoken question.

"The first release has healing properties, among other things."

"What other things?" I ask.

His response is to slowly drag his cock from my body before re-entering me just as slowly.

My lashes flutter shut as my belly quivers.

“Oh,” I gasp. I’m sensitive now. As if he’s embedded some of the fire of his desire into my very skin. My body throbs and tightens. The gasping weariness from before is replaced with the build of need.

“More?” he asks. His hand slides down my spine, grabbing my hair and applying tension in a way that makes my toes curl. The air thickens with tension again, marking the end of Kalos’s momentary relief.

“Yes,” I whisper, bracing my arms for his onslaught again, but he doesn’t power into me again. He keeps his slow pace, fully sheathing himself each time.

This leisurely invasion allows for me to pick up each new sensation like tasting wine. The sweat-damp touch of his scale-covered skin against the back of my thighs, the puff of his breath on my back. And something unexpected.

I’m so wet that the penetration is an easy slide except for... something I can’t quite make out. My pussy stretches and accepts each inch of him, but his shaft isn’t all the same thickness.

“What is—” I’m cut off by him dragging his cock out of me again, my clenching body finally registering the sensation. My brain takes a moment to catch up, but my mouth is quicker.

“Holy fuck! Is your cock ribbed?”

Kalos’s motion stills for a moment, and the sound of his strained laugh is warm and surprising. “Just one of them. Does it meet with your approval?”

The teasing question makes my cheeks burn. I swallow. “Carry on!”

I aim for an imperious tone, but with how craven my lower body feels when he doesn’t move, it comes out desperate. The slide of his next thrust and knowing that the delicious friction

of his cock against my insides is from the very shape of him does things to me that I'd rather not analyze.

But Kalos doesn't seem kind enough to let that go. "Does my little queen like the feel of my cock?"

Ah, back to Hungry Kalos then.

I bite my lip to keep from saying anything more embarrassing than I already have, but he slows the forging of his body into mine.

My hunger answers for me. "Yes!"

"Tell me how it feels." His order is a purr that has me wanting to trip over myself to do what he says.

"So good. Like you're massaging my insides."

"That's exactly what it's doing." His voice is little more than a growl now. "Massaging and preparing your body for what comes next. Preparing you to take my seed."

My brain stalls out like a car. My very reliable, quick-thinking brain is as useful as a paperweight. I don't even question that he's already come inside me, so what makes this different?

The tidal wave of pleasure that hits me with the tease of his words obliterates everything I thought I knew about myself.

Taking his seed. I've never thought that was hot before, but it fits the mood that this would be a night of discovery. My body tightens around him, and he curses, abandoning the slow slide in favor of harder thrusts.

I don't have much time to wonder about this new need sparking in my core, with each thrust of Kalos inside me, his lower cock slides wetly through my folds, brushing my clit. I press back into him and curse as his other cock grinds against me harder.

I tense around Kalos, a sound catching in my chest as the sensations start to escalate again.

“That’s it. Strangle my cock inside you.” His snarl is resonant and adds to the crescendo of my pounding heart. The tight grip on my hair as he holds me in position to take him and the way his cock expands has me falling over the cliff of release again. This time I don’t fall alone.

Kalos hisses, and the release that fills me this time is a warm flush that doesn’t end. I cry out in surprise at the new, heavy ache of pressure. When I stiffen, Kalos groans a curse and fills me *more*, he releases my hair to hold my hips tight to him. His cum overfills me. I support myself with one hand to bring the other to where our bodies are joined with wonder, sliding past his still stiff other cock.

Sure enough, his release is leaking out of me, making a mess.

“Is this much normal?” I ask, curious and still foggy from my orgasm.

Kalos’s hands squeeze my hips as if to remind himself that I’m still here. A thief in his lair rather than a doll for him to fuck. “You said you were experienced.”

His other erection throbs against my hand, and I swallow. That was just one cock.

“I’m experienced,” I murmur with a frown. The bite of the hard floor to my knees returns and I squirm, unable to move with the way Kalos is holding me. He releases his tight grip and places his hand over the one I’m experimentally slipping around the mess he’s left. The gesture is oddly soft in this situation, but I don’t pull my hand out from under his.

I suck in a breath as my body returns to complaining about being on fours. The hazy arousal that made staying in this position possible dissipates, and I hiss trying to move away from my host.

Kalos makes a clucking sound with his tongue, and I still. He presses his hand against mine with more purpose as he pulls himself from my body, using my hand to... “stopper” myself.

I keep my hand where it is, trying to figure out what happens next when he surprises me by picking me up.

It's quick, and in the next moment he's laying me down on a soft surface. One of the giant pillows strewn around the room. I relax into the plush, letting my eyes travel over Kalos as he situates himself between my thighs. His gaze locked onto where I'm keeping his release trapped inside me.

His face is a neutral mask, but there's a flicker of something in his eyes. He brings his attention to my face and raises a brow at me.

I backtrack to what we were talking about.

"I've just never had sex without a condom," I say with a shrug.

Kalos's brow creases. Most paranormal beings have magical ways to avoid pregnancy and infections. I roll my eyes, figuring there's no harm in explaining.

"I have an amulet against pregnancy. I just usually have sex with humans." And condoms are the language of the one-night stand. He looks like he's going to ask more questions, but moves on from the topic.

Good. I'm not going to explain to him how confusing I find the paranormal world. I grew up half in it and half not. There are so many differences in how magical folk interact with each other that humans have always felt like the safer option.

I completely forgot about the amulet. There wasn't much room for thinking about that when we struck the deal. Remembering it now gives me an odd pang. It's stupid, and his pheromones must be affecting my brain because that pang can't be disappointment that all this seed he filled me with won't produce anything.

Snap out of it, Katarina!

His fingers stroke over my tender knees, the bruises already starting to bloom. "Apologies. I allowed myself to get a little carried away."

“So when do I get to remove my hand?” I casually ask as if I have nothing better to do than relax into the cushions and stem the flow of his seed all night.

Kalos’s nostrils flare. “When you would welcome me back into your body again.”

I blink, noticing that Kalos is holding himself very still. He’s not quite over my body, but eased back on his knees between mine. Like he’s trying to give me room to breathe. The action sparks a tenderness in my chest.

I take stock of my body. My muscles are warmed and a little tired while my limbs are loose. As long as I’m not doing any crazy positions, I could go again.

And I want to.

There’s still a pulse of arousal that has steadily been increasing. I slide my hand away from my opening, and the ooze of his seed out of me has my body tensing in loss. Kalos comes over me, slowly, bracing himself with an arm above my head.

“Hungry, little queen?”

My lips tremble with the sudden rush of need drawing me tight. Fuck me, the pheromones must surge when his release isn’t filling me. Biology is clever.

“Yes. I’m so empty now.” My lips tremble.

“We can’t have that.” He nuzzles my ear and I shiver. His lips brush my cheek before his mouth takes mine. His kiss isn’t as all-consuming as before. This one is more of a tease, drawing out the way his body makes mine feel with every soft suck and coaxing nip.

We’re still strangers, but there’s something that makes my heart ache when Kalos touches me like this. When he brushed a claw over my bruised knees. When he held his hand over mine.

This intimacy is like finding real diamonds in place of costume jewelry. Completely unexpected and precious in that unexpectedness.

How am I going to leave this in the morning? That's an issue for future Katarina.

I sigh, my hips rocking in open air as my hands explore the large man on top of me. Kalos pulls away, his golden gaze locked on my face, watching my expression as my hands travel lower. He doesn't move to direct this moment yet, as if he's giving me a moment to settle with him over me. I don't waste it.

I explore. His upper shaft is still damp from before, it's not as hard as it was, but it's still not soft. The huff of breath against my cheek when I slide my hand down the ridges that pleased me a moment ago reminds me not to get distracted.

His second shaft is just as thick but lacks the friction-adding ribbing. This cock is so hard and throbbing, it makes my mouth water. Pearly precum beads on the tip, and I swipe it away with a finger to bring it to my lips.

Kalos stops the action with a grip on my wrist. "That is for your womb. Don't tempt me to take you anywhere else."

I swallow. "My womb?"

A disgruntled expression passes over Kalos's face, and he doesn't respond.

The amulet will keep a pregnancy from happening. So this is only... role-play. Role-play that holds me by the throat while I squirm needily to be filled. I drop my hand to continue exploring, trying to distract myself from his words, and he allows it.

I start to think that this part of him is rather human shaped... until I reach the hard, round swell at the bottom.

"Is that what I think it is?" I ask, wondering, not for the first time, if I've bitten off more than I can chew.

"It's my knot. You'll take it for me, won't you?" The question is a low rumble and the heat in my belly flares at the confidence in his tone.

I swallow. "Will it fit?"

“It will fit. Most women can take it with stretching. A witch like you should be able to handle it.”

“Don’t talk about other women when you’re on top of me.” The reaction is instant. The surge of jealousy at the comment should be a red flag, but I ignore it.

“As you wish, little queen.” He smirks.

To wipe the smug look off his face, I bring the head of his lower shaft to my pussy, and the dragon above me doesn’t hesitate to claim what I’ve offered him. As if he’s been waiting.

We both groan as he slides into my body. He doesn’t give me a moment to adjust this time, and I don’t need it. There’s an ache from when he took me before, and the feel of that has me starving for him.

As if Kalos can’t control himself any longer, he pulls from my body to fill it again. He sinks so deep that his knot presses against my soft folds. He grunts, and the next thrust and corresponding smack against my body is harder. My gasp is percussive to his movements.

Each hit to my clit brings a bright shock of need. I spread my thighs wider, wanting him even deeper. Kalos tries to slow his pace and I can tell it costs him, but every move inside me is accompanied by a hard grind of his knot against me.

I whisper curses because each press of his knot delivers a sharp-edged pleasure at the stretch.

My lips part and words I can’t possibly mean fall out. “Fill me up.”

His body tenses. “You have to accept my knot for me to breed you.”

The sound that escapes me is one part need and the other frustration. “Yes, yes, please breed me.”

I shut off my wide-eyed brain and start to dissolve into need as Kalos grinds his knot against my opening with more force.

It doesn’t budge.

“Fuck, it’s too big!” I cry.

“Patience, little queen, relax yourself for me.”

My body isn’t listening. The arousal has me drawn tight, and I whimper in need.

Somehow Kalos knows my body better than I do. Somehow he’s in control of himself, though he’s the one in heat. He presses his frame close to mine, still keeping most of his weight off me but propped on an elbow. Heat comes off him in waves. The hard grind of his knot becomes a gentle rock.

“Shh.” He places a hand over my thundering heart.
“Breathe, sweet queen.”

I take a gasping breath and try to follow his command, shivering when he rocks his knot against me again. This time he circles his hips. My insides sing for the dragon stretching me. The hardness of his cock is a deep echo.

I think I’ve taken more of his knot this time, but I don’t look down. Instead, I’m completely ensnared by his gaze. Kalos is looking at me with such hungry possession that my core melts. We keep our eyes locked as he slides his hand from my heart down to my belly, his thumb starting to rub my clit softly.

I sigh at the next rock in my body, and he growls. The coiling tension in my core winds tighter, needier. So close to snapping. So close to breaking who I am. But in spite of all that, my body softens.

“Kalos,” I whisper.

His eyes glow at his name.

“Mine,” he growls.

The shock ricochets through my chest and distracts me from the sensual rock of our bodies. I’ve gone through the majority of my life as many things. A burden, a cohort, a trainee to the art of crime, and more recently, a friend. But never as someone to claim.

It happens then, my body gives to this man, this dragon. My throat catches on my emotions as his knot slides inside me. I throw my head back on a silent scream. The climax rages, buoyed and prolonged by Kalos's own. He shoots his release deep. The heat of it is all-encompassing.

I barely notice the bite. His snarly growl vibrates through the crook of my shoulder and dissolves me into another orgasm.

The world disappears on waves of pleasure and crashing heartbeats. I don't know how long it takes to come back to coherency. When I do, I have a heavy dragon on me. He hasn't collapsed his complete weight on me, but his pelvis is locked to my own. His other shaft presses tightly against my clit.

He's no longer biting me. The cold air is what I notice first. He's tilted off me slightly, his chest angled away as if to give me some space. My body doesn't want space. It wants to rub up against him and have him crush us with his weight, but I don't move.

There's a pained expression on his face, his eyes closed.

"Are you okay?" I ask. My voice is raspy, used.

His mouth tightens. "We're stuck together until the swelling of my knot goes down."

"How long will that take, do you think?"

His shoulders move in a shrug. He still hasn't opened his eyes. "A half hour? I haven't knotted someone in a long time."

"Oh." Some ridiculous, possessive part of me wants to ask how long. Maybe if he'd open his eyes and look at me, I'd indulge in that urge, but he hasn't.

It's as if he doesn't want to see me. *Of course he didn't mean it when he said 'mine.'* Don't be silly, Katarina. This is a business arrangement.

I swallow but try to keep my breath even.

For all I know this knotting thing could hurt him. That would be the height of unfairness because it doesn't hurt me at all. There's a heavy ache of pressure where I cradle him, but

each throb of his cock sends skitters of delicious sensations through my body. The light, floaty feeling in my chest makes me feel like I could stay this way all night.

But I get the sense that Kalos wouldn't want that.

I can't keep my hands to myself. I run my fingers up his arms, tracing the way the muscles there meet his chest. Kalos shivers and his body relaxes a little, so I let myself continue. I'm stroking the skin over his collarbone when he finally opens his eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asks through gritted teeth.

"Really good." I shimmy my hips. He hisses, and my breath catches in my throat at the pull of his knot inside me. "Sorry."

"It's fine. It's just sensitive." He looks at his treasures rather than at me. It's a jarring sensation to remember where we are. Who I'm with.

I have a dragon stuck inside me, and he's not pleased about it.

"How many times a year do you have to go through this?" I ask.

Kalos glances at me then, his eyes narrowing on the crook of my neck. The bite he left there. He doesn't look happy. I make a note to ask him about it later, when we're not stuck together.

I roll my eyes. "Never mind. I forget how it is. Secrecy is the best form of safety and all that."

The secrecy of the paranormal world is why it's so hard for me, an outsider, to navigate it.

"An idea you agree with, thief. I'm sure you don't want many knowing about your way of slipping past wards."

I try not to let him calling me *thief* cut after what we just did. I have thicker skin than that. Or I did before he tore it all away by making me feel wanted.

“True.” I shrug. “Sorry. I’m not one for small talk, but I’m going to go nuts if we just stare at each other in silence.”

He chuffs a laugh. “You may want to take a nap.”

I raise my brows. “Well, it is cozy enough to sleep. Your skin isn’t giving off as much heat as before, does that mean your heat is over?”

He sighs. “Not really.”

I blink.

“The needs will return once the knot goes down. For optimal breeding purposes.” His lips quirk.

As if on cue, the pressure starts to subside.

“You want to go again?” I ask in disbelief.

The reluctant dragon disappears, and in his place is the seductive creature who tongued me into oblivion. “Are you done so soon?”

The smile on his face is a thrill. An addiction I’m afraid has already wound its way through my bloodstream, sinking into my bones.

“We did make a deal,” I whisper, hardly believing my words but grateful for them when the smile on his face widens and he flashes his fangs.

He slides his cock from me, and the gush of our combined releases has my cheeks burning.

“And you always complete your deals?” he asks. His voice is a caress and a tease at the same time.

“Always.”

Kalos’s eyes flash. “Then it’s time to pay up.”

His head sinks down and sucks my nipple into his mouth.



I SIGH into the waking world at the now familiar feeling of Kalos’s teeth dragging over my breast.

I groan and push at his shoulders, but he's heavy and my muscles shake with exhaustion.

"I can't go again. I mean it this time. You've broken me." I may always settle my deals, but holy shit, I'm tired enough to sleep for three days.

His laugh is dark but in good humor.

"Easy, sweet. I'm just taking a little taste." He replaces his teeth with a hot tongue, and I moan.

He's been like this for hours. Relaxed until the next wave of demand hits. Then he uses more skills than I can keep track of to ignite a similar desire in me and we'd ride through the need together.

Positions blur in my memories. He had me ride him more than once, prodding me on with tantalizing words of how I needed to work for his seed. The last time I sat astride him, I thought I was going to die. After that, we switched to more undemanding positions. Him behind me, over me. My face pressed against his hot neck and the fabric of the cushions at different turns.

He's insatiable, but also thoughtful. His strong hands massaged sore muscles, and when he can, he lets me nap.

So my body may be on the brink of exhaustion, but it's not as bad as it could have been. If it weren't for the healing properties of the cum from his upper cock, I wouldn't be able to walk.

As it is, I feel raw... but not absolutely destroyed. My heart though... that traitor has gotten attached. So much so, I think I may let him convince me to take him again, if only to have one more moment together.

Because the time of our agreement is coming to an end. Each time he takes me, his skin gets less blistering, his movements become less driven. He still only fucks my pussy, even though with how his other cock was smearing his precum and nudging at my asshole in the various positions, I begged to be taken there more than once.

This will all just be a beautiful memory by lunchtime. I just need to convince myself to be the one to pull away.

I don't know if I can though.

Kalos switches his attention to my other breast, and I thread my fingers through his silky hair.

"How do you feel?" I ask.

Kalos makes a sound in his throat that has my toes curling.

"Awake."

I snort. "Did you sleep at all?"

"I don't need sleep in the same way as you do."

I hum. "Well thank you for letting me take a nap."

He snorts. "I didn't let you sleep. There was no keeping you awake. If I didn't want to take you in your sleep, I had to wake you first."

My lips curve. "Waking up with you inside me wouldn't be terrible."

I feel rather than see Kalos rolling his eyes. "You truly have no self-preservation."

I sigh sleepily. "I have other skills."

"No doubt." His body gets heavier on me, his cocks hard, but not as unforgivingly stiff as they were hours earlier. I shift my hips, and he kisses me. It's so gentle and soft that I want to crack my chest open to let the golden feeling it inspires to illuminate the darkest parts of me.

"Once more, little queen, so you can walk out of here without being bow-legged."

I swallow my dismay at his words of me leaving and spread my thighs wider to communicate my assent. He slips inside me, and we both sigh. This doesn't have the same frenetic energy as the other couplings. I'm so wet from our night together that there's no resistance to taking him or the ribbings on his cock. It's almost as if I've changed to perfectly fit him. That being under him is where I belong.

As someone who has been alone for a long time... it feels too good.

I could almost be fooled into believing that he may want to keep me past one night. I tilt my head back, and Kalos kisses my neck. His movements into my body are soft and slow, luxurious. Each rolling stroke sparks the coiling tension of release, and it doesn't take long for my breath to shudder.

The climax is a gentle thing. The release of a fluttering butterfly instead of the flash of searing lightning. Kalos groans, and the heat inside me stings for a moment before the rawness fades.

I exhale. Why does it feel like I'm on the precipice of crying?

He doesn't dwell in my body any longer than necessary, and too soon, he's pulling himself away from me. My throat is tight, but I blink my eyes open and realize that the light in the room has increased. It's dawn.

Kalos leaves the pillows and strides over to his robe. My body is slow to respond, but I bring my legs together, curling in as if to offer my bare body protection. I sit up.

It's done now. I'm going to leave here, and all this is going to be is a golden memory. Something bittersweet to make me smile the next time I feel lonely.

But maybe I'm not the only one who feels this way. Kalos doesn't look back at me as he puts his robe on. I'm many things, but I'm not a coward.

"You bit me," I say, my hand coming to my neck. There were quite a few paranormal beings that bite their partners to seal a mating. That can't be what he intended, can it?

"It means nothing." His voice is the type of cutting cold that reaches my bones.

Yep, yet another intricacy of our world that I don't understand. I try to let go of my hope that he is harboring some tender feelings for me, but it's hard.

I swallow. "I guess that's not how your kind mates."

He looks at me then, and if I thought his words were cutting, it's nothing compared to the sneer on his face. The seductive dragon of the night is truly gone, and in his place is Kalos. Influential, wealthy, and powerful immortal.

“Why would I mate myself to a woman who would sell herself for a bauble?”

His words are a sharp slap, but he's not done.

“Someone foolish with no self-preservation. Being mated to you would be a lower circle of hell. You've served your purpose. Now leave.”

It's a mercy that he storms away without looking back. That way the tears in my eyes can remain a secret between me and my heart.

KATARINA

BUZZ BUZZ.

I groan and smack at the alarm clock, knocking it from my nightstand, but that doesn't stop the buzzing. I open my eyes groggily and gasp at the ache of my muscles. The familiarity of my surroundings doesn't help the jarring sensation of displacement. I'd been numb this morning when I'd pulled my clothes back on and taken the figurine from the dragon's mansion.

I focused on getting the job done, not letting any emotions bubble up to distract me. After I left the figurine in a public locker and sent a text to let Nemo know it was ready for pick up, the imp had responded with one word:

Finally.

Frustration and annoyance had broken through the numbness then, and I'd let those emotions stay. Teaches me for helping him.

My cell phone starts buzzing again.

I check the time on my fallen alarm clock and curse. It's late in the afternoon. I slept through most of the day. I'd fallen on top of my covers the moment I'd made it home and passed out.

My muscles *ache* in the worst sort of way. I whimper and ignore my phone for a moment more. Nothing good can come from anyone calling me right now.

I pull myself out of bed and stumble to the bathroom, peeling off my clothes while I fill the tub with the hottest water I can stand. The steam in the air has me wrinkling my nose at the musky smell of sex with a lingering tang of campfire. Smears of dried cum decorate my body.

I hiss when lowering myself into the water but moan at the instant relief of it. I'm lucky to have a tub in this apartment. My place isn't bad, just tiny. I spend most of my time at the studio I rent down the block anyway.

I should have taken a bath when I'd gotten home to wash the scents from me. I may have to wash the covers of my bed if there's even a trace of smokiness to them. I don't want to remember anything about the target last night.

I catch sight of the purple-blue hue of the bruises on my knees, and the tears come to my eyes too quickly for me to stop them. I tilt my head back on the tub edge, blinking at the crack in the ceiling. Fuck him.

Last night was nothing and meant nothing. It was great sex with a jerk. If I let myself get bent out of shape over every one-night stand that turned out to be with an arrogant piece of shit, my heart would never recover.

The true loss is the memories that I'd wanted to treasure have been tainted with his words.

The castigation for selling myself hardly makes a dent. It's a generic slap. One that hurts in the first instant, but can be soothed with the knowledge that it was my choice. I do what I must to survive. I made the decision I did because the exchange worked for me.

I may have been backed into a corner metaphorically, but I had options. I could have used an expensive portal charm I carry to get out of there. But the dragon's need called to me. It called to the part of myself I've neglected.

And using the charm wouldn't have resulted in getting the figurine. Nemo is an asshole, but I did the job of breaking into a dragon's hoard to save his life, and leaving without it defeated the purpose.

No, trading myself for a “bauble” didn’t poison our time together. It was everything else.

I hold my breath and dunk myself under the water, trying to escape the disgust in his voice. I resurface quickly with a frown.

The scalding water is now cold. *Weird*. I haven’t been soaking that long.

I shrug and pull the plug. A shower would be better to scour the scent of him from my skin anyway.

After showering and going through the motions of moisturizing and dabbing healing ointment on my bruises, I should be feeling more like myself, but something is still not right.

I shiver, pulling on a hoodie to fight the odd chill. It’s summer, but I must have set the thermostat too low. I check my phone while I wait for the coffee to percolate.

I purse my lips at the absence of messages from Nemo. I don’t know why I expected anything different. He only calls me when he needs something.

The calls and texts that I’ve missed are from Stella.

I’m running late. Save me a table.

Here. Where are you?

I ordered for you. I swear to the gods if you don’t show up by the time it gets here, I’m sending out a search party.

Starting to get nervous. Pick up the phone.

Fuck! We had plans to try the new noodle shop today. I press the call button at the same time as someone starts pounding on my door. I cancel the call and inch toward the go bag I hide in the false bottom of the chest at the end of my bed.

My adrenaline response is weak, but the options running through my brain help start to kick it into gear. Did Kalos change his mind about the exchange? Have the people threatening Nemo decide to track me down instead?

“Open the fucking door! You better hope you’re home. Otherwise, you’ll be in a world of pain when I find you.”

I blow out a relieved breath at my best friend’s panicked voice.

I undo the chain and unlock the door. “I’m so sorry. I was just about to call you.”

“So glad you’re alive. I can recall the search party now,” Stella replies with snark. When the door swings open, her eyes widen. “Wow. You look like shit.”

“Thank you for that.” My lips twitch. My muscle aches are slightly better than when I woke up, but god am I tired.

Stella doesn’t look like shit. Her sleek auburn hair is in a neat bun, but her blue eyes are bright and awake. Despite her chaotic nature and sailor’s mouth, Stella always looks effortlessly elegant in a timeless way. I attribute it to the fact that there is a hierarchy of witch families that deal in power and money—blue bloods of a sort—and Stella and her mother are from a very old one that fell from prominence.

Stella pushes past me with a raised brow, and I try to swallow my guilt down as I shut the door.

She curiously turns to take in my apartment, leaning to sneak a peek into my bedroom before placing a grocery bag with to-go containers on the round table.

“I half expected there to be a man in your bed with how absolutely fucked you look,” she says.

I blush. “I’m so sorry about standing you up. Something came up last night, and I didn’t get in until early this morning.”

“Kat.” Her eyes level on me, and I want to squirm.

I wince and sigh. Stella has an uncanny ability to see through my bullshit. We’ve only known each other for a couple of years. She’d brought a family painting to me to get restored as a present for her mom and had distrusted me on sight.

The painting was the keystone to their house wards, so she'd needed someone who knew about magic and restoration, and that list is very short. But apparently I was giving her suspicious vibes, and she kept poking until, more as a way to get her to find someone else for her project than because I liked her, I told everything.

My history stealing, the forging, and my attempts to make amends. Obviously, I omitted any details so she couldn't call the authorities on me. I'm reckless, not stupid.

Instead of this sending her running, she'd brightened and asked more questions. It's an odd way to start a friendship, but we found common ground.

We're both rejects of a sort. I'd been raised in foster care with no knowledge of my parents or that I wasn't human until my teens.

Stella had a different problem. Her father is a shifter of some sort, but she didn't come out a shifter. Witch genes are supposed to be recessive, so her mother was sent back to her family, and the business arrangement that was the marriage dissolved. The shifter family then took out their revenge on her mother's family, sabotaging their businesses through backroom dealings.

"Have they never heard of a DNA test?" I ask in disbelief.

Stella only shakes her head, lips thin. "It didn't matter. I'm not a shifter. So they won't claim me. It happens sometimes, but it's super rare. Lucky me."

"What happened?" Stella asks, though she squints her eyes in a way that communicates that she's already guessed.

"It was just one last thing," I concede.

She throws her hands up. "It was one last thing the last time he roped you into something. I don't have to tell you how dangerous it is to do what you do."

"He was crying, Stel."

Stella blows out a breath in frustration, and her face softens. "I'm glad you're in one piece. What was it?"

My shoulders come up.

“Isn’t it enough that I’m done and safe?” I ask. I avoid looking at her while I take the food containers out. I open the first one—

“Not that one. It’s spicy,” she says.

I peek at Stella, and she’s back to glowering at me.

“That you’re avoiding talking about it makes it seem like this time was bad. Spill,” she orders.

I hesitate for a moment, putting my noodles on a plate and in the microwave. Noodles and coffee, yum.

I shouldn’t tell her... but I like that she cares enough to want to know about this. “It was stealing a figurine from some guy.”

She frowns. “That doesn’t sound too bad. What guy?”

“I don’t really think that’s important.” My voice gets higher. The microwave beeps, and I put her food in next.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Stella says.

I wince. “It was really stupid.”

“How stupid?”

I sip my coffee. “Do you know that Kalos guy?”

“The dragon, Kalos?” Stella screeches.

“Yeah, that one, but I’m alive!” I rush to say.

Stella’s eyes are so wide that I go back to avoiding looking at her as I put both of our plates on the sad table that I found on the side of the street. I’d tried to sand out the gouged word *Free*, but I’d rather have a carved-up table than an uneven one.

Stella falls into the chair across from me. “Kat, you can’t do something like this again. He could have killed you. He could still do a lot of things to you. Dragons don’t part with their hoard. If rumors are true. He’ll be able to track the piece you took no matter where it goes.”

Well that’s an interesting tidbit.

“I don’t have it anymore,” I say. “And anyway, we kind of traded.”

“What do you mean, you traded?”

“He caught me—”

“He caught you?!”

“As you can see, I am alive. Where was I?”

Stella looks like she’s going to slap me, so I continue.

“Uh, well, he was going through like a heat or something, and I offered my... services.”

I shovel a huge bite of noodles into my mouth.

“Wow.” Her shock is absolute, but as it is every time I tell Stella about my exploits, there’s no judgment. She only cares about my wellbeing and knows I don’t want to do work like this anymore. “So you slept with him?”

I choke at the understatement of that but swallow before answering, “He fucked me in more positions than I know. I thought I was going to lose my voice from screaming.”

If anything, her eyes get wider. “Wow.”

“You already said that.”

She looks down at her food and starts to eat. After a few minutes of pondering in silence, she shrugs.

“Maybe I should break into a dragon’s house,” she says.

Jealousy stabs me at that, but I shake off the ridiculous feeling and force a laugh. “I don’t know of any other dragons. And I got the impression that this isn’t a normal occurrence for him.”

Stella shakes her head. “I’m not going to break into anyone’s house. I don’t have as much luck as you. I’d get eaten—in the bad way.”

“I’m not usually that lucky,” I say, serious. “Anytime I’ve gotten out of a bad situation before has been purely on skill. This was—I don’t even know what to think about it. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not going to see him again.”

“... Do you want to?” she asks.

Do I want to? Does it matter?

I shrug. It doesn't matter. “He made sure I knew just how much he didn't like me after all the fantastic sex.”

There must be something in my expression that Stella picks up because she softens. “After you were kind enough to help him out? What a dick.”

I cough a laugh. “What a dick indeed.”

Or dicks, rather. God, I'm going to miss that.

Stella throws a napkin at me, and I laugh. See, I don't have to be the sniveling woman in the bathtub. I can laugh about how ridiculous this all is.

Our conversation continues, and I ask Stella about her work. She crafts charms for people. She's very talented, and I try my hardest not to be jealous of her magical gifts. I just get weird dreams and have a skill for breaking and entering.

“I've got this super complicated glamour coming up for a minotaur. He's really sweet, quiet though, real quiet.” Stella chews her lip. “I was thinking of asking him out.”

I try and imagine her with someone described as quiet and fail, but what the hell do I know about romance? “If you like him, you should.”

“Well, I won't know if I like him until after talking with him more.” Stella shrugs. “But I feel like I have to start somewhere. It's been forever since I've dated, and I'd love to get railed so hard that I lose my voice from screaming. It would really clear away the cobwebs.”

I snort. Something about the juxtaposition of Stella's poise to her mouth always lightens my mood.

“Don't act so shocked. You're the one that shacked up with the dragon. I'm so curious, but I actually see him on a semi-regular basis for business and would rather not know all the details. He's terrifying.”

“Oh?” I say, thrown off.

“Kalos has his fingers in most businesses in this city.”

“Huh, I guess he’s never needed an art restored.” How would I respond if I saw him again? I blow out a breath. It doesn’t matter. He wants nothing to do with me, and by all rights, I don’t want anything to do with him either.

I adjust my seat with a wince at the tender muscles of my hips.

“Do you need some healing salve?” Stella asks.

I clear my throat. “I’m good. I have some. I just feel... off.”

I didn’t notice it as much before, but the jarring displacement of something different I’d felt this morning hasn’t faded.

Stella straightens. “What kind of *off*?”

“You think it’s a witch thing?”

Stella tries to look patient, but fails. “Have you been meditating?”

Being raised by humans left a lot of gaps in what I know about magic and myself. It’s not like there’s a crash course called *So it Turns Out You’re a Witch*. Stella has done her best to teach me as much as she can, but as the saying goes, you don’t know what you don’t know.

My cheeks burn. “I’ve been a little busy.”

Stella waves a hand. “Everything is a witch thing. You are not only your body, and you need to keep track of what your senses are telling you. So, what kind of *off* are you feeling?”

I crease my brow. “I’m not sure?”

She exhales, back to trying to be patient. “You won’t know until you go looking.”

I take a breath and try to tune into the sensations of everything to pinpoint this disconnect. The savory whiff of food from our finished plates. The warmth of my coffee cup. My sore body. The humming wards of my apartment.

I close my eyes on my next inhale, the air cooling my throat, expanding my lungs. Both Stella and I have magic, hers clusters tightly around her, while mine is a little spacey, searching. I place my hand on my heart, wondering if the dick of a dragon broke more than I let myself accept. There's a tinge of campfire there, and I slide my hand to the bite he'd left at the crook of my neck, Kalos's sneering face flashes in my mind and my hand wanders away, retreating. My lungs fill again, and I embrace the sensation of my chest moving before moving on, lower.

The sensation sparks, and I try to focus.

Something is there. Something new.

I open my eyes, and Stella is staring in shock at where my hand is resting on my lower stomach.

"Oh. My. Gods," she says.

KATARINA

“THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE,” I breathe. *I can't be—I can't even think the word right now.*

Stella makes a high-pitched mouth sound. “Not impossible, just highly improbable.”

“But I have an amulet!”

Now Stella frowns. “What amulet?”

My face burns. “The one that magically stops STIs and... pregnancy.”

Stella's face pales. “I've never sensed that kind of amulet on you. Show me.”

I undo the thin chain with shaky hands and hold it out to her. It's a simple thing—silver with a tiny medallion the size of a bead. Stella holds the chain, and my stomach drops at the conflicted, angry look on her face.

“Did Nemo give you this?” she asks.

“Yeah, forever ago.” I'd barely turned eighteen when he'd caught me kissing a guy. The next day, he'd thrown the charm at me gruffly saying I needed to protect myself.

Stella's lips thin, and she places the necklace on the table. “And he didn't tell you you'd need to get it charged?”

“What?”

She sighs. “Most witches get a permanent one when they come of age. One that charges itself from the witches' magic.

It's more expensive up front, but most would agree that it's a better option than the ones that need to be charged yearly by the maker."

There's a numbness in my fingers and face. "That's one that has to be charged yearly? This whole time I've been wearing a useless amulet?"

I'm reeling. The protection I thought I had is a joke. *Thank fuck for condoms.*

Stella's face is pained. "I should have said something as a charm maker, but it honestly didn't occur to me. You haven't been seeing anyone, and some witches have weird side effects, so it wasn't odd to me that you didn't have one. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault." The numbness starts to recede, and I shake my head. If I'm going to blame anyone, it would be Nemo, but even he didn't do this on purpose. It would be just like him to be so thoughtless to not mention anything. Or so self-centered he didn't even know.

Really, this is just another casualty of my ignorance.

And now I'm... pregnant. My lungs empty on that thought. Stella places a hand on my shoulder. The warmth of her presence is a comfort I've lived without most of my life.

"If this is unwanted, there are options. Safe options. If it's from last night, it'd be a simple thing," Stella tentatively says.

My hand goes to my stomach again, protectively. I clock the instinct and I shake my head, trying to dispel the reaction.

I can't be getting attached. It might be the best option.

"It's from last night. If I had any other wild nights, I'd have told you," I say.

Stella snorts. "I figured... it's just surprising."

Surprising is one word for it.

What kind of mother would I be, really? What life could I provide?

A pretty good one actually.

I am more than a product of my upbringing, a statistic of unwed and pregnant too young. A lot of people get pregnant in their twenties on purpose.

I have my own business that is doing okay. I'm making my amends where I can, other than last night. I'm healthy and smart, if a little reckless at times. I have a best friend and resources.

I could have this. I could have a child, a family of my own. Tears come to my eyes.

I want this. Oh, fuck, I really want this.

"Dragons are really rare," Stella says, oblivious to my internal thoughts.

"Stella," I croak.

When she takes in my tears and the hand still on my stomach, she leaves her seat and wraps me in her arms.

"Oh, honey, everything is going to be okay, no matter what you choose."

I sniff. "I'm scared to want this, but..."

"But you're attached?" Stella pulls away with her arms still around me, her smile is understanding.

I nod. "I want to keep it."

"Then let's do this!" Stella does a little dance. "You're going to be a great mom. This is so exciting!"

I hiccup a laugh that turns into a groan.

I'm pregnant with a dragon's baby.

I bury my face into the silky fabric of her shirt. "I'm going to have to talk to him."

Stella runs her fingers in my hair. The action relaxes my tight shoulders. Discomfort has my throat swelling.

"I know he was a dick, and he's a scary dragon, but did he make you feel unsafe?" she asks.

I bite my lips. Despite everything that happened last night and how he'd threatened me in the beginning... my instincts

say he won't harm me. Maybe that makes me stupid, but my instincts have saved me more than once.

Little queen. I shake the memory of the words from my mind.

"No," I say.

Stella nods. "Then yes, I imagine you'll need to talk to him eventually. Our world is a small one, and someone is going to notice you giving birth to a dragon. But it doesn't have to be right now, or even this month. You can take however long you want to take. It might be better when you can prove the pregnancy other than just knowing because you're a witch."

I wince. "That would make it easier."

The one sex education course I'd taken surfaces in my mind, and I frown. "There's a chance it won't stay, isn't there? What with finding out so early. Humans usually have to wait weeks."

Stella shrugs. "Miscarriages aren't as likely for witches, but yes, if you want to wait to make sure before dealing with the dick, that makes sense."

The relief is instant. *You and I are a pretty sure thing*, I think to the disruption in my middle. Now that I've identified the sensation, it's not as jarring. It's as if it's happy that I know it's there now.

I'm going to have a baby.

I wonder how long I can go without telling Kalos.

KATARINA

NOT VERY LONG.

It's only been a week. I shiver in front of the imposing mansion door. The summer sun on the back of my jacket should be sweltering, but I hardly notice it.

I didn't want to contact Kalos through Stella in case this went poorly. So that left showing up to the man's house.

I don't want to break in again, but I will if I have to. The security guard at the gate had refused to even call up to the big house, but he'd offered to take a message to deliver later. The type of thing I need to say shouldn't be put in a message. I shrugged and thanked him for his time. It helps to be polite if he catches me later.

Getting on the grounds had been child's play. You'd think an immortal would have better security. Maybe he doesn't need it.

The only thief to make it into his house, he'd caught himself. Then fucked.

Good times.

I ring the bell, and the sound is melodic, pretty. Too pretty for a dragon's lair, but he must like pretty things because in the light of day, the mansion is gorgeous. It doesn't look like any one architecture style, but rather a mixture. A column here, an arch there, the organic flourishes of vines in the stonework. As if the designer took the best of each period and somehow baked it into a perfect cake instead of a garish collection.

I bite my lip. I don't hear anyone coming to the door. I ring the bell again.

If no one answers, I'm going to have to break in. It will be a little more time-consuming since I'm assuming he patched the wards around the pane I'd removed last time. Honestly, I could get through the wards without the weak point, it's just with how strong they are, it will be more uncomfortable.

I'm not leaving without speaking to Kalos. If it were just telling him about the pregnancy, I'd wait as many months as I could just to avoid how awkward this will be. To avoid the words he's going to cast my way.

But I need help.

Finally there's a sound on the other side of the door. The man who opens it is decently sized enough to be another security guard but wears a sleek suit.

He looks behind me as if expecting more. "How did you get past the gate?"

"I need to speak to Kalos," I say.

His brow twitches. "It doesn't work that way. You can't just demand an audience with him. I'll schedule you a meeting in the next couple of weeks—"

"That's not going to work." I swallow, my knees almost buckling from a wave of dizziness. "This is very important. Time sensitive."

His eyes focus on me, worry creasing his brow. "Are you okay?"

Aw, this guy seems nice.

"Not really," I admit. "Please, I just really need to speak with him. Tell him it's the thief from last week. That should get his attention."

His brows shoot up, and he reluctantly opens the door wider to let me in. I wince, but step inside. Sure enough, the interior of the house is cool. The air conditioning no doubt delightfully chilly for everyone else.

I pull the jacket tighter around me, the sweater I have layered underneath bunching, but it's a useless gesture. The cold air invades anyway.

"I'll wait while you get him. I won't run off," I say. He's more likely to return to me as an icicle.

He must realize something to that effect because he shakes his head.

"Follow me," he says. "If he's displeased, he'll just eat you."

I huff a laugh but the shiver that travels through me is too violent to make it audible.

I follow behind him. If I thought the outside of the house was gorgeous, it's nothing compared to the inside. Gold banisters on white veined marble, art nouveau mirrors heavy with filigree.

I'm so stunned by this short walk down the hallway that I don't realize that we've reached a dark-wood carved door to what appears to be an office until the man stops me.

"Stay here."

I nod, and he knocks on the heavy door before entering.

"Ben, do you have the numbers from Keller?" Kalos's words muffle as the man who must be Ben closes the door behind him. I'm glad I no longer have an audience because I'm frozen to the spot.

Dear God, his *voice*. It's as rumbly and deep as I remember. Maybe if I'd had more time and space it wouldn't affect me as much as it does, but the memories that surface are too fresh. Him calling me little queen in hushed tones as he makes me beg, the warmth of his laugh when I'd surprise him, the snarling way he'd cut me down to size in the end.

I can't do this.

I take a deep breath and squeeze the hand warmers that have gone cold in my jacket pockets. Those and the chill in my chest are a good reminder of why I'm here. I couldn't even

have a week of space because the troublemaker in my womb is already causing problems.

I have to do this. This isn't for me. This is for us. The baby... and me. Because I don't know if I'm going to survive otherwise.

The door whips open the next moment, and I tilt my head back to take in the fury on the too familiar, aching beautiful face.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Kalos hisses.

His anger is outsized to the situation in my opinion, and he doesn't even know the half of it.

“I need to speak with you.” I look at Ben, who must be Kalos's assistant. “Alone.”

“Anything you need to say to me, you can say in front of Ben.”

Ben's face remains expressionless, but I have the sense he's surprised.

I shrug. Telling two strangers this news is only a little more awkward than telling one.

“Are you going to invite me in?” I ask, more to give myself time to think of exactly how to say what I need to than being offended that he's stopped me in the hall like a child listening at doors.

Will our kid listen at doors? I internally groan. In this whole getting attached business and my confidence that I can actually raise a child, I forgot one very important fact.

I was a terror as a kid. Always getting into places I shouldn't have and knowing way more than I was supposed to. Is this karma?

Kalos narrows his eyes and looks like he wants to snap me in half, but he opens the door wider, and I enter the office.

There's a heavy masculine energy to the room. All carved wood, bookcases, and dark walls.

“Well?” Kalos prompts.

I really can't stall much longer. "I'm pregnant."

"Congratulations."

I'm thrown off for a moment at his quick and decisive tone.

"It's yours."

I can't watch his expression, so I glance at Ben whose mouth drops open in shock.

There's no shock from the dragon. He laughs. It's not the warm laugh he'd given against my skin that night, this is cruel and sharp. "Your boldness truly knows no bounds."

He doesn't believe me.

I shrug momentarily at a loss for what to say. I'd anticipated disbelief, but not this confident cruelty.

"It's true—"

"You return to the scene of your crime and proclaim the impossible. Perhaps you do want me to call the Council to report you."

I blink, and terror flashes through me. If the Council takes me into custody, I'm not going to last long.

My heart starts to race, and it's harder to breathe. It's been difficult to keep calm, but when I get stressed, I lose more body heat. Body heat I can't afford to lose. It's already hard to keep my eyes open. My fingers are past numb, and I'd put on lipstick to hide the blue tint to my lips from passersby before coming here.

It hadn't taken long after discovering the pregnancy to recognize that the little terror in my belly is doing something to throw my temperature off. It's not just my temperature. It sucks heat away from everything. Hot baths only stay that way for a moment. The hand warmers in my pocket lasted an hour instead of the twelve they proclaim.

My shivering keeps me awake at night. I throw up anything I try to eat that isn't above room temperature.

And it's only getting more severe.

“You don’t understand,” I say, trying to keep calm. “I need help—”

“Perhaps go to the actual person who got you with child then and leave me alone,” he ends on a growl. The laugh is gone. His posture is casual, but his eyes show a banked rage I can’t even begin to understand.

My vision goes blurry at the edges.

“Do you think I want it to be yours?” I whisper. There’s the flicker of something in Kalos’s gaze, but I’m trembling with anger that I wish would give me warmth. “I haven’t slept with anyone else for the last year. If there were any other candidates, I’d go there first. I know exactly what you think of me because you told me so.”

“It’s impossible—”

“I don’t care!” I cut him off. The edges of my vision are getting darker, and it only makes my fear worse. “It doesn’t matter how it happened, I only know it did and that something is wrong.”

Kalos’s posture changes. He almost looks worried. The room shifts back and forth, and I blink to dispel the sway. Fuck. He’s finally taking me seriously, and now it’s too late.

“Let’s have you sit down, and Ben can get you something. Maybe some water or something to eat,” Kalos starts, but his voice starts to dampen, and I hear him curse as the darkness at the edge of my vision claims me.

KALOS

I CATCH her before she falls to the floor.

My thief.

My little liar.

I swallow, worried. Or not actually a liar.

Impossible.

Her body lacks any of the warmth that it should have, and she's shivering. I place my hand on her face and curse. Her skin is like ice. I scoop her into my arms and sit us on the couch. I pull off her jacket and check under the sweater to make sure she has another layer before removing that as well.

“What does she need? A healer?” Ben asks.

“Grab me a blanket,” I say. She's too cold for a human. I remove my own suit jacket and bring her to my chest. I press our bodies together and will my heat into her. Because of what I am, I run hot. Fire is my element, and I can burn down cities or do something as small as heating the woman on my lap.

Ben returns and pauses for a moment. Probably at the sight of me cradling the thief in my lap. He shakes the blanket out and wraps it around the side of her body not pressed against me.

“Do you want me to call someone to test the paternity?” Ben asks carefully.

“There's no need.” My throat feels tight, raw. “I can sense it.”

I should have just extended my senses instead of antagonizing her. The dragon part of me has been a horror to deal with since that night. Snarling and moody and distracting me at every turn with the memory of our thief. And when Ben had said she was here, my frustration had boiled over.

I shouldn't have taken out the beast's reaction on her. Especially since she's telling the truth.

It is impossible, but she's pregnant and the spawn is mine. I can hardly breathe through the pain of it.

They'd made themselves known as soon as I'd stoked her anger. A prodding, hungry curiosity poking at my senses that had almost derailed me entirely. I'd blocked that mental channel of communication to keep myself focused.

"So we had a thief..." Ben starts, waiting for me to fill in the rest.

"Last week, during my heat."

Ben's brows shoot up. I send him and Maggie away during my yearly heats. They usually last a couple of days, and it's hellish. This last one had been shorter. Apparently because it had been successful.

"What do you want to do?" Ben asks. "If anyone finds out, she's going to be a target."

That's inevitable. The thief in my arms may already be entangled with unsavory individuals, but with this, she's been forced into a world of different players. I have many enemies lying in wait. All it takes is for one to find out, and our whole world will know of my new weakness.

Acting as if I want nothing to do with the child or their mother won't work either. Enough people are aware of my history. They know I'd never abandon my blood.

They will assume this woman's place in my life based on the fact that dragons can only breed with their mate. I narrow my eyes at the white scar I'd left from my bite. The mark would pass for a mating mark if anyone else were to look for it.

But there is no bond tickling my senses.

“She’ll need to move in here,” I say, thinking quickly. It’s easier to think about specifics than to think about what she’s carrying. “There are side effects that only my presence will help with.”

The circles under her eyes are dark with exhaustion. The effect of the spawn draining her heat energy may be only one of many issues to deal with. I won’t know more until she wakes.

“I’ll tell Maggie to prepare a room for...” Ben trails off, waiting for me to name the woman in my arms.

I press my lips together before confessing. “I don’t know her name.”

Ben whistles. “I’ll start on that then.”

He picks up her jacket and pulls her wallet from the pocket. “If this ID is correct, her name is Katarina Smith.”

Katarina. It’s a nice name.

“Of course it’s Smith,” Ben mutters, and my lips twitch.

“Find out what you can.” I straighten as a memory surfaces. “But first, can you get an order from Maria’s? She’ll need food when she wakes up.”

Ben raises a brow. “Sure thing, boss. Are you sure you don’t want me for anything else?”

I press my lips together. “I should be able to handle one woman, pregnant or not.”

“She seemed a little angry with you.”

I shrug as if I don’t know why she’d possibly be angry with me. My heat has caused a pregnancy, and I had not been kind to her when we parted. There’d been a hopeful look in her eyes that I’d wanted to snuff out. I hadn’t wanted her to have any hope because there is none when it comes to me.

She will not find someone who can care for her heart here.

That she, a criminal who no doubt regularly risks her life, would end up pregnant with the only dragon conceived in the last century against all odds sounds like a joke meant to torture me.

The Fates must be laughing.

KATARINA

THE WARMTH IS the first thing I notice when I wake. I want to moan and press my face into the sensation. The cold plaguing me for the past week has been relentless. I can only fill the tub with so much hot water before running out, and when it goes cold within minutes of me submerging myself, it feels like a Sisyphean task.

The heated blankets that Stella brought had been smart, but really only warmed me enough to make me shiver only every few minutes instead of constantly. I can't walk around for the rest of this pregnancy swathed in blankets needing outlets.

Continuing like this without answers is untenable. I need help, so I went back to the dragon and now I'm *warm*.

"Are you awake?" a delicious voice asks.

I sigh. My eyes blink open and I freeze. I'm pressing my face into the fabric of Kalos's dress shirt. Kalos the dick. Kalos the dragon who accused me of lying about being pregnant with his child.

I push away, but he doesn't let me fall out of his lap where I'm curled.

"Take a minute to reorient yourself. How do you feel?" The sneering man from before is gone, but I know this game now. This concern he's showing me won't last.

"I feel fine," I say, and he lets me pull away completely. We're on a couch in his office. I'm in my tank top, but have a blanket wrapped around me. Kalos's jacket rests on the couch

arm, the snow white of his crisp shirt pulls across his powerful-looking body and contrasts with the black scales that frame his face. It's odd to see him in clothing.

I'll blame my newfound warmth for why my cheeks are hot.

"Better than before?" Kalos asks.

"The cold is gone. Wait, does that mean—" My hand drops to my stomach.

"They are fine."

"They?" My face drains of blood at the thought of there being more than one in there.

"The dragon you carry. I don't know the sex yet."

The dragon I carry. As if he doesn't want to call it a baby.

"You believe me then?" I ask, annoyed.

Kalos looks away. If a man on top of the world could look embarrassed, it would be what his face looks like now. "I was rash in accusing you of lying. I can sense the truth."

I wait, expectant.

Kalos frowns and grits his teeth before giving me what I want. "I'm sorry."

I want to ask him what exactly he's apologizing for, but I don't really want to dwell on the way his accusation burned me or how the words the morning after our night together still have the power to make my heart twinge. This isn't about me.

This is going to be awkward for both of us.

"The baby is okay?" I ask.

"Yes, and healthy."

I blow out a breath in relief. "And I don't have to turn into a popsicle?"

"That is an unusual reaction, but it makes sense. Dragons are usually hatched in eggs. Their development depends on how much heat energy they are fed—"

“Am I’m going to lay an egg?” I ask without thinking, my eyes wide.

Kalos has the grace not to laugh at me, but I catch his lips twitching before he answers.

“I don’t believe so. I have never heard of a witch carrying a dragon’s young. I would have assumed that you’d produce a witch, but with the way the whelp is sucking heat away from you, they will be a dragon. It will just take a form compatible with you during gestation.”

“Okay, so a live birth and a baby?”

Kalos nods. I’m caught on that detail for a moment. I haven’t really thought any further than handling this day by day, and the hellish effect of always being cold hasn’t left much time to consider other things.

I nod after absorbing the information. I’m having a baby. A baby that will turn into a dragon.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “You were saying something about dragon eggs needing heat?”

“The parents will usually blow fire on their egg.” Kalos’s mouth twists in discomfort but continues. “The more fire, the shorter the incubation.”

“But I won’t survive under fire,” I squeak, and it breaks Kalos out of whatever thoughts are bothering him.

He shrugs. “You may, you may not. Your body will change to fit the needs of the whelp. At this moment, it would seem that you’ll be able to get by on the heat needs with my assistance.”

“How are you better than a heated blanket?”

His brows raise.

I shake my head. “I mean, how can you holding me satisfy that need... more than a heated blanket?” There’s really no polite way to ask that.

Kalos’s lips curve, and I’m grateful he doesn’t take offense. “I can manipulate heat energy since fire is my

element. The heat draw of your child doesn't deplete me in the same way it does to everything or anyone else."

Like me. The baby is depleting my heat. I've only been at this for a week and am already lacking in something that they need.

"It's your child too," I whisper.

A flash of pain in Kalos's eyes has me snapping my mouth shut.

"Yes." His voice is like rocks grinding together, and he shakes his head. He stands, walking to the window as if to take a moment before responding. "You will move in here of course—"

"Of course? Why would I move in here?" Sometimes I open my mouth before thinking. Kalos turns back and exasperation already edges his mood, but he answers my interruption.

"Because we don't know how often you'll need my assistance," he says patiently.

"Why wouldn't you just be able to come over to my place for a cuddle?" I ask, even though the idea of this polished man hanging out in my tiny apartment makes me cringe.

Kalos's jaw tenses. "I wouldn't be able to protect you as well if you reside elsewhere."

Technically if I need protection, he could hire a bodyguard, but that statement is hinting at other undercurrents. Dread pools in my belly.

"And are we going to need protection?" I ask.

"Yes." Kalos pauses before continuing. "I have many enemies, Katarina."

I blink. "You know my name?"

He looks away as if uncomfortable. "Ben checked your ID."

So he hadn't known my name. He didn't want to. He hadn't been tempted to find me after I left here that morning. I

close my eyes and mentally shove that annoying, needy part of myself away. There are more important things to worry about.

Like, safety.

“These enemies... wouldn’t it be better if I left here and never contact you again?” I ask.

Kalos taps his fingers on his folded arm.

“I considered that, but it only takes one person finding out. That would also mean I wouldn’t be able to help with the pregnancy without putting you in danger.”

And it would be cutting him off from his kid. He doesn’t mention that though. He just found out about expecting a child. I shouldn’t be so bothered how distant he is about it.

I blow out a breath. “What’s the plan? I can’t just stay here forever. I have a job.”

Kalos’s mouth thins. “You live here. Ben can teleport you wherever you need to go. I would request you not take on any more *work* until after the first year of infancy.”

Not work for over a year? “I can’t do that. I have a business.”

“As the mother, your safety and health are directly connected to our child. There is a bond between the two of you. If anything happens to you—” He stops and doesn’t continue, but I’m starting to follow his train of thought.

“I’m not running into danger—” *Oh*. “Despite how we met, my business isn’t being a thief. That was a one-off job.”

Kalos narrows his eyes. “You were quite skilled in that arena for it to be a one-off job.”

I shrug and pull the blanket tighter around me. The bone-deep chill is gone, but being wrapped up is still comforting. “I used to steal, and now I don’t.”

Kalos arches a brow. “Except from me.”

“I’m not going to do it again.”

We stare at each other before Kalos tilts his chin up. “What is your business then?”

“I restore artwork.”

He blinks. “Like paintings?”

“Yes, I’m very good.”

There’s a pause as he contemplates that before he arches a brow.

“And how did you get good at it?” he asks like he already knows, and I bite my lips, my cheeks heating.

“I don’t do forgeries anymore either.” I’m good at restoration but *fantastic* at forgeries.

Kalos nods easily. “Very well.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Kalos calls for the person to enter. Ben comes in. Now that I’m not freezing to death, I can take in details about the man that I hadn’t before. He’s clean-cut with dark hair and eyes. I don’t know what he is, which isn’t a unique thing for me with how clueless I can be about other paranormals, but he doesn’t *feel* like a witch or a shifter.

He holds a bag of food, and my mouth starts watering.

“You need to start preparing for your meeting with the Leonids unless you want me to reschedule with them,” Ben says.

“No, I don’t want to give them the impression that I’m too busy to handle them,” Kalos says.

Kalos takes the bag of food from Ben. “Give us a moment. When I leave for the meeting, I want you to take Katarina to her place so she can pack up what she’ll need for the next few days.

“You’re not bringing me to the meeting?” Ben asks.

“I need you to get her settled and keep her safe while I’m occupied.”

I raise a brow at that, expecting Kalos's assistant to balk at being assigned as my watcher, but Ben nods solemnly. "Whatever you need."

He leaves, and Kalos strolls toward me with the food. "I thought you may be hungry when you woke up."

"It's been hard to keep things down. It was trial and error to figure out that I can't eat cold food."

Kalos sits and nods, bringing out a Styrofoam container that smells like heaven from the bag and handing it to me. "That nausea shouldn't be as bad now that you've received a surplus of heat."

He gives me a fork, and I open the container. I don't know what the food is, but it looks to be slow-cooked beef or pork. My mouth fills with drool, but the very scent of the food is spicy, and my shoulders slump.

"Uh, I don't eat spicy food."

Now Kalos grins. "You may want to try it before saying that."

I hesitate, and Kalos takes the food from my hands. My body leans toward him to take the food back on instinct, even though I know I can't handle the heat it's going to dish out.

He takes my fork and digs into the dish before raising it toward me. "One bite."

I blink at him and bend forward, gingerly accepting the bite as he feeds me.

Fucking heaven. "Oh my God!" I moan.

Kalos laughs, and I almost choke at the compelling sound of his delight, but manage not to.

"The babe will like most spices. It's a chemical heat and provides you what you've been craving," he says.

He seems to remember himself and hands the food back to me. I accept it greedily, taking another bite of bliss. The flavors aren't what I'm familiar with, and there's the slight burn of spice that had always been too much for me to eat, but

it all blends together on my tongue. The joyous response of my body to the food is almost as good as the taste. It's like every bite sparks happiness. I'm most of the way through the container before my craving releases me.

"Thank you," I say. "It's been challenging to anticipate the symptoms of this."

Kalos looks away for a moment before returning his gaze to mine. "I didn't mean to cause a child. I'm sorry you've suffered because of it."

Embarrassment rages at what I have to admit. "It takes two to tango. I had an amulet to ward against pregnancy, but it wasn't charged."

Kalos shrugs as if I didn't just admit to being the reason why I'm pregnant.

"The amulet shouldn't have mattered. Dragons only procreate under specific circumstances and those weren't met. As far as what I know, it should have been impossible."

"Oh." It's not my fault. Not in the way I'd assumed it was.

This is a little more like fate. I'm not much of a believer in fate, but it's hard to ignore the writing on the wall. I don't want to call this bad luck...

"A miracle then," I say.

"A miracle." Kalos looks at my mouth, deep in thought, before shaking himself. "I need to prepare for my meeting. Ben will take you to pack what you need to be comfortable here." He hesitates. "We can talk about more permanent changes tonight at dinner."

And I've been dismissed. The abyss of my future gapes before me. Everything in my life is going to change. My baby's life depends on my ability to be watchful and adapt to this situation.

KATARINA

THE DUFFEL BAG I have open on the bed is only halfway full of personal items. Ben already teleported a suitcase of clothing to the guest room where I'll be staying. Apparently, he's the rare type of paranormal that can make portals and use them.

But the items in this bag are supposed to be the kind that people won't abandon in a fire. Instead of a collection of sentimental goods, it holds a sketchbook, some magic supplies for meditating, and toiletries.

The bag I'd packed when I ran away from foster care was similar minus the herbs and crystals. All these years later, and I still haven't collected the life I thought I'd have. I'd left to find people like me. To fully immerse myself in the world of witches and magic that had been my birthright, even if I'd been abandoned. I didn't find it.

I'd had Nemo for a number of years, and then I'd filled the rest with work to try and atone for my crimes. Years later, and I don't feel any more clean. My life doesn't feel any more full. Stella is the one bright spot I have.

Maybe that's all a good thing. If my life had been brimming with satisfaction, it would be harder to leave it all behind and embrace the change in front of me.

My hand comes to hover at my middle. A gesture of reassurance and instinct. I've gained something now that won't disappear. Something that requires more from me than any other job has before.

I check behind me to make sure Ben is still strolling around my tiny kitchen space typing out something on his phone before pulling up the false bottom in the chest at the end of my bed. I take out my “go bag.” Everything I need in the event of an emergency to vanish and become someone new.

I won’t be taking it though. The paperwork and some of the more vicious spells are illegal. I don’t need to bring more trouble into Kalos’s home than I already am. I do take a portal spell I’d worn the night of the job at Kalos’s and string it on my useless amulet necklace. I have one other in the bag, so in a pinch, I can drop in to get the bag and get away again. The gut reaction to have an emergency plan is one I don’t argue with. Kalos can try his best to keep me safe, but I’m still responsible for myself.

I’m not worried about other magic users sensing the spell. It has a glamour on it so the magic can’t be sensed by a person unless they focus on it. I carefully put my go bag back in its hiding place and do one last look around the room before zipping the duffel.

“I’m ready,” I say, leaving my bedroom.

“Is that all you’re bringing?” Ben asks, frowning at the bag.

I shrug. “I travel light.”

“If you’re sure.” Ben offers his arm and I take it, inhaling to ready myself this time when he teleports us. I wasn’t prepared last time and yelped in the most undignified way, which he’d profusely apologized for.

It’s a quick thing that turns my stomach, but we’re back in the entryway of Kalos’s place.

I sway on my feet for a moment. “Ugh.”

Ben laughs, patting my hand before disconnecting it from his arm. “Sorry, most people get used to it.”

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

Ben shrugs. “Then it’s that bad every time. You’ll need my help to leave whenever you need to go anywhere for a while.”

Kalos probably wants to keep your presence a secret until he can determine who of his people are loyal.”

“He doesn’t know who is loyal now?”

Ben sighs. “Let me show you to your room. Do you want me to carry your bag?”

I shake my head, and Ben gestures for me to go up the stairs. Only when we’re halfway up does he answer my question. His long legs have him in front of me so I can’t track his emotions.

“There’s never been a reason to shore up our defenses,” he says. “Kalos is the biggest name in this city because he’s wealthy and powerful. His position is strong and there are no other logical contenders.”

He’s the big bad wolf. Or big bad dragon, rather.

“He’s never been vulnerable, so he’s never had to test his people,” I say.

“Exactly. For most employees, undying loyalty isn’t a requirement. He only requires people do their jobs and not do anything to hurt the business. Not to bite the hand that feeds them.”

“But now, if his enemies want to get at him, they just have to get to me.” My lower lip trembles before I press them together to stop the show of weakness.

“Don’t worry. Kalos has my loyalty,” he says as we come to the landing. There’s a stability to Ben, one that rings his beliefs to the heavens.

“Why?” I ask. How does someone inspire this much loyalty in a person?

His smile is soft. “He’s the only family I’ve ever known. Not because we’re related, but because he decided that I was one of his to protect. From what I’ve been able to find out about you, I know you understand how important that is.”

I inhale. We share a look that only two people who have no biological family can share. I nod and Ben continues up the next flight of stairs.

“Sorry about all the stairs,” he says. “Maggie made up a room near Kalos’s, and he prefers the top floor. I’d have taken you straight there, but wanted to give you a chance to navigate the house.”

“Maggie?”

“She acts as the housekeeper and chef. There are a few cleaners that come to do the major upkeep of this place and she manages them. You’ll meet her at dinner. Did you want a tour?”

My eyelids are already heavy. The tiny nap I’d taken before on the dragon’s lap didn’t make a dent in the exhaustion that I’ve spent days fighting. “Can I get one later? This place is huge, and I’m pretty tired.”

“Of course. You can get settled and come down when you’re ready.”

Ben’s agreeableness is so contrary to Kalos that it’s jarring. It’s amazing that he can stand to work with the dragon, but you don’t abandon family. Maybe he likes Kalos’s grumpy nature.

“Sorry you have to babysit me,” I say.

Ben shakes his head, his smile open. “You misunderstand. Kalos entrusted you to me while he’s too busy to protect you. It’s an honor to be the one to help him with this.”

“You think he cares that much? Sorry, I shouldn’t ask you something like that.” We stop before a closed door, and Ben gazes down at me.

“I think he cares so much that it threatens to tear him apart,” he says. “I’ve never seen him as thrown off as he was today.”

“I did surprise him.” My mouth is dry, and my heart is painfully hopeful. It doesn’t seem to matter how many times it gets kicked, it still wants some sort of fairytale ending.

“That you did.” Ben opens the door and enters the room. I freeze on the threshold while he checks the windows and ducks into rooms that must be either closets or bathrooms.

The room is big, almost three times the size of my apartment. It's beautiful in an odd mix of modern and medieval, with understated patterns in shades of purple and cream. Every detail down to the shape of the furniture is elegant. There's a sitting area around a modern, enclosed fireplace off to the side of a giant canopy bed with curtains.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

Ben laughs, returning to be at the doorway. "Kalos does nothing halfway. It's all clear. Let me put my number in your phone."

I unlock and hand over the device numbly. Ben inputs all his details and curves his lips as he gives it back.

"I took the liberty of sending myself a message so I have your number and put Kalos's personal cell in there too."

"Thanks."

"Take all the time you need," Ben says and leaves without ceremony, closing the door as he goes as if he knows I need a minute alone. Or many minutes.

I walk into the room in a daze. There's a lamp with a quartz base that reminds me of the figurine that started all this. Where did that end up? Does it matter? I've stolen so many items in my life that they blend together, but not that one.

Maybe it's because I'd worried over every curve of the figurine before placing it in the bag that morning. As if I'd been waiting for Kalos to come back out and apologize for his words. The numbness that followed that neediness was a blessing.

And now I'm back in this house under very different circumstances. I frown at the memory before blinking. What if the figurine held fertility magic in it? I curse under my breath. I hadn't handled the piece with gloves like I should have. It could have had any sort of curse on it, and I'd held it like a lifeless rock.

I set my bag on the floor and throw myself back on the bed. I need to stop being so reckless.

I put my hand over my middle and let the warmth of it seep into my skin. “I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

Some of the nerves dancing behind my sternum settle. It’s comforting to say something out loud. To address the catalyst for all this. “I’ll make it up to you with all the heat and spicy food you want. I’ll keep you safe.”

I swallow. “We’re going to have a good life. Whether that dragon wants to be involved or not.”

With that promise. I relax into the bed for some desperately needed rest.

KALOS

“NO BEN TODAY?” My driver asks.

“I do leave the house without him from time to time,” I growl.

“Of course, sir.”

I sigh and massage the bridge of my nose. The business with the thief is throwing me. The business with *Katarina*, I mentally correct.

“I’m sorry, Jensen,” I say. “I’m strung a little tight today.”

“Happens to the best of us, sir. Do you anticipate trouble?” he asks. There are many people in my organization who are only loyal to the mighty dollar, Jensen isn’t one of them. He’s an older shifter whose pack moved territories a while back. He didn’t go with them because his mate is buried here. It’s rare for a shifter to live through the death of their mate to begin with, him leaving her grave wasn’t an option.

He’d had a hard time finding a position that fit his skills because of his age. Which is ridiculous. Shifters keep much of their strength and mental acuity while they age. Jensen could go for another twenty years before needing to concede to Time. I don’t know if I’d want to replace him even then.

Dragons usually live in familial groups or develop bonds with those they surround themselves with. Bonding of any type isn’t an option for me. I try to not get attached to the presence of beings that I’ll outlive, but there are a few people who slip past. Maggie, Ben, and even my godson Gage will at

least be in my life for another couple of centuries, though Gage would probably prefer differently. I'd be hard-pressed to admit that Jensen has slipped past those defenses as well, but the shifter is likable.

"Maybe," I admit. "I've heard word that the Leonids have been encroaching on our territory, hanging out at establishments under my protection, being witnessed before shipments go missing."

Jensen frowns in the rearview mirror. "The Council won't do anything about your suspicions?"

I huff a laugh. "The Council is not a fan of mine."

For all that I'd threatened to turn Katarina over to them when I caught her, it's better to handle issues myself than to submit myself to their shrewish glare. If I go to them for help, they're more likely to find a way to blame me so that they finally have a reason to curtail my power than to come to my aid.

Jensen makes a sound and continues, "I'll ask the other drivers while you're in your meeting. The people in the family won't talk, but drivers like to blab."

I grin. "Do you blab all my business, Jensen?"

The man huffs, offended. "You'd deserve it if I did with your apparent lack of trust in me."

"Very true." I swallow. "There will be a woman living with me, maybe long term. It's undecided."

It would be safer for her and the child to store them in a secret location after the birth, but my dragon refuses that option. We will have young, and he will not be parted from them. The struggle between my logical self and beast has never been so opposite. At one time, a very long time ago, we were one, but as with many immortals who spend time in a human form, a separate sense of self developed.

I suspect that it has more to do with how I locked down my instincts the last time I lost control, but the result is the same. He is an echo of what I was centuries ago, and when not in

heat or the presence of a pesky thief, gets more and more distant.

I wonder if the day will come when the beast in me will be a stranger.

I don't know if that's a loss to dread or a boon to look forward to. It is difficult to house a fire-breathing beast while surrounded by civility, but to lose him would be to lose myself, and that isn't something I want no matter how inconvenient the beast is.

"Oh? Are you finally settling down?" Jensen's tease brings me back to the conversation at hand.

"She's pregnant." I press back into the seat cushion and mentally curse how hard this is to talk about, but I trust Jensen and he needs the details to do his job the best he can. "With my child."

"Oh." The teasing note leaves Jensen's voice, but it warms quickly. "Congratulations."

The expected response to the wish sticks in my throat. He's the first one to utter such a thing with sincerity instead of focusing on all the ways this complicates things. This is something completely unprecedented and has the power to dredge up long buried memories... but it is miraculous.

I avoid the emotions that rise from that and continue with the logistics.

"You won't be the one to transport her for now," I say. It would be best if any time she leaves the estate, she does so with Ben so she can't be tracked. It will give me time to sort out who we can trust. Security guards, house cleaners, gardeners. Everyone will need to be evaluated for weaknesses.

"You're keeping the information private while you can." Jensen nods in understanding. "I'll protect our pack with my life."

Our pack.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I say.

Jensen only nods. “You’ll have Maggie caring for her, of course.”

I blink. I hadn’t considered that. Dragons don’t deal with pregnancy in the same way. They don’t have terrible symptoms during gestation or need a healer to check in on them.

“Excellent idea,” I say, not bothering to poke at Jensen for the way his face softens at her name.



I TAP my toe in impatience and get annoyed at the shiny dress shoe. The shoes and the suit go hand in hand with the image I want to project. Cool, controlled, authoritative.

The conference room is another projection of that image. The window shows surrounding skyscrapers, but this one is the best. This building acts as the main hub of my business. There are so many facets of it now that it’s a running joke that it only needs crops growing on the roof to be self-sustaining.

The conference table is large, the surface gleaming, but the other side is empty.

I narrow my eyes, but in the next beat, the Leonids enter.

A moment later would be an insult, and a moment earlier would communicate a subservience they don’t feel. It’s a game that makes me want to roll my eyes.

The men are all bulky in stature, as most shifters are. Usually, the family structures don’t get as large for feline shifters, but this one defies expectation. The three men sit on the other side of the table, not waiting for me to rise and shake their hands, which I wouldn’t have. I can only act so human. I don’t do business as one.

In a way, I’m still lord of the land even though the lands and denizens have changed.

The head of the family nods to me. It’s a surprise that he’s here instead of sending his heir to this meeting. It signals that

there is some strategy at work here. Lorenzo Leonid is in his sixties, young enough in shifter circles to still want to cause problems. His body language tries to communicate relaxation, but a drop of sweat gathers at his hairline.

This will be interesting.

His heir, unfortunately named Leo Leonid, sits at his right. The man is in his twenties, and his body vibrates with tension. The black bag that rests on his lap causes a pang of familiarity to travel over my senses. Lorenzo's brother sits to his left. He's bigger than Lorenzo in breadth, but lacks the glint of cunning intelligence in the head of the family's eyes. He's here to act as bodyguard, even though there is little that he could do if I wanted to destroy the shifters in front of me.

The Council that governs paranormal beings has more to do with me not destroying a fellow territory leader. They require balance, and the Leonid's territory is too similar to mine in size for me to overpower them with the fact that I am a dragon.

"It's always good to see you, Kalos. How have you been?" Lorenzo starts.

He wants to talk pleasantries after attempting to waste my time.

"Your tactics are tiring. Tell me why you wanted this meeting." If I didn't have this meeting, I'd be focused on Katarina's presence in my home.

"Of course, we're only being friendly. As one territory leader to another."

I raise my brows instead of responding.

"You seem like you're doing well," he starts.

"I am." Surprise pregnancy announcements aside, I wouldn't give him another answer even if it were untrue.

"We thought with the news of the break-in last week that you may need to cancel this meeting," Lorenzo says with a shrug.

My shoe stops tapping.

If Ben were here, he'd be able to tell me when the Leonids made this meeting. For a moment, his absence is suddenly like being without a limb. The imbalance is something that could be corrected and accounted for in time, but not what I'd want to adapt to.

It doesn't matter though if they'd made this appointment before my thief had stolen her way into my hoard or after. These are her employers.

Something that I should have questioned her about earlier, but I had been too distracted by her unbelievable news.

I am not distracted now.

"Why yes," I start, not denying the event that they wouldn't have known about unless they orchestrated it. Ben hadn't even known before the thief had returned. "Having a break-in is startling, but I find it rather invigorating. It's truly been an age since I've gone through my ranks and culled." My smile is all teeth, and the men in front of me flinch.

Lorenzo clears his throat. "We know how dragons hate to lose any piece of their hoard, so we tracked it down for you, as a favor of goodwill."

Leo unzips the bag on his lap and places the figurine that Katarina had taken from my hoard on the table. The dragon in me would normally jump to reclaim the lost item, but our brewing young makes us both leery.

I mentally scoff. *Goodwill.*

"How kind of you. And what is the cost of this goodwill?" I ask.

They seem a little disappointed at my lack of reaction. A dragon's obsession with their hoard is legendary because it's very much based on reality. They couldn't have anticipated that we hold to our young even tighter.

"It's a small thing, really. You'd hardly notice it," Lorenzo starts. "It's not even currently in use."

Their deaths would be so satisfying. I start tapping my fingers on the table in annoyance.

“Don’t waste my time, gentlemen,” I say when Lorenzo is distracted by my fingers. Probably more so the talon tips.

He swallows. The stab of satisfaction at the visible tell is vicious and gratifying.

“We’re looking at expanding into imports and exports,” Lorenzo says. “We would like for you to gift us the northern fae gate.”

I still again. “That is a rather serious request.”

Lorenzo nods. “And this is a rather important part of your hoard.”

It is. I collect items in a variety of ways. One of which is by gifts of friendship and oaths of alliance.

It’s an open secret that important relics are safe with me. Many groups of paranormals have found gifting me items is a way to keep their objects safe and cared for. This figurine is one such item.

“You’ll understand if I need some time to think through this offer,” I say and am in too foul of a mood to feel the urge to laugh at the look of shock on their faces.

I can’t let them have the fae gate. That opens up an ocean of trouble. Trafficking of rare paranormals is still a risk that we live with daily. The fae don’t change quickly. They’ve yet to discontinue their practice of indentured servitude, and there are rumors that some nobles in their courts ascribe to their old ways of consuming power through the flesh of certain types of creatures. There are reasons why so many magical folk fled the fae realm ages ago.

I make a note to call the witches that entrusted the figurine to me. I informed them when it was taken, but they didn’t worry about others using it for magic, and they trusted that eventually I’d find a way to include it in my collection again.

But they won’t be pleased if I don’t reclaim the figurine in a timely manner, and their coven is a partnership I value. One thing at a time.

“Thank you for your time, gentlemen,” I say, before leaving the shifters to their shock. The figurine is safe with them, they won’t want to lose the leverage they have, but they may try to make it weightier.

I have time to figure this out.

KATARINA

I WAKE from my nap to the growl of my stomach. It feels like just a moment ago that Kalos fed me, but I guess it's time to start eating for two.

I check in with my body. The practice is a familiar one, even if I'm rusty. Being connected to my physical self was risk management when I worked with Nemo. I had to be aware of each sore muscle, stiff joint. Every movement needed to be accounted for.

I've gotten lax since quitting that life. Otherwise, I wouldn't let my back and neck muscles stay tight from craning over my work. I stretch the muscles with a wince. The days of shivering haven't done me any favors.

I'm not nearly as warm as I was when I woke in Kalos's arms, but I'm not cold either. Instead of messaging Ben, I follow my nose to the kitchen. Ben seems nice, but I don't want to annoy him with my needs.

I take a few wrong turns, but eventually I find the hearth of the house in the form of an ultra-modern kitchen. There's a humidity and my mouth waters at the scent of cooking meat.

The woman takes me by surprise. She's tall and wears a chef's jacket. Her gray-streaked brown hair is pulled into a sleek bun. Her face is the sort that is described as ageless, but there are smile lines at the corner of her eyes.

"There you are!" she says. Her voice is rich with a touch of motherliness to it. "I was going to send Ben to go wake you."

“Here I am,” I say awkwardly.

The woman who must be Maggie comes around the corner. “Let me get a good look at you.”

She takes both my hands, and I gasp at a tickling sensation, yanking away from her.

“Sorry!” She blushes. “Sometimes I forget to ask. It’s been so long since I’ve been called on to use my skills. May I check on you and the baby?”

“Check on?” I ask.

“Kalos didn’t say anything to you?”

“No.” The sensation of being ambushed makes me want to inch away.

The woman rolls her eyes. “Ah, well, he did seem in a bad mood when he got back. I’m Maggie, and I used to be a healer before coming to work here.”

Something starts to boil over in the kitchen, and Maggie whisks to it. I blink as I absorb her pointed ears.

“You’re fae!” I say, forgetting my manners. People don’t usually go around proclaiming what they are. “I’m so sorry!”

Maggie’s laugh is warm. “No problem. You probably haven’t met many of my kind. I am fae, though on this side of the gates that doesn’t mean as much.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, hoping that she’ll answer my questions.

Very few people are open about their origins in our world. Nemo barely spoke about it, and even then, it was pieced out as prizes given after completing a job I’d been leery of. I was willing to get into all sorts of trouble for one of those prizes.

I’d like to think I’m not so eager now... but I’m still the same person, if a little more wise and less shiny.

Maggie’s smile is warm. “When we’re separated from the fae realm, we stop being fueled by it. We age, though slowly, and we’re limited to what fae magic we can do. Those born in this realm are different.”

“But you can still heal?”

“My ability to heal came from a witch in my line, not on my fae side.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know that witches ever went to the fae realm. I know very little about what realms there are. What I do know is limited to anything I could pick up from conversation. Most smugglers and fences know about the fae gates, but my awareness ends there.

“Kalos asked if I wouldn’t mind being the healer to check on you and the baby’s development.” Maggie tilts her head. “Dragons normally don’t gestate like witches do, so I’m surprised he thought to ask me, but I’m happy to use my gift to keep an eye on things.”

“Thank you,” I breathe. “I have no idea on what’s going on in there, so having someone who knows what is normal would be a relief.”

“Of course, dearie.” She wipes her hands on a rag. “Now, let’s try this again.”

She holds her hands out, and I place mine in them. The tingle of power isn’t a surprise this time. Maggie closes her eyes for a moment in concentration before opening them again and squeezing my hands in comfort. “Everything looks good!”

What tension that didn’t ease after Kalos said the baby was healthy loosens now. “Really?”

“Yes, we’ll keep track of how they are growing, but everything that’s needed is there.”

“That’s good,” I say lamely, even as my eyes well.

Maggie squeezes my shoulder in comfort. “You’ve had a busy week. I’ll prepare you a snack so you can settle that growling stomach of yours and take a minute. It won’t be a big snack since dinner is almost ready.”

I open my mouth to say I can make it myself, but she beats me to it.

“Please, let me. It’s been so long since I’ve been able to take care of someone. Kalos and Ben are so self-sufficient. If

they didn't need me to cook for them, they'd be unstoppable."

I huff a laugh. "If you insist."

Maggie's movements are efficient as she prepares the food, and soon I have a platter of salami and cheese in front of me with some grapes on the side.

I furrow my brow.

Maggie answers my unspoken question. "Kalos said that you've been nauseous with colder foods, but that with the heat needs of the child being satisfied, that shouldn't be a concern. I'd like for you to test that if you don't mind? I want to make sure there isn't anything he missed."

My stomach growls again, making my cheeks burn. "I'm hungry enough to try anything. It would be nice to know I can eat ice cream without ending up vomiting."

I start slowly with nibbling the cured meat before my nerves settle, and I eat it.

Maggie keeps an eye on me as she continues cooking dinner.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

I analyze the sensations of my body. Nausea doesn't rise up like it's done for the past week.

"Wonderful." The relief of that is strong. "I feel like I could cry."

Maggie laughs. "That will be normal for pregnancy."

"I could use some normalcy."

KALOS

MAGGIE OUTDID HERSELF FOR DINNER, as always. Though I notice that she's overloaded Katarina's meat serving with one of the hot sauces she brews from scratch. Maggie knowing exactly what we need is the norm.

What isn't the norm is her and Ben excusing themselves from the dining room to give Katarina and me *privacy*. Do they expect something more to happen other than us discussing the logistics of how her life will change? Do they think I want to have a relationship with this woman? That I'm able?

They both should know better.

"How do you feel?" I ask, awkwardness I can't shake clings to the question.

"Better," she says, and her smile softens the tension of the situation.

She looks better. The dark circles under her eyes have already started to lighten, and her grin is reminiscent of the wry way she'd teased me that night. The night I'd taken her over and over again. The memory threatens to let loose the beast that wants to fawn over her, demand things from her.

Our tryst had been in the low light of the moon, and the accent lighting directed on the pieces of my hoard on display. I'd missed details about the woman carrying our young in the darkness.

Her face is pretty enough, her small mouth lush in a way that tempted the dragon that night nearly as much as her scent, which now satisfyingly carries a hint of my own. Her hair is an ordinary color somewhere between blonde and a soft brown, but her green eyes sparkle like my best emeralds. They are arresting. Dangerous.

There's a brightness to her. A shine that I've rarely seen in my life except for centuries ago.

I wonder if that shine pulled in my dragon, though nothing else about her is similar to who we lost.

"For the pregnancy, you should live here," I start, continuing before she finishes chewing. "Ben has already paid the rent on your apartment through the next year, so you don't need to worry about going through the motions of moving until you want to."

It had been his idea as a way to make her feel less trapped and reliant on me. It's a good one.

"Oh, you didn't need to—" she starts.

"I have many things at my disposal, including money. If having the apartment comforts you, allow me to do this."

She blinks. "Okay. I'm not going to complain about that. It does make me feel better to keep the apartment. Thank you."

I nod and continue. "It would be best, for the time being, if you were here as a standard and only left the estate with Ben's help."

"Ben said something about how you need time to figure out who you can trust in your organization."

It's good that Ben thought to warn her.

"To that end," I continue. "You should move your work here if you can. I need Ben to assist me, and while I can get by without him, I can't do so all the time."

Katarina shrugs. "That's reasonable."

She's being so flexible, letting me call the shots. Bending for me in a way that has the dragon wanting to make her do

things to please it. I shake my head to dispel the urge.

“So, I’ve met Maggie and Ben, will there be more of your inner circle that’ll know about me?” she asks.

“Jensen, my driver, knows, but that will be all for the time being.”

She raises her brows. “That’s a pretty small inner circle.”

I twitch my lips. “It’s better for your safety. And when you live as long as I have, it’s advantageous to keep connections few and far between.”

“That sounds like it would be lonely.”

“There are worse things to be than lonely.” My voice goes soft when I don’t mean for it to.

Katarina tilts her head in thought, and an uncomfortable silence falls between us. I get the sense that I’ve shown her more than I’ve meant to. I’m about to talk about something else, anything else, when she breaks it. Blessedly changing the topic.

“If I need to be here for the majority of the time, I need to have my friend be able to visit me,” she says.

I want to agree because that’s reasonable, but I hold back. “Is this friend involved in anything dangerous?” I ask.

“Oh, no! Not at all. I met her after leaving that life.”

I nod. “Then of course.” I think on it. “And have Ben be the one that transports her in too.”

She agrees and takes a bite of her food.

I mentally check off all the items as a way to keep my mind from wandering to the urge to have her on my lap and feed her. It’s an instinctual response, nothing more.

“After the child is born—” I clench my jaw on the words that they should live elsewhere. My dragon is causing more trouble than I know how to deal with. I’m tapping my talons, trying to think of what he’ll accept, trying to set expectations.

Katarina places her hand on mine, scales and all. “We don’t need to decide now. We can wait until we know each other better.”

I nod. Knowing each other better shouldn’t make any difference, but I accept the opportunity to stall this fight with my beast.

I move on to something that can’t be stalled. “I need you to tell me about who employed you to steal the figurine.”

She releases my hand and starts to look nervous. “Uh, I can’t tell you that.”

“Rina,” I say softly, and some tension leaves her at the shortening of her name. My dragon puffs in pride. “This is something important to your safety. What led you to take the job to break into my hoard?”

She squirms. “I wasn’t employed to do it. It was a favor for someone.”

“A favor led you back into a life that you are adamant you aren’t in anymore?” I pry.

“He was in danger, and I care about him.”

I take a moment to breathe through the explosion of jealousy in my chest that burns like dragon fire. I am more than this instinctual reaction. It’s a close thing though.

“Romantically?” I ask.

“Oh, god no!” Katarina’s horrified face soothes the burn. “Just someone who looked out for me and taught me skills when I needed them.”

She doesn’t name him, which is smart. But she doesn’t need to. Ben already gave me a report about her, which includes Nemo Wint as being the person who she worked with in thieving. I would not describe their relationship as one where he looked out for her.

I’ve mentored many people, and I’ve never put a teenager in the danger that he must have. He got to her young and used her for her skills.

And now, as an adult, she put herself in danger because of some misplaced loyalty.

It makes me want to kill him.

“Alright,” I say. I can’t discuss this anymore and remain logical.

Katarina sighs in relief. “You got a little murderly there.”

I twitch my lips. “I try not to, but my dragon can have outsized reactions.”

“Is your dragon who I met that night?” she asks, a teasing note to her voice. “I like him.”

And he very much likes you.

“He’s closer to the surface during breeding time,” I allow.

At the word *breeding*, her cheeks redden temptingly, and I watch her place a hand on her still flat stomach.

She clears her throat. “Well, I had fun.” She grins, and a strand of hair falls onto her cheek.

I clench my fist to keep from smoothing the rebellious strand behind her ear. It’s more of a temptation not to touch the woman than it should be. My familiarity with her body doesn’t help. The knowledge of how it feels to have her tightness strangle my cock and the mewling sounds she’d make are poisonous spines lying in wait.

Dangerous.

“You said that dragons can only breed under certain conditions, do you think that the figurine influenced that? It’s a magic item, isn’t it?” she asks.

I lift my chin to consider the matter before shrugging. “Unlikely. These things are written into the very threads of our soul. The figurine is from a coven of witches who are powerful, but not as powerful as that.”

“What are the conditions that allow dragons to breed then? Maybe we accidentally did something.” Katarina’s brow is furrowed. I don’t want to ponder how this came to be. It

doesn't change anything. The child exists no matter how impossible.

“We did not. Dragons can only breed with their mate.” I clench my jaw, trying to keep my tone even.

It was a mistake to say that.

Katarina's face lights up as if that possibility is precious. Something her soul craves. It's a lash across my senses.

She opens her mouth before I can head her off. “Do you think it's possible—”

I almost snarl to interrupt her. “You cannot be my mate because I already have one.”

KATARINA

“YOU’RE MATED?” Fury I don’t recognize blazes through my chest, even as surprise is as sharp as a slap.

How dare he?

How could he be with me while he was connected to another? Is this just one more thing I don’t understand about paranormal beings? But everything I’ve heard treats mating as an absolute. Infidelity in a mating is almost unheard of. Alarm flares next, protective over the little disturbance inside me. What does him having a mate mean for our child?

Kalos closes his eyes, his face pained. “My apologies. I *had* a mate.”

Had.

“Oh,” I say. Past tense. He had a mate. My anger and fear fade, leaving a washed-out, ambiguous sense of longing.

Kalos holds himself so tightly that it’s a wonder I don’t hear his bones grinding together.

The longing makes me open my mouth when I shouldn’t because I *need* to know. “What happened to them?”

“She died. A long time ago.” Kalos’s gold eyes open, but he doesn’t look at me.

How long ago doesn’t matter. His emotions are stark in the lines of his body and face.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. The sentiment is a useless one, but it doesn’t make it less true.

Kalos shrugs and sighs before his gaze meets mine again. “Dragons have one predestined mate. So you see, we are not mates, and I wouldn’t want us to be. My heart is only meant for one.”

My brain is too stubborn to let this go without more investigation. “But the night we spent together—”

His eyes freeze over, and my words dry up. “Was about sex,” he says. “Not love, and it was a mistake.”

Mistake. That word shatters the tenuous hope in my chest that whispered that I’d finally found my place in the world. That after all the human couples who’d declined to adopt me, I’d found a family.

“*Being mated to you would be a lower circle of hell,*” he’d said. Even if he could mate with me, he wouldn’t want to.

Kalos clears his throat and pushes his chair away from the table, standing and adjusting his suit. He takes the jagged remains of that hope and continues to stab my heart.

“You are the mother of my child. I will try my best to make you comfortable, but do not look to me for anything else.”

The numbness spreads out from my chest.

“I don’t say this to be cruel, but for you to know your place here,” Kalos says.

I blink up at him. For all that his pain was on display a moment ago, his face shows no emotion now. He nods like I’ve agreed and leaves. His footsteps are clipped and echo in the empty dining room until they fade, disappearing entirely.

The beautiful room that was warm and cheery just a moment ago is as silent as a tomb.

I inhale a shuddery breath, trying to do damage control on the thud of my heart.

I don’t love him, so why does what he said hurt so much?



SLEEP COMES SLOWLY FOR ME. I'm in the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in, and still my mind spins. I find another blanket in the closet and add it to the bed. I'm not quite cold yet, but past the hollow pain in my chest, the chill is encroaching again.

Eventually I'll go to Kalos to get an injection of warmth, but I can't right now. I'm licking my wounds.

Tomorrow, I'll be strong. Tonight, I grieve.

I don't love Kalos. I loved the idea of having a fated mate. A place where I fit. I thought that maybe that place could be with Kalos.

There's something magnetic about him. When he's not being cruel, it's hard to remember that he's practically a stranger.

But nothing is going to happen with him. He still feels for the rightful mate that he lost.

I sigh and rub my chest.

I'd always expected that when I had kids, it would be with a man who loved me. Who was excited to be a father and we'd be every bit of the family that I never had. It's not fair to hold Kalos to that expectation, but releasing my desire for that is hard.

It clings to me with skeletal hands. It has the power to make me miserable if I'm constantly thinking of what I don't and can't have. It's not my fault Kalos is the definition of emotionally unavailable. I can't expect that to change. I can only expect to adapt to the situation.

I'm having a baby. They will be my family. Stella will be my family. Maybe with time, Maggie and Ben will be too. I can mourn the moment of losing something I never had, but I won't let that take me down in a spiral.

I don't realize that I've fallen asleep until I wake in the dark with a start, shivering.

Cinnamon and the scent of campfire.

He's here.

I'm on my side, and the blankets behind me lift.

My throat swells closed. The chill has returned.

The bed dips like he's pressed his knee on the edge.

"I am sorry for hurting you," he says softly. There's a warmth near my cheek as if his hand hovers there, but it disappears without touching me.

I swallow and don't respond. The emotions I thought I'd tamped down are too close to the surface. I don't want to say something stupid like *Why don't you want me?*

When really, why would he want me?

"Do you want me to leave?" he asks.

"No." The word is barely a rasp on my lips, but he hears it anyway. His body slides behind mine, his arm wrapping around my waist.

I gasp at the contact of his hot body against mine. The cold flees immediately. The pajamas I wear are flannel and act as a buffer, covering every bit of skin between us.

The instant relief almost brings tears to my eyes.

"Sleep, Rina," he says. The words brush over the exposed skin of my neck and ear.

I don't fight the command. I don't snap at him not to call me a nickname if he's the one putting boundaries in place. I don't get mad at him for making it too easy to soften for him.

I give in.

KATARINA

BREATHE IN. Breathe out.

I move with my breath, enjoying the burn and stretch of muscles. I follow the directive from the instructor on the tablet to keep one knee bent and dig into the knife edge of my back foot for Warrior II. This is nice. Calming. I can almost forget the worries that try to flurry around in my brain and focus on the moment.

Stella's gasping breaths beside me are distracting, but I don't hold it against her. There are a lot of distracting things. Things like the grit of the yoga mat on the stone patio, the sun beating down pleasantly on my back, that it's been a whole month since my world was turned on its head, or that my hair smells like campfire.

I shy away from that train of thought and the dragon it's going to revolve around, focusing hard on the cheerful instructor's words as she tells us to bring our feet together at the top of the mat before moving from our core to raise our right foot. Oh, a balancing move!

Stella topples with a shriek.

"Are you okay?" I pause the video and Stella stays spread on the mat, trying to catch her breath.

"I'm fine. Everything is fine... this was a terrible idea," she says.

My lips twitch. "It was your idea."

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be a bad one. All the research says that yoga is great for birth.”

I skip over the thought of birth and laugh. “That’s great to know, but you don’t have to do it with me.”

“I’m being supportive.” Stella’s face is bright red with exertion. “I thought this was supposed to be relaxing, not pushups and planks.”

“I’m sure it gets easier with practice,” I muse, hiding my secret smile that Stella is willing to go out of her comfort zone for me just to be supportive.

She glares at me, no doubt noticing that I’m not gasping or sweaty. “Why are you good at this?”

I raise a brow and point at myself. “Cat burglar, remember? Being able to balance is kind of important.”

“But you stopped doing that ages ago.”

I smile and shrug, unwilling to admit that I’d kept up my physical routines. The compulsion not to lose strength tastes like that life-and-death decision still. Sometimes moving my body lets me relax when the world and my conscience yells at me, and other times... it’s because I’m afraid of needing those skills again and not having them.

“Some things just stay with you,” I say.

“How did you get into that anyway?”

“I’ve just always had an aptitude for it.” It’s too embarrassing to admit the real reason I started trying to balance on everything I could and perfecting my cartwheels since I can remember.

Stella raises a brow at me. “Sure you have.” She takes a deep breath and blows a strand of hair out of her face. “I think I’m ready to finish it.”

I glance at the practice. There’s twenty minutes left. “We don’t need to do a whole practice today. I hardly think I need to be ready to give birth soon.”

“Okay!” Stella accepts my offer readily. “Do you know how long you’re going to be pregnant for? You still don’t look like it, and I figured with how quickly you were experiencing side effects that pregnancy would be quicker for dragons.”

I purse my lips. “I don’t know.”

I’m the same size as when I’d shown up a month ago. Maybe I’ll ask Kalos how long gestation is if I ever see him. He makes himself scarce, only sliding into bed to act as my personal heater after I’ve fallen asleep. Sometimes I wake to his presence before going back to sleep, and sometimes I don’t, only catching whiffs of campfire on my sheets in the morning and waking comfortably cozy.

He’s good at being a heater. The chill hasn’t returned, but I’ve been so tired that I haven’t been able to talk to him other than to mumble something nonsensical before he tells me to sleep with his authoritative voice that I want to curl up in.

During daylight hours, he avoids me. At first, I didn’t think he was. I figured he always ate his meals in his office and was never in the same parts of the house I was. But the passing comments from Maggie and Ben clued me in that this is unusual.

I don’t want to chase the man from his own home, but I have to be here for my and the baby’s safety. So I try to make it easier on everyone. I set up my workplace in a beautiful room on the other side of the house than his study and try not to utilize Ben’s time too much.

It helps that Ben never makes me feel like an inconvenience. He goes out of his way to make sure I have everything I need before I even think to ask for it. He and Maggie have made this whole experience a little more bearable.

Sure, I’m staying in a beautiful mansion, but my freedoms are pretty restricted. Luckily, Stella visiting me helps immensely.

It took some time to get used to living here, but I’ve adapted slowly. It doesn’t quite feel like home, but I eat

breakfast with Maggie in the kitchen, and she tells me fantastical stories about the fae realm before I work more hours than I probably should, stopping to grab food and take a moment to spend time in the gym Ben had showed to me. He even got some equipment I told him I needed for my gymnastic workouts. Sometimes I take my sketchbook out and explore the countless rooms in the house or the grounds.

The land included in Kalos's estate is a mix of forest and curated garden. There's even a small maze with a fountain shaped like a coiling dragon at its center. It's fun to lose myself in sketching the nature or architecture around me.

I live in Kalos's home, and my world revolves around avoiding him, but it's grown comfortable. I keep focused on my own tasks and try not to think about the dragon.

Most of the time I even forget I'm pregnant since the heat he feeds me has caused the symptoms I'd had before to disappear.

It isn't a bad way to live, but it is monotonous.

"Thank you for hanging out today. I know it can be boring ___"

"Kat, stop," Stella says. "It's not boring to hang out here. I know why you can't just leave when you want to. It's more important for you to be safe than to go to a café together. Let's move over to the grass. I know you like being in the sun, carrying a being that literally sucks heat from your bones and all, but it's really hot and my sunscreen isn't invincible."

I agree, and we move to the grass and trees.

"This place is beautiful though," Stella says. "The only bummer is that I have to deal with your errand boy."

I hum. "I don't know why you dislike each other so much."

Stella picks a blade of grass and glares at it. "Vibes. Some people you can just feel it."

The way Stella and Ben snap at each other could be an Olympic sport for all their perseverance and consistency. They

are opposites. Ben is everything order and organized. His job is to provide solutions. Stella is more chaos and glee. Her work is fluid and thoughts spontaneous.

“How did things go with the minotaur you were making a glamour for?” I ask, wanting to change the subject. I like Ben.

Stella winces. “Uh, yeah, turns out he needed a glamour because he’d met his soul mate online and didn’t want to freak her out.”

“Oh, damn, I’m sorry.”

She flicks the piece of grass away. “Don’t be. Just because I’m not finding love doesn’t mean other people can’t. I’d say that I wish I didn’t have to date, but that would be unappreciative because I know the other side of that.”

The other side of that is an arranged marriage like her mother had. A dark expression passes over her face, and I try to distract her.

“Maybe after I have this baby and they’re older, I’ll join you on the dating scene. I’d like to find love.”

Stella’s eyes widen in surprise. “Do you think Kalos would allow that?”

I frown. “He wouldn’t have a choice. We don’t have a relationship. He made his feelings about that loud and clear.”

Stella shrugs. “I guess I assumed he’d eventually change his mind. It’s not like it’s normal to cuddle with a woman every night and not have some sort of intimacy.”

“That’s needed for the baby.” I swallow. “He’s not going to change his mind and even if he did, why would I want him?”

Stella blinks at me, amused. “Because he’s powerful, gorgeous, and the sex was incredible?”

I shrug. “He doesn’t want me. I’m not going to beg for his affection. Living here while he’s doing everything to avoid me is... whatever. Anyway, there’s more to life than sex.”

Living here is comfortable, but there’s still a thread of loneliness that crops up every so often when I let my mind

wander. When I imagine what the future is going to look like.

“Keep telling yourself that,” Stella says. “But yeah, if I’m still single, we can go hunting for partners together. Partners that aren’t going to be stupid and will appreciate us. I’ve heard whispers of a matchmaker. Maybe we’ll try that.”

I tilt my head at that. That wouldn’t be a bad idea. I could ask for someone kind. Someone agreeable who would be excited to help me raise a kid. I don’t think Kalos has any interest in being a parent or helping with anything other than financial support.

Even with him being well off, I didn’t expect the credit card with no limit that Ben gave me on Kalos’s orders.

I should still ask what type of arrangement Kalos wants to have after the baby is born. If I ever see him that is.

The loneliness isn’t just from being here, but being here makes it more obvious. If I’m honest with myself, it’s clung to me for years.

Work has been about searching for redemption, not fulfillment. Stella is incredibly supportive but has her own life with her mom. Maggie and Ben have been nice and will be good to have in my and the baby’s life, if they want to be, but the people who are only in my corner... I don’t have that.

I may have thought at one time that Nemo was that person, but I don’t want him anywhere near my kid.

“A matchmaker sounds interesting,” I say.

“Want to hear the best part?”

I raise a brow at her, and Stella whispers. “It’s at a sex bathhouse.”

I blink. “A sex bathhouse? Do those really exist?”

“Oh, my sweet summer child, you have no idea. We’ll have to go sometime when your jailer allows it.”

I throw a piece of grass at her. “You’re the worst.”

“But you love me.”

“I do.”

Stella grows serious. “I worry sometimes that you’ll feel trapped here.”

I worry about that too.

“It’ll get better. I have a bunch of appointments to deliver projects next week, so I’ll get some new scenery.” There’s a rustle in the bushes behind me, and I sit up. “What was that?”

The foliage is thick, and I don’t see anything at first. I’d gone over the security with Ben and had him strengthen it with my advice so someone shouldn’t have been able to sneak in like I had.

“I didn’t hear anything. Maybe it’s a squirrel,” Stella says. Then there’s a raspy meow, and Stella jumps to her feet. “Cat! That was a cat.”

“Don’t scare it!” I whisper, but the rustling gets closer as if spurred by the sound of our voices.

The bushes part, and with a loud meow, a rangy orange cat pushes through.

“Oh, I love orange tabbies,” Stella says immediately, crouching down, but the cat pads toward me instead.

“Maybe it lives nearby?” I ask as the cat starts to rub against my legs. I crouch and pet the creature awkwardly.

“It looks like a tom cat.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because of the balls,” Stella teases. “Oh, you’re such a sweet guy and you love Katarina, don’t you?”

The cat’s fur has a greasy texture to it, and the stark bones under the animal’s coat makes my heart ache.

“I can feel all his bones.” I sit cross-legged, and he chirps before curling into my lap, purring loudly.

Stella frowns. “A stray then. He’s so friendly that I doubt he’s feral. I’ll have to take him to the shelter. Mom is allergic to cats.”

I suck in a breath at the thought of taking the cat anywhere, let alone to a shelter with cages. I glance around the bright estate. It's probably a paradise in his eyes.

"He can stay here," I say.

Stella freezes. "Are you sure?"

I quirk my lips as the answer comes to me. The rightness of it is a sigh of relief on my senses. "He'll be my cat."

I run my fingers through greasy fur and am rewarded with a louder purr. "I've always wanted a pet."

Stella opens her mouth before closing it. Probably to ask why I didn't have a pet if I've always wanted one.

I've never deserved one. But this guy just literally fell into my life, and I'm not going to say no to him.

"He did choose you," Stella says as if echoing my thoughts.

He closes his eyes in pleasure, looking too thin but majestic at the same time. "I'll name him Griffin."

Ben's voice comes from the house and gets louder the closer he gets. "Katarina, I'm just checking if your *guest* is going to stay for dinner—what the fuck is that?"

I turn my head, and Ben's face is contorted in horror.

"It's a cat," Stella says, her tone flat.

"I can see that. What if it's someone who spelled themselves to spy on you?" Ben asks.

I frown and look at Griffin. Is that even possible?

Stella guffaws. "Give me a little credit, Barnes. I would have sensed that type of spell. It's a damn cat."

Ben breathes in through his nostrils before responding. "That may be, but I'm not sure Kalos wants a *damn* cat wandering the house."

Anger sparks at that.

Stella is already snapping in response. "Too bad. You are now a beneficiary of the Cat Distribution System."

Before they start fighting about whatever that is, I insert myself. “Kalos isn’t the only person who lives here. I’ve done everything he’s asked of me without complaining. This is my home too, and I want to keep Griffin.”

Ben and Stella blink at me, but he recovers, his lip twitching. “Well, if that’s the law of the land, who am I to argue?” He looks down. “I assume we’re going to need to go on a supply run for... Griffin.”

KALOS

I LET OUT the breath I'm holding the moment I lose sight of Katarina and her friend from my place at the window. No doubt they mean to relax in the shade of the trees after doing their yoga. I never know if catching glimpses of the woman living under my roof is better for my beast or worse.

Each stolen sight yanks at him, but the days when I don't see her, he whines and scrapes at my self-control.

I expected her to tell me to leave the first time I'd joined her in bed, the scent of her tears still in the air, but she softened for me. She allowed me to contribute to the child inside of her the only way I'm able to.

I consider the routine of cradling her body in mine and feeding her the heat energy she needs the same as adding fire to a dragon egg. It's a sacred duty. One I've done twice in my life and never expected to again.

It's the only way I can explain away the peace the act gives me. The way I look forward to joining her bed every night and count down the hours until I can be there again. My dragon rages at me that it's because of *her*, but that's only a trick of my biology.

"Kalos," Sophia says from behind me.

"I'm listening," I lie.

"Sure doesn't seem like it," she mutters.

"Perhaps it would do with repeating," her bonded mate Mace says. "It is a beautiful day outside, and he no doubt

became distracted.”

That has the hair on the back of my neck rising. I turn from the window and glare at Mace, who winks back at me. He’s sprawled on the couch while Sophia sits at the edge of my desk, tossing up a glass paperweight before catching it. I narrow my eyes at her, and she drops the object back on the mahogany desk, sighing.

My eye twitches at the loud sound of the glass hitting the wood before I return my gaze to Mace.

The demon has a penchant for secrets. One that I’ve exploited from time to time, but that I’ve never been on the other side of. Can he hear Katarina laughing with her friend like I can? Dragons have better hearing. Either way, he knows something is up.

Could it be that he really can sense secrets?

Sophia arches a brow at Mace. “Behave,” she says as if she wasn’t just the one throwing around a one-of-a-kind artwork.

Wonderful. They both know something is awry. I trust them enough not to fire them in the literal sense for knowing that there’s an unknown woman residing with me. They work for me as independent contractors, and even though our relationship started contentiously, they are the loyal sort with similar ideals, but every person who knows about Katarina increases her risk.

Sophia looks at me expectantly. “The witches are not being patient. They want the figurine in trusted hands and don’t consider the Leonids as being that.”

Ah, yes, what this meeting is actually about.

I sigh. “I need more time. I will not give in to the Leonids’ demands in exchange for the figurine. Their price is too steep.”

I’d thought that being patient and waiting the shifters out would cause them to give another price I’d be willing to pay, but they are sticking to their original demand.

“What are they requesting for the figurine?” Mace asks.
“Just curious of course.”

I roll my eyes and tell him anyway. I need him and Sophia in the know for their next assignment. “They want the northern fae gate. They say they are getting into imports and exports.”

“Imports and exports, of course that’s what they are after.” Mace snarls.

He has a potent hatred for trafficking and has worked hard to stomp out every ring to crop up this side of the gates. The location of the northern gate is very remote. Ideal for that use case, and I have no reason to believe they’d use it for anything else.

The gate stands unused and sealed by the magic that gives me ownership. If it were closer to civilization it could be useful to me, but I have other gates that are much better situated for actual imports and exports of goods. As it is, the presence of the northern gate is a nuisance. An indestructible nuisance crafted with forgotten magic.

“Exactly,” I say. “I need you two to get me all the information you can about the Leonids. Specifically, anything that will give me leverage to demand new terms.”

“I don’t know why you don’t just destroy them,” Sophia says. She’s a harpy. Being bloodthirsty goes hand in hand with her kind. “You’re a big, fiery baddy, aren’t you?”

I sigh with patience like I haven’t explained this to her before. “Balance is important. If I take out a whole organization without a thought to who will replace them, we could be handing the position to someone worse. I don’t want to be a dictator. I’m too old to want to spend every moment policing everyone else. I won’t do that just to get the figurine back.”

It will require the situation to become much more dire for me to risk having to deal with the Council by upsetting their “balance.”

“What do you want me to tell the witches?” Sophia asks. The witches prefer only speaking with women. With the

number of power players that are like the Leonids in the game, I don't blame them.

"I need you to convince them to be patient," I say. "I will not abandon the figurine. Tell them the stakes are high for the safety of many paranormals if you must."

If I'd known that letting Katarina leave with the figurine would have caused so many headaches, I'd have locked her up in the caverns under this house after that night and just kept her there.

That's not true though. My dragon doesn't care for these games. He gave the piece of the hoard away for the woman's company. He only disliked when I stepped in and made sure we couldn't continue anything resembling a relationship after that night.

Mace stands. "I think Sophia can convince them."

Sophia raises both brows at him. "Oh really?"

"You are very clever, love."

The harpy who's skewered at least one man's balls with her talons according to my records blushes.

"Send the bill and your report about the Leonids when you can," I say. I hire them because they are skilled, not because I want to watch them simper after each other.

"We'll show ourselves out," Mace says, and there's a gleam in his eyes that gives me warning. "Odd that Ben seems so preoccupied of late."

"I'll show you out," I say, if only to keep the demon from snooping. I'd hate to have to kill him. I like him half of the time.

KATARINA

GRIFFIN CLEANS UP WELL. After Ben took Stella home, we go for a supply run. It took watching some videos online, but eventually, the cat has been bathed, fed, and is sleeping comfortably on my bed.

I'd asked Ben not to tell Kalos about the cat, and he had sighed as if I'd told him Maggie was never going to make her award-winning potatoes again. *I won't tell him, but he'll find out. You can't keep the cat a secret forever,* he'd said.

I don't need to keep Griffin a secret forever... just for now. I run my fingers through his fur which is a full shade lighter now that it's been washed, and he buries his face into the blanket on the bed in delight. Happiness glows in my chest. Being chosen by a cat may be a joke to some people, but the warmth of him under my hand and his rumbling purr just make me happy.

I don't want to pop that bubble for anything, especially not to tell Kalos. The house is big enough that he probably won't even notice Griffin prowling around. I'll keep him in the giant bathroom and closet combination at night when Kalos visits and go from there.

I sigh and check the time. Maggie said she wanted to do a health check before dinner, so I leave the cozy cat on my bed after some belly rubs.

As always, the kitchen smells amazing. Maggie sees me and points me toward the table and chairs of the breakfast nook that we all eat at during the day. The set-up is much

smaller than the dining table and has a comfortable bench at the back below a large window.

Maggie hustles over after checking all the pots on the stove. “Ben told me about the cat.”

My mouth drops open, and Maggie laughs.

“I thought he was capable of keeping a secret,” I say.

Maggie shakes her head. “He’s a gossip, or at least with me he is. He won’t tell Kalos because you asked him not to though. I’m glad you have a pet. I’d love to meet him when he isn’t a secret anymore.”

“His name is Griffin, and he’s perfect,” I say.

Maggie grins. “I have no doubt about that. Cats are always perfect.”

“I’m letting him settle in, but maybe in a couple of days he’ll have free range of the house.”

I hold out my hands for Maggie to check on the baby, and she takes them. The zing of her magic always tickles, and I focus on staying still. She takes longer this time, her brow furrowing in concentration before she smiles at me again, but it’s tighter now.

“I have some concerns, but I think we should talk to Kalos about them.”

The blood drains from my face. “What?”

Is it odd to be so attached to something that happened by accident? Maybe, but I don’t care. This is my baby, and there’s something wrong. Are they okay? What if I ate something I wasn’t supposed to? I haven’t even checked the chemicals I use for work. I always wear gloves, but could they have hurt the baby?

“It’s nothing serious yet,” she says firmly and pulls me to stand with her. “Let us go talk to him.”

I focus on controlling my breathing as we walk, and tears start to well in my eyes. Something is wrong, and I don’t know

what to do. Maggie pats my hand in reassurance, but it doesn't help the spikes of worry tearing at my heart.

What if it's my fault?

I don't think I could bear the guilt.

"Sweetie, it could be nothing." Maggie's voice is worried now. The tingles of her magic try to calm my riotous heart, but to no avail.

"What's wrong?" Kalos's voice comes as a surprise, and the sound of it makes it easier to take a deep breath. We've somehow navigated all the way to Kalos's study while I've been lost in my daze of panic.

Kalos strides forward from his place behind the desk, and I'm hit with the intimidation of his presence all over again.

"I have some concerns, but I need for her to try to calm down," Maggie says. "I thought it would be better to tell the two of you together."

His arms come around me in the next moment, and my shaky hands slide under his suit jacket. I breathe in his scent, and my heart rate starts to slow.

"Next time, just tell her. Don't wait for me. It's her body the child is in. She deserves to know what's going on," Kalos growls.

"Of course. I'm so sorry, Katarina," Maggie says.

I just nod, focusing on keeping myself calm. "Can you please say what you're worried about? The guesses in my head aren't good."

Maggie looks hesitant and glances at Kalos before starting, "The child isn't developing."

I tighten my hold on Kalos, not caring that we don't have the type of relationship where I can take solace in his arms. His body is a comfort I won't refuse.

"Explain," Kalos commands.

"They are only a little further in their development than they were when Katarina came here last month. They aren't

progressing like a normal pregnancy. You did say that eggs can lie dormant for years at a time without enough heat to spur growth.”

I breathe out a choked sob in relief. This could just be a dragon thing. This could be completely normal.

Maggie smiles at me, but her concern is still there. “But I don’t think the gestation would be safe to leave dormant. I believe that you need to provide more heat than what you have to spur them to grow.”

“What do you suggest?” Kalos asks, his hand rubbing my back.

“More spicy foods and at least a few hours more a day of contact to start. We’ll check in a few days to reassess. Are you okay with that, Katarina?”

“Yes. Are you sure we shouldn’t be doing anything else?” I ask.

Maggie’s face softens. “You are doing everything we know will help.”

Kalos nods, and suddenly I’m weightless. He’s picked me up and is carrying me to the couch. “Please bring our dinner in here tonight, Maggie. If you can think of anything else that could help, let us know.”

And with that, Maggie is gone. Kalos sits on the couch, arranging me on his lap.

They aren’t growing. “What if—”

He interrupts me. “Everything is going to be okay.”

I scoff, and it breaks through the worry clutching my heart. “You can’t promise that.”

His chest rumbles, and a wave of comfort has my muscles starting to relax.

“Nothing will harm you or the babe, I swear it,” he continues like my words aren’t stark fact.

“You said dragon eggs needed fire, what if that’s what the baby needs, and I can’t survive that?”

“Rina, you don’t have a dragon egg inside you, but we will figure it out if that is what needs to happen.” Kalos’s claws comb through my hair, and my eyelids lower in pleasure. “For now, we follow Maggie’s orders and have more contact.”

I inhale and nod. “Okay.”

I clear my throat and look around the office. The position of me on his lap is reminiscent of when I first told him about the baby, but I don’t dare move away from him. I can feel the heat he’s giving me now. He’s giving me what the baby needs, and something about that calms me enough for embarrassment to heat my cheeks.

“I should have been calmer about the whole thing,” I say more to myself than to him. “I don’t know why I freaked out. Maggie did say it wasn’t serious yet.”

“Because you don’t have control over this.” Kalos’s voice is smooth. There’s a lulling quality to it that makes me want to rest my head on his shoulder, but I don’t want to further invade his personal space. “There are many things in life that we lie to ourselves that we are the ones who are in control, but when it comes to children, we discover how much that is a lie. Parenthood humbles everyone.”

I cough a laugh. “Like death and taxes.”

“Yes. Death and new life always travel hand in hand.” His gaze goes far away at that before focusing on me again. “The fear is natural. It’s instinctual and logical. So take a breath for me and remember that I will not leave you alone in this.”

I follow his order. His scent and the warmth flowing from his body makes it easy to take deep breaths.

“You’re good at this,” I say before pressing my lips shut. Of course he is. He had a mate before, someone who relied on him and who he loved.

The tops of Kalos’s cheekbones pinken, but he doesn’t respond.

“Can you still sense them?” I ask, looking down at my flat stomach.

Kalos's brow creases, and his hand hesitates before coming to lay flat there. He swallows after a moment. "I can."

The relief of that is tempered by confusion. There's a sorrow on his face as he looks down at where his hand rests. I reach up and run a finger over the arch of his brow.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

The expression disappears like it was never there. "Don't pay me any mind. I'm fine."

"You looked like you were in pain."

"Old wounds can still ache. It's nothing." He looks away from my imploring gaze as if suddenly interested with the view from the window. "I am relieved that they are well. The lack of development is most likely from not having enough contact. Dragons require long amounts of time in their parent's fire."

It suddenly occurs to me that he's an ancient immortal being who could only breed with his mate. Had they wanted children? I don't dare ask.

"I'm relieved that you're relieved. Hearing that they are okay from you makes it more real," I say.

The silence that falls starts comfortably. Our breaths come in time, our bodies in sync. The heat of his hand soothes the rough parts of my consciousness, the bits of discomfort and boredom that I've stumbled through for the past month, avoiding the man who holds me.

This is similar to how he holds me at night, but we aren't sleeping, and my mind starts to wander.

His hands are covered in black scales tonight. They aren't consistently like that. Sometimes there are fewer like the day I told him about our child, and sometimes they are like this. Barely human except in shape. He's powerful enough to fully be human if he wanted to, but it's as if he prefers them covered in scales. I forget myself and cover his hand with mine, the texture of them is smooth and heated.

I freeze and glance up at his face, and Kalos arches a brow at me. He doesn't tell me not to touch him. Our bodies seem to have their own language when we're together, one that they've discovered in the late hours of the night while lost to our dreams. His body cradling mine feels familiar.

I glance at the time and realize only five minutes have passed.

I clear my throat. "Well, this is kind of awkward."

Kalos huffs a laugh against me. "It is quite different than when you're asleep."

I rub a finger over a scale. "Do you ever become completely a dragon?"

Kalos looks thoughtful. "I am always a dragon, even when I'm in this form..."

"But you said you had an inner beast?"

"I didn't always. It can happen over time with immortals. Maybe it's from being in human form for too long." Kalos shrugs and instinctively I know he doesn't think that's the case. Somehow I've gained a small ability to read this man even though we've barely been in the same room during waking hours. "Usually, I take dragon form once every other week. I travel by portal to somewhere remote to stretch my wings."

I frown. "But you haven't been?"

He hesitates. "I don't think it would be good to indulge my dragon right now. He's been... territorial. He probably would reject being so far away from our young if given the chance."

His dragon has been territorial because of my presence here? That's news to me. I decide to skip over that topic for now.

"I'd love to see you as a dragon sometime," I say, and even I can hear the yearning in my voice.

Instead of laughing at me, Kalos merely smiles. "So you can add me to your sketchbook?"

I blink. “How do you know about my sketchbook?”

“You leave it on your nightstand.” Now he shifts in unease. “I am not always tired when I come to you at night.”

And he what? Flips through my sketches while we cuddle? My cheeks burn, suddenly self-conscious.

“You should have asked. That’s personal,” I say.

He aches his brow at me. “Like my hoard is?”

I scrunch my nose, unwilling to admit that he has a point. “Then we’re even. I only stole from you once.”

He snorts but doesn’t reject that notion.

“You’re a talented artist,” he says. “I especially like the sketches you did of Maggie.”

A rush of pleasure has me blushing. “Thank you. I’ve been drawing since I was young.”

“I’m sure it helps with your work.”

I try not to wince. “Not exactly. It’s a different skill set for me entirely. It made it easier to learn how to make forgeries, and that has contributed the most to being able to restore.”

“Did you make many forgeries?” he asks.

“Some,” I allow, not really wanting to get into it. The pieces I forged and then switched with the real thing on display are what I can never hope to make right. The original works were sold and changed hands so long ago, and the cut I got from the process was too small to ever hope to buy them back.

As if he senses my discomfort, he changes the subject. “Do you like to draw everything?”

“I love portraits but could do without buildings. Sometimes I’ll sketch things from my dreams. It’s why I started to draw in the first place, to capture the images in my head that didn’t make sense.”

Kalos frowns, so I explain.

“I have two skills that are, for the most part, useless. Getting past wards and sometimes I’ll have dreams that come true. There’s no way to change the outcome, and most of the time they are too confusing to make heads or tails of until they happen.” I shrug.

“Prophetic dreams,” Kalos murmurs. “That’s unusual.”

“I don’t think about it much. It hasn’t happened in a while.”

“Those don’t sound like witch talents. True, there are some witch lines that have dreams, but bypassing wards, no.”

“You don’t think I come from witches?” I and everyone around me just assume I’m a witch because my aura apparently feels enough like one. I figured I didn’t have any craft-oriented abilities because I hadn’t been trained. Witches are usually taught how to practice their craft by family, strengthening their natural abilities and branching it with developed skills.

Kalos shrugs. “There is really no way to know unless we were to track down your biological family. It’s possible that you have some fae mixed with a witch line far back in your family tree.”

I frown. “You looked into my background?”

My upbringing hadn’t come up in the short amount of time we’ve spent together.

“Some,” he admits but lacks any guilt. I suppose if I had a thief living with me, I’d do some digging too.

The dragon waits for me to continue the conversation patiently, and I bite my lip before answering his unspoken question about my biological family.

“I don’t want to find them.”

Kalos raises a brow.

I clear my throat. “The baby will be a dragon, right?”

He pauses before nodding. “Most beings will breed true when breeding with witches, and with how hungry for heat

this impossibility is, they are definitely a dragon.”

My cheeks heat at the word “breed” even though it lacks the context of lust. “So it wouldn’t really help to know where I come from, would it?”

“Unless you wanted to.”

The silence now is full of expectation. This isn’t a topic I like to discuss, and why am I being so open with this dragon who has ignored me?

The answer to that question comes easily. It’s not like he’s going to reject me, he already has. And maybe it’s an old wound of mine that still aches. Maybe it would do me good to talk about it.

“No one came for me,” I say. “They would have known I’d have unexplainable abilities. There are Council-run orphanages, they didn’t need to put me in the human system, but they did.”

“Is that why you ran away?” he asks, voice soft.

“From the beginning, I knew that something was different with me. Humans aren’t sensitive to things, but it must have been obvious enough that no one ended up adopting me. I always imagined running away, finding somewhere I belonged. At first, I wanted to run away to the circus.” I laugh at the memory. It’s a sad laugh.

“And what would your act have been?” Kalos asks, not making me feel nearly as pathetic as I was.

I hum. “I wanted to work with the lions and tigers, but assumed that’s what everyone else wanted to do too, so I made sure to practice being an acrobat as a plan B.”

His lips twitch. “Ah, the origin of your tumbling skills.”

“Guilty as charged.” I shrug. “Anyway, some kids at school burst that bubble. They said that circuses like that didn’t exist anymore, and the ones that did exist wouldn’t take a kid anywhere.”

“What assholes,” Kalos growls.

I raise a brow at him.

“There was no harm in letting you believe what you did.”

My smile is wry. “We live in the real world, and I was too weird for the real world. I knew things were going to happen before they did and wasn’t always careful enough when talking about it. I didn’t know anyone like me.” I bit my lip before continuing. “So the first time I met someone who was also too weird for the real world, I was hooked.”

The words flow easier now. “I had a dream that I was positive wasn’t going to come true about meeting a man with gray skin and pointed ears. Then I stumbled upon him in the backroom of a coffee shop while trying to find the bathroom.”

“I was shocked.” I snort. “He was shocked and definitely not human, so I started peppering him with questions. He gave me his card and told me I was special and if I wanted to know more, I should relocate to the city. That there were more people like that there. And if I needed anything, I should give him a call.”

I swallow. Half expecting Kalos to laugh at how gullible I was, but he says nothing.

“I packed a bag and took the first bus there. I was only six months from turning eighteen, but I couldn’t stand to wait any longer than a few days.”

Kalos’s hand on my stomach tenses, his talons catching on the fabric of my shirt. “He tempted you out.”

“Yep,” I say easily. “I thought he was being helpful for the most part. What I didn’t know was that there was a ward on that room to make sure the business being done wasn’t disturbed, which is why he was unglamoured. I was rather lucky that I had walked in after his clients had already left.” My laugh was breathy. “It would have been so much worse if it was just five minutes earlier.”

I was stupid. Innocent in a way that I didn’t think I could be after being bounced from foster home to foster home. But stopping the story here would feel like lying, only showing the parts to Kalos I’d rather he see.

“I had a hard time when I got here. I didn’t want to call the guy right away. I already knew how to look for the strings attached to the things people offered, and nothing he was going to give me would be free. So I tried to get people to talk to me about magic. Tried to find paranormals. I thought I was going to show up...” I trail off.

“And find people like you,” Kalos says.

I nod. “Yeah. In the end, I called him. Turns out he had a job for me and a place to stay. And that’s how I started stealing. We made a pretty good team. He’d do all the background work with his skills in mixing magic and technology, and I have my... talents. We fit.”

I expect derision from the dragon under me. I was naïve, chasing something I didn’t understand, trying to find where I belonged, but he doesn’t. He dips his head and brushes a kiss to my forehead that hums with care.

“It’s natural to gravitate toward your own kind,” he says. “To search them out. Even now, the few dragons that are left keep in contact, and we are creatures who are solitary except for our families.”

“I don’t think I could forgive my biological family for leaving me with humans.” My voice is rough. “I got into more trouble than I could handle trying to find someone similar to me, whether they were related to me or not. Now that I know more about witches in general, it’s clear that some witch families aren’t great to their members, so it’s better for me not to know exactly where I come from.”

“If that is what you wish. You will always have a place here, Rina.” The words are careful, but they cause an earthquake in my soul.

I frown at him at the same time my heart lodges in my throat. “Don’t promise things like that.”

Don’t offer something only to take it away later.

He presses his lips together. “We may not have a romantic relationship, but you are mine. I care for what is mine.”

I narrow my eyes at him to keep from melting, from trusting him. I trusted him too quickly last time. “I’m not yours. Let’s just focus on keeping the baby healthy.”

His nostrils flare, as if annoyed that I’d assume he’d do otherwise. He glares at me like he wants to say something else. Maybe deny my assertion. The tension in the room rises, and the hand on my belly grows hotter.

The knock at the study door dissipates whatever he’d been wanting to say.

“Come in,” Kalos growls.

“I brought dinner,” Maggie says as she walks in with a tray.

“You should put me down so we can eat,” I say.

Kalos ignores my words for a beat, and I wonder if he’s going to tune them out completely before he finally moves to set me on the couch. He arranges me right next to him so that our outer thighs press together. His body burns against mine. It’s distracting, but better than that one time he’d fed me.

No wonder I’d assumed that we could have a relationship. Kalos sends the worst mixed signals. Of course I’d be confused.

Telling me we can’t be together one moment and claiming I’m his the next. The way he touches me flies in the face of us not being romantically together, but then again, that could just be sex. We’re compatible. It doesn’t mean more than that.

I won’t let my lonely heart try and convince me otherwise.

Maggie sets the tray on the coffee table, and Kalos pulls it toward us so I can reach the plate.

“It looks delicious,” I say, even as my eyes water at the spicy steam rising from it.

Maggie runs her fingers over my shoulder, and her shoulders drop in relief. “Improving already.”

Kalos’s face shows no emotion at Maggie’s declaration. So the extra cuddles will work. More conscious time spent with

this man who so blithely offers me things that I can't trust.

Goody.

KALOS

I KNOCK. My dragon grumbles at knocking on a door in our own home, but this is her space, and she isn't asleep this time.

Katarina swears softly on the other side, moving around the room as if in a hurry. I furrow my brow.

“Who is it?” she calls out.

“It's... me.” I mentally curse myself for how awkward I feel. It's silent on the other side of the door, and I sense her surprise.

She finally answers after a pause. “Come in.”

I enter, expecting her to be on one of the couches in the lounge area of the room or by the bed, but instead she stands in front of the closed bathroom door. I swallow at the scent of the room. Over the past month, this place has become more hers with the scent of her permeating every inch. There's a variation of that today, but I'm too distracted by her to pick apart whatever is new.

“What are you doing here?” she asks. Her heart races with what seems like nerves.

“I thought we could add a contact session in the time before bed as well as in the morning. Does that work for you?” I ask. It's odd to not just lay out my plan and expect her to obey, but I'm not in charge of her. She is mine to protect, but she isn't my employee.

I have very few people in my life who wouldn't do as I command. It's easier to be around people who know what's

expected of them. Katarina and I don't have a contract or any connection other than the young she carries. My dragon wants to provide for her, but I can't just go around doing what I please when it affects her life.

Katarina's shoulders relax.

"That's a good idea." She glances down and blinks. "What are you wearing?"

I look down in confusion before arching a brow. "A robe."

"*Only* a robe?"

"Yes?" Clothing is uncomfortable against my skin for long periods of time, and I prefer the way silk runs over my scales.

Katarina's eyes widen. "You've been sliding into my bed naked every night?"

Ah. "No. I've worn a robe."

"So practically naked." Her voice raises an octave.

I frown. "You've been fully clothed."

Her night clothes have varied since the beginning. When the child was drawing more heat than she could sustain, she'd worn thick flannels. As the heat I've added has offset that drain, she's transitioned more to summer wear of thin cotton. Tonight, she has a set of shorts and a shirt that leaves a good expanse of skin exposed.

"That is not the point," she says.

"Then what is the point? I would never do anything against your wishes while we are in bed." Indignation flashes hot, but the curling, sweet scent of arousal in the air sparks pleasure through my limbs. *Oh.* "Do you think you will be too tempted by my presence, Rina?"

My voice comes out as a purr, and she swallows. I should be more wary, but it's gratifying to affect her so greatly. I'd told her we couldn't have a romantic relationship, and sex would complicate things between us, but over this past month I've been tempted. Every time I catch her scent, it makes me

want to tug her hair back and force her to beg like the night we'd had together.

But that's only the hungry dragon part of me.

"No," she squeaks. "Fine. Wait on the couch."

I frown but turn away from her and do what she says. She ducks into the bathroom and reappears once I'm situated on a corner sofa that I think would accommodate the both of us well.

"What is that?" I ask, aghast.

"It's a robe," she says. "Just like yours."

She ties the robe at her waist, and the sight of it blares against my senses.

"Not like mine," I growl. My robe is a silk masterpiece that warms to my touch and slides over my sensitive skin like an angel's caress. Her robe is so worn it appears rough and peeling and covers her from neck to ankle.

"Yeah, yours is much smaller." She narrows her eyes at me and my bare thigh.

I shrug. "I like to have a breeze."

"I'll keep my robe, and you can keep yours," she says.

My lips twitch, and I choose not to tease her about how I can remove my robe if she so desires. Her glare tells me that she wouldn't take kindly to the offer.

"Very well," I say, patting my thigh. The motion has her eyes dropping for a moment before she shakes herself free of the sight of my bare legs. Humor that's rusty with disuse threatens to rise in my chest.

"Fine," she huffs. She grabs her sketchbook and approaches. There's a hitch in her step when she gets within arm's reach of me, as if she doesn't quite know how to settle on my lap. I grasp her hand and pull her forward before her mind can raise any more objections to this.

When I arrange her on my lap, she softens, relaxing into my hold. As with every time we do this, the easy way she

trusts me with her body and bends for my direction has my dragon sighing in satisfaction and lights a fire of temptation over my skin.

“I hope you brought something to keep yourself busy,” she says, ignoring my presence to open her sketchbook.

“You don’t want me just staring at you?” I ask, teasing.

She blushes, the pink of her cheeks making the green of her eyes more vibrant. If I’d had her under full light that night, would I have pushed her to leave in the morning? Yes. There’s a beauty she has, but no amount of beauty can fix something broken centuries ago.

I brandish my phone in one hand. “I’ll just be working on business.”

I read my emails one-handed as she relaxes against me. My other hand presses against her middle without a thought from me. The robe is just as scratchy as it appears, and I try to ignore it.

We spend a few minutes like that. Me reading and sorting emails, and the sound of her pencil scratching the paper.

Her body warmth travels through the robe, but not well. It insulates even more than her flannels do.

I sigh. “Skin to skin would be more effective.”

Her pencil stops. “I’m not getting naked with you.”

Again. The unspoken word rings with memories.

“I meant for my hand. This would be more effective if my hand was under this garment you call a robe.”

“Oh,” she says and bites her lip before answering. “I guess that would be okay.”

I slide my hand under the robe tie rather than where it gapes on her chest. The fabric of her clothing is warm. I pull up the shirt and press my palm to her middle. I don’t question the action. If she hadn’t donned the robe, I would have placed my hand on her back instead.

The zing of magic, the hungry draw of the heat energy as I feed the babe cracks my concentration. For weeks, I've avoided thinking about the fact that we've conceived a child. That despite my failures, I will have living young. It's a bright pain that I can't work through. At the same time, my dragon purrs in contentment.

I've truly divided myself from my beast to have us react to this situation so differently. This is something more than immortals developing a separate beast. This is a rebellion of a part of my soul. It is distressing to say the least.

To delay those thoughts, I focus on one thing at a time. In this moment, I send more heat to the child and try to find a distraction. The pain will eventually fade.

Rina hums while she sketches. Flowers that bear a similarity to those in the garden come to life on the page. Each stroke of her pencil adds to the structure of the image and almost hypnotically soothes the divide in my heart.

I've seen the great masters' work and hung art pieces in my own gallery, but never has that inspired the same sort of contentment as whatever magic she's spinning over me in this moment. Contentment and hunger.

My talons drag against her bare skin, and she freezes.

"Do you hate my presence so much, Rina?" The question slips out before I can catch it.

She doesn't. Her scent and the way she softens when our bodies press together as if I give her peace tells me that. Yearning blooms in me with her presence. My cocks harden against her warm body, even with her ugly robe.

I want a diversion from the being growing under my hand. I want to rip off the thin robe she wears and press my face into her belly before trailing my tongue lower to lick up her sweet scent from the source. I clench my jaw against the urge.

"Kalos..." She looks away, and I bring my hand from her stomach to her chin, directing her gaze back to mine. There's an echo of the yearning I feel. A desire I want to feed.

“As you said before, we’re physically compatible.” And I’d rejected her. The weeks have worn down my resolve there. It’s possible to give both our bodies what they want without delving deeper. We’ve done it before.

“I can’t,” she says.

I let her look away and have the privacy for her emotions. There’s no telling what I’d promise if the pain in her gaze had gotten its hooks into me. Beyond all expectation, I like this little thief.

Her determination and passion. The way she’s never allowed herself to be afraid of me even when I threatened to eat her.

“I know that other people can separate sex from other feelings, but I don’t think I can,” she whispers. The words circle us before sinking in.

No, I don’t suppose she can. She’d tried to come off as worldly the night of my heat, but Katarina has been searching for love and acceptance since she was young. The desire on her face isn’t just for physical touch.

What I’m doing is cruel.

This is why I’ve avoided her.

“I understand,” I whisper. “I’m sorry.”

I don’t say for what. It’s hard to articulate it myself. I’m sorry for hurting her before with my careless words, for the future hurts I’ll cause, and for the pain that can’t be resolved in my soul that will hurt both of us in the end.

I can’t let myself keep her. I’m unable to bond with anyone, let alone have a mate again.

And in her presence, I acknowledge I want to.

KATARINA

I HUM AS I WORK. The room I've set up for my business is delightful. One whole wall is full of windows that give the perfect north light. I still use specific lights for color matching, but this room is a luxury I've never had.

A lot of things here are luxuries. My room, Maggie's cooking, even forced cuddles with Kalos.

The dragon is a temptation I've never faced before, but he hasn't tried to seduce me again.

The days start to blend together. We find our own balance, a routine that works for us. The baby is healthy and growing even quicker than Maggie anticipated. She admitted that she may have been over-cautious in her prediction and the extra contact may not be necessary, but neither Kalos nor I say anything about stopping. It's a small price to make sure our child is healthy.

And... I like it.

I like the quiet evenings and mornings we spend together. I would have never assumed Kalos to be an expert cuddler, but he could charge for his services. Not that he would need to. The man is richer than God. To my surprise, most of his wealth comes from legitimate businesses.

Some nights when I don't feel like sketching or reading, we talk. He tells me about all the different industries he has his claws in, and I ask all the questions about our world that I've never been able to get answers to before. Kalos shares information generously.

He tells me about the fae realm's history of indentured servitude and the danger of the fae gates. That many of the paranormals that exist on our plane today can trace their ancestry back to beings that fled the fae plane, but so much time has passed that Earth is the only home many of them know. Every question I have gets answered until the topic sways to his life, then he becomes tight-lipped.

I'm curious about him, but all the information he freely gives makes up for the disappointment that he is still a mystery.

The time we spend together is nice... but it's hard to keep from touching him. My senses awaken in response to the warmth of his scales or skin against mine, and I remember the growly way he dominated my body during his heat.

I'm always able to resist, but as the weeks pass, my body's response to Kalos strengthens rather than dims. It's inconvenient. It doesn't help that he knows when I'm wet. His nostrils flare, and my heart skips a beat, wondering if this time he'll offer to soothe the ache of my body with his.

He never does, and the lust brewing in me threatens to shatter my decision not to get involved. Temptation whispers to accept the pain of an eventual broken heart in exchange for the mind-blowing orgasms I know he'd give me.

The robes don't help the situation.

I underestimated how much Kalos hated my robe. I didn't like it either, but it was the only one I had until I'd walked into my closet to find ten colorful silky robes. They're so beautiful and flow so smoothly over my skin that I couldn't reject them. I let him spoil me while trying to convince my heart that the gesture doesn't mean anything.

Kalos just really hated the robe I had.

But... if it was only about replacing the robe, wouldn't he have just ordered the same as his? And these robes aren't that. No, these robes are from all different creators with unique designs on each one. The gift feels personal.

My soul knows art when I see it, and Kalos gave it to me.

The robes are thin and heat easily on contact with him, but I love them too much not to wear them. Even if I fall asleep needy every night.

Once he leaves in the morning, I jump in the shower to try to alleviate the ache in my core, but it doesn't leave me satisfied. My body is hungry and I'm keeping a feast from it.

It feels like it's only a matter of time before I break.

Just like it's only a matter of time before Kalos finds out about Griffin.

The fact that Kalos still hasn't noticed that there's a cat living in his house is because Griffin must be the most chill cat in the whole world. He doesn't make a peep when I put him in the bathroom closet in the evenings, he just curls in his favorite spot to sleep.

I let him wander wherever he wants during the day, and somehow my dragon hasn't noticed his domain has been invaded.

I huff in annoyance. Not *my* dragon.

A dragon. A dangerous tempting dragon whose presence I've grown too used to. I need to prepare myself for a future when these cuddle sessions stop. When I won't wake every morning in his arms.

Like this morning.

The shock of waking alone doesn't bode well for after the baby comes. Maybe I'll be too busy to even remember his existence by then.

There's a sound, and I pull my paintbrush away from the project I'm hunched over. I'm supposed to do retouching on the easel, but got carried away. Luckily the paint stroke isn't botched with the interruption. I glare at the doorway before freezing.

He's here. My stupid body sings.

"Kalos."

He stands in the doorway, the cut of his expensive suit making my mouth water and heat cascade through me at an embarrassing rate. For all the time we spend together, his presence is still a weight, one that pulls like tugging heartstrings.

His eyes shift over me, as if hungry for the sight of me. Has this been as torturous for him as it has for me?

“Business called me away this morning and I wanted to make sure you felt okay,” he says.

Goose bumps rise on my skin, and he must see them because he strides toward me.

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’m fine.”

He surrounds me and pulls my back against his front. I sigh. The embrace eases my horniness and hectic thoughts. The contact with clothes on is different, but the heat of him is still a comfort.

“Hey stranger,” I say, putting my paintbrush down and removing the gloves on my hands so I can rest them on his arm.

Kalos takes in the room. “You seem well set up here.”

I’m working over a table that I put a protective covering on. I’ve stored most of my items in organizational drawers under the table to keep the bottles of solvent and rolls of cotton wool out of the way. Two easels stand side by side. One empty, while the other is holding an 1800s landscape with a drying layer of varnish that awaits retouching.

He’s never visited me during the day. Whenever we’ve made contact it’s been because I’ll stop by his study to let him know that I’m leaving the house with Ben.

He never asked to be kept up to date with my location, but every time I tell him, there’s relief in his gaze. He considers me his to protect. I can make that job easy for him.

“Yeah, this room is pretty great. All this natural light is gorgeous,” I say.

I sense Kalos look down past my shoulder, and his body stiffens. “That’s an... interesting painting.”

I snort, and my cheeks heat. “It has emotional significance. It’s been in my client’s family for generations, and the aging varnish obscured the portrait.”

“And they wanted the portrait... not obscured?”

I laugh. The portrait is kind of hideous. The artist either wasn’t very skilled, or the original matriarch of the family really did have terrifyingly large, glaring eyes. I wonder if the painting had been done to keep future generations in line with the threatening gaze.

“Are you scared of her?” I ask.

Kalos shudders. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“They’re only trying to preserve their history.”

“Perhaps some history should be left buried,” he mutters, and I grin.

“You’re terrible.”

He gives me a look. “That’s terrible.”

“You’re just lucky that it isn’t actually cursed and only looks that way. Sometimes ancestors leave nasty surprises for their descendants.” Which is partially why I’m glad to leave my origins a mystery. All this contact with old witch families really doesn’t leave anything to be admired. I much prefer the tight-knit life I’m cultivating now.

“It must pay well for you to risk such nightmares,” Kalos teases.

I hum in response but can sense his eyes narrowing.

“Care to take a break, Rina?”

I yelp when he picks me up and takes us to an armchair positioned to look out the windows. I should stop letting him manhandle me. I should put more boundaries in place so the warmth in my chest isn’t cultivated with these moments of softness. But I enjoy them too much.

“Careful,” I say as a real warning. “Or you’re going to make me think you missed me.”

He chuffs and doesn’t deny it. I sigh and sink into my place on his lap. With the warmth from the sun and him, the position is almost more decadent than the robes he gifted me.

“I blame my dragon,” he says after a moment. He rubs my back, and my nose brushes the hot skin of his neck. The intimacy of these moments make my breath catch even though I know they will never go anywhere.

I hum. “Has he been making your life difficult?”

His body softens. The hand not stroking my back pulls my body tighter against his. “Of course. He’d rather hold you all day than sit in boring meetings.”

I blow out a breath at the giddy flutter in my chest. “With those options, I don’t blame him.”

I sit up to run my fingers through his hair. The movement is innocent enough that I don’t stop myself, and Kalos’s eyes close in pleasure.

“Maybe you should stretch your wings if he’s causing you so many issues,” I say. “The baby is fine. I can do without you for at least a day before needing contact.”

His lips press together in displeasure. I predict the topic change before he opens his mouth.

“You are getting paid to work on terrifying paintings, correct?” he asks.

“I can stay in business,” I hedge. “And they aren’t all that scary.”

Kalos frowns. “Do you take that much joy from restoration?”

My shoulders draw up, and he runs his hand in circles on my back again, trying to disperse the tension there.

“I’m just curious, Rina. Is this your passion?”

Finally, I sigh. “What I do isn’t because of passion, and honestly, I don’t enjoy it. Some adore doing this work, but

most of the time it's tedious and boring."

Kalos doesn't start questioning me, he waits, letting the caress of his hand urge me on.

It takes a minute. I've never explained my reasons for what I do. It's the dubious benefit of not having someone close enough to question your life choices, and I wouldn't tell Nemo the real reason I started my business. The trees outside sway with a breeze, and I imagine I can hear the rustle of leaves.

"I stole a lot of things when I was a thief." I keep my eyes on the world outside rather than watch Kalos's face. "I always explained it away. That I was just surviving. It was me or them. That people didn't really need the items that I took, so what if I profited? But it only pushed the guilt away. It didn't stop it from coming back."

I turn from the window. I can face Kalos. I've faced all of my past. I deserve to face him too, but his face doesn't broadcast what he's feeling. It makes what comes next harder and easier at the same time.

"Then one day, a woman tracked us down. I don't know how. It must not have been legal enough to prove to the Council that we'd stolen from her because she never brought that up. She begged that we return the amulet that I'd taken. She said it was the last thing she had of her mother and that it would be the most precious thing that she'd leave for her daughter."

I bite my lip before continuing. "I'd stolen her legacy." Something I'd never have, and I'd taken it thoughtlessly. "And it didn't feel like an us versus them. It felt like *I'd* ruined something special."

I blink back the tears. They don't mean anything. I wasn't the victim in that situation.

"My mentor told her it was already sold, and we didn't know the buyers. Which was true for me. She left us then, sobbing. I couldn't put her face out of my mind."

I swallow. "I felt sick. The whole time, there could have been people hurting just as much as that woman, and I caused

that.”

“You stopped,” Kalos says. It’s not a question, but I nod anyway.

“I stopped.” I laugh bitterly. “My mentor was so upset. He told me I was too soft-hearted at first and then that I was ungrateful for all he’d done for me, but it didn’t change my decision.”

Kalos’s eyes narrow. I steer the conversation away from Nemo. Kalos clearly isn’t a fan of his.

“But I didn’t only stop. I couldn’t. I’d seen the consequences of my actions, and I couldn’t just look away.” I clear my throat. “My mentor keeps records, and for a criminal, his personal security is rather lax.”

Or he’d never thought I’d betray him. It’s amazing that he didn’t burn our connection when he’d found out what I’d done. “I tracked down who got the necklace and stole it back. I had it delivered to the original owner in as untraceable of a way as I could.”

I swallow, wanting Kalos to interrupt me so I can stop this exposing of my heart, but he doesn’t. “It didn’t end there. I’d known where some of the other items I’d stolen had ended up too and retrieved as many as I could.” That was more dangerous than all the jobs I’d done before since they’d ended up with people who worked with my kind. Kalos growls as if he knows that.

“But there’s still too many I couldn’t. The items that changed hands or could be directly connected to the guy I worked with. The paintings I’d replaced with forgeries that couldn’t be retrieved. So to offset what I’ve done, I started restoring. It’s a skill I have that adds good to the world rather than steal it away.” I shrug. “There are a lot of older families that have relics that need restoration that wouldn’t have been able to afford it.”

“How long have you been doing this?” Kalos asks.

“It’s been a few years now. The jobs I take from paying clients allows me to take on more pro-bono projects... I don’t

know how else to make amends without turning myself into the Council.”

Kalos tightens his grip on my thigh.

“Oh, don’t worry,” I say, my voice cracking with humor. “I have no will to serve myself up to their dubious justice.”

“When does it stop, Rina?”

I blink in surprise. “When I don’t feel guilty anymore?”

His sigh rumbles out. “That isn’t how guilt or shame works. There will never be a moment where you’ve done enough to wash the memory of that woman from your mind. It will always hurt.”

My lower lip trembles. I don’t want what he’s saying to be true. I want there to be a day when I’m free of this malignant sensation in my chest.

“And you can’t keep doing this to yourself,” he says gently. “The universe doesn’t care about your stealing.”

“What?”

“Making amends is one thing, but you think that by doing the work of restoring others’ treasures that it will make a difference, that it will make you feel better, but if that were the case, it would have already happened.” The warmth of his hand on my back sinks into my chest as if to cradle my heart. “You’ve weighed yourself down with these sorrows. If you let it, you’ll drown under them.”

I swallow. Once upon a time, I would have accepted that as justice, but I don’t want to drown. I want to be happy and loved.

Kalos’s face softens. “Do you think that I’ve never caused pain, death, or heartbreak that I’ve regretted? Part of being long-lived is accepting the guilt for the things you’ve done but not letting it smother you. It’s honorable to try and make amends for what you’ve done, but there’s a line between that and sacrificing your potential because of your guilt.”

Kalos’s talon brushes my cheek as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You have more value to give the world than

your atonement.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I told you the universe doesn’t care about the wrongs you’ve done, and I believe that. But if what you care about is the good you can do, think of how much more you could do if you focused on what you’re passionate about instead of this work.”

I snort. “You want me to just stop the business I’ve built and what? Freeload off you?”

He shrugs. “You can train a replacement if you want to keep it, but I’ll happily provide for you for the rest of your life. I’d planned on that anyway.”

I blink in surprise at that. Kalos continues, “We both know what you truly enjoy. How often in the years you’ve spent restoring have you let yourself invest time in your artwork?”

Almost never. I’ve done more sketching during the time I’ve stayed in this house than I have in years. Being transposed from my life forced me out of the habit of working day and night. With how much I’ve focused on making amends, sacrificing what I enjoy seemed to be the right thing to do.

“Art is precious. Creation is humanity’s best asset. It can touch thousands of souls and make life worth living,” Kalos says.

The rejection in me is instant. “Not my art.”

“Why not your art?”

Because I don’t deserve that.

Something in my face must show my thoughts. It’s as if I’m defenseless in front of him.

“Rina—” His voice is too soft, and the rejection of what he offers rears its head.

“You shouldn’t be the one lecturing me about letting go of damaging emotions,” I interrupt him and regret it as soon as the words leave my lips, but it doesn’t make it less true.

Kalos's eyes flash in surprised pain, but he nods in agreement. "Touché, little queen. Touché."

My throat swells at that. It's the first time he's called me that name since we first met, and as much as I craved to hear it again. I didn't want it to be like this.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Don't be." Kalos shakes his head as he pulls away. "I pressed against your wounds, it's only fair for you to do the same to me."

I open my mouth to say something, anything to recapture the ease we had, but Kalos doesn't give me that opportunity.

"I need to get back to my meetings." He slides me off his lap and places me on the armchair before standing and straightening his suit. "I'll leave you to your work."

"Okay," I whisper, feeling numb and like I ruined yet something else precious.

He pauses in the doorway. "Thank you for the conversation, Rina. And you're right."

I want to ask what I'm right about because the more his words echo in my chest, the more I realize there's truth in what he said as well.

I sit where Kalos had, the leather still warm from him. As the surface cools to my skin temperature, I think thoughts I've never let myself travel before.

Could I do more good doing what I love instead of trying to appease my guilt?

KALOS

I SWIPE through folders on the tablet. Each one holds the details of individuals who will be allowed the closest to me in rank and in physical access. It's been weeks of research and interviews. These candidates are those who are most loyal to me and the most capable in their fields.

The business has been buzzing about it. People are anticipating something big, and they'll get it.

Splitting power is big news. The promotions will cause strife but will ultimately solve the issues we're dealing with. Each candidate will run their own branch of my business. I don't have the will to micromanage anymore. To focus so much on the business only leaves more room for those who would try to slip past my defenses. I must be available to protect my family.

The thought stings, but I've gotten more used to thinking of Katarina and those close to me as such. After avoiding attachments for lifetimes, one thief has shaken everything up.

I hand the tablet back to Ben. "I approve."

This will be an interesting change. I've functioned for centuries without an inner circle, save for Ben.

He nods while he swipes through the same files. "Stevens, Troy, and Keller. I'll call them in." He looks up at me. "You're sure you want to do this?"

I tap my claws against the desk. "Giving them ownership will ensure that things are run properly. It gives each of them

something to protect.”

I grit my teeth against what comes next, but it’s a price to pay. It will not do to promote others over my right hand. I cannot keep Ben indefinitely.

“Do you also want such a posting?” I ask. “You have dedicated many years in my service. You would have whatever branch you want.”

“Stop.” Ben doesn’t look up from undoubtedly typing an email on his phone. He doesn’t appear surprised by my offer.

I narrow my eyes. “You are welcome to do anything in our organization you want—”

“Kalos.” Ben glances up now. “I’m honored to have the position I do. Stop trying to get rid of me.”

I blow out a breath. “I’m not trying to get rid of you. I’m trying not to be greedy with you. You are invaluable to me.”

And someday, he’ll be gone. Whether it be from time or his need for something more in his life than I can give. It’s the nature of things, but that doesn’t stop the sharp pain in my chest.

Ben’s mouth curls, and his eyes drop back to his phone to complete the message. “She’s really softening you up, isn’t she?”

I scowl at him.

Ben tucks his phone away. “How is it going?”

“What do you mean?”

“How are you... handling everything? Katarina? The pregnancy?”

I look away. Sometimes I forget that Ben knows every detail of my life. It had been necessary to explain why I kept to myself about a century ago. Why I chose to suffer through my heats alone. Why I’d raised Gage the way I had.

Ben is one of the few to hear my history from me rather than from rumor.

“Maggie says things are progressing nicely,” I say.

“And the two of you are...” Ben trails off.

“Your penchant for gossip is going to get you in trouble,” I say as if it hasn’t already. I found him listening at doors he shouldn’t when he was a youth. A second-generation demon with no one in the world to keep him from taking dangerous jobs.

He rolls his eyes. “It’s only gossip if I share it with anyone else.”

I open my laptop to scan through the large amount of files Mace and Sophia have been continually updating about the Leonid organization. I don’t have to see Ben to know my avoidance is annoying him.

“We only want you to be happy,” he says finally. “And you seem to be in a good mood lately.”

I have been. Other than my dragon wanting to drag us back to Katarina’s side throughout the day and being unceasingly annoyed that she set up her studio on the other side of the house. The pounding of monotonous tasks against my skull has lightened, and I look forward to seeing her each evening.

“She’s kind and honorable. I have been enjoying her company.” And the scent of her arousal makes it hard not to attempt to seduce her, but I will not push her boundaries. Even the simmer of attraction doesn’t douse the calm her presence gives me and my dragon.

Ben grins. “High praise from you.”

“We aren’t going to have a relationship, Ben.”

He frowns. “Why not? She makes you happy.”

“You know why.” The reasons seem to get thinner every day, but the important ones remain. My ability to bond was crushed centuries ago. That space in my chest where connections to those around me reverberated is dead now.

I cannot have another mate.

Even if I were able to bond, I don't know if I can stomach the possibility of losing a bonded again.

Ben's brow furrows. "You should tell her about your past. She should know about—"

"Watch yourself," I cut in. The time I spend with Katarina is a light in an age of darkness, but I can't keep it. Already it is a struggle to know how I'll manage to be a father given my past and lack of abilities. My track record is poor, and that was without my dragon harassing my choices.

Ben's shoulders drop. "I'm not experienced in grief like you are. But you've held on to this pain for years. Would it be such a bad thing to let it go?"

The similarity of his words to what I said to Katarina is striking, but it would take more than logic to let go of my pain. Sympathy for Katarina rings in me. I shouldn't have pushed as hard as I did, but the waste of her devoting so much time to something in the name of alleviating guilt feels like a crime.

I would not have one as bright as her burn her happiness away over past misdeeds. She's done her best to make amends, doing more will only perpetuate the cycle of guilt and self-worth in her.

She deserves so much more.

"Will you contact Gage?" I ask, ignoring the fact that I'm being cowardly by going through Ben.

Ben arches a brow. "Do you have a job for his crew... or is this a request for a personal visit?"

"He should know about the child."

My godson should be told before the rumors start. That they haven't started yet is pure luck.

"Of course, a new dragon will be born. It's a momentous occasion," Ben says, back to drafting emails. "Do you want me to contact any other dragons?"

My dragon hisses, and I almost roll my eyes at him. The creature too territorial by half. "No, just Gage for now."

I frown at the amount of information on the screen in front of me.

“How has sifting through the information Mace and Sophia sent gone?” I ask.

Ben’s lips purse, but he drops the topic. “It’s like each day that passes they dig up even more. I half wish we could send it to the Council and be done with this, but nothing is provable to the extent that would be required, and that would still leave a position of power vacant.”

Ben is back to working on the tablet, there’s a notification sound, and both of his brows shoot up. “Speaking of. Apparently, Lorenzo has a daughter who is older than his heir.”

“They only just found that?”

Ben slides through the documents they just sent, and I see the file show up on my computer. I let Ben take the reins. He’s much better at speed reading than I am. “It was twenty-nine years ago. It looks to have been buried because the child took after her witch mother.”

It’s a rare phenomenon, but it does happen. I can only imagine how Lorenzo Leonid reacted.

Ben’s face pales, and his wide eyes meet mine, causing the dragon I keep suppressed to raise its head.

“What?” I ask.

“The daughter’s name is Stella Elderflower,” Ben breathes.

Fire travels through my limbs. My enemy has had direct access to Katarina from the beginning.

“Where is she?” *Katarina is in danger.* Fabric rips, and for this moment, my dragon and I are unified in a clear purpose. I’m up and taking long strides out of the room. I will find her. Her scent has imprinted on my soul.

Ben calls out behind me, trying to keep up. “I’m sure there’s an explanation—”

I don't want an explanation. I need to deal with a threat to what's *mine*.

“WHERE IS MY MATE?”

KATARINA

“ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT CHARM MAKING?” I ask, running my fingertip over the rim of my empty tea mug.

Stella frowns at me in confusion, putting her lemonade down on the table. We sit in the kitchen during a rare quiet moment between meals.

Maggie had given us a plate of cookies, flustered, before leaving with Jensen, Kalos’s silver-haired driver. Apparently, he’s been asking to take her to coffee for months now. I don’t know why she’s been resistant, the way she blushes when he’s around speaks volumes.

“I mean, does it make you happy?” I ask.

Stella shrugs. “Of course. I’m good at it and am able to help my clients in a way that others can’t. There are easier ways to make money, but I enjoy it and like being my own boss.”

I’m my own boss, and I can help clients in a way that others can’t...

“I don’t enjoy restoration.” It was easier to tell Kalos than it is to speak the truth now. Stella has been my friend since the beginning of my business. Constantly trying to keep me from overworking myself. Dragging me out of my studio even under deadline.

Stella blinks in surprise. “Really? But you’ve spent so many years building up your business and reputation. Oh, my

gods, I thought—I assumed—gah! Why have you been working your fingers to the bone? Did you start out liking it?”

I swallow and shake my head. “I thought it was the best way to make up for all the things I stole.”

Stella’s mouth falls open. She closes it and shakes her head before continuing. “But you’ve been doing this for *years*.”

And I still feel guilty. I don’t say the words, but Stella must decipher the emotions on my face.

“Oh, honey.” Her hand falls on mine and she squeezes it. “You can’t let mistakes you made years ago determine your future.”

If I hadn’t spoken to Kalos about this first, I’d probably have shaken off her words. As it is, I’ve been reflecting. I wouldn’t allow someone I care about to obsess over and feel unworthy because of past actions, so why am I doing that to myself?

Perhaps it’s as simple as having nothing else to focus on once I’d lost Nemo’s approval. I let guilt guide me into a new life, but allowed it to suck me under. I haven’t been restoring because it puts good into the world.

I’ve been punishing myself. And it ends now.

If I don’t decide that I’m worthy of happiness, what sort of life is that going to be for me? What sort of example is that going to set for my kid?

Ben appears next to the table with a crack of static, and we both jolt in surprise.

“No time—”

He’s cut off by Stella who shoots from her seat. “Angry dragon!”

I turn and stand, toppling my chair. Kalos doesn’t pause in the doorway. He looks different enough that there should be a beat before I recognize him, but there isn’t. His body is still human for the most part, but he seems bulkier. Black scales edge his face and meet into horns on either side of his head. Smoke billows from his nostrils, and his eyes glow in fury. His

hands are much less human-appearing, talons curving and long.

Ben starts trying to talk reason. “We don’t know for sure that she’s in league with them, Kalos. Calm yourself.”

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Kalos growls, stepping forward, his eyes on my best friend. “She’s a Leonid!”

“A what?” I ask, stumbling in between them. My heart races with adrenaline.

“I’m not!” Stella says, annoyed.

“*Enemy.*” Kalos’s voice is gravelly and inhuman. He surges forward, and I push both hands into his chest. He’s almost too hot to touch, but the heat dissipates immediately. I gasp at the rush of sensation through my body as our child devours the heat pouring from him.

I don’t know what Kalos is raging about, but he’s past the point of listening.

“Ben, get her out of here,” I say and am surprised when he follows my instructions without hesitation. Stella’s squeak cuts off as she’s teleported away.

Kalos roars, and my heart quakes even as I absorb another wave of heat. This one ripples with searing intention, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning. I’m left standing in front of an enraged dragon man. His burning eyes, completely black except for the gold of his irises, drop to me, the reason his prey is gone.

Running isn’t an option, neither is talking. I do what I do best: pivot.

“Kalos,” I whisper. I press my body against his, and there’s a flicker in whatever primal instinct sent him stomping in here.

“You will not put yourself in danger,” he hisses, clutching my arms.

Danger? Belying his words, another wave of heat has my hair standing on end.

Fuck me, I didn't think that this much energy would feel like the precursor to orgasm. If I wasn't pregnant with his child, would this burn me to a crisp instead of sending wave after wave of cinnamon heat to curl my toes and dance over my skin?

"I need you." The words from my lips are soft, unthinking. I need the heat and anger and hunger. I need his strength. I want to devour him. A laughable idea, but neither of us are laughing.

He snarls but pulls me in tight. His mouth drops open and hot over mine, and I groan at the contact and taste. The kiss is a vicious thing, the scrape of his fangs almost painful, but I don't care. My ass hits the table behind me, but Kalos keeps bearing down on me.

My thighs wrap around his narrow hips, the press of him between my legs has me moaning. Kalos crowds me until I'm flat against the table. As if to keep me from going anywhere.

Dishes crash to the floor. I'm sure my back is covered with cookie crumbs now, but I don't care. All I care about is the feel of his body against mine. My fingers slide through his hair and grip. The brush of my palms against smooth scales is delicious and adds to the sparks of sensation at my core.

The kiss slows, and Kalos pulls back.

I pant, trying to use my grip on his hair to bring him back to me. I want to rip off his clothing and finally give in to this heat. "Kalos."

"Shhh."

I whimper in need. My dragon is returning to his senses, but he's started my body burning, and I can't stop now. Every moment he's held me close, every time I've ignored the way his presence makes me burn, is rising to the surface, threatening to devour me.

He doesn't abandon me.

He moves his hips against mine. The noxious smell of smoke dissipates as the ribbed cock that's imprinted on my

memory grinds against my leggings-covered pussy. My head falls back, and I moan.

“That’s it, little queen, feel how hard I am for you. Take your pleasure.” Kalos’s voice is deep, inhuman in the way it was when he’d first burst into the kitchen.

I gasp and rock my hips against the solid thickness of him until the pressure coiling in my core gets tighter and tighter. I dig the nails of one hand into his torn suit jacket, and Kalos shifts his hips in a new way that has me unraveling.

“Fuck!” I shout at the same time Kalos groans, wet heat spreading between our bodies, soaking our clothes. The release is short but reverberates through me with waves of shaky pleasure.

I count my comedown with each sawing breath expanding my lungs. One breath, Kalos doesn’t move from on top of me. My second breath, his body is braced on one hand, his eyes closed, and the third breath has his face creased in concentration as if he’s trying to calm himself. His other cock is probably painfully hard, but he doesn’t move to alleviate it.

Each wave of pleasure morphs into relief. Tears well in my eyes as my muscles relax. “I really needed that.”

Impossibly, Kalos huffs a laugh as he shakes his head, his hair tickling my face. I didn’t realize our faces were so close. His body starts to relax.

“Your death wish is worrisome,” Kalos breathes against my lips. “Never get in the way of an angry dragon.”

I release the grip I have on his hair and jacket. “Don’t rage at my friends, and I won’t stand in front of an angry dragon.”

He snorts but pulls us upright before picking me up.

I wiggle in his arms, the pressure of my waistband suddenly uncomfortable, but I ignore it for now.

“What am I going to do with you?” Kalos mutters.

“You could let me walk.”

Kalos's grip on me tightens, and I clarify. "I have legs, you know."

But if he agrees with my statement, he doesn't acknowledge it. I sigh, secretly enjoying being carried by him. I don't know what the plan is. We probably need to regroup, put some space between the two of us, but I don't want to.

"What is a leonid?" I ask as we enter his office.

"The Leonid family are the ones that you stole the figurine for." Kalos sits in his office chair and makes no move to kick me off his lap. I frown at that news. The Leonids must be who Nemo got into trouble with.

Kalos continues, "They are using it to try and broker ownership of a fae gate from me for their organization."

I gasp. "What? You can't give them that!"

Both Maggie and Kalos have told me enough about the fae realm to know how bad that could be.

"I won't. They misjudged my willingness to ignore whatever business they want the gate for."

"Oh," I say, letting my head drop to his shoulder as I mentally try to catch up. "And they're shifters?"

"Yes."

I nod, connecting the dots. "And Stella's mom was married into them for a time. Stella isn't involved with them at all."

"I wish to speak to her about that then." There's a growl to his voice.

"I'd stake my life on that."

"Would you stake the life of our child?" The rage from before is absent, but he's as intense as he was.

I swallow. "Yes. I would never risk our child. Stella and I have been friends for years, and she's hated her father for longer than that."

"Very well."

I open my mouth, expecting to argue with him but snap it shut at his easy acceptance. I narrow my eyes.

Kalos's mouth twitches. "I'd still like to talk to her to see if she knows anything that could help us."

"That's a very different tune than just a moment ago."

He shrugs, but his mood dims. "You calm my dragon."

I wiggle again, looking down to see if my waistband is caught on anything and freeze. Kalos must sense my shock because he looks down as well.

My stomach, which had a barely noticeable curve to it this morning, has swollen in size. I have an unmistakable baby bump. I'd known I was pregnant before, I could feel it magically, but seeing it is very different.

Kalos's grip on me tightens and distracts me from the wonder of the change.

"What a greedy youngling," he murmurs with a shake of his head as if torn between amusement and an emotion that looks too much like pain. "They must have eaten up the heat my dragon didn't temper when you stopped us."

"I look pregnant." I touch my stomach and it's warm. I don't feel the baby move yet, but maybe they're sleeping off their feast.

"You do." Kalos doesn't move to touch my belly, and I don't push him to. His too-still posture adds to a slowly growing suspicion.

My mind goes back to the incubation of dragon eggs being dependent on how much fire they're given. How much did that fiery interference speed up this pregnancy?

"Well," I start. "I don't think we have to worry about if I can withstand dragon fire. It doesn't seem like that will be necessary." It's one less thing to worry about, but there are so many other things to worry about. Things like baby how-to books and nurseries. I take a breath and mentally shelf all that for the moment.

Kalos merely nods. His body has receded in size, his talons and scales back to how they were except for the horns on his head.

“The horns are nice,” I say. They are dark in color and jagged like shale.

Kalos’s cheeks pinken. “It helps settle my dragon. He wants to be seen.”

I run a finger up a horn, and Kalos shivers. His dragon wants to be admired. I pull my hand away. This is a dangerous intimacy. His body is stiff against me. Neither of us had planned the moment in the kitchen.

The reasons not to be physically intimate haven’t changed. I want this dragon. I want his body, his teasing comfort, and quiet moments in the evening. I even want his arrogant snark and grumpiness.

But he doesn’t want me in the same way.

And that has nothing to do with me.

“I should get up,” I say before blushing. “We should both clean up.”

His pants must be uncomfortable by now.

Kalos tightens his grip on me. “Let me hold you for a bit. I don’t enjoy losing control of my temper, and your presence is soothing.”

“Okay.” My voice is soft. I’m comfortable on his lap. Too comfortable. I’ve tried my hardest not to soften for this dragon, but I fear I already have.

I push that line of thinking away for another time. When I’m alone I can let myself contemplate these things. For now, I’ll just enjoy this moment.

Kalos’s body straightens, and his next words are bewildered.

“Is that a cat?”

KALOS

I NARROW my eyes at the purring creature perched on Katarina while she naps in my arms.

We still haven't moved from my office chair. My release dried in my pants long ago and dinner will be soon, but I can't bring myself to wake her or face the change in her pregnancy yet.

The child tripling in size has worn her out. The child that is now hidden under the orange furball that invaded my territory *weeks* ago.

Not seeing Katarina's swollen belly doesn't negate the effect it's having on me. I feel the child's mind against mine, and instead of blocking myself from it, I let the flutter of emotions weather me. They're dreaming.

Part of me wants to run as far away as I can to protect this spark of life from my tumultuous thoughts, and the rest of me wants to spread my hand over Katarina's belly and feel the child move. To accept the gift of this for what it is.

I brush Katarina's hair out of her face, sliding it behind her shoulder. The edges of a mark peek out from the neckline of her shirt.

The bite I'd given her during my heat is a neat scar. The white mark doesn't stand out too much against her skin. It had healed over very quickly for a witch.

I should have known then.

But it wasn't until the moment we believed her to be in danger that I'd known for sure.

Somehow, even without the ability to form a complete bond, my dragon has claimed Katarina as his mate.

He's ready to accept this youngling into our lives despite the catastrophe of last time.

I'm the one who is still broken and unable to move on.

The cat leaving its place on Katarina is the only warning I get in the hurricane of my thoughts. The doors to the office burst open, and Katarina startles awake in my arms.

"Alright, old man, I'm here. The dagger barely touched me, but I figured you needed to make sure I was alive with your own two eyes—oh, shit!" Gage freezes midway in the room at the sight of Katarina on my lap.

"Dagger?" I ask, becoming more aware. "What dagger?"

KATARINA

I BLINK, trying to shake the fog from my nap. I'm still in Kalos's lap, and there's a surprised man that I don't know staring at me.

The man's face creases in confusion. "I thought—you know, that's not important. Why did you want..." he trails off as his gaze drops to my stomach.

My very obvious stomach.

I may not recognize the man, but his presence feels like Kalos. His coloring is even similar, though his dark hair is wavy and his golden eyes have a warmer tone.

"Is this your son?" I ask, and Kalos flinches.

The man's lips compress before he smiles. It's a friendly, bewildered smile edged with a bitterness I can taste.

"No. Just his godson," the stranger says.

"Katarina, this is Gage. Gage, this is Katarina..." Kalos trails off as if not knowing how to describe our relationship.

I shrug. "The woman miraculously pregnant with his baby without being mated to him."

Kalos stiffens under me, and I push out of his lap, standing to offer my hand to shake.

Gage's eyes widen. His eyes not moving from my belly. He doesn't take my hand.

“I think—I think I’m going to come back later,” he says. There’s something warring behind his eyes.

Kalos massages the bridge of his nose. “That may be for the best.”

Gage doesn’t waste any time in escaping the room.

“Gage,” Kalos calls out, and the man stops at the threshold. “I’m glad the dagger barely touched you.”

Gage doesn’t turn. He just nods before leaving.

“Apologies,” Kalos says. “He needs time to process.”

I want to curl back up in my dragon’s lap, but sit on the edge of the desk instead, giving us both some space.

“You raised him?” I ask. I want to ask more questions, invasive questions, but Kalos’s shoulders are tight. He’s struggling, and my questions won’t help at this moment. Later I can interrogate him and make him tell me all about his history so I don’t trip over painful subjects like I just did.

Later, I’ll ask about my suspicion that the hole in Kalos’s heart that seems larger than the loss of a mate.

“I—yes. I raised him,” Kalos says, his eyes drop to my stomach. “I wanted to tell him about the youngling before he heard it from anyone else.”

And instead, Gage was met with the sight of my belly.

“I should have let you finish the introductions—” I start, but Kalos shakes his head.

“It would not have mattered. The way you introduced yourself is fitting enough.” There’s something mulling in Kalos’s eyes, and I recognize a partner in guilt. “I was not the father he needed.”

Ah.

“And now you’re being thrust back into that role again...” I shake my head. “We haven’t really discussed how involved you want to be. You don’t have to have an active role in our lives.”

I place my hand on my stomach, and the corresponding movement inside me derails my train of thought and leaves room for Kalos to interject.

“Dragons need a dragon mentor of some sort. There are struggles that are unique to us like controlling our shapeshifting and fire.” The words roll off his tongue as if he were a scholar rather than an expectant father.

I don’t want Kalos to feel compelled to raise a child he didn’t mean to create. I don’t want us to be a burden he takes on out of guilt or honor. “Nothing says that the dragon has to be you. Maybe Gage—”

The vicious sound that comes from Kalos’s throat cuts me off. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. It doesn’t seem to help because he’s standing toe-to-toe with me in the next moment.

“Another dragon will not take what is *mine*.” His eyes glow gold, full of annoyance and possessiveness.

I swallow my tongue instead of arching my brow and challenging like I should. I try to tamp down the delighted thrill at his words. The man just admitted to being a disappointment the last time he parented.

We deserve better than that.

“Then I guess you have some time to figure out how to be the best parent this baby needs,” I say. “Otherwise, we’ll figure this out. With or without you.”

I don’t know how much time he really has left with the apparent progression of this pregnancy. I rub a circle on my stomach, wanting to feel another movement, but they leave me wanting.

Kalos watches the motion, his jaw clenched. A breath later, he nods in understanding.

KATARINA

I PULL BACK a beautiful indigo robe with a gold peacock pattern and look at myself in the mirror. The swell of my stomach is still small compared to the full-term pregnancy photos I looked up. Ben was kind enough to get me a specific moisturizer for the stretch of my skin. I don't know what Kalos pays him, but he's worth his weight in gold.

“Rina.”

I jump.

Kalos leans against the doorjamb. He'd stopped knocking when coming into my room. Which doesn't bother me as much as it did when I was hiding Griffin.

“What are you doing?” he asks. His gaze is on my face, rather than my bared stomach.

“What does it look like I'm doing? Looking at my belly.” My cheeks burn, but I refuse to feel embarrassed. This is a big change in a small amount of time.

Maggie estimates that the baby is probably the same as a little over twenty weeks along in a human pregnancy. Which is terrifying. I went from ten weeks to halfway there in the blink of an eye and the glare from an angry dragon. My body aches a little, trying to accommodate the growth. I'm sure it would be much worse if the pregnancy didn't have magical origins.

I am focusing on the positives.

I sneak a look at Kalos in the mirror, admiring the breadth of his shoulders and the way his robe gapes to show the

muscles of his chest.

The horniness from before throbs hotter now. I don't know if it's because of hormones or the moment in the kitchen earlier. It's probably both.

I want to take off my clothes and throw myself at this dragon, but with the way he carefully doesn't look at my body, I don't. He doesn't seem to be feeling the same heat as I am.

I pull my tank top over my belly and belt my robe over it.

What if he's not attracted to me anymore? I swallow that thought down. That doesn't matter and it would probably be for the best. We have a lot of other things to deal with in the meantime.

"Did Stella give you the answers you were looking for?" I ask. He'd done his interrogation over the phone so as not to spark his dragon to anger.

"You were right. She doesn't have any contact with the family. She's never been on their compound. She has a tenuous relationship with one brother who refused to join the family business. She gave us the phone number he uses, but he's a globetrotter of sorts, and she has no idea where he is. She said I should just burn the rest of them to the ground."

I raise my brows at Stella's bloodthirstiness. I knew she didn't like what was done to her mother, but her emotions seem to cut much deeper than what she revealed to me.

"How would getting in contact with her brother help?" I ask, leaning my hip against the bathroom counter. Griffin jumps on the counter and meows at me to pet him.

"The whole compound is keyed to blood ties. If we could get him to turn against his family, he could simply walk out with the figurine, and we'd be done with this business."

"That would be convenient." I scratch under my cat's chin, and he starts purring.

Kalos arches a brow at the cat. He accepted his presence here surprisingly well.

“Your animal wants to cuddle,” Kalos says dryly before clearing his throat. “Did you want to join me on the couch?” Kalos asks, letting his gaze drop briefly. The contact probably isn’t necessary tonight with how much of his energy I’ve had today.

“Of course,” I say, not because it would be good to keep feeding the baby heat... but because the idea of not falling asleep in his arms makes my heart hurt.

Gah, I’m in such trouble when it comes to him.



I WAKE from blurry dreams of pleasure, aching with need.

My arm shakes when I reach out for Kalos, but the other side of the bed is empty. I whimper. My hips rock, and the thin robe clings to my hot skin. The horniness from the pregnancy is finally calling all its cards in, and there’s no way that I’ll be able to take care of it myself.

I need my dragon, and he isn’t here.

I don’t even know exactly where his bedroom is.

I blow out a breath in frustration and punch a pillow. Perhaps it’s better this way. I can’t give in to my desires even if I wanted to.

Maybe my body just has a primal need for his presence. His scent. I could go curl up in his office and see if that helps. I’m not prepared to search him out in the middle of the night, wandering the halls of this giant place horny.

I have more pride than that.

I move in the dark, keeping my steps soundless until I come to Kalos’s study. There’s no moon tonight, but his scent fills every inch of this space. I’m familiar enough with his office to try and pick my way to his couch before changing directions. His chair will be the most scent soaked.

The chair creaks as I round the desk, and I freeze. There’s a whisper of movement, and talon tips run up my thighs.

“What are you doing, little thief?” Kalos asks. He must stand because the darkness gets warmer. There’s pressure on my belly from his body, and I shiver in relief. All my senses are attuned to this dragon lurking in the shadows.

“Kalos,” I whisper. A tip of a talon and the pad of a finger drag down the side of my face. I step forward, and he steps back. I bite my lip at the absence of him.

“Isn’t this déjà vu?” I tease instead of resorting to begging right off the bat. My voice cracks. Can he see in the dark? I feel around the desk and turn toward it, presenting my backside to him.

He rumbles behind me. He can totally see in the dark.

“You can catch me rifling through your important papers and demand my body in retribution,” I say, my skin feeling too tight.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, not drawn in by my roleplay.

I pant. “You weren’t there when I woke up.”

“Do you think it’s easy to hold you when you whimper my name in your sleep?” Kalos asks, his words a careful cadence.

My face heats, but I lean forward on the desk, trying to tempt him without words. His body presses against mine, and I moan. His silky robe unable to disguise the fact that he’s already hard.

“I can think of something better for us to do than sleep,” I say.

My stomach presses against the desk, and I frown down at it for a moment before Kalos distracts me.

His breath is hot against my ear before he nips it. “Go back to bed, little queen.”

I make a sound of denial, and it catches in my throat.

“Nothing has changed but your hunger.” He says the words as if the hunger doesn’t have the power to make me want to crawl out of my skin.

I press up on my tip-toes, trying to push my ass against the hardness of his cocks.

“I know,” I whisper. “I know you don’t want anything permanent, and it would just be sex. But please... don’t make me beg.”

I’m signing permission for him to break my heart. In the stark darkness of night, I understand more about myself than what I hide in the light of day. It’s already too late to save myself from heartbreak.

It’s too late, and I’m too hungry to care.

He pauses, and his body throbs against mine. “But I have fond memories of you begging.”

I huff a tight laugh. “They are pretty good memories.”

Until the morning after anyway.

“You need me to provide assistance then?” His hand slides up my inner thigh, and I bite my lip at the flip of our situations. Me, the one in a heat-like state, while he is the thief in the night, stealing away my sanity.

“But whatever will you exchange for my service?” he purrs.

“Whatever you want,” I gasp.

“So needy,” he murmurs. “But your terms are amenable.”

My brain won’t allow me to worry about what he’s going to demand in *payment*. I’ll gladly forfeit anything to feel him inside of me again.

His talons retract, and his fingers sink into the clasp of my body. I groan. The stretch and pressure act as a balm while barely satisfying the desire in my blood.

“I need your cocks,” I gasp.

“You need whatever I give you.” Kalos’s even voice starts to darken. The dominance that pushed my limits and launched my pleasure into the stratosphere that first night together is a promise that has my toes curling.

“Yes!” I whisper.

He twists his fingers, and they press against a sensitive spot inside me that causes my legs to tremble.

“Mine to do with what I wish.” His words cause a cascade of sensation to flow through me.

“Yours,” I sob. It’s true. I may not be his mate, but he owns my mind and heart even when he doesn’t want to.

His fingers leave me, and he spins me around, catching my mouth with his. The kiss burns me alive and is more beautiful than a sunset. I try to climb his body, but at the press of my belly against him, I ease back. I don’t want to do anything that would cause him to stop, and he doesn’t like to be reminded about the baby.

Kalos lays me back on the desk. A pen tangles in my hair, but I don’t care. When he rises above me, I have a passing worry that my belly is going to be more obvious in this position, but at the first press of silk-covered hardness to my wetness the thoughts disappear.

I moan.

There’s a click, and the desk lamp turns on. I blink at the brightness but freeze at the sight of my dragon over me.

“I took you in darkness last time,” he growls. “This time I want to see the color of your eyes when you come around me.”

He pulls the tie of my robe, and I freeze as it falls away from me. My sleep set stretched over my stomach comes into sight.

I swallow. “But—”

Kalos stops. “But what?”

“I don’t want you uncomfortable with...” I trail off, but my fingers brush the side of my stomach.

He arches a brow. “Do you think that the sight of you swollen with my young does anything but make me want to fuck you over and over again so that the world knows it’s mine you carry?”

My cheeks burn. “You’ve been avoiding it, and I just thought—”

“It was surprising at first. Our child is so much louder against my senses. Harder to ignore.” His talon drags over my tank top strap, the sharp edge tearing the fabric with ease. His gaze snaps up to mine. “I have complicated feelings about many things, but not of how you look and not what it does to me.”

He rocks his hardness against me again, and my eyes roll back.

“You can’t tear all my clothes,” I say, but the words are breathy and cause his brow to lift in challenge. “These ones are old so it’s fine... but in the future, please ask.”

He bows his head in acquiescence. Not questioning that there will be moments in the future where he’ll be tearing off my clothing.

In a blink, my clothes fall to rags.

I gasp as he sucks a nipple into his mouth. The flesh has grown almost painfully sensitive with the new changes. My hands run under his robe, pushing it off until he’s also bared to me. His body is just as beautiful as it was before, his human-toned skin graying over his core to where his erections stand.

I tighten on emptiness as he sucks harder on my nipple before he switches to the other.

“I need you inside me,” I say.

His teeth graze my skin, and I shiver. “All in good time—”

“No!” But it’s moaned out and completely unconvincing if Kalos’s snort is anything to go by.

“So hungry for a cock to fill you? You’re sounding a little desperate.” The tease is cruel but makes me wetter. Apparently, my kink is Kalos being an asshole. Great.

“Maybe I’m hungry enough to find someone else who is up for the job,” I hiss.

Well, there goes my self-preservation. Kalos growls. His fingers thread through my hair before pulling my head back. The tension on my scalp has a spike of heat racing down my spine and over my skin.

“What was that, little queen?”

I swallow, but my bravery isn't hiding like my good sense is. “If you're not going to fuck me—”

I break off when he pinches my nipple—hard. My cry turns into a moan when he tugs it softly.

“You shouldn't prod me into losing control,” he says.

I laugh at that. “I do a lot of things I shouldn't.”

“Then you'll pay the price for it,” he growls. “Beg for what you want, little queen.”

“You know I want you.” I squirm. Kalos massages my entire breast now instead of torturing my tender nipple.

“But I want to hear you say it,” he says, his eyes glowing.

Arrogant, temperamental, sadistic—I gasp as he presses a hot cock to where my body is weeping.

“Please, Kalos!”

His hard flesh presses forward, and my head falls back on a groan at the contact. Happy to miss his satisfied expression as he releases my hair.

The blunt head of his cock slides against my folds before my body gives way to the leaking hardness. He sinks inside me, and I envelop every ridge of his cock hungrily. He goes slowly, whether to torture me or for himself, I don't know. I don't care as the stretch and sensation of him being cradled inside me has my thighs spreading wider.

Kalos groans. “You feel better than I remember.”

His hand rests on the swell of my stomach, and our eyes lock.

“*Mine.*” He growls in the way that lets me know his dragon is calling the shots right now. It's almost a relief.

Dragon Kalos is much more predictable.

I nod, the words catching in my throat at the claim.

“Going to fill you over and over,” he breathes. “Bathe our young in heat until they’re strong.”

I try to move my hips to urge him to go faster, plunge deeper, anything but this slow-drawing pace that has my body trembling with need. Kalos removes his hand from my stomach and grips my hips instead, keeping me where he wants me while he moves.

He withdraws and presses inside me again. My hands clasp around his scaly wrists.

“Faster,” I beg.

The next thrust hits me deep, and I groan in satisfaction, needy once more until he snaps his hips harder. Our bodies fall into a rhythm. The dance of give and take established when we first met.

“So good,” I whisper without meaning to. He’s everywhere. His scent, the brush of his breath. The lamp casts his muscles in relief as his body strains with each thrust into mine. He’s moving art and for the first time in a long time my fingers itch for a paintbrush, not to revitalize a portrait, but to create something new.

The climax takes me by surprise. The jolt of Kalos’s body inside mine rattles my bones and curls my toes until the drawing tightness of my core snaps. A chord struck that reverberates a wave of pleasure inside me. It isn’t enough.

Kalos grunts, and the heat he spills inside me has another wave of delight shivering through my body. I bite my lip as the feel of his cock moving inside me becomes larger and more sensitive with a tingling zing. His first release healing and priming me for what comes next.

“I need your knot,” I demand.

Kalos’s seductive smile has me clenching around him. “Give your cunt a moment to rest, little queen.”

I whimper and claw at him as he pulls his cock from me, pressing his fingers into the tender flesh between my legs.

“Calm yourself, Rina.” Kalos’s tone is smug, his snarling dragon once more locked behind his control. He massages my folds and opening wetly. His scales sliding over my sensitive skin has the muscles of my core twitching.

My face heats as his release leaks past his fingers. “*Fuck,*” I whisper, wanting to hide and drag him on top of me again in equal measure.

“Such a pretty cunt,” he says. “All filled up with my seed and growing my young.”

His nostrils flare as his gaze travels up to my swollen stomach. Maybe his dragon isn’t quite as locked away as I thought.

“Kalos—”

“Be a good little queen and let me look at you.”

I feel his eyes on my very exposed pussy and squirm. “I need more.”

“I know. You’re greedy and it’s my job to take care of you, but I also need to inspect you to check for damage.” His eyes glint in the light, belying his words. He’s enjoying toying with me. “Spread your legs wide.”

I swallow, bringing my heels to perch on the desk edge and spreading my thighs so he can *inspect* me. The position is all at once clinical and forbiddingly hot. His other hand comes to my inner thigh, his thumb peeling open my folds, analyzing.

“You’re doing so well, little queen.”

I tense, and more of his first release leaves me. Shame and arousal raze my senses, and my lips tremble.

His fingers slide inside me again, and my head falls back as he strokes a sensitive spot. Though with how the fluid from his first release behaves, everything inside me is a sensitive spot.

“Kalos,” I breathe, my back starting to arch from whatever his fingers are doing inside me.

“Does my little queen need something more?” he purrs. “I’m at your service.”

I want to scoff at his words. At my service? He may be assisting me, but he’s calling the shots, and nothing I do will change that no matter how much I beg. My body shivers with a violent need.

“Please.”

“Your cunt does seem sufficiently hungry for my knot now.” Kalos presses in another finger gently. The pressure builds before my body stretches to accept his three fingers eagerly. The smile on his face should be illegal.

He slides his fingers free of me, the slick mess of them making the heat in my cheeks border on painful. I wiggle my hips, about to remove my heels from the desk to run away. The arousal so loud in my head that I’m practically nonsensical.

“Shh,” Kalos shushes me, and I realize that the embarrassing whimpering sounds hanging in the air are coming from me. From the triumphant look on his face, they don’t bother him.

His hand grips my hip again as the other lines his erection of his second cock to my entrance. The hard head of his cock is already wet with precum that heats my soaked folds. The relief is so close I can taste it.

Kalos barely applies any pressure, but my body opens to accept him.

We groan in unison as his cock slides inside me.

I try to lift my hips to take his knot. My mind is only full of memories of his stretching me in a way no one else can. Kalos tsks and tightens his grip on my hips, not allowing me to move to take more. He’s enjoying this too much.

Instead of ramming his knot home, he pushes and drags his stiff cock in and out of my body. Each press of his knot against my folds causes a full-body shiver.

I whimper with need. “Kalos, I’m losing my mind. Please, I need your knot. I don’t know why.”

Kalos shushes me again and releases one hip to wipe my cheek. I’m crying. There are tears on my face because of how deep I want this dragon inside me.

“What’s wrong with me?” I ask, fearful but needy still.

“It’s only instincts, sweet queen. Your body wants my knot because it will comfort you. I need you to take a deep breath though because taking my knot will be different now that you carry my young.”

I follow the order and take a breath, trying to calm my fears with the knowledge Kalos is giving me.

Kalos continues, “You’ll need to work for it. You’re so engorged that the fit may be uncomfortable. Do you still want it inside you?”

“Yes!” I don’t pause to think. I’m only running on pleasure and need now. There’s no limit to anything that my dragon wants to do to me that will stop me from taking his knot. He sinks the rest of his shaft inside me, the knot pressing against the wet mess of my folds.

“Push out against me,” he says.

I blow out a breath and push, my body flowering against the hard, swelling press of his knot. I scrunch my brow. Pushing seems counterintuitive to getting him inside me, but once I relax, my body gives more than it had before, his knot sliding part way in.

I moan loudly, squeezing around what I can of his knot before remembering to relax. Kalos curses, no longer the picture of cool control.

“Almost there, little queen. Again.” His order is determined, but soft, save for the clicking of his teeth together.

I push, bearing down on the swell of him until I grunt. I suck a breath in, my body relaxing and Kalos’s knot sliding home in one smooth move.

The pressure. I cry out, wanting to sob and moan in victory at the same time. Deep pleasure crashes inside me like angry waves against a cliff. The bright cut of discomfort a lightning strike before Kalos soothes the sensation with his hot mouth on my nipple.

The hard, sucking draw distracts me from the unforgiving stretch. Kalos groans against my skin, and the heat of his release adds to the other flood of sensations.

“*Fuck, fuck, fuck,*” I chant in a whisper.

Kalos switches nipples and my thighs relax, closing around his torso.

The sensation of his knot inside me is clear. A large part of his body is lodged inside of mine and now that the worst of the discomfort has passed, the physicality of it makes itself known. I gasp out a breath, and Kalos drags his fangs against the tender skin of my breast.

“Better?” he rumbles, the front of my body warm from his.

I blink. “I don’t know. Everything is in a kind of a daze.”

“That will pass. It’s your body responding to all the feel-good hormones from the knot.”

Feel-good hormones and bodies. The thoughts come disjointed.

“Does knotting influence attachments? Physically?” I ask but already suspect the answer.

His jaw clenches, and there’s a beat before he finally answers. “Yes, in a similar way that sex does, but it packs a little more of a punch. I apologize, Rina. I didn’t think of that.”

I wave a hand before returning it to touching his back. The stroking motions soothing me as well as causing the dragon on top of me to shiver.

“We’re pretty connected anyway.” In body, in mind, and heart. If only on my end. I blink at my internal revelations. I wasn’t supposed to acquire feelings for Kalos, but I’m not in

the practice of guarding my heart. With the way we interact, it was only a matter of time.

I close my eyes. Someday he's going to break my heart. I thought I could avoid it, but I can't. I'm not someone who can just stop feelings from happening.

But for this moment, with his knot buried inside of me, I'll enjoy this.

For this moment, he's mine.

KALOS

MY DESK SMELLS LIKE SEX. Sex and Katarina's begging.

It's distracting, but I make no move to remedy it. Pride fills my chest, and the dragon inside me preens every time the scent reminds us of last night.

I shouldn't have done it. Katarina deserves a lover who can give her their heart. She'd told me she couldn't separate sex from emotion and still I'd taken her. I couldn't leave her in such need. My dragon wouldn't abandon his mate... and we're a greedy creature in the end.

The reminder of the mating comes with a slight sting. I've kept the burden of knowledge that my dragon has claimed Katarina to myself. It won't make a difference in the end. My inability to bond will eventually break the understanding between us, and it would only cause more hope and eventual pain if I told her of the dragon's claim.

It's bad enough that the primal part of my being seeps out and says possessive things during intimacy, but that can be excused as bed play. It doesn't change the truth.

I can't keep her, and I'm more disappointed by that than I care to analyze.

I sigh and push away from my desk, needing a break. Ben is in the kitchen working on dinner. It's Maggie's night off, and we trade who manages dinner on these days. We're no chefs, but each of us can make a few meals that are passable.

I'm halfway to the kitchen when my dragon hears Katarina. I can't make out what she's saying yet, but her tone is one of panic. I increase my pace and burst through the doors of the kitchen in the next moment.

Katarina and Stella are sitting at the table in front of the window, a mountain of books in front of them, while Ben is at the counter.

"What's going on?" I demand.

Katarina's eyes are wide with tears. "I can't have runny eggs!"

Confusion makes my mind slow. "You can't have eggs?"

"*Runny* eggs and deli meat." She sniffs and holds up a book with a bright cover.

"Kat, I told you most of this stuff probably doesn't apply to a magical pregnancy, much less one involving a dragon," Stella says, casting an uneasy glance at me. We'd come to a truce of sorts after the revelation of her parentage, but she'd still seen my rage and that's not something to be ignored.

"And you're crying because you can't have runny eggs?" I ask, trying to catch up and discover whether there's anyone who needs to be torched to stop the tears tracking down Rina's cheeks.

Out of the corner of my eye, Ben shakes his head. Trying to communicate that either I need to proceed with caution or that my misunderstanding of the situation is pitiful.

"I'm crying because there's all these rules I've never heard of. Why didn't I think to prepare before now? I'm going to be the worst mother in the history of mothers!" The last one ends on a wail, and my eyes widen.

"That's not true," Stella says and widens her eyes at me, silently telling me that now it's my turn. She's rubbing circles on Katarina's back.

"Rina," I say, sliding in on the other side of her. "Please stop crying. You are not going to be a terrible mother. Maggie

would have told you if there was anything you needed to be cautious of.”

My words don't stop her sobbing, but she throws her arms around my neck and presses her face there. Stella and Ben exchange a surprised look, but I ignore them.

There's a notebook open on the table, thick with writing, and a hastily drawn chart of the types of fish to avoid based on mercury content versus fatty omegas.

I blink in surprise.

“I need to be prepared,” she says thickly into my shirt.

Ah. It's no mystery that Katarina is good at everything she does. I'd have never known she was in the gallery that night if I hadn't been heading there, she flawlessly forged more paintings than she's confessed to me, and her restoration skills are in demand even though she doesn't enjoy the work.

Katarina demands perfection and succeeds through preparation.

She's studying these books as closely as she would a heist. Thinking through each scenario, but there's no way to anticipate everything, and she's going to run herself ragged if she tries.

“How long have you been at this?” I ask.

“*Hours*,” Stella answers. “Because someone got her all the books she asked for.”

She glares at Ben who presses his lips together in annoyance.

“I didn't think it would cause this,” Ben snaps back.

I raise my brows at him, and he blushes. “I thought she just needed to check a few things, and she didn't want to bother Maggie on her day off. This is better than her looking it up on the internet, right?”

Stella rolls her eyes at him, but I agree.

Katarina's sobs quiet and she pulls away. “I know I'm not being logical, but I'm overwhelmed, and I don't know what to

do—” She breaks off and blinks rapidly like she’s going to start crying again.

Hormones. Stella mouths to me.

Hormones have dissolved the competent, snarky woman I know and care for into a worried puddle. It seems criminal, but now that I understand what a big part of this meltdown is, I can solve it.

“I will read the books,” I say.

“You’ll read the books?” Katarina asks.

“I will read the books and check every warning with what I know about dragons. Then I’ll work with Maggie so you have a list of things that you have in your control.”

“You’re going to read all the books?” Now Katarina frowns. There are at least ten on the table.

My lips twitch. “I can *read*.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and the fire of her annoyance is much more acceptable than her crying. “I didn’t mean that. I just mean there are a lot of them and about a lot of different things.”

I read the titles, and she’s not wrong. There is everything from pregnancy planning, giving birth, to the first year of life. I spread the books on the table and pick up the two about preparing for birth.

“You can read these ones,” I say and pray that the subject won’t upset her the same way as the pregnancy books did. Giving her a task should help, and at least the birth isn’t something she’s already halfway through with. “Now go and cuddle with Griffin, and I’ll let you know when I have a list.”

Katarina’s eyes widen. “Oh my god. What about toxoplasmosis?”

I don’t know what toxoplasmosis is, but I’m about to find out.

“Rina, do you trust me?” I ask.

She blinks, and I'm almost as surprised as she is when she nods.

"Trust that I will do everything in my power to keep you and the baby safe. Including reading about toxoplasmosis and letting you know if it's a risk."

Her shoulders relax, and she holds the books about birth to her chest.

She casts a glance at the notebook in front of me.

"That's mine now," I say. "You can have it back after I talk to Maggie."

This won't work forever. I have no doubt that Katarina will read all the books in their entirety after I give my report, but then she'll at least have a baseline of what she does need to worry about rather than the majority of things she doesn't.

"Okay," Katarina says, and my dragon puffs up at the soft look in her eyes. "Thank you."

"Of course," I say. It's not fair to have Katarina go through all the information alone.

Stella breathes a sigh of relief and slides off the bench. "It's been too long since I've seen Griffin anyway."

The women leave and I restack the books, picking up the top title and opening to start reading.

"I'm surprised," Ben says.

"I'm offended at your surprise that I can read," I grumble back.

Ben shakes his head. "You were so adamant that you two wouldn't have a relationship..."

"Stop gossiping, Ben. Or I'll assign you some of these books to read for me." Katarina and I do have a relationship. Whether it was something that I wanted or not. I will not allow her to overtax herself.

Ben hums. "I don't think you will."

I glare at him.

Ben grins. “Because you promised her that you’d read them, and you’re not about to break her trust.”



“OH MY!” Maggie’s voice is warm as she takes in all the books on the table. “She did get busy, didn’t she?”

“Katarina does nothing by half,” I say. “Who told you?”

“Ben was keeping me up-to-date through the process. I think he was going to call me back home, but you handled it.”

I’d known the exact moment when Maggie returned to the back kitchen door... and how long she lingered there.

“I’ll have plenty of questions for you later, but did you have a nice time?” I ask, smiling when she blushes. Ben’s gossip goes both ways.

“Yes, I did. Jensen was a perfect gentleman.”

“Not too much of a gentleman, I hope,” I tease her.

Maggie gasps. “You will say no such thing to him. I enjoy that he’s taking so much time in romancing me.”

Maggie is fae, and fae do love their carnal activities.

“I’m surprised you finally accepted his offers,” I say. My driver has been slow in his approach. Patient at the same time as letting his interest be known. I didn’t think Maggie would ever let him past the point of flirting.

Maggie doesn’t respond to my remark and instead goes to check the potatoes boiling on the stove. The pot roast in the slow cooker should be done soon. It’s not her night to cook, but it’s hard to keep her out of the kitchen.

Maggie frowns. “Where’s Ben? These potatoes are going to get overcooked.”

“He went to take Stella home.”

“Oh, she should have stayed for dinner!”

I arch a brow. “Apparently, she’s not brave enough to try Ben’s cooking.”

Maggie nods knowingly. “The two of them are quite entertaining.”

“I’ll admit, I haven’t seen the show except for today.” I did wonder why Ben’s face closes off whenever she is mentioned.

“You haven’t seen the show because you’ve been avoiding a certain lady in residence.”

“Yes.” I don’t deny the charge. “I started out avoiding her anyway. Not that it was possible with the required contact.”

Maggie hums, flicking off the burner for the potatoes and grabbing a strainer.

“I accepted Jensen’s offer because I wanted to,” she says, looping our conversation back. “It’s been a long time since I lost my mate.”

Maggie’s mate had been a radical in the fae realm. He didn’t want to wait for their slow courts to abolish the more heinous laws or punish the nobles committing the most atrocious acts. The list of enemies he made had eventually caught up with him, leaving Maggie in a dangerous position on the other side of the gates.

She may age here and be less powerful overall, but she can remain free of contacts who would try to drag her back into the conflict and to do what she wants without judgment. A noble fae, even one separated from those who hold court by many bloodlines, keeping house for a dragon? The ridicule would do nothing for her peace of mind. She enjoys what she enjoys, and I happily provide protection and a home.

Maggie drains the potatoes. “I’d been thinking since Katarina showed up that you should accept the good thing in front of you and let yourself love again, and I realized I was being a hypocrite.”

My throat swells at her words, because I may have thought the same thing about her and Jensen. “And now you’ll allow yourself your impudent words because you’re no longer a hypocrite?”

She doesn't respond immediately, and I wait for the words that I know will sting.

"It doesn't betray those we've loved to keep on living after they're gone," Maggie says softly. "It's something I've thought for years, and I finally let myself believe it. That's why I went out with Jensen."

She clears her throat. "You are ages older than I am, Kalos. Wiser too. I'd never think to lecture you about how you live your life."

I shake my head on a chuckle as she's done exactly that. "Of course you wouldn't."

Her face softens. "You smile more. I don't think I've ever seen you as relaxed as you were this morning."

My cheeks heat, and my grin turns rueful.

Maggie continues, "You deserve more than you've let yourself have."

"I'd make a mess of it," I say, voicing concerns that I try to repeatedly bury. "There's part of my heart that isn't there anymore. I don't know if I could love again, even if I tried."

"Have you tried?"

"I haven't wanted to." To love without a bond would feel... temporary. I can admit to myself and others that I like Katarina, that she brings me peace, but to dwell on my feelings past that when a permanent relationship would only have me experiencing her eventual death to old age is a pain I'll rail against.

"Then you'll never know." Maggie shrugs. "You have a miraculous child on the way, falling in love isn't nearly as impressive a feat."

I don't respond to that. The child isn't as miraculous now that I know that my dragon has mated Katarina. Unlikely and rare, yes, but not miraculous. There's an emptiness in my heart where the bonds of a mate should be, a silence.

My dragon healed whatever part of himself had the same damage, and not for the first time have I wondered—how?

Did he snuff the memory of the mate we lost from his mind? Our son?

I don't think so. Dragons hoard what they find most precious. They don't allow it to fade or disappear.

Perhaps that is why he holds so mindlessly tight to Katarina and the future she offers. He is instinct, while I am only bitter logic and the memory of pain.

KATARINA

I FROWN at the painting in front of me. It'll be the last project I do for a while, and the dirt is being stubborn. Or I need to alter my mix of solvent to remove this type of varnish. I have a new restorer starting at the beginning of next week. An excited young witch who loves this work and learned the basics from the internet. I'll slowly train her on the more specialized parts of restoration until she can take over for me completely. The business side of getting an employee set up is just the distraction I need to forget how ridiculous I've been the last couple of days.

It feels like my body isn't my own.

Everything makes me cry. Half the time I don't even know if the tears are from being sad, mad, or scared. The freakout over the pregnancy books put the uncontrollable mood swings on display.

It will be a relief to let restoration go. It truly is a much more frustrating job than I've let myself realize. The years I've spent punishing myself with my profession are over. Now it's time to figure out what I really want to do in life.

Tears well, and I roll my eyes at myself.

At least Kalos has given me a list of things to avoid that he and Maggie agree on for pregnancy safety. The list is tiny and makes me feel silly all over again for being so overwhelmed before even asking Maggie what was relevant to gestating a dragon.

I'm smart. I could reason that the rule against baths over a certain temperature definitely didn't apply, but everything else I had no idea about. Maggie had gently explained that most of the food restrictions were to avoid getting sick, and with the temperature the baby is running, getting a fever isn't going to affect anything.

So my rules are: avoid stress, extreme workouts, and sleeping on my back. Even that last one is debatable.

Right now, stress is the only thing I'm unsure how to avoid. Especially with the mood swings, but I'm doing my best.

My phone lights up with a text, and I ignore it. Avoiding stress isn't the only reason that I'm not going to respond to the texts Nemo has been sending me, but it's a good one.

It started slowly. He sent a text last week asking how I was, which I'd ignored with a pang of guilt. I wanted to respond. I wanted to believe that he was going to be worried about me, but my actions were validated when the next text was about the perfect job for me and to call him if I was interested.

Nemo doesn't care about me. He probably never did.

Am I really so unlovable?

I sniff and wipe away the tears angrily. *Stop this. Stop this right now.*

Since those texts, Nemo's been sending more, acting like because I broke into Kalos's place, I'm back in the business. He gossips about mutual contacts we have, who has taken which job, what items are in demand this week, or a sly inside joke we used to share.

He was never so chatty when I responded before, so I can only imagine that each detail he drops is a ploy to suck me back in. And I'm done.

I'm done being used by him.

I should text him back and tell him to stop contacting me, but I don't. Because I'm weak. Because I've known him for so

long that I don't want to just cut our ties. I still care about him.

He must care about me a little, right?

These mood swings are going to be the end of me.

A tap on the open door has me jumping in surprise. I almost don't recognize the man standing there since our meeting before was so brief.

"Sorry!" he says. "Ben said I could find you here."

"It's alright," I say as I try to match a name to his face. When I do, surprise has my eyes widening. Kalos's godson, Gage, stands in the doorway sheepishly.

"I see you remember me," he says.

"Yes, sorry, I wasn't very awake when we first met." My cheeks heat at the memory of napping on Kalos's lap after the getting in the way of an angry dragon and humping him like a rabbit in heat.

He nods. "I remember. Can I come in?"

"Sure," I say. "Kalos isn't here..."

Gage winces. "I wanted to apologize to you for my reaction to the news of your pregnancy."

"Oh, that's fine. You were surprised." I place my hand on my stomach.

Gage watches the move, his gaze softening. "Yes, I was. I just wanted you to know that I'm excited that another dragon will be born. We are rare and that can be lonely."

"Kalos explained a little about your history and why you needed some time," I hedge.

Gage's smile is a little rueful. "I admit that I may have felt a little jealous. Kalos has been in my life since I hatched, even if on the sidelines. The thought of losing his attention threw me for a loop. It was a childish reaction."

I've mulled over Kalos's confession about their relationship since that moment.

"Can I ask you a question?" I ask.

“Of course.”

“Was he a terrible father?” I can care for Kalos while still seeing his flaws and being critical of them. Information is power, and in a world of magic and creatures beyond my imagination, I need power.

Gage’s rueful smile drops. “Ah.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, it just takes me back to things that I’m not really proud of.” Gage thinks for a moment. “It’s not that he was a terrible father... he just wasn’t one. He provided for me but was ultimately absent from day-to-day life. It created a lot of strife for me. I wanted his attention as more than a distant mentor. I was not the best-behaved child, or teenager...” Gage trails off before rolling his eyes. “Or young adult.”

I crack a smile at that even though my heart breaks for him.

“Oh gods, please don’t cry!” Gage says, eyes wide.

“Ugh! It’s not your fault. My hormones are all over the place.” I hurriedly wipe the sneaky tear away. “Please continue.”

Gage hesitates, observing me for any more tears before he starts again. “You should understand that raising me was something he promised my parents. They died a few years after his own losses and my egg was hidden away, kept dormant until dragon hunters were wiped out. It wasn’t until many years later that he kept the promise and hatched me.”

His losses. The hair on the back of my neck rises, and the suspicions I’ve harbored for weeks start to trickle free.

“So he hatched you, but didn’t exactly raise you?” I ask.

Gage nods. “There were a lot of people who cared for me, but they weren’t dragons, and it wasn’t the same as having a parent. It... made me angry. I eventually confronted him about it.”

“And?”

“He apologized.” There’s a note of surprise in Gage’s voice even all these years later. I can relate. Kalos is a proud beast.

“He thought when he hatched me that he would be able to handle the bond between a new dragon and parent, but we didn’t bond. I bonded to my first nanny instead. He thought that even without a bond, he could still act as a father to me, but... he said it was too painful.”

“Because he lost his mate?” I ask, even though dread has pooled in my stomach that not even the kick of my baby can distract me from.

Gage shrugs. “Of course, but a lot of it was because my presence reminded him too much of the son he’d lost.”

The truth is like cracking ice, cold and clear. I swallow. “He’s never told me about his son.”

But I’d suspected. The flash of pain in his eyes when he’d touch my belly, or talk about old wounds. Little breadcrumbs that lead to heartbreak.

Gage nods, unsurprised. “I didn’t know either, not until the moment that I’d confronted him. He doesn’t like to talk about it. When his mate fell, the bond between her and their son killed him as well. It’s the scary part of the hatchling and mother bond.”

Scary is an understatement. Kalos said that the bond lasted for the first year of life. I retreat away from those thoughts until I can have a moment to process them.

Gage continues, “I forgave him for not being the father I wanted him to be. It helps to know that it was something he desired, but struggled with. I know he loves me in his own way.”

But what if he can’t do it this time either? I rub a circle on my stomach and think. Can I be enough of a parent for the both of us? Is that fair to our child?

“You shouldn’t worry,” Gage says as if he can read my mind.

“Why?”

“This time will be different.”

My laugh is full of disbelief at his confidence. Kalos had been right about everyone deluding themselves about believing they are in control of things. “And why will this time be different?”

“Because she’s got you, and you’ll keep him in line.” Gage grins like he’s going to enjoy witnessing this immensely, but my thoughts stutter out.

“She?”

“The baby.” Gage’s eyes go wide. “Uh, you didn’t know that it’s a girl?”

“No.” My lips go numb, and I feel around for the leather armchair, before lowering myself down. I’m going to have a daughter, and it all feels so much more real than it was when the baby was just a dragon that likes to kick me at night.

“You don’t look so good,” Gage says with panic in his voice, but I don’t respond. I need a moment. He’s gone in the next blink, and this time I let the tears come.

Stupid tears from happiness, confusion, or terror.

Maybe it’s all three.

KALOS

“KALOS! SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH KATARINA!” Gage’s shouts are distant and echo in the house, but I hear them clearly and hang up the meeting I’m on immediately. I run.

Gage skids to a halt when he sees me coming, and he dashes back the way he came.

“What did you do?” I demand.

“I don’t know! We were just talking, and she went pale,” Gage says as we arrive to Katarina’s workroom. She sits on her leather couch, frozen and unresponsive to our presence.

“Rina,” I cajole, and she blinks at me through tears before shaking her head and scowling at Gage.

“You didn’t have to call the calvary. I was taking a moment, dammit!” she says.

My lips twitch in relief.

“Sorry if I prefer my hide on my back instead of a torture rack,” Gage snarks back, face full of relief.

Katarina turns her face to meet mine, her eyes still wet but clear of the stress from before. “Gage says it’s a girl.”

“What?” I say, my adrenaline is starting to calm, but words are harder to decipher especially without context.

She snorts. “The baby. The baby is a girl, though I don’t know how he can tell.”

I look to Gage, and he rocks on his heels as if embarrassed.

“Dragons can sense our own,” I say to explain. I would have been able to tell the sex if I’d let myself. I don’t know why I hadn’t.

Because it would have made it more real. Like how it is now.

I still. *A girl.* We’re having a daughter.

“At least I’m not the only one who needs a moment,” Katarina says wryly and pushes herself to stand. “I think I feel like a snack.”

I move to pick her up, and she puts her hands up to stop me. “I may cry like a leaky faucet, but I can still walk, goddammit. Anyway, I’d like to take a minute without the two of you hovering around me.”

An emotion passes over her face so quickly that I almost miss it. Sadness. For me.

Gage blinks. “Hey! I thought you were in trouble. How was I supposed to know that you weren’t about to go into labor?”

“Thank you for your assistance, Gage,” Katarina calls over her shoulder before she disappears down the hall.

We stand where we are for a moment until Gage clears his throat awkwardly. “Well, I should be going—”

“My office,” I cut in.

Gage presses his lips together, and I think he may tell me to go fuck myself rather than follow my command, but he must take pity on me.

“Yes, sir,” he mutters. We don’t say anything as we trek back across the house. As soon as I close the door behind him, I break the silence.

“You told her.”

Gage nods. He doesn’t ask what I’m talking about. He knows that as big of a revelation as finding out my child is a girl, that isn’t what caused the flash of emotion on Katarina’s face.

“You should have been the one to tell her,” he says.

He’s right. Ben suggested the same thing.

“I know,” I say and pause before continuing. The relationship between Gage and I has always been difficult to navigate. When he was young, I tried to keep him from knowing how much his presence affected me. It hadn’t been fair to him. Which resulted in my appearance of cool control. Our relationship improved as he became an adult, and I finally accepted that I needed to show him my true emotions. I endeavor to only be honest now. “It’s difficult to confess my shortcomings.”

He scoffs. “Kalos, you lost your family, that’s trauma, not a shortcoming.”

I squint at him. “My inability to bond is a shortcoming.”

I cannot bond with a mate or a hatchling. I will forever be separate from Katarina and the baby, unable to feel them in my soul how I crave to. Because I do crave that. Even with the tidal wave of unease and fear that comes with it.

I will try my best to work around the lack of a bond for Katarina and the baby, but my best may not be good enough.

Which is why I haven’t made any promises.

“There are people you can talk to about that,” Gage offers. “Those who specialize in bonds.”

I compress my lips in instant denial. That kind of magic is very dangerous and requires a large amount of trust.

“The world is different, Kalos.” Gage shakes his head. “We don’t need to seclude ourselves and hide secrets the way we used to. There are people who can help.”

There’s a crack in my resolve at that. Is it possible? Is it worth the risk?

I clear my throat as if my godson hasn’t upset everything I thought to be fact. “If there is someone you trust, I will take that under advisement.”

Gage blinks in surprise before hiding the expression. “Alright. I know one off the bat that I’d trust with all my crews’ lives. The matchmaker at the bathhouse sees soul threads. She might be able to help.”

“The bathhouse that your succubus frequents?” I ask. There are other bathhouses in our world, but that one has a renowned matchmaker.

Gage blushes. “She’s not my succubus—”

I snort. It’s not my place to judge the relationships that Gage keeps.

Gage rolls his eyes at me. “But yes, that’s the one.” He looks thoughtful. “You should take Katarina there anyway. She’d probably enjoy some time away from this place.”

My nostrils flare, “It’s not safe—”

“It’s heavily warded, and there are private rooms,” Gage interrupts me, and I narrow my eyes at him. He continues, “You’d enjoy it too. It’s to your tastes.”

I consider his words before shrugging. The bathhouse is not a bad idea. I doubt that Katarina has noticed herself feeling more closed in, but with the mood swings, it would only do her good to get out of the house.

And this matchmaker may be able to change... everything. “Okay.”

Gage is surprised by my answer, but he’s quicker to wipe away the expression this time.

Have I really been such a domineering dragon that he’s so surprised that I’d take his advice? Yes, I have been. The hollow pain that I’ve kept alive in my soul hasn’t left much room to be flexible with those around me. I’m excellent at pushing people away.

Which brings me to my next words. Words I’ve said before, but they bear repeating.

“I am sorry,” I say. “For not being what you needed as a child.”

Having a youngling on the way reminds me of all the ways I've failed him. It keeps the feelings fresh.

"I wasn't a father to you, and I should have been." I admit the next with reluctance, but stark honesty. "I don't know how this time will be any different."

Gage grows serious before nodding toward the door. "She makes this time different. You squandered raising me as your son. Don't squander the gift of having a mate."

I glance away. "We are not mated." *Completely.*

He shrugs. "Not yet, but it's a possibility. Don't tell me that she's been under your roof all this time and you haven't been courting her in whatever way you can. That you don't love to provide for her physically or monetarily?" He laughs. "Or have you not noticed how much you enjoy giving her gifts?"

I clench my jaw because I have given her gifts, provided for her. Had the robes been meant as a courting gift?

Yes. Things that I've been doing because of instinct draw me closer and closer to Katarina. And if I could be fixed? If I could bond with Katarina, what then?

I could have her as a real mate.

We'd have a future.

KATARINA

I BLOW out a breath slowly and stare at my flushed cheeks in the vanity mirror. I'd picked a stunning green robe with an intricate dragonfly design on it to try to distract myself.

Griffin meows at me, and I shake my head at him.

"You don't want to know what I'm thinking," I say. Or feeling for that matter.

I burn.

It's just like that night in Kalos's office. Is the random horniness better or worse than crying all the time? I guess if there's no hope of satisfaction it would be worse, but... my bedroom door opens with a soft click, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Rina—" Kalos comes into sight and cuts off. His nostrils flare. "You're in need. Why didn't you come get me?"

"You were busy. Ben said you had a meeting." So I'd come up to my room and ripped my clothes off to take care of it myself. The first orgasm had come quickly. So had the second. But neither stalled the need for long.

If I were a betting woman, I'd guess that I need Kalos to settle the craving. That I need him filling me up with his cum or tongue.

The robe flows over my skin and makes me shiver. I wear nothing underneath. I'm bare and sensitive and need Kalos's help.

He makes an annoyed sound. “I don’t care if I’m in a meeting. You tell me when you need something.”

“I need you,” I say easily. I may be a prideful woman in the light of day, but my body has learned that begging this dragon gets it what it wants. He doesn’t make me wait.

“Then come, little queen. Let me satisfy you.” He holds out a hand, and I practically run to him. When he pulls me into his arms, I sigh in bliss. He picks me up in a bridal carry and heads for the bed. “Not complaining about me picking you up now,” he teases.

I hum. He places me on the bed, and I kneel on it, pulling him close to me, enjoying the slide of our silk robes against each other but needing more. My hand slips inside his robe, over his heart, before untying the robe and pushing it off his shoulders. He watches me as I move, his golden eyes glowing in the low light.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he asks with the curve of his lips as my hands drift over his chest and abs before dropping lower to touch his cocks. They’re already hard and pulsing hot in my grip. The tips beading with precum.

“Yes, but I need more of you,” I say, half in a greedy daze and half-burningly curious.

“I am yours to explore,” he says as magnanimously as a king. His arms open wide. I have no doubt that he’s been a king before. Powerful, forbidding, immortal creature. A crown would look good on him.

I glance down to keep myself from being distracted. I lick my lips at the pearly white bead of cum starting to run down his upper shaft. “Can I taste you?”

The glow of Kalos’s eyes brighten in avarice. “Only if I can return the favor.”

I shiver at the memory of how he’d tongued me our first night together. “I wouldn’t complain about that.”

My mouth waters, but I don’t rush myself. The burn in my soul is hungry, but I want more than mind-blowing orgasms. I

want to learn Kalos's body. I want to discover how to make his breath hitch and the muscles of his thighs tighten.

Each detail is one that I'll lock away. Secrets for myself. Brushstrokes to build memories for when our daughter is born and he no longer needs to hold me at night or satisfy the needs of my body.

My lips part on the tip of his cock, kissing him. The head is warm and spongy, the skin soft. He throbs in my grip. Another bead of cum forms under my lips, and I lick it away. My senses are filled with a salty, spicy flavor, like bitter cinnamon.

Kalos huffs a breath above me, being patient with my explorations.

I take him in my mouth to reward him, my lips sliding over the ribbed texture under the skin of his shaft.

He moans and talons tangle in my hair.

My toes curl when he slightly tugs on the strands, angling my eyes up to meet his. The power he exerts has me making a sound that is muffled by his hardness.

Kalos arches a brow, silently asking permission to move with the soft rock of his hips.

I greedily accept the soft thrust, and Kalos tightens his hold on my hair. "Your mouth is so pretty when it's full of me, Rina."

I stroke my tongue along his shaft as he pulls away slowly. His other cock smears streaks of precum along my cheek and throat. It's not lost on me that this may have started with me exploring Kalos and giving him pleasure, but now it's very much Kalos directing where he wants me, and I love it.

Each time he gives me an order or positions me how he desires it creates a fuzzy glow in my chest along with a throbbing response of interest in my body. It makes me feel wanted. It makes me believe that he needs me.

"Will my little queen let me fuck her throat until she swallows me down?" he asks.

I nod excitedly, but gag with his first full thrust. I've only done this a few times before, but never with a ribbed dragon cock.

Kalos allows me to pull away on a gasp.

"Too much?" he asks, stroking away the tears from my cheeks. My face burns in embarrassment.

"It was just a lot at once. I've never had a guy thrust in my mouth." I quirk my lips at the thought that I'd bitten off more than I can chew, but don't voice it. I'm not the most experienced, but even I know not to talk about biting right now.

There's a glint of possessiveness in Kalos's eyes that has my heart skipping a beat. It's not a kind look. Is his dragon displeased at the thought of me doing this to others?

"Again, I'll teach you how to take me," Kalos growls and places the head of his cock on my parted lips. He waits until I open my mouth to take him before forging in. "Swallow when I hit the back of your throat."

I do what he says and my eyes water, my body tensing up. Kalos's deep groan makes it all worth it. My body clenches in emptiness, but I focus on how he's moving. I let his body dictate the actions of mine as he steals my breath over and over again.

I'm swallowing taste after taste of Kalos, but I want more. My nails dig into his thighs, and his muscles tighten.

"Now swallow my seed. Let it ease your cravings," he hisses.

I moan at the thought, and the hard cock in my mouth kicks as it fills it with bitter cinnamon. I swallow multiple times but not quickly enough. His release spills from my lips, and he pulls from me, adding to the mess on my chin.

My body sways, satisfied and hungry all at once. Kalos breathes out, his thumb wiping across my mouth and smearing his seed to make an even bigger mess.

I moan, and his eyes flash, showing Mr. Dragon is in the building.

“So beautiful,” he purrs. “My perfect mate.”

Mate.

I’m disappointed that it’s his dragon saying these pretty words rather than Kalos, but I’ve already accepted that we won’t have a relationship like that, haven’t I?

Maybe I have some hope still alive. A small flame of possibility I have yet to snuff out and that I don’t want to.

As if the words reawaken Kalos, the glow in his eyes dims, and he picks up his robe from the floor, using it to wipe my mouth as clean as he can without water. “My apologies,” he murmurs.

“It’s okay. I like it.” And I do. I like that he felt the need to rub his release into my skin. It’s similar to when he fills up my pussy and I feel claimed for days after.

His motions still. “Would you keep from washing my scent away for now?” His nostrils flare. “I like my mark on you.”

I nod, a little dazed, before blinking and bringing my attention to his other cock—the one with the knot. My body is begging for release, but I don’t want to leave him wanting.

Kalos stops my movements.

“Not yet. It’s time for my prize,” he says.

I open my mouth, but he’s already in motion.

He places his hand at the small of my back and pulls the tie for my robe. “Perfect little queen,” he croons. The robe is quick to fall from my shoulders. I move as if to lie back on the bed, but he keeps me where I am.

His taloned finger brushes over my swollen lips. The light touch is a sensual tease. He continues to stroke down my cheek to my collarbone. I shiver, goose bumps racing over my skin as his heated hand strokes over my breast, the nipple already unforgivingly hard.

He lets his hand drop to my swollen stomach. The haze of lust lifts for a moment with his hand caressing me there. Our child moves in response to his touch. I spent too much time and tears thinking about what he'd lost after I left him earlier. I can't imagine the pain he went through, the devastation.

I can almost forget about his complicated feelings when the corners of his mouth curve up into a soft smile. "She's quite active."

"It's always worse when she hears you," I tease. The burn of need taking a backseat for this moment. "I think she must like your voice."

His grin grows wider. "Or hate it."

I smile back. "I guess we'll find out, but I'm betting she'll be a daddy's girl."

I'd be if I were in her situation anyway. Kalos is protection and power, and when he curtails his scary parts and lets his softer side out... it's like I'm the only person in the world and I'm safe.

He's a dragon I could love. If I were going to let myself love him.

"A daughter." His words are soft, disbelieving, but he changes tracks and gazes up at me, his expression fierce. "I hope she's as brave and determined as her mother."

Ah, fuck me, the tears are back. I let out an aggravated sigh as I wipe them away and glare at him. "You did that on purpose."

He laughs, his lips brushing over my stomach. His eyes glint in mischief.

"I'd never do such a thing." He straightens and guides me to lie down on the bed, lying beside me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes!" My cheeks are hot in embarrassment. "Not crying at the drop of a hat would be nice, but I'm fine. That was just really sweet of you to say."

"It's the truth." He runs his claws through my hair, and my lashes fall in bliss. His other hand slides up my inner thigh, the

brush of his knuckles against my folds has my legs spreading without his command. “You owe me, little queen. And as I remember, you always pay up on your deals.”

I swallow, but my voice still has a hoarse quality to it and much less snark than I intend when I speak. “Of course I do.”

“Then it’s my turn,” he purrs, and his head disappears past my belly before the hot lash of his tongue has me crying out. The sensitivity that was calmed by me drinking his release resurfaces. Tension coils in my body with each lick of his tongue. It’s like it was the first night. He’s tasting me for his benefit, forcing my body to give him more and more of my arousal.

I feel around and grasp his horns like they offer more than a convenient handhold. There is no steering this dragon as he devours me.

His thick and pointed tongue dives inside me, and I cry out. It seems almost like it’s growing in size—shifting and thickening. When the horns in my hands grow and become more textured, I realize that the sensation of being overfilled by his tongue isn’t a trick of my imagination. He really is fucking me with a dragon tongue.

Each impossible slide of his curving appendage has mewling sounds escaping my lips. My body tightens around the squirming part of him and I cry out, moaning.

The press of his fang against the side of my clit is all it takes for me to come. I try to snap my thighs together and use my grip on his horns to do *something*, I don’t know what, but he’s too strong. His hands keep my thighs wide as he thrusts his tongue as deep as it will go. It makes my orgasm last forever, my body helplessly pulsing against his mouth. His pushing tongue demanding more.

Tidal wave after tidal wave crashes through me until I’m shaking and my voice is hoarse.

Finally, Kalos lets me push his horns away. There’s a cracking sound, and when he rises from past my belly, his face

is how I remember it, but his horns stay large, and his chin is a mess from me.

“You are mine to pleasure, Rina. Do not deny me with your hesitance again.”

I blink. The limbs of my body are heavy and satisfied. The fever pushing my need high has broken, and in its wake, a flash of tiredness threatens to pull me under.

My eyelids are heavy, but I respond with stubbornness. “Your turn.”

Kalos’s laugh is soft. “Sleep, my queen.”

I hum, liking it too much when he calls me his, but frown a moment later. I don’t want to leave him wanting. Kalos strokes my cheek with a claw.

“Rest awhile. I can be satisfied later.”

I surrender to the lulling moment and the knowledge that we will have a later.



I CAN’T SLEEP.

I sigh, wide awake after passing out earlier. I enjoy the heat from Kalos spooning me and try to push the pillow under my head into a position that will make it easier for my body to relax into sleep, but it’s not working.

If I sleep, I’ll probably dream again of swirling, vibrant oranges transitioning into purples and blues. It wouldn’t bother me. Out of all the dreams I could have, that one is beautiful and makes my fingers twitch for a brush.

But no matter that I *feel* tired, don’t fear my dreams, and the baby isn’t even kicking me right now... I’m just not falling asleep.

I sigh again. A little bored and antsy.

Kalos’s hand slides up to cradle my stomach.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks in a lethargic rumble.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” I whisper.

His mouth brushes my neck, and he nuzzles the skin behind my ear.

“I can wear you out,” he says, the words are curling and suggestive and occur at the same time my stomach growls under his hand. We both freeze. My face heats in embarrassment, and his chest shakes in soft laughter.

“It would seem you have different needs to be seen to,” he says.

I sigh. “I’m sure it will be fine—” I start but am cut off by another growling sound of hunger.

Kalos tsks. “Allow me to have the pleasure of feeding the mother of my child.”

When he says things like that, how can I deny him? We put on robes and head to the kitchen quietly.

I frown as he starts pulling out pans. “I can just have a piece of fruit—”

“Nonsense. You need meat and spices.”

“You don’t have to go to the trouble—”

“Rina.” His golden gaze ensnares me. “Allow me this.”

I blink, but plant myself on one of the stools next to the counter.

“Alright then. Knock yourself out,” I say.

“Prepare to be amazed,” Kalos says, his tone serious even as his mouth curves. This playful version of Kalos is rare. My mind tries to tell me he’s this way more around me than other people, but I resist that.

It would be dangerous to start thinking of myself as special. I know where I reside in Kalos’s world. He made sure to tell me at the very beginning.

But I can enjoy this.

“What are you making?” I ask.

“Something I think will help with the hunger and... your other side effects.”

My cheeks heat at the memory of how unbelievably horny I was earlier. “I thought you appreciated that side effect.”

His laugh is a huff. “Oh, I do. I was talking about your mood swings. I know they bother you.”

“And they don’t bother you? It can’t be easy being around a woman sobbing at the drop of a hat.” I roll my eyes.

Kalos shakes his head on the way back from the pantry. “You are creating new life. My young grows in your belly. If I couldn’t stand a few moments of discomfort, I would not deserve to claim my place as her sire.”

His smile fades at his last words. His feelings are complicated, he said. And I’m trying to understand, but this is a story I only know bits and pieces of and started hundreds of years before I was even born.

He turns toward the stove and starts to cook. The air takes on a new tension, and when he speaks, I barely catch his words.

“You can ask about it if you have questions,” he says. “You deserve to have your questions answered.”

I do have many questions, and maybe I deserve answers to them... but Kalos doesn’t deserve to be interrogated about his past pain. But it’s always there. Always behind every word we say, each soft moment he gives me. He carries it with him so completely and silently. Never peeling back his protective layer, snarling when things brush against it.

I want to help him carry that, to give him a measure of peace if I can.

“Will you tell me about your son?” I ask. “You don’t have to, but... I want to know you.” I ache to know everything about this dragon.

And I want to give him the space he needs to remember the ones he’s lost.

Kalos doesn't say anything at first, and the oil in the pan sizzles as he adds ingredients. A spicy fragrance begins to fill the kitchen by the time he finally speaks.

The pause was so long that I assumed he's going to say that he doesn't want to talk about it. I even expect that he may revert to the arrogant, glaring man who throws words like daggers.

I don't expect Kalos to open his heart to me.

"His name was Luke," he says, speaking to the food cooking in the pan instead of to me. "He had beautiful red scales which he got from his mother, but his eyes were gold like mine. He liked to find the shiniest rocks while in dragon form." He huffs a sad laugh. "And gnaw on them in human form."

His exhale shudders. "And he was perfect."

I slide off the stool and go to him. Unable to stay away from his grief-drenched, melodic voice. I wrap my arms around his waist, resting my forehead against his back. Kalos places his hand over my arms to protect them from the spitting oil.

I let myself imagine an infant with Kalos's gold eyes. I let the ache of Kalos's pain become mine. I don't know how to comfort someone experiencing grief. I can only be here.

He doesn't stop speaking.

"Ava and I had been fighting." His mate's name had been *Ava*.

"Fighting?" I snap my lips shut, not meaning to interrupt. I peek around his body to see his face, but he still keeps his gaze on the cooking food.

Kalos curves his lips at my incredulity. "Yes, fighting. Just because we were mates doesn't mean we didn't fight. And having an infant is difficult. There's much stress and it requires flexibility. Ava was feeling shut-in and angry with me."

Kalos glances at me. His eyes are soft, and I hope I keep the inappropriate stab of jealousy from my expression. I didn't ask about his mate, but this is what he's willing to share with me.

"I was more involved with human matters than other dragons and took human form often. Our son chose to do the same. Dragons develop quicker than humans, but he was still an infant, and as you can imagine, human infants are much more work than a dragonling would be. It also meant that she had to take a human form to help care for him. She blamed me." He shrugs. "As was her right. It was my fault. I was too intrigued by humanity and other paranormals that lived with them to set our home up in a high cave with other dragons. Technology and politics have always had a hold over me."

"Ava indulged my interests, finding them odd, but we were heart-fated, how could she keep me from something that would make me happy? We lived in a modest keep where there were amenities enough to cater to a human child and my interests." Kalos stares at the sizzling meat in the pan, seemingly lost in thought before he continues.

"She was so patient with the both of us, but needed a break. She needed to stretch her wings. And even though I knew she needed it, I begged her not to go, but she was Ava. Bright, beautiful, powerful. Female dragons do not kowtow to the wishes of males. She would not be kept from the skies because of pesky hunters that didn't have any more magic than her claw shavings."

He continues, "I wanted to go with her, but neither of us could stomach leaving our son alone with strangers."

Kalos turns the stove off and braces his hands on the front of it. He doesn't turn in my arms or move to get plates. His body is stiff under my hands.

I remain motionless. Not wanting to detract from his words even if I didn't ask for these details. I care about him, deeply. I don't want him to carry his pain alone.

"I felt it when she fell." Kalos's voice is hollow, echoing through the centuries since that moment. "It was unbearable."

He pauses, so I tighten my arms around him.

“How did you survive?” I ask. The question has stewed in my mind since the moment he’d revealed he had lost a mate. Most mated pairs don’t survive losing the other.

Kalos closes his eyes, face stricken with pain. “I don’t rightly know, and I didn’t question it. I only focused on trying to save our son. He didn’t fade at the same time she did. I hoped that meant that he could survive her death as well, that the hatchling bond wouldn’t be strong enough to steal away his light, but as the days passed, he grew weaker. I did everything I could to try and save him...”

Kalos clears his throat and opens the cabinet to get a plate. His tone more brisk, businesslike. “When his light went out, I thought I’d follow him, but that didn’t happen. There were days that I wished I could, but I was the only one keeping their memories alive, hoarded in my soul.”

“And dragons don’t give up their hoard.” I blink away tears, but they soak through the silk of his robe, and he turns in my arms, hugging me to his chest even though I’m supposed to be the one comforting him. “I’m so sorry, Kalos.”

“I know,” he says, his hand cradling my cheek.

“I’ll hoard their memories too,” I whisper.

His chest hitches at my words, and I stiffen, thinking I’ve overstepped, but he exhales and his talons brush through my hair gently.

“Thank you.”

KALOS

THE TEARS in Katarina's eyes aren't like the moments of frustration from mood swings. These tears are for me, for my family, and each one sips away the futile sadness and rage that simmers in my throat whenever I let myself remember them.

There are things I will never tell her. Not because I'm ashamed of them, but because she doesn't need to carry the weight of them. The rage and desolation of my dragon burning the world away around me after the last spark of life had left my son. Or that in trying to save my son, the hunters had already butchered Ava for parts by the time I thought to retrieve her.

As dragons, our bodies are heavy with magic. Magic that practitioners of all kinds can wield. It took hundreds of years to track down each piece of her until I could finally lay her body to rest with the remains of our son.

But I told her the important things. And somehow, and as with many things she does, letting Katarina grieve for me brings me calm.

My chest expands with my inhale. "Now, it's time I fed you."

Katarina wipes away her tears, and I guide her to the table, sliding into the bench and pulling her to sit on top of me. It feels natural to hold her like this after all the times we've spent in contact to exchange heat.

I scoop a bite of food up with the fork and hold it in front of her mouth, half expecting her to take the fork from me and

tell me she can feed herself, but she doesn't. She gives me an exasperated look, but lets me feed her the bite. My dragon purrs under my skin, and I can't help but to agree with the sentiment.

This small action settles both me and the beast. It's a small echo of pulling the choice organ meats from a kill and presenting them to a mate.

Rina hums in enjoyment. "This is so good."

"I thought you may enjoy it." It's only strips of steak pan-fried with spices that will satisfy our daughter's tastes, but Rina's whole body softens in pleasure like it's some exquisite dish.

Her eyes are still a little watery from sadness. "Thank you, Kalos. For the food... and for telling me."

I tighten my hold on her. There are other things that she should know.

"My dragon has mated with you," I say, not knowing how else to tell her. Tonight is one for revelations after all.

I didn't plan on sharing that fact with her, but now with Gage putting ideas in my head of consulting a magic practitioner, I have... hope. And in that emotion, it feels wrong to keep hiding this from her.

Rina's brows crease, so I explain. "That night when we made our agreement. He mated you. That's how you were able to get pregnant."

"What does it mean that your dragon has mated me?" she asks, not debating that the dragon and I are separate.

I try to shrug. "I don't know. It shouldn't have been possible."

Silence falls after I feed her another bite. It chafes, not being able to offer more information, but even the dragons who became scholars wouldn't be able to answer this conundrum. Dragons aren't separate beings. One part of our soul doesn't mate without the other.

“And you don’t feel the same?” The words are a question, but she doesn’t say them like one. She says them like she expects my answer and will understand, but is saddened.

The regret catches in my throat. “I’m sorry, but no. There isn’t a mate bond between the two of us. That part of me broke when Ava fell.”

She nods.

I wish there was. I wish that I could feel her presence alive in me the way a mate is supposed to. To sense her humor or fury.

I want Katarina as a mate even though I’ve told myself it’s impossible.

Her snack is coming to an end, and soon we’ll go back to bed, and I’ll lose this quiet moment with her. The impending loss makes me reckless.

“Will you stay?” I ask, before letting myself dither mentally about it.

Katarina frowns. “Stay?”

“After our daughter is born.” I swallow. “Will you stay here? With Maggie, Ben, and me.”

“Do you want me to?”

You bring me peace that I don’t understand, I think but don’t say. “I enjoy your presence. I like you.”

The words are so bland in comparison to the depth of her effect on me, but it’s what I can vocalize. She makes me want to take risks.

Rina’s eyes soften in thought. “Do you think we could one day have something deeper than we do now without a bond?”

I want to lie, to make promises, but I refuse to be another person to give Rina false hope. “I don’t know. You’ll continue to age without a mate bond, eventually dying.”

She tilts her head. “I’m tempted to tease you for your reluctance to just enjoy the time we’d have together like

humans do, but I suppose when one loses the people they love it's hard to be that vulnerable again."

"It destroys the soul." Or at least it destroyed mine. I hesitate but continue, "There may be a solution to that issue, but it requires more investigation."

"It's not something you want to risk without a guarantee." She's beginning to understand. There are dozens of arguments against keeping what is between us casual, but she only places a hand on my heart. I can taste her sorrow, and it makes me want to snarl, vanquish the one who caused it, but it's my fault.

"Can I think about it?" she asks.

"Of course," I say, because there's nothing else to say. Some part of her must want to stay even without the option of something growing between us. A part that I can court and coax, draw out while I try to find a way to keep this witch that won't destroy me.

She's quiet as we head back to bed, and I pull her past her door.

"My room," I say to the questioning look that she shoots me.

"But—"

"Griffin will find us," I say, as if that would be her only objection to her staying in my space. The whole house is my territory, but my bedroom is my inner sanctum. I need her scent there after the memories I've fought with tonight.

I need her there, even if she chooses to leave me eventually.

I don't know what she must sense from my words in the dark, but she squeezes my hand.

"Alright." The word is simple, but it rings with something new. Perhaps she knows how much I want her now. Maybe she'll let herself believe we have a future.

And maybe her bravery will help me believe the same.

KATARINA

KALOS SLEEPS, his face peaceful in the morning light. He's usually up and busy by now, but he's passed out like he's exhausted, and maybe he is. Fighting demons, even ones that only exist in past memories, is not an easy feat.

I can read between the lines. I know what happened to those hunters. Good. I hope the crunch of their bones gave Kalos some measure of satisfaction, but I don't think it did.

My fingers itch to trace over his textured horns, but I resist, not wanting to wake him.

He asked me to stay.

He wants me in his life, has even been thinking about ways to extend my life, if that's what he meant last night.

It's so far away from our first dinner together that it should be comical, but it's not. He has wounds he needs to work through, but he wants to work through them. Why else would he bring me to sleep in his room?

The space is gorgeous. I can practically feel the wealth cradling me. The luxury fabrics of the giant bed under us and the décor are one thing, but the crown jewel of the room is the ceiling. Or rather, the lack of one.

The glass dome above us lightens from the orange-reds of dawn to periwinkle blue, and I can only imagine what it looks like once the sun really hits it. The shaped facets that gleam are stunning.

The expense to ward it must be extraordinary. I'd roll my eyes at the excess if the sight didn't hug my breath in a vise. It may be wasteful, but my artistic soul refuses to agree.

This is the value of art, and Kalos is a patron.

And he wants me to stay.

That his dragon mated me is almost incidental. I force myself not to ponder on it too long. I enjoy when Mr. Dragon comes out during sex, but that's only a small part of Kalos and I want... more.

The smart thing would be to keep our relationship as casual as we started. It would be safer for my heart and our future relationship as parents not to add fuel to the flame. Sex is sex, as Kalos had said.

I should guard my heart from being devoured even more by this dragon's presence.

I should let Kalos deal with his wounds on his own.

I *should* stop myself from hoping.

Then, after our daughter is born, we can be on friendly terms.

I know it's too late to save myself from the heartbreak but to try for something more with this dragon who sees himself as broken flirts with disaster.

The cautious part of me tries to sneer at Kalos's offer, asking if I'm going to let another person in my life who just takes what he needs, while I hold out hope that I mean something more like I'd done with Nemo.

While the rest of myself argues that nothing ventured is nothing gained... and this place in Kalos's life is something I want.

Not just having a place in the world. Having *this* place.

Shoulds haven't done much for my happiness. I devoted myself to restoration to appease a *should*.

The safe path won't give me what I want.

I'm going to take this one day at a time, and I'm going to allow myself to hope. Kalos isn't Nemo, and I'm older and wiser now to recognize those emotions.

It's time to focus on what I want for my future, for our child's future.

It's a risk, but my happiness is worth it.



BEN PORTALS US into a marble-floored lobby, and the space tilts. Kalos's hand on my waist keeps me from swaying, and I smile gratefully at him.

When he suggested taking me somewhere new to help me relax, I'd been shocked. For months I've only experienced the outside world as quick errands. Kalos's estate is beautiful, but my gods, did I need to get out.

Kalos had laughed when I confessed what I thought I'd hid so well. *My little queen, you were approaching the moment when an animal would chew through their own arm.*

"Welcome to the Love Bathhouse!" a heavily pregnant woman with curly red hair says. I blink, and we exchange looks at the other's baby bump and mutual smiles. "I'm Rose and will be available to answer any questions you have. Your room has been prepared. Why don't I lead you there so we can open up the rest of the lobby?"

A bathhouse? The air has a pleasant touch of humidity that sizzles with wards and magic.

"Have fun." Ben grins and disappears again.

"Thank you for closing off this space for our privacy," Kalos says as we follow Rose down a hallway.

Rose nods. "Of course. I know you would have rather arrived in the room for security reasons, but the lobby is the only place where our wards allow portals and only from those who don't wish harm on the occupants."

“That’s an intricate ward,” I say. And it’s probably the tip of the iceberg. I would not want to try and break into this place. The hum of wards around us caresses my skin, barely noticeable but vibrant once I focus on them.

I could do it, but the strength of the power here would make it very uncomfortable.

Rose casts a teasing look at me. “The better to keep things secret and safe.”

“We appreciate that,” Kalos says as his talons tickle my lower back through my dress.

Rose reaches a heavy oak door, opening it, and giving the key to Kalos. Her eyes pass over him when she does. It’s almost as if she’s checking him out, but the look lacks any lust. In fact, she looks a little sad after her inspection.

“Here we are. Just text or call if you need anything. You can of course come into the lobby and get things, but there’s no guarantee that you won’t run into anyone else. The main rooms are rather popular tonight,” she says.

“Main rooms?” I ask.

“Yes, they are open for group activities and exhibition.”

I feel my cheeks catching fire. *Oh*. This must be the sex bathhouse Stella mentioned.

“We won’t be using those aspects of the bathhouse.” Kalos’s words are quiet, but firm. The possessiveness of them has something in my chest curling with delight.

Kalos brought me to a sex bathhouse. How romantic. I catch my snort before it becomes audible when we enter the room that Rose leads us to. My mouth falls open.

The décor is lush pinks and purples. The intricate tiling on the floor and walls swirls in floral shapes of roses and thorns. Gold paint in geometric designs on the floor gives a tease of the types of wards at play. One side of the room has a sunken pool of water that steam rises from, while the other is a recess of padding and pillows. In front of the bedding area sits a low table set up with plates and candles.

It's *gorgeous*. I swallow the sarcasm from moments before because this is the most romantic thing I've ever seen.

"Enjoy." Rose winks. "There are complimentary supplies in the cabinet, and be sure to light the candles."

Kalos's lips twitch with a smile. "We will."

With that, Rose leaves. The door locks behind her, the tickling in the air is the only sign that a ward for this room in particular slides into place.

"Candles?" I ask, marveling at the tile art on the walls.

"The Love Bathhouse trades in magic made during sex," Kalos says. "Lighting the candles acts as the consent to and initiation of the ritual."

That's probably why the wards feel like a tidal wave instead of a slow trickle of power.

"Did you bring me here to seduce me?" I ask, half teasing and half surprised. Kalos has never been the instigator of our intimacies. After catching him in his heat, I've always been the one begging or offering myself up on a platter for him.

He arches a brow. "I'm betting that my queen will need to be satisfied some time tonight. If not," he shrugs. "I'm sure Rose will accept monetary compensation for the use of the space."

Need to be satisfied. Like last night. Or any of the times that I've gotten randomly horny from this pregnancy.

"I want you to enjoy yourself. That doesn't have to be from sex," he purrs as if he senses the pang of disappointment.

I push the sensation down. I can't be disappointed if I don't communicate my wants.

"And what if I want you without the cravings?" I ask. No needy churning of my gut, no urges that make it hard to think—just Kalos directing me how he wants. Just giving a moment to whatever is growing between us.

It's an admission, and he treats it as one.

My cheeks heat under his considering gaze.

“Then we have dinner first,” he says.

I blink in surprise, and he explains with a twist of his lips. “If you are mine to care for tonight, I will not have you go hungry just to feel the cradle of your body around me that much sooner.”

Mine to care for.

He must misread my hesitance. “Allow me to romance you, little queen.”

Will I allow him to treat this like an honest-to-god date? Yes. This is the beginning of something I ache for.

The seating for the table is comfortable. We remove our shoes and curl up in low pillows that have a nice amount of back support. The setting is intimate in a way that is usually absent between us even with the hours we’ve spent cuddling together. This is new, and in that newness comes awareness.

The food is a spicy noodle dish that makes my body hum with delight, but that’s only one aspect of our dinner together. We talk about our respective businesses. How my new employee is getting on with projects and how his are reacting to the changes he put in place. Kalos even asks about some of my experiences in my thieving days, and I find I can recount humorous moments without being overcome with guilt.

I was, first and foremost, very good at what I did.

With each topic, the nerves that have wound me tight start to loosen. I really did need a night out. I must glance at the hot water one too many times because Kalos kisses the backs of my fingers and suggests we take some time to soak.

“You didn’t tell me to bring a swimming suit,” I say and feel every one of the years that I spent in the human world when he grins at me.

“You don’t wear swimming suits here, Rina.”

I swallow. “What about the candles?”

He arches a brow. “What about the candles?”

“Shouldn’t we light them? For the sex ritual...” My body hums in anticipation.

“Do you expect me to fuck you as soon as I see you naked?” Kalos asks, his eyes have a teasing glint, and my cheeks get even hotter.

“Maybe,” I admit.

“I do have some self-control.”

I almost wish he didn’t.

“But yes, we should light the candles,” he allows. “There’s no need to rush, but I’d also like to continue our night uninterrupted.”

Kalos takes my hand and helps me stand from my cushion. Our bodies brush, and he steadies me as the blood returns to my legs in a rush of pinpricks. I lean toward his spicy scent. The heat of my body’s arousal isn’t from being hit with a craving for him. No, it’s present in almost all our interactions.

My body wants this dragon almost as much as my heart does.

Kalos brushes a thumb over my lips, and I move to suck the pad of it into my mouth. He moves it away from my lips and smiles, a hint of fang showing.

“Not so fast, sweet queen,” Kalos tsks. “You said you wanted me, and I am not one to be rushed.”

I swallow down the retort that I’ve rushed him plenty of times before because the tension that blooms in my belly at the slow touch of my skin against his is delicious. He takes a step back and leads me to a wall that has an altar of sorts set up with cabinets on either side. There are three thick pillar candles lined up and a stack of long matches to the side.

I select a match and look at the three candles. My brain works through the minimal witchcraft I know and the concept of what we are doing. “Do each of us light one?”

Kalos nods. “And then we light the one in the middle together.”

My heart thuds as I strike my match and carefully light the candle on my side. Kalos pinches the wick of his candle like how someone would snuff out a flame, but when he releases the wick, a flame sputters into existence.

Right. Dragon.

He grins at me and encases my hand holding the match with his before bending his head down to blow softly, purple flame mixes with the orange of the match, before they both light the wick of the third candle. A staticky sensation crackles in the air, but I'm too busy staring in shock.

"You can really breathe fire," I whisper.

His laugh curls around me like smoke, satisfied and clinging. "Yes."

I purse my lips before continuing, "I'm realizing that maybe I shouldn't have gotten in your way when you were angry."

"And now she understands," Kalos says, shaking his head. "I could never hurt you, little queen. The dragon part of me especially."

Because I'm his dragon's mate. I push the thought away because there's really so much more to focus on right now.

Kalos disposes of the match and opens a cabinet, looking for something before pulling out a small, clear glass bottle and something else I don't catch sight of.

"What's that?" I ask.

Kalos arches a brow. "You'll see. Come, Rina, let's get you in the water."

I bite my lip and head back to the pool. Kalos sets the items on the edge of the soaking pool before returning to me. Each motion makes my breath quake. I'm horny. He can definitely scent that, but he doesn't hurry. If anything, he slows down. He pulls on the tie of my wrap dress, giving me plenty of time to object, but I only swallow.

The dress comes off easily. He slides a thumb over the swell of my stomach before directing me to turn away from

him.

“I can feel the hum of your charm, Rina. What magic do you have hidden away?” His words tickle the shell of my ear as he undoes my bra.

I blow out a sigh of relief at losing the garment and moan softly when the dragon’s hands slide to my front, massaging my breasts. My mind is having a hard time deciphering his words until I remember the charm I’ve been wearing around my neck.

“It’s not supposed to be detectable,” I rasp, distracted.

He shrugs. “Dragons are beings made of magic. There is no hiding such a thing from us.”

“It’s just a portal charm.”

He whistles. “Expensive trinket.”

I shrug. “It’s a *very* expensive trinket, Mr. Money, but useful.”

Kalos directs me to turn with a light touch to my waist, and I face him. My mind blanks when a talon hooks under the band of my underwear. He tugs the stretchy fabric down, leaving me bare to him.

I bite my lips in apprehension. The vulnerability of being naked when he’s clothed. We stand like that for a moment, my skin burning under his gaze, before he trails his fingers up my side, letting his hand rest on my hip.

“You’re so beautiful.” The words are hushed and leave no room for misinterpretation.

I inhale at the unexpected surge of emotion. I’m not used to getting compliments, let alone from someone like this intimidating being.

“Am I the only one getting naked?” I ask to deflect the clumsy feeling in my chest.

Kalos grins slyly, raising his hands in invitation. I want to roll my eyes at his showiness, the power of his presence, or the demand that I be the one to undress him like a devotee to a

god, but I don't, because I am a devotee. My fingers itch to slide over each plane of warm skin, but I curtail myself to unbuttoning his dress shirt.

My eyes devour all that I reveal. My hands tremble with inappropriate nerves with every scale that catches the light as his skin grays and darkens the lower I get. I slide the shirt from his shoulders, and Kalos throws it to the side, uncaring that the garment probably cost more than my apartment rent.

I've never done this, remove real clothing from him. We're usually in robes by the time we start this type of play, and the increase in work to get him bare is unexpectedly erotic. I shift my weight back and forth by the time I get to unbuckling his belt. The urge for him burns, but we've already started this song and dance. He won't just satisfy me how I need tonight.

He'll take me how he wants to.

One of his hard cocks brushes my knuckles as I unzip his pants. Kalos grabs my hands then, bringing them both up to his mouth to kiss each palm. "You feel too good against me. Allow me to finish undressing so we can soak."

I almost whimper at the delay. Kalos asked to allow him to romance me, but he's far too skilled. His eyes gleam as if he knows that.

"You said you wanted me tonight. I want to give you that, but it will require you playing my game, my queen."

A game of deprivation. My body heats, and we haven't even gone into the hot water yet.

"Okay," I nod. "I want all of you."

And I do. I want the dark fucking on his desk, the way he rubs comforting circles on my back, and his sleepy smiles in the morning. I want all aspects of this man. The dragon who makes his eyes glow and the part of his soul that aches for his past losses included.

His smile is slow, and he makes quick work of his pants and underclothes before taking my hand and leading me down the steps into the water. I pull my gaze away from his body. His strong thighs are a familiar sight, but if I let myself watch

the fluid way he moves, I'll combust. That's not even mentioning the stiff cocks on display.

He's a buffet that I must wait to savor.

The hot water distracts me from my lust as it laps against my skin, melting the tension in my body. The water is a perfect temperature... and stays that way. Our baby girl doesn't suck the heat away. Even with how Kalos keeps her fed on heat, there has been more than one bath cut short from the water cooling too quickly.

I ease into the water with a delighted sigh.

Kalos looks around like he can read the magic rather than just feel it all around. "They have many spells here."

"Have you been here before?" I ask and regret it immediately. This is a sex bathhouse. I don't want to know if he's been here before.

Kalos shakes his head. "No, but Gage said this place would fit my tastes and he's right."

My lips twitch at that. Kalos likes beauty and luxury. Most of the time I feel rather scrappy around him, but not tonight. Not when he looks at me like I'm precious.

Things have shifted between us since Kalos took me to his bed. There's an openness between us.

Kalos sinks his body near mine, the water now coming up to our necks. He sits on one of the stone benches and pulls me onto his lap.

If this were a regular first date, I'd play a little harder to get, but I'm terrible at playing coy, especially for him. My smile refuses to be hidden. I lean back against his body.

I moan when he starts to massage the muscles of my lower back. Kalos's laugh is soft, but he doesn't tease me about my reaction. He continues to find each tight muscle that no amount of stretching can ease and coaxes them to loosen.

I'm practically a puddle by the time he opens his mouth again. "Do you feel the need to run?"

I hum and frown in question, but his claw taps on my portal charm.

I take a moment before answering.

“I like to be prepared,” I say. “I believe in your ability to keep me safe, but that doesn’t mean I want to be defenseless. Running and hiding is a flexible and dependable exit plan.” I bring my hands to my belly. “I don’t want to be caught in a bad situation.”

Kalos doesn’t respond at first, and I pull away to see his face. His expression is considering. “There are caverns below the house. If you need to hide for any reason. Those would be a good place to go. It’s the stronghold of my territory.”

“Okay,” I say. “You’ll have to show them to me so I can have them in my mental map for the portal.”

Kalos nods, and my shoulders relax. I wasn’t going to give up the amulet, and I wouldn’t think he’d ask me to. The primal, legendary creature inside him though, he can be a little illogical. Like mate bonding with a thief.

And on the topic of caverns... “Are you ever going to show me your all dragon form?”

Kalos tilts his head playfully. “Are you so eager to see a modern-day monster in the flesh?”

I huff. “Not a monster.”

He raises his brows. “At this moment, he’d resemble one.” He pauses before answering my questioning look. “It’s been a long time since I’ve stretched my wings and shifted. It’s not an issue yet since my dragon wants to be near you more than anything else, but I don’t think it would be a good idea to have you around when I next shift.”

Kalos rubs a hand over his chest. “Since we aren’t acting as one, I don’t know how he’ll be. He could steal you away and put you in a tower to keep you for all I know.”

His eyes crinkle in a tease, but concern is there too.

My shoulders drop in disappointment. “Oh, okay.”

I'm not going to argue with safety. Once the baby is born though, I want to see a real live dragon. It doesn't mean I can't tease him about it.

"He's probably more like a Komodo dragon than what I have in my head anyway," I say.

My lips twitch at Kalos's quick frown, but he's smug again in the next instant.

"Keep saying things like that, and there's no telling what my dragon will do once you're in his sights."

Goose bumps break out over my skin, even under the water, at the flash of thrill and fear. I grin.

Kalos's eyes narrow. "You're not easily frightened away."

I think about that. "That's not it. Part of me enjoys the thrill of it."

"I'm sure your days have been filled with thrills. Have you been bored with me?" Kalos teases.

I shrug, wanting to be honest with myself as much as with him. I lean back against his chest before answering. "A little. But I was before you too. The restoration work hasn't been thrilling. I think I lied to myself about what life is supposed to be like and tried to fit into that. Maybe that's the real reason I took the job to rob you."

I end with my voice soft. Shame mixes with annoyance at myself.

Instead of being curt, Kalos's next words are gentle.

"You spent years living on the edge. It's not a surprise that part of you enjoys it."

"The worst part."

"The part that brought you to me and probably what calls to your friend Stella. As much as you ground her in general, chaos calls to like."

I'm quiet at that. Stella's friendship had been the bright spot of my life before meeting Kalos.

“Enjoying thrills isn’t a personality flaw no matter that it’s gotten you into trouble in the past.” His claws comb through my hair, and I breathe out on a shiver.

“And I can provide you thrills. No need to break into places and risk your life.” Kalos’s words roll with sex, and just like that, my body is awake again. I squirm on his lap, and he grips my hips, grinding my ass to the front of his body.

“Can you?” I ask, a little breathless.

Kalos makes a sound in his chest that has my back arching, both of his throbbing cocks press against me.

“I can fill your life with new experiences. Push you to the brink of your limits.”

The heavy thuds of my heart attest that he’s right, even if he’s adding a sensual nature to the words. My body thrums in awareness. His thumbs press against my back before dipping down to spread my cheeks. His upper cock slips between them and rubs against my asshole at the same time as his lower cock slides through my wet folds.

“You said you wanted all of me tonight, little queen.”

I grasp what he’s indicating as he grinds his two cocks in their strategic locations.

There’s a flash of fear, but the excitement is overwhelming.

“What if I don’t like it?” I ask.

“Then we’ll stop, but you will.” His voice deepens. “I’ll stretch you where no one has taken you before. You’ll remember this claiming for days.”

I bite my lip, and a cock throbs against my clit. My mouth is dry, but my lower body is hot and heavy. The grip of his hands and the slide of his erections add licks to life flames that will surely bring my desire to a roiling boil.

“Then yes,” I say breathlessly. “I want all of you.”

Kalos stands, and I yelp. The water cascades off our bodies as he walks us over to a shallower part of the pool. He places

me on the edge facing him, and I gasp at the cold stone against my bare ass.

“Too cold?” Kalos laughs.

My nipples harden from each efficient movement of my dragon and the cooler air teasing my hot skin.

“I like the temperature difference,” I observe primly. My body clenches on nothing, and I squirm.

A hungry growl rumbles softly from Kalos. He threads claws through my hair, drawing his bare body between my legs. His unique erections still hidden under the water. “Do you want me to warm you?”

I pretend to consider. “That should be fine. Perhaps from the inside out, if you will?”

Kalos’s conquering mouth devours the teasing smile from my face, and I moan. His taste makes my skin blush hotter than the heated waters.

He nips my lips after he breaks the kiss. “As my queen wishes.”

Kalos pulls over a nearby cushion and places it behind me so I can sit up at an angle.

This dragon and the way he considers my comfort warms my heart almost more than my body burns in arousal. Almost.

His mouth follows mine as I lean back, tasting me with each brush of lips as my thighs tighten around him. Water runs from his body down to mine. Each drop a percussive moment. I’m already to the point of being willing to beg when he pulls away.

I sigh in disappointment, but keep my pleading words to myself. Kalos wants to play, and I want whatever he’s willing to give me.

His chuckle is warm as he moves down my body, sucking my tender nipples into his mouth one by one. The pull of each drawing suck of my breasts tugs my core tighter and tighter. He stretches my thighs wider, and my lashes flutter shut on a shaky breath.

There's a soft *snick* sound that makes me frown in confusion before he distracts me completely, releasing my breasts and skimming his damp lips over the tight skin of my belly before sinking between my legs. His mouth covering my pussy with one deep lick.

I cry out, my eyes blinking open. I can't see his face with my stomach in the way, but I *feel* everything. My hands come to his horns, and he groans against my wetness at the tension.

His tongue thickens and plunges inside me with little preamble.

I gasp his name almost without meaning to, ending my breath on a moan as he fucks the too-dexterous part of him in and out of my pussy. I clutch his horns harder, making soft sounds in the back of my throat, when something cool and slick brushes against my asshole. I stiffen in surprise and try to catch sight of his face past my stomach.

Kalos pulls away at my movement and shows me the object in his hand. It's one of the items he took from the cabinet. I blush at the recognizable tapered shape with a wider end. I've never used one, but it's impossible to be on the internet and not know what it is.

It's a butt plug. This one is metal and has a green jewel embedded in the flared side.

"They provide a selection of new toys for patrons. It will make it easier for your body to take me." Kalos watches my face as he explains. "Do you want me to stop?"

I shake my head. My body is hot and swollen, needy without his tongue teasing me. His mouth curves, and he presses the lube-covered toy back to my rear entrance, massaging the cool metal against puckered skin. He moves it in easy circles that has my toes curling and breath catching.

It's a slow tease, but Kalos is patient. His eyes glow with hunger and pride.

"Relax for me, little queen."

A needy sound escapes me as I do as he asks. The tapered end of the toy slides a small way inside me before he eases it

out. I bite my lip at the foreign glide when he presses it in again, my body relaxing to take more of the girth.

“Good,” Kalos rumbles. He moves the plug in and out carefully, pushing me to relax more with each press of the widening toy. He’s a master in reading my body, massaging away the tightness of being filled in a place so unfamiliar. I moan at each lick of pressure.

Kalos’s head sinks down, and his tongue licks through my folds.

He makes a tsking sound. “You’ve been keeping secrets, sweet queen. You should have said you loved ass play. Your cunt is weeping for it.”

I make a soft sound of hollow denial and shake my head. He grins against my needy center, and I recant my nonverbal denial.

“I didn’t know,” I say.

His hum makes me moan, and he presses the plug inside farther. The pressure is sharp, but stops before the point of pain and only adds to the cascades of shivery pleasure that is drawing me tight. He keeps the toy there a moment before retreating again.

“So close, Rina. Relax for me.”

“Fuck!” I cry out when the toy eases past the widest section and the rest slides in before stopping at the flared base.

Kalos growls and laps the bright sensation of taking the full plug higher with his tongue, greedily licking up my arousal. He sucks on my clit and the world goes white.

The tension that wound me tight even as it coaxed me open snaps. The orgasm is a weak, shuddering relief, a flash of heat before cooling waves.

In a blink, Kalos is pulling me to sitting, the plug shifting in a tease. He kisses my throat, my cheek, before claiming my mouth. His campfire and cinnamon tastes erotic with the mix of my flavor. He lifts me off the edge, and we sink into the water again, my senses still reverberating.

“That’s it. Something to take the edge off,” Kalos breathes against my lips as I pant against his.

“What?” I ask, shaking my head, still coming down from my release.

His laugh is warm and knowing. “You don’t want more?”

“There’s more?”

“Oh, Rina, there’s always more when we’re together.” The teasing note of the words doesn’t disguise the softness of Kalos’s face. His heated hand cradles my chilled cheek.

One of his cocks brushes against my stomach. *Oh*. With his tongue buried inside me and the teasing pressure of the toy, I almost forgot why we were using the butt plug.

Nerves rise all over again, but Kalos tightens his hold on my body, chasing away the worst of them with his strong arm around my waist.

“Easy now. We don’t have to do anything more than we’ve already done,” he says.

Instead of rushing to deny that point, I reflect. This experience is just as much for me as it is for him. My body hums with the recent climax, but there’s an underlying need that still hasn’t been addressed. I’m not satisfied.

“You promised that I’d have all of you,” I say.

Kalos’s grin is searing. He threads his fingers through my wet hair and pulls gently, causing my eyes to roll back.

“And you will have all of me,” he murmurs before kissing me. The kiss isn’t a hurried thing. It starts slow before deepening. It communicates all the words he’s never actually said.

He wants all of me. Not just for sex, but for something more. Something he doesn’t think is possible and won’t say aloud.

Or that’s just what the flame of hope in my chest wants me to believe. Higher logic than that doesn’t exist in this moment. The world is Kalos’s taste, and I’m lost to it. Each stroke of his

tongue and nip of his teeth entrance me until I'm digging my nails into his shoulders, trying to climb his body to get more of the teasing flavor of what he's promising.

Kalos's body tenses, and the growl building in his chest when I nip his lower lip hums the knowledge that he's at the end of his patience.

"Please," I say, running a hand up and softly stroking his hard upper cock.

The water splashes with his movement, and we're back to the cushion he placed at the edge of the pool. He turns me over it, my face and breasts pressing against it as the hot water laps my belly. A stone step in the side of the pool is at the perfect height for my feet in this position. My cheek presses against the damp fabric, and I revel in this vulnerable position.

Kalos's hands slide down my body, trailing drops of water over the skin of my ribs and swell of my hips, before tugging on the butt plug. I make a sound of surprise and he slows his motions.

"Is this okay?" he asks. His voice deep with his own desire.

"Yes, you just surprised me," I admit. "Keep going."

The pull on the toy is softer now, increasing in strength until finally my body gives to the slide and I moan. There's another *snick*, and I glance back, watching Kalos apply lubricant to his ridged upper cock.

The shine as he strokes his hand over the flushed darker skin of his erection has my body tightening, and a needy sound escapes my throat.

Kalos's grin is pure sin. "Are you ready to take me, my queen?"

"Yes." My answer is more of a breath than a word, but he hears me. He knows what I want.

He climbs over me, warming my back, the position claiming and primal. The hot, slippery head of his cock slides over the delicate skin of my asshole, and I moan at the

sensation of it. He presses against me even slower than he had with the toy, but my body is ready for this.

The head of his cock pushes past a ring of muscle, and I groan. The feel of him penetrating me there is intense, all-encompassing.

“*Fuck,*” I breathe as I give this part of myself to him.

His hips pull and push gently, coaxing my ass to take more of him until he’s sliding almost halfway inside me. My body tightens in surprise, but there’s no pain, only the stretch.

Kalos curses.

“What?” I ask.

“Watching your body take mine is causing havoc to my self-control.”

“Then let yourself go.”

Kalos coughs a laugh. “No. This is too precious of a gift to lose this moment because of the erotic way your asshole is stretching to take my cock.”

I make a pleading sound in the back of my throat. His words are distraction enough for the both of us because, with his next press in, he slides all the way home inside me.

Kalos groans. “Oh, sweet queen, you’re perfection. Are you ready to take my first release?”

My mind ping-pongs between thought, emotion, and sensation, but still manages to interpret his words. We’ve been together enough times for me to know what’s coming next.

“*Please.*”

Kalos’s cock swells, and his grunt rattles my bones. The heat from his first release has me crying out. The tightness eases as his healing cum fills me where I’ve never been filled before. I’m still stretched and raw, but my body tenses in the need for more, to completely be taken by my dragon.

“Kalos,” I moan and try to muffle myself with the cushion, but my hips try to move to push back and take more of him.

“Shh, let my seed work,” he purrs, and I bite my lip.

It’s working too well. Every slick ridge on his cock throbs inside of my sensitized ass.

When he slips his still stiff cock partway from my body, I try to rear back to stop him. I need *more*.

Kalos’s grip on my hips stops me, and he laughs.

“Fuck me,” I plead. “Take me. I need you.”

“Yes, you do.” Kalos softly rocks his hips, the ribbing of his body pulling and pushing into mine has a whimper building in my chest. “I promised you thrills, Rina. I won’t go back on my word to you.”

I press my face back into the cushion, letting him direct my body how he wishes me to be.

“Now it’s time to give you all of me. Relax for me, dearest.”

I relax, not from his order but from surprise. *Dearest*.

Kalos drags his other cock against my weeping center and pushes inside.

I shout, and he freezes. Oh my god, the *stretch*. His cock in my ass throbs in time to the one in my pussy.

“You’re so wet for me. So needy. Breathe into the stretch,” he orders.

I’m trying.

Kalos runs a hand down my spine, pushing down between my shoulder blades. It should make breathing harder, but something about the submissive posturing unravels the tightness in my chest.

“I have you, Rina. I won’t let you fall.” His moan is guttural, and his words don’t quite make sense, but the meaning is clear.

My damp skin should be chill in the open air, but my body is on fire. The tension caused by trepidation fades as I take

more deep breaths. It leaves room for more awareness to assail me.

Kalos is *everywhere*. Our bodies are so connected that I don't know where I end and he begins. Taking him like this crumbles the last dregs of self-preservation around my heart. I thought I was being brave this morning when I committed to allowing myself to hope for more.

That's nothing to the rawness of this moment.

Kalos *owns* me, and I'll accept nothing less than all of him in return.

"You seem to love to be filled with me, little queen." His words are halting and slow instead of the expected smugness. Like he's as lost in me as I am in him.

"I'm yours," I say. It's not the first time I've said it in the heat of the moment, but this time there's no whispers of doubt curling in the shadows of my mind. This time, there's no going back.

He rumbles in response. "Mine."

The single word sears me, and I lift my hips, trying to usher him into motion without more words that will leave me flayed in the morning. He responds to my body's cues.

He pulls back, my toes curling at the retreat. The first thrust is a soft rock of his hips, his cocks sliding slowly but easily all the way inside me. The knot of his lower cock presses against the lips of my pussy.

"Katarina," he moans, and I tighten around him at the sound. "You cradle me so nicely."

I arch my back, trying to take all of him that I can, and the move cracks my dragon's composure. His soft movements start to hold more determination, each easy slide only sparks more of a need in both of us.

Each action is a tidal wave inside me. The absolute desolation of emptiness when he withdraws, to the screaming, stretching pleasure of completion when he forges forward. I may be his vessel, but he's my soul, filling a need that my

heart has always had. We are one in a way that chases loneliness away forever.

He is my *home*.

I don't care that we aren't heart-fated like he was with the mate he lost. I'll tear the fabric of our souls and make knots in it to capture this moment for keeping. He's mine by my demand alone, and I will not forfeit any ground.

My nails dig into the cushion under me, my body climbing with each growling thrust from Kalos as he moves with abandon. I speak words I don't dare keep trapped in my heart. Words about need and want and conquering that neither of us will be able to understand.

The smack of his knot against my clit is enough to bring me to the cliff's edge, and the vibrating growl of the dragon inside of me catapults me off it.

This time, when I break, it's not a weak climax that leaves my limbs like noodles. It's cataclysmic. An explosion of colors, thoughts, and pleasure accost my body and mind.

It's painful euphoria, but I'm not alone. I cry out at the pressure of Kalos's teeth over the scar he left at the crook of my neck. He doesn't break skin, only holds me in place and muffles the roar of his beast.

His cocks swell, and hot rushes of seed fill me *everywhere*. I sob in ecstasy as the pressure from the release fills me until there's nowhere left for it to go. Excess cum leaks from my stretched body, and I bite the cushion under me when I feel it run down my legs.

I tighten around him to try and keep it inside, but it only releases another gush.

"There's so much," I marvel.

Kalos pulls his softening cocks from my body, and more seed leaves me in a rush. He nuzzles my ear. "I didn't dare try and make you take my knot with how filled you already were."

I glance down, and he releases the firm grip he had on his knot to trick his body into thinking he'd locked it inside me.

I hum, half-delirious. "I appreciate that."

I move to push up from the cushion, but Kalos presses my back down again.

"A moment, little queen."

I don't know what he means until I turn my head and take in the expression on his face. His eyes glint like he's discovered some treasure for his hoard as he watches where his release oozes from me. My cheeks burn, and hiding my face in my arms does nothing to dim the cheery glow in my chest.

Introspection does. I ponder the thoughts I had during our coitus while Kalos enjoys the spectacle of his seed leaving me. Our bodies communed in almost a sacred way, leaps and bounds from what we've communicated with words.

"We should talk," I mumble. There are things I want to admit to him. Demands I want to make while they're still fresh.

"I know," Kalos says, finally pulling me upright and sinking us in the hot water again. My human brain stalls a little at the idea of dirtying the soaking pool, but magic solves a lot of things involving hygiene.

The expression on Kalos's face when he turns me in his arms speaks of all the things we tiptoe around. Mainly, the feelings we have for one another. The resistance to those feelings that I won't tolerate to stay, but I don't want to push him past what he believes is possible.

"Give me some time, Rina," Kalos says as he runs the talon of his thumb over my lips and cradles the side of my face with the texture of his scaled hand.

I shiver at the memory of him saying my full name with reverence I've never experienced before. I have to believe that what we have between us won't shatter with a little conflict, but I don't want to be the one making demands alone. The fear

of being left behind after feeling so connected to this dragon makes it hard to speak.

Kalos dips his forehead to touch mine. “I will give you the answers you seek, but I need time to find them.”

The relief that he’s not going to try and deny what’s brewing between us has my shoulders dropping.

“Promise?” I ask. I am not a coward, but some strategy is probably wise when it comes to matters of the heart.

Kalos’s golden eyes glow with intent.

“I promise.”

KALOS

“I NEED to speak to the proprietress of this place. I won’t be long.” I allow myself one more caress of Katarina’s oiled skin.

She makes a soft sound. It’s been a long time since I’ve given a full body massage, but I still have enough skill to leave the mother of my young as practically a puddle. Her head rests on her folded arms at the edge of the soaking pool, keeping her head above water while she dozes.

Our daughter draws a lot on Katarina’s energy even with the heat I feed her. That, combined with our activities, and Katarina deserves a nap. I couldn’t keep my hands from going through the motions of pampering her if I tried. It’s my honor—and pleasure—to try to alleviate any discomfort she’s in because of me.

I kiss her shoulder, and her lips curve in a satisfied smile.

Her body is lush and tempting, skin heated and supple from the water. The memory of the emerald-jeweled end of the plug between her cheeks is a vision that I ache to replay over and over again. That’s a toy that we’re keeping.

This thief has stolen my peace of mind, among other things I didn’t know still existed in my craven soul, and I need to make sure it’s a neat job for her. No loose ends that will leave our lives unraveling in distress.

To that end, I must meet with the soul witch that runs this place.

It's quick work to dry myself off and redress. I take the key with me, locking the wards behind me as I go. The security of the bathhouse is impressive.

I turn toward the lobby but pause. The light scent of citrus that signals the matchmaker leads me in the other direction. I follow it down the low-lit hallway before coming to an open doorway. A man's voice rumbles under a soft feminine laugh.

I enter and clear my throat at the sight of the redheaded witch I seek in the arms of a dark-haired man.

The man's aura strikes a familiar note.

"Gideon," I greet him. We don't know each other well, but immortals are few in this modern age. I spare a glance at the matchmaker's pregnant stomach and tuck the detail away. I'd assumed that krakens didn't breed, but I'm obviously mistaken.

Rose pushes away from the kraken, but he doesn't release her immediately.

"Kalos. What do you want?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"He needs to speak with me," Rose says, poking his chest. I don't question how she knows that. The glance she'd given me earlier tonight made it clear that she senses my issue.

"Your mate can stay," I say. I prefer if he didn't. I enjoy my privacy, but if the roles were reversed, there's no way that I'd leave my pregnant mate in the presence of a powerful immortal.

I'm here asking for help. It does me no favors to make demands to shield my weaknesses.

"I hear that you work with soul threads," I say.

Rose nods and pushes away from Gideon again. This time he lets her go and takes a place leaning against the wall. I ignore his watchful stare while his mate rounds the table heading to the cabinets.

"I do work with soul threads. Tea?" she asks.

“No thank you,” I force out, swallowing the discomfort down. Tea from a witch like Rose Love means talking and comfort... it means bad news.

Rose’s shoulders drop, and she turns back toward me. “Right to it, I guess.”

“I would prefer that.”

Rose approaches me, halting two steps away at the sound of disagreement from her mate’s throat. She rolls her eyes.

“Touching him will let me see everything, Gideon,” she says.

Gideon’s jaw clenches as I stiffen. I don’t want to be touched by another woman. She clocks my reaction.

“Just your hands if you will?”

I hesitate, and she shakes her head.

“The two of you, I swear.” Her eyes stare through my soul and seize me. “I vow never to reveal what we discuss. Please, relax. Your defensiveness can throw off my instincts.”

“It’s difficult,” I force out. “He and I aren’t really meant to be in the same room.”

“Oh?” Rose looks back at her mate, intrigued.

Gideon’s mouth twitches. “Magic from the earth meeting magic from the sea. It mostly feels uncomfortable.” His eyes lock with mine. “If you mean my mate no harm, none will come to you from me.”

Some of the tension tightening my shoulders eases.

Rose is still frowning at her mate. “But you’ve never had an issue with Gage.”

“Gage is quite young,” I say.

Gideon only nods in agreement. This modern world where paranormal creatures intermingle with one another can cause discomfort, but the part of me that enjoys innovation and change is thrilled by it. I mentally scoff at myself. Katarina and I are alike in that way.

With thoughts of the warm woman I left, I offer my hands to the matchmaker. This time, she takes them. Her grip is soft, comforting in the way sipping tea is, easing and medicinal all at once.

After a moment of Rose analyzing the space around me, probably seeing things that I can only sense, she gives my hands a squeeze.

“You’re quite a mess,” Rose says, not unkindly. “Your dragon has bonded to her, but you have not.”

The truth stings no matter how gently she says it.

“I know,” I say before clearing my throat. “I’ve been mated before. I know how it’s supposed to feel.” And no matter how being with Katarina makes my heart soar, it’s not the same thing.

Rose nods. “I can see your previous bonds, or rather, where they’ve been left to wither.”

The breath freezes in my lungs at the mention of my other bonds. *Ava, Luke.*

“Must they be severed if I wanted to mate again?” I don’t know if I can do that.

Rose shakes her head. “No, of course not. It’s more that you’ve closed off that part of your soul from yourself. When we ignore parts of ourselves, those parts don’t stay healthy.”

I swallow. “So it would be impossible—”

“Not impossible,” she cuts in. Her mouth thins before she continues, “You’ve separated yourself from your beast too much. Gideon has told me that dragons are similar to krakens in being more magical than physical beings.”

I nod. We are shapeshifters of magic. There’s no knowledge how either of our kinds came to be. Krakens are thought to be born from the sea, while the first dragons came from the fiery earth, but there’s no memory to attest to these things.

“I think you could form another mate bond in time,” Rose breaks through my thoughts. “It may take months or even

years, and it won't happen by accident. You need to stop pushing your beast away. He is you and you are him. You don't help either of you by rejecting him."

"I don't reject him—" I start to argue, but stop. I don't reject him, but I do consider him separate. An entity to allow exercise from time to time. Not a being that should exist in our modern world. His emotions are a tumult of reactions.

"He's, to put it simply, your heart," Rose reiterates. "By being in alignment with him and his will, you can start to awaken that part of yourself that you've let go fallow."

The witch does something that feels like strumming a chord, and the beast is at the forefront, seething with worry and need. I grit my teeth and just as quickly push him down again.

"It hurts," I hiss.

Rose's eyes darken with sadness. "I'm sorry about the pain. The ties that have a hold on you will... ache. There's no way around that. I wouldn't recommend severing them. They are attached to the best part of you."

My lips twitch. "The parts that are withering."

My heart. How tragically poetic.

Rose arches her brow. "They are only withering because of neglect. That doesn't change the fact that the memory of the ones you've lost includes your happiest times as well as the worst times. You've refused to make room for other things. It's not about letting go. It's about having the courage to add to them. To let the most volatile part of yourself thrive."

Her next words strike my very core. "You've wounded yourself, but wounds can be healed. The pain won't go away, but you can add sweetness to it still."

Sweetness... it's such a simple word for what she means. I can have a mate again. I can have Katarina as my mate.

"And this just takes me accepting my dragon?" I ask, my voice hoarse. I don't know where to even begin.

Rose gives me an understanding smile as if she understands my conundrum. “To start, it will be you working not to suppress your dragon. It would help the process if you spend time in your original form—”

“I can’t,” I cut in. “I can’t leave Katarina while she’s vulnerable.”

“That makes sense.” Rose nods but doesn’t look pleased. “We can set up appointments where I act as a guide and... hurry the process along like I just did. It would take some time to untangle your being, especially if shifting isn’t an option, but it won’t always be as painful. It all depends on what you want in the end.”

“Thank you,” I say, my eyes on her hands while my thoughts brew. It should be a simple thing to agree to. I want Katarina as my mate, and through this process it will become possible, but there are other effects that will come from becoming “aligned” with my dragon.

The last time we were one, my dragon burned down the countryside in anger and loss. Should a being like that really be accepted in our daily lives?

“Now stop touching my mate and go back to your own,” the kraken grumbles. Rose narrows her eyes at him, but drops my hands all the same.

“You can call me when you decide what you want to do,” Rose says.

I swallow and nod. Gideon comes up behind his mate as if he can’t wait for me to be out of the room before touching her again.

I turn to leave, not needing the sight of the happy couple to stir even more conflicting thoughts in my mind, but stop when he calls out to me.

“Dragon.”

I turn back.

The kraken’s face is stern. “It’s worth it.”

I bite down on the reaction to tell him that he doesn't know my pain, what I've lost, because that doesn't matter. This is one immortal speaking to another. He has what I want. A mate carrying his young.

To him, any pain, or destruction, is worth that.

What's more, Katarina deserves to have a mate that is connected to her very soul, who can offer her forever.

She's stolen a portion of my heart, and I ache to gift her the rest of it.

KATARINA

I'VE GOT a couple of bites left of my peanut butter toast when Kalos enters the kitchen.

“Good morning—” he cuts off his greeting and lasers in on my food. “What are you eating?”

Maggie hides her smile behind her book. We've already talked about this craving, and the conversation ended with a puzzled shrug from her.

I pull my breakfast closer to me. “Toast.”

He sniffs the air with a frown. “With cayenne pepper on top?”

I shrug. “It doesn't really change the flavor, just the heat profile.”

And each bite causes a spark of delight that has me doing an excited shimmy. He should be glad it isn't something like pickles and ice cream.

“Aren't you supposed to be working?” I ask to distract him. Work is how he's gotten out of the talk we were supposed to have after our intense night at the bathhouse.

I'd been nervous that he was avoiding me, avoiding the difficult topic, but the first night I woke to him carrying me from my bed to his eased a lot of those worries.

His actions speak louder than words. He wants me to stay.

He just needs time, and as long as there are no more growth spurts from our daughter, we have at least three

months left to figure things out.

That thought causes excitement and trepidation to zing through my limbs. I don't know if I'm ready to be a parent yet, but our little girl is impatient to light the world on fire if the number of kicks she gives me is any indication.

"I have a surprise for you," he says, moving on from the toast with a playful glimmer in his eyes.

"Is it showing me the caverns like you said you would?" I tease while my mind works at trying to guess what this surprise could possibly be. Most of the surprises in my life have been by accident, stumbling on Kalos in his heat, the baby.

I don't think I've ever had anyone plan something for me.

Kalos frowns. "No, but you're right. I'll need to take you down there. I don't know if today is a good time to do that. I have a meeting, and I don't know what other things will crop up from it."

He rubs his hand over his chest.

"*So it has been work,*" I murmur, but Kalos catches the words and his sly smile does nothing to clue me in on his secrets.

"Not completely, but you'll see."

With my curiosity sufficiently piqued, I slide off the stool while finishing my toast. Kalos takes my hand.

"What has been keeping you so busy at work?" I ask. I miss our nightly cuddles. Griffin is a fantastic cuddle buddy, but even my amazing cat can't take Kalos's place. A thought that makes the option of Kalos pulling away from me hurt more... but I won't let him do that quietly.

I believe in the relationship we could have and won't go down without a fight.

The time I'm giving him to sort himself out is just a pause.

"We've initiated the transfer of powers to our new inner circle," Kalos says, leading me up the stairs and down a

hallway I've never gone before. "It's been an exercise in patience and training each person in what they are responsible for now."

"Did you manage it all yourself beforehand?"

"Yes and no. Ben has always helped, and each of the people promoted handled a portion of what they are in charge of now. This just makes their authority official."

We stop at a door that looks like all the others. This room is probably right over his office on the lower level.

He turns toward me, and for the first time looks a little unsure.

"I think you should close your eyes," he says.

"Oh, you think so, do you?" My lips twitch at his uncharacteristic nerves.

Kalos narrows his eyes. "Yes. Close your eyes, little queen."

A shiver runs up my spine at the dominance in his tone, and his expression heats in response. He takes a step forward and I expect him to release his hunger for me, but he stops.

"Close. Your. Eyes." There's no room to argue in his words, and I pout before following the order.

The door opens with a click, and Kalos guides me into the room with a hand on my back, teasingly lowering it to pinch my ass when he has me where he wants me. "Open them."

I blink them open, and the first thing I register is the light. The room is bright with cool light from the wide windows. The view of the forest and city beyond that is stunning.

The next thing I notice is the easel. It's a durable build of light wood, and on it sits a canvas.

A large blank canvas. That isn't all. There's a drop cloth on the floor, more blank canvases resting against bookshelves, a table with organizational boxes that mimic the setup of my tools downstairs, except the cubbies are filled with new tubes of paint.

I move toward the set up slowly, as if it will disappear if I startle it. The tubes are all the same colors I'm used to working with, but these paints are the highest quality brands. I almost choke at the sight of the paintbrushes. I've only had one or two expensive brushes before, kept nice through careful cleaning, more than that would have been wasteful for the type of work I do. Most synthetic brushes work just fine.

Kalos has gotten me a whole set. A variety of sizes, materials, and shapes. Boar bristle and sable rounds, brights, flats, and filberts.

I'll be the first to attest that nice tools aren't required to be a skilled painter... but it sure makes it easier.

These are the tools of an artist.

"But I already have a workroom," I say softly.

Kalos scoffs. "That's a workroom. This is a studio."

I stand stunned and start to blink rapidly at the sight of Griffin sitting in a new cat tower in the corner.

He fills in my silence with details. "If there's anything I've missed, just let me know. And if you don't like this room, you can choose another, but this does have an added benefit I'd like to show you."

Kalos designed this room just for me.

"It's perfect," I say.

His shoulders drop in relief.

"Why? Why do this for me?" I ask.

Kalos stills and doesn't answer immediately. The silence fills with all the options that my mind deems as possibilities in his smooth voice. Sweet reasons like wanting to foster my art to sexy reasons like wanting me to work closer to him and everything in between.

The one I refuse to hear is "*It's nothing.*" Because this, this is something. He didn't just buy a set of nice paints. He bought the best versions of the colors I already use. He devoted time and care to set everything up how I like it.

He got my cat a tower for fuck's sake. This is not nothing!

Kalos's brows furrow like he doesn't know the right words to say.

"I think it's time to have that talk," I whisper.

Kalos nods, taking the change in topics in stride.

"It's possible for a bond to form between us," he says.

I blink. "A mating bond?"

Kalos leans back against the table, but the tension in his muscles belies his casual position.

"I consulted with a soul witch, and she says it may take some time, but it's possible. It will require me opening up more to my dragon, but..." he trails off with a shrug. It's possible for us to become mates.

"And what is this?" I gesture around us with a disbelieving smile. "Your way of convincing me to stay?"

The idea makes me giddy. No one has gone through the effort to make me stay. Nemo trying to keep me working with him doesn't count. He wants me for my skills, not for *me*. I'm usually the one holding on tight, but here's my dragon offering a hell of an olive branch whether he knows the right words to say or not.

He smiles back in chagrin. "Not only that. This is for you. Because you deserve a place to create. You deserve the room to explore what you want." His golden gaze traps mine. "And maybe if you can let your destructive feelings go, I can do the same for mine."

This is a new beginning for the both of us.

He clears his throat. "Healing my ability to bond may take more time than you're willing to wait—"

"Okay," I say. "I'll stay."

He gave me a studio and asks me for patience with his gaze *and* his words. This is him putting it all out there.

“And you don’t have to beg me to make art. I’ve gotten a lot better at letting the guilt go and believing I deserve good things.” Or if not deserve, to fight for what I want. To fight for *this*.

Kalos is my good thing. We deserve to be happy. I’ve paid my penance. Now it’s time to live.

Kalos is speechless for a moment, but he reaches out and pulls me into his arms. The embrace has my heart fluttering like a butterfly in the calm certainty of this moment.

“You honor me. I strive to be worthy of you.” Kalos cradles my cheek, the talons warm against my skin.

“You already are,” I say.

But Kalos shakes his head. “Not yet, but someday...”

The moment is a careful one that I soak up eagerly. Eventually, Kalos releases me but takes my hand.

“I also picked this room because it has a secret.” He strides toward the mantle of a fireplace and pulls a decorative flourish downward.

My eyes widen when the bookcase next to us swings open.

“I have a secret passageway in my studio? There are secret passageways in this house? Those are not on the blueprints!”

Kalos chuckles. “Of course they wouldn’t be. This is one of a few, and if you behave, I’ll show you the rest.”

I peer in the dark and make out a spiral staircase heading downward. “Where does it go?”

“My office first, and then it continues to the caverns beneath the house.”

Excitement zings over my skin. “Can you show me them now?”

Kalos winces, rubbing his chest again. “That wouldn’t be wise. That’s where we open a portal for my dragon to stretch his wings.”

“Is he causing problems?”

Kalos sighs. “With how hectic work has been, he’s practically climbing the walls. Sleeping beside you helps, but it’s starting to become less effective. I don’t want to give him ideas by going down to the caverns. It’s not the right time to let him take over.”

That sounds like the opposite of becoming more aligned with his beast, but I’ve never lived with a fire-breathing being trying to dictate my actions.

“I’d prefer for you to wait for me to give you a tour down there,” Kalos says, thoughtful. “The lighting is ancient, and it’s not really meant for human exploration. I may need to push some rubble around. I don’t want you tripping down there.”

I roll my eyes. “I can handle caves.”

Kalos glances at my rounded belly with doubt. “Please, Rina.”

“Fine! I’m sure I’ll be plenty busy with painting anyway. When is your meeting?”

Kalos frowns at his watch. “Any minute.”

I bite my cheek to keep in my disappointment. This is the most I’ve spoken with him in days.

“Alright. I guess it would make the most sense for you to take the passage then. I’ll try to keep myself from crashing into your office and being a distraction,” I tease.

Kalos pulls me into his arms. “You are the best distraction. If you need me, I will drop everything.”

Now I smile for real. “Just remember you said that.”

He kisses me, nipping my bottom lip in a tease, before leaving for his office, pulling the bookshelf closed behind him.

I turn in a circle, taking in the room with only my cat as an audience now. My very own studio. *And it has a secret passageway! How cool is that?*

“Can you believe this, Griffin?”

Griffin gives a croaking meow as a response, and I pet him. Already my fingers itch to run over one of the many

blank canvases. I turn to the organizational drawers and find some soft vine charcoal for sketching, but I ignore it for now. Choosing to dilute some burnt sienna to start the basic shapes of an underpainting instead.

What I have in mind is more organic in shape than a sketch would provide.

There's been a recurring dream that demands to come to life under my hands, and in the presence of so many blank canvases, there's no stopping me now.

KALOS

“COUNCILOR MOON WILL SEE YOU NOW.” The assistant’s voice is soft and deferential, even as her eyes are bright with curiosity. No one would expect me to need the Council for anything.

I stand from the plush chair in the receiving area and straighten my tie. I’m unused to having to wait for meetings, but even with all the power I have, I bow to the laws... now that we have them.

Ben stays seated and nods toward me. He’s aware of what I’ve come here to discuss, but his presence wouldn’t help. I already have the cards stacked against me when it comes to asking for allowances that the Council would rather not give. It does me no favors to remind anyone that I have a demon with the invaluable skill of portal magic on my staff.

I itch at how far I am from Katarina, but Moon only accepts audiences in his home. A luxury of having the dubious honor of a seat on the Council.

But this can’t be avoided. The threat of the Leonids cannot be allowed to remain with my intention to make Rina my mate.

I’ve started the process of remedying the dragon with Rose, and it’s made everything more difficult than I imagined.

My dragon is much more present. Things that I could keep a cool head about before have me snapping in irritation. Emotions that I’ve silenced over the centuries are live wires in my body. I’ve kept my contact with Katarina to a minimum,

hoping everything will eventually settle so I don't upset or hurt her by accident. I don't believe the dragon part of myself would hurt her on purpose... but I've locked him behind a wall in my mind for a long time.

The assistant leads me down the hall of the manor. The thick rugs under our feet muffle the sounds of our steps so that they don't reverberate through the line of suits of armor.

It's an unusual décor choice for an immortal of our history. Perhaps they are trophies of knights Moon dealt with when his kind were hunted. I applaud his morbid decision if it gives him an ounce of pleasure. Moon's kind were rare even before others wanted to use their parts for spells.

Now they are nearly extinct.

The room the assistant leads me to is cluttered and warm in a way that modern décor doesn't allow for. It looks to be a mashed-together personal library and study. Bookshelves take up every wall, with books and other memorabilia bursting from the shelves. My host stands with his hands clasped behind him before a grand fireplace that crackles.

Moon appears to be a man in his forties, but his long white ponytail and curling beard ages him. He doesn't respond to my presence immediately, almost as if he's fortifying himself.

Finally, he raises his gaze to mine and arches a silver brow in acknowledgment. "Kalos. It's been some years."

Decades. A discomfort bleeds into the confidence that I project. We were friends once.

"Councilor Moon," I nod. My lips twitch even with the heavy feelings plaguing my chest, and Moon rolls his eyes at the address. "The beard is new."

The look he shoots me is withering even as he strokes a hand over it. "It gives me an air of gravitas, don't you think?"

"Definitely," I say. Offending a Council member by saying he looks like the archetype for Merlin won't do me any favors. I glance around but see nothing familiar in the room. There was a time when at least a few of the items he kept on his shelves were from me.

It's jarring to realize that I hardly know the man in front of me anymore. The lines of caution and weariness on his face. The plain look covering the tinge of sadness in his eyes.

I have been absent physically as well as emotionally, and now, whether it's from Rose's digging into my soul or Rina's presence in my life... I am awake.

Sorrow threatens to close my airway, the emotion as poignant as if I'm reliving all the ignored invitations over the years, but this time I'm not numb to the consequential loss. Robert Moon had been a casualty of my determination to keep free from all attachments.

I clear my throat. "I came here for an audience, but I should start with an apology."

Moon's brows rise in surprise. "An apology from a dragon? I thought I'd never see the day. And what, pray tell, are you apologizing for?"

"For being a terrible friend."

Flashes of emotion cross Moon's once familiar face. Surprise, anger, and exasperation—perhaps I should not have begun with this. Finally, when I think he's going to snarl at me, his shoulders drop. Grief flavors the air. He sighs.

He gestures to two chairs before the picture window in the back of the room. "Let us sit. We have time to speak before you implore me in an official capacity."

I move toward the seats with trepidation. Everything feels raw around me, and I didn't anticipate a heart-to-heart when I made this appointment.

Moon starts speaking once we are seated. "When Ava died, you pulled away from everything that had been a part of your life. You seemed to bury your emotions, and I understood."

It's a marvel that I don't flinch at the sound of her name in his smooth voice.

"I thought my presence may survive, but that proved inaccurate." Moon shrugs. "I do not blame you for your grief. I've only mourned your absence."

“Then you are a better friend than I could ever strive to be.” My avoidance of him wasn’t intentional... but it was effective.

There’s a twinkle in his blue eyes. “Quite right.”

I huff a laugh, but Moon continues switching to a serious manner. “If you truly mean what you say, and this isn’t you buttering me up for a favor... all is forgotten.”

I scoff. “I don’t need to butter you up for a favor.”

“Of course not. Why would the mighty Kalos need anything from anybody? We should all count ourselves lucky to exist on the same plane as his excellence.” His smile is teasing.

I scowl to hide my own humor. “I am not that insufferable.”

Moon raises his brows and shrugs, the motion exaggerated. “If you say so.”

We lock eyes and share a soft smile. There’s a harmony in our bickering that I wasn’t aware I missed.

Moon clears his throat. “Now what did you need this audience for?”

I lean back in the chair, momentarily mourning the lost moment and anticipating his reaction to my words. “I wish to have the permission of the Council to strike against the Leonids.”

Moon’s guffaw is instant. “And you think you don’t need to butter me up for that?”

“They are a threat to me and mine,” I cut into his chuckle.

“They are an opposing territory leader, of course they will be a threat. The purpose of keeping territory leaders around is so that they challenge each other.” And keep others in line.

I tap my talons against the wood part of the armrest. “And because the Council does not wish to deal with the caretaking of the people in our territories. We provide a solution for you, but the Leonids have repeatedly tested their luck and my

patience. Sabotaging materials and businesses, releasing troublemakers within my borders—”

“No claws on the furniture,” Moon cuts in, glaring at my hand. “Without them taking violent action against you, the Council will not condone you to be the first to strike.” He makes a thoughtful sound. “It’s hard to imagine that they’d make such rash moves without some sort of backing. Do they have an ally that rivals you in strength?”

I thin my lips. We’ve considered the possibility, but other than espionage, which takes time, there’s no way to know for sure. “We’re unsure. They want a fae gate. If they do have an ally, it could be anyone.”

Moon nods, gravely serious. “That is alarming. The fae realm is going through its own upset. The courts are lobbying to outlaw the consumption of fellow magical beings.”

I blink in surprise. “Finally, but that only extends the list of possible allies the Leonids could have who want to obfuscate their dealings.”

And these unsavory individuals will only keep on coming. I will have to up the security for all my fae gates.

Moon sighs wearily. “That’s true. Unfortunately, none of this will change the Council’s sentiment.”

I let out a breath of frustration tinged with smoke. “If I were anyone else, what they have already done would be enough for the Council to intervene.”

Moon coughs, waving the smoke away. “I won’t deny that, but it doesn’t change the fact that you are who you are, and the Council won’t care if someone is sabotaging a couple of your operations. Honestly, there’s still a portion that won’t side with you even if the Leonids do resort to violence first.”

Moon only states plainly what I’ve suspected.

I huff in disgust. “Am I really that hated? Still?”

Burn a countryside down in fury once, and no one forgets it.

Moon's smile is sharp. "You are that powerful. Fear is a strong influencer. There are a few councilors who wouldn't mind anyone who has been around as long as you have with the influence you hold to disappear. You and I both know that you could easily strike against the Leonids without permission and stand against the Council enforcers when they come for you, but that will risk returning to a time before the Council... and no one wants that. Even you do not want that."

I can only nod. For all their ills, the Council provides a safety net for paranormals. The net may have holes that leave a few vulnerable still, but it's better than nothing. Better than returning to a time where rarer paranormals hid themselves from everyone.

"Waiting for them to strike puts my mate at risk." I pull the words from my chest, bleeding and raw.

Moon's eyes widen. "You have a new mate?"

I nod. No matter how much pain or sessions with the soul witch it takes to complete the bond, Katarina is my mate.

"And young on the way." Somehow this is easier to expose to my old friend than the accidental mating that I intend to complete.

The joy lighting Moon's features soothes the discomfort of revealing my vulnerabilities.

"Truly? A new dragon will be born? Congratulations!" he says. Moon's eyes transitioning from shock to wonder with an underbelly of sorrow.

It's a peculiar thing for creatures as old as we are to anticipate the birth of a member of our species. It's a new beginning, even as we continually try and solve the issue of fitting into the advancing society developing around us.

It's a hope for the future. That what we are will extend past what we expect. That we will exist.

Moon shakes his head to bring his thoughts back to the details of this meeting. "If it were up to me, I'd give you the allowance to do with the Leonids what you see fit. I can approach the Council on your behalf, but, Kalos, you will not

get the votes. I am only one voice, and the majority will be against you either by allegiance or strategy. And the Leonids will be informed of the attempt.”

I hiss in frustration and shake my head. I would not have the Leonids informed prior to my plans.

Moon nods in silent agreement. He arches his brows. “You’ll need to figure out a different way to destroy them. A way where the Council cannot find you at fault.”

“Very well,” I say.

“Cheer up, my friend,” Moon says. “You have so much to be happy about. A new dragon. Fate truly smiles on you.”

My lips pull into a reluctant smile. I haven’t let myself dwell much about our child. It’s hard with my beast closer to the surface and reactive to all the possible dangers. I rub my chest in thought. I will keep both of them safe.

“Perhaps there will be more unicorns in time,” I murmur. “Our world is ever changing.”

Moon’s smile turns sad, and he drops his gazes out the picture window instead of meeting my eyes. “Unlikely. Our last female decided a long time ago that she will not risk trying to birth more children only to lose them.”

Shock has me blinking. Things start to become clearer. Moon’s continued dedication to the Council though he is almost always outnumbered. The lack of his mate to greet me.

“Moon—” I start, but he cuts in with a shake of his head.

“We live separate lives.”

It isn’t rare for immortal mates to have fights and separations from time to time... but it’s not something I ever thought Moon would struggle with.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be. I only wish her happiness.” Guilt and sorrow hint that there is more to the story than that, but we’ve only just reconnected. If I had accepted any one of his invitations

over the years, I would have been able to be here for him as he was for me when I lost Ava and Luke.

Moon sighs and changes the subject. “You do have another plan to strike against the Leonids? One that won’t cause me to work day and night to pull your ass out of the fire after the fact?”

I intertwine my fingers in front of me. “If I told you, that would make you complicit.”

My friend’s glare is many things, but there isn’t an ounce of surprise. After a moment of silent lecturing, he must come to the conclusion that he’s imparted a sufficient amount of wariness to me and he nods.

“I wish you luck.”

We may need it.



“WHERE IS KATARINA?” I ask. I’ve already checked her room, and now I’m in the kitchen expecting to find her making a nighttime snack, but the only occupants are Maggie and Jensen sipping tea. I arch a brow at the shifter but he only sips from his mug happily.

Maggie shrugs. “I’ve been taking her meals to the new studio. She’s been working nonstop since this morning.”

I bite back a smile. When I gave her a studio, I hadn’t expected her to dive into her passions so completely, but I can’t help the bloom of happiness at the result. It’s a bright spot after hearing that the Council will only hinder us rather than help.

“*Why? Why do this for me?*” she’d asked. As if she has no idea the depth of my feelings for her. Perhaps she doesn’t. It’s been precarious to balance my emotions and the things I want to promise to her.

What would I not do for you?

When I get to the studio, the worries nipping at my heels ease at the sight of my little thief with her head resting on her folded arms on the tabletop, asleep. The room is dark except for a single light set up over the current painting she is working on.

She's why the dragon part of me has been practically clawing his way out all day no matter how far we traveled from her, but she's worth it.

I nudge her elbow gently.

"Rina."

"I only closed my eyes for a minute," she says sleepily.

"It's time you came to bed." I slide my arms around her and lift her from her chair.

She peers at the dark room and sighs. "It may have been for more than a minute." She curls into my chest and waves a hand. "Make sure to turn off the lamp."

I huff a laugh at the order from my little queen and get closer to the canvas, tilting her in my arms to reach the lamp.

I freeze. Prickles of awareness and foreboding run over my skin. The colors on the canvas are ethereal, blues, oranges, purples, and reds, the shapes only just starting to blend together organically.

"Rina." My voice is strained. My chest tight at the familiar sight.

"Hmm?" she says sleepily.

"Was this from a dream?" I ask, hoping that I'm wrong. There are only so many reasons for my thief to be having prophetic dreams involving what's on the canvas.

"Mmhmm." She nods.

The fear and worry roar through my senses, but I try to keep myself calm.

Katarina has been painting dragon fire.

KATARINA

“THERE’S no telling what it means. It doesn’t have to mean anything!” My sleepiness is long gone, and I sit on Kalos’s bed. I’d rather be doing other things in this bed than discussing my dreams that have meaning, but aren’t helpful, but my dragon paces instead.

He stops in his tracks. “What if he hurts you?”

“Who?” I ask, but the fear and self-recrimination in his eyes communicates who he means.

I force my shoulders to relax and to keep my tone even. “Your dragon isn’t going to hurt his mate.”

“But what if he does?”

The air is tinged with smoke, and I have an irreverent realization that there are no smoke detectors in this entire mansion just for this reason.

“You need to trust him, Kalos. You need to trust that he wants what is best for the both of you.” And worrying that he’s going to hurt me isn’t going to help him be more “aligned” with his dragon. Which means that I don’t get to be Kalos’s mate, but I don’t voice that selfish part.

Are the dragon fire dreams worrisome? Yes, but—

“I have yet to have a dream that has been a helpful message or warning, and I don’t think it’s going to start now,” I say, and the words come out as a beg. I want the worry stringing Kalos tight to ease. I want his wicked smile and even

his smug arrogance, but those things have been as absent as his presence.

I try to communicate all this with my eyes, even as I watch Kalos close his emotions away. The silence between us reverberates. The issue gaining seriousness as the clock ticks.

He doesn't believe me.

"I can't take that chance," he says before turning away from me. "I need to work."

"It's almost midnight," I whisper.

He doesn't respond, and I'm left alone in his bed.

Wary of the future, but more frightened that I've just lost a piece of what's between us.



KALOS IS WORKING. We haven't really spoken since that night. I hardly catch his scent on his own sheets anymore.

Some of it is that he's focusing on shoring up our defenses. A few ward masters have been through, strengthening the spells that are already set and weaving in new ones. There is no expense being spared to make this house a bunker.

But it also feels like he's avoiding me.

I'm grateful for the upscaled security. The revelation that I've been dreaming about dragon fire is more unsettling than I want to admit to him. Not because I think he's going to lose control, but because it's pressing on a nerve. A feeling that something bad is going to happen. Intrusive thoughts make it hard to work, but the stroke of paint on canvas helps immensely. The one I'd been working on that spooked Kalos is done, and I've finished two other canvases like it.

The fire paintings are gorgeous. The colors and winding nature of the shapes echo as deadly as the sound of a rattlesnake. It plucks the strings of my lizard brain and makes it dance. But the sight of the flames doesn't spark fear for me. The shape and color provide an odd comfort.

What they mean is a mystery.

Kalos fears that he's going to lose control, and I fear that I'm going to lose him.

I run my hands over my belly in thought.

Him pulling away elevates the feeling that something bad is on the horizon. I'm good at being prepared even if Kalos's care has made me lazy. What would I do if Kalos's enemies get into the house? The wards are strong, but there are ways to overwhelm them.

Kalos mentioned the caverns, which is a good option, but I can't use my portal charm to go there until I've been in person.

There's a tickle that I need to collect my go bag just in case, but I'm able to push that down. Ben and Kalos have been too busy to escort me back to my apartment just to get a contingency plan that may not be necessary. Kalos's presence makes the caverns the best place to retreat to, and that doesn't require supplies.

I bite my lip in contemplation as I gaze past my easel to the hidden doorway to the staircase. If there's an emergency, using the portal charm to get to the caverns is the safest plan of action to avoid stumbling down the stairs in the dark.

My phone lights up with another call from Nemo.

"No, thank you," I breathe and decline it. The imp won't take my silence as an answer. He thinks he can wheedle me back into doing work for him, and every day I get messages of fake concern. It digs at the good memories I'd built up in my mind of him.

I thought he was my family. My mind has been too full of Kalos, mate bonds, and his avoidance to try and analyze my relationship with Nemo, but I'm beginning to feel certain that he doesn't feel the same about me as I do about him. He's someone I may need to completely cut from my life, but I'm not in the headspace to make that type of decision.

I take a deep breath, letting my eyes flow over the colors of the canvas to center my thoughts on plans.

I need to be prepared. That will ease this flurry of worry in my chest that feels like I swallowed acidic butterflies.

Kalos isn't the only one in charge of my safety. I need to take the steps needed to keep myself safe, to keep our daughter safe.

I can't just sit around and wait for Kalos to show me the caverns. He's in the city today, and he's been hesitant to bring me down there while his dragon is riding him so hard. And that was before his worries about what me dreaming about dragon fire means.

"It's just you and me, impossibility," I say, giving my stomach a final pat before making my decision.

I grab the flashlight I've started keeping in a drawer in case of an evacuation to the caverns, and for the few times I've listened at Kalos's office door, and head toward the passage. I'm dressed sensibly to go exploring, with the thin boots I used for thieving and a canvas maternity jumpsuit Ben found for painting. It's as if a part of me knew I was going to do this.

As long as I go slow and have my phone with me, everything will be fine. Nemo altered my phone a few years ago to make it so I'll get reception magically no matter the physical limitations.

The bookshelf swings open when I trigger the mechanism, and the cold air from the hidden stairs chills my hot cheeks. The spiral staircase is well maintained and doesn't make a sound as I descend. I pass Kalos's office. I'd be hard-pressed to admit how many times since he's started avoiding me that I've hung out on this landing, listening to the dragon I want through the wall while he conducts business.

An ache at his avoidance always wells at the sound of his voice. I've attempted to pull him to bed a few times, but he always gives some perfectly acceptable excuse, giving me a push of heat energy with the barest touch of his hand to fulfill the needs of our daughter.

Each time he kisses my forehead and sends me off to bed alone, the flame of hope in my heart sputters, but I feel the

same as I did when I first came here.

I'm willing to fight for my place here, but I won't beg for someone to love me.

My heart rate starts to pick up with adrenaline as I continue deeper, following the staircase lower into the earth.

The adrenaline soon morphs into exertion as seconds turn into minutes, until I've been slowly descending for more than a quarter hour. The stairs go on and on with no end in sight. My thighs start to burn, and I sit on the cool step to take a breather. My basketball-shaped belly and careful movements are taking more energy than I realized.

Or the baby is zapping my energy because it's colder down here. Cheerful thought.

I continue my journey. The stone wall I brace myself against is icy against my hand, but it's better than the metal railing. Right when I'm wondering if I should go back up and try another day when Kalos can carry me, the stairway opens into a cave.

The light from my flashlight travels through the dark and catches on stalactites but doesn't reach the floor.

There's a light switch in the center of the stair spiral, and I flip it on. The lights come on slowly, and I grip the metal railing that separates me from the edge of the steps with awe.

I was expecting a room-size situation. That isn't what's below the place I've been calling home.

Caves as far as I can see span in every direction.

Plenty of room for a dragon to live. I slowly descend the rest of the way until my thin boots crunch on wet stone.

I wander while angling the flashlight up to take in the many rock formations on the ceiling. There are some places where the rock has been broken. I squint my eyes at a wall, and my mouth drops open when I make out the deep gashes.

Claw marks.

Kalos's dragon form may be a little bigger than a Komodo dragon after all...

My feet itch to continue exploring this place, but my guilt and the visual reminder of the dragon I'd rather not worry has me heading back to the stairs. I came down here to check that this was a good place to retreat, not to go on an adventure.

I inhale and brace my hand against a stalagmite to catch my breath before starting the long climb back to my studio. My palm slips against the wet rock. I lose balance with a gasp, sliding and lurching forward toward a mound of loose rocks.

The fall feels like I'm in slow motion, but that doesn't change the fact that gravity is betraying me. The uneven terrain under me makes it so I can't rebalance. I twist and use my flailing arms against more rocks to slow my fall, pushing some of the rubble Kalos mentioned. My ass hits a bigger rock and pain ricochets through my body as every loose rock in the universe cascades over and around me, digging into my legs and burying them.

The rocks stop sliding as quickly as they started, and I take inventory. My twist kept me from falling on my stomach, and fortunately none of the bigger rocks got close to hitting it. My tailbone throbs, and I probably have rock-shaped bruises all over my thighs. I may have pulled a muscle in my arm with my flailing, but the worst part is the heavy rocks biting into my thighs. A good portion of my legs are buried. The press of the cold rubble against me is tight, but thankfully not painful. I try to move, but the pressure around my ankle gets worse, the twinge of discomfort has me hissing.

I'm trapped.

"Shit," I whisper and start to blink away tears. It could have been so much worse, but it's hard to remember that when my heart is racing and the chill of the stone starts to permeate the canvas of my jumpsuit.

I unzip the pocket where I stored my phone, glad I didn't put it in my back pocket.

I curse silently before tapping the contact.

“Kalos is going to be pissed.” The words echo in the space as I prepare to confess my sins.

KALOS

“*LEAVE,*” I hiss.

Ben freezes in his attempt to move the rocks around Katarina. He doesn't deserve my ire. He'd been quick to teleport us here when she'd called me and confessed where she was, but my emotions are surface-level today, and her tear-filled eyes aren't helping with the raging violence brewing. The territorial possessiveness that comes with being around her in distress and in this space are two meeting winds of destruction.

“Are you sure?” Ben asks slowly, taking a step away from Katarina to appease the vicious side of me that growls at him.

The portal that is spelled to open down here to give my dragon freedom crackles across my skin, but I push past the distraction.

Katarina's eyes are wide, and she's shivering. She's half buried in a mix of rocks and mud, and there are dried streaks of dirt on her face.

She could have been down here for hours if she hadn't been able to call, trapped and possibly injured.

“Now,” I say, and Ben vanishes without another word.

“Traitor,” she says under her breath but snaps her mouth shut at my glare.

My hands are less human than they usually are. My control of this form falters in the face of the raging worries echoing in

my ears. They make passably shovels as I gently dig her out of where she's stuck, moving rocks that could have crushed her.

I grit my teeth and focus on the work. She keeps her silence until I move the last bit around her ankles.

I pull her to stand, analyzing her movements. "Are you injured?"

She shakes her head. "Kalos—"

"I told you not to come down here," I say. The waves of terror that crash against my heart threaten to spill over. Something worse could have happened. I could be pulling her cold body from the rocks instead of watching her step away with a wince.

"I needed to case out the caverns to be able to use the portal charm," she says, gesturing to her necklace. Her tone is perfectly logical.

"You could have stayed on the stairs," I snap. It's useless. Katarina has an adventurous spirit. Telling her to stay on the stairs is like telling her not to be herself, and that fact is what's chipping away at my control.

I can taste the fire in my mouth. I need to get away from her. I need to finally let the dragon overcome my flesh so he isn't scrabbling at my walls.

I pull her toward the stairs, wanting to pick her up and carry her, but knowing that would be too much for my current state. The skin touching hers already burns with demand. My jaw is tight. I push the anger, worries, and fierce presence of the creature trapped inside me down.

The effort is enormous.

We could have lost her.

Katarina's gaze is full of worry. She should be worried. Everyone should worry that I'll lose control. It shouldn't have taken her painting images of dragon fire to forewarn how close I am to the edge.

"I should have stayed on the stairs," she placates. "I just felt like I needed to come down here in case the worst

happens.”

And the worst almost happened.

The phone she has gripped in her dusty hand lights up with a call. Both of our gazes drop to the name “Nemo.”

The walls that keep the darker of my emotions contained crack.

“Why is your mentor calling you?” It sounds like an accusation rather than a question.

Her eyes are wide in surprise. “You know who he is?”

I snarl. “I have a thick file detailing how the two of you worked together. Why is he calling?”

Katarina shakes her head, trying to come to grips with the fact that I’ve known who she associated with even as she’d tried to shield him from me.

“He probably wants me to do a job.” Her brow furrows, and she declines the call.

“You’re not doing it.”

I can taste her exasperation on the air.

“I wasn’t planning on it. If you didn’t notice, I’m the size of a house.” Her gesturing to her swollen belly rattles the lizard under my skin. *We could have lost our mate, our young.*

I narrow my eyes. “And you’d consider it if you weren’t?”

She blinks in surprise and *hesitates*. “N-no!”

The hesitation causes a chill to invade the churn of panic in my chest, not dousing the sensation but sparking an awareness that floods me with fear.

What about the next time Nemo gives her a sob story? What if she gives in because she needs a thrill after our daughter is born? He wouldn’t disclose the risks.

He’d put her in danger without a thought.

Just like he did when he sent her here.

“If I asked you to promise never to take a job from him again, would you? Even if he told you he’d die?” I try to keep my words neutral, but they come out with a deadly calm.

Katarina’s mouth opens and closes as she struggles with her answer. I shouldn’t be so incredulous. I shouldn’t have asked such a question while in my current state.

But my logic is burning a fiery death, and in its place is only instinct. The need to protect her.

To protect myself.

“He doesn’t care about you!” I snarl.

Katarina flinches, but the flash of regret in my soul that I’ve hurt her doesn’t make a dent in the rage burrowing in my skin.

“I-I know,” she says.

“Do you? You risked your life for him countless times. He pulled you into acts you’ve castigated yourself for years and he hasn’t lost a second of sleep.”

Her lip trembles, and I try to temper my words better.

“You are mine. Do not be flippant about your safety,” I say, the tension in my chest not subsiding.

“I’m not being flippant—”

“Then why are you here?” I roar. “I told you not to come down here without me.”

I’m ashamed at the sound as soon as I release it, but Katarina doesn’t cower. Her eyes glint, her own fire being stoked in the midst of my barrage. I may be a proud beast, but she is a queen.

“I needed to come down here,” she snaps. “You don’t control me!”

Too close.

The cracks in my soul shatter.

The words are too close to what Ava said before she left. The echo heralds the surety in my heart. I’m going to lose her.

I'm going to lose Katarina.

It may not have been from this stunt, but every day is a new danger.

How can I keep sane when the mate of my heart refuses to stay safe? It's not a matter of *if* but *when*.

This is the searing pain of Ava falling, this is holding Luke to my chest as my son grows cold all over again.

I cannot survive the loss again. *We* cannot.

My dragon writhes in both agreement and argument, conflicting emotions fight for dominance. The urge to shift slowly takes over my limbs even as my heart bleeds.

I barely hear my own words as I utter them.

"I can't do this."

KATARINA

“I CAN’T DO THIS.”

His words cause the mix of annoyance and shame burning in my chest to collapse.

“Do what?” I ask even as the blood drains from my face. Kalos’s eyes burn as he shakes his head. His focus flicks back and forth like he’s at war with himself. This is more than a quibble about going down to the caverns or my old mentor trying to get me to work for him again.

“This.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, enunciate each word. *This* could mean anything, but the stupid flame of hope in my chest for our relationship is on the verge of burning out. In its place is a gutting rage. “We are already doing *this*.”

We’re having a baby together whether or not it’s something he thinks he can handle.

“*I can’t.*” Kalos turns and lurches away from me. The sound of bones cracking and fabric tearing is second to the stabbing panic in my chest.

My mind grasps for reason. Something, anything, to slow this train down before we crash.

“But your dragon mated me,” I say.

He doesn’t mean to rip away all the comforts I’ve secured around myself about our relationship. He’s just upset. This

place and his dragon are making him say things he doesn't mean.

He asked me to stay.

Kalos whips back around, and the sight is horrifying. His body is shifting into something unrecognizable. Scales are taking the place of skin, and horns grow in size with his form. When he speaks, it's a surprise I can understand him.

"My dragon is a beast with the self-preservation of a gnat. Mating you was merely a faulty instinct," he snarls as his jaws elongate.

I stumble back at the vehemence of his words. This is Mean Kalos in a way I've never seen him. Either he's speaking things to cause me to push him away...

Or he really believes them.

The transformation completes on that terrible thought, and a black dragon the height of the mansion above us stands before me. Any other time I'd be fascinated with the sight, but not right now.

His eyes glow gold, but there's nothing I recognize of the man I wanted to take as a mate behind his slit pupils. The Kalos I lost my heart to has been devoured by the beast of his rage and confusion, and I'm only left with the barest part of him.

The adrenaline response in my body is instant. My biology wants to cower in front of this great creature. I tremble, but I stand strong against the fear.

This dragon is my mate. He will not hurt me even if he now regrets our mating.

The dragon opens his teeth-filled maw, and my certainty falters. There's a glow of violet in his throat, and my tongue dries.

Is this how I die?

The dragon turns his head at the last moment and releases a stream of fire. Blues morph into purples, reds to oranges in organic swirling shapes. The sight is familiar from my dreams,

but my paintings lack the stinging scent of smoke and the visceral fear of destruction. Rage and loss manifest and heat the rocks of the cavern with nothing to catch fire and burn.

I stumble backward. My flight response overriding my need to prove to myself that I trust his dragon... because I'm not so sure I do anymore. The metal staircase clatters when I scramble up the first couple steps backward.

The dragon stops the slew of fire with the snap of his jaws. His serpentine neck pulls his horned head back until I'm directly in his sights. I swallow at the abrupt silence, my heart thundering in my chest. My breath catches when he opens his mouth again, half expecting for his teeth to chomp down on me, but instead a torturous sound rends from him to the stalactites above us.

I clap my hands over my ears, but that doesn't stop the bellow from striking the depth of my soul. The roar is full of fury and shattered pain. It's a lament and mourning call all at once. It's breaking my heart.

He's keening.

Tears track down my cheeks, and the air presses in on me as if there isn't enough oxygen in the room.

The cry dies out, and the dragon's eyes land on me again. I open my mouth, but no words come. What can I possibly say? My limbs are stiff with a primal fear as my body shakes.

Kalos has said more than once that he's broken... and I think I finally believe him.

His gold gaze flickers, and his giant body moves, turning from me toward where a portal spell must sleep in the wall because once the dragon is before it, a circle of pitch-black opens.

"Kalos!" I call, needing to do something but not knowing what. My chest is so tight that I can barely project, but the dragon looks back at me. I flinch, still trying to work through what fear is primal and what is reasonable. "Don't go."

I don't know why I make the plea. It's logical for this massive dragon to leave and get whatever pent-up emotions

he's dealing with out, but my memories of abandonment whisper that if he leaves now, he'll never come back.

He twists the knife in my chest by turning away and launching itself through the portal without hesitation.

The taste in my mouth is bitter, and the portal closes. All that's left are singed rocks and a sob building in my chest.

Kalos is gone.

KATARINA

KALOS DOESN'T RETURN by dinner or the next day.

It's been two days, and I press my lips together. The stroke of paint on canvas fails to calm the burning pit of emotion in my chest, but if I'm moving, I'm less likely to allow myself to spiral into dark places or to give in to worries that threaten to drown me.

The visual of dragon fire is absent from my work now, probably the completion of what my dreams were waiting for. My current paintings feature glossy black scales and forbidding golden eyes.

There's a tap at my open studio door.

Maggie stands there with a tray. "Care for some lunch? You must be hungry."

The mild thread of nausea in the back of my throat suppresses my appetite, but skipping meals would be bad for the baby.

"Sure." I start cleaning brushes. "Sorry for making you come up here."

"Hush. This place offers you solace. I won't steal that away from you right now."

Solace. I wouldn't say that, maybe distraction. My studio offers me more than the ugly emotions of Kalos's bedroom. I've tried to sleep there since my ability to sleep in my bed has gone the way of my appetite, and Griffin prefers to hang out in

the dragon's bedroom, but his campfire scent doesn't settle me the way it did before. It just reminds me that he's not here.

"Do you mind if I check on the baby?" Maggie asks, setting the tray on the coffee table in the sitting area away from my paints. It's always wise to keep a strong divide from eating and drinking locations when it comes to painting. I've gulped paint water only once, but that's enough.

I pull the nitrile gloves off my hands and hold them out to her. "Please."

Maggie's skin is pleasantly warm against my clammy hands. The chill hasn't returned as violently as I expected. Mostly I'm only cold enough that I need to throw a hoodie on. I try not to think about what I'm going to have to do if it gets worse.

The zing of Maggie's magic is a comfort now, and the fae hums after a moment. "She's doing okay."

My heart lodges in my throat.

"But she isn't thriving," I guess.

Maggie's eyes soften, and she brings my hands together before patting them. "I think she's picking up on your emotions. The hatchling bond is firmly in place even if she's gestating in you instead of an egg."

I'm a jumble of emotions, symptoms, and regrets, but the loudest at this moment is guilt.

"I didn't mean for that to happen." I pull my hands from Maggie's. "Is there a way you can make it better for her?"

Maggie tilts her head. "Other than making it better for you? No. It's best to not mess with the bond."

I huff a weak laugh. "I don't know what that would take to make me feel better."

Maggie pulls me to sit on the couch in front of the lunch tray. Her presence gives me a pang of comfort I've been missing. I've been avoiding her and Ben since the literal blow up with Kalos.

“You could share your worries. Your plans.” Her gaze touches on the duffel bag next to the easel. I’ve kept it within my sight since Kalos left. It’s not as equipped as a go-bag but has some provisions along with money and a phone charger.

“It’s my fault he’s gone,” I say.

Maggie snorts. “It’s Kalos’s fault. He will return.” She tilts her head. “But that’s not what you’re worried about, is it?”

How do I explain when I don’t understand myself? The urge to go down to the caverns to settle my worries has morphed and grown. Claws of inevitability dig into logic and keep me on the edge of my seat waiting for the storm to start.

I want Kalos to come back. We have a lot to talk about.

But for some murky reason, I don’t think I’ll be here when that happens.

I sigh. “It doesn’t make any sense, but it feels like something bad is going to happen.”

“You think you’re going to have to run.” Her voice is soft but rings clear through the way my nerves haven’t stopped buzzing since Kalos left.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “It’s probably just paranoia, but the bag helps me feel a little better.”

“Ah.” Maggie sits back as if she suddenly understands everything, her expression thoughtful. “You should trust your intuition.”

I roll my eyes more at myself than Maggie’s advice. “My intuition is what started this. I went down to the caverns because of this feeling. I could have asked Ben to help me or told you where I was going. I could have demanded that Kalos show me the caverns. But it felt... necessary.” My shoulders drop. “I’m not used to relying on people.”

I thought that Kalos was the one that was struggling in this relationship, but I don’t even know how to be a part of a family, and I’ve made everything worse.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. This is all new to you,” Maggie says.

I shake my head even though she's right. Everything about my life now is new.

“And I suspect that there are other things at work.” Maggie hums before continuing. “Kalos mentioned that you didn't want to explore your heritage. Which is understandable. Children with mixed blood haven't been treated well by either side historically, so to leave that stone unturned is wise...” Maggie trails off.

“But?”

Her eyes sharpen. “But you have fae blood and it's influencing you. Your abilities are fae-like, more so than I realized, and there are details about the fae that would help you navigate them.”

Excitement sparks in the midst of my misery. I'd told Maggie about my weird abilities when Kalos mentioned that I had fae blood, but she hadn't mentioned anything like this. “Like what?”

“The fae believe in fate,” she starts.

I try to keep my shoulders from dropping. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but... a lot of people believe in fate. Even humans who don't know about magic believe in fate. This is hardly the revelation I was looking for.

I must not be able to keep my thoughts from my face because Maggie laughs.

“I promise it's relevant. Fate is hardly a unique concept, but we are especially sensitive to it. It's the way that life moves around us. The flow of the world is a constant hum and guides those who can listen to it where they are supposed to be.” She hesitates before continuing, “It may be hard for you to accept, but the things that are fated to happen will happen no matter any action taken. I suspect that's why what you dream has never been changeable.”

“And you think this feeling I'm getting is me tuning into fate?” I don't like that. Don't like that at all. “And there's nothing I can do about it? No way to change the outcome? That hardly seems useful.”

Maggie's smile is slow. "It's a very human reaction to want everything to be useful. The ideology is to take comfort in the fact that what's supposed to happen cannot be altered so easily. For good or ill, our belief system is more passive in comparison to the more mortal belief that you carve your own destiny."

"One does feel more empowering than the other," I mutter.

Maggie gets a faraway look in her eyes. "You're not wrong. Our society has suffered for this reliance on what will be, will be, but when you receive nudges from the universe toward paths that don't seem to be alterable... you work with what you've been given." She clears her throat. "The intuition is not to avert the future we travel, but to act as a warning."

So all the fae have moments of paranoia like mine? My paranoia isn't actually paranoia, but an early warning system? That's an easier truth from me to swallow than that I'm marching to fate's drum. Perhaps I am too human to give myself over to this ambiguous power, but I can listen to the warning sirens in my head and trust that where there is smoke, there is fire.

Maggie continues, "The nudges that you're sensitive to are not comfortable, but place you where you are required to be. You may regret going down to the caverns because it caused Kalos to leave, but it's what needed to happen. Kalos would have avoided his other half out of fear for you until it produced a truly dangerous situation if you hadn't done what you did."

I scoff. "I thought that situation was plenty dangerous. Thank you very much."

Maggie raises a brow and I sigh, because yeah, it could have all been much worse. It doesn't make me feel any better that some compulsion is what instigated the fight we had.

Kalos has to deal with his dragon, and I have to deal with being a conduit of fate.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Maggie presses her shoulder to mine in affection. “But you can handle it. You were always meant to be the one to push Kalos from his comfort zone.”

“He doesn’t want to be pushed,” I say before pressing my lips together. Dark emotions gather like storm clouds when I think about Kalos. Thankfully my *intuition* is taking up most of my contemplation because the quagmire of my emotions around Kalos feels like it has the power to break me.

Maggie’s smile is rueful. “No one wants to be pushed, but it’s not a decision for us to make.”

What will be, will be. The sentiment is sour on my tongue. I don’t like it, but I can make it useful. I can be ready to act when whatever bad thing my nerves are trying to warn me is on the horizon comes for us.



WHEN THE FIRST EXPLOSION HAPPENS, it’s cathartic.

Which is not what I’d expect from the experience, but the encroaching *intuition* has drawn my muscles to the point of pain over the day. Having a name for what I’m experiencing helps some... but it mostly makes me impatient.

So the *boom* that rattles the house nearly has me collapsing in relief. The relief is gone in a flash. *Something* is happening. Is someone attacking the manor? A gas leak? That one is unlikely. Whatever it is, it’s time to leave.

I pick up my bag from its spot under my easel and look around.

“Griffin?” I call out. He was just here! My eyes start to water, and I run down the hall to Kalos’s room. It’s his favorite place to spend the day. Each step makes my heartbeat thunder faster and harder in my chest.

I need to leave... but I can’t leave my cat.

My throat tightens at the idea of leaving everyone else, but Maggie said that she wasn’t experiencing the same type of

intuition. I'm the one who can't be here if the wards fail.

Or fate is sending me somewhere else... let's not think about that right now.

But that thought has my stride slowing. If I'm supposed to go somewhere else because of that bitch, Fate, wouldn't it be better for Griffin to stay?

I can't give up on him that easily. I finally get to Kalos's room and burst in. I can barely breathe through the constriction of panic in my chest.

"Griffin? Where are you? Here kitty kitty!" There's no croaky meow, and I forcibly cut off my sob. The room is empty.

I have to go.

I glance to the ceiling in time to see a giant ball of fiery orange hit the artistic dome. The house rattles, and I almost lose my footing. The wards hold, but this is their weakest point. Whoever is attacking the mansion must know that, because another ball of fire lights the room from the outside.

This time the crash is deafening. Static runs over my skin as the wards above snap and the glass shatters. I scream, covering my head from the glass shards raining down.

There's a distant howling sound, but I ignore it to clutch my necklace. I've run out of time. My fingers find the small metal charm and it crumbles when I press down, setting an intention and releasing the magic that resides there.

It's time to rely on all my skills.

It's time for me to disappear.

KATARINA

THE FALLING EMBERS BLUR, and everything shifts around me at nauseating speed. The lush colors of Kalos's bedroom morph into the familiar laminate lines of my apartment kitchen. I tremble and hold in my sob as I brush shards of glass from my hair. The air doesn't smell like smoke here.

I'm safe.

Maggie. I bite my lip to keep the tears at bay. *Ben. Jensen.* My vision blurs. *Griffin.*

They will be alright. They have to. I can't be distracted. I won't be safe here for long. I need to head to the real sanctuary I have in mind once I pick up my supplies. I'll have to use a ride-sharing service to keep from burning through my last portal charm.

I suck in a breath and center myself, wiping my eyes. *They will be alright.*

With my eyes clear, I frown. This is my apartment, but it doesn't *feel* right.

A sound has me spinning toward my tiny couch. A familiar person sits there, feet resting on the coffee table while he scratches his scalp. He doesn't seem at all surprised by my appearance.

He uses a remote to turn off the television that sure as hell wasn't here when I moved out, before standing with a stretch. His gray skin looks paler than I remember it being, and the

scent that wafts over to me makes me think he hasn't washed his clothes in days.

"Nemo?"

"Took your damn time," he grumbles.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, but I blink at the sink full of dishes, the stack of magazines on the table, and the new flatscreen. "You've been living here?"

"I needed a place to lie low for a minute. I would have asked if you answered any of my calls."

My cheeks heat in a mix of embarrassment and frustration. The distraction from witnessing part of Kalos's home destroyed is welcome, but him helping himself to my place is not. "So you thought you'd just make yourself at home?"

"It's not like you were using this place anyway, not with you staying with the dragon." The skin around his eyes wrinkles as he squints at me.

"How did you know I was staying with Kalos?" I ask, awareness edging out my embarrassment.

He shrugs. "You could have just told me you had an *arrangement* going with the guy. You didn't have to screen my calls."

The emphasis he puts on the word leaves little room for me to wonder what he thinks I've been doing with Kalos. I push down the urge to touch my stomach. The hoodie I'm wearing is baggy, the pockets poking out and hopefully disguising my belly. Nemo has never been good at noticing things where I'm concerned.

"You weren't listening to me. I don't want to take any more jobs," I say with a shrug, trying to keep from moving at an angle that would highlight my new silhouette. Nothing good can come from Nemo knowing about the baby.

"Why would you?" His sneer is ugly. "You're living in the lap of luxury, getting fat, while I've struggled. We could have made great plans."

The fat comment rolls off me like water on a duck. Me gaining weight is just one more thing for him to gripe about because it affects his ability to use me to slide through windows.

The answer to how he knows where I've been connects in my brain. He'd "checked over" all my equipment before that job.

"You put a tracker in my phone," I say, my voice full of disbelief.

His upper lip curls. "It's a simple thing. You should have checked for the spell. It's not my fault you've gotten rusty."

Not his fault I've gotten rusty. As if I need to always be on my guard and live my life like he does, running from shadows and being threatened by clients. He'd rather I be miserable so we can be miserable together.

Because me being miserable is useful.

"I didn't check for the spell because I trusted you." I thought he cared for me at least a little bit. I got into a fight with Kalos over that fact. Granted, if the fight wasn't about Nemo, it would have been something else, but the truth still stings.

Kalos was right. I had my suspicions, but suspecting that Nemo only acted like he cared enough to use me and having it presented to my face is something else entirely.

Nemo widens his eyes. Like he's surprised I'd be stupid enough to trust him. I am too.

I shake my head. "We're finished. You need to leave."

"You're just going to forget everything I've done for you?" he sputters. "If I leave here, the Leonids are going to pick me up as easily as shooting fish in a barrel."

"I've forgotten nothing!" I shout. "I've more than paid back my debts. It's not my fault or problem that you're in trouble with the Leonids."

At the mention of the Leonids, I head for the bedroom. Nemo's presence sidetracked me. I only came here for my bag

before heading to my next destination.

“Katarina!”

I freeze. The tone of his voice shifts from alarm to smugness.

“Why do you think the Leonids attacked the dragon’s place? They need leverage. Do you think I wouldn’t give them the dragon’s girlfriend?”

Fear tightens my throat. I hadn’t known it was the Leonids attacking the mansion, but that detail pales in comparison to the danger of this moment. For all that I’ve known that Nemo works with dangerous people, I’ve never considered him a threat to *me*.

To my daughter.

The movement is instinctual, and I’ll regret it for as long as I live. My hand comes to my stomach for a split moment—only a moment—before I jerk it away. But it’s too late.

Nemo’s eyes drop and widen. “Oh fuck.”

He slides his hand out of his pocket, and panic is an ugly song in my mind at the sight of his phone already lit up with either a call or text message.

“Please don’t do it,” I say. “If you ever cared for me even for a second. Please don’t do this.” I never thought I was one for begging, but this livewire of terror zinging through my chest gives me no choice.

Nemo’s face softens. “I did care about you, kid.”

Hope is a dangerous thing. It starts my heart pumping again. Maybe this will be okay.

“But I care about me more,” he continues, and the breath leaves my lungs. “I’m sorry. This information is too valuable.” There’s a tinge of guilt squishing his brows together. “I’ll give you a five-minute head start.”

I don’t waste that time trying to convince him to do anything otherwise. Even if there’s a sliver of guilt in him, the gleam of greed in his gaze is too much to combat that.

Nemo walks out of my apartment, and instinctively I know it's so I don't hear the conversation he's about to have.

"Head start my ass," I mutter.

I run to the bedroom and unearth my bag, digging out my last portal charm. Luckily, I don't need that five minutes.

Phone tampered with. I'll come back when it's safe. I text to Ben before pausing to add: *I hope everyone is alright. Please take care of Griffin.* I toss the device on my bed.

There's a shriek of tires outside. I've run out of time. I break my second portal charm of the day with a destination in mind.

Anywhere is better than here.

KALOS

BEING LOST IS A DISQUIETING SENSATION. It's not comfortable, but there's no pain, no worry. There are only the primal urges. The joy of flight, of hunting prey, and of basking in the sun.

But even my dragon knows we're missing something. Or rather, especially my dragon knows. He's the one who mated our queen after all. We bred her while I was full of need, but he feels all the demands that I push down constantly.

The need for *others*. Family, community, a mate.

He feels the things I don't want to. My worry for Katarina pales in comparison to his. My fear of loss is the same.

My dragon experiences the world in black and white. Joy and pain. And letting myself dwell in all the terrible possibilities that could happen to Katarina, my fears about the dragon fire prophecy and losing control, has caused so much confusion in our very being.

Our... Even in the state I'm in, I can't bring myself to pull the pieces of myself back together again. The emotions of my dragon and my logical mind echo through each other.

But the soul witch is right.

We are not separate.

And I must go back. The throb of pain in my chest is hard to identify. I don't want to identify it. I've spent years ignoring the sensations of my own emotions until they grew smaller and more distant. Until I could lock them away under the appearance of adapting to the modern world around me.

But I am not a modern creature, and the more determined I am to schism myself, the less I'm capable of giving my mate what she deserves.

Reconnection comes slowly and is searing in its pain. Stitch by stitch, I pull myself together. The wind against my wings, the fire brimming in my emotions. The job is patchwork without the soul witch to guide me, but it's necessary. I focus on the yearning of my heart.

The pain I fight is the fear of losing Katarina, and it will be there no matter if I ignore my feelings for her or am successfully able to complete our mating bond.

I'd rather suffer every waking minute to hold her.

She is brightness, the prized jewel in my collection.

I have been a coward, pushing my nature down to the far reaches of my soul, hiding from myself.

No more. I am awake, and I must return.

I'm back through the portal and in the caverns without a thought. The scent of dragon fire and blackened stone snuffs out the scent of my mate. I can't tell how long ago she was down here. Ben appears before me as I shift into my more human form. He tosses clothing at me without ceremony.

"How long?" My voice sounds raspy.

Ben's expression is blank. "Three days."

Worry brews in my chest at his neutral face. Other times we've done this same exact scene, but I would start with questioning him about the business and how it fared without me. Eventually I'd ask about him and Maggie. I assumed that if I kept them low priority, I could keep lying to myself about them being my family. As I assumed not having Moon in my life would separate me from extraneous feelings.

Not this time.

"Is Katarina alright?" I ask. My heart seizes when his expression falters, but I breathe through it.

"I don't know. She's no contact right now."

He recounts the Leonid attack and a primal rage pumps in my veins. Katarina is in the wind, following some intuition from her fae blood. It was a wise choice.

If I had stayed here... it would have never happened, but I also wouldn't feel as whole as I do now. I'm not fixed by any measure, but the discordant urges are gone. I've built a bridge between my competing selves and only time will tell what it can weather.

"Are there any casualties? Were you, Maggie, or Jensen hurt?" I ask.

Ben blinks in surprise at the question before answering.

"Jensen got hit in the head pretty bad and Maggie has been nursing him back to health." Ben's lips twitch. "I think he's a hundred percent, but milking the situation. Maggie says he'll be fine by tomorrow either way."

"How do we find Katarina?" I ask. I need her to return. I need to apologize. Now that the pieces of myself are pulling together, the memory of her flinching from my callous words and cowering before my dragon fire sinks its claws in.

I lashed out at my mate and need to make amends. I need to protect her from those who would use her against me.

Ben winces. "The attack isn't the only thing."



I CLASP my fingers and gaze at Katarina's best friend. Stella bites her lip but meets my eyes, looking for all the world like she's a child in a principal's office.

"I'm not sorry," she says.

"I wouldn't think you would be." I glance at the fertility statue that she single handedly snatched back from her blood family. "This actually works very well for us, but Katarina will be displeased to hear that you put yourself at risk."

Stella's gaze grows steely. "I've always been powerless. Nothing I could ever do would put a dent in them. Not a single

thing. I ignored the desire to hurt them all my life, but you gave me a way I could. It might be a small way, but it was something only I could do.”

My lips twitch. She means it literally. Only someone with her blood could walk into the compound and get it back.

“So, I’m not sorry,” she ends.

I nod. “Very well. We will have you stay here in the meantime in case they discover how they lost the statue. Your mother is welcome here as well.”

We may still have use for Stella’s fury before all this is said and done, but that plan isn’t my first resort. It would upset Katarina, and I’ll avoid that if we can.

Stella winces. “I sent my mom on vacation somewhere remote. We have some time before I need to worry about her.”

And before she needs to confess what she’s done. If she decides to confess. My reports listed their relationship as close, but no worthy parent would want their child to take on revenge on their behalf.

“Have you heard from Kat yet?” Stella asks.

“Not yet.” And that fact grows more unbearable by the minute.

Where are you, my queen?

KATARINA

I CLOSE my eyes and try to take comfort in the hot water, but peace eludes me. Somewhere across town, Maggie and Ben are dealing with the absence of Kalos, Nemo is probably surfing free after a big payday, and who knows what Stella is doing, but I bet it's something more productive than secretly soaking in the waters of a densely warded bathhouse.

It's hard not to feel like this is indulgent, but this is the best place for me to be. Technically, it's still too close to danger, but Rose is loyal to Kalos, and I can get in touch with Gage through her if need be... in the event that Kalos doesn't return.

Because I need to plan for that possibility.

My body *aches*. The water is hot, but I still shiver every few minutes. The pregnancy is taking a harder toll now that I'm on my own, and the injustice of that causes the angry frustration burning in my chest to spark.

Food any colder than piping hot has started to turn my stomach again, and my anger helps mask the fear that everything is only going to get worse. If my body temperature drops much more, I'll need to send a message to Gage. He'll be able to provide for me what Kalos can't.

But that feels like a betrayal.

"Knock, knock. Is it okay for me to come in?" Rose calls out.

"Of course," I answer, swallowing down my thoughts, but they only rest at the top of my stomach instead of vanishing,

waiting for my next weak moment to try and rise up again. I'm wearing a sports bra and panty set that Rose had provided for my comfort since I don't want to be flashing my goods while trying to keep from freezing to death.

"How are you doing?" Rose asks. She carries a bag of takeout and my mouth waters.

I inhale a shaky breath before pasting on a smile. "Good."

Her lips twitch. "As good as can be expected, I'm sure."

I shrug. When I arrived asking for sanctuary, I'd said that Kalos's absence had emboldened his enemies. I didn't say anything about the fight we had or that I'm half expecting him not to return, but the matchmaker seems to read between the lines of my words with eerie accuracy.

"Is there any news?" I ask.

"Word on the street says that the attack was the Leonids attempting to make moves. There was some damage, but the wards held for the most part. They stopped their attempt shortly before you showed up here actually," Rose muses.

I nod. They were after leverage. They stopped because Nemo told them about a target too tempting to ignore.

A defenseless woman pregnant with Kalos's child.

I left everything behind to get somewhere safe quickly, and it didn't make a difference because I stumbled on the one person I'd trusted the longest...who didn't even give me a five-minute head start.

I bite my lip and look away. I even left my damn cat. I'm the worst cat mom. I was in a panic and needed to go. The only thing keeping me calm is knowing that Maggie and Ben will take care of Griffin in my absence.

And if I hadn't left, it's likely that the Leonids would have eventually made it all the way through the wards instead of just the glass dome. *Stupid Fate.*

"Thank you again for helping me," I say.

Rose shakes her head.

“Don’t mention it. We pregnant women need to look out for one another.” She winks. “Anyway, Kalos will be more than happy to pay the bill I send to him.”

My smile goes from fake to weak but honest. “I’m sure he’ll love that.”

Maybe I should feel guilty for racking up bills in his name, but it’s the least he deserves.

“I have your Thai order with triple the heat. Just the thing to burn your mouth off and help grow a dragon. I’m glad my baby only demands sushi nonstop,” Rose murmurs. “I shouldn’t be surprised. My mate is a kraken. Fish makes sense. It doesn’t matter that I could hardly stomach seafood before getting pregnant.”

I snort out a laugh. “I couldn’t handle spicy food at all.”

We share a comfortable smile before she tilts her head. “Can I sit?”

“Of course, it’s your place after all,” I say.

Rose kicks off her shoes and slips her feet into the water with a relieved sigh. “Nonsense. This is your space as long as you stay here. And the price Kalos is paying for the rent of this room is outrageous.”

I shrug. “He has the money, and the baby’s safety is important to him.”

Rose only nods.

“How soon until you’re due?” I ask, wanting to change the subject.

“We aren’t sure. This baby is a miraculous one. A baby kraken has never been recorded.” She looks down at her stomach, her smile warm. “No one knows how much longer it will be. We’re going on eleven months now, and I don’t mind admitting that I’m looking forward to when I don’t crave sardines.”

“Eleven months!” I exclaim. “That’s longer than a human!”

Rose nods. “Gideon, my mate, has otherworldly patience and even he is starting to reach the end of it. Hopefully we get to meet this bundle of joy soon.”

I mentally count. “I’ve only been pregnant for about three months.”

Rose’s eyes widen. “Well, your child is in a much bigger rush than mine.”

“Yeah, I guess she’s ready to get the party started.”

We quiet on that thought. It’s not an uncomfortable silence, but a moment of connection. Rose isn’t Stella, but there’s something about her that helps ease the tension in my soul. Not all the tension though.

The smile slips from my face.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Rose asks after a few long beats of oneness.

“Are you sensitive to stuff like this?” I wave my hand, and Rose’s lips twitch.

“Do you mean the misery coming off you in waves? I think a troll could pick up the emotions you’re putting down and they can be rather slow about that type of thing.”

Misery. That’s one of the myriad of feelings swimming around me. It doesn’t matter how much frustration I try and level on top of it, the anguish bleeds through.

Being in the bathhouse doesn’t help things one bit. I’ve attempted to lock away the memories we made when he brought me here, but things escape through the cracks. The sensations of my body run in line to my emotions. *I ache.*

I want Kalos to rub the tightness in my muscles away and chuckle at our daughter’s appetite for heat. I want him to kiss my neck and craft an image of our possible future with only a few words.

But I don’t get to have that anymore. He left.

I don’t know what went through his head in the cavern—why exactly he decided that he was done with us—but it didn’t

leave much room for hope. Maggie may have been certain that Kalos will return... but that doesn't mean that our relationship will continue once he does.

I miss him.

I stare up at the beautiful ceiling.

"I don't think talking about it would help," I say.

Rose only nods. It's the understanding in the motion that does it. The illusion that this matchmaker can solve any issue if only I speak.

Words that I haven't let myself reflect on bubble out of me like the witch beside me can draw water from a dry well.

"I need him more than he needs me," I say and blink away the quick moisture in my eyes. "And I'm not okay with that."

Rose hums, but now that I'm voicing my worries, they don't stop.

"He can just leave. And I'm..." I look down at my stomach, trying to not let the negative thoughts catch hold. From the very beginning, I've chosen to think of our daughter as a miracle rather than a mistake. I don't want to ever say the word *stuck* about my situation either. Words have meaning.

But nothing changes the fact that my body—my life—has radically changed. I have a child to think about. I won't ever abandon her, leaving because I'm in an emotional snit isn't an option for me. I could give birth next week or next month.

I'm not alone—as her kicks into my lungs remind me—but I'm so much more vulnerable than Kalos will ever be. It's not fair.

Rose reaches over and places her hand on my shoulder, her comfort and kindness acts as a centering balm in my sewer of dark thoughts.

"But *you*"—she emphasizes the word with a stern look—"hold all the cards. You have everything he wants. There is no leaving you without leaving a part of himself."

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t keep his daughter from him
—”

“You misunderstand,” Rose interjects softly. “You have his heart.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” I thought it was true before he left. That he was showing me how he felt about me through his actions. He asked me to stay.

She shrugs, her confidence unwavering. “A matchmaker knows these things.”

Do I have his heart? I lift my hand from the water to place on top of hers. “I think that even if I hold all the cards, it’s not going to make a difference if he’s avoiding pain. He’d be willing to make that sacrifice.”

He’s done it before, hasn’t he? Rose doesn’t deny my words, but they don’t negate hers either.

That stupid candle of hope sputters to life, but I’m half tempted to blow it out myself. It would save me more heartache.

But it would also cost me the life I want. I’d be doing the same thing I’m accusing him of.

“He may be willing to sacrifice his heart and happiness. Many beings will do that and more to avoid pain, but only time will tell if Kalos is one,” Rose says.

The sure tone of her voice causes my eyes to narrow. Kalos only started to believe that we could be mates after coming here. “You seem to know a lot about him.”

Rose smiles but stays silent. It only confirms my suspicion that she’s the soul witch Kalos has been working with.

“Fine, keep your secrets.” I roll my eyes.

And maybe I’ll leave a little room in my heart for hope.

“I’ll be fine without him,” I say, because the anxiety of his absence, of having to deal with this pregnancy alone, demands a solution. My heart may hurt, but I’m not trapped.

“Of course you will.” Rose raises a brow. “You’re resourceful, smart, and there are others who will help you with no questions asked.”

Others like her and Gage. Stella. Ben. Maggie.

A vibrating sound disrupts the moment and Rose sighs, aggrieved. “I should have left my phone at the front desk, but Gideon only lets me out of his sight if I have it on me.”

I swallow my envy at her mate’s protectiveness but smile.

“Go ahead. I won’t be offended if you answer,” I say.

Rose reads the screen, perking up. “It’s just a text. There’s a rumor that Kalos has returned.”

I push away from the wall and sit higher in the water. “He has?”

Rose nods, a considering expression passing over her face. “Would you like us to inform him of your whereabouts?”

This is the test, isn’t it? If I tell him where I am and he doesn’t come after me, doesn’t try and make up after our fight, then it’s all over for sure.

I’ll demand more from him of course. I’m worth more of his consideration. He has a dragonling to care for, and I do need him to channel heat energy for the rest of the pregnancy, but co-parenting and forced proximity doesn’t make a mating.

Do I give him the ability to hurt me again?

KALOS

“KALOS.” Ben looks up from his phone. He sits on the other side of the couch from Stella as we work to track down Katarina. So far it’s been casually calling allies, not asking about my mate, but leaving the line open for them to confess any details.

This quiet searching is something that I’d have done with no issue prior to reuniting with my dragon but now chafes. The plan to keep the people who know who Katarina is to me few is a logical one. Logical and slow.

And it feels wrong to my newly awakened instincts.

I want my mate and young in the arms of my embrace. I want to ensure their safety. I wish to trumpet to the rooftops what she means to me.

And to apologize for losing control.

“Yes? Have you found Katarina?” I ask.

Ben stiffens. “No, Lorenzo Leonid is calling. Do you want me to answer it?”

I taste dragon fire but gesture for him to pass me the phone.

“What could he possibly have to say?” Stella asks. She refused to leave us to our calls, reaching out to her own contacts in search of her friend.

Ben’s lips thin. “Nothing good.”

I silently agree with him. The Leonids have been a thorn in my side since this all began. I will have their blood on my talons one way or another. Their fate was sealed when they attacked the manor. They can only dig themselves deeper now.

I accept the call and place it on speakerphone. “What do you want, Lorenzo?”

His smug laugh is staticky and Ben and I share an annoyed look. He’s put a spell in place to scramble any attempt to record his words.

“Is that any way to greet another territory leader?” he asks.

“It is when that territory leader mounted an attack on my home.” I keep the words calm even as I burn on the inside.

“You would be hard-pressed to prove that we did any such thing. You weren’t there, and will the Council really listen to anything your employees say?”

I grit my teeth and don’t respond.

“I thought not,” he answers for me. “We never wanted to be enemies. You should have given us what we asked for and all this unpleasantness could have been avoided.”

“Does this call have a point?” I ask.

He doesn’t quite hide his snarl before his voice is smug again. “You seem to have misplaced something you’re attached to. A man’s legacy is worth any weight in gold, don’t you agree? It’s the future itself.”

Stella curses softly even as ice spreads through my spine.

“Speak plainly, you know we can’t record this call,” I bite out, wanting there to be no mistaking their meaning.

“We have your mate.” His words are sharp like he’s annoyed that I’m not allowing him to toy with me. “If you want her back, meet us at the northern fae gate with the appropriate magics to transfer ownership of it by seven p.m.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say, trying to get more information even as I want to roar and tear him to pieces.

Lorenzo hums. “Just ask her employer.”

His voice fades as another starts babbling in its place. “They have Katarina! She came to me, and I gave her up.” The phone is pulled away as the speaker, who must be Nemo with how Stella rears in shock, howls in pain.

“Let’s make this business as clean as possible, Kalos. Be there at seven or your mate will be the one who pays for your obstinance.” Lorenzo hangs up.

“I hate him so much,” Stella says, shaking in anger.

Smoke rises from my nostrils, and my scales rustle in rage. I’m on my feet, slamming my fists against the desk.

“They have her,” I whisper the words into silence. The air of tension is deadly. My body aches to transform and retrieve her. I crave to destroy everything in my wake.

They dare threaten my mate?

The room is still, neither Stella nor Ben willing to pierce the primal instincts of my mind. The only creature that has no compunction with interrupting my spiral of fear and overwhelming rage is the damn cat.

Griffin jumps on the table and rubs against where my arms shake with the need to shift. I blow out an aggravated, smoky breath at the animal, but he only meows at me. It’s a morose sound, and something about that, combined with the fact that Katarina loves this cat immensely shakes me free from my instinctual response.

Now isn’t the time to burn down our home in rage. I will not hurt those we care about, not even the *cat*.

A distant part of me acknowledges that curtailing my emotional reaction is much easier than it would have been before I reunited with my beast. This is a sign that I am healing. That the dragon fire incident will not be repeated.

The moment gives me the time I need to collect myself and clarity.

Katarina is incredibly clever and skilled. If the Leonids have her, she’s slipped in and out of more dangerous situations than she’s in now.

If they have her.

“Why didn’t they put her on the phone as proof?” I ask.

Ben shakes his head. “Perhaps she refused to speak?”

Stella glares. “They would have just tortured her like they were doing to Nemo. Kalos is right, it’s weird that we didn’t hear from her. Is this enough to involve the Council?”

“We have no proof of their claims,” I say. The Council won’t care. Moon confirmed that. The Leonids are allowed to bite at my territory and resources, even claim to have my mate, but if I were to crush them in response... then they’d care. That reminder cools my reactions further.

I pet Griffin as I think, the calm he gives helping. We must proceed as if the Leonids have her until we know better.

“I will give up the fae gate for her, but what are the other options?” I ask my second-in-command and Stella.

A noise has us turning.

“Does no one answer the door anymore?” Mace asks, strolling into my office.

“You didn’t ring the doorbell,” Ben mutters.

Mace shrugs. “Thought I smelled smoke. I figured that you may need to hear the message I have for you. Though I don’t know if I should tell you. It’s not like we’re friends or anything.”

The demon arches a brow to cover a pout.

“You’re friend enough to be allowed past our wards. This isn’t a good time to play poke-the-dragon,” Ben grits.

Mace cuts the teasing. “Ah, it’s like that is it? The mate you’ve been keeping secret—from even me!—has claimed sanctuary at the bathhouse. I’m your incorruptible line of communication.”

He can’t help the fancy bow he executes.

I blink in surprise. “What?”

The news is so incongruous to the Leonid threat that everyone in the room reels. Everyone, save for the enigmatic demon.

“They’re straight up bluffing?” Stella’s eyes are wide. “That’s so stupid though.”

“Or desperate,” Ben murmurs. “Why are they so desperate?”

Mace turns as if to answer his question, but I cut in.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

His nod is sharp. “Of course. I just spoke with her.”

“How is she?” I ask. Not knowing if I’m questioning him to satisfy the fury I’ve banked to deal with the Leonids or because I doubt his claim.

Mace hesitates before answering, his brows creasing. “Not very relaxed, honestly.”

Relief makes it way past my doubt. She’s really there and not captured. The bathhouse is a smart choice. The strength of the wards and allies will keep her safe.

I want to go there and see her for myself, but this issue with the Leonids must be dealt with, and we have less than an hour to do so.

Mace must see my internal struggle. “Gideon will allow no danger to befall the place. If not for your mate’s sake, for his own.”

“Thank you.” My shoulders drop. With the kraken there, Katarina is truly safe.

“Now that we know that they don’t have her, what do we do?” Stella voices the question on all our minds.

“We could have her return.” Ben shrugs. “Call the bluff. It would embarrass the Leonids, and whatever is making them so desperate will eventually come to bite them in the ass.”

Ben is excellent at providing solutions, but that won’t work. Not this time.

“Lorenzo threatened my mate.” The knowledge may not be public yet, but the shifter knew what he was doing and did it anyway. He has the confidence that whatever strength and influence he has is enough to strongarm *me*.

This threat won’t disappear on its own. If it’s not this day, it will be another, or some other enemy.

I’ve approached this wrong, hiding my mate and young from the community. Hiding the fiercest parts of myself to blend into a modern world.

I am a dragon. It’s time that people remember that.

It’s time that I remember that.

There will be nothing left but ashes.

But we must figure out a way to make it lawful first.

“This calls for plan B,” I say to Ben.

A stricken expression passes over Ben’s face as he follows my line of thought. He looks to Stella.

“What’s plan B?” she asks.

She’s plan B.

There are rules that need to be followed, but I refuse to cower.

“Mace, if the bathhouse is offering Katarina protection, we accept,” I say. “We will collect her when it’s safe.”

“Planning all the fun things without me?” he asks.

I arch a brow and both of Mace’s rise. “Plausible deniability is good too.” His expression becomes serious. “I wish you luck and victory.”

“Luck isn’t necessary when you’re what I am,” I murmur.

“All the same,” Mace says with a shrug before he disappears. He’s probably standing in front of Katarina now. Regret flickers to life in my chest. I should have sent a message back to her, but now isn’t the time to worry about the ache in my heart. It’s time to plot a revenge that will keep the world away from my family.

“Ben, can you give us a moment?” I say.

“Of course.” His voice scratches and he clears his throat, not casting any glances at the red-headed witch who narrows her eyes at me as he leaves.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“If you could facilitate the destruction of the Leonids, would you?” I ask. It doesn’t take long for my words to sink in, and when they do, the gleam of hunger in her eyes is almost regrettable. Katarina will be angry at me for this later, but Stella is her own person.

“The Council won’t allow you to wipe out a fellow territory leader,” she says, thinking aloud. “And I can’t take over in my father’s place to preserve whatever balance they have a hard on for.”

She is correct. It would cause turmoil and panic to have someone so inexperienced be a territory leader. Though she is not powerless.

“But you can enable another to. You are the blood daughter of Lorenzo Leonid.”

Stella leans back, connecting the dots quicker than I expected. “The Devil...”

The plan isn’t a convoluted one, but she’s very up-to-date on territory disputes if she already knows that title and where this conversation is going. The thought of Katarina’s fury has me hesitating.

“This is not something required of you.” I sigh. “You and your mother are under my protection—”

“But this way you’d be able to unseat my sperm donor and his inner circle without the Council taking issue,” Stella finishes for me.

Because a takeover by mating follows our laws. It doesn’t matter that Stella isn’t recognized as a Leonid. Territory claims are about blood and those mated to that blood.

“And doing this would eliminate the threat to Kat,” she says.

“This threat. There will be others, but I plan on setting an example.” I level my gaze on her. “Do you understand?”

“You’re going to kill him,” she says and takes a moment to consider it before continuing, “It’s not the revenge I had in mind, but his death will be because he threatened your mate and child. I’m merely capable of making it so that the Council doesn’t try and make an example out of my best friend’s mate.”

I nod. “And it would take away any threat they are to you and your mother. You are under my protection, but they’ve already ransacked your place of business for taking the statue.”

Stella frowns, unsurprised but grim. “He’s violating all the rules.”

Lorenzo is acting desperate, and that makes him dangerous.

“Is this the only way?” she asks the question but knows the answer. This is the cleanest way. The way that leaves everyone she cares about as safe as they can be. If I retaliate in a way that puts me in the Council’s sights, Katarina will be vulnerable.

But Stella’s life will be forever changed.

“Given more time, we may be able to figure out some other plan,” I allow. We’ve been in the process of prodding Lorenzo’s younger son to stage a coup, but he’s unwilling, and the logistics would take too long to come to fruition.

Stella nods, but her answer is in her eyes. This witch is done being a cast-off pawn. She wants blood. Maybe it’s the shifter in her that demands the revenge, or maybe this will feed whatever wound she carries in her soul.

“And... *he* is amenable to the arrangement?” she asks.

“Yes, Ben sent out feelers when this conflict began.”

Stella doesn’t react with anger that we’d be so presumptuous. This is a solution we didn’t want to need. She leans back in her chair.

“He’s not known for his kindness. Hence the name, The Devil. You think he’ll be a better neighbor to you than Lorenzo?” she asks.

“He is honorable and an ally.” I pause for a moment. “I don’t know how he’ll be as a mate though.”

Stella shrugs. “That’s something I’ll find out I guess.”



I GET out of the car before Jensen can open my door for me. The shifter narrows his eyes, but we aren’t performing for an audience. There’s no need to wait for my driver to open my door in this remote area.

Luck is on our side with the northern fae gate being in this dense wood, far from the wandering eyes of humans. There’s a ward around the area, and I, like most magical beings, have an innate ability to keep from drawing attention, but there are limits to that.

We came early.

The guards I keep at the gate are at the ready. The gate itself is inert. Merely an empty stone archway, the air around it crackling with static magic. Only I can activate the gate, it being attuned to me since I claimed ownership of it a few hundred years ago, but it would be foolish not to have sentries posted.

But the guards aren’t alone.

“What are you doing here?” Ben asks.

“I’m always present for crimes that I’m supporting.” The dry amusement is clear in the gargoyle’s words. “And examples need an audience. More than just Kalos’s people as witness.”

He has a point.

“Thank you, Stoneheart,” I greet him. He’s larger than Ben in stature, his wings clasp like a cape but leave his body bare

except for a dark-colored kilt. Tattoos spiral over his gray skin, an oddity for his kind.

Stoneheart isn't a clan name. As far as Ben's research could tell, he's never been in a clan. A lone gargoyle is unusual, but after a few years cultivating his people and a few territory gains moderate enough to keep the Council happy, he's a power in his own right. His coldly ambitious actions earned him the name The Devil by those who wish to gossip about him.

He doesn't need more territory, but what he'd get from his mating to Stella would have been hard to say no to.

"And my bride is here, so I should be also." He offers his hand to Stella to help her out of the car.

I didn't want to bring the witch, but she couldn't be persuaded to stay back at the house. It's one thing to orchestrate the downfall of your enemies, but witnessing it is another. Her skin is pale, and she's stiff around her intended mate, but there's no panic in her eyes. She knows what she's agreed to.

Stoneheart narrows his eyes at my second-in-command, and Ben wipes the glare from his face. I tighten my jaw in foreboding. I had not anticipated Ben's reaction to this plan.

The magic from the nearby fae gate buzzes over my skin. Ancient and wild in a way that modern magic isn't. It's not an uncomfortable thing, but not for the first time, I consider how much trouble we'd save if this gate didn't exist.

"Be sure to be out of the blast range. This may prove to be quite messy," I instruct my people. Stoneheart looks amused but keeps casting glances to where Ben stiffly stands beside Stella. Ready to evacuate her and Jensen at a moment's notice.

I direct the guards to leave the fae gate and take their place beside the other witnesses. No need to put them at risk.

The rumble of vehicles coming down the dirt road has us turning.

Three SUVs pull up on the other side of the clearing. Men pour out of each of the vehicles, shifters and a few magic users

that must be mercenaries.

It's a paltry show of force.

I almost pity Lorenzo, but he cast himself as my enemy. I will not spare him just because he is overconfident.

Lorenzo's upper circle is all here, his brother and son flanking him in their business suits. They project an air of triumph. One that I'll enjoy devouring.

The image of power is disrupted by a petulant tone.

"What the fuck is she doing here?" Leo asks, glaring at Stella. Stoneheart takes a step toward her, returning the look her brother is leveling on her. Lorenzo makes a sound of dismissal, and Leo ducks his head.

"Doesn't matter, she's no one," Lorenzo says to us as much as to his son.

Stella's lips thin, but satisfaction lights in her eyes. She nods at me. She doesn't regret facing the man who destroyed her mother. Not when she knows how this will end.

"Where is my mate?" I ask, playing the situation out.

"She's back at our compound," Lorenzo says. I'm impressed by how good of a liar he is. "We'll return her after you pay up on your end of the deal."

"That wasn't what we agreed on," I say.

He shrugs like he hasn't a care in the world. This man must love to gamble.

"It's what works for us. If anything happens to us, she'll pay the price." He keeps his tone amiable as if he hadn't just threatened to harm my mate. These shifters have truly gotten more confident than is safe for this world.

"But we do have a gift of... goodwill to smooth over her absence." A flare of cruelty has Lorenzo's lip curling. He makes a gesture, and one of his lackeys retrieves a plastic bag from a vehicle, pulling out a dark, wet shape and throwing it into the space between us.

Stella gasps in recognition and averts her eyes as the head of an imp rolls to a stop some yards away from us, the trail of blood splotchy and already drying.

I spare a moment of dismay at the death of a person Katarina considered her mentor even as a colder portion of me is relieved that his presence is no longer a threat to her.

“Why kill him?” I ask. They would never destroy an asset just for “goodwill.”

Lorenzo shrugs, abandoning the farce. “We have no need for an in-debt, troublesome imp with no sense of loyalty. Here is your revenge against the one who betrayed your mate.”

I struggle not to scoff at his words. As if presenting me the head of one creature is going to stop me from taking my due from Lorenzo.

“He must have been too nosy,” Ben mutters. “They must be hiding something.”

That tracks, but it won’t save them.

“You are very confident that I’m going to just hand over the ownership of the fae gate to you,” I say.

Lorenzo laughs, but it sounds shrill. “We have powerful allies that want this gate. Even if you kill us and ensure the death of your mate, they will keep coming for it.”

There’s truth in that accusation. The gate will always be a target for those who want it, while being too dangerous to entrust to anyone else.

The air takes on my deadly intention, and the shifters in the clearing start to cast glances at each other, sweating.

“You may have allies who have pushed you to this point, but did you really think I wouldn’t find out that you don’t have my mate?” I ask.

There’s a flash of alarm in Lorenzo’s eyes.

“Get the dragon,” Lorenzo calls out to his men. “We need him for the gate magic. Kill everyone else.”

I laugh, the shackles of my cool demeanor falling. I wouldn't have minded dealing with the trouble of striking first, but that Lorenzo has taken that burden is a gift.

I grip the wild, vengeful part of my soul, and the transformation rips through my body. The pain that has become commonplace since I'd first separated from my beast is no more than a pleasant warmth as I accept what I have become. What I've always been.

The world shrinks before me as my height grows. Shiny scales buffer against bullets and fire spells from the scurrying bugs that are Lorenzo's people.

I whip my tail around, careful of the people I brought behind me, and flatten Lorenzo's men. They go flying, smacking against the SUVs and each other. A few have shifted into lions either on purpose or out of fear, and once their animals see that they are outclassed, flee into the woods. The magic users fare much worse with some spells going haywire in the confusion and impacting teammates with magic fire.

Fools. Attempting to use fire against a dragon.

My throat heats in satisfaction as the spikes on my tail sink into an enemy or two. The sound of their screams causing a sick sense of joy, but I pull my instincts in enough to keep present.

These men are only fodder for the real perpetrator. The risk to Katarina.

I pick out Lorenzo easily, plucking him from where he's attempting to climb into an SUV to flee the hell he's called down on his own people, pushing his son out of his way to escape. His screams and begging when my talons grasp him are a sweet song to my ears.

Mercy is a weak and modern concept in this moment when Lorenzo's sobs are the whistling woodwinds and the crunch of bones under my teeth the percussive conclusion to this saga of frustration. By the end of Lorenzo Leonid's existence, my bloodlust is barely quenched.

Once their leader falls, the ants scatter. One SUV manages to reverse away, driving erratically. I release my fire on the rest of our enemies to keep any more from escaping my wrath. Death by dragon fire is more humane than what I wish for any who stand against me, but it is the quickest.

I do not wish to eat them all.

The taste of blood and fire leads to a silence. There are only the dead and those that I still protect with my body... and the hum of fae magic.

I rear up and face the fae gate. The reason my family is at risk. This structure is a thankless thing. Something that will only cost us in the future.

For Katarina, for our daughter, this must be dealt with.

I move toward the gate, each heavy step causing the earth to shake, as if the magic of the gate knows I'm coming. No one has been known to be able to destroy one, but that will not stop me.

“Kalos! Stop!” Ben's shout is distant. “It could kill you!”

He's right that there's a risk, but I will not allow our lives to be influenced like this again. Let anyone who dares come for what is mine know the extent of my power.

The stone arch crumbles between my teeth, and the magic burns my mouth. The structure resists, shuddering and sending out a shock wave that flattens everyone who still stands and rattles my bones. I refuse to stop now.

All that I am rises to the occasion. My connection to the earth and the fires brewing there, the power of my rage, and the need to protect my family.

I sense the moment the gate breaks. The arch gives way under my grasp and disintegrates into nothing.

The last death keen of the ancient thing rings out with such force that the pain causes me to reel back. People are calling to me, but I cannot hear them with the magic that formed the gate sizzling over my nerves in fury.

Then there is nothing but seething darkness.

KATARINA

I CHEW ON MY LIP. It's the only thing I can feel through the numbness that spreads, invading my chest.

He didn't come.

I tried to be hopeful. I tried to believe that I mean something to Kalos.

I'd even dressed in anticipation of him or Ben coming for me. Instead, a demon named Mace assured me that they would come as soon as whatever business they are dealing with is through.

I put myself in front of a train. I shouldn't be surprised that it hit me.

Disappointment is such an insignificant word.

Kalos wants me to stay at the bathhouse. Out of sight and out of mind. *And out of danger*, the hopeful part of me argues. It doesn't stop me from feeling abandoned.

How many times does he have to leave for me to learn my lesson?

I rein in my emotions and breathe. Nothing is settled until I speak with that dragon, and I must be as calm as I can manage to do that. I can't let myself be riled up while he keeps me waiting.

I'm not going to let him leave me in a box until he's ready to play with me again.

The door bursts open, and I'm already standing, ready to use my words to *calmly* rip into a dragon but deflate at the sight of a gasping Ben. My nose wrinkles at the smell of smoke clinging to him.

"Katarina! Kalos needs you!"

"What?" I ask, but Ben already has a hold of my hand and pulls me down the hallway. I almost trip as I try to keep up. As soon as we enter the lobby, the world spins as he teleports us away. Suddenly we're surrounded by trees and burning piles on the ground.

"What the fuck?" I stumble. I don't take much more in other than the massive black dragon roaring fire down on a burned-out SUV.

"He's lost it," Ben says. "He was only supposed to take out the Leonids."

"Take out the Leonids?" I ask. I thought that wasn't an option.

Ben's brow creases in frustration as he tries to explain. "For daring to threaten you. They claimed they had you hostage."

"It seems like he was successful." My voice is pitched high as I realize the smoldering shapes surrounding us are bodies burning to husks.

"It was quite the spectacle," a being I've never met says. I squint at him, putting together his features and determining what he must be.

The gargoyle is unlike any of his kind that I've seen before. He wears a black kilt and his skin has a gray cast, but the resemblance ends there. The dusky purple undertones of his skin contrasts with dark tattoos and the many piercings lining his ears. The hoop through his lower lip flashes when he smirks at me.

He looks like a pirate.

A pirate standing next to a very pale Stella. I have so many questions.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Stella.

“Witnessing the downfall of her enemies,” the gargoyle says. “But now that it’s morphed into the downfall of anyone to get in the way of a dragon, I’ll take my bride and leave.”

“Bride!?” I yelp.

Stella’s eyes go wide, but she doesn’t scream when the pirate gargoyle sweeps her up in his arms and takes off.

I turn back to the scene of wreckage. The dragon has started gnawing on the metal frame of a burning vehicle. Ben’s mouth is tight as the gargoyle absconds with my friend, but he focuses on me.

“After dealing with the Leonids, Kalos destroyed the fae gate.” Ben’s face is full of fear. “The blowback must have sent him deep into himself because I can’t get his attention. He’s acting like a mindless beast. And with the magic hanging in the air, no one can get close to him.”

I frown. “Not that anyone would with him being like this.”

Ben looks like he’s going to cry. “We have to bring him back somehow. If he keeps going on like this, the Council will take notice, and if they come when he can’t control himself...”

“They’ll determine he’s too much of a risk to stay alive,” I say softly. They’ll execute him. This is bad.

“You’re his mate. If anyone can calm him, it will be you,” Ben pants.

I think through the situation quickly. “But I’m not really his mate, Ben. The bond isn’t complete.”

Not refusing, only pointing out that facet of the issue.

“Kat, this is risky. I’d do it if I could, but I can’t get close at all.” The exhaustion is clear in the slope of Ben’s shoulders and the lines of his face. “With your ability to walk through magic, along with the fact that the dragon considers you his mate even if the bond is unfinished, it has to be you.”

He’s right.

I glare at the dragon to ignore my worry that I won't be able to bring Kalos back with our frayed bond. Anger is easier, it sits ready for me to grab hold of it. This is why he didn't come for me? So he could deal with the Leonids without me?

Kalos has damaged himself trying to destroy something that was supposed to be indestructible to keep me safe, and he couldn't send a fucking note to me beforehand?

He'll be taken away from me for good if the Council gets wind of his current state. Idiotic giant lizard.

I stomp forward. The fae magic I stride through brushing against my skin even more gentle than passing a ward.

"Hey, asshole!" I call out, and the black dragon's head snaps toward me.

"That was not what I meant by calming him," Ben hisses.

"Well, it's what he gets," I snarl back before turning toward the scaly beast. "You have to stop this before the Council shows up!"

The beast tilts his head at me in confusion before going back to crunching on the cars as if just one more tire is what he needs to make his life complete. I pick up a nondescript piece of metal and chuck it at him. It falls short.

"Stop!" I shout, picking up another item that looks suspiciously like a melted gun and throw it. Anger makes my aim worse, but I hit another burned out vehicle and the sound gets his attention.

Goddammit, I'm already winded. Pregnancy: 1. Katarina: 0.

"Oh, now you listen?" I ask, but something about the shiny emblem on one of the cars distracts him.

"You know what? Fuck you!" I shout so loud it hurts. "You left me!"

Something about my tone must finally ensnare the beast because he drops the vehicle. His golden eyes flicker in recognition.

I spread my arms. “You apparently did all this to keep me safe, but you left!”

He didn't do this for you. He did it for his status. If you give him the opportunity, he'll hurt you again. The doubts ring so loud, but I suffocate them with my determination.

Because the dragon is *listening* to me.

“I need my mate to come back. *We* need you to come back.” My words are strong, anger as clear as ever, but I place my hands on my stomach, trying to dig into his brain to remind him of our daughter.

The dragon snorts and creeps toward me.

Surprise at succeeding in getting his attention is replaced by alarm. Now I have a mindless dragon approaching me.

I keep still as his serpentine neck brings his massive head near me. His movements are slow and curious. He reminds me of a giant dog.

My lip trembles when the tip of his snout brushes against my stomach. Relief spreads through me at the contact.

“Please come back,” I whisper. I place my hand below his flaring nostril. His skin feels like marble under the sun—sharp and hot, but not enough to burn.

The great beast rears back and sneezes as if I'm no more than a dandelion seed.

I hiccup, and my vision blurs as tears fill my eyes. The energy, the anger, and the frustration leave me all at once and I start to shiver.

The fear I've tried to ignore stabs me and leaves panic in its wake.

I don't know how to fix this, but if I don't fix this, Kalos is going to die. The tears in my eyes start to fall. The magic around us is suffocating in its thickness, curling around me like hungry vines.

“Kalos, please come back.” My throat is thick, and I try to swallow. The magic starts to sting my eyes even with my

torrent of tears. “I need you.”

The dragon huffs in some sort of frustration. His snout comes back to me again, nudging me away. I stumble but remain upright, my arms cutting through the air. I freeze at the sensation of thick power encroaching on us like a living animal circling prey.

What the hell is happening?

The dark truth of the situation surfaces quickly. I’d easily passed through the magic hanging in the air before because it *let* me.

Kalos explained once that fae magic has a mind of its own, dying on this plane without conduits or spells to hold it together. Dragons are pure magic. It’s trying to hold off its fading by *eating* Kalos.

I swipe my hands over the dragon’s heated scales, trying to wave away the invisible vines ensnaring him. Every inch I reach is thick with humming energy. It takes effort I’ve never had to expend before to clear the magic away.

Focus stifles my fear.

“You have to get away,” I say, hoping he’s present enough to understand my words. “The gate magic is trying to devour you somehow. It must be keeping you in this state.”

Poisoning his mind to keep him if not docile then distracted. He makes a whining sound but doesn’t move. As if he *can’t* move.

His large gold eyes flicker as sweat breaks out all over my body. Each of my movements over what I can reach of his head is slower than the last.

“Kalos!” I cry out, my limbs getting heavier. “Go! Fly!”

He rumbles under my hands, my blinking slow, eyelids heavy. I move to pull away more of the insidious wisps of magic around him, but freeze. My feet ignore my mental commands to move.

I’m too tired.

The dragon tries to nudge me away again, but the magic I've cleared away from him has wrapped around my middle.

Around our daughter.

I can't move, can't flee through the sear of energy around me. My ability to slide through magic, to clear it away like I'd been doing for Kalos, is drained. I've reached the end of the skill I've taken for granted and am unable to protect the baby dragon I carry from the voracious, ancient thing trying to devour her.

I'm helpless as it sinks its teeth in.

I scream.

The world closes in, wrapping my body and squeezing. I gasp in surprise that it's a giant clawed hand rather than the crush of magic. There's a clap of air as giant wings beat, and we're rocketing upward. The fae magic wrapping around us stretches, pulling painfully, trying to keep us near the ruins of its home before finally shattering.

The ricochet of sensation has my body tensing as if to retch. Pain zings over my nerves even as air whistles around us. The strength of the wind fills my eyes with tears when I try to open them so I keep them closed. The pain starts to numb, first my skin from the cold, then my limbs with a deep weariness.

I lose track of what's happening, flirting with unconsciousness in starts and stops. I don't know how long we're in the air. My body doesn't shiver even though cold stabs me.

The next sensation is a surface at my back. I can't *feel* anything distinct about it, but my body knows.

The scent of cinnamon and the taste of wildfire, the bounce of the cushions before I'm pulled into human-shaped arms. I'm *home*. In our bed.

After a few attempts, I succeed in blinking my crusted eyes open. The burn of light is barely anything compared to mental screeching pain of my body. I've never overspent magic, but I don't think it's supposed to be like this.

“Kalos,” I murmur. Heat flows into me from all around. He holds me to his bare chest. My face digs into the crook of his neck and I hiccup a sob in relief at his presence.

“Shh, I need to give you energy, Rina. Stay still for me,” he says with a halting cadence.

But that’s wrong. I try to move. My arms wrap tight around my stomach.

“The baby—” I start. The world comes more into focus. I can’t focus on much, but the scales on Kalos’s cheek glitter with moisture.

“Rina, you need heat. If I don’t stay here with you, the magic you’ve expended could kill you.” His voice cracks.

My body starts to shiver again and it’s jarring and painful, but doesn’t distract me.

“Is she okay?” I croak.

“You need to rest,” he says, his fingers threading in my hair as he continues to push an almost painful amount of heat into me.

I try to push him away. “Kalos! Tell me if she’s okay!”

My vision is still slightly blurry, but I catch sight of his face and wish I hadn’t. The pain of my body is echoed there. His golden eyes lack any glow.

“... I don’t know. It drained me to break free of the gate’s remnants, and I can’t—I can’t sense anything. I’ll get Maggie.” His voice is quiet, like he’s trying to keep his emotions from escaping. Even still, I feel his despair.

“Please,” I beg.

This can’t be happening. We got away.

Kalos saved us.

His presence disappears. My hands shake as I try to tap our daughter into movement. My lips part in a silent keening when my impossibility doesn’t nudge me back.

The world starts to blink out. I don't know if it will do any good to fight the darkness that encroaches.

It doesn't matter whether I try to fight to stay conscious. The darkness overwhelms me, cradling my terror until I break, and everything vanishes.

KATARINA

I WAKE UP WARM. My body aches, and I press my face into skin with a smattering of scales. I want to stay in this spot for the next day at least. Maybe Kalos will take pity on me and hold me a little longer. He does that sometimes. It's probably prodded by guilt that the pregnancy has sapped so much of my energy—

My memories come into focus all at once, and I jolt to sit up, but strong arms keep me still.

“Easy, little queen, you must rest.” Kalos’s voice is rough but soothes the part of me that has mourned his absence.

“Kalos—” I start to ask, but he interrupts.

“Our dragonling is strong. A little shaken, but strong.”

“She’s okay?” I ask, hardly able to believe it. Not with how motionless she had been before I’d lost consciousness.

He swallows. His face is drawn tight with exhaustion, but his eyes are bright and shiny with emotion. “She’s okay. Maggie checked her over while you were passed out.”

The relief is like a gasp of air after drowning. Beautiful, painful, and too much. The gasp turns into a sob, and I crumble into Kalos’s hold. Each shuddering breath rips through me. Each bringing with it sharp memories and emotions.

Kalos stokes a scaled hand over my hair trying to offer comfort in my overwhelm.

She's okay, but she almost wasn't.

I ball my fists, and the first strike against Kalos's chest is painful against my skin but cathartic at the same time. Too many emotions to name assault my senses.

"How could you?" I cry. My voice thick with tears and raw. I don't even know what specifically I'm angry about. Him leaving, him not coming for me, him risking his *life* to destroy the fae gate. It all swirls together into a stew of betrayal.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, my queen, my Rina. For all of it."

"That's not enough," I choke out.

"I know." And the deep lines in his face show that he does.

This fear of losing her. Of losing him. It's so large in my soul I don't know how I'll ever function again.

It's not just fear. Kalos risked his life to destroy the gate... and I risked our daughter's to try and save him. I was only thinking of him.

If I dwell on that guilt, it will devour me more completely than the fae gate magic attempted to.

"You left!" I cry. It was his first sin, so we might as well start there. "You can't just leave me."

My gut churns at the memory of the vulnerability and anxiety of his departure.

"I did." His voice is frustratingly calm. "I was... unwell. I needed the time to convene with the wilder parts of my nature."

Each word smooths over some of my riotous anger, even when I don't want to lose those sharp edges.

Kalos's eyes glow with determination even as his arms cradle me. "I was always going to return, but I needed to find balance before I could come back."

The words are what I've spent days agonizing over, but now that I have them and everything else in the mix, I don't know what to do with them. I look away from his imploring gaze and notice our surroundings for the first time.

We're in his bedroom, but there's no trace of the damage from the Leonid attack littering the sheets around us. It's no different except for the flood of light in the room. I glance up, and my throat catches at the sight of the destroyed dome. There's a distant birdsong from outside that conflicts with the broken part of our home.

My home.

"I love you, and it hurts so deeply," I whisper without meaning to.

Kalos blinks in surprise. "You love me?"

"Yes, you thoughtless reptile!" I snarl.

Ignoring my animosity, the corners of his lips lift in a boyish expression of hope.

"Then I haven't broken things beyond repair?" he asks.

The anger halts for a moment. It leaves a portion of calm that I don't deserve.

"I don't know," I say, soft and broken. I don't know anything. I don't know how to get past what he's done, what I've done. I don't know how to resolve all of it with the knowledge that this place and these people feel like the only home I've ever known.

He lifts my chin and touches his lips to mine softly. "Then rest, Rina. Let me care for you. Everything else can be addressed later."

"And she's okay," I say against his lips as a reminder to myself more than anything else.

Kalos nods. "She's okay. You're okay. And I'm never letting you go."

That should be alarming, but my tired mind mercifully leaves it for later.

KALOS

“EVERYTHING IS SET TO BE FINALIZED,” Ben says with a professional air as if we stand in a conference room rather than the back of a cathedral. His manner is fitting. This is a business deal after all. One that he’s been able to pull off within seventy-two hours from the moment Stella sat across from my desk and made the choice that brought her father down.

The audience shuffles around to sit, lacking the usual joyful emotions of a wedding. The people representing the Leonid contingent, distant relations, and those who reside in the territory, are subdued and watchful.

Stoneheart’s half of the church is watchful as well. The gargoyle keeps an interesting mix of people as his inner circle. A lizard man stands beside him in the position of best man. They look to be conversing about business in the same manner that Ben and I are. The rest of his crowd are less wide-eyed than the Leonids and more tense in anticipation of a fight, but there will be no violence today.

This contract is neat, and by the end of it, the Council will be unable to blame me for any of it.

Councilor Moon glares at me from the end of the aisle, but I’m unconcerned with his ire. He loves to officiate weddings. If any of the other Council members invited are glaring at me as well, I don’t notice it.

The wedding is large and formal by necessity. Almost every pew is filled in the grand building. This union is a

statement of Stoneheart's power as much as it is of my influence.

Each Council member was invited, but I think only a few shifters have turned up. Probably to see if there can be any way of invalidating the mating agreement between Stella and Stoneheart. Moon reported that a good portion of the Council wants me drawn and quartered, but they must follow their own laws.

News of what I did to Lorenzo Leonid has become common knowledge, and none of the attendees around us dare to catch my eye. If the engagement hadn't been signed in blood, the Council would have attempted to take my head by now.

The success of destroying a territory leader who meant my family ill should be a moment of triumph, but I barely register it. This victory is hollow if I cannot succeed in making my amends with Katarina.

With that thought, I glance at the closed door to the room where Katarina is helping Stella get ready.

To say that my mate is upset with how I circumvented the Council's rules is an understatement.

"Do you think she's okay?" Ben asks.

"Who do you mean?" My voice is cold toward my second-in-command.

"Katarina, obviously." Ben looks away, and his cheeks flush.

It will take some time to forgive Ben for putting Katarina and our daughter in danger. His plan worked, and there were few other options for a good outcome, but that doesn't stop my anger.

That this wedding seems to be tormenting him feeds my vicious nature some. Ben has denied all interest in Stella, but that doesn't change the way his jaw clenches or the look of hate he casts toward Stoneheart.

The gargoyle has picked up on his animosity, but luckily for Ben, seems to find it amusing rather than take offense.

My friend has fucked himself with this plan of his, and eventually I'll be sympathetic about it, but not at this moment.

“Katarina is... healing,” I finally say. I don't know how else to phrase it. I've spent as much time as she'll allow me holding her, feeding heat to our daughter, and sharing whatever energy I can through our thread-thin mating bond that is perceivable now that I'm not suppressing my dragon.

Physically, my mate is fine. She was tired and spent much of the interim sleeping in our room. I had a ward master place a special ward where the dome will rest until it's repaired. I'm hoping that Katarina will want to choose the new design. She loved the previous one, but I want our home to be one that she feels invested in.

Because she may physically be fine, but emotionally... she's distant. I mourn that with the state of our bond, I can't feel her emotions. I can only wait for her to sort through her feelings and present to me what she wants to expose.

I'm helpless with how lost inside herself she is, but I do my best to draw her out in little ways. I care for her like a mate who deserves her should.

I fear it won't be enough, but I hold hope at the words she confessed. *I love you*. She loves me, and I will prove my own feelings to her. Remembering her words helps with the sentiment of the rest, *and it hurts so deeply*.

I don't want to cause her pain, but I can't help myself from wanting her to choose a life with me. Now that I'm more whole and balanced, I want to be the one who comforts her.

Ben straightens when Katarina exits the door. They exchange a look, and Ben gestures to the harried fae wedding planner. The wedding march music begins.

Everyone stands. Katarina takes her position next to me, and I place my hand on her lower back. The move is an open declaration to the crowd.

I will not hide my mate and young anymore. I will do everything else in my power to protect them, but every instinct I have demands I be open about what they mean to me.

They are everything.

Stella strides forward. Her wedding dress is an elegant lace number that covers much of her skin but fits like a glove. It's beautiful and a marvel that Ben found something that fit so well in such a short amount of time.

Ben's shoulders crash down when she passes by us without a backward glance.

Katarina takes in that and watches her friend walk the rest of the way down the aisle to Stoneheart, his face wiped of all expression.

"What have we done?" she murmurs to me.

"People make their own decisions," I say, but it's poor comfort.

"It was what she wanted," Katarina admits. "But it doesn't make this any easier."

"Stoneheart is a strong protector. In time this may have been something that she'd have chosen without the pressure of helping us," I say, though I don't know how large that possibility is.

Ben turns and leaves the church before the crowd sits. I don't have the heart to call him back.

It seems I have forgiven him enough to find sympathy after all.

KATARINA

I WANT to tell myself that the wedding is beautiful, but the image of Stella biting the lipstick from her lower lip and wincing just moments before stays with me.

“It will be fine, Kat.” Stella shrugs. “Just a little awkward. He approached me a few years ago with this exact proposition. I turned him down because I didn’t think he’d be able to usurp my family.”

We watch as my friend does what Kalos arranged to keep the Council out of our business. I don’t blame him, not really. I blame myself for not realizing how deep Stella’s hatred of her biological father ran. I’m a terrible friend.

It only adds to the list of everything else I’m failing at.

A terrible mother.

A terrible mate.

And I don’t know how to solve any of it. I’m powerless to help Stella. Her sacrifice is what will keep us safe.

And I can’t bring myself to embrace Kalos the way my soul craves. It’s easier to keep everything at a distance.

The ceremony is mercifully quick, the sealing kiss perfunctory. Stoneheart briskly leads Stella out, and everyone begins departing for the afterparty. A stranger asks Kalos if we’ll be there, and he begs off, citing that I’m tired and need rest. Which I am.

The trip home is uneventful. Maggie has food ready for us, and I eat it even if I have no appetite. Griffin asks for pets and stays close after getting chin scratches.

The world is in shades of gray, but this is easier, simpler.

Maggie's and Ben's concern is clear on their faces when they wish us goodnight.

Kalos doesn't show his concern, but I feel the thick blanket of it. I'd been so angry at him, but it's hard to stay that way with how close he's been since the scare we had.

Every moment he's cared for me. Bathing the scent of fae magic and smoke from my skin while I struggled to stay awake. Coaxing me to eat even as my guilt made me nauseous.

Every moment I've struggled, he's been there, patient and gentle.

Perhaps if I don't snap out of it, he'll finally get frustrated enough with me to tell me to pack my bags.

But he won't.

I don't know if that helps or makes me want to bury deeper into myself.

He pulls us to his room. In the beginning, I'd made an attempt to move back into my old room, but he wouldn't hear of it and it's not like I actually want to be alone with my thoughts.

"Ben will check in with Stella daily until he's confident that she's okay," Kalos says as I sit on a couch, staring out the dark window, still in the formal maternity dress Ben had given me to wear for the wedding. "The Council won't be able to touch us now, but we'll keep aware if they try."

His voice fades as he walks into the closet to remove his suit. When he reappears, he's in one of his robes, and the sight jolts a moment of awareness through me. A moment where I remember that I still exist in this body.

That I love this dragon even if I can't fathom continuing with this mating with the way my emotions press down on me.

As if he registers the change, Kalos moves slowly, kneeling before me and taking my hands in his.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks.

“About what?” I ask even as my throat thickens.

Kalos runs his scaled thumb over the back of my hand, not dissuaded by my deflection. “Whatever is keeping you from me. From living. That flash in your eyes is the first I’ve seen of my mate since you woke after the fae gate.”

My lip trembles.

His golden eyes wince. “You’re allowed to still be angry with me—”

“I’m not,” I interrupt and am surprised by the truth of that. I’d worn my anger like a suit of armor, but each piece has melted away when faced with how he’s taken care of me.

Without the anger, there’s only clawing emotions that give my mouth a metallic taste.

“Why aren’t you mad at me?” I whisper as if his anger would make the guilt trying to drown me easier to navigate.

Kalos frowns and tilts his head.

His confusion frustrates me. He should know exactly what I’m talking about.

“I put her in danger,” I say. My hands on my stomach in explanation.

His frown clears, but instead of the expected derision, there’s only understanding.

I don’t want the understanding. “What I did was worse than going down to the caverns alone. With that, I had a plan. I was thinking about keeping her safe—” I break off, struggling to breathe for a moment. “I forgot to think of her at all when I approached you at the fae gate.”

Kalos pulls me into his arms. The move so unexpected that I accept the embrace without thought. The warmth of it has a tear escaping down my cheek. He lifts me and turns until he

sits on the couch with me in his lap, an echo of every time he's held me to provide our daughter heat.

I hiccup, and he presses his forehead to mine.

His voice is soft when he speaks. "Rina, I'm sorry for how I reacted in the caverns. I was wrong and struggling. It was unfair to put the burden of that on you."

I sniff. All of Maggie's words about fate, and it's Kalos's that finally release the tinge of guilt and failure from that memory.

Kalos continues, "Life is full of risk. It's easier to realize that now that I'm whole. With the fae gate, I could not expect you to sit on the sidelines while I was in danger. Not when you could possibly do something to remedy it."

Shock makes its way through the despair that's coiled around me.

Kalos pulls back to meet my gaze, his determined. "You are my mate. Whether the bond is complete or not. You are courageous and daring. To expect you to be anything else is contrary to your nature. For you to demand of yourself anything else is destructive to who you are."

The truth of that fights at the miasma of negativity surrounding me, lightening it. Kalos's arms squeeze around me.

"I am here to protect and care for you." His talon slides over my cheek, wiping away the tear there. "Will you let me?"

"But I just mess things up," I whisper.

"You do no such thing," he rumbles, and there's finally anger there. "You *saved* me. You shouldn't have had to, but you did. You ran from here when needed to protect our daughter. You found strong allies that could keep you safe and close by."

As he lists out each item, the guilt releases its claws and the truth of my conflict surfaces.

"I'm scared to want this," I say. I'm scared to love Kalos only to lose him. The close call showed me just how easily we

could lose our daughter.

“Ah.” Kalos’s face softens. “Now that is a feeling I know well. Fear is why I pushed you away for so long. It kept me manageable... but broken. I don’t wish that for you.”

He kisses me, and the fire of need flares, attempting to douse my worries. The endless fear that would destroy this life I’ve fought for.

“Allow me to help remind you how brave you are, thief of my heart,” he says against my mouth when the kiss breaks.

My brow scrunches in confusion. *Of my heart*. Does that mean—

Kalos catches my expression and pulls away, huffing a laugh at himself. “It’s my own fault that you’re surprised. Allow me to clear any misunderstandings.”

He straightens, his claws threading through my hair to tilt my face up to his. The tickle of talon points against my scalp has a sensual shiver chasing the remnants of my pain away.

“Katarina, mate of my heart and by bond, my queen.” He watches his talon tip brush over my lower lip before lifting his gaze to mine, his eyes burning with purpose. “I love you. I want to spend the rest of our lives together whether we succeed in strengthening the bond between us to the point that gives you my lifespan or not.”

I’m stunned by his confession.

“Will you be brave for me?” he asks. “Will you push back and demand from me what you deserve?” He swallows as if nervous. “Will you choose to be my mate?”

Him *asking* me now, despite us already being connected and me carrying his child, makes my breath catch. But memories threaten this moment.

“You’d choose me?” I ask softly. “Not just your dragon?”

His words in the cavern are a distant pang, but they still cut. I hesitate to put myself in that situation again without knowing.

Kalos winces, his face falling, but he doesn't look away. "I was wrong to say what I did. I am my dragon. What I said was in conflict with my deepest desires. I... didn't want to experience the pain of losing you, and somehow leaving before that could happen felt like the easier option."

And I understand. Perhaps more now than I would have before. He was full of fear. The same fear that is trying to keep me from claiming all the things I've wanted.

But I won't allow it to steal from me.

I'm a thief, an artist, a mother, and... his mate. Nothing will take that from me, especially not fear.

"Yes," I say, cutting the last hesitating doubt from this moment. This is my place. My home. "I'll be your mate."

Kalos hugs me to him with a growl, and I laugh before he cuts it off with a heated kiss. I moan at his taste. Each hour that I've missed him comes to life without the chains of guilt and terror holding me back.

I place my hands against the scales on either side of his face, taking every flavor of him that I've missed. My hunger as craven as my empty body.

His ardor responds to mine. His cocks hardening under my ass, and his skin heating to my touch.

He breaks the kiss, eyes glinting. "And will you accept all of me as a mate? My mating bite and carry the future babes I sire?"

I snort a disbelieving laugh, dizzy at his words and the desperate kisses. "Getting ahead of yourself, aren't you? Perhaps we should just focus on the one we're having first."

He stands, cradling me in his arms and strides toward the bed. "You underestimate my need for you, my queen. I'll never have enough of you or filling you with my young. I'll prove to be a very convincing mate and keep you hungry for me."

"I already am hungry for you," I scoff as my face heats. "Whether or not you try to sneak future babies in."

This conversation is ridiculous and a distraction from the aching need of my lower body, but it's the promise of a future. A future where Kalos wants me and what we could create together.

He places me on my feet in front of our massive bed, and I gasp as his talons shred the serviceable dress I'm wearing to pieces. It makes me wetter, and I expect him to descend on me in a fiery rush, but he doesn't. I claw at his robe, but he captures my hands.

His smile is sexy and arrogant. "There will be no sneaking. You'll beg for me to make your body swell each and every time my heat comes around."

My face heats with the memories of his last heat. We'll be doing that every year.

I shake my head, grasping for logic. "But we're not having a kid every time."

"We'll see what you beg for."

The brush of his words against my ear and the thought of him filling me, attempting to breed me at every opportunity, has a shiver of forbidden pleasure cascading down my spine. I want that. I want his cocks, his knot.

Kalos hums. "The scent of your arousal is so sweet. I don't think it will be much work to convince you to accept my seed during my heat. I think you enjoy being swollen with my child as much as I enjoy seeing it."

An embarrassed sound catches in my throat because he's right. I pull at his robe to try and distract him from details that have my cheeks burning. The idea of creating a family with Kalos is a tender one, but the thought of *making* that family has me kissing him with a moan.

I press my body against his, my belly getting in the way, but his hand slides between us, his fingers stroking gently through my folds. He growls against my mouth.

"So wet for me, Rina."

“Don’t make me beg, Kalos.” I want him now. I want him forever. I slip a hand into his robe and grip his upper cock, enjoying the textured ribbing of it and the weeping head. I move to take his lower cock into my other hand, but he halts my motion with a disapproving tut.

“Not so quick.” His grin is wicked. “Lay down. It’s my honor to give you what you hunger for, mate, but I need to examine you first. It’s been some time since I’ve been inside you. I need to make sure your body is prepared to handle my attentions.”

I swallow, and a flash of heat whips through my body at his words. The silk sheets are cool against my skin as I slowly kneel on the bed before allowing Kalos to direct me, my back sinking into the mattress.

My knees press together, and his eyes darken as his scaled hands drag over the skin of my hip, my thigh, before tapping my knee.

“Open,” he growls. The precision of each movement has my body trembling in need. I’d joke about me being naked while he’s clothed if the air wasn’t stilling in my lungs at the vulnerable position he’s put me in.

Kalos arches his brow, and my lower body clenches in need. I take a breath and slowly open my thighs for his examination. The cool air against my wet pussy is an arousing stroke by itself, but he doesn’t touch me there yet.

“Have you touched yourself while I’ve been away?” he asks as if he was merely on a business trip instead of his heartrending absence.

As if he always meant to return.

The last toxic knot in my stomach loosens at that realization. He was always going to return to me. He will always return to me.

We are mates, with or without a complete bond.

“No, I haven’t touched myself,” I breathe. My worries and the anxiety caused by the impending attack left little room for

desire. I was in survival mode without his presence, and now my needs are returning with a vengeance.

“You do seem like you’ll need to be stretched to take me,” Kalos muses as the pads of his fingers brush through my delicate folds, my arousal spreading with the hot touch.

I whimper as his talons retract. His fingers shift into a more human shape as he uses two to press against my entrance, massaging me there in circles before the embarrassing amount of wetness has him slipping inside.

“Such a beautiful offering.” The breath of his words skate over my pulsing, ignored clit.

“I’m hardly a sacrificial virgin.” My quip surprises me, and I don’t know where it came from with my brain scrambled by his ministrations.

Kalos’s responding grin is devilish and has pleasure curling in my lower belly.

His eyes glint hungrily. “It doesn’t mean we can’t pretend.”

My laugh is cut off by a gasp as his mouth descends on my neglected clit, his tongue stroking over me as if I am a sacrificial feast just for him.

“Did you eat virgins?” I ask, gasping and squirming under his mouth.

Kalos lifts from my sensitive core to chuff a laugh. “You’re getting distracted, Rina.”

His heated gaze tells me he doesn’t mind my curiosity. I groan as two fingers become three as they stretch me just as he warned, giving specific attention in pressing down against the thin skin at the back of my entrance before twisting up against the place inside me that he seems to be an expert of. He’s not getting distracted.

“Then answer my question—fuck!”

He sucks my clit again, and the heat he’s been building unravels on my moan. The climax is a gentle wave. In its wake

my body relaxes and allows his fingers to sink deeper inside me.

I gasp, a sheen of sweat on my skin starting to warm again as my body accepts his actions.

Kalos purrs in satisfaction. “Some dragons did set up situations where they’d pick the prettiest humans as companions. They did not eat them. Dragons reserve eating people as an action of disrespect.”

I tighten around the fingers invading me as I try and keep my thoughts in order enough for a conversation. “Did you ever —”

“I was uninterested in such things until you offered yourself up for my use when I caught you.”

I shiver when his tongue licks my sensitized flesh, trying to squirm away from the stimulation, but Kalos layers the sensation and a whiplash of need spreads through me. His fingers keep me full, open.

“Such sweet offerings,” he says with a smirk.

And it was a sweet offering. I made a decision in moonlight and darkness that changed the course of both of our lives forever. We were two lonely souls brought together by chance and circumstance... and maybe fate.

I suck in a breath when his fingers leave me. He drops his robe, and I shift my hips up eagerly as my eyes devour the lines of his body.

His smile could melt steel. “Patience, my queen. It would be unwise to rush this.”

I open my mouth to ask what he means, but I forget my words when he grips his upper cock. I clutch at the sheets, trying to summon the patience to keep from demanding he slide it home inside me. I ache to be filled by him, miss feeling our bodies connected.

Instead, my dragon’s body stiffens after a few slick strokes, and he hisses as a white stream of hot seed splashes across my bare pussy.

“What the fuck?” I ask, torn between sensual shock, loss, and anger.

Kalos’s eyes narrow, and my argument freezes in my chest.

“Do you trust me to satisfy you?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say without one sliver of doubt. My lips twist. “But I didn’t think I’d have to wait all night for it.”

“What I want from you will take more work than a short climax on one of my cocks.” His gaze locks with mine as if daring me to look away as he lowers himself between my spread legs and uses his fingers to gather the cooling release on my skin.

My eyes flare wide when he presses the mess inside me. The tingling on my skin reminding me that this release is his healing one.

“Oh,” I say as the air leaves my lungs and the gold of his eyes warms in satisfaction. I want to question him on what his plans are, but my toes curl as a wave of pleasure shudders through me.

My body tightens around Kalos’s hand as he slips a fourth finger inside me. I moan helplessly but work to relax for my mate.

“I want to give you all of me, sweet queen, will you take it?” he asks, finally putting words to what he’s planning.

I frown. He’d said that before at the bathhouse when he’d taken my ass and pussy at the same time, but he isn’t teasing my ass.

His fingers twist inside me, and what he must mean clicks. The heat that cascades through my body and burns my cheeks is like searing lava.

“You can’t be serious,” I gasp. “Will that even work?”

His eyes glint playfully. “That’s something for us to discover. Will you allow me to show you how brave you really are?”

I squirm against his massaging, stretching fingers and consider what he's suggesting.

"What if I don't like it?" I ask.

"Then we stop and won't do it again," he answers easily, just as he's done every time he's pushed the boundaries of what I've known. Everything we do is a negotiation. Even with his heat, he endeavored to keep me comfortable and satisfied. I trust this dragon to push all my limits.

"But I think you'll like it." His voice lowers, and the growl in his words has me tightening around him. "I know I want to be completely engulfed by you. Have both of my cocks strangled by this tight cunt."

Words are hard to muster for a few beats of my heart.

"O-okay."

Kalos's grin is sharp, and he drops a tender kiss to the inside of my knee. "Do you want to be on top?"

I shake my head. "I want you to be the one who pushes me."

A steely expression takes over his face and he makes a sound of satisfaction in his chest. He likes when I submit to him. Maybe on a different day, I'll flip the tables, but giving myself over to him after having to take care of myself for so long is something I prize.

Kalos widens his fingers, and I gasp at the burn before it subsides into something less harsh.

"Play with your tits," he orders as if to distract me from his actions, but I shake my head.

"Too sensitive." I breathe.

Interest flares in his expression. We've idly wondered if our daughter will want to breastfeed. The option seems likely with the changes in my body.

He slides his fingers from me and sits on the bed, dragging me to straddle him.

"Hey—" I crease my brows.

“I can push you whatever position we’re in, sweet queen.” Kalos grips my hips and demonstrates his strength as he lifts me to grind against his cocks. “This way is best for me to have you how I want and to allow your body to take me.”

He licks my nipple, and I gasp at the soft sensation before devolving into a mewl as he softly sucks. The stimulation is just soft enough to keep me from hitting him out of principle, but I feel it *everywhere*.

“Kalos,” I plead. I thread my fingers through his hair and rock my sopping wet core against the throbbing cocks under me.

He holds his cocks together in his grip, his fingers nowhere close to being able to enclose their girth. The one with the knot at the base resists the action, but the heads are about even when he grinds them against my opening.

I suck in a breath at the press of throbbing heat, hesitating.

Kalos releases my nipple with a growl. “This is what you’ve begged for, mate. Take me.”

His talons dig into my hips as he holds me in place. My heart thunders in my ears, and I grind over the double heads, letting the sensations of them against me chase away my hesitation.

My dragon kisses me softly, and I blink my eyes open, not realizing they were closed in concentration.

“This is for both of us, love.” His words are soft. “Do you want this?”

“Yes.” The thrill edging this moment makes it hard to breathe, but I want this. I want to be stretched past the point of believability. I want to give this to my mate. I want to prove this to myself.

My need has me circling my hips, working the tips of him inside me. When they notch in place I almost whimper, but my eyes lock with Kalos’s.

My mate. Father of my child. My home.

I bear down and both of his cocks slide inside me with a pop. My breath leaves me all at once, and I groan at the impossible stretch. I can't see my progress because of my belly, but I know I've only taken a couple of inches.

Kalos groans with me. "So tight."

"I don't know if I can take more." My voice goes up in pitch.

"Shh," Kalos says, breathless. "We aren't rushing. Just focus on how this feels."

I blow out a breath and follow his soft words. The stretch reaches deep in my soul, every part of my body reacts to holding his throbbing cocks inside my body.

I pant against Kalos's lips as he strokes a thumb gently over my clit. Everything is sensitive there, and the soft touch is all I can handle.

His sweet words warm me between kisses as his small circular strokes reverberate through my body.

"No dragon has had a better offering."

"Should have known you'd change everything the first time I tasted you."

"So beautiful. I never thought to have such a gift as this again."

"I'm yours, little thief."

Each phrase is hushed and precious, wiping away every bitter word we've struggled through to get to this moment.

Soon my hips rock back and forth, unable to stay still while my body is weeping in need of friction.

Kalos presses up gently with each rock, testing the limits of my pussy until I open wider to accept more of him. We both break our kisses with a curse when my body gives, and he slides halfway in.

"That's it, my queen. You're doing so well, taking everything of me. Allowing me to stretch you past your brink."

I moan into the skin of his neck, loving the taste of fire and salt there, my fingernails digging into his shoulders.

The stretch has stopped holding my chest tight, and my breathing comes easier, my body accommodating the needs of my dragon and now hungry for what he's going to give us.

I want his release. I want to be overflowing with his seed stretching and changing me. I don't want anyone to wonder about my claim on this dragon even if our bond is frayed and thin.

He is mine.

I sink my teeth into the crook of his neck, biting down hard. Not sure what I'm doing, only that it feels right. Necessary.

Kalos groans, and a flush of precum heats my insides.

"Harder," he growls.

I sink my teeth deeper, desperate to follow his command.

When I break skin, he does the same. His hot mouth makes the sharp teeth only a passing sting that transitions into a deep throb as he holds me immobile.

The taste of blood on my tongue is brief, my focus swept away by the cocks swelling inside of me.

The flood of heat from his release triggers the crash of my orgasm. My body clutches around the overfilled sensation, wanting to keep his seed inside me, but there's too much and I'm stretched too far. I cry into his skin, the continued clutch of his teeth in my neck shudderingly perfect.

When the pleasure ebbs, my bashfulness is waiting, but it's a sleepy embarrassment that keeps me lulled in a peaceful state as Kalos gently releases his bite and separates our bodies. My cheeks flush at the gush of seed from between my legs.

I hide my face against my mate's throat, and his chuckle vibrates against the burn of my blush.

"You are the sweetest offering a dragon has ever claimed, little queen."

I scoff, but allow him to carry me to the bathroom and fill the tub without complaint. This type of mess requires more than a wet rag to clean up. His careful motions of washing me clean reminds me of how I left this place after his heat: crusty, exhausted, heartbroken, and upset with myself for being heartbroken.

It comes full circle now. With hindsight, my emotions at the time had been valid. I'd just left my mate without knowing it.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Kalos says, still naked but kneeling outside of the tub, focusing on running a washcloth up my thighs.

I hum, not needing to comb through old memories. I turn in the tub to face him. Kalos's gaze drops to my breasts, the washcloth in his hands forgotten.

“You bit me,” I say, bringing his focus to the quickly healing wound in the crook of my neck. I suspect it will heal into another white mating mark to match the one I have on the other side of my neck where he bit me during his heat.

The mark that started everything.

Kalos presses his thumb into the wound, and the spark of pleasure surprises a gasp from me.

“Yes.” His eyes glow golden.

I grasp my knowledge of magic enough to do a check on myself. I bite my lip when I find the answer I'm looking for, or rather, the lack of.

“It didn't complete the bond,” I say.

His eyes soften. “No, I still need to do work to strengthen that. I wanted you to carry a mark with a memory of how I should have claimed you.” Kalos caresses my cheek. “With the absolute conviction that you are mine. My miraculous mate.”

My throat swells at the tone in his voice, and I reach up, running my finger over the bloody skin and imprint of my

teeth that I left on him. “I suppose that mine won’t leave a mark on you.”

Kalos hums. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Mating magic is unpredictable. This one may stay, and if it doesn’t, we’ll do it again once our bond is more complete. I will happily carry your mark.”

I open my mouth in curiosity but close it just as quickly.

“Ask your question,” Kalos says, but still I hesitate.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for this moment.” I slide down into the water more, not wanting to bring up painful subjects.

“You want to know if I carry Ava’s mark?” Kalos guesses.

I sigh and shake my head. I’m not jealous, and I don’t want him to think I am. “It’s not like it’s something you control—”

“I understand, Rina. That mark faded sometime after her death.” His answer is simple, and tears prick my eyes at the starkness of it. I blame pregnancy hormones.

“I’m sorry,” I croak. It must have felt like losing her all over again.

Kalos nods, accepting my sympathy. “It was difficult at the time... but now I can see the purpose of it.”

“What do you mean?”

When he looks at me, it’s as if he can see the depths of my soul. As if he accepts every flaw and talent I hold. I don’t want to ever look away.

“I would have never allowed our night together to occur if I had still been carrying her mark. No matter the pain of my heat. A mating mark is sacred.”

I respect that. And if he hadn’t made our arrangement...

“I would have never found you,” he continues. “And that isn’t something I would ever risk. It was necessary to lose the mark of my previous mating... Ava and Luke are always with

me, but that doesn't mean that I can't have happiness. That I can't have you." He swallows. "And our daughter."

I nod. I know he still has fears regarding what kind of father he'll be, but every second we're together, the worries I carry about that fade. If there are obstacles, we'll overcome them. The problems we face, we'll solve.

Together.

"So if my mark doesn't take, I'll be using you as a chew toy until it does?" I tease, wanting to lighten this moment to match the certainty thrumming in my heart.

Kalos grins and goes back to stroking my skin under the water, his big hand coming to rest on my belly. Our daughter chooses that moment to kick him. His delight flavors the air and softens my soul.

"Yes," he says simply. "I demand your mark and everything you choose to give me."

"I love you, Kalos." Before, I'd confessed that while in pain, and I want—no need—to give the words to him as the gift they are.

Kalos's face softens.

"And I love you, thief of my heart."

EPILOGUE

KALOS

The pain flares through my body again, and I pause in my work, breathing through it. I check the time when it fades and narrow my eyes, going back to reading the papers I hold with a silent grumble. There's no call from the room above for me.

She's pushing her luck.

It's taken months of aggressively working with the soul witch to get the bond Katarina and I share to the place where I feel her pain, and I don't regret it one bit. It gives me insight on her mood and what her body experiences.

Gage watches where I'm perched on the edge of my desk with wide eyes. He has his own paper reports in front of him.

"What was that?" he asks.

"Katarina has been having contractions since last night."

If anything, Gage's eyes get wider. "And that's not something to worry about?"

I huff.

"She won't allow me to take her from the studio until they're closer together. She said she doesn't want me hanging around and suffocating her until she's in active labor." Honestly, perhaps not even then. Katarina has gotten quite snappy these last few weeks.

I admit, I do not make things easier on her. The only thing keeping my worries under control is the knowledge that she will sense them through the bond.

“And you’re allowing that?” he asks, his jaw slack.

I roll my eyes at the notion that I would allow or disallow Katarina anything while she’s in such a state. I must truly seem like a dictator to my godson.

“If you are ever in the same situation, you may understand.” I keep my words careful, but Gage still frowns. His relationship situation makes how Katarina and I came together look generic.

“And where is Ben?” Gage glances around. “I’ve never known him to be absent for so long. Usually he’s attached to your side.”

“Ben has his own mess to deal with. He’ll visit after the birth.”

As much fear as I suppress, there’s a flare of excitement at that statement. Soon, maybe this time tomorrow, my daughter will be born.

It’s the hell of waiting before then that has the power to drive me out of my mind.

I suck in my breath at another flare of pain and check the time. The contractions are too close together to leave Katarina in her studio alone.

Gage stands, sensing the change in the air. “Let’s reschedule this meeting. Let me know when my sister is born, will you?”

He’s gone before I process his words. Warmth blooms in my chest that my daughter hasn’t even made an appearance in the world and her family ties are already growing. Her life will be so different than the loneliness I’ve fostered for centuries.

I take the stairs in the secret passageway to Rina’s studio two at a time. The bookcase swings open to show me my mate with her hands at her lower back, breathing slowly. I analyze everything from her scrunched brow that has a smear of green paint bisecting it to her stiff posture, but a single detail has my heart rate picking up.

There’s a puddle under my mate’s feet.

“Did your water break? And you didn’t tell me?” A hefty dose of disbelief mixes with my alarm. I take out my phone and dial Maggie, not needing my mate’s answer. Griffin gives a croaky meow from his cat tower that seems to agree with my exasperation.

Katarina winces guiltily as she smiles at me. “I needed to finish the painting first.”

I snap my mouth shut to keep from releasing flustered words. The woman is going into labor. Now isn’t the time for lectures. Later we’ll see how she appreciates spanking. That’s an activity we haven’t tried yet.

Maggie picks up, and I detail that Katarina’s water has broken and how many minutes apart her contractions are. Katarina’s brows raise as if surprised I’ve kept track. This witch will be the end of me.

Maggie calmly gives me instructions before hanging up.

“Maggie will meet us in our room,” I say. Katarina decided that was where she wanted to give birth after the dome was finished. Something about it feeling like her space.

It should feel like her space. The craftsman used one of her dragon fire paintings as inspiration for the dome design.

“Sounds like a plan, but first, look,” Katarina says while pulling off a glove and gesturing to the canvas. I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of looking at her work with how annoyed I am. She rolls her eyes at me. “Kalos, chill out. She’s not going to rush out of me. We have hours yet.”

Yes, spanking is looking better by the minute.

Aggravated, I turn toward the canvas and freeze.

The brushstrokes are bold in *Alla Prima*, but the edges are smoothed artfully in places to give enough definition that the portrait is clear. The toddler has a shock of curling dark hair that contrasts with her cherubic cheeks and bright green eyes. Black scales cover her tiny hands as she reaches out as if demanding to be held.

Our daughter looks like me with Katarina’s emerald eyes.

My throat swells with meaning.

“She’s going to be fine,” my mate says. “I thought this would help the fears.”

Help me because this is something she’s seen in her dreams. A message from fate of what is to come. A message that won’t just be for me.

Our daughter is hope. It’s a heavy burden for one so small, but that doesn’t change how people interpret her existence. Dragons haven’t yielded eggs in centuries. The world thought the age of monsters was over.

And now our immortal hearts have hope again.

I swallow. Pain breaks me from the moment, and Katarina hisses, hunching over. I use my body to support her. I’ll carry her as soon as the contraction passes.

“You’ve given me such a gift.” I kiss her damp forehead. “I may not even spank you later for ignoring your contractions.”

She breathes a pained laugh. “Don’t take away my incentive.”



In all the wars and bloodshed I’ve seen in my life, nothing is as primal and vicious as birth.

Nothing makes me feel nearly as helpless as holding my mate through her bellowing cries.

Dragons have the right idea with eggs.

With there being no other dragon from witch births, we couldn’t know if any of the mitigation strategies for pain would be dangerous. Maggie can’t help herself from adding a small amount of magic here and there to soothe Katarina.

Maggie croons instructions, and Katarina tries to control her breathing. I help her reposition, knowing through our connection which direction her pain is urging her. The cat

makes appearances during the lulls between contractions, but there hasn't been a long lull in a while now.

"I can't do this," Katarina gasps.

I almost laugh. The words would have terrified me before seeing that painting. Katarina gave me the gift of knowing both she and our daughter come out of this ordeal on the other end. "You are doing this. I tremble at your power, my queen."

"I'm so tired," she whines.

"I know." I feel her waning as I wipe away her tears. "She's almost here."

"She has a lot of explaining to do when she gets here," she grits out.

I press my forehead to hers and feed more energy to her through the bond. Katarina shifts, perking up in time for another contraction.

All my deep-seated worries that I will fail my mate, my young, pales in the visceral nature of this moment. I will not let them down. If the hatchling bond doesn't snap into place when she is born, I will work every day to rectify it.

Failure is not an option.

Time blurs together as if I'm lost in a killing rage, but my only focus is Katarina.

It could be hours or minutes, but finally our daughter is born. Maggie holds up a squirming pink creature that bears no similarity to the toddler in the portrait.

The bond is a whisper before becoming a taut, ringing string at her first cry. The relief almost brings me to my knees.

"A baby girl," Maggie says, placing the squirming witch-appearing infant on Katarina's bare skin.

"Kalos—" Katarina's eyes are bright with tears, and she looks at me. "Look at her."

"I see her." I swallow emotion, overcoming my stoic nature. "I feel her."

My voice cracks, and Katarina's laugh is full of pained joy as she understands.

The bonds we've forged together vibrate with joy and sweetness.

I am whole.

EPILOGUE

KATARINA

I GASP AWAKE, something tugging me from the deepest sleep.

My hands fly over the covers of the bed, searching for what's missing. The bassinet next to me is empty.

“Rina.” Kalos’s voice is soft and halts my panic. “I have her.”

He stands near the window, holding our daughter Evangeline in his arms. I sigh and fall back against the pillows in relief.

“I thought we were having a wonderful time and letting you sleep, but *someone* seems to have become impatient.” Kalos arches a brow at our adorable baby girl who shrieks and stretches her hands toward me, flinging the raw piece of meat she was gnawing onto the bedspread.

Kalos rolls his eyes and wipes her cheeks and scaly hands clean before handing over our daughter. Her dragon features automatically recede when she’s back in my arms. It’s always a marvel to watch her instinctively shift to protect my skin.

“I’m sure she loves hanging out with you in the morning,” I say. I know I enjoy being able to get more sleep. Evangeline blinks her green eyes up at me when she starts nursing. With her dragon nature, it’s been all guesswork to figure out what she needs. Sometimes she loves to chew on raw meat and other times she wants milk.

And as soon as we figure something out, it changes.

She appears closer to a five-month-old than her real age of seven weeks. Parenting blogs say that it's unbelievable how quickly babies change, but a dragonling puts that all to shame. I'm not prepared for how much quicker she's developing than a human child, and it feels like whenever I blink, she becomes someone new.

"We have an agreement of sorts," Kalos says, sliding into bed beside me and combing his talons through her downy dark hair. "I spoil her, and she doesn't try to wake you through your bond."

I sigh and rest my head against his shoulder. "It seems like your agreement needs to be renegotiated."

"Perhaps." Kalos hums and kisses my cheek.

His contentment thrums through our bond. It had taken a couple of months to develop the bond to a place where he can feel me, and even more time for me to complete it enough to be able to feel him, but this intimacy is like nothing I've ever experienced.

For so long I was alone in the world, and now the ethereal bonds of my little family ensures I never am. The hatchling bond has been helpful for trying to guess what Evangeline needs. Every day I wonder if it will ever stop feeling like my heart resides outside of my body. Perhaps it will change at the end of the first year. That's when Kalos says the bond fades into a more inactive form.

Eventually Eva finishes nursing, and Kalos whisks her away again. She doesn't complain and gurgles happily at him.

"Get in the bath. I'll handle things," he says and heads out of the room before I attempt to protest, even though I'm aching for a good scrub and soak. Taking care of a baby is a lot of things, miraculous, amazing, and gross.

I down a granola bar and a ton of water as I wait for the water to fill the tub. By the time I rinse in the connected shower, the water is just at the right height and I lower in with a blush-inducing moan of pleasure, closing my eyes and relaxing in the luxurious water.

There are benefits to not being pregnant anymore. The ability to have a hot bath without the water going cold instantly is a big one.

Hot hands caress my skin, and my lashes flutter open, my mate's eyes glow gold in satisfaction.

"Where's—" I start but he interrupts.

"Maggie is watching her." Kalos slips into the water behind me, my bare body resting against his.

I hum in gratitude even as I bite my lip.

Kalos's chuckle vibrates against my back. "I can feel your guilt, my queen. She won't miss us for the length of a bath."

He's right. He usually is. And I appreciate this time alone with him too much to complain about it.

With the help of magic, I'm completely healed from birth even if I'm still taking it easy physically. Luckily, we have so many people who are helping, but that's a guilt in itself. Eva is developing so fast that it's inevitable that I'll miss milestones if I want to spend a day in my studio.

Kalos must feel the same because his inner circle has been running his business practically without him since the birth.

"When do you think she'll slow down?" I ask.

"Another month maybe," Kalos muses. "Her growth will start to match the pace of human development when she can move around by herself. The more independent she becomes, the less her magic will try to speed up her progress for her safety."

I rest my head back, enjoying the light touches of my mate's hands under the water. "That makes sense. Maybe it will be easier for me not to hover by then."

Kalos brushes his lips against my shoulder. "Perhaps. And perhaps this is only a new skill to learn."

The skill of mitigating my guilt. I suppose all new mothers have to deal with that.

His fangs brush over one of my mating marks, and a shiver runs down my spine. I hum and press harder against his body, needing the contact. Adapting to this new life will take time and skill, but I'm not alone, and my mate is excellent at providing healthy distractions.

“Does my queen need to be worshipped?” he asks.

“You worship me with every action.” I press my thighs together.

“As you do for me.” He drags his teeth over the skin of my neck again, an echo of when he tried to scare me away in the very beginning.

“I miss the way you feel inside of me,” I whisper. “I want to be used. I want to feel like that thief you caught stealing from your hoard.”

His chuckle is dark, and his hand slides up my inner thigh, massaging my pussy. His other hand cradles and massages my breast. I moan.

“Easy,” he says, stopping me when I try to turn in his arms. “Let me pleasure you how I want.”

I sink into the sensation of his touches, riding the rising waves of need this dragon easily stokes.

My breathing becomes choppy the longer he teases me, and I start to shift my hips without meaning to, arching my back. The hum of comfort rises in time to each movement and I sigh. Accents of bliss tantalize me until I'm clutching his hands.

“Please, Kalos, I'm so empty.”

This time when I twist in his arms to straddle him, he lets me. His lips part as his eyes devour my flushed face and breasts. Water drips down my heated skin when he clasps the back of my neck.

I rock my hips over his erections, but he guides me over his upper cock, the only one he's allowed me to take since giving birth. I'm too greedy to complain about the ridged

length and sink my hips down. The stretch makes me hiss, but feels otherworldly.

“Slowly, Rina, careful,” Kalos says, his voice deep with need, but stern.

“I can handle this,” I whisper, my eyes rolling back at the drag of the textured cock inside me when I rise up again.

He growls. “You’ll handle what I tell you to handle.”

I tense around him at that, delighting in his dominance even as it causes frustration. I keep my movements slow, the water of the tub lapping the undersides of my breasts. Kalos strums my clit with his thumb in slow circles, and I’m peaking before I mean to.

The orgasm only makes me needier to be filled exactly how I’ve craved. Kalos’s hips rock with me now, seeking his own release.

“I can take more,” I beg. “I can take your knot.”

Kalos grunts, and his healing release floods me, causing my toes to curl, but his body doesn’t relax. Not with how I’ve said the word *knot*. He’s been keeping that part of himself away from me, sweetly not wanting to push me too quickly.

But it’s left him short on control, and I’m ready to tear that bulwark down.

“Please,” I say, dragging my nails over the mating mark I left on him. “I need your claiming.”

Kalos snarls, lifting and turning me over the edge of the tub. Water splashes everywhere, but I couldn’t care less. Joy rushes through my veins that he’s going to give me what I’ve been begging for. The head of his hard lower cock presses against my pussy in circles, spreading his first release around messily.

“Is this how you wanted it, sweet queen?” Kalos asks, his tone vibrant with vicious need. A wicked part of me wants to push him farther, but he has me pinned in place.

“Fuck yes!”

He grips my hair, and I moan at the tension, the bliss of submitting to this dragon even if I pushed him to this.

Smack! I freeze at the surprising, sharp burn. Did he just—

I whip my head around and Kalos allows the action, easing the grip he has of my hair. The smile on his face is all fang in response to my wide eyes.

“Do you think I forgot about you ignoring your labor?” he asks. The ass cheek that he slapped barely stings now but is a rosy shade of pink.

My eyes widen. He’s been holding on to the threat of spanking me for seven weeks?

“I always remember my promises,” he purrs as if he can read my mind.

Something hot churns in my belly. I thought the pleasure was good, but with this added element, I’m squirming in need. My desire claws over my skin.

I gasp when he pushes his cock inside me. The thrust is slow, but this new angle and my hungry core make it more intense.

His hand comes down in another slap, and I whimper at the resulting bite.

“Do you hate this, Rina?” His voice is smug, because he knows I don’t. He can feel me as surely as I can feel his victory with each strike. “Your cunt is practically weeping.”

“More,” I whisper, and my dragon delivers. Each strike of my skin has a shiver of sensation rolling through me and an echo of his lust through the bond.

Finally, Kalos reaches the moment of breaking, and with a snarl, he fucks me with a vengeance. I moan, scream, and curse, my thoughts lost in every move he makes inside me. His knot smacks against my pussy with each thrust, and the impact leaves me wanting. This is the best sort of punishment.

I beg between gasps but am drowned out by his guttural words.

“My mate. Mine to breed. Mine to love.”

My heart would threaten to melt if I wasn't mindless with need. “Kalos, I need your knot.”

“Then take it.” Even with how rough his words are, he sinks his knot deeper into my body slowly. My pussy lips stretch to take him, and I moan from low in my chest, forcing my body to relax until it gives way to the thickest part.

I cry out as his knot locks inside me, and Kalos bellows in release. His heat fills me, the pressure of it sealed inside has me coming with a desperate cry.

I'm shaky when Kalos pulls me from over the tub edge. Our bodies stay locked together, but he situates us sitting in the water again.

“That was okay? I wasn't too rough?” Kalos asks.

“That was perfect.” I sigh in utter satisfaction. The good feelings of his body locked inside of mine soothing all the worries that continuously rise up during this adventure we're having together.

Kalos blows out a breath that tickles the back of my ear. “I can't believe you convinced me to knot you. Now we're stuck in this bath until it goes down.”

I hum, wiggling. “Feels good. I can't believe you spanked me.”

“You enjoyed it.” He chuckles before groaning in my ear. “And knotting you feels amazing.”

I hum in agreement and we both relax, spent.

Kalos kisses the back of my hand. “When your body gives me back my cock, you're going to spend the morning in your studio.”

I open my mouth to object, but he interrupts me. “No arguments. You need time working again. Don't think I haven't seen your fingers twitch for a paintbrush. Evangeline and I will play off to the side if that's what you need to feel comfortable. You won't miss a thing.”

I turn my head and kiss him softly, communicating my gratitude through the bond.

Everything is going to be alright, better than alright.

I have a place in this life that I've fought to keep, family, friends. I share my heart with a fire-breathing dragon who regards me as his most valuable treasure.

And dragons never give up their hoard.

The End

To get a bonus epilogue of Katarina and Kalos, [subscribe for my newsletter!](#)

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello Dear Reader!

Thank you for reading *Hoarded by the Dragon*!

The biggest truth of this book is that I didn't plan for it to happen. I was minding my own business planning another book when the set up for Kalos's story came to me. A thief and a dragon? Yes, please.

Now, this project was supposed to be a fun—fluffy even—short story. I can only laugh that once I met these characters, this book bloomed completely out of control and sparked a marriage of convenience book to boot. Because yes, Dear Reader, Stella and Stoneheart get a book... Ben too.

Writing is something that has become increasingly more personal for me. It's an exploration as much as it is a painstaking endeavor to create a story that will enchant those who read it. I don't always know the themes of a book before I start. It's as fun as it is frustrating, but a big part of my process is trusting that it will become what it needs to be.

This book is about grief, new beginnings, and adventure. But what this book is mostly about, is change. I, myself, am not a big fan of change. My brain would love it if my routine stayed the same day in day out, but that's not the nature of living.

We learn. We grow. Nothing remains constant. And that's scary.

But ultimately, we persevere. Either we decide to adapt, like Katarina, or we need a little push to bring us back to those who care about us, like Kalos. That's the message I really took to heart in this story.

I want to take this moment to thank my readers. You are the reason I can do this, and I am continually grateful.

A big shout out and thank you to my beta readers, Whoop and Sue, who helped shape this tale into something I'm truly proud of. Your input was invaluable, and I wish all the best things for both of you.

With the end of this project, my heart is full, and I wish everyone happy reading,

L. Lark

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lillian Lark was born and raised in the saltiest of cities in Utah. Lillian is an avid reader, cat mom to three demons, and loves writing sexy stories that twist you up inside.

More information about Lillian can be found on her website at LillianLark.com