

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CREA REITAN



HOUSE
OF AGNI
THE HAREM PROJECT

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DRAGON FIRE FANTASY

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House of Agni

The Harem Project | Book 5

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Welcome to The Harem Project. Unfortunately, this is a work of fiction. This world isn't real. Yes, I'm very sad about that.

This is a paranormal romance meets urban fantasy. What's the difference? The part of the world this story focuses on is that of the paranormal, making it largely a paranormal romance. However, it's set within the backdrop of our current world where the supernatural live side by side with humans, though they do so in secret, which also makes it an urban fantasy.

In this book, you will find monsters of all kinds. This is a monster story featuring demons filled with dark, carnivorous hunger; sea monsters that are anything but harmless mermaids; aerial monsters that bring about storms of gargantuan proportions; elemental monsters that can manipulate the earth into beasts; storm monsters that are the embodiment of natural disasters; and much, much more.

There are murderous organizations in this story. Those set on exterminating monsters as they see them as abominations. There are moments of torture, extreme fear, immense pain, abduction, and murder. This story specifically takes a look at bonding with new lovers (a lot of them) set on the backdrop of our main female lead feeling self-made guilt over the murder of her sister by the Division of Silence.

Please note that this story is told equally from all characters of the harem - Zuri is *not* the main character; there are five main characters, though you'll find that because the character with a lot of emotional hurt is male, the relationship building part of the story is largely focused on him.. That means this story is going to be equally mm and mf/mfm/mmf/etc. Why does the blurb read as if it's told from Zuri's POV primarily? Because I like the blurbs to read along the same lines! Yep, simple as that.

Within these pages you'll find a damaged hero who needs a lot of love and healing. There's a lot of affirmation and affection given to him. A cinnamon roll harem who are all super sweet. There are natural caregivers and a strong female

lead. As with all books in this series, you'll find found family as well as hurt/comfort.

You'll also find praise, pegging, a deliciously pierced demon peen as well as fascinating (and super pleasing) dragon peens. Our big dragon bottom is a strict bottom - he doesn't like his peen having attention at all, which of course, means hands-free spraying. He's also a very loud, vocal, whiny bottom that you can't help but want to lick. There's oral fixation, praise, and some marking/claiming 'mutilation' within these pages.

One last note: there is child death and abuse/torture/murder in this book. IT IS NOT IN DETAIL BUT MENTIONED. Though these children aren't human, if you've learned anything by reading these books I hope it's that those that are true monsters look just like you and me. You never know when one of them lives right next door and what they hide in their basement. Those different from you don't make them monsters or their lives any less valuable.

Because there is a moment where our characters meet with American government officials, you will hear some bashing of the government. Please keep in mind that this is a work of fiction as well as paranormal. In no way does anything within these pages depict the feelings, opinions, or beliefs of the authors. I repeat, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION.

This series has a lot of characters to try and keep track of because I enjoy a large cast. For your convenience, family unit diagrams can be found on my website. Especially since there is a lot of character crossover between books, these can be invaluable. They can also be spoiler-y if you're late to the party because they get updated with each new book release to reflect any changes.

This is a polyamorous romance, a whychoose reverse harem that isn't revolving around a single female who gets all the males' attention. There are other relationships that are just as important as those between the men and the single female, and all are featured.

If anything that you just read bothers you, it isn't what you're interested in, or you find might be triggering, please do not read this book. Otherwise, enjoy the Agni's story of finding family, love, and acceptance.

Note - This is an Amazon exclusive series. If you're reading this ebook anywhere other than through Amazon, it is a pirated copy and has been stolen! Please don't add to that.



Emrys

NOT GUILTY. THE COURTROOM BROKE OUT INTO APPLAUSE AS if this were a televised celebrity hearing. There were handshakes and hugs and words of congratulations. I was not at all surprised that our team won. The evidence against the accuser was monumental, and there was no way he could refute it.

Now he was going to live in poverty for his lies since he was responsible for a boatload of money he didn't have to begin with for false accusations, lawyer's fees, and damages. I was pretty sure my team was going to counter sue for defamation as well.

Some people were just too stupid to be cons. If you're going to lie and sue one of the biggest corporations in the northern hemisphere, then you best have a solid fucking case. This man had a hole in his case bigger than that which downed the Titanic. Not even kidding.

"Nice job, Mr. Morgan," one of my partners said, offering me his hand and gripping my shoulder. It was a struggle to keep my fire down and not burn the man. Fortunately, nonsupernaturals had the uncanny (and rather stupid) ability to explain away everything. Including another man's touch that could leave them with third-degree burns or worse. "There really wasn't any doubt."

I nodded, pumping his hand. "You did a good job. Nice solid defense. When will you be serving the papers?"

Our business had exploded in the last two years. Since I was one of three partners in the law firm, I didn't generally take cases much anymore. Instead, I got a cut of everyone else's wins. However, I usually sat in on the big ones.

My partners, Stout and Yvoric, were still very active in the cases which allowed me to tend to our business as a whole. It's not that I didn't love driving people into the ground, but especially this last year, I was afraid if I lost my temper, I'd set a courthouse on fire.

That would be a little difficult to explain away.

As if thinking about how arduous this last year had been had invited more drama, my phone pinged. Reflex made me pull it out and after seeing who it was, I tensed. I hadn't seen them in well over a year now; not since they demanded that I take the Harem Project questionnaire to make sure I matched with them.

Even so, Iskander messaged me at least once a day. And *still* my stomach flipped with that familiar sick feeling. Hurt coiled in my chest as if it were a house fire reaching out to devour anything its fingers could touch.

Without opening the message and clearing the notification on the screen, I pocketed my phone before turning to one of the lawyers on the case. "I'm going to head out. Enjoy the celebration."

"Thanks, man. We appreciate you coming to support us."

I smiled and turned for the door, bringing my scarf around my neck and heading into the mid-summer sun. Why the scarf? Because my human skin was far too sensitive for this weather. If it burned, my feathers would shine through like I was a fucking burning star. Yep, I didn't want to walk down the sidewalk on fire. That tended to cause alarm.

This I knew from experience. That was a fun day as a six-year-old. Since then, I have covered my skin no matter the temperature.

Fortunately, since I was made of fire anyway, I rarely got overheated by the sun. Biology and I weren't the best of

friends, but it had something to do with fiery down insulation that allowed me to control my own body temperature. This was a blessing and a curse.

When I was mad, the fire burned just below the surface. It could get hot enough that my skin would glow with the fire underneath.

It was a struggle I'd dealt with for the better part of a year now.

My phone pinged again, and I pressed my lips together as I stepped into my car. Pulling my phone out, I saw another notification from Iskander. He was the only one of the family that was firmly supportive of me *not* having to match them through the questionnaire.

The thing is, I took the questionnaire, but I never looked at the results. Deep down, I already knew that they wouldn't be in my life. A family filled with sea monsters when I was made of fire? Maybe I already knew that I didn't belong there. Maybe this was for the best.

I'd stopped talking to the rest of them months ago. After another argument, I tried to cut ties completely. Then Imani came to my house and said that perhaps we didn't need to match. Maybe they made a mistake in demanding that.

My response? I moved so she no longer knew where I lived. If my life wasn't so tied to my phone, I'd have changed my number too.

Five of them got the hint. Iskander had not.

I wasn't surprised. We met first. We fell in love first. I think he was just as devastated and heartbroken when Imani brought up the matching questionnaire.

Swiping the notification off the screen, I stuck my phone into its cradle and started the car. I intended to go home. To strip and stand under burning hot water until my skin was practically melting. If it wasn't just a mirage, it probably would have to some extent. I'd be covered in burns at any rate.

Instead, I found myself parking in front of the local Harem Project branch. Without even putting my car into park, I sat

there and stared. I wanted my family. I wanted to feel like I was wanted. I needed to belong somewhere.

I needed someone to celebrate my wins with and to hold me when I was feeling worthless. I needed to know someone wanted me, no matter what a fucking test said.

Yet, I knew that the questionnaire was going to find that family for me. It was such a fucking point of contention in me that I was too conflicted about it to go back. The family that I'd thought was mine had been able to turn me away because they needed a computer's damn proof that their love for me was real.

It wasn't like they were the first to throw me away, either. They were just the latest. Part of the reason I didn't go back to see the results was because I was too afraid that there wouldn't be any. Maybe I was going to break some record and the administrative manager on duty would come in and say, "I've never seen this happen before. You're the very first. There must be some glitch in the system because no results came up."

Logically, I knew that wasn't going to happen.

But there was something else. The voice of the man who I'd met when I went in to take the questionnaire for the first time. Answering the questions in the state I'd walked in meant I'd not necessarily be as honest as I needed to be. That fear kept me away.

It's kept me away for more than a year. I've done everything possible to not even drive down this street and pass the building.

So why was I sitting outside it right now?

I just came off a big case. My bank account just got fatter. I should be celebrating. Instead, I'm sitting outside the building that broke the last tether to the relationships I thought were the ones I was meant to be with. I thought that I'd finally found unconditional love. A home.

The AM had been right, though. Even before he said the words, I'd already known. If they'd asked me to take the test

for confirmation that I belonged to them, then I really didn't. They weren't my family.

Maybe it was the heartbreak of *once again* being rejected. Of something I was so sure about being ripped away, leaving another lashing on top of the others that never healed.

Hearing his words had been the final blow to end my relationship. When I left the Kaiyo's, we'd agreed that it was a temporary goodbye because I'd take the questionnaire and see that they made the cut. Even with Iskander promising me this over and over, I could feel his fear and fury. His fear that I wouldn't be coming back. His fury that his family was responsible for this.

The thing that really stung was that they weren't all matched through the Harem Project database. And they didn't all go there to test for the affirmation that they belonged together. To me, that meant one or more of them didn't want me there. I was fine to fool around with and promise empty plans for the future to, but when it came time to get serious, they didn't want me.

When I blinked away the hurt and anger that surged to the surface again, I was standing inside the waiting room. Looking around, it was the same as the last time I was here. The only difference being the person behind the desk.

It was still a man, but not the pretty blond. This one was a... fae? I tilted my head until the air around him flickered and sparkled. Yep, fae.

"Hi," he greeted me with a smile. "I'm Lieke. Welcome to The Harem Project. How can I help you?"

I shook my head and took a few steps towards him. When did I even walk inside? "I... don't know," I admitted.

Lieke nodded and gestured to the chair. I nearly fell into it. He moved toward a cabinet and opened one, returning to me with a cold bottle of water. Offering it across the desk, he sat. "You're looking a little... hot."

I glanced at my hand to see a fiery orange sheen to my skin. Frowning, I accepted the bottle of water, though that

didn't really cool me down. I stood in the sun too long. How fucking long was I outside the door? Jesus, what's fucking wrong with me?

Lieke watched me as I took several sips and concentrated on pushing the fire back. Because I was literally made of fire, it took a fair amount of control to get it to settle when I was not feeling particularly steady on my feet.

It was a dangerous thing to be in the world we're currently living in and fire monsters were public enemy number... Well, I supposed all monsters were just pretty much public enemies at this point.

"Want to talk?" Lieke asked.

I shrugged and set the bottle down. "I was here a year ago," I told him. "Emrys." Lieke nodded as if he knew that. Maybe he did. I couldn't remember all the talents a fae had. "I just... maybe I'm ready to see my results now."

Lieke smiled and got to his feet. I watched as he opened a cabinet, but paused. "A year ago, Emrys?"

I nodded.

"Would you like to look at your questionnaire again before you review the results? A lot can change in a year."

Smirking, I nodded. "Yes, that would be appreciated. Thanks."

He smiled, and I watched as his hand shifted to the higher shelf. Pulling out a tablet, he turned it on as he came back toward me. Pointing the screen in my direction, there was a square waiting for me to look into it. Once my face appeared in the camera, blue and purple lines mapped all my facial features.

Then my profile popped up.

"New technology," Lieke said, pulling it around to tap through something. Maybe opening it up for editing. "We like to keep our programs improving and your privacy is always very important."

"Thanks," I said.

He smiled, even as he moved through screens on the tablet. When he was finished, he looked at me, still smiling. “Right this way. I’ll get you settled.”

I followed him through a door that looked like a panel in the wall. The hall was a cross between something you might find in a hotel and a modern corporate building. All the doors had plaques, naming the suites within. Between every three or four rooms we passed was a window that overlooked different landscapes. It was proof enough to me that at least a handful of these sites were connected through some magic.

We stopped at Draco 8 and Lieke opened the door. The room looked pretty much the same as the last room I was in. Comfortable as I might be here for a while. Considering it took me nine hours the first time to get through it, I didn’t doubt I might be here just as long.

Lieke handed me the tablet. “Do you remember the guidelines from when you went through this initially?”

“Honesty to the point where I’m uncomfortable,” I said.

He smiled. “Yes, exactly. Since the questionnaire updates constantly based on what the bot thinks might be helpful and what programmers agree to add, you might find entirely new sections or just a few questions throughout that haven’t been answered. This isn’t anything to be concerned about that you didn’t answer them. There have been routine improvements. I’ll also remind you that you’re not required to finish it in one sitting. And we’ve added a feature where you can go back to a certain section if you remember something and want to add it where you think it best pertains. I’m actually really happy about that feature; I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard the complaint that someone has forgotten something and now can’t add it.”

“Editing should have been one of the first features, no?” I asked.

He shrugged. “One might think, but I suppose the thought behind not being able to edit is that you don’t have a chance to second guess what you’re typing. It was to facilitate honesty and not censoring what you initially entered.”

“That was a lot of pressure,” I said. “I bet people took extra time on each question because they knew they couldn’t go back.”

Lieke nodded. “Yep. Time’s cut down considerably, though it’s still on average five and a half hours.”

“I bet it would be less if you offered keyboards,” I said.

Though it was a joke, he grinned. “I have Bluetooth keyboards for those who request one.”

My brows shot up, and I laughed. “I... that might have been helpful initially, but since I’m just editing, I don’t know that it’s necessary, but thanks.”

“I find that it’s a generational thing. The younger generation grew up typing on screens where the older had keyboards. If I think to offer it, I do. You’d be surprised by the amount of those who ask for one, though.”

“Good to know.”

Lieke smiled and headed for the door. “Feel free to stretch your legs and raid the fridge. Give us a call if you get hungry and we’ll get some food delivered. You’re also welcome to take a nap if you get tired. All the things.” He waved a hand.

I nodded, and he left me in the quiet room. Looking around, I noted how different I felt this time. Maybe it wasn’t a conscious decision to come here, but it was a choice this time. I was not here proving to anyone that I belonged with them or that I didn’t.

But maybe I was here to prove to myself that I was right for someone. Whether they wanted me was an entirely different thing.



Emrys

I ERASED ENTIRE ANSWERS. SOME OF THEM I WAS CRINGING SO badly at, I was embarrassed to even read them. I was really glad I decided to edit this shit.

It was clear I had been angry and hurt when I took the questionnaire the first time. Seriously, it was bad. Ugly. Reading some of my responses reminded me of some of the little things I'd forgotten about the Kaiyos.

They weren't bad people. I constantly needed to remind myself of that because I truly believed it. I just wasn't right for them. The only one I truly missed at this point was Iskander. My heart still bled for him. And I knew by the way he messaged me all the time that he did for me.

This was a perfect situation where I wasn't meant to be with the entire family, but I could have had a very happy life with a single man from that family. He was still one of my favorite people; one of my biggest regrets and deepest heartaches.

I tried to remain friends with him. But seeing him was far too difficult. I couldn't do it. There was no way I could see him and pretend that I didn't love him.

Still.

Which only brought me back to the idea that this was still a mistake. Could I really look at my results and find a family that I belonged with? Was it possible that I could find someone

that could overwrite how I felt for a single man? Would it be fair to go into something knowing how I felt about someone else?

Maybe the question that I feared the most was one I was too afraid to truly ask myself: was it possible to find a family and *everyone* wanted me? Not a single man more than the others. Not two or three of five. All of them.

I'd been staring at the screen for eight minutes now. I wasn't at all watching the clock tick the minutes by. It took me just over three hours to get through the questionnaire the second time because, while some of my responses were absolute horror shows, many of them weren't. The 'congratulations, you've completed The Harem Project matching program questionnaire' screen stared at me. All I had to do was press the button to call on the AM.

Instead, I was staring at the words. Afraid of what I'd find when handed the results.

Was I going to run again? Finish the questionnaire for the second time and then disappear once more? That felt awfully cowardly, even in my fear of what I may or may not find. I wasn't sure which was worse—the idea of not matching with anyone or the idea that I'd find a family that I felt I belonged to and they wouldn't want me.

Since that seemed to be the pattern of my life, that was now my biggest fear. Falling in love and then being thrown away.

Finally, I tapped the button that called for the AM and turned off the tablet. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on breathing instead of letting my fire out. I was sitting in a fucking flammable room, and that would be disastrous.

It wasn't long before there was a knock at the door. When I answered, I found Lieke still here. "Do you live here?"

He chuckled. "Twenty-four-hour shift. I work two a week which gives me five days a week off."

"I don't hate that idea."

Lieke smiled and followed me into the room, letting the door shut behind him. “How’d it go? How do you feel about the questions this time around?”

“Better,” I admitted.

“You still look uneasy,” he said.

I gave him a wry smile. “Yeah. Lifetime of disappointment, I’m afraid.”

Lieke nodded and turned on the tablet he was holding. “I’m confident that’s going to change today,” he said quietly, resting a hand on my arm. I’m reminded of the previous guy who did that. My fire must be down since he didn’t flinch away.

“There are only success stories here, huh?” I’m slightly fishing for assurance.

“Mostly, yes. Those who fail the program do so because they lied or purposefully left out pertinent information on the questionnaire. Thus why we emphasize honesty to the point where you’re horrified of your own answers.”

I chuckled, but there was still tension in my shoulders.

“It’s alright, Emrys,” he said quietly. “I’m very confident your life is about to change for the better.”

“You think so?” I didn’t mean for the vulnerability to leak out in those words, but I could hear them clear as day.

“I do. Sometimes you just know when someone walks into the door, they’re going to walk out having met their family. One reason I work this job is because I love to be a part of that. I love to see happily ever afters start here.”

“I’ve been in here before. I didn’t walk out happy.”

He chuckled. “You weren’t ready before. You are now. There’s a difference. If you’d have been ready before, you’d have looked at your results. Since you didn’t, you weren’t ready.”

“You could see that?” I asked, glancing at him a little warily.

Lieke chuckled. “We have cameras outside the door. Facial recognition. If you have a profile with us, it comes up. It’s really a safety precaution because of the prevalence of ORKA spreading throughout the world.”

“If I didn’t have a profile?”

“Depends. If you pop up in the database of known ORKA agents, you’re apprehended. Don’t ask what happens to you at that point. It’s out of my job description to know. Otherwise, you’re assessed through conversation, and we tend to take a leap of faith. We also lock doors. Just in case. Besides that, you’re a firebreather; a supernatural. The chances you were with ORKA were already slim.”

“You can tell all that through the camera?” I asked, surprised.

He grinned. “Yes, and no. Your profile notes that you had fire in your eyes when you were here last. It didn’t take Bronte long to note that you’re a firebird. The fact that I could see your feathers of fire when you walked in only solidified that.”

I laughed and closed my eyes. “Good to know I’m sucking at this whole camouflage thing these days.”

“It’s alright. We all go through shit from time to time. It wasn’t that long ago that my entire family was falling apart. Those were rough days, and we all made mistakes. We were less aware and less careful than we should have been. Part of belonging to this community is that there are always those around you to have your back when you need it.”

I smiled, really liking this man. “Thanks. I needed to hear that.”

He patted my back. “Okay, let’s see what we have here.” Lieke went through the screens and showed me different features, explaining what I needed to know about highlights and note taking. How I could remove a family from the list if I felt like I didn’t fit well with them for whatever reason. He showed me how to sort the results by distance, alphabetically, genders within the harem, size of the harem, and everything

else I could possibly think of. There was even a check box for those with a pierced dick.

Not going to lie, I was tempted to see that just out of curiosity.

“When the list is long, I like to remind those who come in that what this means is that you would be a perfect fit for any of these families. All of them, even. But don’t get too distracted by the number of names you see. What matters is how you feel about them when you open their files. This list means your match with them, your compatibility with them, is so incredibly high that the computer is convinced that you’d find a forever with any of these families. It’s up to you to weed through them and find *yours*. Because it’s definitely here.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, my voice catching.

“The only times the bot is wrong is if you weren’t honest,” he said. There’s no question in his statement. He didn’t ask if I felt like maybe I wasn’t honest or whether I felt confident with my answers as they were. He trusted that I was honest.

It was really a good thing I didn’t look last time. It’s not that I wasn’t honest then. I was. But I was so angry that’s the only thing anyone would feel when reading my profile.

Once Lieke left me alone, I allowed myself to really look at the list. I was breathless seeing that there weren’t just a handful but almost a hundred results. It was overwhelming and yet, there was a part of me that was relieved to see that there were a lot of results. For a minute, I was caught by the enormity of this.

There’s some reassurance in front of me right now. Lieke’s words drifted through my head and I played them on repeat. My family was here. All I had to do was find them.

The only filter I put on was the one to alphabetize the list. Out of curiosity, I scrolled to the K and was unsurprised to see that Kaiyo didn’t make the list. What I was surprised about was that it didn’t hurt like I thought it might. The devastation that I’d have felt last year, even knowing that they weren’t going to come up, never hit.

I still felt the loss of Iskander. My heart hurt at knowing I've lost him for good. But it wouldn't have mattered if House of Kaiyo made the list, anyway. After they pushed me to do this, I wouldn't have chosen them. I wasn't good enough on my own for them to love me and make me a permanent part of their family. No bot was going to convince me that they're right for me after the fact.

The reality was they weren't then and they're not now.

Scrolling back up, I determined that the best way to go through a list this long was to begin at the top. House of Agni was the first. Considering Agni means fire, it seemed like a good place to begin.

Clicking on their profile, I was met with three of the most beautiful men I'd ever seen. My breath caught so thoroughly that it took me a solid half a minute to gain control of my lungs again and force myself to breathe.

My results with this family were so high, it might as well have been a perfect match. There were little species designations next to their pictures in the top corner. Nothing that would give a nonsupernatural pause, but for me, who grew up in the world of monsters, I knew what I was looking at.

Fable, a dragon, with the most stunning eyes I've ever seen. They're such a bright gray, they're almost silver. The reflection of his dragon within them was intense. His hair was neat and pushed to the side. His face was all masculine lines with a path of hair trailing his jaw.

He's so fucking stacked with veiny arms and smooth skin that my cock twitched just looking at him. I matched with him 99%.

Julian, also a dragon, was completely different from Fable. His eyes are deep brown and so mesmerizing. There's a shadow of growth all over his jaw, lower cheeks, and around his perfect pink lips. He wore glasses that framed his pretty eyes and his hair was also neatly brushed to the side.

He's smaller than Fable. Trim with quieter defined muscles. His chest had a light scattering of dark hair, as did his lower stomach, where it disappeared into his jeans. I matched with Julian 100%.

While I expected the third man to be a dragon as well, I was surprised when I found a djinn. Yarak's hair was blond and looked like he kept running his hands through it. His face covered in a week's worth of messy growth. His eyes were such a stunning light brown that I thought they're nearly hazel.

His body nearly matched Julian's, but he's smooth. Our match was 99%.

I didn't even want to move on from the profile page where their bare minimum stats stared up at me. The way my heart raced and my breath caught, how my fire reached for them... it's all so very... unsettling.

Overwhelming. Consuming. As if everything inside of me was saying that these men were mine.

But a voice in my head said I felt like that before. I've been convinced of that before. And I've been thrown away before.

"This is different," I muttered to no one. "There's data and whatever other kind of proof that they're... right for me. That they'll want me too."

Just like the Kaiyos did at first.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I flicked the screen so I could continue into their profile. Reading about each man. Every single word sank into my fire, making it burn hotly. Vividly. With such a strong, steady flame, it was difficult to think that there would ever be anyone other than them.

But what if they didn't want me? What if I choose them and then they read my profile and decided I was not good enough?

I continued to read, trying to ignore all the voices warring inside me when my fire pulsed with one thing: I belonged with House of Agni. They were mine. They were always mine. They're my matching flames. They breathed the same fire.

They were also remarkable people. Strong and happy with a big group of friends and active in a lot of civil groups. Different communities and charities. Their relationships were strong, healthy, and beautiful. I stared at their candid pics for so long, I swear I could see them blink.

And when I got to the dick pics, my cock was too fucking hard. Dragon's cocks were... not at all human. And the djinn's? Yarak's? Let's just say that if I had put on the filter for pierced dicks, he'd be top on the list.

Without looking at any other family, I hit the call button and then nearly freaked out. Was I really doing this? Was this really happening? Was I going to put myself out there to be rejected again?

The knock on the door almost made me fall off the couch, which would have been both impressive and ridiculous considering my back was pressed to the cushion. Jumping up, I threw the door open so that I was facing Lieke again.

His smile turned to concern. "You look like you're going to jump out a window, Emrys. What happened?"

"I just... Tell me again that these results are good. That I can trust what I read."

His concern turned soft. I was surprised when he rested his hand over my chest, my heart. "What do you feel?"

I swallowed, trying to catch my breath. "I think... I think I found my family, but I've been wrong. So many times."

Lieke nodded, his hand moving to my head. I closed my eyes as I leaned into his touch. Fuck, I was so touch starved. His comfort, his assurance, bled into me.

"It's okay," he said quietly. "It's different this time, right? You're not leaving anything to chance. You can see that they're perfect for you. And if your fire dances with their names? You know that they're yours."

"What if they don't feel that way?" I whispered.

"I've been working here for forty years. Not once have I seen that happen. When you know, you know. Do you know?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. Opening my eyes, I met his. “Yes. I want the House of Agni.”

His grin spread. “Fuck yeah. Aw, honey, you’re going to love them. I’m so fucking glad you’re here, Emrys. They’ve been waiting for you.”

I choked on the emotion in my throat. “Do you know them?”

“I do. Very well. They’re some of my best friends. And Emrys? Look at me. Are you listening?” I nodded. “You’re perfect for them.”



Fable

BECAUSE WE'RE NOT ENTIRELY SURE ABOUT ALL THE MAGIC that ORKA had, I was careful when flying around. Which was somewhat difficult since I was so damned big. It's not bad when I was in the sky on a cloudy day, but the sun was shining bright over clear skies. It made scouting a little more challenging.

Fortunately, my ability to cloak and conceal was innate. Dragons would have been hunted by every species on Earth if the world knew we weren't just monsters in fairy tales. I couldn't remember the last time a dragon actually held a princess prisoner in a castle's highest tower. We left that stuff for the dragons who dwell within monarchies.

Instead, we hunted in secret.

There's magic in the world that made our kind invisible to the naked eye, regardless of whether that species used their own magic or whether it's borrowed, stolen, or given. Since there were dangerous nonmagicals possessing magic and hunting supernaturals, I tended to be a little more careful.

A year ago, I wouldn't have worried about it. But since Silence had produced nets that can force an enraged, energy-maxed storm into their human form... I was a little more wary of my surroundings. I was a very different kind of creature and it's possible that those same nets wouldn't work on me.

For starters, this was my true form. I'm a dragon. I was born a dragon, in this shape, from a fucking egg. If they're going to force me into any shape, it would be this one.

And good luck containing my fucking fire. It burnt hotter than what the world generally thought of when someone said fire. It's so hot, it matched my silvery eyes.

However, dragons weren't invincible. No matter how big and badass we were. We're hunted, and I knew better than anyone that Silence was producing weapons that could pierce our thick scales. One of my back feet was never going to be the same again.

Not that I'd ever complain about that injury when I lost my sister while making it out of there with only a lame foot. That was the day I realized that our species was less indestructible than we'd come to think of ourselves as.

There weren't necessarily many stronger species, but there were weaker ones creating massive weapons. While we liked to say that these weak species weren't a threat, the fact they've hunted down so many of the apex species to extinction or near extinction said otherwise. The weaklings were now the apex predator. What they lacked in physical strength, they've made up for in weapons fueled by their own bigotry and fear.

Those were dangerous combinations. And monsters had been complacent for far too long before doing something about it. I was no different. Not until it affected my friends and those I love. Not until I was fucking abducted from a damned escape room, caught unaware.

Now it's personal.

It's sad that it took being personally affected (twice for me) before we did something about it. In some ways, there was a whole lot of blood on our hands and lives at our feet. This was what happened when the world looked the other way because something wasn't directly affecting them. We might not have been physically taking lives or contributing to the deaths, but we were just as responsible for looking the other way to keep the attention off of us.

For the last just over two years, we're no longer waiting to be attacked and responding. It seemed that one family after another was becoming the target of either Silence or ORKA. Sometimes both. It took nearly losing many lives, mine

included, before we pulled our heads out of the sky and decided to focus our attention on fighting back.

Like attracted like. Strength tended to build with others of their own power or greater. Because of that, my closest friends and their families were some of the greatest monsters around. Four of which had been directly attacked now, plus three others by happenstance for being with someone who was a target.

There were a lot of questions we had, but right now, my family was focused on ORKA. Together with the Darkyns, Nashes, Aves, and Wyns, our primary focus these days was hunting down every single ORKA agent and agency and putting targets over their heads.

Once we were relatively certain that we had located and identified the majority of them, the process of eliminating each branch, each person, would begin. There was a time when I might have argued that the agents just didn't know better. They've been fed a line of shit through propaganda.

I no longer cared. They attacked and killed (and according to Jennings, experimented on and tortured) monsters for no reason other than they could. We're not living beings to them. We're toys. Beasts. Rabid animals.

The fact they'd gained magic to help them with their extermination plan really pissed me off. The entire supernatural world was faced with the danger that was Silence. Why the fuck would they make humans a threat too? We didn't need to be splitting our attention on two different fronts.

I'd been circling one of the buildings for a long time. ORKA had always been easily recognizable by their black and white doors. No matter the color of the house, their doors were distinct. It's come to light that they've changed that now. No longer are we looking for the black cat in a sea of orange tabbies. Now we're looking for a needle in a barrel of rice.

Diving into the body of water, I remained still for just a few seconds. Watching the sea life pass as I held my breath. A shark meandered my way, their body swaying and shifting

elegantly in the water. It hovered close, and I touched our noses together, predator to predator, then it moved on.

Sharks were remarkable creatures. Those in this part of the world recognized dragons readily, knowing that we weren't a threat, but we could be. I hovered under the water for a while longer, staring through the shifting surface to the world above me. Waiting for vibrations from the land to reach me through the water.

ORKA facilities were never just the house they appeared to be. More often than not, there were underground holding facilities. That meant supernatural prisoners. Supernaturals being tortured. I waited to feel their screams or cries or growls. Anything at all.

I was too far away. The only thing I was certain about was that this was indeed one of their facilities. I'd been watching it for the last few days, and I'd seen enough agents walk in, dragging a head or a body under the cover of night to convince me.

Propelling myself up, I broke the surface and created a fountain of water that anyone looking would have thought a sea monster just broke through and vanished. I couldn't remember which body of water I was in right now. Which outlet this was. Big enough for sharks, but I wasn't in the wide ocean.

It didn't matter. I'd already pinged it.

I headed home with a yawn, a sound that filled the sky with echoes that sounded like plates within the earth's crust were shifting. I really loved being massive.

My flight home was uneventful, and I dropped into the backyard before beginning the process of shrinking down. When I wasn't under high stress, this process was a little faster than today. I could always force myself back into the man I pretended to be, but since it wasn't necessary, I let it happen more naturally.

When I was finally standing on two feet, I moved to the sliding back door and stepped inside. My husbands were

already there, waiting in the kitchen while they moved around making dinner. Yarak looked up, then down my body, before looking up again.

“Hey, sexy reptile,” he said.

I grinned. “Hey, demon sugar. What’s for dinner?”

“You, if you don’t get clothes on. You know the sight of that fucking dragon cock just *does things* to me.”

Grinning, I stopped long enough to kiss both men, rub my dick against Yarak’s bubble butt, and then headed to grab a pair of sweatpants. I washed the salt water from my hands and face before returning to the kitchen. I expected to find them attending to what they had been, but both my men were frozen with Julian on the phone.

I turned off the stove since Julian was clearly not paying attention to it anymore and then stared at him. His eyes were wide, his breath shaky.

“What happened?” I asked. “Who called?”

Preparing for the worst, ready to run to the rescue, Yarak just shook his head. “I don’t think it’s that kind of call,” he whispered. “But... it’s Lieke.”

I nodded. That didn’t mean much. Biting the inside of my lip, hoping Jennings and the rest of the Wyns were okay, I watched every tick of movement on Julian’s face.

“Yes. Send it over,” he said and pulled the phone away from his ear as we all heard the telltale beeping that told us the call was ending.

For another second, he didn’t move. Didn’t look at us, but stared at the wall. Then all three of our phones pinged at the same time.

That seemed to snap Julian out of it, and he looked at us. “Lieke said... there’s a man at his office. *Ours*. He just sent the profile.”

My heart leapt as my entire body broke out in chills. Yarak reached for me, pulling me close so he could wrap around me. He liked being held. Being loved.

“Sorry. I should have—”

“No,” I said, interrupting Julian. “You know how these things are.” Patting Yarak’s hair, I shifted so I could bring him into my arms. “Come here.”

Julian wrapped around us, kissing the side of Yarak’s face, and then we remained like that for several minutes. “A husband?” Yarak asked at last. “Not a wife.”

“However we grow to completion is fine,” Julian assured him, nuzzling into the side of his face. “Lieke said he’s perfect for us. A pretty firebird who... needs us. Just as you’ll see that we need him.”

Yarak took a breath, and I could literally feel the way he released the moment of doubt. Demons were filled with hollows. Dark corners. For a fire demon, he also had the strong compulsion to latch onto those who breathe fire like he did. The pull in two separate directions, where demons were constantly alone, while the fire fed him the urge to find like flames; it meant that Yarak had a rare moment of uncertainty when something in his life was shifting dramatically.

It didn’t happen often, but then, we’ve been three for a very, very long time.

“Ready to look, sugar?” I asked.

Yarak smirked at me, planting a kiss on my cheek and reaching down to cup my ass. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Julian said, running his fingers through Yarak’s silky locks. It really didn’t matter how Yarak styled his hair. The amount of times Julian and I ran our hands through it meant that it was always a windswept-looking mess. We couldn’t help it, though. He was so... soft.

We didn’t step back, but waited for Julian to bring his phone around and open the app. The notification on the screen read ‘Your potential mate’s profile. Click to view.’

With a collective breath, we clicked the button and the man’s face filling the screen was simply breathtaking.

“Wow,” Yarak breathed. “He looks like an Abercrombie model.”

I snorted. He did. He so did!

“Emrys Morgan,” I murmured as Julian swiped the screen. “Holy fucktail. Look at our matches!” I’d seriously never seen such a high match. Overall was 100%. Overall!! Two of our individual scores were a little less, but every part that ranked by the algorithm was 97% or higher.

“He’s ours,” Yarak murmured, leaning his head on my shoulder as we started sweeping through the screens. He repeated it a dozen more times until we got to the last page. That’s where we stared.

The last question of the questionnaire never changed. It was always some variation of ‘is there anything else you’d like to add?’

“I want absolute certainty. When I walk in, if I’m yours, take me by the neck and pin me against the wall. Fuck me until I *know* I’m yours. And don’t take it back,” Julian read.

There was a pause, but I knew that we all felt the same thing. Something that had been niggling at the edges of my mind. Something hinted at as we read each word.

“He’s been hurt,” Yarak said quietly, his finger brushing the side of the phone as if his touch would soothe Emrys through the device. “Poor, sweet fiamma.”

Swiping once more, we came to look at the contract. Rooming. Just that that told us he wasn’t sure. He was scared. You didn’t ask for the whole cart when you thought you weren’t even going to get passage to begin with.

“Let’s bring him home,” I said.

Julian nodded as he scrolled through the contract. His deep brown eyes met mine. I knew what he was going to say, but I shook my head.

“No,” I said, kissing his lips. “I fear that he’s going to feel like we’re taking sympathy on him when it’s very obvious he’s been hurt.”

“A lot,” Yarak growled.

“We need to assure him through him being here and seeing it. Not a contract that promises that we will be. It’s important that he comes to that conclusion on his own. He needs to be able to trust that we’re not going anywhere, by choice,” I said.

Julian sighed. “I get that. I do. But... I also want him to know that we’re never letting him go. He’s our flame. This is his home. We are his mates. Always.”

“Call Lieke,” I said. “Let’s bring our titus home.”

Julian clicked out of the app and called Lieke. He answered with, “Tell me you’re taking this man, Agnis.”

I chuckled.

“You never had a doubt about that,” Julian said, and I was happy to hear the confidence back in his voice. “Tell me something. When you’ve spoken to him...”

“Yes,” Lieke said. “There’s a very long note in his profile that we keep. He was... well, let’s just say that I think this man has been through a lot and it always turns out that he’s left feeling unwanted. He presents as very put together. Strong. Confident. But I think that a lot of that is his fiery armor. He needs you. He needs your love.”

I shivered and closed my eyes. I already loved this man. Emrys. He was branded on my heart with a hot iron. Right next to Julian and Yarak. I could feel it.

“We thought so,” Julian said. “Though he never came out and said as much in his profile, there are a lot of hints about him hurting. We’ll sign the contract as is. When can he come?”

Lieke chuckled. “Patience, firebreathers. Let me see what he needs to wrap up here. I get the impression he’s not just a convenience store worker where he can just walk away without worrying about cutting ties. He certainly dresses like he’s important.”

“He’s a corporate lawyer,” Yarak said. “You’re right. But make sure he knows that we’re fucking excited and stupidly

impatient to have him in our arms. Where he's never going to be free again."

"Less stalkery and obsessive, though," Julian said. "But yeah. That."

Lieke laughed.

"Will you put our family on hiatus for a while too?" Julian said. "I think Emrys needs our full attention, and we're going to make sure that all he knows is how long we've waited for him to come home. No interruptions."

"Yep. See you soon, Agnis. I'm really happy for you."

The call ended but we remained huddled together with our arms around each other as Julian pulled up Emrys's file again. For a very long time, we just looked at the face of our man who already owned us before he even stepped foot in our door.



Julian

LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER AND OUR MAN WAS ON his way. He'd be here any minute now. My husbands and I were waiting on the covered deck out front, as close as I'd allow us to be without standing at the end of our driveway.

For the last few years, we've been convinced that the next and last member of our family would be our wife. Yet, one look at Emrys's profile and we knew that we'd been wrong. We'd been waiting for him all along. Every single part of me could feel it. He's been missing from our lives for far too long.

"At the risk of sounding whiny... When is he going to be here?" Fable asked.

I chuckled, pulling him closer. I kissed the side of his head. "Soon. Lieke texted me an hour ago, and they were about seventy minutes away. Patience, baby."

He sighed dramatically, and while it was for show, I knew he was impatient. Fable was as impatient as a man could be. He was the epitome of needing instant gratification. Hell, Fable was a lot of things that almost seemed counterintuitive to what one might think by looking at him.

Our property was surrounded by large, old-growth trees. A perimeter of them circled our house, splitting for the driveway alone. Even that had an archway of branches that made our property look almost magical.

Though the forest continued on three sides, our house being tucked right into it, there were only two rows in the front. Because we required privacy at all times, being

firebreathers who frequently walked around half-cocked in hybrid form, there was also a thick growth of shrubbery, greens, and flowers between the trees at the front of our property.

Because of this, any noise from traffic was almost nonexistent. But so was anyone who didn't pull into the driveway.

I saw Lieke step through the arch and meet my eyes. Patting both husbands on the leg, I slipped from the large lounge we'd been anxiously waiting on.

"He's here," Yarak murmured.

They remained where they were, though I knew it was difficult for both of them. Heading down the porch steps, I nodded and Lieke disappeared behind the wall of green. As soon as my foot hit the stone walkway, Emrys came into view. My breath caught as his dark eyes met mine. He was stunning in his pictures, but in person?

Wow!

There was a slow hesitation in his step, tension in his shoulders. Though he tried to appear confident, I could practically see his nerves radiate off him as if they were steam.

We met about halfway down the sidewalk, and I immediately stepped into his space. The last thing he wrote within his profile flashed before my eyes and my chest clenched. It's not that I was opposed to fucking upon meeting, but despite his written words, that's not what he really needed.

Without closing the distance entirely, I brought my hand to his arm and brushed my fingers down. I could feel the way his fire tripped and lurched at my touch. At his anxiety. His fear. My fingers fell into his palm, making his hand twitch, and I laced our fingers together.

My other hand went to his cheek, the tips of my fingers grazing his cheekbone and then moving into his hair. His lips parted as my mouth hovered over his.

"I recall quite clearly what you requested upon meeting, Emrys." His breath caught before he exhaled shakily.

“However, that’s not what you need.” He flinched. I could feel him stiffen and begin to recoil. I held him firmly. “What you need is to know you belong here—wanted and loved. That you’re mine; ours. My beautiful inferno, every last inch of your body belongs to me. And we will spend every day reassuring you that this is your home and we’ve been waiting for you our entire lives. Do you understand?”

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

My thumb gently brushed over his cheekbone. His dark navy eyes glistened in the sun, the fire inside him dancing hotly. “About which part?”

“All of it.”

Oh, this sweet, broken soul. I’m going to set every last person who’s damaged him on fire and watch them burn. “Every word, Emrys. We will make sure you understand this every single day. Nothing will change tomorrow or next week. Not next year or in ten years. Your fire is mine to command, to own.”

He trembled, his eyes closing. I pulled him close, wrapping my arms around him. Though his touch was hesitant, he immediately hugged me in return. His tension didn’t leave him. It would take more than the first two minutes of meeting for him to trust what I said.

For a while, I just held him there before remembering Lieke. Glancing up, I found him leaning against a tree—the damn thing becoming covered in bright white flowers that have never grown there before; fucking fae—and smiling at us. Returning his smile, I gave him a nod. He didn’t have to stay. He safely delivered our man and for that, we’d forever be in debt. Regardless, that it was his job.

I waited until Lieke pulled two suitcases through the arch and placed them under the tree he’d made bloom before disappearing again.

“Come with me,” I said. “Time to get you out of the sun and meet our other hotheads.”

His quiet huff of laughter made me smile. I had noticed his face was already turning bright, but I knew it wasn't a blush. His sensitive skin had already been exposed to the sun for far too long and his fiery feathers were bleeding through.

He met my eyes as I pulled back, and I could finally see something other than fear in them. Hope. I kissed his lips gently, feeling the way he shivered and his breath became shaky. "It's alright, beautiful. You're home now. You're never leaving again."

Even small and unsure, his smile was perfectly lovely. So sweet. So hurt. I hated how I could see that hurt shining through as brightly as it did.

Linking our hands again, I led him to the porch. I'd have to make sure Fable and Yarak knew how very good they'd been by remaining just where I needed them to be. Their eyes were trained on Emrys, staring with such desire and adoration that not even our hurting Emrys could miss it.

Once under the shade of the porch, I pulled his scarf off and dropped it on the chair. Then I pulled off his jacket, revealing his arms in a short-sleeved white shirt. I hung the jacket over the arm. "We're protected here. You don't need to cover so thoroughly unless you want to. Okay?"

Emrys nodded.

Then I urged him onto the lounge between Yarak and Fable. Both of my men wrapped around him completely and started cooing to him. Their touches were soft and slow, giving Emrys every opportunity to tell them to stop. Their fingers brushed his jaw and lips and hair. Over his eyes where tears clung and down his neck. Over his stomach and chest, down his arms and tracing his fingers, palms, and veins. All the while, the sweet words never stopped.

"You're finally home."

"We've missed you, titus, my burning bird. So much."

"Finally here. You fit so perfectly between us."

"You smell like fresh air and fire. Perfectly sweet."

“Feel the way my fire dances for you? Reaching for yours?”

I climbed on the lounge behind Yarak, drawing Emrys’s face toward mine. He’d been looking between the two of them, lips parted, tears clinging to his eyes though, he refused to shed them. “You okay? Do you need some space?”

“No,” he whispered. I’d yet to hear his voice in full. “I don’t want to be let go.”

Yarak and Fable took that to mean that they could get closer. I didn’t think it was entirely possible, but they managed to smooch him further. Emrys laughed quietly, closing his eyes and clinging to them, his hands buried in their shirts.

“Never let you go.”

“Never, ever. Forever right here with us.”

“Between us.”

“Letting us love you and spoil you.”

“Pretty firebird. So pretty. I can’t wait to see you burn through the air, titus.”

Resting my chin on Yarak’s shoulder, I watched Emrys for any sign that he became uncomfortable as they continued to smother him in affection. But it was clear that he wasn’t at all feeling claustrophobic. The tension he’d been carrying relaxed. He was a sponge, soaking up all the adoration that they were laying on him.

Starved for it.

What happened to him that left him feeling this way? So unwanted. So untrusting of the promises we freely gave him. Of what we already promised by accepting his proposed contract.

I was beginning to doubt that it was a single incident. More than once, something broke his fragile heart and now he was afraid to trust what his fire, his bird, and his heart were telling him. That he belonged here. He was ours. We were never going to let him go, nor go a day where he’d think

anything other than that our love for him was fucking pure and absolute.

One step at a time.

When his stomach growled, Yarak and Fable instantly stopped talking. Both sets of eyes dropped to his stomach, making a beautiful blush creep along his cheeks.

“You’re hungry,” Fable said. He planted a kiss on his cheek and pulled himself from the lounge. “Let’s go. Time to feed you.”

We followed Fable into the kitchen. By the time we joined him less than a minute later, he already had a dozen sausages out, a pan on the stove with a whole mound of butter in it to melt.

Yarak kissed Emrys’s cheek next and headed to the sink to wash his hands before chopping the onions into julienne strips. I squeezed Emrys’s hand before following. Washing my hands and then preparing the sausages for the oven that was already preheating.

Emrys washed his hands a minute later and then moved closer.

“You don’t need to cook tonight,” Yarak said, his voice quiet. Gentle. Soothing like only a demon can be. The kind of tone that will seduce you into letting him possess you.

“I’d like to,” Emrys said, and the three of us turned. His gaze moved between us and a soft smile touched his lips.

“There are peppers in the fridge,” I said. “Grab a few? Chop them into thin strips?” I held up a bit of onion so he could see the size we were going for.

Emrys nodded and opened the fridge. It didn’t take him long to find the drawer with the peppers. Keeping him in my peripheral as I wrapped the sausages with strips of bacon and placed them on a rack over a tray, I saw his eyes widen and then a smile split his face. “Which kinds of peppers?”

“Any kind,” Fable said. “We can never have enough heat.”

“But also some bell, because they’re big and crunchy,” Yarak said.

Emrys nodded and pulled out three different colored bell peppers plus a handful of different smaller, hotter peppers. I spotted a few different types.

We worked quietly as Fable toasted buns in the toaster oven, slathered them with aioli, and then topped them with cheese. Yarak sauteed the onions and peppers. And I watched the sausages in the oven.

Dinner was plated within twenty minutes. These were the best kinds of meals—quick and delicious. After putting together eight sausage, onion, and pepper sandwiches, we stood in the kitchen and ate.

By that, I meant we surrounded Emrys and fed him, each of us taking turns to lick the bit of grease, cheese, or aioli that caught at the corner of his mouth. A heat remained on his cheeks that had nothing to do with his sun-kissed skin showing off his fiery feathers.

We made it through a ninth before the four of us were full, having shared all of them and hand fed our new man. When Emrys licked my lips of aioli, Fable pulled him forward with a growl, sealing his mouth in a kiss.

It wasn’t deep or anything. Because that’s not the kind of beast our dragon was. Despite being the apex predator of most land and air monsters, he’s deceptively soft. Rare to find in a dragon.

When he released our flushing firebird, he yawned and then laughed. “Sorry. It’s been a very long day.”

“Then let’s go to bed,” I said. “We’ll just put the food away and the rest can wait until morning.”

Fable nodded, keeping Emrys in his arms. Yarak stuck the onions and peppers into a container while I handled the sausage. With both in the fridge, we headed upstairs.

“There are four bedrooms,” I said as we moved down the hall. “We only use the one primary, but you’re free to—”

“No,” he said quietly, shaking head vehemently. “I’d rather stay with you.”

Yarak wrapped his arm around Emrys’s hips, pulling him tight. “If you want to sleep alone, we’ll always be right here whenever you wake up. Don’t ever doubt that, fiamma. Now that we finally found you, we will never let you go. We’ll never leave.”

I could tell by the way he swallowed, Yarak had hit on something. Emrys nodded as we stepped into the bedroom.

“Do you want a shower?” Fable asked. “I know you’ve spent a lot of the day traveling.”

Emrys nodded again. “Thanks.”

We ushered him into the bathroom and gave him what was probably an overwhelming tour of a small space. Yarak turned the water on and faced him. “Can I wash you, Emrys?”

I stood by the door, watching.

Emrys nodded, his lower lip between his teeth.

“You can tell me no,” Yarak said. “Me wanting you here isn’t dependent on whether you let me do something. I only want to take care of you. I don’t—”

“Yes,” Emrys said. “You can wash me. If you want to.”

Yarak grinned. “I want to.” He moved in close before Emrys could do anything else and gently removed all of his clothing before ushering him into the shower. Then he stripped himself.

The bright colors of our Agni house seal over his heart always made me smile. Mine and Fable’s were in the same place. One day, we hoped Emrys would want a matching one.

Yarak was always a sight to behold. The man was just fucking sexy. Not that you could expect anything less from a demon. An ugly demon couldn’t seduce you into being his puppet quite as easily as a hot one.

Emrys’ eyes stared at the house seal for a minute before dropping to Yarak’s cock that was more metal than cock, it

seemed. Okay, that was an exaggeration, but... Well, it was a work of art. He was half hard because he always was.

He was also all business as he held out two different body washes for Emrys to sniff and choose from. After deciding, Yarak took a body glove and dropped to his knees. Starting at Emrys's feet, he washed our new man thoroughly. Every single inch, leaving nothing untouched. When his front was done, he pulled Emrys against him, chest to chest, and started washing his back.

Fable leaned into my side, and I wrapped him up in my arms. He sighed. "I can feel his bruises from here."

I nodded. "I know. There are dark spots in his fire. I'd be willing to bet there are dark spots on his bird where his fire's gone out."

He swallowed and rested his head on my shoulder. "I want to heal him."

"We will, baby. We will. It's just going to take some time and a lot of reassurance."

Fable sighed. "Yeah."

I chuckled as we watched Yarak wash Emrys's hair and then his face. So softly, as if he were dealing with a newborn, his touch to Emrys's face was like the softest of pets against my heart. So sweet.

Yarak was usually just a fun-loving goofball, who was passionate about life, about those he loved, friends and family, and about protecting his tribe. It's not often that this side of him comes out. The side that is all about taking care of someone.

I often mused it might come out more often if I wasn't around. Both my husbands defer to me in that sense, allowing me to take care of them. Because Yarak is comfortable in both roles, he cares for Fable with me, but allowed me to take care of him.

Right now, he's all about giving Emrys exactly what he needs. The soft, sweet touches. The quiet affirmations. Every assurance, both verbally and physically.

Once he pulled him out of the shower, Yarak set about drying Emrys off, just as thoroughly as he washed him. “I have lotion,” Yarak said, pulling a bottle from the closet. “It’s for feathers.”

Emrys’s eyebrows went up as he glanced at us. “You don’t have feathers.”

Yarak grinned. “Some of our closest friends are aerial monsters. All of them have feathers. When you chose us, we grilled them for information on care. You firebirds aren’t very common, since your existence is a direct contradiction of everything about you. Feathers and fire.” He grinned and held up the bottle. “Can I?”

The way Emrys was looking at him just melted my heart. It was the lengths that we went to to make him comfortable. The meaningful gesture we made by asking our friends how to best make sure he’s at home here and has everything he needed.

He nodded without a word, and Yarak went to work again, covering his body in lotion. His touch was smooth and soft, not quite business, but definitely not hinting at anything either. It was all care.

I was a little surprised when Yarak didn’t try to brush his teeth for him, though by the way he watched Emrys in the mirror, I was sure he was searching for some indication that he’d let Yarak.

My sweet mother hen.

“Okay, Emrys. You’re ready for bed,” Yarak said with a smile.

“Take him,” I told Fable. “Tuck him in. We’ll be right there.”

Fable nodded, reaching for Emrys’s hand. He went to our dragon, and the two disappeared from the bathroom. Yarak looked at me, his brows knitting. “Am I being too much? Am I smothering him?”

“No, sweetheart.” I picked up the discarded towel and dropped it over his head before gently massaging his head. “I

don't want our bed sopping wet.”

He laughed. “Sorry. I wasn't paying attention.”

I quickly dried the rest of him before pulling him to me and kissing him. He hummed into me. “Don't change, Yarak. He needs you just the way you are. Focus on taking care of him and I'll make sure you have everything you need too.”

“Love you, Jules.”

“Love you too. Let's go cuddle the fuck out of Emrys until he doesn't remember what it's like to hurt.”



Emrys

SLEEP FADED AWAY, BUT THE WARMTH AROUND ME REMAINED. I could feel the different fires burning, simmering in coals. They were each a little different and I was learning to tell them apart. Just like their personalities.

This was the fourth morning waking up like this. Surrounded by men who hadn't changed at all. Each day was a little more special. A little more real. Though I still waited for them to change their mind.

Everyone changed their mind eventually.

But their words continued. Soothing, sweet, comforting, assuring. Always assuring. They were filled with promise, though that specific word never left their mouths. Their promises still coursed through me, trying to overwrite everything that I've come to know. To expect.

Fable was pressed against my back, his arms tightly around me. Though his attention never left me, always coddling and loving, he instantly turned to mush from Yarak or Julian's touch. Even his touch on me was like that. He was all about making sure I knew that he was here and mine, but as soon as I gave him any indication that I wanted to move or anything, he backed off. Letting me shift our position or the situation entirely as I wanted.

I wasn't surprised. His profile said that more than anything, he wanted to just be and let those who love him call the shots. He was content to follow as long as the person

leading loved him and had his best interests at heart. I thought there was more to it, but I'd yet to see. I was still new here.

Maybe I wouldn't ever see.

Yarak was in front of me, his face pressed to mine as he quietly snored. This man was a bit of a surprise. His profile said that he was happy to take care of someone. He loved to spoil the important people in his life.

But the level of attention that he gave me was almost as if I were a small child unable to take care of myself. It was never belittling, though. Every single touch was filled with such soft affection that I could feel it tingle where his fingers moved. His words were the embodiment of emotion. So sweet and soothing, articulating into words everything my battered soul needed to hear as if it were written all over my body.

I half suspected he'd help me use the toilet if I let him. As it was, I'd even let him convince me to let him brush my teeth once. The way he fucking cooed at me just melted my heart.

Then there was Julian. Quiet and watchful, knowing exactly what I needed before that need really manifested inside me. As if he read me like a book, he was constantly caring and strong. Holding me with such a firm embrace that I was sure I could shatter into a thousand pieces, and he'd put them all together again without a word, knowing where every edge needed smoothing and seal the cracks until you never see them again.

If I'd let them.

I've been in a position like this before. Where I was surrounded by love, and everyone said the right things. But those promises were always broken. I was always left devastated.

My bird knew this was different. But he was a beast. A monster. What did he know about the matters of human emotion?

Then again, I was more monster than human. And my monster said this was where we belonged. These were our mates. This was the place I was always meant to be.

Just like Julian, Fable, and Yarak told me.

While I believed them, the voices of past hurt and fears can't quite fall silent yet.

I took a deep breath and stifled a groan. We always slept naked, and I didn't miss the way we all woke up hard. But I was never touched and from what I'd seen, they never touched each other. I had a feeling that it was in response to the last thing I added into the questionnaire.

I want you to own me and prove that you do.

Julian said right away that this was not going to happen how I asked for it. Sex wasn't going to prove anything. I'd know I was theirs without question before that happened.

That meant I was going to be celibate, didn't it? I didn't think my dick could take that kind of torture. He'd done nothing wrong.

It was probably my squirming that woke the dragon behind me. He hummed, his hot breath brushing my skin. I took a deep breath to try to get myself back under control.

His hand ran over my chest and stomach, barely brushing the head of my straining cock. I whimpered and the rumble of quiet laughter vibrated through his chest into mine. I groaned, shivering.

"Need some help with this?" he asked, his finger tapping the head of my cock.

I twitched and grunted, nodding. "Please," I rasped.

It wasn't his hand on me as I expected. A mouth closed around my cock and made me gasp, my eyes flying wide open as I stared at Julian's smirking face. My hands went to Yarak's soft, satiny hair as I gripped him tightly.

He sucked gently, moving his tongue around my dick and teasing my slit. I whined pathetically, my hips bucking against him.

Fable's hand on my hips pushed me forward, and we rolled until I was on my front with my dick shoved deep into Yarak's

mouth. He groaned around me, a deep growly sound that sank into my balls.

My fists tightened as I buried my face into the pillows. I couldn't stop my hips moving on their own, trying to find release.

That is, until hands on my knees spread my legs wide. Those hands moved to my ass cheeks, spreading them too. My entire face turned hot, but my embarrassment vanished as soon as a mouth was pressed to my hole.

I cried out as he dragged his tongue along my crack, flicking it over my hole. Gently biting my sensitive skin before sucking on me so that I felt that suction from both sides.

Crying out, I tried to buck between them again, but I couldn't move with how wide my legs were spread. God, it felt good. So good. The heat and pleasure that raced through me, building and slamming against the fires that I tried to keep in, was overwhelming.

Then his tongue speared me, moving inside my body, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I shouted into the pillow. Fuck, it was good. Too good. So good. My orgasm was right there. But I went from a very long dry spell to being so overstimulated that it just wouldn't fall.

A hand in my hair told me I knew just who was eating my ass now—Fable. Because that hand in my hair said one thing: I own you. He did. He could have me. Every single bruised piece of me.

“Do you feel good, beautiful?” Julian asked, his mouth at my ear and his hand still in my hair.

I almost sobbed as I nodded frantically. I tried to tell him as much, but words wouldn't come.

“Do you need release?”

This time I sobbed as I nodded. Everything in me was tight and desperate. Straining. I *ached* so badly.

His lips brushed my temple, and I turned my face to him. To feel him. His mouth brushed mine and I desperately wanted

more.

They haven't stopped kissing me since I got here, but they've all been soft, sweet kisses. Intimate. Personal. Right now, I needed something else. So badly.

Please!

"Come," Julian said. "Fill Yarak's throat, beautiful inferno. Burn his lungs."

Then his lips covered mine in a searing hot kiss. His tongue invaded my mouth as he claimed me. Though he was only touching me with his hand on the back of my head, I felt him everywhere.

And my orgasm screamed through me. Everything in me tensed as I cried out, my hands gripping Yarak's hair tightly as I shoved into him. The three of them never stopped. They kept sucking, licking, kissing me until I fell limp, trying to catch my breath.

"That's it," Julian murmured. "Look at you. Look at how beautiful you are when you come. Such a perfect little inferno."

I moaned at his words and let myself sink into their soft touches. Yarak continued to suck my cock gently as Fable moved his tongue around my ass. Slow, soft strokes. Julian didn't stop murmuring to me. Praising me for having an orgasm that I did nothing to contribute to. Still, there was something in his words that made me just fucking melt into them.

"I don't want to leave here," I said, shivering.

"Then we won't," Julian said.

With Yarak and Fable not stopping what they were doing, I thought maybe they were as content to be right where they were as I was. It wasn't the sex I needed from them. Not right now. It was the soft, quiet moment we were sharing where we were all connected.

Yarak's arms were curled around my thighs, holding me open, his fingers gently rubbing along my skin. Fable's tongue

never stopped moving, as if I were a melting ice cream cone and he wasn't going to let a drop go. And Julian didn't stop kissing me with his tongue deeply stroking inside me between murmuring words my heart needed to hear, even if they were still about how proud he was of me coming.

I wasn't sure which part of this had me so worked up, but before I knew it, another orgasm snuck up on me and I was gasping into Julian's mouth, my eyes crossing as I spilled down Yarak's throat again.

When I came down from it, "my god, my god, my god, my god," was constantly repeating from my mouth.

Julian's deep chuckle made me shiver in pleasure. "Been a while, huh?"

I nodded. Far too long. Since leaving Iskander and the others, I hadn't had any interest in sex. That meant it'd been a year or more. This time, the shudder that raced through me was for a different reason. Fuck, did I drown Yarak?

We eventually rolled out of bed and Yarak washed me in the shower as he always did. When we joined Julian and Fable in the kitchen, there was already a spread of food before us. They let me eat on my own this morning, though from the way Yarak was watching me, I didn't think he liked that I was doing it.

I fought the smile and wondered why I loved this so much. It could be smothering. Suffocating. There's a part of me that thought I might feel restrained and choked off. But my fire burned hotter every time one of them did something for me. Especially if it was something I was more than capable of doing, like feeding myself.

Because they *wanted* to take care of me. They knew I was capable, but wanted to do these things for me. They wanted me to feel cherished and loved.

I'm not sure I've ever experienced anything like this. Not even with Iskander.

As if my thought summoned him, my phone pinged. I glanced at where it sat on the table and the notification that he

sent me a message. Swiping it off my screen, I flipped it over and looked the other way.

It's been more than a week since I opened our message thread. I'm sure I'm hurting him by ignoring him. Out of everyone in my past, I've never shared something with someone like I did Iskander. The reason the death of my last relationship was so painful was because I knew I was losing him. *That* broke my heart.

Over time, I only felt resentment for Imani and Aminah. It was Imani who demanded this thing from me, and Aminah followed without question. Deacon, Ciaran, and Roshan initially put up some fights, but they also backed down. As those days drew on, as we argued about it, the only one who ever stayed firmly at my back was Iskander.

The five of them stopped messaging me; but never Iskander. It wasn't hard for me to convince myself that to everyone else, I was disposable. Iskander was probably the only one who thought otherwise.

“Emrys?”

I looked up at Julian saying my name to find all three looking at me with concern.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

Taking a breath, I nodded. “Yes. Sorry.”

Silence fell around us, but I felt uncomfortable now. Like I was hiding something. Closing my eyes, I sat back in my chair. “His name is Iskander,” I said quietly. “The message I just got. I haven't answered him in over a week.”

“Who is he?” Fable asked. I couldn't place his tone, but it made me wince.

“A member of a harem that didn't want me. Only he did. Obviously, that means it didn't work out,” I said.

I was surprised when the three of them surrounded me. I was taken out of my chair and Julian brought me into his lap, straddling him. He kissed me until I relaxed; Yarak and

Fable's hands never left my back, legs, or arms. Anywhere they could touch.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"You don't need to be sorry," Julian said.

"You can tell us if you want to," Fable said. "We knew from your profile that you've been hurt."

I cringed and looked at him in horror. Fable smiled, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. "It's okay. Monsters as old as us tend to have some baggage behind us."

I took a breath and nodded. "You're right," I said quietly. "Their family is just the most recent in a long line of people who didn't want me."

Their hands tightened on me. I needed it. I needed to know that I was here and wanted right now. "We were together for nine months and then one day, Imani decided that before they made me a permanent member that I should go to The Harem Project and take their questionnaire. That way, when they came up in my results, it would have been... you know, legit."

"That's bullshit," Yarak said.

I laughed, the sound bitter. "Yep. I know. Iskander was furious. I think he still hasn't forgiven them. Neither have I."

"What's the family name?" Julian asked.

I opened my eyes to look at him warily.

"We have a large ring of close friends and while neither of those names are part of them, their friendship circles expand beyond the families we share. Sometimes we meet new families. I just want to make sure that we never put you in a position where you run into them and have to live through that pain all over again."

I believed him. It was hard not to when he was looking at me like that. "Kaiyo," I said. "Do you know them?"

All three shook their heads.

I nodded. "Good. I'd rather not see them."

“You still talk to Iskander?”

Shrugging, I said, “I did sometimes. At first, I thought that maybe he and I could still be together. I thought maybe he was the only one of them that loved me at all. Maybe I was there just because he wanted me. Maybe the whole matching thing was Imani’s way of putting an end to us.”

“I’m sorry you were hurt like that,” Yarak said. “Do you want me to burn them alive?”

“It’ll take a lot of fire,” I said. “They’re water monsters.”

“Oh, beautiful,” Julian said, sighing. He kissed my cheek, pulling me close.

“It won’t take long to boil their pool so hot that we cook them alive,” Fable said, his voice a growl.

Though their teasing threats were meant to comfort me, I thought maybe I should be upset. These were people I thought I loved. Who I thought loved me. Over the year after I left to confirm that *I didn’t* match with them, I’d re-evaluated everything since meeting them.

It wasn’t hard to determine that if they loved me at all, it wasn’t more than fleeting. Except Iskander. His love, I believed. What he and I had together was real, but it was likely the only part of that whole experience that was real.

“No,” I said eventually. “But thank you. And I’ll tell him to stop messaging me now.”

“You’re allowed to have friends,” Julian said. “Whoever you want. We aren’t ever going to try to control any aspect of your life.”

I leaned forward and wrapped my arms around him. He hugged me tightly. Fable and Yarak closed in behind me until I was squished tightly.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll think about it, but... it might hurt less to just have him go away now.”

Maybe. We’ll see. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to say goodbye to that part of my life. I’m sure about his love,

even if it's forever barred from me. This is so new, I'm still afraid it could break.

If I said goodbye to Iskander and the Agnis decided they didn't want me... I'd truly be alone.



Yarak

HE WAS BEAUTIFUL AND SWEET AND I HATED HOW MUCH HE hurt. There was so much hurt in him, I could feel it welling up constantly.

The day was cool; perfect for us to hang out on the back deck in the lounge chairs and snuggle as we watched the ducks come and go in the pond at the back of our property. There's a whole family this year.

Emrys was between my legs, lounging back on my chest. His hands were light on my legs, as if he was still hesitant to touch me. Everything about him was hesitant, though I could see moments where he either made a conscious effort not to be, or he's so invested in a conversation that he forgot to be.

I needed to take this away. He didn't deserve to feel like his life was going to slip through his fingers at any given moment. Why had it, though?

The demonic part of me said that there's something inside him that pushed people away. If this last family was just one of many over the years, did that make Emrys the common denominator? Should we be concerned?

The louder part of me said that it was bullshit. This man belonged to us and he wouldn't feel so hurt if he was the reason he was pushed away from everyone he loved in the past. Perhaps he's too needy? Too clingy? Too emotional?

Whatever the reason was, we're totally here for it. There was no doubt in my dark heart that this man was always meant to be ours. And if we'd met him in another way outside of The

Harem Project, we sure as hell wouldn't have forced him to go through their questionnaire just to make sure he fit.

There was no doubt about it—Emrys Morgan was our missing husband. Even if we haven't made him our husband yet.

In the lounge chair next to us, Julian and Fable were in the same position, but it seemed Julian had other plans than just relaxing for our baby dragon. Fable's whine made my cock jump. It was already half hard, but hearing our boy sound so needy was an instant injection of lust. From the way Emrys squirmed slightly, I thought he felt the same way.

Glancing at my husbands, I found Fable's arms secured behind his back and Julian's hand down Fable's shorts, stroking that big cock. I smirked at the way Fable groaned and grimaced at the same time.

Our boy was a bottom through and through. He'd really rather not have his dick touched at all. His balls were fair game, but he didn't like his cock having much attention. You wanted to see someone come hands free? Fable could easily spurt a damn fountain.

"Julian," Fable whined. Despite being bigger than Julian and I, hell he was bigger than all three of us, Fable was our needy, vocal, and completely submissive bottom. At least, in the bedroom. He wasn't quite that way outside of it. "Please."

"What do you want, baby?" Julian purred.

Emrys shivered, his hips rocking up slightly as he watched. Julian's hand dipped lower, cupping Fable's balls and giving them a light squeeze. Fable bucked up wildly. Though he did so with enough force that he should have been dislodged, Julian held him firmly by the arms he still had pinned between them.

"Make me come. The way I like."

Meaning, 'stop touching my dick.' I chuckled, pressing a kiss to Emrys's shoulder. He took a shuddering breath, his fingers digging into my thighs a little as he watched the dragons fool around. Without looking, I could hear the rustle

of clothing and knew that it wouldn't be long before the click of the lube cap joined the noise.

"You okay?" I asked quietly, nipping at Emrys's ear.

He shivered, his fire flaring brightly under his skin. Nodding, he said, "Yes."

I continued to press soft kisses on him, though he squirmed more and more. I could see the way his pants were tenting. If he hadn't been wearing underwear, it'd be a mountain peak between his legs.

"Yarak," he said right as Fable gave a high-pitched whine that made us both shiver. His fire burned right below the surface, turning his skin a smoldering orange.

"Yes, Em?" I asked. "Sweet fiamma, you can let your fire out. We're protected back here."

Taking a breath, he did just that. His skin faded away on his shoulders and chest, leaving fiery feathers in bright oranges, reds, and yellows in its place. His eyes blazed with fire and he whined.

"You can touch me, Yarak," Emrys said. "Please."

"You're so deep," Fable whined, and I glanced over to find him in the same position he'd been in last I looked except now, both dragons were naked, and Julian was buried inside Fable. "So deep," he whined, the sounds coming out of him being sinful.

"Is that what you want?" I asked, glancing back to see the desire in Emrys's eyes as he took in their position.

We've fooled around most mornings since the first time, but we've held off on having sex with our sweet firebird. Given what he'd said he wanted in his profile, we needed him to know that sex wasn't what made him ours. Anyone can have sex. Our connection needed to go deeper than that. He needed to be sure of us and his position here before.

We didn't want him to confuse sex with belonging or love.

But apparently, sex was on the table, since the dragons couldn't keep their dicks under control. Which was fine. I've

been dying to touch this man.

“Yes,” Emrys breathed, smoke fluttered in the air from between his lips. I caught a glimpse of his tongue to find that it too had changed into the dark, somewhat pointed muscle of his bird.

I shifted us and shimmied our pants and underwear off until he was naked in my lap again. Julian dropped the lube between us while he slowly fucked up into Fable, eliciting a never-ending backdrop that was pure need.

Coating my fingers, I reached between us to rim his hole, bringing my other hand around to stroke him. Emrys dropped his head back, his breath catching when I pushed my finger inside him. His muscles clenched around me, strangling me. Keeping me in place.

“Relax, Em,” I murmured, tightening my hold on his cock and stroking down to the root. He groaned, long and low. His body went boneless in my hold, and I slowly pushed my finger in deeper. He shivered. “That’s it, precious. Let me stretch you.”

He nodded and I could tell I was doing a decent job of distracting him from what I was doing in his ass as my hand gave his perfect cock expert attention. He really was perfect too. Thick and veiny with a fat head. Even this appendage was basically on fire.

How had he ever been with a water monster? I felt like that would be painful for one or both of them. All involved.

By the time I had three fingers working inside him, Fable was practically yelling to the gods, announcing how deep Julian was. How good it felt. How it stretched him and burned. I wasn’t sure if that was from pain or Julian’s fire.

Dragons were a little different from monsters like Emrys and me. We were fiery on the inside and out where dragons’ fires burned within, and they could project it outward—fire breathing. So, I leaned toward it hurting Fable a little, which was why it burned. Glancing between them as Fable’s hips

moved up, removing Julian from his body for a minute, I wouldn't be at all surprised if that was the case.

That beast was big. Hell, both dragons were huge. But then again, so was their species. I'd learned that dick size had nothing to do with the human skins monsters shoved themselves into so we could blend in with the regular folk. It was in direct proportion to our monster.

Not that Julian's cock was *that* big. Fable was by far the bigger dragon. Massive. The kind you see in drawings lounging across the battlements of castles and still looking too enormous. If his cock was proportionate, I thought it would be as big as Fable as a man. Like, his entire body.

The image always made me chuckle.

But yeah, that's the idea.

I wasn't quite as hung, though I was impressive, nonetheless. You know, I'm not biased or anything. Nor have I had any complaints. But that's not what made my cock extraordinary. It was the many embellishments I'd added to it. My sack was covered in hafada piercings—little rings that basically jangled like bangle bracelets if I walked around naked. I had a reverse Prince Albert and then a king's crown with seven curved barbells in dydoe piercings ringing the base of my mushroom tip, meeting the Reverse Prince Albert in a complete circle.

Then there were the two deep shaft piercings: one a third of the way and the second, two-thirds of the way along my dick. Straight through. Like mile markers. You are here, you still have this far to go. And then beyond.

Lubing my cock while still alternating between massaging Emrys's balls and stroking him the way he clearly liked, I lined myself up and pressed into his tight body. Slowly. So slowly, I was pretty sure I was going to lose my fucking mind with how tight he was.

His fingers dug into me sharply, his jaw clenched. He stopped breathing as he tried to force himself to relax.

“That’s it, Emrys. Let me inside your magnificent fiery body. Look at you all strung out for me. All tense. Feel good, fiamma? Does it feel good?”

A breath punched out of his lungs when I hit the first deep shaft barbell and his body tensed. “Holy fuck,” he muttered.

I wrapped my arm around him, resting my hand over his heart to feel it racing like he was running a marathon. “Breath, Em.”

He nodded, the motion quick and somewhat stiff as I continued to slide inside. So fucking tight.

“You’re so deep. Oh god, you’re so deep.” Fable’s voice cut through the moment, and I grinned, pressing my face into Emrys’s neck, burying it within his fiery feathers.

I continued to rub his cock and make my way inside him, little by little, until I was completely seated. His fingers were basically embedded into my thighs. This man didn’t bottom often. That’s okay. I’d make it good for him.

Keeping him still, I concentrated on his dick until he relaxed and when I moved again, it was slow and I made sure to hit every pleasure point inside this tight ass. His sounds weren’t quite as vocal as our dear, sweet dragon, but they were plentiful. Gasps, sharp inhales, quiet whimpers. His hips moved with me after a while, though his jaw and most of his body remained quite stiff. His fingers never pulled out from my legs. I was going to have scars and I’d wear them with pride.

When I dropped my hand to his balls, I could feel how tight they were, and I grinned. “You going to come for me, fiamma?”

“Yes,” he said, voice ragged and raw. “So soon. I’m... I’m almost... Oh—”

“Up, Fable. Come on,” Julian urged, and Fable basically fell onto our lounge. I moved my hand from Emrys’s dick so Fable could latch on. His body was pliant as Julian moved back in, finally in a position to fuck him with feeling.

The sounds Fable made never stopped, which only made Emrys's entire body jump with pleasure. His fire spiked as his hips moved with mine until he shouted as he came. The way his body clamped down around me, shoving me deep and holding me hostage, made my eyes roll. As the seconds ticked by, I knew that if he didn't let go, I was going to fill his ass right here.

Three. Four. Eight. Twenty-thousand.

I couldn't be expected to count in this state. Especially when I unleashed inside him as the dragons roared their own orgasms. My eyesight darkened for a minute as I held Emrys tight to me, keeping myself right where he lodged me so I could fill his ass with every drop.

Then I sagged. The dragons sagged.

Breaths started to calm. It took me several minutes to realize Emrys was not at all calming, though. If anything, the grip his fingers had on me was not loosening but tightening. There was a tear in the corner of his eye, his jaw so fucking tense, I was willing to bet it ached. His heart though... I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

"What's wrong, Emrys?" I asked, and he turned his face into mine, pressing it against me. "Do you need Fable to stop?"

I glanced down to find Fable still suckling on his cock, right where I knew he'd be. His striking eyes blinked up at me, reflecting that of his dragon.

"No," Emrys choked. "It's not—"

Julian shifted and pulled Emrys's face around by his chin, studying him. A long silent minute followed during which my cock reminded me that I was still lodged inside this man and his body was *not* relaxing around me.

"Did I hurt you?" I asked. Not everyone liked piercings.

"No," he said, but I could hear the strain in it.

"You've never done this before," Julian said.

Emrys winced, squeezing his eyes closed.

“Done what?” I asked, feeling myself tense because I already knew. “Fuck, Em.” I gently pulled myself out of him and then wrapped my arms around him tightly. “What the fuck?! Why didn’t you say so? I could have really fucking hurt you. I don’t have a cock made for first times.”

Emrys gave a breathless laugh. “I wanted to. And I’m not a virgin. I’ve just never... bottomed before.”

“Your profile is a little misleading,” Julian said, frowning.

He shook his head. “No. I mean... Well, I didn’t mean it to be. I don’t—” He took a deep breath, finally relaxing in my arms. I tightened my hold on him.

“If we were in a different position,” I began, my anxiety making my heart race now. It was only this position that kept me moving slowly. Letting him primarily call the shots. Otherwise... I probably would have let loose. “Fuck.”

“You can’t keep stuff like this from us,” Julian said, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

Emrys nodded. “I’m sorry. But for the record, I liked it just fine. It’s just really sensitive after the fact and your metal is, uh, unforgiving. It doesn’t soften.”

I barked a laugh and pressed my face to his neck. “Did I hurt you?” I whispered.

He shook his head. “Less than I expected,” he said quietly, finally pulling his hands from my leg. He laid one over mine and gripped me tightly. “And I loved it a lot more than I expected, too. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I guess I kind of thought... I guess I thought I must have said something about it in my profile. Yours were all clear. Julian doesn’t bottom; Fable doesn’t top. And you switch. I suppose I thought I said something about how I’ve always topped but... I just don’t want to anymore.”

“Why?” Julian asked, settling back down, wrapping around Fable, who was still sucking gently on Emrys’s dick. “So you’re aware because I’m not sure this is in the profiles, Fable has an oral fixation. A lot of it has to do with the age of his dragon. Unlike most monsters, the man and the dragon age

separately. Fable is his own man, he's definitely an old man. But his dragon, despite being nearly eighty, is still considered juvenile. I'm not sure how up to date you are on your dragon lore, but juveniles need to self-soothe often and Fable's preferred method is sucking. Dicks are his preference, but he'll take anything—fingers, nipples, your tongue, your lip, earlobe... But if it becomes too much, all you have to do is tell him to stop and he will.”

Emrys shook his head and ran his fingers through Fable's disheveled hair. “No. It's alright. It's oddly soothing to me too. Even with how sensitive my cock is right now.”

Julian smirked. “Yep. It's fucking frustrating when all he wants is to suckle when you're hard, though. This is all you get.”

Emrys made a face and I snorted.

“It's worse than you think,” I said.

“Why don't you want to top anymore?” Julian asked.

Emrys sighed and relaxed back into me. His fingers didn't stop moving in Fable's hair, and his hand over mine remained, but the rest of him completely relaxed. Finally. “I don't know. I guess I just want to be... taken.”

“I don't top,” Fable said. I looked down in time to see him take Emrys's dick back in his mouth.

He smiled. “I know. It's not a hard and fast rule or anything. I don't dislike it. I guess I just want to be the one...”

His voice trailed off. “You want to be vulnerable,” I said quietly, and he nodded. “You want to surrender to us so we can have you completely.”

Emrys swallowed. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Beautiful, you're already ours. Give us every single piece of you and we'll protect it like the fragile and precious firebird you are.” Julian moved up along Fable again and wrapped his hand around Emrys' neck, pulling his face up. “You're never going to hurt again, Emrys. You're home.”



Emrys

TWO DAYS LATER AND MY ASS WAS STILL SORE. I DIDN'T HATE it. The reminder that Yarak had made me feel so good constantly brought a smile to my face, even when I was somewhere I couldn't see them. Like now. I was in one of the spare rooms on my laptop, reviewing the new cases that my law firm has taken on. Answering emails to my partners and our other associates within the firm. Trying to be useful for the company I helped build, though I've mostly taken a step back.

Still. I wasn't retired, and it felt a little unreasonable that I should at such a young age. Maybe I'd earned it, but then again, I've let everyone else work for the past year and a half and just lived off my percentage of their wins.

My phone rang and I glanced at it. The name that appeared on my screen made my heart jump and I shivered.

Iskander.

I hadn't answered his messages in two weeks. Not since I went back to The Harem Project and found the House of Agni. It's not that he ceased to exist, but I was at the point where I didn't think that was a thing between us.

The pain I had over not being with him was still just as raw as it's always been. Seeing his name on my screen almost physically hurt. But it's time to stop talking to him now. Right? I needed to cut ties.

Why did that feel like I couldn't take a breath when thinking that?

I shouldn't have answered, but I did. At the last second, I swiped the accept button and then brought the phone to my ear, holding my breath.

“Emrys?”

A shiver raced through me, his voice touching something deep in my soul. I hadn't actually spoken to him in six months. I hadn't heard his voice in six very long, painful months. It shouldn't still hurt this badly to hear it, should it? Not when I had my family. The family I *knew* without a doubt were mine.

Okay, there's still doubt, but I was almost completely convinced that it was different this time. Despite that pain in the ass voice in my head telling me that they're going to throw me away, eventually. I didn't believe it. I won't!

“Emrys?”

I took a shuddering breath and nodded. “Yeah. I'm here.”

His exhalation was loud. “Are you... okay? You're not in the hospital or... being tortured?”

My eyes narrowed a little as I frowned. “No. Why?”

“Then why haven't you answered my texts?” he asked, and I could feel the hurt in his words as if it were a part of me.

“I'm sorry,” I said and meant it. No matter how hurt I was, I never, *ever* wanted to hurt him. I didn't want him to hurt at all. “I just thought... maybe it was time.”

Iskander didn't answer for a minute. “I miss you,” he whispered. “So fucking much, Emrys. I hate this.”

Tears stung my eyes for the millionth time over this entire situation. I took a deep breath and nodded. Maybe it would be better to tell him I didn't feel the same. So we could cut ties and move on. I was where I needed to be. Where I was supposed to be. This was my home; my family.

I could believe that, right? Even less than two weeks after meeting them, I could believe it.

“I miss you too,” I said. I was always awful at lying.

“I get that... I know that you need to live... separately... but we can still talk, can't we? We can still be friends?” he asked.

My chest felt so fucking tight. For a minute, I was brought back to that moment when Imani sat us all down and announced her decision to have me go to The Harem Project for confirmation that we belonged together.

The cold rejection that swept over me. The knowledge that *once again* I was being thrown away. Kicked out.

Not wanted.

Ripped away from Iskander, never to see him again. Fuck, the way my chest hurt. I rubbed at it absently as I tried to determine if I could bear to be friends with him. He needed to remain a part of my past. I needed to put distance between us so I could completely move on.

I needed to.

But I still felt so fucking affixed to him. Like somehow, we're still glued together. Like we were for those nine months.

“You think that's a good idea?” I asked.

“No,” he answered, and I smiled at the way he sounded like a kicked puppy. “But also, yes. I—Please just don't ignore me. My mind plays through every nasty scenario it can come up with and you know I have a very twisted imagination.”

I chuckled. “Yes, I know.”

“The world is scary,” he said, quietly. “You're a hunted species. Please, don't let me think you're...”

“Alright,” I said. “I won't ever let you think that. I'm sorry for not responding.”

There's a moment's pause before he said, “I know why you want to and I... don't begrudge you that. If the situation were reversed, there's no doubt in my mind I'd try the same thing.”

That's a lie. Iskander wouldn't have walked away and stayed away when the reality of the situation settled on him

like I did. No. He'd come back and sink his claws into me, never to let me go.

But I'd been told I wasn't wanted one too many times to try that.

"I hate this," he muttered. Where there might have been a pout early on, he now sounded bitter. Defeated. Angry. "Were you busy? Did I interrupt? Your place looks empty."

I smirked at his words and closed my eyes. "I... moved. Mostly. I..." Bringing myself to say the words was difficult. Not because I thought I was wrong in being here. But because I knew it's going to hurt him.

"You found somewhere you truly belong," he whispered.

I winced and nodded. "Yes."

There was a rustle over the receiver as if he rubbed his phone against something. Then he came back. "I'm happy for you," he said.

"How are you?" I asked, trying to move the conversation away from me. "Are you okay? Is... everything okay?"

He laughed, but the sound was bitter and empty. "Yeah. Fucking peachy, Em."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. None of this was ever your fault. You did nothing wrong. If anything, it was mine. I was so fucking blinded by being in love with you that I didn't see what was happening around me."

I couldn't take a breath for a second at his words. It's not like we'd not told each other we loved the other. We did. Often. But hearing it now? It hurt like a knife through my chest.

"Em, I'm sorry I put you through that. I should have paid more attention to them. Or I should have..." He sighed. "I play this game a lot. What I should have done."

"It's been a year," I said quietly.

“Yes, and you’d think by now I’d be a whole fucking person again and yet, I still feel like I’m ripped in two.”

I winced. Split between me and his family.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean for this to get heavy. I really wanted to know that you’re okay. You are, right? They treat you good? They take care of you?”

A smile touches my lips and I sigh. “Yes, Iska. They’re... amazing.”

“Good,” he said, conviction in his voice. “I’m going to go. Please don’t ignore me anymore.”

“I won’t. I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” he whispered. “Talk to you later.”

The line clicked off, and it felt like I was suddenly plunged underwater and the pressure against my lungs was just too much. I needed to take a breath, but there wasn’t any air to breathe. Why did it still feel this way?

A hand in my hair made me jump, and I looked up to find Julian. His expression was soft as he ran his fingers along my jaw. “You okay?”

I nodded, though that might be a lie. “Yep. He thought I was being tortured so...” I shrugged, as if that excused why I took a call from my ex and talked to him for twenty minutes.

“We already told you; you can be friends with whomever you want to. We’re not going to control your life, beautiful.”

There was a part of me that wished he would.

I’ve held onto control for my entire life. I enjoyed it. That’s just who I naturally was. It made the flailing worse when everything that I thought I had control over suddenly exploded in front of me.

Maybe that’s why I wanted to roll over and present my stomach. Or... actually, my ass. I wanted to be controlled now. I was so tired of the fight. Of losing. Of hurting.

Julian’s mouth covered mine. I knew these men were capable of deep and hungry, but with me they were so

heartbreakingly sweet and gentle. I wanted to be manhandled. Held down and just torn into. I wanted to feel completely fucking owned.

But maybe I thought I just needed to feel the pain of that. Because that's all I've ever felt. Maybe if I feel it now and get it out of the way, I can live.

These men made it clear that they're definitely not going to do that. They'd let me be vulnerable. They'd let me roll over. But they weren't going to brand me with the pain I claimed I needed. They were going to mark my entire body with gentle touches and soft kisses. With their words and their affection.

Until *that's* what I was drowning in.

He pulled his lips from mine and rested his forehead against mine. "This is home," he murmured. "You're my firebird. Mine. Understand?"

Laughing quietly, I nodded. "Yes."

"I'm never letting you go."

"Good. I don't want to be let go," I said.

"They were all fools," he whispered. "You're an amazing man, Em. My beautiful, soft firebird. I promise, it's their loss, and it's far too late for them now. You're right where you're supposed to be."

"You know just what I need to hear," I said.

"I'm telling you your reality, hot stuff," he said, getting to his feet and pulling me to mine. "You're our prisoner. Dragons keep those who they claim locked in a tower, you know."

"Are you calling me a damsel?" I asked, smirking.

"Nah. I'm telling you that there's no way out."

"Don't the dragons normally get slayed in those fairy tales?"

Julian laced our fingers together as he pulled me from the room. "Oh, honey. They can try to penetrate this hide, but I promise, I'm the one that does the penetrating."

He winked, and I laughed.

“You’ve been reading the wrong fairy tales,” he said as we headed for the stairs. I could hear voices downstairs, far too many to just be Fable and Yarak. That meant their friends had already arrived. “The theme of fairy tales is happily ever after. True love wins. All that mushy shit. If the dragon had wanted to keep the princess, they would have. That’s the only reason a weak human could win against an apex predator like a dragon whose skin is impenetrable.”

“Unless they’re using magic,” I mused.

He kissed my temple. “Indeed.”

There was no doubt that two of the men sitting on the couch were storms. Their eyes and the energy crackling in the air gave them away. But fuck if they weren’t swimsuit model perfect. The third guy was very large. A shifter with light hair and eyes.

“This is Aratiri and Tempest Igarashi and Gannon Aves,” Julian said. “A little pre-party debrief before the others get here.”

I nodded and sat next to Fable on the second couch. He immediately wrapped me in his arms, kissing the side of my neck until I was laughing. Then he settled and watched the others with his chin resting on my shoulder.

The three were smiling.

“He’s a hottie, Agnis. Think you want to be a part of my campaign?”

Yarak groaned. “You really just want us to show you up, huh?”

Aratiri chuckled. “Leave him alone, Tem.” His eyes turned to me. “Tem is a social media influencer. While his primary focus is conservation, he’s recently made a transition to include positivity for non-traditional families such as ours.” He gestured toward us and then back to them. “It’s more than just a LGBT+ initiative, though all closest friends really represent most flags that we fly under. It’s about exposing the truth behind ethical non-monogamy and polyamory.”

“That’s really... great,” I said. “I’m not opposed to contributing. My company would be happy to invest.”

Tempest grinned. “Arat wasn’t clear. I take racy photos and post them online.” My eyes went wide.

“He also takes really sweet photos,” Gannon said, rolling his eyes. “The world already thinks anything other than monogamy is just a means to have more sex. So while there is plenty of that kind of imagery, he spends a lot of time taking candid photos of our families and what it means to live in a family like ours.”

“That’s still really great,” I said, “and I stand by my offer to donate.”

“Thanks,” Tem said. “We can circle back to that since I brought my camera.” Yarak groaned, mumbling something about the storms always wanting a pic of his pierced dick and dragon asses. With a wide smirk, Tem said, “We’re really here to talk about ORKA and Silence. I assume you’re familiar with each.”

“Yes. I shudder to know that there are people oblivious and unaware.”

“So, in a couple short hours, you’ll be meeting the large extent of our families,” Gannon said. “Our involvement wasn’t always a priority. Like most supernaturals, we wanted to stay under the radar. The tipping point was when our families, in particular, started being attacked. Brief history: Just over two years ago, when our demon friends finally found their wife, she was revealed to be a banshee. One that was experimented on for the first decade and a half or so of her life. While she was still settling in and bonding with her freaks of the demon species, my husbands were attacked in a supermarket in broad daylight by ORKA. They left Anakin unconscious while making off with our ice phoenix.”

My eyes widened. “And no one stopped them?” I asked, horrified.

“With their glowing knives? I think the humans just stayed away for fear of their own lives. Much like monsters tend to

do.” I frowned, even knowing that he wasn’t wrong. “So... turns out our banshee was a double agent with ORKA so she and her nightmare penetrated the facility and long story short, Ryker ate the facility and rescued our husband but somehow his wife was handed over to Silence.”

My mouth hung open. I felt like I was watching a movie. “I didn’t know they were connected.”

“It’s debatable whether they are or not,” Aratiri said. “We’ve recently started looking into what kinds of dealing they have, but so far, our research is turning up empty-handed.”

“You’re getting ahead,” Tempest said, nodding at Gannon to continue.

“Not much to tell following that. We eventually located the facility that had Ady prisoner and Ryker took the entire thing down.”

“Ryker is the nightmare you mentioned,” I said.

He nodded. “Yes. Shortly after, we connected with our wife, whose father was part of ORKA. That was a shitstorm, and we left a massacre around the childhood home she was imprisoned in for the second time after being stolen from our fucking yard. Then the Wyns matched with the ex-wife of a director of ORKA, then she was abducted along with Fable and three others. Another shitstorm that revealed so much more horror.”

I twisted to look at Fable with wide, horrified eyes. He smiled and kissed my mouth. “Don’t worry. I burned half the building down before Ryker finished the rest.”

“It was so fucking sexy,” Yarak said, sighing.

Gannon chuckled. His laughter faded. “A year ago is when we had a very rude awakening.” He looked at the Igarashis.

Aratiri nodded. “Silence attacked our family while we were camping on a mountain. They have... weapons like nothing we’ve ever seen before. Nets that can force monsters out of their monster and back into their human shape. They weren’t aiming to kill, but to abduct us. It was right around

there when we received news that they're also abducting humans. When we stormed the facility that we knew had a whole bunch of humans, the horrors we found inside were... worse than any nightmare we could imagine. Programmed hybrids. Newly created monstrosities. Human/monster experiments. And a lot of human women kept as breeders.”

My body broke out in chills as I stared.



Emrys

EVERYTHING INSIDE ME TURNED COLD WITH FEAR. MY FIRST thought was that I needed to tell Iskander, so he'd be extra careful. I may not be with him, our lives together might have been barred, but I would be fucking wrecked if something happened to him.

Then I felt slightly guilty that he was my first thought.

“Once again, Ryker took down the facility,” Tempest continued. “And as with last time we destroyed a Division of Silence property, they’ve fallen frighteningly silent.”

“The families that make up our closest circles are thirteen. The Igarashis, Daemons, Malaks, and Savages concentrate their energy on Silence. Darkyn, Nash, Aves, Wyn, and us focus on ORKA. The other four—Terra, Taru, Taika, and Nereus—are backup and resources, working with The Harem Project. I’m happy to say that The Harem Project isn’t just sitting back and gathering information anymore. They’re moving into an offensive position. Creating weapons. Gathering support,” Julian said. “The problem is that Silence has been building themselves for generations while we’ve just begun.”

“There’s a difference between what we’re doing and what they’re doing, though,” Gannon said. “Their attacks are out of fear and seeking power and control. Ours are personal and concentrated against those who think they have the right to decide which species lives and dies.”

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We, as in our family, right now, we’re putting a target over every ORKA agent’s head and on every ORKA facility. Covering every corner of the globe,” Julian said. “The Wyls and Nashes are helping in that effort. Darkyn and Aves are working on plans to execute a mass attack against them when we’re reasonably certain we’ve collected the vast majority.”

“We’ve always considered them a nuisance and nothing to be truly concerned with,” Yarak said. “Until we learned about the magic they have that they shouldn’t. And that they’ve got some tie with Silence. We can’t afford to treat them as obnoxious bullies anymore. They’re a threat that needs to be dealt with appropriately.”

Again, I broke out in chills. “Someone gave them magic?” I asked, completely flabbergasted by this notion. “Why would we give humans magic when they use it to kill us?”

“That’s the question we’re trying to answer,” Gannon said. “There’s speculation among those who have been in their prison that there were promises made and whatever. But even on the inside, being married to a director within the organization, Jennings knew nothing about the magic.”

I shook my head. I had no idea the threats that lie right under our noses. The Kaiyos lived on the same road as an ORKA facility. They always told me it was to keep an eye on them. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I wondered if they knew about the magic they had. Even if it was something they kept to themselves, I didn’t think Iskander would keep it from me.

They didn’t know. They needed to. As angry and hurt as I was by them, they didn’t deserve to be killed or worse, tortured by humans who thought they had a right to hunt monsters.

“What’s our next step? What are we working on right now?” I asked.

Fable hugged me tightly. “In an hour, we’re getting together with our friends and having a good time around a really big fire that the gods will feel. But right now, we’re

working on tracking down ORKA.” He paused. “And debating how we want to begin exterminating them.”

“It’s a little dicey because we believe many of their agents only know the line of shit that they’re fed,” Aratiri said. “Jennings was told a whole slew of bullshit to convince her of what made a monster. Anyone different is a monster. Anyone *not human* is a monster. And monsters are evil.”

“Jennings got a second chance,” Gannon said. “So the debate is whether we just start killing on sight or try to rehab.” He shrugged. “Fear drives humans to act the way they do. When they fear something, their first reaction is to dominate it. Make sure that they come out stronger and on top. Neutralize or eliminate the threat.”

“Much like Silence,” I said, frowning.

“Yes. Their agendas are eerily similar, no?” Tempest said. “The difference is ORKA has a target on every monster’s head. Silence picks and chooses. Those they can control by one means or another get to live. Everyone else must die.”

“And we’ll be replaced by abominations just as deadly, but that can be controlled,” Aratiri said.

This entire conversation made my stomach churn. My fingers were cold. I was so fucking unsettled over it.

“I had no idea the threats were so... big,” I said.

“Which is another thing we’re trying to figure out how to remedy,” Julian said. “Monsters have conditioned themselves to appear as mundane as normal. To remove themselves from the situation in hopes that they’ll be left alone. They also believe that humans aren’t a threat. Though all monsters know of both Silence and ORKA, they still believe that keeping a low profile will allow them to be left alone. That’s not the case and we’re not sure how to correct that just yet.”

“Then there’s the issue where Silence is hunting humans and they’re basically sitting ducks,” Gannon said. “What should be done about that? Or nothing because we want to punish the masses for those involved in ORKA?”

I made a face, earning myself chuckles.

“Yep, that’s where we get stuck,” Yarak said, grinning at me. “On the one hand, serves them right. If they stayed in their own lane, maybe they’d be left alone. Except we know that’s not the case in this scenario. Silence has gone unchecked for far too long.”

“And that’s why having an entire world of monsters ungoverned was always going to be a bad idea,” I muttered, shaking my head. “The nonsupernatural world might be a fucking mess all the way around with their cruelty toward each other, wars, racism, and whatever. But there’s at least some form of policing. There are governments in all these places trying to make it better for everyone.”

“Arguably,” Gannon deadpanned.

I laughed. “Yeah, I know. But the idea is still there. Until Silence came along, there wasn’t really anyone in charge. The authority was weak and truly unsuccessful.”

“What would you do?” Aratiri asked. “Given the information you have, what would you do regarding all of this?”

“I suppose letting your nightmare friend eat everything is off the table?” I asked.

They chuckled.

“While Ryker isn’t at all opposed to that, nightmares aren’t truly invincible. He’s one of the few left alive. As you can imagine, his family wants to keep him safe,” Julian said.

I nodded. “That’s fair. I think the first thing to do is tell all the monsters that the threat is larger than they think. Not just with ORKA but with Silence. Monsters know that we’re basically on borrowed time before we catch Silence’s eye, but there’s a false sense of security in thinking that we’re going to go undetected and that the worst they’re going to do is kill us. The supernatural world at large needs to know the truth. All of it. They need to know what Silence is creating and what they’re doing.”

Gannon sighed. “How would you do that?”

I didn't get a chance to answer. There was a knock at the door, and Fable jumped to his feet, pulling me with him. The smile on his face was beaming. "The party starts!" He kissed me breathless before heading for the door, leaving me with my head spinning as I blinked after him.

"Jesus," I muttered, the rest of the room laughing.

"Come on," Yarak said, pulling my hand into his and leading me towards the back door. "Let's catch up on prep."

That consisted of bringing food outside and getting the fire ready. Not lit yet, but it would be soon. The mound of brush and wood was in the middle of the yard, spanning eight feet in diameter. I glanced into the sky, debating how high the flames would reach. Maybe we'd sear a cloud or two.

"It's plenty safe," Gannon said, coming to stand next to me and offering me a bottle of water. "As easily as you start fires, you can put them out if you choose. Besides, we'll have enough water-inclined monsters among us that will prevent a wildfire."

"We also have a wildfire," Aratiri said, coming up on my other side. "My family will be here soon, and Taranis *is* a wildfire. Then we have Bronte, a tsunami. We'll get the fire out if you're too busy dancing in it and let it get out of control."

I laughed, shaking my head.

"Hey, sweetheart," Gannon said, and I turned to look at him. A petite girl with long brown hair and big, innocent eyes looked up at him with a sweet smile. Gannon kissed her forehead. "Everything good? Where're the others?"

"Yep. I came with Oisin, Notus, Ipy, Aden, and Lazarus. We were having tea," she said, raising a brow with amusement. "I'm not sure what the fuss was about. It's hot, bitter water. No matter how many times they try to convince me otherwise or make me try different concoctions, I just don't see the appeal."

Gannon chuckled as another man came to stand next to Aratiri. He pushed into Aratiri's side with a sexy smirk before

his eyes turned to me. He looked like a fucking biker or some shit. Maybe a tattoo artist.

“This is Notus,” Aratiri said. “The Agnis’ new husband, Emrys.”

Notus grinned. “Glad to meet you, man,” he said, offering me his hand. “They’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

Warmth in my chest expanded. “Thanks.” I thought to correct them on the husband title but...I didn’t want to. I liked it a little too much. Even if I was getting ahead of myself.

Others started piling in quickly then. There weren’t trickles of one or two, but eight and nine at a time. Gannon, Aratiri, and Notus kept a running commentary on who was who. The ones that were easy enough to remember were the water monsters because they headed straight back to the pond with the ducks. The ducks didn’t seem to mind their company at all.

The others not hard to remember were the demons. I could feel the ice hanging around Ryker from anywhere in the yard. Not to mention the cold, empty eyes he looked through. And those deep red lips that looked like they were stained with blood. Not even the moroii had bloody lips like that, and there were a few here.

It was a trip to see so many dangerous monsters in one place. Especially since everyone got along. There was laughter and games. Even a few kids running around. The backyard was filled with the smell of food and, later, fire.

Even as overwhelming as meeting all these people at once was, there was a sense of belonging in me I’d never felt before. Not once. It almost felt as if my past relationships had kept me at arm’s length, knowing that I was just a plaything for them. I was temporary. Not someone they were going to introduce to their inner circle.

But here, I wasn’t just being introduced. I was thrown in as if I was always part of the crowd. Not a number, but a person. A member of their extended family. This was always my home, and they weren’t welcoming me home, but welcoming me back.

The feeling was surreal as people came up to me, introduced themselves, and then started conversations as if I wasn't new to them. We talked easily about anything and I never once felt like they were just there because I was part of the Agnis.

I wasn't a temporary visitor. I was here to stay. Everything about this night and these people emphasized my belonging here. As easy as it might have been to become lost and overwhelmed by the vast quantity of people, it almost felt like I could breathe easily for the first time in... years.

I'd found my home. The missing pieces of my heart. My tribe.

The only thing missing was Iskander. That I kept looking for him, expecting to see him walk out of the crowd, was becoming a very conscious problem for me. He wasn't here. He wasn't a part of this, of my life.

I needed to let him go.

That didn't stop me from pulling out my phone during a lull while everyone ate and texting him a brief synopsis of what I learned and a warning—a plea—to be extra safe and cautious. To be aware of those around him.

He clearly wanted to talk, but I told him I wasn't in a place to do that. We were having a party.

[Iskander] Welcoming you home. Like we should have done.

My heart clenched. For a long time, I didn't answer because I wasn't sure what to say.

Arms wrapped around me, and I shifted to look at Julian. He smiled, kissing my cheek as he glanced at my phone. I didn't try to hide it. But I did explain.

"I was telling him to be careful. There's no such thing as 'safe' anymore," I said.

He nodded. "Good. You need to tell everyone important to you."

His words made me feel guilty, though I tried to push it away. He *was* important to me, and I sure as hell didn't want him dead.

"You can invite him over next time, if you want," Julian said, and I tensed. Imagining the Kaiyos here.

"Uh..."

He chuckled. "I said *him*. Not all of them."

I didn't hate that idea nearly as much. "I haven't seen him since Imani made me go take a test to prove I don't belong there," I said.

Julian nodded. "You didn't. You belonged here." We rocked a little as he pressed kisses to my neck. It didn't hurt nearly as much when he said it as when I thought about that moment. Because I could recognize it as the truth and I believed it now.

Except for Iskander.

I looked out at the people being illuminated by the dancing fire that touched the sky above the surrounding trees. We were far enough away that there wasn't any chance that they'd catch a wayward flame. And there were enough storms in residence that there wasn't a chance for a sudden wind to pick up and the fire to become out of control.

It almost felt... magical.

"This is exactly where I belong," I said, turning so I could wrap my arms around him too. "This is where I want to be."

"Good. Dragons keep what's theirs, my beautiful inferno. Your fire compliments mine. It was a done deal the moment you stepped foot on this property," he murmured.

Every word from his mouth felt like a healing salve. With every utterance, a little more of me healed. It would take a long time to get rid of all the wounds and bruises. To seal every crack. But I had no doubt that he'd do it. That all three of my men would.

Because they meant it when they said they were keeping me. This time, it wasn't an empty promise.



Fable

“YOU DID *NOT* REALLY BRING THAT HERE,” JENNINGS SAID, looking at Sirius with horror. Her eyes flickered around the many bodies surrounding us as she dropped her hands holding the barely there lingerie and hiding it behind her back. Her cheeks were a lovely shade of red. “What’s wrong with you, Siri?!”

For his part, Sirius looked at her with wide, innocent eyes. Never believe a Kitsuné when they look at you that way. They’re full of fucking mischief.

“Edison *really* loved that one on me. So did Astro. I even wore it in one of his scenes,” Sirius said, blinking at her as if it was Jennings being completely unreasonable.

Zen snatched the little piece of fabric from her hands and let it drop so we could see the whole thing. Honestly, the way it shrank up, it looked like it was made for an eight-year-old at the most. “Clearly this is stretchy,” he said in his smooth, hypnotic voice. Then he proceeded to stretch it and put his hands through the many cuts.

“Oh, definitely. It’s expertly made too, so that you can pretend to be contained but also to hang out,” Sirius said, taking it from Zen. He placed his hand in the hole within the crotch and spread his hand so the sheer fabric stretched over his palm. “I’ll admit that it didn’t hold in my sac. That just hung out, swinging like a wrecking ball.”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered at the visual that popped up in my mind.

Zen snickered as Jennings covered her red face. Sirius continued as if I hadn't spoken and we were talking about the weather. "But it held my cock in place really well. It was sexy as hell too. I even felt sexy. But you know, this hole is in the perfect place that there's no awkward, irritating, or painful friction against the base of my dick when it was time to whip it out, either."

"Good to know," Zen said. He looked at Jennings. "Though you won't have an issue with that either way, Jens."

"Oh my god," she muttered.

Sirius made a face. "You know," he said, handing it back to Jennings who quickly hid it behind her back, "I realize I buy these things for you, but I really don't like to imagine you in them. No offense, pretty girl, but your girl bits terrify me."

I laughed, bumping him with my shoulder until he swayed.

"Don't get me wrong. I love all things pretty lace and feminine. I really wish one of my husbands would be femme." He sighed a little dramatically. "Alas, they're all big, beefy men."

Jennings shook her head. "How is it we always end up talking about lingerie and your big husbands?"

"He likes to brag," I said.

Sirius shook his head. "No." His eyes moved through the crowd before locking on one of his said husbands. I'd never seen one of them have to actually look for one of their husbands. I hear Canidae monsters share some kind of mate bonds. You know, as they do in fantasy novels. It's not something we've ever talked about, but by the way they *just know* where the others are, I kind of think they do. "It's hard not to talk about them. They're just... perfect."

"Ugh," I said, rolling my eyes. "Don't get him started. I want to keep the steak down that I ate earlier."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "I question the way you love," he said, frowning at me.

“I think it’s sweet,” Jennings said, linking her arm through his.

“Speaking of relationships,” Zen said, brushing his fingers against her jaw. “Everything okay with you?”

We hadn’t been aware of the turmoil among the Wyns until it was basically broadcast in front of everyone when the four of us were abducted. Though we weren’t really there to see the sudden fall out, we were told about it and then the Wyns made an apology to all of us for letting their moment of grief get in the way of all of us.

It hadn’t. And if we’d known they were hurting, I’d like to think that we could have somehow given them the support they needed. Likely, we probably couldn’t have done anything at all. But I’d still like to think that maybe we could have.

“Yeah,” she said, leaning her head against Siri’s shoulder. “Everything is a lot better. It gets a little better every day.”

“Good to hear, kitten,” Sirius said.

Their attention turned to me. “What about you?” Zen asked. “How’s it going with Emrys?”

I knew I was looking at him with a stupid, goofy grin. This time it was me who sought him out in the crowd, and my eyes were drawn right to him. He stood in front of the fire, still with Gannon, Tem, and Arat. He was smiling. Laughing. Looking completely at ease.

“We’re doing really well,” I said. “He’s... been through a lot.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to marry him up right away,” Siri said, and I smirked.

“There were reasons we didn’t,” I said.

“Those same reasons are why you haven’t claimed him in either way yet?” Zen asked.

“What does that mean?” Jennings asked.

I turned my attention back to her and pulled my shirt up, showing her the burns across my chest around my Agni house

crest and ribs. Two separate, distinct ones. She inhaled sharply. “It’s not what it looks like,” I said, tracing the edges of the one from Julian. It looked like a traditional burn scar, pinker than my skin and slightly raised. The other, Yarak’s, was almost black—that of a fire demon. “Fire monsters mark their mates with their fire.”

“It’s the only kind of fire that can mark them,” Zen said and I nodded.

“So you have the House of Agni dragon over your heart and then their burns on the rest of your body?” Jennings asked, her brows still knitted together.

I nodded. “Yep. I guess you can equate the tat to a marriage vow. Legal. Expected. Tradition. That kind of thing. It’s an identifying marker for the world, in a way. Advertising that we belong somewhere. We’re a part of something bigger. Special. The burns are more like...” I nodded in Siri’s direction. “Pack bonds, but visible. We don’t feel anything, per se. There’s no physical or ethereal connection between us. Except in the supernatural world, this clearly says I have been claimed. This one by a dragon; this one by a demon.”

“Do all demons do that?” she asked, her gaze flickering into the crowd. This girl still had so much to learn almost two years later.

“No. The mating of wraiths and nightmares is different. That’s between souls and you feel it... in different ways. I think Pax’s mating is hidden because Ryker’s is so loud. There’s no way to miss that Ady is Ryker’s.”

She nodded. “Yep, I get that. No way to miss it at all.”

Zen and Sirius nodded.

“So why none of that with your new man yet?” she asked.

“Without getting into his business, we had other things to sort out before we took that step. We scoff and tease the Nashes for their disgusting display of vomit-inducing sweetness toward each other all the time, but they’re really our couple goals. The deep connection and love they share is

visible for everyone to see. Their bonds come secondary to the relationship they build between them.”

Sirius grinned hugely at him. “I really love that you recognize that, Fable,” he said and pulled me close with his arm around my shoulders. I laughed, falling into him and dropping my shirt. “You’re right. The pack bonds are something our animals need. It has nothing to do with our relationship. Not really. What we feel for each is strictly what we’ve cultivated over the years.”

“Right. And that’s the point we want to get to before all the showy things. Those are good and all. They’re even important. But not as important as everything else,” I said.

“I think a lot of people get complacent in relationships,” Jennings said quietly as she stared into the darkening backyard. “You guys really are couple goals, Siri. Even your weird obsession with lingerie.”

He laughed. “Keeping the bedroom spicy, kitten.”

Zen shook his head. “You don’t need lingerie for that.”

“Oh no,” I said and already knew what was coming before Siri said anything.

“Need, no. But apparently you need to be educated. Don’t worry, sweet bloodsucker. I’ll find just the right getup for you,” Siri said.

Zen sighed. “I walked into that.”

Jennings laughed, nodding.

By the time we broke apart and the party died down, I found Emrys standing over the remnants of the licking fire. It was mostly coals now, with flames jumping up occasionally around the large circle. I could tell by the way he stood close to the edge that he wanted to get in.

Glancing around the yard, I decided that enough people had cleared out. Those who lingered were going to see a naked dragon. Cupping his face, I brought his eyes to mine. “You doing okay, titus?”

Emrys smiled. “Yeah. I’m doing... good. In a weird way, I really needed this.”

I kissed his lips. “Good. I’m really fucking happy to hear you say that. Want to roll around in the fire with me now?”

He laughed, eyes scanning the area. “There are still people here.”

“This is their cue to leave,” I said, pulling my shirt over my head. I kicked off my shoes as I dropped my shirt far from the fire and then dropped my pants and underwear, shoving them to the side, too. The way Emrys’s eyes scanned over my body hungrily guaranteed my dick hardening right here on the spot.

I stepped onto the coals as my dragon pulled to the surface, covering my sensitive and fragile human skin in scales. In my peripheral vision, I caught Emrys’s shiver as he looked at me, dropping a hand to his crotch.

Grinning, I walked to the middle and dropped to my knees before looking up at him. “Please?”

Emrys swallowed. His gaze flickered around before locking with mine. He swayed for a minute before quickly discarding his clothes and stepping into the circle. Around his feet, flames reached up, wrapping around his shins. His skin vanished as his body was covered in a thin, sleek coating of fiery feathers and the fire in his eyes burned bright.

He stood over me, heat in his eyes. His hand ran over my face and through my hair. “Tell me what you want,” I said, knowing he needed the reminder that I didn’t do control of any kind. He’s written off his own control. I knew that. But I also knew he knew how to be in control.

I didn’t have a single bit of dominance in my body when it came to this. I needed to be led. Used. Fucked.

But I wasn’t sure if he was going to be okay with that. From what I’ve seen so far, he’s completely washed his hands of that part of him. He’s completely compliant when in Yarak or Julian’s hold. There are not even glimpses of a past him peeking out and looking for an opening.

Yarak and Julian took good care of him. Of both of us.

It'd be a lie if I said I wasn't nervous about how Emrys and I would come together when he first told us about this side of him. I couldn't muster up something inside me that I just didn't have. It's rare among dragons to be as completely and utterly submissive as I was. It's the complete opposite of everything else in our nature. As apex predators, we dominated.

I didn't.

Now I waited nervously. Wondering what he was thinking as he looked down at me. His hard dick straining toward me, a bead of pre-cum glistening under the moonlight.

My heart jumped when his hand tightened into a fist in my hair. His other grabbed the base of his dick and pressed it to my lips, smearing his pre-cum all over me like lip gloss. I whimpered, needing him. But I didn't want to pressure him, so I said nothing.

“Open, sweet dragon,” he murmured.

I did, and he pushed inside my mouth. I groaned around him, enjoying the way he pulled my head back and forth, bringing his dick in and out of my mouth. “So pretty,” he whispered, and I groaned again, bringing my hands around my back and locking them there.

Then Yarak was there, wrapped around his back and stroking my face. “Look at you,” he murmured. “So fucking perfect, fiamma. Work his mouth. Make him choke.”

Emrys shivered and shook his head. “I need...” He pulled me closer as he leaned back, making Yarak groan.

“How about this?” he asked, pressing his nose into the flames that licked around Emrys's neck. “You bend over our pretty dragon here. Give him your pretty dick and listen to him whine for you. I'll fill your hole up, just like you need. And when Julian is done banishing everyone from our backyard, he's going to wreck my ass.” He twisted Emrys's face around so he could kiss him. Emrys's hand tightened so hard in my

hair that I groaned. “Can you do that, Em? Can you give that to our sweet dragon? Give him your fiery cock?”

Our firebird shuddered. He looked down at me, his fire blazing in his eyes. I could see his hesitation and I tried not to be hurt by it. I knew it had nothing to do with me. This was something he needed to work through. The constant rejection in his past had shifted something inside him and he wasn't sure how that piece was going to work out.

He took a breath and nodded. “Okay.”

“I'll be right here,” Yarak assured him. “Giving you everything you need. Promise.”

“I don't want to... top you,” Emrys said. “Is that...?”

“You never have to. One dick is more than enough when it's from a fucking dragon,” Yarak said, chuckling. He gently pushed me off Emrys's cock. “Hands and knees, sexy reptile.”

I scrambled to do as I was told, spreading my legs wide and pressing my face into the hot coals. It wasn't long before I felt fingers in me. Working me open and coating me with spit that I was pretty sure was Yarak's. I've felt him behind me too many times to count. And I could hear the quiet whimpers from Emrys.

Glancing back, I found our demon was readying us both at the same time. My dick pulsed with excitement. My balls felt so fucking heavy as tingles raced through me.

It took far too long before Yarak got us both to a place where he was comfortable moving forward. He concentrated on getting Emrys on his cock first and I watched as heat pooled through me as he made his way inside our sweet firebird.

Then Yarak shifted a nearly boneless Emrys toward me, and it wasn't long before that cock of fire was searing into my body like a burning iron. I whined loudly. The way he filled me, scorched me. It was all so fucking good that words came tumbling out of my mouth.

I wasn't sure when Julian joined us, but I felt his addition to our chain and in this moment, I'd never felt so fucking

complete. This was it. This was my family.



Yarak

ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVED ABOUT OUR FRIENDS WAS THAT we're really one big family. We had good natured arguments and laughed. We went out, teased each other, and we remembered what's going on in the other person's life.

Our affection for each other was real. We're an extended family.

I was already sitting in our usual booth when Javan and Maryn joined me. By the way they're eyeing each other, I could only imagine what they'd been talking about as they walked in. Before I had a chance to ask, Akello joined us, followed by Hadley. Of the five of us, Hadley basically fell into her seat and dropped her head onto her folded arms.

"Too many dicks, huh?" Maryn asked, patting her head.

Hadley snorted. "No. We got a puppy, and that thing is fucking chaos. You'd think with twelve of us, we'd be able to keep up with a single puppy." She picked her head up and gave Maryn a deadpan look. "Not the case. I think it's demonic."

We laughed at her theatrics.

"I really think it's too many dicks," Maryn said, shaking her head. "Is eleven necessary?"

"How many dicks do you have in your toy box?" Javan asked. Maryn tilted her head to the side before squinting her eyes at him. "That's what I thought. Just because Had's are

attached to living, breathing people, doesn't mean that she has any more than you do."

"Mine get attached to living, breathing people. I have the benefit of tits and no testosterone," Maryn said.

Hadley laughed and shook her head.

"I feel like you're going to lose this argument," Akello pointed out as he took a sip of his water. "We're all happy with a lot of dicks."

"No less than three," Hadley said.

"Actually, I only enjoy one," Akello said, "but I appreciate where you're going with that."

"Did I always know you don't bone Lazer and Torin?" Hadley asked.

Akello snorted. "No idea, love. We're all about hands and mouths, but as far as ass-to-dick is concerned, Jasper's my only dick."

"And you're his only dick. It's rather sweet," I said.

Our witch rolled his eyes at me.

"I've only recently got three," I said. "Since I still fall into your minimum, I'm game for wherever this conversation is going."

"I still stand by my statement then," Hadley said.

"Actually, that takes me out," Javan said, making Hadley turn to him. I could nearly see the way her wheels were turning. "Which of your men count as one together? I have questions."

We laughed.

Javan smirked. "No. Koa is only Calix's. That's the way his Little works. He's still our husband and we love him just as much as we do each other, but he's Calix's little boy. They're only physical together."

Hadley stared at him for a minute. "I feel like I've lived under a rock this whole time. I didn't know about Akello

being choosy when it came to dicks, and I had no idea that Koa and Calix were... exclusive? Is that the right word?"

"Kind of." Javan shrugged.

"I have minimum requirements," Akello said, also shrugging.

Maryn snickered.

"Huh." Hadley shook her head.

We paused long enough to order the entire menu (we're growing monsters!) before turning back to each other.

"So you're really going to blame your demonic dog for the bags under your eyes?" I asked.

Hadley frowned. "Alright. While the hellhound runs me ragged, there are other things. For instance, my parents keep dropping in and hinting at grandchildren. I have like a hundred siblings, many of which have children, and they're harassing me! Then there's..." She frowned and sat back, her expression turning bitter and irritated.

Akello slid over and wrapped his arm around her, kissing her temple. "Trouble at home?" he asked gently.

She grinned. "Not at all. Actually." She sighed and blew out a frustrated breath. "I had three really close friends before I joined my family. We spent most of our time together. All the time. I really thought they were my ride-or-die. Turns out, two of them are. The third—not so much. If she'd have just, you know, disagreed with my lifestyle choices, I could respect that. But now she's posting slander and bullshit all over the internet. She's basically made it her mission to 'educate' people about unethical multi-partner pairings and shit. I know I shouldn't let it get to me, but it really does."

"I'm really dying to set someone on fire," I said.

"How you say that so nonchalantly is troubling," Maryn said.

"Your entire reason for existence is to kill unworthy men who don't make it to Valhalla. It's like your breath of fresh air. And *my demon* is troubling?" I asked.

Maryn sniffed. “There’s a difference. I’m judging souls worthy of an afterlife with Odin. You’re just mean.”

I laughed, shrugging. “We’re just going to have to disagree. Personally, avenging those who hurt my friends and husbands feels much more honorable than smiting those whom you do not favor.”

Apparently, I said something triggering because the entire table turned silent as they stared at me. Waiting for me to expand. I wasn’t sure what else they wanted me to say. Should I expand that to third party relationships? My friends’ friends?

“What’s going on with your husbands?” Akello asked. He still had his arm around Hadley. She settled into him and looked at me with concern.

Sighing, I shook my head. “Nothing. Why?”

“Someone’s hurt your husbands?” Javan pressed. The glint in his eyes showed me that his monster was watching too. Waiting to be pissed on my behalf.

I wasn’t an overly sentimental or sappy man. Demons would really get scoffed at if that was the case. But I really loved that my friends took on any slight against someone I loved personally. It made my chest tighten. Maybe that was my fire dancing.

“Nothing,” I said. “We all came with a bit of baggage as old monsters tend to do, but nothing new.”

A beat of silence passed before Javan said, “How’s Emrys settling in?”

Trying to hide my smile behind my glass of water, I took another sip. Was I surprised that he hit the nail on the head as to what prompted me to add my husbands to my setting people on fire statement? No.

“He’s getting there,” I said, sighing. “A little more every day.”

“Good,” Hadley said. “You should come over for dinner. Gale and Tara need someone new to feed. They’re getting bored cooking the same things we like all the time.”

Smiling, I nodded. "I'll mention it. Honestly, Emrys is good. We're all good."

"Can I ask... weren't you looking for a wife?" Hadley asked.

I nodded, smiling. "Yes. But sometimes we're surprised by the holes within, exposed to us when that missing piece turns up at our door. Believe me when I tell you, Emrys was always supposed to be ours."

"Does that mean you're no longer looking for a wife?" she asked.

"Oh no. We definitely want a wife. A woman to worship and adore. To spoil so thoroughly that she'll be convinced she's royalty." I grinned, imagining this hypothetical woman. Blinking out of my thoughts, I found the table watching me with smirks. "I'm just saying that sometimes where you think your future's headed isn't necessarily the correct destination. As happy and content as the three of us were together and have been for a lot of years, it's already so difficult to remember a time without Em. And he's only been with us for two weeks."

"That's sappy enough to have come out of the muzzle of a Nash," Javan said, but I didn't miss his smirk.

"Yeah, well." I shrugged. "It's Hadley's fault. She's asking questions."

Our food arrived, and we spent the next ten minutes silently stuffing our faces. No one could eat like a monster. I swear, though scans would show we only have a single stomach, I was pretty sure we had three or four.

When we finished, we didn't hang around the restaurant like we usually did. Instead, we headed down to the beach to walk in the sand. Conversation continued and I couldn't help but hope that Emrys found this kind of friendship too. I was pretty sure it would help him settle even more. Knowing that it wasn't just us, his to-be husbands, that wanted him forever. But to have a somewhat separate support group would do him a lot of good at reminding him how wanted and valued he was.

My husbands and I were all lucky enough to have that. I had these four; Fable had Sirius, Zen, and Jennings; and Julian had Bastian, Kohara, and Landon Eve. Landon was one of the few people who came from outside our immediate circle of families we were close to. Though it wasn't all that much of a surprise. He was an AM at The Harem Project and also Gannon Aves's brother.

There were other bonds like that too. Nuine Orksma, the minotaur that Jennings rescued, hung around sometimes. The poor man was covered in scars. He's easily triggered by loud noises, screams, and the dark. But he's sweet. We tried to have him and his family around sometimes. We weren't sure what their support system was, but after the kind of shit that he went through, they needed someone who understood.

Ady especially knew what it was like to be tortured for years at a time. As did Cobalt Malak; he'd been missing for so long, the Malaks thought he'd been murdered. Obry and Jennings had other kinds of abuse to relate to. Though their experiences were different, they still held trauma within them.

In a broader sense, all the Igarashis had been attacked. They'd watched one of their husbands die. They'd seen another handful get severely injured. Shiloh was pumped full of drugs that basically immobilized him. Sirius, Zen, and my own Fable had been getting ready to be experimented on.

In a group this size, we weren't immune to the hazards of the world. There was a chance that, while his trauma was his own, there was always going to be someone who he could talk to that could relate and give him some words of comfort.

A good therapist was helpful too.



Emrys

I'D ALWAYS KNOWN ABOUT ORKA AND SILENCE. THE biggest reason supernaturals left our world for the human one was to escape Silence and go as undetected as we could living amongst those not of our kind. ORKA was always thought of as the lesser threat.

The shock I felt learning everything I did about both agencies still made me shiver when I thought about it. Silence didn't surprise me and yet, it did. That they were using humans like cattle was disgusting. They were little more than science experiments.

But the truth about ORKA was shocking. Their ill-gained magic. Experimenting on monsters. The connection between them and Silence was fucking terrifying. They weren't the lesser threat everyone thought they were.

The truth about both needed to be broadcast to the world of monsters at the very least, though that wouldn't help the humans. They were defenseless. Sitting ducks.

There were a few humans within the ranks of friends that my new family had. I'd met Obry, who was the victim of some fucked up parental shit. But even she had a strange connection to ORKA that no one had expected. And Jennings! Being married to one of the directors with all that shit going on right beneath her nose that she didn't know about?! Fuck!

I had a crash course on everyone at the bonfire the other night, thanks to Gannon, Arat, and Tem. I couldn't necessarily

put faces to names, but I was becoming familiar with names, all the same.

The Nereus family had a human, Oliver. The Malaks had Aden. And the Darkyns had two: Raleigh and Jex. I could only imagine how they felt about this new development within the monster world. Where once they could be considered safe from the horrors monsters had lived with for generations, now they were the weakest link. Not because humans were weak, though depending on which monster you asked, they were. But because, as a species, they didn't know about the threat standing right in front of them.

I'd been no different from anyone else. After escaping the monster world, I set up a life among humans, kept my head down, and just lived. My goal was always to go unnoticed and be left alone. I wasn't part of the problem and yet, I had been content to live my life under an intentional blind eye as long as it meant I was alive.

Chills raced along my body as I looked out the window. It was the dead of night. One in the morning. Fable and I were sitting in a car down the street from an ORKA facility where we'd had a report of high doses of magic. We were waiting for four others before we went to investigate.

I wasn't sure what 'investigate' entailed, but when my men were talking about it, I knew it was time to stop living a complacent life. It was time to become part of the solution.

Honestly, I was a little surprised when I asked to join this party, that no one argued. I'd been prepared for a discussion at the very least, but all I got was that I needed to listen to Fable and the others without question. Until I was more familiar with how they operated, I was considered 'in training' and no one could afford for me to hesitate or question what was going on.

I'd been excited in the two days leading up to this moment. Now I was ready to vomit. Despite being made of fire, I wasn't a fighter.

Fable's hand on my arm made me jump, and my head swiveled to look at him with wide eyes. "You look terrified, sweet titus," he murmured.

Shaking out my unease, I shook my head. “I’m nervous,” I admitted.

He smiled, cupping my face. “It’s fine. We’ve done this a hundred times before.”

“Is that an exaggerated number?”

Fable chuckled and laced our hands together. “Yes, and no. As a whole, we’ve done this probably more. Me, specifically with this little contingent, no. Maybe a dozen. We try to keep to the same teams because we become familiar with each other, but otherwise, we spread out.”

I nodded. “What are we looking for?”

Fable shrugged. “There’s nothing specific. We have Koa on radio, and we’ll be patching him into every piece of electronics we can while he does his thing in the background, including monitoring security. Then the Daemons and Darkyns are on standby for backup, though I’m sure we’ll be fine. The only reason we’d been caught off guard in the past is because we didn’t consider them a true threat and we let them take us by surprise, unprepared. That won’t happen again.”

“If they’re working with Silence, then there’s a chance that they have some of the debilitating weapons that Silence had,” I said.

“We’ve argued this point, but here’s the thing: if they armed humans with a means to take down the biggest monsters, that would give them an advantage. Not only in knowing that what they considered as manageable abominations are actually true threats, but it was basically handing them our kryptonite. We don’t think Silence will do that for obvious reasons. And second, from what we’ve seen, the only monsters who have been armed with those weapons are drones. Someone completely and totally controlled remotely. In other words, no one with volition of their own that could turn around and wield it against their masters.”

A quiet tapping on the window made me jump. My heart landed in my throat, and it took me a minute to swallow around it. Even as I vaguely recognized the men outside, it

took me quite a bit of internal convincing that we hadn't just been caught.

"Ready?" Fable asked.

I nodded, though I wasn't sure. The lock disengaged with a *snap* and my door opened to a man who looked like a walking shadow with human features smiling at me. He was nearly as terrifying as the nightmare I'd met the other night.

"Hey," he said, backing up to let me out.

"Hi," I answered warily. It earned me a chuckle.

Akello shoved him out of the way and linked his arm through mine. "He's just as unhinged as Ryker, but for a very different reason."

I glanced at the man in question, who was smirking at Akello. "What reason is that?"

"Ryker isn't capable of fully immersing himself into being a human because there's completely zero humanity in him. He's literally the personification of nightmares. Tyrus isn't the same thing. He's a demon, which is basically the darker, more twisted and powerful version of a human. Well and good, right? Just like your djinn. However, Tyrus is also a fucking psychopath. Which means half of his ability to *human* is dysfunctional at best."

I looked at Tyrus to find him still smirking. There was a cold calculation in his eyes that could only be read one way: fucking crazy.

"I see," I said.

"However," Fable said, linking his hand with Tyrus's which not only made my heart jump with a bit of fear but also made Tyrus grin like a fucking devil, "even psychopaths are loyal. They're so fucking loyal and possessive that they'll burn down the fucking world for those they care about. So really, they're big fucking teddy bears."

This time, Tyrus rolled his eyes.

"You're going to give your guy whiplash," Liev said, rolling his eyes. He looked at me. "Suffice it to say that he

feels a quarter of the emotions you do, but he'll never let anything happen to you. You're now part of his circle and that means the world will end before he lets a pretty little feather on fire on your head go out."

I snorted, but nodded. "Uh, thanks."

"So," Lazarus said, bringing us back on topic. "Once more, quickly. Ty will slip into the shadows and key Koa into the system. Once we get the okay from Koa, we make our way inside to investigate. We're looking for anything that feels filled with magic outside the walls, bars, and shit."

"We're freeing those inside, right?" I asked. It wasn't a question of 'if' we found someone inside. It was basically guaranteed.

"Of course. Though we're going to try to leave the building standing and just... redesign it to imprison those who step inside. Which will give us ORKA agents to... terrorize," Akello said. "It's worked half the times we'd tried it but we're not sure why it didn't work the other half. We're still looking into that."

I nodded. Again, my skin broke out in chills as my fire simmered just below the surface, waiting to erupt, whether from my fear or anxiety, I wasn't sure. Was I scared? Difficult to say.

"Koa?" Liev asked.

For a minute, I forgot I had the radio in my ear until I heard the deep voice answer. "Online. Proceed when ready."

We walked quietly down the sidewalk, avoiding the streetlights, which wasn't difficult since Tyrus basically sucked the light out of the air as we approached. The light flickered back on once we were out of its ring. Was that freaky? Yep. But it was also fucking impressive. I'd never met an oni before, but damn, they were... curious.

As we approached, Tyrus slipped into the shadows and disappeared. By the time we reached the door to the building, which looked like all the houses on the residential street

except for the black and white door, Tyrus was back and Koa informed us he had the security system on loop already.

“He works fast,” I said.

“You have no idea. Koa is a damn beast,” Akello said.

“He owns half the world too,” Lazarus said.

“Don’t be dramatic,” Koa said into our ears. I smirked at the banter while Akello worked on getting the door open.

It clicked silently and swung inward. For a minute, we stayed where we were. Still and silent as Akello looked into the waiting room. No movement. No sounds. Nothing at all.

“Proceed,” Koa said. “There’s a door to the left of the couch behind the bookcase.”

“How original. Hidden door in a bookcase,” Fable muttered as he swung it open. Koa chuckled in our headpieces.

Lazarus handed me a flash drive and nodded toward the computer. I glanced around the space, which was like any other ordinary clerical office with file cabinets, a copy machine, and doors to other office areas. Flicking the computer on, there was a moment where I mused about how I’d win this case of breaking and entering, as well as hacking into another organization’s computer programs. Not to mention all the other crimes we were about to commit.

Fuck, I’d splay these people open for the vultures.

But then, the likelihood that ORKA was going to broadcast that they’d been under attack wouldn’t allow them to operate under the radar anymore. They’d have to announce to the world what they’re doing.

“Koa?” I asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Are there cameras in the cells and experiment rooms?”

“There are. Why?”

“So you can already see what’s going on deeper within the building?” I asked.

“No. Akello has to strip the magic as you move deeper. Why do you ask?” Koa asked.

I frowned. “I’m a lawyer by trade. My mind is listing all the laws we’re breaking right now. I just fell down a rabbit hole that I’d be able to skin us alive in court if this case was brought to me. But I know that ORKA wouldn’t go public with what they’re doing because it would call attention to them. Then again, if they did, I can only imagine the mob mentality that fear would generate within the world.”

As I took a breath, Koa said, “And you want to be able to show them the truth with the video stream.”

“Yes. That’s what my long-winded rant was getting at.”

Quiet chuckles filled the room around me.

“Don’t fret, lawyer. I’ll have what’s here and already have a store of what we’ve uncovered in other places. Including how the lovely Jennings, clearly a fucking human, managed to settle a raging and abused minotaur all on her own.”

The image that popped into my head made gooseflesh rise all over my skin. “That computer is all set,” Koa said. “Move on, lawyer.”

I grinned and nodded, pulling the USB out of the computer and returning to the rest of them.

“Ready to lose your dinner?” Akello asked, scowling at the single door they hadn’t opened yet.

“No. But let’s go.”

He flashed me a smile before pushing the door open and we followed him in. I could feel the magic in the air. It was charged like a fucking storm, making everything inside me fizzle. My fire danced, turning my skin orange with the flames just beneath the surface. Taking a breath was difficult since the air felt so thick. Hell, even my eyes burned.

“Fuck a duck,” Fable said, coughing.

My men had spent a long time preparing me for what I was about to witness, so I knew we’d find cells of monsters. And that some of them would be in really rough shape. I knew that

beyond the cells were likely going to be rooms with incapacitated monsters who'd been tortured for fuck knows how long.

However, walking into a room with a fucking winged horse with lightning streaking over its body was not what I was prepared to see. There were chains around its hooves and neck. I wasn't sure if the thick magic in the air was from the pegasus or the chains. But one of them was giving off a magic storm of energy.

It took me a minute to see that the pure white beast was covered in bloody scars, old and fresh wounds. His light eyes turned to us, nostrils flaring with a current of fury.

"This explains a lot," Tyrus said. "There's not enough shadows here because they have a fucking pure monster held here. Idiots. He's going to take the place down."

"Maybe we should let him," I said but then caught movement in the cells behind him. "After we get the others out."

"Who is the monster whisperer?" Fable said.

"Jennings. Clearly," Liev answered.

"They have his baby in the back," a voice said from behind the pegasi and everything inside me turned molten with anger. "She's alive..."

"Is it better to let him loose to retrieve his daughter or bring the daughter to him and then let him loose?" Tyrus mused. "One of you who can feel familial bonds like that answer."

I stared at him with wide eyes.

"Now isn't the time to explain to him," Akello said as he bit his lip. If I wasn't mistaken, he had a whole herd of babies at home. Or if they're born of witches, are they automatically called a coven? A flock?

Akello let out a breath and approached the pissed off pegasus. He pulled out his phone and turned it on, flipping the screen to show the monster towering over him. "I have babies

too,” he said quietly. “Six, actually. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now, sweetheart. But if we’re going to help you, I need you to help us first. Can you talk to me? Are you able to find your voice?”

The sound that came out of the pegasus was not something I’d ever heard before. It raked down my spine and made my soul shiver. I was shocked when he actually spoke. A horse’s mouth wasn’t meant for human speech.

“Witch,” he growled.

“There we go. I’m going to let you loose. I’m going to take your chains off. We’ll help you get your daughter out and if she needs medical attention, our Nephilim here will be happy to do whatever he can. Okay?” Akello said.

The pegasus shook his head so his white mane fluttered in the air. “Yes,” he answered.

“I just need you to not take the building down until we get the rest of the monsters out. Can you do that?”

He growled, and I thought he’d do the nightmare proud. “Yes,” he said at last. “Witch. There are others. Other pegasi who have been captured—parents with their offspring. They’re spread out among other buildings. We were taken from our herd.”

Akello pressed his lips together. “Fucking hell.” He turned to look at Tyrus with a desperation in his eyes that I could feel in my bones. Tyrus nodded. I wasn’t sure what communication passed between them, but the heaviness of the situation wasn’t lost on me.

“You first,” Akello said. “Then we’ll get your daughter. Then we’ll empty this building of monsters. Once we’ve finished this, we’ll talk about the others.”

“Yes. Let me go now,” the pegasus said.

Akello made quick work of it. Once the last chain was loosened, the beast turned so quickly and streaked through the cell block that I could only see the white trail left from the lightning that coursed over his body.

“I’m going to be dreaming about this for a week,” Akello muttered.

Tyrus took his hand and pulled him down the cell block. I watched, confused. If Tyrus didn’t have those parts of humanity...

“He’s actually really close to Akello,” Fable said, taking my hand in his. He brought it up to his mouth and kissed the back of it. “His emotional capacity might be stunted, but that doesn’t mean he can’t see what Akello needs.”

“That’s what happens when the unfeeling find feelings,” Lazarus said. He was suddenly shoved into the bars of a cell by a shadow. His booming laugh filled the area.

Fable looked into the cells. “We’ll be back. One monster at a time.”



Julian

LITTLE MONSTERS MIGHT SOUND LIKE A CUTE PRESCHOOL name, but really, I was advertising what kinds of students I accepted. Between three facilities, I employed 150 staff, and we enrolled over 700 kids. By kids, I meant the young of supernaturals in the world. And while we're primarily a preschool, with kids starting at age three, we actually taught until first grade.

I owned the schools, having built them with the idea that I wanted somewhere safe for my future kids to learn how to be monsters and blend into the world of humans while still getting a good educational foundation. It was important to me that there was that structure and safe space in the world for young monsters.

It'd been a wild success and while we advertised to the world that we're not a first come, first serve student enrollment kind of facility, it's based on student need and other factors. We just didn't disclose the kinds of factors we took into consideration.

While my position as president didn't facilitate me being in the classrooms often, I enjoyed dropping in from time to time so that the kids recognized me and the staff were comfortable with me—which, by the way, were only monsters too. I also liked to remember my roots of teaching. Weird for a dragon, maybe, but it was something I truly enjoyed.

As I stepped out of one of the kindergarten classrooms, my phone rang and I pulled it out of my pocket to find Kiley

Taru's name flashing across my screen. Stepping back into my office, I answered.

"Hey, Kiley. What's up?"

There was a pause before she said, "Hey. Question. When you brought Emrys home, did you put your family on pause?"

"Yes. I received the confirmation email stating that we were no longer active within The Harem Project's roster of available families," I confirmed. It was kind of a tricky decision because our wife could show up at any time. But given how much Emrys needed our full attention and commitment, it wasn't a difficult decision to make.

When Kiley didn't answer, I asked, "Why?"

She sighed. "Julian, there was a glitch in the system and the bot threw you back into the bank. You ended up in a list of results."

"Alright. Well, you caught it."

Kiley didn't answer, and I turned my full attention to her. "No, I didn't," she said after a minute. "Her name is Zuri, and she chose your family."

My heart stuttered to a stop. "What?" I whispered.

"There was apparently a glitch, and we don't make a habit of going down the list before we give it to our clients. You know that. So I didn't catch that you were on it. However, when she told me that she wanted *you*, I went back to my desk and pulled your account up like a dozen times. Sure enough, you're on hold. But I also confirmed that the tablet in her hand had House of Agni up on the screen."

"No," I said, closing my eyes. "This is a really shitty time." Emrys was doing well. I was pretty sure he was finally finding his footing and becoming comfortable, sure of his place with us.

But I could only imagine how this was going to fuck with him. "Kiley, I..."

"I know. I didn't tell her anything, though I'm assuming the face I made when she told me she chose your family might

have given away that something wasn't right since she kept asking me what was wrong. Jules, Emrys isn't in your profile yet, either. You haven't approved his addition yet. She doesn't know about him."

"Fuck," I muttered again and let my head fall back on my chair. We hadn't approved his addition because our profile was supposed to be kept out of the fucking system! When we were ready to go live again, I'd have made sure Emrys's profile was where it needed to be.

"Kiley, tell me what you think of her. Is she—?"

"If I didn't think she was perfect for you, I'd not have hesitated in telling her that you weren't available, Julian," she said quietly. "She's a boitató. Confident. Strong. She works for The Harem Project in the division working against Silence. She's your wife. I'm fucking sure of it."

"This is..." Everything inside me warred. Our wife was here! She was ready to come home. Finally!

But I dreaded how this might set Emrys back.

"I haven't said anything to her. Only that I'd present to you the option. It's completely up to you," Kiley said.

If we missed this chance, if we turned her away, we might never find her again. Not least of all, *I didn't want to* turn her away. Then there was the unlikely possibility that she'd be understanding and accept a brief delay in our meeting. But what kind of message was that sending her? Fuck, what would that do to us? To Emrys, knowing that our wife was waiting on us because of him.

"I'll call you back," I said. "I need to talk to my husbands."

"Good deal. Let me know."

I didn't bother shutting down my office. Instead, I just closed the door and locked it before telling our receptionist that something came up and I needed to leave. As soon as I sat in my car, I called Fable to tell him to come home.

After breaking almost every traffic law I could manage in the ten-minute drive, I stepped inside to find Emrys in the kitchen, making sandwiches for lunch. I stared at him for a minute, not calling attention to myself. Was this going to hurt him? Fill him with doubt about him belonging here? He was definitely getting more comfortable. He was finding his confidence in knowing that we wanted him.

Adding someone else was really going to fuck this up.

Stepping into the kitchen, Emrys looked up at me and smiled. My stomach flipped as I cupped his face and kissed his pretty lips. His smile was wider when I pulled back.

“You’re home early. Want some lunch?” he asked.

I nodded. “Please. Fable is on his way too. Would you mind doubling?”

“Okay. What’s the occasion?”

I watched as he stopped what he was doing and pulled out more slices of bread. “I’ll tell you all when we’re together. Is Yarak upstairs?”

Emrys nodded. “Yep. He was yelling at someone on the phone when I asked if he wanted lunch.”

Chuckling, I kissed his cheek and turned. I could hear Yarak’s voice before I hit the top landing. Yelling, indeed. Stepping into the door, his light eyes flickered to mine for a minute, and he flashed me a grin.

“I need you,” I said quietly. “Important.”

He nodded, letting me know he heard me before he turned back to the call. “Look. I’m not going to argue anymore. You don’t get the files unless you pay. End of discussion. This also might be a bit of a shock to hear, but you’re not my only client and I’ve spent more than enough time on you when you can’t afford what you asked for. You won’t receive the edited files until the invoice is paid in full. And if you take longer than thirty days, you’ll have daily fees for each additional day you miss. I’ll also be ending our contract after this. I won’t deal with clients who can’t pay on time when I have a mile-long

wait list.” He stopped talking before raising his voice to cut off the person on the other end. “This conversation is over, Delia.”

Pulling the phone from his ear, he hit the end call button and scowled at it. “I’m going to set her soul on fire. Fucking Karen thinks she’s going to get my time and services for free. Stupid woman doesn’t realize she’s dealing with a fucking demon.”

I chuckled as he got to his feet and slipped his phone into his pocket. “Why are you home?” His arms wrapped around me as he pressed his lips to mine.

“I’m going to need you to remain clear-headed,” I said. “I can’t tell which way I’m going except that my dragon is ready to claw its way out and I can’t trust my own mind right now.”

He frowned. “I’m going to need more than that.”

Sighing, I pressed my forehead to his. “Kiley just called me. Our wife is waiting for us at The Harem Project right now.”

A shiver raced through him. “What?” he whispered.

I nodded.

“But... I thought we—”

“We did. Apparently, there was a fucking glitch, and the bot pulled us up anyway.”

“That’s rather inconvenient,” he growled.

“It is except that, if the bot *knew* she was ours, maybe it did it on purpose and there wasn’t a glitch,” I said, talking out of my ass. “What if we remained on hold, weren’t on her list, and she chose someone else?”

“That’s a stretch,” he said with absolutely no conviction.

“I’m rationalizing. Reaching for fucking straws. This is why I need you to have a clear head for me. Can you do that?”

Yarak kissed me. Slowly. Letting our mouths glide across each other, melding together. He continued to kiss me until I relaxed some of the tension in me. “Yes,” he said, pressing another kiss to the corner of my lips. “But you’re going to

need to fuck me real good tonight for keeping my cool when I'm freaking out inside."

I chuckled and nodded. "Yep. My pleasure."

We headed downstairs, and Fable was already at the counter with Emrys as they made their way through the sandwiches. Yarak and I joined them, and we ate in relative quiet until we were taking care of plates and cups.

"Why did you need us home?" Fable asked.

I nodded and rounded the counter to bring Emrys to me. Pressing his back against the countertop, I cupped his face with my hands. I could already see the concern in his eyes as his breath became shallow.

"Listen to me, Emrys. Okay?" he nodded. "No matter what, this is your home. We're not letting you go. Understand?"

"Of course, we're not," Fable said, frowning.

Yarak pulled him close and then crowded around us. "Shh, baby. Let Julian talk."

Fable frowned, but nodded.

"Kiley called. She's an AM at The Harem Project," I said for Emrys' benefit. He nodded. "When you joined us, we put our family on hold, so we'd be out of the pool of available families, despite knowing we're still waiting for our wife. It was more important that we created our bonds with you." I brushed my fingers through his hair. "We knew when reading your profile that, more than anything, you needed to be convinced without a doubt that this is where you belonged. The day you came home, we were more certain that this was the right choice. That we weren't ever going to ask you to leave. That you're ours, through and through. We didn't want any interruptions."

Emrys nodded. "I appreciate that."

I kissed his lips. "There was a glitch in the software and the bot threw our family back into the pool of available families waiting for a wife." Emrys licked his lips and nodded,

a single bob of his head that he was paying attention. “She’s there now. She chose us. However, because we pulled our family from the pool with the intent to update the information later when we put it live again, you’re not attached to our family yet. She doesn’t know about you.”

“She wants you and not me,” he said, his voice distant.

“No, beautiful. She doesn’t know about you at all. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t want you. Those are two very different scenarios.”

Emrys swallowed. “You want her,” he whispered.

Yarak gripped Emrys’ hair and pulled his face close. “Listen, fiamma. This isn’t ever going to be ‘one or the other,’ understand? You are ours. Permanently.”

“But... you haven’t made it that way,” he said. “I didn’t think... I thought maybe...”

“Oh, sweet angel,” Fable murmured and leaned his head onto Emrys’s.

“Yes, we do want that. Very much. But we didn’t want you to think that you’re here because of an obligation. We want you to *know* that you’re part of our family. We want you to know that mentally, but also emotionally. No matter if we welcome our wife or ten more husbands, your place with us will never, ever waver. Your importance in our home and hearts will never be less important than that of someone else’s. We never wanted you to think we *had to keep you* because we married you. Or because we marked you with our fire or our house. This isn’t something we have to do. It’s what we want. We want you, Emrys. Always.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath. “I believe you.”

Yarak smiled and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

“What do you want to do, Em?” I asked.

He shook his head, his eyes going wide. “No. Oh, no no no. I don’t want to make that decision on my own.”

“Not on your own,” Yarak said. “This is a group decision.”

And it was. Unsurprisingly, we chose to ask for her profile with the understanding that Kiley explained this whole scenario to her, so she understood what she might be walking into. She'd also get Emrys's profile, something that made him flinch.

Also unsurprisingly, we were in love with her the minute we started reading it. Something that I didn't miss on any of my men's faces. Not even Emrys.

It was Emrys who spoke first. "She's... perfect." The reverence in his voice made me smile.

Yarak lifted his face to meet his eyes. "That's the exact same thought we had reading yours, sweet firebird. Just so you know."

Emrys's eyes glistened. "I understand that feeling."

"The thing about the bots is that it *knows* when you're right for someone," Fable said quietly. "Maybe it pulled our profile because it calculated that Zuri was our wife."

Yarak met my eyes and smirked. It was basically the same thing I'd said upstairs.

"It's not just that," I said. "Monsters *know* when they find their mates. It's a calling deep inside us that just says *mine!* so loudly that we can't ignore it." I cupped Emrys' face again. "You are mine, Em. I knew it the second I opened your profile. My dragon was ready to cover you in our flames, beautiful, so the entire fucking world knew that you're owned by a dragon who will feel no guilt whatsoever about tearing down someone who touches you."

"Or looks at you wrong," Fable added, eyes hooding.

Emrys smiled, bowing his head.

"This is permanent. No matter the contract. No matter the marks or tats or bonds. We were always meant to be your home, and you were always going to be our firebird." I tipped his face up again, framing it with my hands and caressing his cheeks with my thumbs. "Do you understand that?"

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I understand what you’re saying. I feel that too.”

“And have you felt that in the past?” Yarak asked.

Emrys smiled a little and closed his eyes. “Not about a family, no.”

There was more to unload there, but now wasn’t the time.

“She wants marriage,” Fable said quietly.

“We’re countering with rooming,” I said. “You okay with that?”

Emrys breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. That alone was enough that Yarak and Fable readily agreed. I put the call in.



Zuri

BEING MADE OF FIRE MEANT I WAS BORN AN ENEMY OF Silence. There was still a debate about who was the real mastermind behind their fuckery and I was seriously dying to know. It was a personal puzzle I *needed* the answer to. But that's not my job.

I've spent the last thirty years in research, deep within the walls of The Harem Project. Picking apart everything we knew about the Division of Silence. I honestly didn't think we'd see action in my lifetime. It's not like the agency was dragging its heels, but we're in the business of knowing everything so we could make an informed decision.

The problem was that while we gathered intelligence, Silence was inventing monstrosities that we weren't prepared for. It had since come to our attention that if we waited it out too much longer, no matter what strike we made against them, we would simply not succeed because they'd gotten far too big.

I wasn't sure of the people involved in the decision to shift our focus, working toward the offensive instead of, well, sitting on the sidelines watching and gathering information. Truthfully, I didn't care why we changed; I was just glad that we did.

That didn't mean my job changed too much except that I was given a new assignment. No longer was I strictly focused on analyzing anything I could get my hands on regarding Silence but now, I was looking for where Silence and ORKA intersected.

One incident led to this: the handing over of a banshee from ORKA to Silence. That she wasn't the intended target wasn't lost on anyone. It could definitely be happenstance, but no one truly knew.

And that's where I came in. Not that I had answers yet. I needed more data to analyze so I could try to find links and associations between them and I was only as good as the information I was given. The latest intel I received was on pegasi adults and their young being tortured together and separately.

How the fuck they managed to wrangle those magical creatures was mind blowing. They're so pure, they're basically the embodiment of magic. That meant there was more than just strong magic at play to hold them. It was fucking epic magic.

They had to get that from somewhere. And the fact they could hunt us in the wild and not just stumble upon monsters was getting concerning. More and more, we were getting reports of new monsters being taken that we were sure they'd never known about a year ago.

However, I was now on sabbatical. It was time for me to give into the craving to find my family. My damn beast wanted to mate and really, I was tired of being lonely.

I'd been fiddling with the questionnaire for years. Filling in parts of it and then getting distracted with work again. This had been a pattern. But today was the end of it. I stepped in first thing in the morning and finished up my questionnaire. A researcher at heart, I went through all seventeen family profiles, but honestly, after I read Agni's, it was unnecessary.

I didn't think I recalled a word I read outside of their family after that. They were mine. I knew without a doubt that they were my family. The chills never left my body when I called Kiley back in to tell her my decision.

That's the first time I'd felt a little unsure. When I announced I wanted Agni with a marriage contract, she stilled, her image flashing so that I got a glimpse of the Valkyrie she was. "Can I see?" she asked.

Maybe this was standard practice. Maybe I was saying Agni wrong, so she was concerned. But the way her gaze trained on their faces told me that it was something else entirely, so I asked what was wrong.

Despite me asking, she only nodded and told me that she'd let them know.

It was weird. Right? But what did I know? Maybe this was common practice? Maybe all AMs are weird.

It was more than an hour later that she returned to me and sat beside me. "You know them, don't you?" I asked.

Kiley smiled. "Yes. I apologize for my concerning behavior earlier." She took a breath. "Because I know them and am quite good friends with them, I also know that their profile was supposed to be on hold. They weren't available within the pool of open families right now."

My stomach sank, and my mouth turned to sandpaper. She patted my hand. "I knew this because I was just over their house a week ago to meet their new man, one not added to their profile yet."

This time my heart sank entirely.

They didn't want anyone else.

"Zuri, look at me," Kiley said, and I blinked away my thoughts to meet her eyes. "Don't get carried away. I've spoken to Julian and the four of them agree that you belong to them. You're their wife, just like you know you are." I tried to let that give me hope, but everything was just unloading right now. Four.

"Zuri."

Blinking again, I shook my head. "Sorry. I'm listening."

Kiley nodded and turned the tablet she was holding around. "This is Emrys; their new family member. He's only attached in the background for right now because they took themselves off the market and haven't updated their profile yet. He's only been there for three weeks, honey."

I reached for the tablet and my heart skipped at the sadness in his dark blue eyes. Without realizing I was doing it, I dragged my finger across the screen, down his handsome face. Of course, this made the screen pop up with little windows and then turn to the next screen. I huffed quietly and let my gaze travel over the words.

Knowing Kiley was there, I hadn't meant to get sucked in, but the next thing I realized, I was reading the last words of his profile. *Fuck me until I know I'm yours.*

"Jesus," I muttered. Who hurt this man? Who do I need to constrict until they pop like a fucking zit?

"I'm glad you feel strongly about him," Kiley said, her voice making me jump and reminding me she was there. I laughed nervously.

"Sorry," I said. "I hadn't meant to... read it all."

"It's totally fine. I wanted you to. How do you feel about this situation now?" she asked.

I nodded, turning the screens back until I was staring down at this man's face. His gorgeous face with the sad eyes that reflected every ache he still carried with him. His scars might not be visible to the outside world, but they're there as if they flashed over his head.

However, I kind of felt like... I was intruding now. This family wasn't for me. Not yet. They hadn't meant to be made available.

Someone got to them before me, and he was now staring up at me from the screen in my lap. That didn't change the fact that every instinct inside me wanted to smoosh this man's face to my chest and hug all that hurt out of him. Or maybe just smother him with my boobs until he only had happy thoughts left.

The thought might be irrational, but I kept thinking, *he got to them first. This is his happily ever after; not mine.*

"You know them," I said.

Kiley nodded.

“Do they... are they open... to me?”

She smiled. “Given their circumstances, they’ve countered the contract to a rooming arrangement.” It shouldn’t have stung. I shouldn’t have flinched. Rationally, that made complete sense. If I could see how much turmoil was going on inside Emrys *through a picture*, I could only imagine how he was in real life.

“Zuri?”

I looked up at Kiley again. She touched my cheek.

“Honey, please know that any hesitation on their part isn’t a reflection of how sure they are that you belong to them. They knew it just as thoroughly as they did concerning Emrys three weeks ago. It’s just the timing. As you can probably see, Emrys... he comes with some past hurt that they wanted to soothe away before they dedicated their hunt for their perfect wife. It’s not a matter of who, but of when.”

“Should I come back?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, honey. Speaking off the record and as their friend alone, what I think is that you should accept their contract. Go to them. And be patient and understanding. I don’t know all of this man’s past, but I know that what they’re working on isn’t something that can be erased with a marriage. Not this kind of doubt and insecurity. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you need to be a support and not an obstacle. Which is unfair to ask of you since you’re also new to them.”

I dropped my gaze back to Emrys on my screen. My heart already beat for this man. For all four of them. But was my presence going to hurt him? Should I leave them alone because he got there first?

“Can I have a minute?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said. “Hit the call button when you’re ready.”

I didn’t know what to do. Once I was left alone, I pushed the coffee table aside and then set up both tablets on the floor, leaning against the couch. One with Emrys’s profile open and the other with the rest of Agni.

Making sure the door was locked, I stripped from my clothes and got onto my hands and knees to let my monster out. She was slow because she was irritated. Irritated that there was a holdup getting to her new mates. Irritated because I wasn't going to let her eat whoever it was that hurt Emrys or whatever it was that haunted his past so much that it shined through his eyes in pictures.

Once I was cramped inside this space and basically coiled myself into a knot, I rested my head on the floor and looked at the two screens, making my monster look.

See them! They're ours, right? Tell me you feel this too.

Yesssss.

Then why do I feel so uncertain?

Okay, don't get me wrong. There are only a few animal-ish monsters that can actually talk. Snakes aren't one of them. That didn't mean we didn't communicate just fine.

In many ways, we're a single entity. One being. But there were times, especially when I was wearing my human skin, that it felt like we were two separate consciousnesses. My monster didn't have words, but feelings.

The only thing she was feeling was longing and *mine!!!* I tried to convey my doubts and what it meant to her. To us. But I quickly realized that maybe me trying this was a mistake. She was very obviously on a one-track mindset right now. And that was borderline obsessed.

While she lay almost licking the screens like a freak, I stewed in my own self-doubt. Very literally feeling torn. I knew they were mine. I could feel that in my bones. But I also felt like I was intruding on someone else's time. There was an unfair and confusing voice that kept telling me that someone got to my family before I did.

Which was stupid since I knew that Emrys was just as thoroughly mine as the other three. I spent a lot of time trying to put into reasonable thoughts why I felt this way. It wasn't fair. It wasn't even accurate.

What it came down to in the end was if I could accept this contract, go to them, and not feel any resentment. Would I feel like a fifth wheel?

It took me a while to get my monster back in, which I struggled and swore at her over since she hadn't wanted to come out in the first place. When I was back on the couch, dressed again and slightly panting from the effort, I called Kiley back in.

She was smiling as she took a seat beside me. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Actually, I want your thoughts on that. What do you think?" I countered.

Kiley smiled. "I think you're going to love them. You're the completion they've been waiting for, Zuri. They're some of the best men I know, which is saying something because men in general give me the heebie jeebies."

I laughed.

She took my hand in hers and squeezed it. "I promise. If I thought for a second that this was going to be bad for you or them, I'd say something. I'd have said something when you told me you wanted the Agnis initially if I thought you weren't the right one for them. I knew then and I'm even more convinced now that you're it." She squeezed my hand again. "You're their wife, honey. But this man"—she tapped the screen with Emrys's face on it—"he's going to need some extra love and attention. That's the only reason there's a note of hesitation."

I nodded. "I really do understand that. But I'm not sure why I feel so... conflicted."

"Tell me something." She let go of my hand and placed it over my chest. "What do you feel, Zuri?"

A smile covered my face because that part I knew, without a doubt. "These are my men."

"Then let all those conflicted feelings and doubts go. They *are* your men. All you have to do is prove that to yourself and

them. You know the truth of the matter. Now it's time to live that truth."

I grinned at her. "You're pretty awesome."

"Thanks, doll."

Taking a breath, I gave her a nod. "I'm ready to go home. Let's sign the contract."



Emrys

WE WERE SITTING ON THE FRONT PORCH IN THE FAMILY SIZED lounge where they'd been the day I arrived just over three weeks ago. In some ways, this felt like déjà vu, except I was in the wrong place. The emotions that flooded me as I walked down the walkway toward them flooded me for a minute—the fear, doubt, uncertainty. The way my chest was so tight and constricted that I could barely breathe. My stomach churned, and I almost stopped half a dozen times to be sick.

Worst of all was the way my whole body was tense as I neared. The words that I wrote at the end of my questionnaire screamed through my head. Those words were in a direct battle with the voice that said I didn't belong here to see who was the loudest. They wouldn't want me. They'd throw me out just like everyone else did.

When Julian touched me, his soft, gentle caress, I nearly cried right then. I'd asked for hard and demanding, but he denied me that and gave me what my heart was too afraid to ask for. I thought that being commanded, controlled, owned would keep my fragile heart from shattering in the precarious way I stitched back the pieces.

His sweet touch and voice, the words he said, broke through every gossamer thread as if he'd hit me with a wrecking ball. Maybe that was why I had wanted harsh and brutal. Because the opposite would hurt all the more.

I never thought I'd see a day where I was feeling whole again. When every past disappointment and rejection wasn't

living rent free just beneath the surface. But those days were coming more frequently now. I felt good. I felt wanted.

And it was genuine.

There were many times that I wanted to believe their words more than I already did because I craved to be loved. I needed a home and a family. Everything in me felt so fragile and I needed the support. I needed someone to spend my days with and to make memories with.

The Kaiyos were just the last on a long list of me being wrong. In hindsight, I knew that so many of their words were lies. They were humoring Iskander. Iska was the only one who ever spoke the truth. I believed every word from his mouth and because I was so desperate to have him—the real thing—I believed the others and became complacent, thinking that because Iskander loved me, they would have to.

They'd have to keep me.

That's the only reason it felt like they ripped the rug out from under me. Because I thought they'd let us stay together.

Clearly I was wrong.

None of that mattered right now. Even with Iskander's daily text messages, I felt more at peace than I have in so long I couldn't even remember the last time I felt this way.

Except now my heart was racing with renewed fear. Doubt. Uncertainty.

But I *knew* that this was my family. I *knew* they weren't going to replace me with the wife they always wanted. *I knew they wanted me.*

Unfortunately, the voice that had been getting quieter as the days passed was now practically screaming in my head that this was the beginning of the end. My days were numbered. Once they had the wife they craved, they'd have no use for me anymore.

The voice was lying, just regurgitating my deep fears of rejection. Preparing me for the inevitable.

Not the inevitable. I'm not going anywhere.

“It’s a good thing that we are, and most of our furniture is flame retardant,” Yarak said quietly, patting down my hair. “Your fire is about ready to break free.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“If you’re nervous for any other reason than that we’re meeting the final piece to our family today, you don’t need to be,” Julian said, knowing exactly how I was really feeling.

Sighing, I nodded. “I *know* that. Yet, I can’t make the voices stop.”

Fable kissed my jaw. His lips fluttered down to my neck and then my shoulder. “You’re forever,” he murmured, making my heart stammer. “I will burn you right now if that will put your mind at ease, my titus.”

I took several breaths and smiled. “Honestly, I think my head just needs time to catch up with the rest of me. It’s been a long time of repeated letdowns. It’s an expected pattern. Despite everything inside me lining up and feeling that this is different, there’s still that part of me that’s just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“We aren’t going to change our minds,” Yarak said.

“We’re also going to tell The Harem Project that if someone else finds our family in their results after this that they’re to tell all the AMs not to call,” Julian said, a frown in his voice. “This is our completion. You and our wife. No more.”

“You say that, but what if—?” Fable started.

“No more,” Yarak and Julian said at the same time. I laughed quietly and closed my eyes.

Fable looked distressed. Julian took his face and twisted him so their eyes met. “I know what that means. I know what I’m saying means we could potentially be missing someone vital. Baby, sweet dragon, our family is complete now. I have no doubt that there might be a dozen more men and/or women that are fucking perfect for us.” Fable’s eyes went wide at ‘a dozen.’ Hell, even my heart stuttered with trepidation. “But we

need to know when and where we draw the line. We need to know when our puzzle is complete.”

“And if we’re handed another profile that makes our fire dance and reach, we’re going to keep saying no, despite that it might not be right for us,” Yarak said. “Not because *that person* would be wrong, but because we need to know the limits on our relationships and what’s perfect and what might put strain on us.”

“We’re not storms,” Julian said. “Eleven men is far too many for us. Especially since we like to share completely. All for one and shit. We don’t want separate relationships and hopping between beds and knowing that my lover might not be your lover.” He waved a hand. “We want to sleep in one bed. We want to be together completely. I never want there to be a time that I’m overwhelmed by all the personalities and bodies in my own home that I feel like I’m drowning.”

“Do you think the Igarashis feel that way?” Fable said, horrified.

Julian smiled and kissed his lips. “Not at all. But baby, they’re storms. Their monsters are made to be in large groups. Where we prefer smaller homes while being surrounded by others to create our community. They want their community under one roof!”

I really liked the Igarashis. They were some of the sweetest people I’d met in life. Not that I thought I’d actually met them all. I didn’t even remember more than five names, and one was their wife.

It was then, as we were all finally settled, that a car pulled into the driveway. My heart jumped and lodged in my throat as I stared. I could already tell that the person in the driver’s seat wasn’t our wife. Someday wife, I mean. Sometimes it was easier just to say wife or husband because boyfriend/girlfriend felt like such an inadequate title.

The car parked, and the driver got out. I recognized her from the gathering, but I couldn’t put my finger on her name. It was only after I remembered that the AM who I’d been

talking to at The Harem Project brought me here did I think it was probably Kiley.

My eyes immediately stopped on the woman who stepped out on the far side of the car. She was... stunning. Her smooth ivory skin looked fairer due to her stark white hair that fell in layers toward her elbows. Her delicate hand pushed her bangs from her eyes, feathering them to the side as she came around the car to meet Kiley.

I hadn't noticed Julian got up until he was walking down the stairs of the porch and momentarily obstructing my view. There couldn't be an entrance more different from mine. I faked every ounce of confidence I might have given off. The only time I ever truly felt that kind of confidence was in the courtroom or my office. When the control I had was backed up by assurances and conviction in my ability, knowledge, and success.

I was decent at faking it otherwise, but this girl—our Zuri—she was the embodiment of poise. Shoulders back, head high. She walked with sure steps toward Julian, a pretty smile on those perfectly pink lips.

“Breathe, Em,” Yarak said, and the breath I'd been holding came whooshing out of me.

Zuri and Julian met, stepping into each other's personal spaces. For a beat, they just stared at each other, not speaking. I couldn't see Julian's face fully, but I caught part of him in profile. The adoration on his face was evident.

My stomach knotted as the voice inside my head said, *does he ever look at you like that?*

Our pretty wife's smile was soft, sweet, and coy. She leaned up on her toes and placed a kiss on his lips, one soft hand over his chest. His heart. Julian wrapped her up, hugging her tightly. He must have said something to her, because she smiled and nodded before he let her go.

Zuri remained where she was, her attention on him, as Julian moved to the car. He gave Kiley a quick hug and then

retrieved Zuri's bags from the trunk. Two suitcases, a backpack, and a duffle.

Somehow, he still took Zuri's hand as he led her to the stairs. My heart raced as they got closer. The blood whooshing in my ears was loud enough that I couldn't even hear their footsteps as they approached.

What if she didn't want me? I wasn't part of the profile that she initially read. I was what came with the family. Like a stray dog—not something noted, but there, nonetheless. What if her decision to be here was because she was set on them, and I was just... leftovers?

Her eyes swept over us when they were close, and then they landed on me. A beat passed. A second. Fuck, I was going to be sick.

I couldn't catch my breath as she approached the lounge, her gaze never leaving mine. I was pretty sure I was trembling at this point.

If only those idiots I've buried in the courtroom could see me now! I bet they wouldn't even recognize me.

She sat on the lounge and reached for me. As if she had command of my volition, I slid forward so I was in front of her, my legs tucked under me somewhat awkwardly.

"Hi," she said, then her small, soft fingers brushed my skin, and her fire made mine jump.

My lips parted, and I finally sucked in an audible breath.

This close, I could see the way her eyes were all sorts of color. At a distance and in pictures, they looked blue. Light blue. But up close, I could see that they were a whole array of colors. Blues, browns, greens, slate. Like the rest of her, she was... perfection.

"Hi," I said quietly. Did my voice shake? Fuck, I hoped not.

Both her hands came up then. I watched, transfixed, until they were framing my face. She pressed closer to me, her leg

against mine, as she stared into my face. My eyes. What was she seeing?

“Emrys,” she whispered, and I shivered. “Who hurt you? Can I eat them?”

“She’s perfect,” Fable murmured on a sigh.

I couldn’t help it. Her words and then Fable’s... they made me huff out a laugh. My eyes closed as I tried to let the tension in me fall away.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Really.”

“Hmm,” she answered, her fingers brushing my cheeks just like Julian’s did when he was telling us about her. “I could see your pain in your pictures, even before reading your profile. It’s been a long time since I’ve fed my snake. Are you sure I can’t eat them? It might be cathartic.”

Opening my eyes, I grinned and reached for her. She let me pull her to me, her entire body wrapped around mine.

I’d been picturing her small and dainty. While her curves were soft and feminine, she wasn’t actually small at all. On the higher end of five-feet-something, with hard muscles under her soft skin. She was a predator. I could feel it in her hold.

She hugged me tightly. For a minute, we were left alone and then Fable joined us, wrapping around us both. I could feel Zuri’s hand move from me to touch him. And when Yarak joined us, Zuri’s other hand moved to touch him too.

I looked up, finding Julian leaning against a chair and watching. His ankles crossed, his hands in his pockets, a sexy, happy smile on his entirely too kissable lips. When I met his eyes, his smile grew wider.

He joined us too. Pressing against Zuri’s back and encompassing us all.

Zuri sighed. “I wondered what it would be like to meet my forever. I wasn’t prepared for it to feel like I was coming home.”

“Yes,” Fable said, nuzzling into both of us. “We’re whole now. Finally. Now we can start living for real.”

Her laughter was quiet and perfect. There was a feminine quality to it that I just fucking loved. I pressed my face into her neck and she hummed soothingly.

I decided she was a lot like the others. She read a person and responded without conscious effort. Zuri just *did*.

Even Fable, who liked to be the baby of the house, responded to what I needed over his own needs.

Someday, when I was a whole person again, I'd make sure that he always got to be the baby. I'd take care of him too.

But for right now, I was going to let myself melt in their touch, their hold. And drown out the fretting voices in my head with a new mantra.

I'm home.



Zuri

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A LATE RISER. IT WASN'T THAT I WENT TO bed late. Sometimes, maybe. It was just that I loved to sleep. It was my happy place.

The last couple mornings I woke up in bed alone. I wasn't surprised by this; I expected it. We'd had the weekend together before they returned to work. All four men were ready to take a week off for my arrival as they had Emrys's, but I insisted that they work.

I took the week off, though. Why did I insist that they work when I didn't? I wanted to learn their routines. I was a researcher at heart, so I wanted to observe and see how I fit in.

From their profiles, I knew what their jobs were. Julian was the only one that left the house daily since he ran a small chain of preschools for the supernatural. He was out of the house by seven. Fable worked from home as a content editor. Not so ironically, his genre of choice was monster romance. Funny, right?

Yarak had a studio on the second floor tucked inside his office, where he worked as a voice actor. He contracted with a local studio somewhat frequently, so he'd have to leave the house for those jobs. And Emrys was working from one of the spare bedrooms as a partner in his law firm. I thought he planned to be in person there from time to time but he hadn't yet since he'd moved here.

That left me. I'd also be leaving the house daily but not until 9:30. I worked ten to four, four days a week. It was

enough to pay the bills and allow me the small luxuries I cared to have. Which weren't many. I was rather a simple girl.

Rolling over, I was surprised to find Fable there. He had a stylus between his lips as his eyes moved over whatever was on his tablet. When I looked at him, his pretty, dark eyes flickered to me. They reminded me of stormy skies. Such a pretty color, slate or charcoal or something.

He smiled, reaching out to run his fingers through my hair. "Good morning," he said around his stylus.

"Morning," I said. "How come you're still in bed?"

"Didn't want you to always wake up alone," he said, pulling the stylus from his mouth and letting it connect with the side of the tablet, a magnet within holding it in place.

His words were so fucking sweet that I smiled. "Come here, Fable," I said.

With a grin, he placed the tablet on the side table and slid down the bed, so he was facing me. I wrapped him in my arms, bringing his body against mine. He was so big, easily three times my bulk. It was easy to be lost in him, yet I wouldn't because that wasn't the kind of man he was.

My arms wrapped around his neck, and I dug my fingers into his hair. "You're so pretty," I told him.

He grinned. "Thank you. You're pretty too. Stunning."

I kissed his lips, and he squirmed against me. I could feel his monster cock thickening, pressed against my thigh, and I rubbed against him. He shuddered as I bit his lip.

His big hands rested on my waist before moving up my back to hold me to him. Though we all slept in the same bed and in nothing but our underwear, there'd been little sexual touch since I'd gotten here. I was under the impression that they didn't want to put pressure on me. Letting me call the shots. It was sweet, though totally unnecessary.

I was hungry for these men. I knew that they'd quench a thirst inside me that no one else had ever touched before.

Dropping my hand down to his chest, I tweaked his nipple, making him inhale sharply. His body was so strong, so big. I spent the next several minutes just touching him. Mapping his muscles and tracing his veins. So sexy.

When my fingers dropped to outline his big dragon dick, he flinched as if I hurt him. Fable pulled his mouth from mine, his dark eyes staring into mine.

“You really don’t like to be touched there, huh?” I asked.

His cheeks flushed. “Before you ask, there’s nothing in my past that caused that. I just... yes, it feels good, but I prefer nearly *everything* else.”

“That’s alright, sweet dragon. You’re allowed to like what you like,” I assured him.

He grinned. “Okay so...” His cheeks darkened. “I don’t think I’m going to like... I suppose it’s not really called topping between men and women, is it?”

I chuckled. “No. I think it’s just referred to as sex.”

Fable made a face. “Well, I like sex a lot but I like it... from behind.”

“How about we go shopping?” I suggested. The surprise at the change in topic made his eyes turn wide. “You can pick the dick you’d like me to use on you. We’ll have sex the way you like it.”

His fire flared under my touch. I could feel the hard, sleek scales of his dragon pop up over his skin as he shivered. “You’d do that?” he asked quietly. The needy, vulnerable tone in his voice made me pull him closer and kiss him until he was whining.

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll do whatever you need, precious.”

Fable whined, his eyes fluttering shut. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“If I don’t like... to stick my dick in things—people—how will I please you?” he asked.

I grinned. “Are you opposed to using your mouth? Your strong, long dragon tongue?”

Fable’s smile was wicked. “No. I like things in my mouth. Can I practice now, fintan?”

Fintan. I tilted my head to the side. “White fire?” I asked.

He grinned wider. “Yes. You’re my pretty little white firebreather. Is that okay?”

Kissing him breathless, I nodded. “You can call me what you want, precious.”

“Can I use my mouth on you now?” he asked again. I nodded. Fable moved quickly for such a big man. He was suddenly no longer near my mouth but between my legs, pulling my panties off. He spread my legs wide, and I watched the fire dance in his eyes.

They flicked up to me before he gave me a grin and dropped down. His fine ass arched up on the bed and I groaned at the sight. That was before his mouth even met me. That perfect tongue moved between my lips, over my entrance and then clit until he sucked at the apex of my sex. I moaned, closing my eyes.

“Such a sweet boy,” I murmured.

Fable hummed appreciatively before literally burying his face and pressing his tongue deep inside me. I caught my breath, my back arching like a cat.

“Jesus, Fable. Where did you learn this?”

He didn’t answer as he licked me all over, making my entire body tingle until I was shaking like a junkie. Too soon, his tongue left me, but this dragon knew where the clit was and how to work it. He flicked it a couple times with his tongue, nearly having me off the bed entirely by the way I jumped. Then his mouth covered me, and he sucked until I was screaming through my orgasm.

That was quick. My man was magic.



I SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY WANDERING THROUGH THE house, learning my men by observing them working and through their things. I didn't snoop. Despite knowing this is now my forever and that meant that maybe I could go through drawers and open closets, that didn't really appeal to me.

Instead, I looked at pictures and art. Décor. The kinds of food they stocked in the fridge and pantry. I watched how they sat when they worked, the tone of their voices when they had to speak to someone professionally, their thoughtful expressions as they mulled over whatever was in front of them.

After organizing my clothes in the big closet with theirs, I lined my suitcases up with the row that was already taking up the back wall. I wasn't sure why, but a goofy smile flickered across my mouth upon seeing them. Out of all the things in this house that could scream 'family,' a row of suitcases really did it for me.

After a while, I tucked myself into a chair in the corner of the living room where I could see almost the entire first floor and started scrolling through emails—new information that had come into my department in the last few days—and pleasure reading. The house was peaceful, even with three other people inside.

There was a sense of comfort knowing that I wasn't alone. Knowing I could head up to one of the spaces where they were working and sit quietly in the corner, just to be near them. I did that yesterday with Yarak as he spoke into his microphone, narrating whatever it was he was reading. I thought it was a book, but I didn't ask.

Just as I had settled into my book for a while, Emrys walked into the room looking down at his phone. He paused in the middle of the room, and I watched as his face took on a sad, maybe painful expression. He rubbed his chest absently and then sighed.

Moving toward the couch, he sat down and closed his eyes, clutching his phone in his hand. I wondered what it was he was reading. Or was it something other than that? Maybe it was a lack of communication?

Before I could go over to him, Fable entered the room. His eyes homed in on Emrys right away, and he sat close to him on the couch.

“What’s wrong, titus?” Fable asked, brushing his fingers over Emrys’s jaw.

It was interesting that he chose another name to call Emrys. One that meant ‘to burn.’ It was fitting. I could always feel Emrys’s fire burning right under his skin.

“Nothing,” Emrys sighed and tossed his phone aside.

Fable watched it land. Then he grabbed Emrys and rolled them backwards so that Fable landed on his back with Emrys splayed across him. Emrys laughed and reflexively flailed for a minute before he settled.

“Wanna cuddle?” Fable asked.

“Always,” Emrys answered.

I knew that Emrys had only been here for a few weeks, but there was very obviously already a rapport between the four of them. As if one of them could just *feel* when Emrys hit bottom and needed someone. I had observed it already, though I hadn’t sensed it before that.

Another pang inside my chest made me wonder if this had been the right decision. Maybe I should have offered to wait. To join them in a few months.

A quieter, nastier voice said that he was always going to be the one who got to them first. He was the partner in duress that needed rescuing while I was just... here. From hurt to forever, he was going to get to live the coveted happily ever after.

That voice was annoying because I knew it to be wrong. Right, but also wrong. There was nothing wrong with coming into a new family and not needing saving. Being strong didn’t make me less... wanted.

“Where’s Zuri? She might like to cuddle too,” Emrys said.

I smiled at his question. It reminded me that they’re always thinking about me too.

Steps on the stairs drew my attention toward them and I watched Yarak practically skip the last three and land with a *thud* on the floor. He paused to observe the men on the couch.

“You sound like you carry the weight of a dragon,” Fable mused.

Yarak grinned and moved over to them. He pushed Emrys’s legs and then climbed on their pile behind Emrys, straddling Fable. His hands dug into Emrys’s ass cheeks. For a minute, I watched them.

They were beautiful. Seeing them take care of each other filled me with warmth. And a bit of longing. I wanted to be a part of their pile. But I didn’t want to invite myself. I didn’t want to intrude.

“Where is our wife if she’s not with you?” Fable asked.

My heart skipped as it so often did when I heard one of them call me their wife.

Yarak’s fingers paused as he considered the question. His gaze moved back to the stairs before swinging toward the kitchen. That’s when he spotted me and I smiled. He grinned.

“She’s being a voyeur,” Yarak said, winking at me.

Emrys snorted.

“What does that even mean?” Fable asked, picking his head up to look at Yarak, who was back to squeezing Emrys’s ass cheeks.

“It means she’s found a spot that is perfect for seeing anything and everything we do right here,” Yarak said. He pushed his hips forward, making Emrys groan. Fable shuddered.

It was still early in the afternoon, but the front door opened then, and Julian stepped inside. His gaze fell on the three men

on the couch before moving to me as if he'd known I was there. He smiled as he stepped inside.

He stripped off his outdoor clothing and shut the door. Stopping to drop a kiss on my head, he moved to the three men on the couch. "What are you doing?"

"Emrys was looking sad," Fable said.

Emrys chuckled. "I'm good. Promise."

Julian crouched down to look into his eyes, and I could just barely see the soft smile on Emrys's lips. "Yeah?" Julian asked, running his fingers through Emrys's hair.

"If you guys keep smothering me with all this love and attention, you're going to get me addicted to it and you'll never be able to stop. I'll need this every single hour to recharge," he teased.

Julian kissed his lips. "That's the plan, beautiful. As long as you know that with every touch, another promise is made that we're forever."

Emrys's quiet intake of breath made my heart pinch. Fuck, the way he hurt was just... It made me furious that someone would do that to him.

Yarak stopped his sensual touch and draped himself over Emrys. "Forever, fiamma," he murmured into Emrys's hair.

Julian kissed Yarak and Fable before getting back to his feet. He crossed the room to me and held his hand out. I slipped mine into his and he pulled me against his chest, pressing his seductive lips to mine.

"Want to help me make dinner?"

I nodded, and he took me into the kitchen. By helping him make dinner, he really meant that he'd sit my ass on the counter so I could keep him company. I didn't mind. We talked about nothing and anything. He told me about his day at the preschool and I told him about the new information that had just been dropped concerning Silence.

The way he nodded made me think that perhaps he already knew that.

When he had everything cooking, he wiped his hands on a towel and moved to stand between my legs. “We’re really glad you’re here. You know that, right?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“You know that we will marry you—we want to. But we didn’t want to put pressure on Emrys.”

“I know,” I said.

“I don’t want you to feel like we’re putting your wants and needs aside in favor of addressing his.” Julian brushed his fingers through my hair, moving my bangs from my eyes.

His words only reaffirmed that I made the right decision. This was my family. Leaning my head against his, I said, “I won’t lie and tell you that sometimes I feel like this isn’t my time and maybe I should have waited. But all relationships need time to grow. I’m willing to put in the time.”

He sighed. “You’re exactly perfect for us, Zuri. The wife we’ve always waited and longed for.”

I smiled, brushing my lips to his. “Good.”



Julian

MY PHONE RANG JUST AS WE'RE SITTING DOWN TO BREAKFAST. While I wouldn't normally answer when we're eating, my gut twisted at seeing Miller's name flash across my screen. Frowning, I glanced up apologetically at my family before answering it.

"Hey, Nash," I said. "What's up so early this morning?"

Miller's huff made me tense. The entire Nash household was easygoing, laid-back, and sickeningly sweet to each other. It's gross and yet, I fucking loved every second of it. So to hear him sound even remotely frustrated had my hair standing on end.

They're getting ready to start eliminating ORKA facilities so my mind had already gone to a worst-case scenario when he spoke.

"Sorry, Julian. I'm just calling to give you a heads-up that we're going to be offline for a week or so."

"What happened?" I asked, making the entire breakfast table pause to look at me. I knew that Fable could hear the conversation just fine with his dragon senses. But I wasn't sure about the others, though they watched me just as intently.

"Seems that The Harem Project bots are going rogue and pulled my family from the 'family completed' list and dumped us into the results of someone's matches." He paused as I glanced up at Zuri. Her brows were knitted together though I was still unsure whether she could hear or not. "He'll be here this afternoon."

“Oh,” I said, unsure where to go with that. When a beat passed, Miller chuckled.

“Yeah, man. Apparently, our household isn’t the only one the bots are fucking with.” He sighed as my gaze once again moved to my family, specifically Zuri and Emrys. He wasn’t wrong. Though I wasn’t sure that we’d made that specific detail of Zuri’s arrival known outside of Kiley, who only knew because she was the AM on staff that day.

“Everyone doing okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, sounding exhausted. “We’ve been six for so long. We’ve *known* that this was it. This was our end game. We’d already made our goal, you know? Fuck, Jules, our house isn’t set up for a seventh person! How is this going to end well?”

“Ending isn’t an option,” Astro said, his voice close but muffled slightly.

“I know that,” Miller said, exasperated. “I don’t actually think it’s going to end. As with all my husbands, we know without a doubt that he belongs here. With us. We’ve been fucking missing him and didn’t realize we had that hole in our lives. I’m just... concerned. We’ve been six for three decades. Our bonds are deep and strong. Our fucking lives are so interconnected and... and... I worry that he’s going to feel like he doesn’t have a spot.”

“Because we don’t have a spot for him,” Sirius said, sounding stressed.

“What do you need?” I asked. “Name it.”

Miller chuckled. “Nothing. Just to vent for a second, I guess. To be clear, I’m not doubting Bellamy. Hell, I can already feel our pack bonds expanding for him; reaching for him. I’m just worried about everything *human* that might make him feel like he doesn’t belong. You know?”

“I do,” I said. Not from experience, but when I met Emrys’s gaze, I thought I knew exactly what he meant. “But you know what?”

“What’s that?” he asked, amused. A hint of his usual ease seeped back into his tone.

“You’re so disgustingly lovey, I have no doubt that you’ll make him feel like he’s one of you as soon as he walks into your yard,” I said.

He snorted. “Thanks, I think.”

“No, that’s definitely a full thanks,” Astro said.

“I wonder if he’ll be down with shooting porn,” Fable muttered, proving that he was definitely listening. I also had my answer on whether the other three could hear when they all looked at Fable, perplexed.

On the other end of the phone, a chorus of laughter met my ears, and I grinned.

“Thanks, dragons,” Miller said. “We really needed that. Anyway. We’re going to go dark for a bit and wanted to give you the heads-up. That being said, you best keep me in the loop. If I don’t answer, just leave me a voicemail or drop me a text message. Deal?”

“Yep, absolutely. Enjoy your new sausage.”

More chuckles.

“Thanks, Julian.”

The call clicked off, and I stared at Miller’s face on my screen for just a second before the phone went to sleep. What the hell was going on at The Harem Project? Was there a glitch in the system? Had the AI gotten too intelligent and was now taking matters into its own hands? Uh... circuits?

“What was that about?” Yarak asked, pulling my attention from the dark screen to my husband and the rest of my family looking at me.

But when my gaze landed on Zuri, I decided that even if the bot was getting too independent of its programmers, maybe it knew what it was doing. Zuri was there this week. She was our wife. But what if the program left us out of her results? What would have happened then? Would we have missed her entirely because she’d have found someone else?

“The bots pulled Nash from the depths of completed families and added them to someone’s potential matches,” I said, making Yarak’s eyes go wide.

Their eyes flickered to Zuri, and our lovely lady just smirked.

“Yep, so. Their new packmate will be there this afternoon.”

“They... accepted the match?” Emrys asked, and I could already see that his mind was spinning with what that meant for us.

Zuri was the one who slid her chair closer and pulled him close, humming quietly to him that nothing would ever change the relationships already here.

“She’s perfect,” Fable sighed. I couldn’t count how many times he’s said those words over the past five days. But he wasn’t wrong.

Emrys smiled against her neck, his eyes peeking at me through her curtain of hair. The sweet smile on his face said so many things. That he appreciated being seen. That he needed the confirmation and assurance of his place with us—even from the newest member of our family. His dark eyes said that he still felt insecure, even as he tried not to. As he attempted to trust us with his tattered heart.

They also said that he completely agreed with Fable. Zuri was fucking perfect.

“They did,” I said. “If I had to guess, they did so for the same reason we accepted Zuri’s match when we weren’t supposed to be in the pool. Even if we as men are subject to doubt and hesitation, our monsters are not. We knew Zuri was our wife the moment her pretty face lit up our screens. There’s no doubt in my mind that the Nashes felt the same way as soon as they saw the man’s face.”

“Is it a man?” Zuri asked.

Yarak and Fable grinned.

“They’re a sausage-only household,” Fable said with a wicked grin.

She laughed, her pale fingers moving smoothly through Emrys’s hair. “I see.”

“I guess... if they’ve been complete for a while, I guess what I’m saying is that I’m surprised that they even entertained the thought,” Emrys said.

“Believe me; since the bot threw us into Zuri’s matches when it wasn’t supposed to, I’ve been conflicted about it ever since. Obviously, it was the right thing to do. But at the moment I got Kiley’s phone call, the emotions that I cycled through really ran the gamut,” I said. “And yes, I’ve thought about this time and time again since. I know I said that I was going to tell The Harem Project that we wouldn’t even want a phone call if we were resurrected from the complete list for someone else in the future, but there’s that niggling thought... What if that means we’re still missing someone, and we just don’t know it yet?”

“We’ve gone through that twice in the last month,” Yarak mused as he touched Emrys’s arm. “We thought we were already waiting for our last piece—our wife. But then we get the call that Emrys is there waiting for us and it’s like... what the fuck had we been thinking?! Of course, we weren’t ready for our wife yet because we didn’t have all our men! Then we think we need to wait until we’ve healed all of Emrys’ broken pieces and we get the call for Zuri and *again*, we’re just fucking floored because we need her to help us do that.” He waved at the two of them, Zuri still holding Emrys.

“I’d like to say that this is a discussion for another day,” I said. “But who the hell knows when we’re going to get another call? However, we’re going to have to pause since I really need to get to work.” I’d already reported that I’d be late today, but I hadn’t planned on being *this* late. Though I’m not in the classrooms, I liked to be there when the kids came in. I liked that the parents and the students alike recognized me.

Zuri sat up and kissed Emrys. “Sweet azizi, you’re loved. You know that, right?”

Emrys's breath caught as he stared at her. Her smile was so filled with affection that I could feel it even when it wasn't directed at me. He reached for her again and hugged her fiercely. "Thank you, pretty flame."

Zuri rounded the table and kissed Fable and Yarak before stopping at my side. She'd announced two days ago that she wanted to join each of us at work for a day. Just to see what we did and learn as much as she could about us. Today, she would be coming to work with me.

I kissed each of my husbands, pausing at Emrys, who I kissed a bit more thoroughly. Until he was smiling against my lips. Knowing that we were all giving him extra affection today. Every day. Always.

"Zuri's right, you know. We were in love with you the moment we saw your face on our phone screens. I know you're not used to feeling this kind of affection, beautiful, but it will become familiar one day," I said.

He took a breath and nodded. "I love you too," he said quietly, his cheeks pinking slightly. "I'm still learning to trust myself with that. It gets in the way."

"I know. You take all the time you need, sweetheart. We're here for all of it."

His arms went around my waist for a brief but tight embrace before he stepped away with a nod.

With Zuri's hand in mine, I led her outside, stopping at the passenger side of the car to cup her face and kiss her deeply. She hummed into my mouth, her lithe body pressing up against mine. "You have no idea how relieved I am that you naturally respond to what Emrys needs," I said. "But I need you to make sure you let us know if we're not meeting yours. You're in a different place and we all recognize that Emrys needs a lot of attention to rewrite all the hurt he's come to know and expect. That can make us blind to each other."

She patted my chest. "Don't worry. I'm very good at making sure I get what I want."

I chuckled and opened the door for her. “I’m excited to spend our lives together, Zuri. We will make you our wife soon.”

She grinned. “Good.” She waited until I climbed behind the wheel and started the car before she added, “How do you feel about offspring, dragon?”

My foot hit the gas pedal, and the car revved loudly before I pulled it back, thankful that we were still in park. Looking at her, I enjoyed the sexy but wicked glint in her eyes.

“I take it that’s an appealing future, Julian.”

I groaned and closed my eyes for a minute. “Yes. Hell yes. We want a big family. Lots of babies. There’s a very long clause in our marriage contract.”

Zuri grinned. “I haven’t seen yours specifically, but I’m definitely on board with that.”

Putting the car into drive, I headed for the closest preschool. My dragon was ready to break out right now and breed this woman! I could feel my scales break out in various spots all over my body.

Oooh, maybe we’d be lucky enough to breed some pretty hybrid offspring!

“What dirty thoughts are you thinking over there?” Zuri asked.

I laughed. “Imagining a dragon/boitatá hybrid baby,” I admitted. The way she looked at me made me stifle a groan. “Exactly. Creating life is one thing. A beautiful, precious thing. But having a true combination of genes between two species that really epitomize and personify the connection between us?” I groaned again. “Intoxicating thoughts.”

“Hybrid species aren’t all that common,” she said, but I could hear the want in her voice too. “Especially not outside of a lab.”

“They’re not,” I agreed. “Unless you consider the myths and lore between subspecies and different breeds within a

specific species. There are all sorts of flowery stories to go with it but the science behind it is simple—”

“Continuous crossbreeding,” she finished for me. “Fair enough.”

I pulled into the parking lot and slid the car into park. How was I going to get through a whole day without bending this woman over my desk? Talking about making babies to a dragon who’s been waiting for his wife for three decades is dangerous talk.

We walked inside, and I introduced Zuri to Mabel. She’d been with me since I opened this branch, the very first. “Good morning,” she greeted us both, offering Zuri a wide smile.

“How’s everything?” I asked.

She brushed me off. “Everything is fine, Mr. Agni. You know that. Everything is fine.”

Two *fine’s* in a single statement? That meant not everything was fine. My gaze flickered behind her and met Dana’s. She nodded in my direction.

“Good to hear,” I told Mabel. “Let me know if anything changes. Alright?”

“Of course,” she said, giving me a wide smile.

Taking Zuri’s hand, I headed down the hall until Dana met us in the corridor. “Honestly, everything *is* fine. There’s been a glitter explosion in the kindergarten hall here. I’m pretty sure we’re going to be breathing glitter for the next year. Stanford Site is out of toilet paper. Apparently, their shipment never arrived, and Patsy didn’t notice until we were completely out. I have a rush on the way and am also investigating what happened, but as of right now, they’re using paper towels.”

I made a face, and she nodded.

“The more concerning thing is that Site A is having electrical issues. The lights are flickering like a haunted house. As you can imagine, with a bunch of kids, there have been some fear-filled meltdowns. We’re not sure if it’s actually electrical in nature, though Ed doesn’t see anything wrong, or

if one of our little darlings is discovering their powers and isn't quite sure how to control themselves.”

I chuckled and pinched the bridge of my nose. “This is what happens when I'm late,” I muttered.

Dana smiled. “There's an order of TP waiting at Mega Shopper if you want to drop it off on your way to A,” she said.

“On it. You got the glitter thing under control?” I asked.

She waved her hand as she moved back toward the front office. “I already have a deep clean scheduled for this evening. Just wanted you to know why your office is covered in glitter.”

Groaning, I shook my head and grabbed Zuri's hand again. “I'm not even going to look. Let's go, wife. We're taking a field trip.”



Emrys

“SHOULD WE REALLY BE DOING THIS IN DAYLIGHT?” I ASKED, looking around the street. Unlike the last ORKA facility I visited, this one wasn’t residential. It was located on a busy downtown street with tons of people around.

As I stared at the building in question, the sky lit up like a streak of lightning seared overhead. But nothing followed. Pedestrians looked up warily, waiting for the clear skies to split open and rain to pummel them. There were faces in shop windows and doors as they looked around in confusion.

But I knew what it was. Not lightning, but magic.

“That’s why we can’t wait,” Gannon said as he looked through the windshield of the bus we were in. “Massive magic surge means that they have something inside who is ready to lose its shit.”

“Another pegasus,” I said.

Aratiri and Tempest nodded.

I wasn’t with Fable’s group today. When I got the call this morning asking if I wanted to tag along since their Nash was out of service for a while, I agreed. I wasn’t sure I was even any kind of help, but I still wanted to be able to assist if I could.

Gannon handed me an earpiece and I placed it in my ear. When I had it situated, I could already hear the muffled voices

on the other end. I didn't recognize one of them as Koa this time, though.

"Everyone ready?" Tempest asked.

"Koa has had it on a loop for a while," a voice said on the other end. "He's on standby if we need him but I think that the magic inside has frightened most of the staff away. There are two people inside and they're clerical. They keep looking at the door to the cellblock with a simple door knob lock separating the monsters from them as if that's enough to keep them safe."

"I'm going to let the monsters eat them," Aratiri said as if he were talking about a Hallmark movie he had watched.

I snorted at my own similar thoughts.

"Proceed when ready."

We climbed out of our vehicle and headed toward the building as another flash lit the sky. This one was so bright that my vision was completely white for a second. "We don't have a witch with us," I said as we neared the door.

"Noted," Arat said with a smirk.

"I'm just saying that it was Akello that nullified the magic as we passed through it last time."

"Ah," he said, nodding. "Don't worry. We come witch-equipped." He patted his chest like that was supposed to mean something.

"Okayyy," I said, drawing out the word. "You ate a witch. I'm glad that'll help."

They chuckled around me as we reached the door and Gannon pulled it open. "No," Arat said, not caring in the least that we just walked into enemy territory. "Plum spelled a bunch of clothing to negate various types of spells." He tugged on the jacket I was wearing. "Yours too, pumpkin."

"Is that why Yarak made me wear this?" I asked.

He laughed. "Yes."

“Behind the painting of a flower with tit petals,” the voice in my ear said.

Arat snickered and while I wasn't sure that's what the artist was going for, I could certainly only see breasts now. Gannon disengaged the next door and pulled it open. As soon as he had it swinging wide, the workers inside screamed like girls in a nineties horror movie.

I rolled my eyes and followed everyone inside.

“Would you like to die today or come home with us for questioning?” Tempest asked, and I was once again reminded of a Hallmark movie. A clear threat but stated as if he was declaring they were soulmates.

The one girl made her decision for us as she whipped out something that looked an awful lot like a Taser. The other girl dropped behind the desk, covering her head like the ceiling might fall on her.

A gust of wind whipped by me, pulling harshly on my jacket, and slammed the girl with a Taser against the wall so hard that an echoing *crack* filled the room. When she dropped, blood immediately started pooling around her.

“We play for keeps, darlin’,” Arat said, tilting his head until it cracked.

Tempest rounded the desk and pulled the second girl out by the back of her neck. She screamed and then screamed again when he hovered her in front of her dead colleague. “Is this your fate, or would you like to cooperate?”

“Kill me,” she said. “You’re monsters, aren’t you? Just kill —”

Her words cut off as another *crack* echoed through the room. This one less severe, though no less audible. Tem dropped her on top of the first woman and turned for the door.

“Windy pants is stronger than he looks,” a voice through the speaker in my ear said.

“When I rip you apart by blowing a kiss, we’ll see how sarcastic you’re feeling, Neph,” he answered.

“Don’t worry; they’re husbands. You’re going to enjoy their ribbing for this entire excursion,” Gannon said.

Laughing quietly, I nodded as we headed through the door. We were dropped into a hall of sterile offices, which we followed until the end where a steel door waited for us. This wasn’t at all suspicious. I could only imagine what authorities would think of this place.

Gannon pulled it open and once more, we came face to face with a pissed off pegasus. Like the last one, it was covered in wounds and scars and dried blood. Unlike the last one, its face and front hooves were drenched in drying blood. There were two bodies in front of it too.

We remained motionless as we took in the sight.

“Do you see this?” Arat asked.

“Yes.”

I wasn’t sure what good that would do. But it at least explained why there weren’t many people working at this facility lately.

Tempest gripped Aratiri’s arm tightly and leaned in. “Be careful. Promise.”

Arat kissed his cheek. “Yes. Promise.”

He moved closer, and I was immediately terrified for him. Especially as magic flashed through the building again with such strength, we were all pushed backwards, our feet sliding against the tiled floor.

Arat held up his hands. “We’re here to help you,” he said. “We’re going to get you out of the chains and reunite you with your baby.”

“There are three of them,” a voice from within the cells said. “But I don’t think one of them is...”

The pegasus reared up and slammed his hooves into the ground. The sound that filled my ears was like a fucking shotgun, making me jump and nearly duck.

“Listen to me,” Arat said, still showing his hands to the beast. “I’m going to help you. I’m sorry you were taken by these disgusting people. It’s something I can’t change. I can’t fix what was broken. But I can reunite you with your babies. But I need you to calm down first. I have a family, too. They want me to come home.”

The sound that came out of this monster was loud, irritated, and angry. But I didn’t miss the fear, either.

“They murdered my baby,” he growled. Chills covered my body from my scalp to the tops of my feet.

“We have names of the people who worked at this building, doll. Let’s get you out of here. Get your babies. Set free the other monsters. And when you’re ready, you can eat everyone who did this to you and yours. But I really need you to calm down for me. Your babies need you to calm down. Can you do that?” Arat asked.

I wasn’t sure the monster *could* physically do that. I couldn’t even imagine their mental state. Knowing that one of his babies was dead and no doubt by some pretty awful means. Knowing that two more of his babies were probably in some terrible conditions themselves.

“I can’t shift like this,” the monster said. “The magic in these chains prevents me.”

“Will you let me near you?” Arat asked.

The pegasus’s eyes met ours, and my blood turned cold. They might be beautiful and pure, but that look was stone cold murder. That his face was covered in blood only added to the unease that skated through me.

His eyes closed. His chest rose and fell with deep, quick breaths as he tried to calm himself. “I won’t harm you, storm.”

Arat nodded. He moved slowly, his hands pausing when the pegasus opened his eyes. “Just getting the spelled cutters. Watch me. I’ll keep in your sight this entire time.”

“We’ve been hurt too,” Tem said. “Our family is big, and we were recently attacked while we were vacationing on a mountain.” While he talked and the beast’s focus was on him,

Arat made his way around and worked on the chains. “One of our husbands died. It was only luck that we have a very large family of storms and that our friends were close by to resurrect him. But in the weeks that followed, more of us were deeply hurt. Zilan still feels the magic that wreaked havoc on his bones and that’s after one of royal blood removed it from his body.”

I shuddered at this story, looking at him completely horrified. I’d known that they’d been through some shit last year. They told me at the bonfire gathering. But I hadn’t known just how... traumatizing it had been for them. How do they not live under a rock to try to hide and be left alone?

“Did you kill them all?” the monster asked. “All those who did that to your family?”

“I don’t think we managed to kill those directly responsible,” Tem said. “But we did take down an entire Silence facility and everyone inside. We... discovered some fucking horrors and the truth about some things they’ve been doing. It’s... given us nightmares.”

The last chain fell, but the pegasus didn’t move. He stared at Tem for a long minute as Arat joined us. I’d never seen one of these monsters shift in real life—until recently. I’d only been told about how they do it. When he shifted into a man, he wasn’t big. Not nearly as massive as his monster would have you believe.

He was almost soft. Willowy. Breathtaking with long silvery white hair.

And still covered in blood, which looked more morbid on a human face. “Thank you.”

“I want you to know we’re working on tracking down the rest of your herd,” Arat said. “We stumbled upon one of yours by accident a couple weeks ago and he told us that there were more. We’ll keep looking.”

He took a deep breath and turned with a nod. Like the last one, he moved toward the back door, but it was with slow, measured steps instead of at the speed of fucking light. When

he disappeared, one of the prisoners beyond said, “He’s severely injured. We don’t think he’s going to live long.”

I rubbed my face. “How are we going to find the others before they all suffer that fate?”

Gannon moved to the first cell and shoved the lock back. Inside was a small girl, young. My breath caught. “It’s not just the pegasi that we need to worry about,” he said as he pulled open another cell. “Jennings said there are over 450 ORKA facilities that she knew about. And within each are cells like these. The worst have rooms behind closed doors where unspeakable things take place.”

“We need to find them all and end them,” Tem said as he started on the opposite side of the hall. I stood in front of the small girl, who was cowering in the corner as she looked up at me. That they didn’t think twice about putting a child through this was... unthinkable.



THE THINGS I SAW IN THAT BUILDING WILL LIVE IN MY memories for a very long time. One of the pegasi babies was indeed dead. Murdered after being experimented on and mangled. Their corpse was still on the examination table, though it was barely recognizable as anything other than it had been living at one time. Perhaps the most disturbing thing wasn’t even that it was young. but that it had started to shift back into a human form. A little hand lay wide, as if it were reaching for someone to comfort it.

Hours later, I felt so fucking sick to my stomach at the things I saw. Tears stung my eyes. Every time I blinked, a new horror was laid before me.

When I got home, Zuri was the only one there. She must have seen how wrecked I looked because she practically jumped from the couch and wrapped her arms around me.

“What’s happened?” she asked, her hand rubbing up and down my back. “Are you okay? Did you get hurt? Do I need to eat someone?”

I hugged her tightly and took a breath that smelled just of her. “I didn’t know what humans were capable of,” I said. “The ugliness. The nastiness and cruelty. I thought that was reserved for monsters like those who work within Silence.”

She sighed. “Monsters come in many different varieties. Just like our species. The tricky part is recognizing the intent within their soul. Recognizing a soulless killer isn’t as black and white as it should be.”

She wasn’t wrong. Tem killed someone with his bare hands and didn’t think twice about it. But his compassion for the monsters within the cells and behind the locked door was radiant. Even murder wasn’t black and white, despite what the law might claim.

Killing someone didn’t make you a murderer and a criminal. Killing someone without an actual reason, killing the innocent because you felt justified to do so, torturing someone because they’re different from you—they deserved to die. One death wasn’t enough for them.

“I’m not sure I have the stomach to keep doing that,” I admitted. “I want to help but... I don’t know if I will ever *not* see that little pegasus on the table, dismembered and broken like they were a lamb set in for slaughter.”

Zuri’s breath caught. Her body stilled. Then she hugged me tightly. “I don’t have the stomach for it, either. That’s why I work behind the scenes. I try to find patterns and give educated, reasonable guesses about connections for others to investigate. Don’t get me wrong; I’ll become one of the monsters humans fear to protect those I love. That’s very different from being part of a search and rescue mission, though.”

I nodded. “Maybe that’s what I need to do.”

“You’re really brave, azizi. You know that?” she asked.

I laughed quietly. “Am I?”

Zuri nodded, pulling away enough so she could see my face. “No matter how afraid you are of any given situation, you still put yourself in it. Whether it be here with men you

fear could hurt you emotionally, or rescuing those who have been severely brutalized by true monsters. You're a good person, sweet stuff."

I smiled and kissed her. "Thanks. I'm not sure I'm brave. But sometimes I make the right decision despite my fear. Like taking the risk that *this time*, everything will be different."

Her smile was always so beautiful that it made my heart skip. "It is different. This time, when we say we love you, we mean it."



Zuri

“EVERYTHING OKAY?”

I turned my head to smile at Yarak. “Yes.”

“We can go inside for a while if you’re feeling overwhelmed,” he said, his gaze scanning the yard packed with bodies.

Apparently, every time one of the families in their closest friends circle accepted a new member into their family, they got together to celebrate. This party wasn’t just for me, it was for the new Nash husband too. I was really thankful not to have the full weight of this many people’s attention.

“I’m good,” I said. “I like to watch.”

“Hm,” he hummed, kissing my cheek. “Alright. Let us know if you need a break, though. Okay?”

I nodded. With another kiss on my cheek, I watched him move away from me and join a group that I’d seen him with periodically throughout the few hours we’d been here. Two girls, two guys, and Yarak. I recognized one as a witch and one as a swamp monster. Fascinating.

Shifting my focus, I found Emrys standing with a couple storms and a giant shifter. He was smiling, laughing at something they said. He almost looked like another person. Like he allowed himself to stop thinking for a while and just relax.

Or maybe it wasn’t quite as innocent as that. Maybe he was putting on a happy face, so people who must still feel

somewhat like strangers couldn't see the turmoil going on inside him.

He'd told me about his past in a CliffNotes version two days ago and it only made me want to let my monster out and hunt. How this sweet man could constantly be hurt, how others continuously took advantage of a man who just wanted to find his home and be loved... It made me furious!

Before I started spitting fire through my eyes, I turned away until my gaze landed on Julian. I smirked because it looked like he was part of a meeting of CEOs. There was just this air about them as they sat together and monitored everyone else.

Or maybe that's the preschool teacher in Julian.

Chuckling to myself, I spotted the last of my men—Fable. As soon as my eyes landed on him, I could hear his boisterous laughter. The girl with him rolled her eyes, tossing her loose auburn curls back and leveling another of the men with a glare.

“Hey.”

I moved my attention to the girls who were taking a seat around me. One of them, a pretty elf, handed me another stemless wine glass filled to the brim with sangria. She smiled as I accepted it with a thanks.

“Hi,” I answered in return. “I'm not being a recluse. I'm just observing,” I said, bringing the glass to my lips.

They grinned. “Yeah, we know. I'm Seneca. This is Coral and that's Finlynn. The loud two-and-a-half-year-old elf running around is Fin's.”

I laughed, my eyes seeking out the antics of the girl as they said it. We weren't at our house, but at the wolves's house. There was a stream that ran through the backyard, along the line of the trees, that the girl was running through as adults chatted while watching over her.

“She looks like a handful,” I said.

“You have no idea,” Finlynn said. “I swear, I mated with a demon. One of my husbands has a lot to answer for.”

Our line of sight was cut off when the new Nash walked by. He flashed us a smile before heading for a group that had his guys in it. I watched as he moved to the front of one and leaned against his chest. The man scooped him up, one hand under his ass, and brought him into his arms. Without missing a beat of the conversation.

“I have to say, I’m surprised at how easily Bellamy fits with them,” Seneca said, shaking her head with a smile. “He’s as completely opposite them as one could get and somehow, he’s just the soft touch that their testosterone-filled house needed.”

“You really ought to consider nametags at these events when you’re welcoming new people,” I said. “With pertinent information, like their names and who they belong to. Who is the guy holding Bellamy?”

The girls laughed.

“That’s Kormak. A giant, sexy anubis,” Coral said, her eyebrows dancing on her forehead.

“Ah.” Yep, I could totally see the shadow of an Anubis hanging around him. But Seneca wasn’t wrong. Bellamy was completely the opposite.

The guys of Nash were all big. Built. Filled with muscle. Bellamy was at least a head shorter, lean and willowy, and all sorts of cute femme colors. He currently wore short gray shorts that I was pretty sure should only be allowed in the bedroom. His crop top was pink mesh, cut low in the front. There were three necklaces around his neck, bracelets around his wrists, and rings on his fingers. His nails were painted to match the color of his shorts. The mop of curly hair on his head was pushed back with a headband. The metal kind with cat ears; although, I think they were supposed to be dog ears in this case. And his bare feet with matching painted toes were tucked into cute sandals. He had a single earring, a delicate nose ring, a brow pierced, and a pretty floral tattoo around his ankle, the other had a hemp anklet.

“Yep,” I said. “But he’s adorable.”

“He is,” Coral and Finlynn said together.

“We’ve been musing about what we’d have done in their situation,” Seneca said. “The Nashes have been a complete family for over three decades. Then one day the bot has a stroke and suddenly, they’re getting a call that they have a new match.”

Chills raced down my arms as I glanced at Julian. That’s exactly what happened to us, although different at the same time.

“I’m both surprised and not surprised that they considered it,” Coral said. “I mean, when you’ve lived the same way for so long *knowing* that your life is complete, to have someone say that here’s this new thing that will completely disrupt your entire existence...”

“Yet, I can’t even imagine telling them no,” Finlynn said. “Yes, we’re convinced that we’re whole. We’re complete. But you know what it’s like, Coral. The moment you look at the face, even digitally, of someone that belongs to you, you just... know.”

“You only get the call if *they* feel that first,” I said. “Right? At that point, it’s almost inevitable. So it’s basically a sure thing when you get that call. So turning it down?” I shook my head.

We were complete now. The Agnis, we were complete. A whole family. But what would have happened if, when Kiley called them to tell them I was there and theirs, they said ‘no’? They weren’t ready.

Or in the Nashes’ case, ‘no, we are already complete.’

“It’s like, once you’re told that your person is waiting for you, you can’t turn away,” Seneca said. “You already know in your heart that they’ve been missing, and you can’t help but wonder how you’ve never noticed. Everything that follows is just formality at that point.”

Bellamy shifted in Kormak’s arms, dropping his head to tuck under Kormak’s chin. He nodded at whatever Kormak

said and smiled shyly before tucking his face into the bigger man's neck.

"You know what's really curious?" Coral asked. I shook my head. "There's a mating thing among some species. Canidae, they have pack bonds. But every once in a while, a wolf will find another that uniquely bonds. Some cultures call it a mate. Others call it a luna. It's not common and not chosen. It just happens when they match."

"Like the wraiths and nightmares," Finlynn said, nodding.

"Yep, exactly like that. Well, from what Lorcan said—Lorcan is my husband—when he was talking to Edison—one of the Nashes' husbands—he said that as soon as Bellamy walked into their yard, Kormak was on his feet and the two saw no one but each other for like twenty minutes. They could all feel the new bond resonate through the pack and *knew* what it was. Bellamy and Kormak never exchanged a word. It just happened. Just like that," Coral said. "That bond is so rare and uncommon that it's practically myth, at this point. Yet, here it is."

Chills raced over my body. "Imagine if they'd told The Harem Project they weren't interested in the new match when they called," I said. "That would be awful."

"On the one hand, they might not have known. Sure, *now*, they can look back and be like, 'thank fuck.' But I don't think Kormak knew when he was looking at the digital profile of Bellamy," Finlynn said.

"So it's a bond between the monsters, not the men," I said.

"No, I think it's... spiritual?" Coral frowned. "I think that maybe inhuman DNA makes it possible for certain species, but I don't think it is strictly the monster. Lev says Kormak himself is very different toward Bellamy too. But it's unconscious."

"The species dictates if a bond is possible and what kind of bond," Seneca said. "There are types of bonds among witches too. None of them are *mates* like lovers, though. It's magical bonds that serve different purposes, but it still isn't a choice by

the people who wield the magic as it is between our magic and someone else's."

"Don't you have one?" Coral asked.

Seneca shook her head, shrugging. "Not me. Torin and Akello. Which is really kind of the epitome of what I was saying because while they're husbands, they're very platonic in relation. We have a theory that it's the old blood witches that are able to form the bonds. Torin is basically royalty among witches. He comes from a long line of pure, old magic. So it's unsurprising that a magical bond would originate with him."

"Or maybe toward him," I suggested. "If he's got the royal magic, maybe it's other magic that's always reaching out for a bond or whatever, but it's only old magic that can accept it."

Seneca turned thoughtful; her gaze drifting over the crowd as if she were looking for her family to contemplate it. When she took a sharp breath, the three of us turned to look in the direction she was looking.

There were monsters. Then there were apex monsters. And then there were monsters that even the apex monsters feared. The nightmare was that monster.

He's currently sitting on an outdoor two-seater sofa. Beside him was another scary monster, an oni. And now wedged between them was Bellamy, all brightly colored and seemingly oblivious.

"Did no one tell him that you don't play in the dark with demons?" Coral asked, her voice breathless.

"Names," I said.

"Nightmare is Ryker. The one on the other side is Tyrus. The one watching in amusement is Bryn. Nightmare, oni, fouke. Basically, if you're scared of them, they're sitting in that circle," Finlynn said.

Bellamy was saying something, leaning heavily against Tyrus, who just looked at him as if he didn't recognize what he was seeing. The confusion on his face was kind of adorable.

He looked up at Ryker with wide eyes as if asking, ‘what am I supposed to do right now?’

Bellamy poked Ryker’s chest and my heart nearly stopped. Ryker’s head tipped to the side as he looked down at Bellamy, equally perplexed. Bellamy looked up at Tyrus with a wide smile.

All the while, Bryn watched on. Highly amused. And Bellamy made himself comfortable.

Chancing a look around, I found all the Nashes angled in their direction. Though they appeared at ease and still fully immersed in their individual conversations, they were very aware of where Bellamy had planted himself. For that matter, the entire yard was aware and watching.

It felt like we were holding our breaths collectively.

Tyrus looked up at Bryn, waiting for direction. When he didn’t get anything from Bryn, he looked around the yard. I saw one of the Nashes nod. Encouraging? Tyrus looked back at Bellamy as if he was completely an enigma.

“That man has no fear,” Coral said, shaking her head. “A nightmare and a psychopath demon of darkness.”

“Psychopath?” I asked, wary.

Seneca smiled, reaching over to pat my hand. “Don’t worry. He’s on a tight leash. The Darkyns don’t let him stray too far.”

I shivered and noted that I could probably name the Darkyns by who was watching Tyrus more intently than the others. Then there were other demons too. Those that the nightmare belonged to, but they didn’t look nearly as concerned as the Darkyns.

“Should we be concerned?” I asked.

They didn’t answer for a minute, but eventually, Finlynn shook her head. “No. I think everyone is being overly cautious because they’re not accustomed to seeing someone treat them as everyone else is treated. You know, people. They’re regarded as the monsters they are. It seems Bellamy doesn’t

feel that need. But no, I don't think Ryker or Tyrus have any intention of hurting him."

"They just don't know what to do with him," Coral said, amused.

They really didn't. Tyrus was still looking very confused as he answered whatever question Bellamy asked. Meanwhile, Bryn was trying to hide his laughter under a hand as he kept a close watch.

"I feel my stress spiking and I barely know these people," I said, placing a hand over my racing heart.

The girls laughed. "Because you know you've got a home with us, girl."

I looked at the three of them while they continued to watch Bellamy and the darkest monsters. A smile settled on my lips. I did have a home here. With the Agnis and with these monsters. I've been surrounded by monsters most of my life because of where I worked, but there's never been a time where I felt like I actually belonged somewhere.

But that's because I belonged here. I just needed to find my way.



Yarak

WE GOT THE CALL ONLY A WEEK AFTER THE NASHES TOLD US they were going dark for a while, that they were currently out hunting ORKA, taking their new pup along for the ride. There was a particularly active site less than a hundred miles from where they lived that they were going to take out. Monsters had been going missing there by the droves.

I wasn't sure what had them acting now as opposed to later, but because I was in the middle of an admin day, I signed on for backup if they needed it. There were always a handful of us on backup or we tended not to do whatever dangerous thing we wanted to do. Responsible adults and shit.

Since I was too fucking bored with my day, I shut the laptop and, with phone in hand, I headed out of my office to see what everyone else was up to. Julian wasn't home, of course. I didn't know why he just *had to have* a job that took him outside the house, but whatever.

The door to the bedroom Emrys was using for his office was ajar, so I stopped to peek in at him. He was on the phone. His posture said he was relaxed enough, so probably talking to someone other than the man from the previous family who had fucked with him.

I was conflicted over how I felt about this man, Iskander. From what I understood, it wasn't his fault. He'd been duped, as Emrys had. However, Emrys was the one left alone with a broken heart over it. And this damn man wouldn't go away and leave him alone. Emrys still had feelings for him, which I

was pretty sure this guy knew. I couldn't help but think that he was stringing Emrys along.

It really pissed me off.

But right now, Emrys was smiling and since I heard the word 'plaintiff' I was confident that he was talking to someone from his work. My man was smart. A fucking kickass lawyer who had many more wins under his belt than losses.

Deciding to leave him alone, I headed down the hall, poking my head in the other doors. One guest room was empty while the other found Fable hanging halfway off the bed on his tablet as he worked. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was a cat. The way his body was able to contort to whatever weird ass position we found him lying in was amusing.

I headed downstairs and found Zuri at the dining room table. There were two laptops, and a tablet set up in front of her, plus a third computer monitor.

"Is this what your office normally looks like?" I asked, causing her to glance up at me. She flashed me a smile.

"I have a bank of monitors, actually. And entire tables covered in shit. One table I haven't touched in a month, but it's still covered in stuff that I'm sure is vital in some way or another."

I chuckled as I came up behind her, resting my hands on her shoulders. She leaned back, her head against my stomach. "You done for the day?" she asked.

"Meh. I'm bored with work and can't go do anything in case our wolves need something, so I'm just wandering around the house, seeing who I can annoy before they get sick of me and kick me out," I said.

She laughed, one of her hands moving up to cover mine. "Fable and Emrys already kicked you out, huh?"

"Nah. Em was on the phone talking lawyer-y things that I didn't understand. Fable is twisted in a knot and I was afraid he'd get stuck like that if I snuck up on him. That means you're stuck with me, wife."

She grinned, tipping her face up to look at me. “I can live with that.”

I bent over her, capturing her soft lips with mine. “Pretty wife,” I murmured. She smiled against me.

The front door opened so quickly it slammed against the wall. I jumped up, spinning around in time to find Julian looking a little wild.

“Bellamy was burned. They’re on their way,” he said.

I pulled my phone out and opened the screen. Had I not turned the fucking ringer on? No. It was fine. All sound on as loud as it would go. “I didn’t get a call.”

He shook his head. “I know. They don’t know what kind of fire it is so they’re coming here.”

So many questions!

Feet on the stairs said that Fable and Emrys heard the door slam too. They joined us a minute later and Julian repeated why he was home and a little frantic. I pulled his face to mine after a minute. “It’s cute that you’re worried about a man you’ve barely met, Jules,” I murmured. “Such a big heart.”

He rolled his eyes at me, but it had the desired effect. He huffed and relaxed. “Sorry. Lev was freaking out and his fear kind of got me worked up.”

“It’s all good,” I said, touching his cheek. “No need to explain. We love our friends like family.”

Julian nodded, giving me an amused smile. “It’s a good thing you’re cute, or I’d kick your ass for mocking me.”

I smirked and turned away. “I’ll let you do something else to my ass later, old man.”

Our banter was interrupted by the pounding on our front door. It was hard enough to shake the wall.

“Fuck’s sake,” I muttered as Julian turned to open the door.

Miller stepped inside, followed by Kormak, carrying who could only be their new guy. Sure, he’d been at the party, but I’d barely had a chance to get a glimpse of him, never mind

actually talk to him. He was... small. I found myself cocking my head at the surprise. I didn't know wolves came in that size. I thought they were all massive, like the three who stepped inside. Kitsunes weren't all that large as animals, but their human bodies tended to be big.

The man sighed in exasperation. "Seriously, I'm fine. It's just a little burn."

I raised my brow when Fable looked at me with wide eyes. It was covering half his face...

"Little," Zuri said. "What do you consider a large burn?"

The guy turned his head and took us all in, his eyes darting between the five of us. Then a smile split across his face before he flinched, and the wolves became more agitated at his obvious pain.

"I'm Bellamy," he said, trying not to smile. "I don't think we actually met at the party the other day."

Julian introduced us and motioned for Kormak to set him down on the couch. He didn't do that but sat where Julian indicated, keeping Bellamy in his arms.

"You guys are cute," Fable said with a wide grin.

"Tease later," Miller growled.

"I'm not teasing—"

I reached for Fable and pulled him back. "Not now, sexy. Let's just see what we can do."

"What caused this?" Julian asked.

"A fucking stick," Miller growled, sinking to his knees on the couch next to Kormak.

"What kind of stick?" Zuri asked, causing all heads to swivel to her.

"Is that relevant?" Lev asked.

Zuri nodded. "Yes. Wood has many properties and can hold different kinds of magic, including that which would produce fire. For example, a wand made of ash is shit at

retaining any kind of magic *except* earth magic, particularly properties imbued by an ogre. There are a handful that are good fire conductors though. However, the kind of wood determines the kind of fire.”

I smirked, biting my lip to keep it in as much as I could. Emrys raised his hand to cover his mouth while Fable all out beamed. The wolves just blinked at her like they were just seeing her for the first time. Actually... maybe they were. Had they met the other day at the party?

Julian cleared his throat. “Remember Zuri? Our wife?”

Zuri smiled, offering them a wave.

“Uh...” Lev said, his gaze shifting to Kormak and Bellamy. “I wasn’t watching the stick as much as trying to avoid the fire.”

“What color was the fire?” Zuri asked.

When the wolves looked at her in confusion again, I couldn’t stop my chuckle.

“My fire is white,” she said, and her eyes sparked with it. “It matches my hair and my snake.”

“I... Normal color, I guess,” Miller said, frowning. “Fuck, I didn’t know this was going to be so complicated.”

“Or that we were going to be quizzed,” Astro muttered, amused. He was leaning against Sirius, who was equally amused and stressed.

“Okay,” Julian said, waving me over. “Let’s try djinn first.”

“You think it was djinn fire?” Kormak asked, distressed. Meanwhile, Bellamy looked at me with awe. Yep, I could get used to being looked at that way.

“No. I think a demon has a better chance of pulling the fire out than we do if it’s caused by magic. We can light fires; we’re not that great about controlling them after the fact,” Julian said.

“Good to know,” Miller said and shifted, so I had room.

“Hey,” I said as I sat on the low table across from Kormak, with Bellamy still clutched to his chest. “Do you feel like you’re still on fire?”

“Really?” Miller asked.

Edison pulled him up and pushed him between Sirius and Astro. “Shh, baby cakes. Let the weird demon ask his questions.”

Miller glowered at the room in general before allowing his pack to huddle around him. I tried like hell not to grin as I turned my attention back to Bellamy.

He was watching Miller with hearts in his eyes before he looked at me. “No?”

“I would rather you be more confident in your answers. I need to know what kind of pain this is. Different fires cause various kinds of pain. Did it sting like a bunch of hornets? Sear like you were being branded by a hot iron? Did it feel like you were being plunged into an oven?”

Bellamy’s awe turned into horror. “I... I don’t know.”

“Think about it,” Kormak said, pressing a soft kiss to the side of his head.

Bellamy nodded and closed his eyes. “Okay, it felt like... uh... I was being electrocuted and that caused the fire? It kind of tingles still. Like maybe there’s a live wire still in my skin? That sounds stupid.”

I grinned and patted his hand. “No, it doesn’t. That’s very helpful. I’m going to touch you, okay?”

He nodded. “Will your touch feel like fire too?”

“Only if I want it to. Firebreathers can create fire under our skin or within our touch, yes. But I am generally under control. Julian, want to get the first aid kit?”

Julian nodded and headed out of the room as I lightly touched his heavily blistered skin. He didn’t flinch at all. “Do you feel my fingers?”

He shook his head, the first flash of concern covering his face. “Oh no! I can’t.”

“Easy,” I said, placing my hand over his. “I’m not surprised; I’m just asking. Concentrate on keeping your breathing even, alright?”

Bellamy nodded and closed his eyes as I touched the seared skin. It took me several minutes before I found the ‘live wire’ he was referring to. It took me another minute to identify what kind of ‘wire’ it was. I glanced at Julian with a frown.

“What is it?” Miller asked.

I glanced at him. “There are many classes of fire sources. Demons. Reptiles.” I gestured to my dragons and Zuri. “Aerial. Other supernaturals create their own fire like certain elementals. But there are also a whole series of magics that create artificial fire. I’m both surprised and not that this is one of those. The part that I’m... curious about is the type of magical fire this feels like.”

A beat passed as I continued to just toy with the fire sizzling under my fingertips.

“Are you going to finish or make us guess?” Miller snapped.

“Shh,” Edison crooned, making Miller huff.

I looked up at Miller and gave him an apologetic smile. He was truly scared.

“I think it’s from a sorcerer,” I said. “I’m not completely sure because—”

“They’re extinct,” Sirius said, frowning. “They were hunted generations ago.”

“How do you even know if it feels like that? Have you met a sorcerer in your lifetime?” Lev asked.

“I haven’t, no. But I have felt a witch’s fire. An alchemist’s. A mage, a wizard, a warlock, a magician... I’ve felt them all *except* a sorcerer’s. But I’ve read about it. I’ve heard tales. How they capture fire in their lightning.”

“Yes!” Bellamy exclaimed, startling us all. “That’s what it felt like. I was struck by lightning and the electrical charge just didn’t stop.”

“Can you get it out of him?” Miller asked. “Is that a thing?”

I smiled. “Yeah, it’s a thing. Fire calls fire.”

It wasn’t hard once I figured out what it was I was working with. However... “This is probably going to hurt, kit. Brace yourself.”

He nodded, set his jaw, and gripped onto Kormak tightly.

The way he squirmed and whined said that it indeed did hurt. All six Canidae with him filled the living room with growls that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. The room filled with flames that danced and screeched as I forced them from his body.

There was a moment where I became engulfed, and it took me a minute to allow my demon to break free and consume them completely. I left a scorch mark on the table I was sitting on and singed the couch where my knees were pressed. A moment passed and then the smoke alarms went off, making the entire house jump.

I sighed and reached for the first aid kit. His cheek was bleeding now.

“Just cover it so he doesn’t bleed out,” Miller said. “We’ll take him to the Malaks.”

“No,” Bellamy said. “I want to keep my scar!”

Kormak looked at him patiently, rubbing a big thumb against Bellamy’s lower lip. “Sweet baby doll, you don’t need a scar that covers your entire face, darling. I’ll give you as many scars as you want.”

“You won’t think I’m pretty anymore if I have a scar on my face?” Bellamy asked, his unseared cheek pinking at the promise of scars.

“You’re impossible,” Kormak said, his eyes flickering up to mine. I tried not to grin and went about cleaning the wound

and adding the right kinds of ointments so that he probably wouldn't scar much.

When I had him reasonably bandaged and they headed out the door, I pulled Miller aside and handed him another tube of ointment. "Call Lazer and get one that's magically enhanced for scars."

He nodded and turned but paused. I was surprised *again* when he turned back and wrapped his arms around me. "Sorry, I was being an ass."

I laughed and wrapped him tightly. Big softy needed a hug. "It's all good. I know you were scared."

Miller huffed. "Fucking man is going to give me a heart attack. I can feel it now."

"He's pretty perfect for you. Just the disruption you needed in your relaxed life," I said.

He rolled his eyes as he stepped back, but his gaze remained on mine. He looked all over my face, though I wasn't sure what he was looking for or what he found. "Thanks. For... that."

"You're welcome. For whatever you need now or in the future."

Miller gave me a smile before turning and heading out the door. "We need to restock our first aid kit with burn supplies," I said as I faced my family again. "If ORKA is now playing with fire too... I feel like we might receive more fire injuries in the future."

"It really felt like a sorcerer's magic?" Zuri asked.

I nodded and shrugged. "Yes. Everything in me says sorcerer. That I couldn't identify it right away only further solidifies that idea."

"What does that even mean?" Julian said, shaking his head.

"Who else better to convince humans to hunt monsters than a monster whose entire race has been exterminated by said monsters?" Zuri mused.

“Fucknuts,” I muttered.



Fable

WE GAVE ZURI A BRIEF RUNDOWN OF WHERE WE WERE WITH Silence and ORKA as we had Emrys, though we did it this time instead of our friends. Mainly because we were headed to the Aves's house to gather around their enormous table for a meeting.

It was time to do something in a different kind of defensive way.

Zuri was surprised at how much we knew that she hadn't. She was a little irritated about it because some of the information might have been useful for her to do her job more effectively. Considering she's on the team trying to connect ORKA with Silence, I didn't doubt that. And since we fed *most* of our information to The Harem Project as we acquired it, I wasn't sure why her department didn't have that information yet.

Maybe it was held up. Damn corporate red tape.

On the way to the SUV, Emrys's phone rang. He stopped just outside the vehicle and pulled it out. He wavered on whether he wanted to answer it or not. I could feel the way his fire smoldered hotter.

Pressing his lips together, he looked up to meet my eyes. I nodded. "We have time. Go ahead."

He answered it, turning around but not moving away. Did he know that I would be able to hear the entire conversation with him this close to me? And so would Julian from inside the car. Even with the engine running.

“Hey,” Emrys answered.

There was a sigh on the other end. “I didn’t think you were going to answer.”

“I was just heading out.” Pause. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Flight 1456 to Dallas, now boarding at Terminal C23. Last call for flight 1456.”

“Are you at the airport?” Emrys asked, confused.

“Yeah. Uh... What’s the closest airport to you, Em?”

I raised a brow, glancing behind me at Julian. He was watching Emrys too.

“Why? Where are you heading?” Emrys asked.

The man, who I assumed was Iskander, sighed. “I need to see you. For closure or some shit. Just to... see you. To talk. I promise I’m not looking to get between you and your new family, Emmy. I... I love you. But I want you to be happy. Obviously, I can’t give you that. But I still need to *see* that you’re okay.”

Emrys didn’t answer, but I heard his breath catch. I moved closer to him, wrapping my arms around him so he knew I was there. He wouldn’t need to handle this conversation on his own.

“Iska, I don’t want to see—”

“No, Emrys. Just me. They’re not with me.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant in the bigger picture, but Emrys inhaled sharply. “You’re alone?” he asked.

“Yes. I told you. I need closure or something. All they do is piss me off,” he said, his voice bitter. Angry.

Emrys looked at me, unsure of what to answer. I looked at Julian, who nodded. “Yes,” I told him, pressing my lips to his jaw. “He can come over.”

Emrys didn’t answer Iskander and we heard another call for flight 1456 in the background. Finally, he answered, telling

him which airport.

Iskander sighed in relief. “Thanks, Em,” he said quietly. “I’ll text you my details once I book a flight. Send me your address and I’ll be there... Well, whenever I can catch a flight. Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“I promise. I’m not trying to get between you. Or hurt you. Or make you feel bad. Nothing like that. Really, I swear, Em. I wouldn’t do that to you. I just need to see you.”

Emrys took a deep breath. “Alright. I’ll see you... soon.”

“Yes. Soon.”

The line beeped, signaling the end of the call. For a minute, he just stared at the black screen before his eyes met mine. “You could hear the conversation?”

I smiled sheepishly. “If you’re within a dozen feet, sometimes more depending on background noise, yes, I can hear your phone calls. Dragon senses and all that.”

He laughed, letting his head fall back. “Good. Then I don’t need to repeat that.”

“No, not for Julian and I. But we can tell Zuri and Yarak if you want.”

Emrys nodded, then shook his head. “Let’s just go. I need to not think about him for a while.”

Yarak was already in the backseat, waiting for us. His concern as he looked at Emrys only became more pronounced when Emrys didn’t want to talk about it. He climbed into the middle seat, and I followed. Zuri turned in the front seat to look at him as we settled in.

“We’re here for you, azizi,” she said, reaching for his hand.

“One day, I’ll be here for all of you,” Emrys answered. “But thank you. I don’t know what he really wants coming out here, but I guess we’ll find out.”

Zuri nodded, though her eyes flickered to mine. She probably had an idea based on what she already knew and

what she'd picked up from the exchange between Emrys and I, Emrys's side of the phone conversation, and context clues.

We didn't speak about it as we drove. Julian and Yarak continued to fill in Zuri on whatever they thought might be pertinent information going into this conversation. Honestly, I wasn't sure which way I leaned.

We were one of the last cars to arrive at the Aves's with Malak and Taika pulling in right behind us. "I find it funny we tend to gather here when we need a big meeting and they're one of the smallest families," Akello said as he joined us.

"I think they like the idea of hosting enormous dinners but never do," Hawthorn said.

Yarak re-introduced them as we made our way through the front door. If I remembered those in attendance, there were going to be twenty-four of us today and we've sat thirty or more people at their table before. Sometimes we needed to sit on laps, but I was always happy to sit on one of my husbands' laps.

As if reading my thoughts, Julian pulled Zuri into his lap as soon as we made our greetings and gathered around. Bellamy was there and in Kormak's lap, the side of his face was still healing. Hadrian frowned at him.

"What?" Kormak said after a minute.

"You know that Laz or Cobalt could have fixed that already, right?" Hadrian asked.

Kormak gave him a wry smile as Bellamy said, "I like my war wound," and sniffed. Kormak raised a brow, his arms circling Bellamy a little more tightly.

"Ah. Very... well," Hadrian said.

"The djinn pulled the fire out of it already," Miller said. "When we suggested we visit you, he pouted." There was amusement on his face, but I could also see his frustration.

"I just want sexy scars. That's not so much to ask," Bellamy said.

“I told you; we’ll give you as many scars as you want,” Kormak growled, tenderly touching the healing burn on his cheek. “Not with fire, though.”

“This is cute,” Lorcan said, grinning. “Look at you. Old dogs trying to retrain themselves. He’s just what you needed.”

Miller turned foxy eyes on Lorcan, who just continued to grin as he sat back in his seat. “Where’s Sin?”

Lorcan laughed. “Didn’t mean to ruffle your fur, sweet paws. But Oisin is working, so you get me today.”

Rolling his eyes, Miller turned away, looking anywhere but at the merman. Something that Lorcan found highly amusing.

“Alright,” Iker said. “As much fun as we have ribbing each other, we have a purpose. Just so we’re all on the same page, we’re debating the merit of informing the human world that monsters are real, and some are now hunting them to perform unspeakable acts on. The risk we take is that they’re going to react based on fear and attempt to proclaim that all monsters need to die. Which will lead us to further complications.”

“Here’s the thing,” Miller said, leaning forward. “My husband was nearly fed to a fucking minotaur that they tortured for fuck knows how long. I don’t really give a fuck what comes of this meeting as long as it’s understood that we’re going to be hunting ORKA agents like this is Call of fucking Duty.”

“Easy,” Bastian said, resting his hand on Miller’s arm. “We will never stand in your way. We will always have your backs. That’s not what this is about.”

“Yet it kind of is,” Miller said. “Because if we tell them what’s up, we’re also going to have to make it clear that at least some of us *are* hunting them for a legit reason. Which will not only call attention to the fact that ORKA is there, and this will probably lead to fear and self-righteousness-based support for them, but will also emphasize that we are monsters and we do kill humans.”

“We kill humans who have been hunting monsters,” Kohara said. “We don’t hunt humans to experiment or rape them. There’s a big difference.”

“You’re assuming that these people are going to be rational,” Maryn said, causing us all to turn to her. She’s usually the voice that is shouting the opinion that we’re not really for. She rolled her eyes at us. “I’m serious. Look at the governments in charge of these countries. And the way they have their population trained as sheep. Even those who don’t support the current government and support their rivals do so not caring whether what they stand for is fair, just, or ethical. Then there are worse governments—dictatorships—where you don’t have a choice but to comply with whatever bullshit they tell you. There are monarchies. There are fucking criminal empires that are stronger than their current government. Miller’s right.”

“Someone make note of that,” Akello said. “She agreed that a man is right. I’m pretty sure I’ve never witnessed such an occasion.”

Maryn tossed an orange at him. It was only then that I found the table filled with food. Grinning, I reached for a tray of pastries and shoved a muffin in my mouth as I sat back to listen.

“Then we let the humans get hunted, tortured, raped, murdered?” Merrik asked. I didn’t see Merrik often. I wasn’t even sure how he got voted to come here instead of one of the other Terras.

“I don’t know that there’s an easy answer to this,” Javan said. I glanced his way to find he was sitting in a chair with Calix between his legs. Javan’s arms wrapped around him, his chin resting on Calix’s shoulder. It wasn’t often that Koa wasn’t with Calix, so when it happened, Bryn or Javan was all over him. I smiled and glanced at my husbands and wife. “Moral and ethical dilemmas either way. We let the humans go unaware and watch them become slaughtered or worse. Or we tell them and take a chance that they’re going to turn their nasty attention to monsters, which will create a third front that we have to fight against.”

“There’s the third scenario that says they’ll be on board with whatever game plan we have until the threat of Silence has been extinguished. Then they have no reason to play nice with the rest of the monster world and, once again, fear will take over and we’ll become too dangerous to co-exist with,” Idris said.

I groaned, scowling at that idea. I wasn’t the only one.

“As someone with two human husbands, I’m really uncomfortable leaving the world at large in the dark about the threat around them,” Iker said. “They have us to protect them. But who protects their families? Who protects their co-workers?”

“Maybe we need to not be the army of however many monsters make up your friendship circle and grow the ranks,” Zuri said. “I get that it’s not enough to protect everyone, but...”

“We pick and choose who to protect?” Iker asked. “Based on what criteria? That they’re lucky enough to have monsters care by a third-party relationship?”

“That also doesn’t change the likely scenario that Idris mentioned,” Javan said. “We protect the humans now and later, when we’ve gotten rid of the aggressive threat, they turn on us.”

“There are humans with monster magic in their hands,” Torin said. “They can’t reproduce it, which we can be thankful for, but as we already know, they can use it against us.” He looked at Bellamy who was still sitting unconcerned in Kormak’s lap and listening with little outward interest to the conversation. “The first priority when it comes to humans is to retake what they’ve either been given or stolen. Then, in reality, humans are a very small threat to us. Even with their weapons.”

“How many ORKA branches were there at last count?” Hadrian asked, looking at Javan and Calix.

Calix sighed. “According to the last computer system Koa hacked, we were nearing 700.”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “I thought we were less than 500?”

He nodded. “That was, what? A year ago. They’re expanding rapidly.”

“The weapon they pulled on us was new to them,” Miller said. “I don’t know if that means it was new to that specific facility, to those individual agents, or to ORKA as a whole. But when they shot it and saw what it did, the shock on their face was unmistakable. I’d rather err on the side of caution and say that someone is feeding them new weapons. That means there are monsters somewhere helping ORKA along.”

“Is it too far a stretch to think it’s Silence?” Iker asked.

I looked at Zuri. “Honestly, even with all the information I now have that hasn’t been handed down to me through The Harem Project yet, I can’t find any reasonable connection between the two of them. If it’s there, it’s well hidden. But their agendas are similar enough in the basest of meanings that I don’t think it’s *impossible*. They’ve just covered their tracks.”

“Otherwise, there’s a loose cannon. Someone somewhere that’s giving them shit,” Merrik said.

“Or... they’ve got a witch within their grasp and are somehow getting shit from them,” Torin said, frowning.

“Is there magic that can hold you?” Hadrian asked.

Torin shrugged, shaking his head at the same time. “Me? No. But Plum? Veri or Seneca? Akello? Yes. At the threat of death, torture, or hurting someone they love, what lines do you think they’d cross if they thought that one of us might be in danger?”

I shuddered at the thought. He’s not wrong.

“It’d be a bad day for them,” Torin said, and the dangerous glint in his eyes even gave me the chills. “There’s very little in this world with stronger magic than I have. To take someone that belongs to me will end very badly. But not everyone has my kind of magic. There are entire covens with magic enough combined that can’t match mine. What could these humans do

to them that might force them to think that their only option is producing new weapons for them?”

“I hate when we do this,” Maryn said, scowling at Torin. “Expanding our possibilities so far that we become stretched so thin just thinking of a way to take them all out.”

“I think that needs to be our focus,” Miller said. “I understand it means we’re putting a population of more than eight billion people at risk... but did you just hear that number? Eight billion people. There aren’t that many monsters left in any world. Entire species have been wiped out by these assholes. I’m not saying it’s fair or right, but right now, we can walk in the world, down the street, into restaurants and be left alone. What happens when a world of eight billion now thinks we’re too dangerous to live too?”

“That means every world we know of won’t be safe for us,” Bastian said. “We will no longer know safety. Our kids won’t know what it’s like to have a carefree childhood. They’ll live like Ady—the fear of being discovered drove her to hide so thoroughly that she knew *nothing* about the monsters around her, including how to identify a threat right under her nose.”

Only two of our friends’ families had kids. The Terras had a daughter. The Taikas had six kids. Gannon Aves had four nieces and nephews. Hadley had like a fucking dozen brothers and sisters, many of which had kids.

“So we don’t tell them,” Iker said, his eyes narrowed. “We let them be hunted?”

“I don’t know, Iker,” Bastian said. “Maybe I feel differently because my entire family is demons. Or maybe I feel differently because within my house is the only banshee left known to be living, and she’s still being hunted. Perhaps it’s because I have one of the very few nightmares left alive. I don’t know. But I’d protect your men as if they were my own; I don’t feel that their lives are any less valuable because their species isn’t nearly wiped out. But... our reach is only so far. I’d rather set us up for success than failure. The obstacles we face are already mountains. And yeah, I’d rather we have

somewhere safe to blend in, rather than be constantly looked at with fear.”

“Especially since your husband feeds on fear,” Kohara said.

“That notwithstanding, I think we need to consider a plan that gives us the best possible scenario of success considering our primary objectives being to eliminate both ORKA and Silence. Doing both will also protect the unaware humans,” Bastian said.

Iker sighed in frustration.

This conversation went on well into the night without a solid plan by the time we turned in.



Emrys

I DIDN'T BRING MUCH WITH ME WHEN I MOVED TO LIVE WITH the Agnis. There wasn't much to bring. I'd always lived in a furnished condo that I leased, claiming that I didn't need much to be happy. This was probably why my bank account grew as very little ever came out of it.

In hindsight, I thought that maybe I hadn't put any roots down anywhere because I had always been waiting. Every place was temporary. That condo and the places before them weren't homes. They were just places I slept while I waited to find where I belonged.

I'd always been ready to move. To walk away from the generic places I slept and into the home of the family I belonged to. Everything I owned fit into a suitcase and duffle bag. Most of that had been clothing. There were only a few items I'd brought that had any sentimental value to them.

Those few things were now spread out on the floor around me as I sat leaning against the bed in the spare room where I set up my office. By office, I meant where I plugged in my laptop.

There was an overly large skeleton key with a tag on it that read 'one.' I'd stolen it from the escape room where Iskander and I had our first date. A date in which we spent most of the time making out and just... hugging. We'd been deemed eaten by the dungeon cryptid. Yeah, we hadn't made it out.

The second item was one of those cheap airline blankets that you get when you fly business class from when we went

as a ‘family’ to the Poconos over Christmas break two years ago. Iskander and I had huddled together under it the entire flight, murmuring and laughing quietly like school girls giggling over a cute boy.

A scarf was rolled up next to the blanket. He claimed it was a cheap find when I kept wearing it, but I loved it because it matched the color of his eyes and it really spoke of ‘sea monsters’ with the shades and designs. Besides, despite Iskander’s claim that I didn’t have to wear it all the time, I could see how much he loved that I did.

The last item was a crocheted firebird that I’d found outside my condo a week after I left the Kaiyos upon Imani’s insistence that I go to The Harem Project for official matching. There was a necklace around its neck, a heart, and on the back read *yiamo sian*. Whatever the words meant, they were in the native language of nymphs; Iskander used to whisper them to me all the time. I assumed it meant ‘I love you’ or some variation.

Why had I kept all these things for the past year?

Maybe because none of them was a reminder of the Kaiyos, but of Iskander himself. I hadn’t kept anything from the family as a token of them. Perhaps I’d always known that it was Iskander and me; not all of us together.

Each of these four items just... tugged at me. There was no way I could throw them out. I’d tried so many times over the last year, but in a way, that meant I was cutting off Iskander from my life. No matter how much I needed to, how many times I swore I was going to do it, my heart always felt like it was tearing in two.

Sometimes I told myself I just wasn’t in the right place. I wasn’t strong enough to do it then. I hadn’t had any support or... anything at all. He was all I had.

So why couldn’t I throw them out now? Why did I *still* feel so torn about this? How could I possibly still love him so deeply after all this time?

Maybe Iskander's right. We needed closure so we could move on. Maybe this visit would allow us both to close that door so we could live again.

A light tapping at my door made me look up. Zuri peeked in at me and I smiled. "Hi," I said.

She smiled softly and pushed the door open the rest of the way. This woman was the most gorgeous of any specimen that I'd ever seen. Her tall, lean, hard body and snowy white hair... stunning. Shiny pink lips. And those eyes!

Zuri glanced around at my things before stepping through them to lower herself on my lap, straddling me. "Are you okay, azizi?"

I smiled a little. "Yep. Just... remembering, I guess."

"We can put him up in a hotel if it's going to be too hard for you to have him here," she said.

Dropping my head to her shoulder, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with her scent. "No. It's just that I haven't seen him in over a year, so... I don't really know how this is going to go."

She nodded. "Come on. Let's get you relaxed before he comes." Zuri got to her feet and pulled me along with her.

I rarely used the attached bathroom for more than the toilet or the sink. But she flipped on the water before turning to divest me of my clothes. I let her, enjoying her attention and not having to think. When she had me fully naked, she ushered me under the burning water and gestured for me to sit on the built-in bench.

The water was scorching, filling the room with thick steam. It felt remarkable. Then she was there, climbing back on my lap. Her perfect, silky skin, all slick and smooth against me, definitely got the attention of my dick. Even as I tilted my head up to look at her pretty face and tried to ignore it.

Her fingers went into my hair, running through the short strands and along my scalp. "We're here for you," she said quietly. "You're not doing this alone."

“I kind of feel guilty,” I admitted.

“Because you’re looking forward to seeing him?” she asked.

I laughed. “Oh, no! I’m dreading that moment.” She laughed too. The sound filled me with warmth and somehow settled me a bit. “I feel guilty because... I still... love him. Sometimes I don’t think it’s ever lessened in the year plus since I’ve seen him. But maybe I’m just romanticizing it all, right? That has to be the logical explanation for why I can’t just let him go.”

“Maybe you are,” she said, her gentle fingers on my neck. “But maybe you really do love him. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“How can there not be? He isn’t a part of this family.”

“Do you love your parents? Siblings?”

I gave her a bemused look. “You know that’s very different.”

Her smile was soft and beautiful, making my heart skip. “It is. Fine. Then, let me put it in these terms: Are you only going to love one of the men in this house? Or just me?”

“No.” I frowned. “I still don’t think it’s the same thing.”

“But it is. Just because Iskander doesn’t belong to us, doesn’t mean you can’t love him. If loving someone was a choice, the world would probably be a very different place.”

I sighed and hugged her tightly to me, squishing her pretty breasts on my chest. Her lips, her breath, brushed my skin and I shivered. Not that I could really tell at this point since we were under the spray of hot water, but I was pretty sure being this close to her in this position was making my dick drip. But that could just be the water.

“Zuri,” I breathed, trying to keep my hips still.

“Want me to take care of you, my treasure?” she murmured in my ear.

I groaned quietly and nodded, releasing the tension in my shoulders I hadn't realized I was holding onto for a reason other than Iskander's impending arrival. Her mouth covered mine, hand gripping the back of my neck to keep me where she wanted me. Zuri's free hand went down my chest, my stomach, and circled my raging dick.

She slicked her fingers down my shaft, holding the base with a tight fist, and then pressed herself against me. Her hips moved the head of my dick between her slick folds, making us both moan into each other's mouths. I nearly lost my load as soon as her hand at the back of my neck moved to circle the front, pressing my head against the wall and not letting me move.

For several minutes, this is how we passed the time. The feel of her heat, but not getting it to encompass me was maddeningly arousing. Teasing. Her kiss was demanding and yet somehow still delicate. My fingers dug into her tight, round ass as she worked us.

When she finally sheathed me inside her, my mouth broke from hers and I groaned loudly at the way her body strangled mine.

"Such a big firebird," she grunted. "Let me feel your fire."

As if her words turned on an explosion inside me, my fire roared to the surface and nearly engulfed us both. With it came even more pleasure, which I only barely managed to hold back before I spilled inside her pulsing heat.

However, I didn't manage to hold on to the battle for very long. I filled her as if I were a starved man, listening to all the sounds she made as she rode me. The hot water splattered against us, hissing loudly as it met the fire that engulfed us.

It was so good...



THE LONGER THE MINUTES TICKED BY, THE MORE NERVOUS I became. I was sitting on a chaise with Julian as he held me in

his arms as if I were a small, upset child. It was becoming a familiar sensation, though I loved the attention. I loved to feel his affection and assurance. His strength and support seeped into me with every casual kiss he brushed against my exposed skin.

We were watching television while we waited for Iskander. I'd offered to pick him up from the airport, but he insisted on catching a rideshare. It felt never ending like this, though. Like I kept waiting for something to erupt into flames.

"Take a breath, beautiful," Julian murmured, and I released the one I'd been holding. Some part of me was aware I was holding my breath, but I was surprised every time I let it out. "Want to talk?"

I shook my head. If I opened my mouth, the chances of me being sick were going to increase exponentially.

Thankfully, my wait was over. The knock at the door made me jump and I couldn't help but look at it with slight terror. It had really been more than a year since I'd seen this man. Would I even recognize him? Hell, did I look the same? Probably still looked like the train wreck I was when I left his house for the last time.

"Want me to answer it?" Yarak asked.

Shaking my head, I managed to pull myself to my feet and move to the door. I hesitated for a moment longer before pulling it open.

My breath caught. Iskander looked no different except for the slight bags under his cerulean blue eyes. The streaks of sea blue strands in his blond hair were exactly as I remembered. These aquatic looks were what gave Iskander's species away. Thankfully, with a world filled with people dying their hair and wearing wild contacts, he blended in well enough.

But everything about him, from his soft colored hair that fell to his jaw and his bright eyes, said that he was a nymph.

"Emrys," he said.

My name falling from his lips made my stomach erupt as it always did. I sucked in a breath and held it for a minute, trying

to get myself under control. I was hoping when I saw him again, I'd wonder why I was still so hung up on this man. Why did my heart still yearn for him? Why couldn't I just let go when I had my family now?!

He took a single step forward. Not more than a few inches. It was enough that I reached for him and he took that to mean the awkward moment was over. Iskander stepped over the threshold and wrapped his arms around me, holding me so fucking tightly that I was sure it was the only reason I wasn't falling apart right now.

Fuck, why did I still love this man?!

It was only at this moment that I realized maybe I was always the person who needed someone else to take the reins from me. As soon as I indicated that something was okay or what I needed, Iskander just *did* without me having to ask. Just as my family did.

I used to think that I enjoyed control and now, all I wanted was to give it up. But I think I just realized that what I really wanted was this right here—someone to let me say what I needed without saying it, and then the person who loved me just doing it.

“You still smell like fire and air,” Iskander said, sighing.

I grinned under my squeezed shut eyes. “You smell like fresh water and wishes.”

“I fucking missed you, Emmy,” he whispered. “I'm so fucking sorry.”

His words broke the dam inside me, and I had to fight to keep the tears inside. I clutched him harder, trying to use my hold on him to anchor myself. It took me far longer to get myself under control than I'd like to admit.

Eventually, I pulled myself from him and gestured for him to come inside. He picked up the backpack on the porch and set it down just inside the door before looking at me again. Eyes only for me. Nothing new there.

“This is Julian, Zuri, Yarak, and Fable. Iskander,” I said, introducing them as my family got to their feet and we

approached.

Greetings went around and then Iskander looked at me, a small smile on his lips. His hand brushed mine, squeezing my wrist and holding the contact for a minute. “This makes more sense, Emmy. Doesn’t it?”

I wasn’t sure what he was referring to for a minute before his smirk brightened and I could see the water dancing in his eyes. Twisting my hand in his, I squeezed him in return. Then, as if realizing we were practically holding hands, we pulled apart. Iskander took a step away and shoved his hands into his pockets. I folded mine across my chest, tucking my hands under my arms.

“Yeah,” I said. “I suppose, in hindsight, maybe that should have been obvious.”

He nodded, but his gaze never left mine. My skin tingled for his touch. My chest felt so... tight. Everything in me yearned for him.

“Want to show him to a room?” Julian said. “Let him wash the travel off him?”

Iskander groaned and let his head fall back. “Thank you. I feel like an airport.”

“Yeah. This way.” I waited for him to grab his bag and then he followed me upstairs. “We have three spare rooms, though I use one to work in. I’ve never seen anyone spend the night, so I’m not sure why we have so many.” Pushing open a door, I stepped aside to let him in.

He looked around, a smile on his lips, before his gorgeous blue eyes met mine again. “You look good, Emmy.”

I laughed and closed my eyes, shaking my head. “No, I don’t. I’m a fucking mess.”

His hand on my stomach made me open my eyes. I could read the pain in his expression, feel it spread through me as if it were my own. He pulled me to him and hugged me again. “I’m sorry. For everything. For making you go through that. For not being able to stop it. For how much you hurt because of me.”

I took a shaky breath and clung to him. “No offense, but I was kind of hoping seeing you would make me realize that I’ve been over romanticizing my memories of you.”

Iskander laughed, and it sounded bitter. “Believe me, Emrys, I understand that completely.” He pulled back, dropping a kiss to my forehead, reminding me that he was a couple inches taller than me. “I’ll see you downstairs. Okay?”

Nodding, I stepped away and shut the door with me.

I was not going to survive him being here. Already I felt torn in two.



Julian

I DRIED MY HANDS AND SET THE TOWEL OVER THE SIDE OF THE SINK. Now that we were cleaned up from lunch, I headed toward the family room where everyone was gathered. I could already hear Iskander's voice as I moved down the short hall where I found Emrys leaning against the corner of the doorframe, watching.

Iskander was sitting on the side of the couch with his phone in his hand, leaning over to show Yarak and Zuri something on his screen. Yarak had Zuri in his arms as they leaned closer. As I approached Emrys, I heard the three of them laugh.

Fable grinned at them from a chair as he watched, listening to Iskander tell them about somewhere he'd visited recently. When Zuri and Yarak moved away, Iskander looked up and tossed his phone to Fable, who caught it easily.

I was surprised by Iskander. I found that over the last few days, he was easy to get along with; easy to like. Which was fortunate because watching him and Emrys together was like witnessing magnets constantly being drawn to each other. Until they realized what they were doing and then one or both would move away.

As I stepped up beside Emrys, he looked up at me with a smile before pulling his phone out of his pocket. It's usually turned to silent, but he's always got the vibration on. My gaze dropped with his. Imani.

Emrys looked at it like he just tasted something sour as he hit ‘ignore.’ Before he could get it back into his pocket, a text came through.

[Imani Kaiyo] I really need to talk to you. Answer your phone.

I glared at the screen. So fucking pushy.

The phone rang again as soon as Emrys opened the text, but once more, he ignored it.

[Imani Kaiyo] It’s really important. Please!

Once more, the phone rang. Emrys met my gaze with a scowl, and I gestured for him to move back into the kitchen. Sighing, he did as he hit the green button; I followed behind him.

“You have no business calling me,” Emrys said in greeting.

“We can’t find Iskander,” she said. “It’s been two weeks. Have you heard from him?”

His eyes moved to mine, surprise written all over his face. His gaze shifted to look down the hall as if he could see Iskander from where we were standing.

When he didn’t answer, Imani spoke again. “I’m sorry, Emrys. Obviously, I went about shit wrong and hurt you. But please, he’s my husband.”

“Your apology is an afterthought as a means to get what you want,” he said, glowering. “What makes you think that he’s contacted me?”

“Because he loves you,” she said, making Emrys’s breath catch. “All this time later, he still loves you. I know you two still talk, though I don’t know how frequently. Please, Emrys. It’s been two weeks since we’ve heard from him.”

I frowned as I watched the emotions play across Emrys’s face. “Your problems are not my concern,” he said after another minute. “Don’t call me again.”

A grin split across my face as he hung up and frowned down the hall. However, apparently Imani didn't have boundaries, and she called right back. Emrys's hand tightened around the phone, so I took it from him and answered instead.

"If you keep calling my husband, we're going to have problems," I growled into the phone. Apparently, she hadn't known that he was with someone else now. Iskander obviously hadn't shared that information. "Maybe you're accustomed to getting what you want through demands and bullying, but you can take that shit somewhere else. Stop calling him. Clean up your own mess and don't bring my husband into it."

I waited a beat for her to speak, but apparently, I took her off guard enough that she didn't say anything at all. I hung up and pocketed his phone. Kissing his lips, I gestured for him to head down the hall. I'd take care of any more pestering from this woman.

Part of me wanted to tell her that Iskander was fine. Alive and healthy enough. Outside of that, I wouldn't give her any information. It was courtesy because I believed that she was worried.

I followed Emrys in and took a seat on the chaise while Emrys sat on the table in front of Iskander. I could see both of their faces from this position. Iskander smiled at Emrys, but it faded when he saw the way Emrys was watching him.

"We need to talk," Emrys said.

Iskander sighed. "I didn't mean to overstay. I'll leave—"

Emrys shook his head. "No. Not that." He paused for a minute, studying Iskander's face. "They don't know you're here, do they?"

Iskander's expression immediately turned into an angry scowl. "What did she do now? I swear to fuck..."

Emrys smirked, but it died quickly. "Don't worry; Julian not so subtly threatened her, and I don't think she'll call again. I also didn't tell her you're here or that you've been in contact with me over the last two weeks." Iskander sighed. "Where have you been?"

He sighed again and dropped his head back on the couch.

“Why are you really here, Iska?” Emrys asked quietly.

“Fine... No, I haven’t been in contact with them in two weeks. Since they made you leave, I’ve progressively gotten angrier. More bitter. Fucking out of my mind with grief and all sorts of shit. But no matter how much time passed, my longing to be with you never lessened. Which meant my resentment and anger toward them only increased. After six months of that, I decided maybe I needed to talk to someone, so I found a therapist. My goal was to move on.” He opened his eyes to look at Emrys. “To get over you, since we weren’t going to be allowed to be together. To find a way to move past all this anger and shit I have toward them. After two months, that didn’t happen. Clearly.”

“Clearly,” Emrys said, a smile playing at his lips.

Iskander nodded, smiling too. “So, I don’t know. My therapist turned her attention to you. I can’t tell you how many hours I spent just spilling shit. Telling her what happened and what I felt. Vomiting all my misery and shit.”

He picked his head up to look at Emrys more fully. “Are you familiar with a dojem?”

Yarak’s eyes went wide as I held my breath.

Emrys tilted his head to the side. “Soulmate?”

“Uh... Not quite. But yeah, I guess that too. When two souls find each other and kind of... form a bond. When your entire world shifts to center around them. With it comes these deep, eviscerating feelings. A connection that you just can’t shake.” He took a deep breath. “A love that only fucking grows, no matter how long they’re apart.”

Emrys’s eyes had been getting progressively wider. His breath held as Iskander explained.

“And when they’re separated for any reason, the hurt and fucking ache inside them just... echoes. You fucking *pine* after them like a goddamn dog!”

“Oh my god,” Emrys whispered.

Iskander sighed, nodding sadly. “Yeah. Well, about four months ago, my therapist mentioned this phenomenon that rarely happens anymore. It’s so uncommon that when it’s brought up, you just kind of think, yeah, it’s not a big deal. It’s akin to what humans think of as soulmates—just an emotional, somewhat sappy construct to describe their stupid emotions and probably lose that love eventually anyway because fuck if they know what forever actually means.”

“Your bitterness hasn’t lessened,” Emrys said, laughing a little.

He laughed and waved his hand. “Not really, though I don’t pay it much attention.” His smile fell again as he stared at Emrys. “I started really digging into the concept of dojem and have spoken to a couple of monsters who have this bond. Besides the things they told me—which was irritating that I could see it in every interaction between us and neither of us knew it—there were things I noticed too that they didn’t think to mention. Probably because they don’t notice it as someone watching them might. But their constant need to touch. How that contact can visibly settle them. How they’re drawn to each other when they’re in the same room.”

“Jesus,” Emrys muttered, looking away.

Iskander nodded. “Yep. It became clear that you and me—we’re not just two guys who fell in love. Our monstrous souls created a real bond that won’t be severed.” He waited until Emrys looked at him again. “You’re my dojem,” he whispered.

Silence filled the room until Emrys laughed and closed his eyes, hanging his head back. Tears trickled down his cheeks. Iskander sat forward but didn’t touch him. “As... dooming as this might sound, I’m actually relieved to have an explanation for the shitstorm that’s always twisting inside me.”

Iskander moved to the edge of the couch and reached for him, his hands gently cupping Emrys’s face so he could wipe his tears away. “I know. It was a relief and also the worst fucking news I could be given.”

“I’m guessing this story catches up with real time?” Emrys asked.

“Yes.” He didn’t move away but dropped his hands to rest on Emrys’s legs. “The fighting at home never stops. I hate being there. I *hate* them. Sometimes I look back and try to remember something good. Find a good memory. My therapist has given me a laundry list of techniques to try in order to... maybe build a bridge. Over the last year, I’ve tried them all. It’s like every moment before you was just... lackluster. Lifeless. And everything after you is hell. Two weeks ago, Imani made a mistake.”

“Doesn’t sound like it’s the first,” Zuri said quietly.

Iskander smirked. “Far from it. Spoiled siren is used to getting whatever the fuck she wants. But two weeks ago, the truth behind her actions came to light. Out of her own fucking mouth. Apparently, I’ve always kind of been a loose cannon. I bring someone home that I’m momentarily in love with.” He smirked. “I understand she’s probably right. That’s just how my species rolls. So when I brought you home, they hadn’t thought anything of it. They treated you like they did all the others. Thinking that eventually, I’d grow bored and we’d separate. For reasons we now know, that didn’t happen. It became apparent to her that something was different when I started talking about making you a permanent member of our family.”

Emrys sighed, his eyes closing. His shoulders tensed. I nearly went to him, but Iskander moved closer, getting off the couch and kneeling in front of him, between his legs. Taking his face back between his hands and talking quietly.

“In an effort to split us up, having you go to The Harem Project and *not* being matched with us seemed like the simplest way to get the outcome she wanted. She had zero concern for either of us or how we felt about each other. Knowing that you didn’t match with us and already feeling like the wedge she placed between my family and you would serve its purpose, she thought it was over. For some stupid reason, no matter how often I yelled at her that this, between you and me, was different, she was fucking convinced that once you were out of the house, everything would magically return to how it was before. Before you.”

Emrys's lips pinched together.

“She still doesn't understand that there isn't life before you,” Iskander whispered. “Stupid bitch is still delusional. I'm not going to make you suffer through listening about the fights we've had. But knowing the truth about what was behind this, hearing how remorseless she was—*is*—over it, that was the last straw. I could no longer recall why I had been attempting to work through this. I can't imagine I ever loved someone like her. So, yeah, I left.”

“Two weeks ago,” Emrys said.

“I think I left long before that, but since I kept returning there to sleep in my own bed, they didn't see it that way. But I disconnected from them months ago. Withdrew their access to my bank accounts. Removed their permissions from anything financial in my life. I even disconnected my phone from their account. The only thing I haven't done because it's not possible, is divorce them. I did the only thing I could think of and just... left.”

“Divorce isn't a thing,” I said. “Not among monsters.”

Iskander sighed and leaned backward, letting Emrys go and breaking their contact completely. “I know. Also, I meant what I said. I didn't come here to try to get you back. I don't want to come between you and your family.” He took Emrys's hand once more. “This is where you were always meant to be, Emmy. The way they love you; the way they take care of you... That's not something you'd have ever gotten with my family. Not only is that not the kind of household that's been cultivated there, but... it was all a lie.”

“What about you and...?”

He sighed. “I don't have an answer for that. Honestly, I wasn't even going to tell you because I didn't want you to have to live with that kind of pressure. But I think not knowing what it means and why you feel the way you do might be crueler. I don't know if this was the right answer or not.”

“It was,” Emrys said.

“So, the reason I asked to come here is kind of what I said. Closure, sure. But I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to know if you felt the same way because if you didn’t, then it was just a me thing and I thought maybe I could find a way to get over you then. Now that we have confirmation that you and I feel the same way, it means we can still figure this out.”

“How? I don’t...” Emrys looked at me, duress shining in the fire that flashed in his eyes.

I got up from where I was sitting and joined him on the table, wrapping around him and holding him close. Iskander backed away a little, but didn’t let go of Emrys’s hand.

“Thank you for your honesty here,” I told Iskander. “Knowing what Emrys is going through will definitely help everyone navigate life. Including you. But I need to ask: what’s your plan now? You’re not returning to them, are you?”

“Fuck no,” he said, frowning. “Honestly, the only one I can fucking stand at all is Deacon. Maybe because he was the only one who actually argued with me for you. I haven’t given it much thought as to what my plan was after this visit, but no, I’m never returning to them. That’s not my home. They’re not my family. Whatever they constitute as love is just... not. It’s control and manipulation based on what Imani wants.”

I nodded, brushing a kiss to Emrys’s jaw.

“I don’t plan to stay much longer,” Iskander said. “And I really, really appreciate you letting me stay here, knowing about our past. Knowing that there was still something lingering.”

Yarak shifted forward and rested a hand on his shoulder. “While we’re not interested in inviting you into our family in a permanent way, you don’t have to be a stranger, either. I think you’re both going to need some support while you figure this out.”

Iskander smiled. There was so much relief in it that I almost pulled him in for a hug too. When was the last time someone hugged him before he walked into this house?

“I promise not to try to interfere or anything.” He met my eyes. I wasn’t sure if it was the reflection of his river or tears in his eyes when he looked at me. “Thank you. I’ve known more comfort and kindness in the three days I’ve been here than I have since I was forced to part with Emrys. Having your eyes ripped open is painful and becomes even more so when you’re looking back with hindsight.”

That was it. That was all I could take. Most might not understand this since it would appear to go against what you see when you look at scaly scary dragons, but we’re actually huggers. We thrive on affection and cuddling. His words snapped my resolve, and I pulled him forward, hugging him in my arms with Emrys.

Iskander laughed but burrowed into my hold, into Emrys’s chest. He sighed after a minute when I didn’t let him go. “Thanks for this too,” he whispered. “I’ve lived without it for far too long.”



Zuri

I WASN'T SURE WHEN THE DECISION TO TELL THE HUMANS about monsters was made. I wasn't even sure that we had the authority to make that decision when it affected all monsters. But the next thing I knew, Julian and I were driving to DC to meet with representatives of the White House.

My first thought was: why are we wasting our time on the American government? It's either going to be received as a conspiracy theory, a prank, or they're going to turn the military on us. There was nothing rational about the American government. It was a bunch of old white men who thought that religion needed to dictate the country as well as their own personal views and beliefs instead of...

You know what? This is neither here nor there. We're heading to DC now. I was along for the ride because I was a leading scientist and I wanted to be involved in the Agnis' stand against ORKA. I wanted to support and pull my weight in anything they were doing.

"Why didn't we get other dignitaries here? Other countries' leaders?" I asked, not for the first time.

Julian chuckled and reached for my hand. "Most of us are residents of the US. Residency is what dictated this decision."

"That's lame."

He laughed and though I fought not to smile, I couldn't help the way my lips tugged up.

We met the rest of our friends in a park where we piled into two cars. Most of those involved were chosen for specific reasons. Iker Darkyn is a leading pharma CEO. Kohara works for The Harem Project as a director or something. He's had a lot of dealings with government officials and law enforcement.

To the nonsupernaturals, The Harem Project mostly dealt with conservation and programs for the disadvantaged and abused. While there *were* programs in place for humans in those areas, we primarily concentrated on monsters. Not that anyone knew that.

Hadrian Malak was a high-profile lawyer. Cobalt was brought because he had probably some of the more impressive and least threatening magic; the ability to heal. Then there was Koa Savage who owned half of Brooklyn. He's some tech company genius or something.

There's some apparent fun competition to see who could own more of New York between Koa and Aratiri Igarashi. I didn't know what his exact job was, but he's a well-known business tycoon.

Then there was Torin Taika, who was an old blood witch. Which in the supernatural world basically equates to royalty. To the outside world, it looked like he came from old money. Oil or tobacco or something.

Maryn Taru was a Fortune 500 business owner. Miller Nash was a partner CEO at a financial institution for the disgustingly wealthy. He also moonlights as an AM for The Harem Project! He claims it's more wholesome.

Then there's Julian. He's the humble card as the owner of a prestigious preschool chain. And me—a leading researcher. I wasn't sure what my name was on, but it was apparently out there. I definitely wasn't as impressive as some of these guys, but I enjoyed the many species we had gathered. Some terrifying and some rather impressive.

It was probably a good call not to bring along the nightmare or psychopathic oni.

“We’re sure this is a good idea?” Koa asked from the front seat. He was covered in tattoos. A big, furry guy painted in ink.

“No,” Julian and Torin said at the same time.

“We’ve got people that the world recognizes and respects. Hopefully, we can just be like ‘hey, there’s a threat in your backyard but as you can see, not all monsters are... monstrous’.” Miller said.

“And if not, Koa can eat them,” Torin said.

Koa snorted.

We followed the car of our friends in front of us in silence for the remainder of the ride through DC and pulled through security at the Pentagon. I was amused when they put us through metal detectors and patted us down, thinking they’d find the weapons we carried. My snake coiled, ready to hiss fire at them. I wasn’t the only one whose amused smile unsettled security.

We settled into a conference room that was pretty massive.

“Think we’re going to meet the president himself?” Cobalt asked.

“I hope not,” Torin muttered. “The guy is an idiot.”

“A stupid one at that. I literally broke through his firewalls in three minutes and the moron said I should be charged. *After* he asked me to test his security,” Koa said. “As if it’s my fault that he has software that a chimp could poke holes into until it’s Swiss cheese.”

“You’ve met the president?” I asked, wide-eyed. “These comments aren’t just because you didn’t vote for him.”

Koa chuckled. “I didn’t vote for him, but yeah, I’ve met him. Wasted a month of my life on his useless ass.”

Torin and Aratiri nodded in agreement.

“Huh. I guess I need to get rich and famous so I can meet lame politicians,” I said, causing the room to laugh quietly.

We were joined a few minutes later by a whole slew of men in suits and then a handful of men in uniforms with guns. Again, amused smirks went around the table as we eyed the men with guns. At least a few of them shifted under our amusement. This only made the suits look nervous.

Handshakes were made and then a moment of silence settled over us as the two sides of the room settled into a bit of a stare off.

“To what do we owe this meeting?” one of the suits asked.

Hadrian sat forward. “While what we’re going to tell you is going to sound like we’re pulling a prank, we ask that you suspend your innate human need to explain it all away and scoff. We can prove part of what we’re going to tell you. And we can show you evidence of some other things. Otherwise, you’re going to have to make your own decisions to believe us or not. You’re not the only government we’ve spread out to visit today.”

The wariness in their faces became a lot more pronounced. A beat passed.

“Supernaturals are real,” Hadrian said.

I could tell that several wanted to laugh. Now they thought it was their turn to look amused and their gazes flitted over us, waiting to see someone crack with the joke. When we didn’t, their amusement started to fade.

“Alright,” one man said. “I hope you can show us evidence of this.”

“Do any of you have any ailments? A sprain? Broken bones? Any kind of medical issues?” Hadrian asked, sitting back in his seat.

Another beat of silence before one of the men sat forward. “I have asthma. I’ve had it since I was a kid.” His voice was wheezy. I swear I could hear the way his lungs rattled when he spoke. “Simple movement leaves me short of breath.”

Cobalt stood and gestured to the end of the table. “I’m going to ask you to demonstrate this for the room. Jog in place?”

The man frowned as he got to his feet and met him at the end of the table. He looked at who I presumed must be the man running the show, who gave him a nod. So he took off his suit jacket and laid it on the table before doing as Cobalt requested. It was almost immediately once he started jogging that he became winded and bent over the table. His fingers fumbled for his inhaler.

“Hold on,” Cobalt said. “Let me show you.”

The man gripped the inhaler in his hand, but nodded. Cobalt rested a hand on his back, over his lungs. A faint white glow filled the room, followed by a lot of shuffling by the men with guns and many gasps by the others.

It didn't take long. He was used to dealing with serious injuries. Less than a minute later, the man stood up with wide eyes. He stared at Cobalt as he took a deep breath. His bewilderment was bright in his eyes as he looked at the suits.

“I can breathe,” he whispered, his voice filled with awe.

Narrowed eyes. Suspicion. And there—fear.

“What did you do?”

“Is it permanent?”

“Did you hurt him?”

Cobalt rolled his eyes as he returned to his seat. “I'm a nephilim. My primary form of magic is healing.” He gestured to Kohara. “I've even managed to bring a friend back from the dead a time or two.”

My eyes widened. I hadn't known that. Color me fucking impressed.

While we were coloring people, the suits looked on in disbelief.

“Aren't Nephilim fallen angels? Demons?”

Cobalt shrugged. “Honestly, you can believe whatever you're inclined to. I literally just showed you what I can do. It's not a parlor trick. I've never seen that man before. Yes, it's permanent. No, I didn't hurt him.”

“Are you all Nephilim?” the suit in charge asked.

“No. Cobalt is the only Nephilim among us,” Hadrian said. “However, we are all supernaturals. We’re all also immune to your guns.”

“Does silver kill you?” one of the armed men asked.

Hadrian rolled his eyes. Miller scoffed.

“Sweetheart, we’re not werewolves. *Those* aren’t real. They’re a fantastical version of the supernatural they represent constructed by humans. After all, how comfortable are you right now knowing that you don’t have an advantage and we don’t have weaknesses that you’re programmed to know how to manipulate?” Miller asked.

More shifting.

“What is this meeting about?” the leader suit said, anger filling his voice. “If you came here to threaten—”

Iker waved his hand. “This right here is why supernaturals never bothered to tell you we’re right beneath your noses. Because you always think that we want to take over your weak ass governments and your weak ass population.”

The man scowled.

Iker leaned forward. “Now we’re going to tell you about the weaknesses we have.” Cobalt and Kohara pulled their shirts over their heads. Cobalt’s torso was *covered* in scars while Kohara had a single one, straight through his chest.

“Other supernaturals. Cobalt lived because his abusers wanted him to. Kohara lived because he’s friends with nephilim and our nephilim was able to get to him in time to restore his life,” Iker said.

Silence filled the room as they stared at the scars the two men showed. Hell, I was fucking staring. Cobalt looked like one of those adult coloring books. There were so many lines to color within. I swallowed, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“There are two things we’re here to tell you today. One of them is this,” Hadrian said as our two guys retook their seats.

“There’s an organization within the supernatural world who calls themselves the Division of Silence. For the past... many generations, they’ve taken it upon themselves to play god and decide which species should live and which should become extinct. I’m sure you like this idea because on the surface it sounds like we’re policing our own and thinning the herd.”

There was no way to deny that’s exactly what they thought.

“However, we’ve recently been fighting back and the things we’ve seen inside their walls are horrifying. They’re hunting natural-born supernaturals who cannot be controlled by a remote and creating horrors that can. They’re forcing supernaturals into a hybrid state—that’s between our true form and the human form—and have turned them into programmable mindless drones. What you will be most interested in is that they’ve recently turned their sights onto humans. Not only are they experimenting with them to see if they can physically create Frankenstein’s monsters, but they’re also using them as breeders for fuck knows what.”

“You came here to tell us you’re hunting humans,” the man in the front said.

Hadrian rolled his eyes. “Do you honestly think if *we* were hunting humans, we’d be here telling you? I know you’re more intelligent than that.”

The insult wasn’t missed.

“We’re telling you that the same people hunting their own kind are now hunting yours. Unlike ours, yours are defenseless.”

“And unaware of the threat,” Torin added.

“Which makes them sitting ducks,” Hadrian concluded.

“What are you suggesting?” one asked.

“What do you propose we do to protect ourselves?”

“How do we recognize supernaturals?”

“All very good questions. None of which do we have answers for,” Iker said. “I would like to tell you that while

there are organizations like that in our world, it's no different than yours. Mafia. Cartel. Gangs. Dark web. It's the natural progression of what we deem civilized society. The difference is, supernaturals have magic based on their own species. And that magic can be devastating."

"What we're suggesting is that you somehow figure out how to tell the world that they need to watch the dark corners," Hadrian said. "There isn't a way for you to truly protect yourselves. I don't say this to be an asshole, but you don't have the strength to fight a supernatural."

"Before you get all huffy that we think you're less, you should know that I have a human husband," Iker said. "Among our close friends, we have a lot of human spouses. This isn't about which race is stronger. We're literally here trying to warn you that you're not alone in the world and that the things that go bump in the night also have the equivalent of a mafia or cartel. Hell, it's probably all the bad human groups in the world rolled into one. We don't want you to be sitting ducks."

"You said there were two things," one of the men said. "What's the second?"

"There's a human organization called ORKA," Miller said, pulling a folder onto the table. "Organized Redemption for Killable Abominations. The eleven of us are considered apex predators in the supernatural world. But that doesn't mean there aren't weaker species. Somehow these humans have acquired a bit of supernatural magic and they've been hunting our weaker species. Torturing them. Basically trying to either kill them off or make them perform in dog fights." Miller leaned forward. "I'm telling you right now that we're hunting the assholes hunting our kind. You can threaten us if you like. You can try to detain us—which will force us to show you what you really don't want to know because *we will be leaving here today*—or you can understand that this is a war that you don't have to be a part of."

"They have your magic?" the leader said.

Miller smirked. "Before you get excited, it can only be reproduced by a supernatural. Which means they've hurt some

enough and promised release in exchange for magic. The magic is fairly weak and only successful on the weaker species.”

“And our human spouses who have been caught in the crosshairs,” Torin added.

“Nothing they have will hurt one of us,” Iker said, gesturing to us.

I appreciated the liberties and half truths they were telling these guys. I definitely understood the necessity of them.

“Let me make this clear,” Iker said. “The people running the show who are now hunting humans like wild game? If you try to move against our kind in any way, they will not lose sleep over turning your world to ash. And everyone in it. I know you’re used to thinking that humans have dominated everything on earth. They’ve outlived, outmaneuvered, out-assholed entire species and populations.” His voice lowered. “But I promise you. This is not a fight you will win. Not even with your nuclear, chemical, or whatever fucking new warfare you have under your belt. We are the true apex predators and when push comes to shove, if you want to make an enemy out of those unlike you, be prepared to suffer a devastating loss.”

I could see the man in charge trying to control his rage. He really did want to wage a war. If he thought he could contain us, I was *positive* he’d do so. Men like him, those who thought they were unstoppable, were actually the weakest link in any civilization. They’ve led their people to ruin with their arrogance.

“You’ve come as a courtesy to give us a warning about your unlawful people,” one of the men said.

“Yes,” Hadrian said.

“And to let you know that we are actively hunting ORKA,” Miller said. “As a whole, supernaturals live in peace with humans. If we didn’t, there’d be a lot of fucking death everywhere. Your species is the one who acts as if they have the right to kill anything they want because they can.”

“That was a mistake. And we will be rectifying it,” Iker said.



Zuri

MY EYELIDS FELT HEAVY, BUT I WRENCHED THEM OPEN WHEN the bed shifted. Emrys climbed out and stretched. He looked back at the rest of us, a soft smile touching his lips, and then headed for the bathroom. Forcing my eyes to remain open, I waited for him to come back.

Iskander left more than a week ago, and while there were moments where it looked like Emrys was more at peace, there were also moments where it looked like he was going to fall apart completely. Being told you're a dojem and then your other half leaving? I could only imagine how that must wreak havoc on Emrys's emotions.

Sometimes I wonder if it was necessary. Couldn't we just keep Iskander here for Emrys? It's not like we didn't get along with the nymph. Fuck, I think we all kind of liked him. He was full of smiles and stories and laughter. So easy to be around. Friendly.

But he wasn't *family* in the same sense that we all were. Not even in the way that other families were, in that not all members shared the same bed. I understood why he left. But they'd been living with the pain of being forced apart for a year or more now. Less than a week couldn't erase all that.

Emrys came out of the bathroom and moved into the closet. Blinking slowly, I glanced to the windows to find that the sun had barely come up. The clock said it was just past five. It was far too early to get out of bed. By like four hours minimum! But I dragged myself to the edge to follow Emrys out.

“I got him,” Yarak said, kissing the side of my head. “Go back to sleep, Sleeping Beauty.”

Grinning, I closed my eyes but only *after* I watched his fine naked ass walk away and listened to the soft tinkling of the rings on his pierced bits clink together. He reminded me of one of those skirts with all the little charms on them. The ones that ladies wore when they shook their hips really fast. It’s music all in itself. Yarak’s music came from his balls as he walked.

The thought made me giggle as I wiggled my way back under the covers. A hand on my hip was the only warning I had before I was slid backward in bed, my back meeting a chest. I laughed again as Julian curled around me.

“Why are you laughing so early?” he murmured, voice thick with sleep.

“Yarak’s junk makes music,” I said.

Fable burst into laughter behind Julian, but Julian’s chuckle was quiet and deep. “Does it?”

“Yeah. Like one of those hip dancers. You know? But he doesn’t have to do anything but walk around. With each step, we hear the music of his people.”

Fable laughed loudly again, and I couldn’t keep the grin off my face.

“Since you’re thinking about cocks first thing this morning,” Julian said, rocking his hips into my ass. His dick, hard and dripping, poked roughly into my ass cheek. I could feel the bumps along the bottom, and I had to hold back a groan. Those things were magic!

I nodded, wiggling myself into him.

“Hold on,” Fable said. “I need a cock in me too!”

“Patience,” Julian said.

“Go get my new dick, precious. Once Julian makes me come, he can fuck you until I get strapped up.”

Fable groaned, and the bed shifted as he climbed out. Julian's hand went down my side, over my hip, and stroked my thigh. His hot, wet mouth kissed over my shoulder and neck. "I am so fucking turned on with the image of you fucking him," Julian said, driving his hard cock against my ass cheek again.

I grinned as I pulled my knee up, inviting him to my heat from behind. "Come on, Jules. Make me come so we can please our big dragon."

He growled as I felt the blunt head of his leaking cock slid down along my crack and pushed against my asshole. Laughing, I swatted at him. "I have a different use for that one. Try again," I teased.

Chuckling, he bit my shoulder and thrust his cock down to my heat. He hooked his arm under my leg, dragging his hand up my chest, between my tits, and then around my neck as if he was looking for something to hold onto.

I barely gripped his hand when he shoved that enormous dragon dick inside me, making me cry out. Even on the first, sudden and invasive, intrusion, I felt every rib of pleasure rub along my walls and they made my nerve endings tingle with fire.

"Holy fuck," I muttered, letting go of his wrist and gripping the bed.

His chuckle was dark and deep. The steam from his fire burning deep inside him made me break out in a sweat as his breaths puffed along my skin. He pulled out, pausing so just the tip of him teased at my entrance.

Even though I was expecting him to slam home, I still cried out when he did. Sudden, sharp, hard, deep. And then he was fucking me in earnest. Pounding me so hard that my head spun. I was about to grow a tail and wrap around him, just so I could control his movements.

It was too good. I was going to come undone far too quickly.

Burying my face into the bed, I let my body go. His grip around my neck kept me still. Even with each thrust shoving me forward, his hand didn't let me budge. I couldn't get away from his deep thrusts.

My head spun as my skin tingled. I was going to shed a skin from the intensity rushing through me.

The orgasm that crashed over me felt like a freight train careening off a broken bridge. There was a moment of suspension where the engine hung in the air, moving forward with jerking motions as the rest of the train caught up. Then it fell endlessly into the gorge, hitting the ground in an earth-moving explosion.

“Dragon dicks aren't for the faint of heart,” I muttered breathlessly.

Julian laughed as he gently pulled out of me. “Catch your breath, sweetness. Fable needs a lot of attention. He's really rather an attention whore.”

“I am,” Fable said.

It took strength I didn't have right now to shift enough so I could see them. I laid eyes on Fable just as he pulled his fingers from his ass and wiped them on a towel.

“Come here, baby,” Julian said, moving on the bed to make room for him. “Hands and knees.”

Fable nodded, moving into position. Julian pressed a hand to his lower back, making him spread his legs wider, pushing his cock into the bed. He lined up his still-glistening dick with Fable's hole and slowly slid inside. It was somewhat mesmerizing to see each ridge and bump pass by Fable's tight ring. Watching it stretch and contract around Julian like a sleeve made my insides warm.

Then again, it could be Fable's already loud and whiny babbling.

“Oh, my god you're so big. Ohmigod you're so deep. So deep. Ohmigod. Ohmigod.”

His vocalness always made me smile. There was no doubt that he liked it. None at all. He never gave you a moment to question it. Even when it wasn't words, the sounds he made were sinful intoxication.

Listening to him, hearing the slick *slap* of their bodies together, feeling the bed rock beneath me, it all did wonders to get my strength up. I got to my hands and knees and reached for the harness. I'd opted for one that wrapped around my back and then a strap around each thigh instead of like a thong. Hoping this would stay in place better. Not to mention, I had less of a chance of a very uncomfortable wedgie with a thick strap!

I slipped my legs through the straps and pulled it up and around. It took me a while to find the right spot to tighten and secure all three straps in place, so I was fairly confident it'd stay where I wanted it.

Fable and I went to the adult toy store together, and he chose a handful of dicks of various sizes. The one he chose today was probably closest to Julian in size and shape. It was a fantasy dick and while it didn't exactly match a dragon's cock, there was a scaly texture, ribs, and a couple more pronounced ridges. He'd been really excited about it in the store.

Once I had it secured into place, I reached for the lube and started rubbing my new dick. Let me just say that there's a strange sense of power in this right now. I grinned like a schoolgirl in anticipation.

"Ready, love?" Julian asked.

I nodded.

"Ever pegged someone before?"

I shook my head as I watched him slowly pull his cock out. He chuckled. "You're going to love it. I'm a little sad you don't have a dick of your own because the feeling is just..." he trailed off as he considered his words. "No words for it."

Kissing his lips, I moved behind Fable and pushed him until he was flat on the bed. Straddling his hips, I touched his round, jiggly ass cheeks. He moaned.

“Be easy at first. It’s not hard to hurt someone like this,” Julian said.

I nodded again. “Tell me what to do.”

“Like I said, go easy. Don’t force anything. Fortunately, it would take something a lot harder than a silicone dick to break him physically, but you can still make him uncomfortable. Listen to him. Read his body language. Fable doesn’t keep quiet, so you’re going to know if he doesn’t like something.”

“Okay,” I said, wrapping my hand around my new cock, stroking it again. “I have to say, this could be addicting. I feel like I have a fifth appendage and I want to high five someone with it.”

Julian laughed.

Bracing one hand on Fable’s back, I shifted my body so my weight was more fully on my knees and used my hand to angle my cock downwards. Running the head through his crack and making him whine. I shivered in appreciation.

Yep, this could really get addicting.

I rubbed the head over his hole a couple times, adding different pressures and feeling him squirm and whine under me. When I finally pressed against his hole to work the head in, my eyes were glued to the spot. Watching as his body instinctively tried to keep me out. The way it gave in and stretched for me, wrapping around the head of the dick at the same time Fable sucked in a breath.

It was weird. I was clearly in control of this, but I couldn’t actually feel his body. There was a strange disconnect that left me unsteady for a minute. Handicapped almost. But I gently pushed further inside him, watching that tight ring of muscle being forced to expand to accommodate the cock.

How it really widened when it got to the first pronounced ridge.

“Holy fuck,” Fable said, his body jerking. One of his hands came around his back, and I linked our fingers together.

“You okay?” I asked, breathless.

He nodded. "It feels good. Different. It's so big."

I pulled back a little and then pushed in further. Continuing to rock my hips, going deeper every time. Deeper and deeper. It felt endless. It felt like I was going to pierce his lungs. His hand clung to mine as I bottomed out and held still for a minute. Marveling that my dick was completely inside this man.

Shifting so I could see better, I stared at where I disappeared inside him. How wide his body stretched for me. How tight he was, strangling my silicone cock.

"Fuck," I muttered, wiggling a little and earning myself a whole chorus of sounds from Fable that gave me chills of pleasure.

I pulled out entirely, teasing his gaping ass with the head of my dick. Then I shoved inside him completely in one long, smooth thrust. Fable jerked; his whine was so fucking loud my ears rang.

Then I was moving. Watching where our bodies connected. Listening to the slaps our skin made against each other. Feeling the way he squirmed under me, pushing his ass back in time with my erratic thrusts.

This was no joke. My thighs ached. My back and core muscles burned. My arm wobbled from holding onto his hand as tightly as I was, using it for leverage as much as keeping him anchored. "I'm going to need to work out more," I panted as I nailed him again and again.

Now Fable started to beg. Over and over, he begged for me to make him come.

His words, his need, drove me on. Harder and deeper. Quicker. I shifted so I could get better leverage. Hovering over him with my hand planted on the bed, I slammed my hips into his ass until I was almost dizzy.

Finally, he came with a long, loud cry/shout/moan. I shuddered as I worked him through it, watching my sweat drip from my forehead onto his back. When he finally went limp under me, I collapsed on top of him, my dick still in his ass.

Fable groaned as I tried to catch my breath. “Seriously, that’s no joke. I’m so out of shape.”

Julian chuckled. His fingers brushed my damp hair aside, and I blinked blurry eyes to see him smile. Then his attention went to Fable as he lay beside us. He gently brushed his hair from Fable’s face.

“You okay?”

“She’s still so deep,” he whimpered.

“Sorry,” I murmured and tried to find the strength to pull myself up long enough to get my dick out of him.

“No,” he said, laugh-whining as he drew the word out. “Leave it. Fuck, it feels good. Like you’re forcing me to take you even when my body is soooo done.”

I wrapped my arms around his big chest and hugged him.

“I love you,” Fable whispers.

Grinning, I closed my eyes. “Love you too, precious.”



Yarak

ONCE AGAIN, I WAS LOOKING AT A FRESHLY SEARED BELLAMY as he was being nearly crushed in Kormak's arms on our couch. This time, others had begun piling into our house too. And it wasn't because they'd gone to an ORKA facility. He'd been at work when he'd been attacked.

"I'm not even dangerous," Bellamy pouted, his arms at his sides. Kormak's hold was barely not into the burned area on Bellamy's chest.

"Same thing as last time?" Miller asked. He was doing much better at keeping his cool. My eyes flickered to him, and I noted that he was only keeping his cool verbally. The pissed off eyes of his kitsune were shining at me. His fingers were clenched into fists, and his entire body shimmered with crackling magic.

"Yes and no," I said, frowning as I poked and prodded. Most of which was just to see what he was feeling. When Bellamy didn't even flinch, I knew that there was other magic than just the fire. Magic that made him feel no pain so that he'd continue to burn, thinking he's fine. "Still sorcerer's fire, but there's something more common about the rest of it. Something that feels strangely like witchery. He doesn't feel me touch him. He doesn't feel that the fire is still very much burning into his skin."

Bellamy's eyes went wide as he stiffened. "Put it out," he squeaked. "I don't want to burn to death!" Tears filled his eyes as he clutched Kormak's arms tightly. The big anubis's low, threatening growl filled the room. I ignored them both.

“That wasn’t there last time?” Miller asked, trying to keep his cool.

“Not in this ratio. The numbing was to an extent, but it had basically stopped burning already,” I answered.

Torin joined me sitting on the coffee table and I pulled my hand back so he could touch it. He frowned as soon as his fingers skimmed the surface. “I know for a fact that line of magic is dead,” he said. “I watched him die.”

“That sounds ominous,” Anakin said.

“Yeah, well.” Torin didn’t expand for a minute. When he moved his hand away, he said, “Sometimes people need to die for their own good. He was reckless and mad with revenge toward Silence for killing his family. The last of his people. But he was creating weapons to hand out widely, thinking that if he managed to arm *everyone* to fight against Silence, it would end.”

“That is fucking disastrous,” Iker muttered.

“Exactly why he needed to die, and his weapons be destroyed,” Torin said. He looked into Bellamy’s face. “I’m going to cancel the magic. That means you’re going to be in a world of pain for a minute. But I need to evaluate your pain to see how extensive the damage is. Alright?”

Bellamy put on a brave face, his shoulders stiffening as he gave a single nod.

We knew the moment that the magic was gone. Bellamy burst into tears, his body tensing in pain. The Nashes became a pack of growling, rabid wolves as they tried to get closer to soothe him.

It was many, many, *many* minutes later before Bellamy stopped crying and the burn visibly started healing. By the time Torin was done, he moved aside for Lazarus to come in and heal the rest of it. Bellamy gave a shaking breath and a tear-stained smile.

We gave the Nashes a few minutes to comfort Bellamy before we gathered close in our now packed to the gills family

room. I didn't think every member of our friends' families were here, but it was probably pretty close.

"Think you can tell us what happened, Bellamy?" I asked.

He sighed, his cheeks pinking. "I was at work and this group of guys came in, sitting at a table at the end of my... station. They stared and were making me uncomfortable but I'm a professional, so I continued working while trying to ignore them but not ignore them."

"Where do you work?" Torin asked.

He flushed and looked up at Kormak.

"Sweetling, half the people in this room subscribe to my sex channel," Astro said.

Bellamy turned wide eyes around the room. "You do?"

I shrugged. "No shame. Your dog is hung like a horse and knows how to work it," I told him. I wasn't actually still subscribed. When he first opened his channel, I think most of us subscribed to help him gain traction. Some kept their accounts, though I wasn't sure how many, if anyone, actually looked at it. There was just something you didn't need to see your friends doing.

Astro smirked at me because he knew I wasn't subscribed anymore.

"Oh," Bellamy said, giving the room another appraising look. "I work at Barnum's. I'm a dancer."

I frowned. "This is going to sound like a come on, but how naked were you? Do you have any telling marks?"

"I was in a thong," he said, straightening his shoulders. "And no. I have some light bruises and bites that I don't cover up because I've found that it really gets people going when they can imagine that they manhandled me and left me marked like that. But... no. I haven't gotten the Nash mark yet."

"Then how did they know that he was supernatural?" Torin asked.

“Better question. How did you get away, Bellamy?” Hadrian asked.

Bellamy flushed again. “As soon as they burned me, I kind of... went on instinct and attacked them. Not a full shift and I don’t think anyone noticed outside of the group of them when my hands turned into paws with big claws, and I was sporting a sharp set of teeth. Then, when the confusion was high, I ran. Drove home.”

“They might not have known, but they do now,” Torin said.

“Oh no, I’m sorry,” Bellamy said, tears stinging his eyes. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to die. They were trying to take me, and I didn’t want them to!”

I rested my hand on his arm. “It’s alright. Torin isn’t upset. He was just making an observation.”

“Their sole focus was on Bellamy.” I shifted at Koa’s voice, as did most of the room. He was sitting on Calix’s lap with his laptop, which was almost comical since Koa was a giant of a man and Calix wasn’t quite as big. But there he was, legs crossed under him, as he sat on his Daddy’s lap. It made me smile. Until I remembered that he was talking. “As soon as they walked in the door, they looked for him and their attention never wavered.”

“He was their target,” I mused, reconsidering Bellamy again. He didn’t even *feel* like a shifter. Shifters usually have a kind of presence hanging around them. Something that tells you they’re strong and they’re other. Bellamy was distinctly lacking that. “But why?”

“What if it’s not Bellamy specifically that they were after?” Ady asked and once more, the room swiveled to look at her. “When ORKA suspected someone was a monster, they tagged someone around them to try to coax out the actual monster. It’s just as possible that their actual target was one of the others.” She looked over the Nashes huddled together on the couch. “My guess would either be Edison because he helped Jennings, or Kormak because he screams I’M GOING TO KILL EVERYONE when you look at him.”

Chuckles filled the room.

“Then again, Edison has the same screaming personality. But Bellamy would be an obvious hit for Kormak since the handful of times I’ve been in their presence, Bellamy is always in Kormak’s hands,” Ady said, shrugging.

“Fine,” Miller said. “We’ll keep a better watch around our perimeter. Let’s talk about the now improved fire weapon.” He looked at Torin. “Does it sound like something that your dead sorcerer was making? Could something of his stash survived, and *that’s* how ORKA is getting weapons?”

Torin was silent as he considered this. He stared at Miller, though I wasn’t sure that’s really where he was looking or what he was seeing at all. “Yes,” he answered at last. “I emptied his home. Then burned it down with my own magic. I made sure nothing survived, though I didn’t account for outside stashes.”

“How about a timeline? Did ORKA’s presence pop up around the time of this sorcerer’s madness?” Iker asked.

Torin frowned. “I don’t think he was handing humans weapons. His plan was to hand other monsters weapons. *If* these belonged to the sorcerer in any way, it wasn’t by his hand that they came to them. I’m pretty confident in that.”

“How hard would it be to figure out how to use them?” Miller asked. “I’m betting that they don’t really understand what their weapons do. They were just as surprised by the results of their weapon when attacking Bellamy the first time as we were.”

“I mean, aim and pull a trigger,” Torin said, shrugging. “But you said it was a stick the first time. What was it the second time, Bellamy?”

“I don’t know. I was completing a revolution around the pole when I was suddenly hit in the chest and all hell broke loose. Their hands came on me as they tried to pull me off the stage. That’s when I freaked out and fight-or-flight kicked in. I did both, in that order,” Bellamy said.

“Bellamy was without question the target the second time. What about the first?” Iker asked. “Was he *the* target, or was he *a* target?”

The Nashes considered this before Lev shrugged. “I’d say he was *a* target. They had seven men coming in and attacking. I think they just pointed and shot.”

“Ohh,” Jennings said, lurching forward so she was near. “Did you disconnect their security? Because if they caught you on camera and *know* you were supposed to die from that shot, then they see that you looked unharmed, you’ve basically just put a target over your head. Obviously, you’re not human because you’d be dead right now.”

I looked at Koa, who was frowning. “You know, I disassembled the security that was attached to the building. I didn’t look at anything outside the building. If they were attached to different accounts, different feeds, I didn’t look there. But we need to consider that now, since I’m sure they’ve figured out that someone is fucking with their system.”

“I have a wild suggestion,” I said. Koa’s dark eyes met mine. “What if you, as a human, offer them your services as a tech genius guru god.” I waved a hand, making him flash me a grin. “You must have a scar or two. Blame a monster. You want to be a part of the response to take them down.”

“What makes you think I have a scar?” Koa asked, raising a brow.

“You’re covered in tats, man. Surely one of those tapestries is covering something you don’t want the world to see.”

“Or maybe I ran out of books as a kid and this way, there’s always a new story to read,” Koa said.

I blinked at him. He held his serious expression until I glanced behind him at Calix. The unicorn just smirked at me. I didn’t know if that was the truth or not.

“Okay, so you can just claim that you’re covered in scars that you’re hiding,” I said.

Koa nodded.

“They didn’t see you when you were rescuing me, did they?” Obry asked. She was basically hiding, as she usually was, when we gathered in large numbers. Not intentionally, but her small frame was dwarfed and almost hidden among her four husbands.

“Not in this form, no,” Koa said, tilting his head. “I don’t think so anyway.”

“If not Koa, then someone from his company,” Iker said, nodding. “Keep Koa’s face out of their sight, but once they have a contract, that gives Koa full access.”

“Do you employ other monsters?” I asked.

Koa nodded absently, his fingers tapping on the side of the keyboard. “Yeah. Let me look into that. I’ll get back to you.”

“Okay, with a plan in place, I say we break for food. I’m starving,” Ellis said, jumping to his feet with a wide, radiant grin.

“You’re always hungry,” Juniper said, looking up at him with a fond smile.

Ellis beamed at him, holding his hand out to pull Juniper up. “I’m a growing boy.”

“You’re a hungry demon,” Ryker corrected. “There’s a difference and it’s not subtle.”

A shiver went through the room.



Emrys

“FUCK’S SAKE, ARAT,” TEM SAID, MASHING THE CONTROLLER.

“What?” Aratiri answered, a grin on his face.

“If I could target your ass, I would,” Tem hissed.

“I know you would, but you never do,” Arat teased, and I knew they weren’t talking about the game. Gannon snorting confirmed my thoughts.

Arat’s shoulder knocked into mine. I glanced his way to see Tem shoving at him as they both tried to keep control of their cars on the screen.

The screen in question was enormous, so while it was sliced into four boxes, we might as well be looking at our own television screens stacked on top of each other. I’d be doing a lot better if I could remember to look at the right one. I’ve been looking at Gannon’s for like half the race.

Sliding my car around, I ran into the little spinning question mark boxes and half watched the little circle on the screen spin through the various things I could get inside. *Bullet. Bullet. Bullet.* I chanted. I was in eleventh place. So, I was pretty sure I deserved the bullet.

I wouldn’t be in eleventh place if I wasn’t always looking at Gannon’s screen! And these lava castle levels were no freakin’ joke!

“Yes,” I hissed and mashed the button to turn me into a bullet. I knocked all three of their asses into the lava and a chorus of ‘come on!’ rose around me, leaving me grinning.

To be fair, this was seriously the only game I had any skill at, which was probably why we were playing it. First-person shooters, I was a wreck. Someone had to practically hold my hand and revive me every three seconds. And my shot was shit.

Adventure games, I basically just jumped around in circles. Even in real racing games, I spent most of the time on the guard rail. This one that was designed for kids? Yep, I could manage it just fine.

My phone vibrated, and I glanced down to where it lay on my thigh just as my bullet crossed the finish line. I took my hand off the controller and tapped the screen to pull up the thread I'd been halfheartedly involved in with Iskander. He sent me a photo, and I grinned as I picked up the phone to look at him.

His vivid blue eyes looked at me, which only caused the blue streaks in his hair to become a focus of his appearance. He was standing in front of a waterfall. There were people everywhere in the background.

But Iskander was alone.

My smile faded. As I studied him, I could see that his smile wasn't genuine either. The ache in my chest gave a sudden pang, and I set the phone back on my thigh.

He was here for less than a week. Six days. He's been gone for a week and a half. Glancing around the room at my friends and listening to their banter as they chose their racers for the next round, I felt more at peace than I had in so long I couldn't remember the last time.

Being with Iskander for those nine months had been everything I wanted. If I was willing to admit it to myself, I hadn't been all that interested in his family. I wanted a family, and he came with one. I'd been willing to settle for that. As long as I had Iskander.

What hurt was their lies. For those nine months, they acted in a way that led me to believe that they wanted me there too. I hadn't had any indication that they were humoring Iskander.

So their rejection felt like every other time I found I was unwanted after being led to believe it was different ‘this time.’

Even Imani tracking me down after to supposedly apologize and try to fix it was just a calculated move. She didn’t actually want me. She wanted Iskander to forgive her.

Because I knew Imani well enough to know that she wasn’t going to stop showing up at my house to try to ‘convince me’ that she was being legit, I’d picked up and moved. Which didn’t take much. I went from one furnished condo to another, taking my two suitcases and single duffle bag with me. Hell, even the linens remained.

I wasn’t ever at peace in their presence, though. With Iskander, it felt like we stole perfect moments together. Those were the times I felt closest to being whole. He and I were on the same page.

But even without realizing it, they always felt like stolen moments. Like we were making our way up an incline and eventually we were going to reach the top and come tumbling down. I hadn’t known why I felt that way. When I told Iskander my worries, he told me he would keep me forever.

That’s probably where the shit hit the fan. He went home to tell his family that he wanted me to be a permanent part of them. We all know what happened after that.

The countdown on the screen brought me back to the moment, and I resolutely stared at my box. I felt good. Happy. The ache inside me from Iskander’s absence didn’t go away. Some days it throbbed like another heartbeat. Sometimes it made me overwhelmingly sad. But sometimes, like right now, it was just a reminder that he was out there somewhere. My dojem. Even apart, we were together.

The first time I fell off the side of the track, I quickly typed a message back to him.

[Me] Find your happiness, Iska.

Swiping the phone screen off, I stuffed it in my pocket and turned my attention back to what we were doing. Playing games on this sleepy Sunday. Even when the phone buzzed in

my pocket, I continued to listen to the guys around me tease each other.

“Oh fuck,” Gannon said as he tried to move to the side of the road as Arat came streaking by with invincible star power. He still managed to hit Gannon, who reached around my legs and hit Arat. “Assfuck.”

“Sometimes, yeah,” he said, smirking. Then his screen became dotted with ink, and he cursed at Tem’s evil laughter.

I chuckled, keeping myself as inconspicuous in second place as possible. It only lasted until one of the bots struck me with a lightning bolt and I shrunk to the size of an ant. When I stopped spinning, I was in fifth place.

Fingers in my hair made me glance up in time to see Yarak climbing over the back of the couch to sit beside me. “Can you guys pause this for a minute?” he asked, picking up the remote.

The game paused, and we were all aware that it meant we’d just lost this round. And probably the entire series.

“What’s up?” Gannon asked.

Yarak pressed into my side as he clicked the remote to bring the television back up. “Thought you might like to hear this.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket again, and Yarak looked at me. I smiled, leaning in to kiss his cheek. His demonic grin in return made my insides molten.

When the signal turned over to satellite, Yarak navigated to the channel he wanted, and it was clearly in the middle of a press conference. There were dozens of microphones and recorders in the air, raised above heads. Flashes went off everywhere.

There wasn’t anyone talking yet, just mumbled words behind hands covering microphones. Then it was finally called to rest.

“This is a message for the general public,” the secretary of defense said.

“He was ready to murder us all at our meeting,” Arat snickered. “I bet he’s fucking loving being the one up there.”

“Is this—?” My words cut off as he continued to speak.

“We’ve recently met with some individuals who claim to be supernatural beings. They’ve shown us evidence of such. While this isn’t the alien announcement so many people are waiting for, in a very real way, I can tell you that we’re not alone in the universe. There are other forms of life. And as with alien conspiracy theorists, they’re living among us.”

“That’s a twist I didn’t see coming,” Tem said.

“I’m just impressed with his even expression and tone,” Arat said.

I hadn’t been present for the revelation with the US head honchos. I’d been out with a group that went to the UK to talk to the monarchy. Our little group split up to make stops all around the world. While I’d say a vast majority of them reacted like the US group, some were actually readily open to listening. Others were a bit more hostile.

None quite so much as some of the southern countries, which unfortunately for them, meant they came out on the losing end. Our guys didn’t hesitate to show them who they really were and walked through their armed men.

I thought what might have convinced them more than nothing wasn’t the feats of proof we offered them. It was the fact that not a single place the world over had their particular welcome party caught on security. They did so for safety. Personally, I wouldn’t put it past someone like the secretary of defense to try and use their identities for blackmail.

“Maybe that’s how ORKA got magic,” I muttered.

“What?” Gannon asked, shifting on the floor to look at me.

I blinked at him a few times, realizing I must have said that out loud. Glancing at the television where the asshole defense guy was fielding questions when he hadn’t even gotten to the good stuff yet, I relayed my thoughts.

“That’s an interesting and probable hypothesis,” Arat said, pulling his phone out. He dialed as we turned our attention back to the television.

“Hey. Where’s your Little? We have an idea on how ORKA might have obtained supernatural magic and if we’re onto something, Koa might be able to find it in their system somewhere.”

There was a pause as we listened to this man who wanted nothing more than to refute our existence, argue and defend that we were, in fact, real. That there were probably half a dozen of us at least within their midst right then.

That comment made the entire crowd shut up and look at each other with terror. We laughed.

“Yep. Just tell him to look for any evidence that they’re blackmailing a supernatural in some way. They have proven their identity or something. Anything that could be used as any kind of leverage. If we don’t have anything now, let’s keep that high on his priority list the next time we break into a new system,” Arat said.

A minute later, he got off the phone. “Koa is taking a nap right now. He’ll relay the message.”

I grinned, leaning a little more into Yarak. He wrapped his arms around me, and we waited patiently for this man to get to the good shit. It took another twenty minutes.

“The purpose of this press conference isn’t to announce that they’re real. It’s to warn the human public that within their population is an empire of criminals who have begun hunting humans for sport and experimentation.” A chorus of loud questions erupted, and he waved them off. “We’ve been assured that there is an equal sized group working against them, not only for your protection but for their own. However, we are at a very large disadvantage. These supernaturals are light-years more advanced than humans, meaning they have their own built-in defenses. We do not. There is very little we can do to protect ourselves against them, since even our bullets don’t seem to hurt them.”

“They’re monsters!” someone yelled from the crowd. “They eat humans. They steal children. They will rape your wives and daughters. They will torture you and steal everything you have. They’re not supernaturals. They’re monsters. They need to be hunted down and exterminated.”

There was a mumbled response behind the podium and movement moved through the crowd. The yeller tried to get away, but he was apprehended.

“He’s ORKA,” Gannon said, frowning.

Once the crowd had settled again, the secretary of defense continued. “Let me make this perfectly clear,” he said, his voice low, calm, and angry, “*if* you decide that you’re going to treat them like the enemy and hunt them, they will retaliate and kill you. There will be no one on your side to move against them since you brought that on yourselves. Yes, they’re dangerous. Yes, they’re stronger than us. Yes, they could absolutely destroy our race and world as we know it.” He pressed his hands flat to the podium and leaned forward, his mouth almost touching the microphone. I could hear his breath.

“These beings have lived among us for hundreds of years. If they were going to do any of those things, they already would have. Any radicals, any rogues who decide that they’re going to do their own thing on their own agenda and hunt these beings—you’re on your own. We will declare you lawless, which will afford you no legal defense, no support, no assistance of any kind. Like it or not, the only ones in the world strong enough to protect us against their own brand of mafia are the supernaturals themselves.” His jaw clenched for a minute before he added, “We’re at their mercy and will provide whatever cooperation and assistance we can in their fight against this empire of criminals.”

More questions were screamed into the void as we stared at the television. A beat passed with the only sound being the questions being fielded on the screen.

“That was a little unexpected,” Gannon said.

“A little,” Yarak snorted. “I was pretty sure that asshole was going to try to declare war on us.”

“He’s not as stupid as he looks, I guess,” Arat said.

“The real question is, did this do more harm than good?” I asked. Once more, I gained all of their attention. “I just mean that before, Silence was being somewhat stealthy in abducting humans, presumably to keep their cover. Now that it’s out, will they even bother to hide themselves? Did we just open hunting season where the game might as well be sheep?”

Four sets of eyes stared at me, and I smiled a little. “Sorry. My job as a lawyer is to see the consequences of all actions and prepare for them.”

“Yes, the goal was for the general population to know about monsters,” Gannon said, sighing.

“It’s out now,” I said, shrugging. “As selfish as it sounds, maybe Silence will focus on stealing humans for a while and let the monsters catch up in our weaponry. We spent so much time being passive while they’ve been preparing for the final showdown.”

“Your logic is very dark and dooming,” Arat said, frowning.

“The truth is, we can’t mass produce something to keep humans safe when we can’t keep monsters safe. Our efforts need to remain where they are—to neutralize Silence. That’s the only way anyone will be safe,” Gannon said.

My thoughts went back to Iskander for a minute. Alone.



Fable

“OHMIGOD, OHMIGOD, OHMIGOD,” I CHANTED AS ZURI slammed into my prostate over and over again. The hot coals under me seared my hands, and I flexed my fingers, feeling as the claws that had broken free dug into the ground. “So good. It’s so good.”

Her hands were small but strong as she gripped my shoulders. Behind me, she gasped and grunted with every thrust too. I don’t think it was just from me. We had a whole chain going. Behind Zuri was Yarak’s pierced cock inside her sweet pussy. Then there was Emrys and lastly Julian.

Fire danced around and over us, licking across our skin. I knew that mine was no longer the fragile human’s that I wore most of the time. I was covered in scales, my spines starting to protrude down my back.

“You’re so deep,” I whined, burying my face in the hot coals again.

“Are you ready, precious? Ready for my touch?” Zuri asked. Her voice sounded hissy. Snake-ish. If I could bring myself to look behind me, I would. But fuck, the way she was rearranging my insides with her perfect cock was just too much.

“Yes,” I begged. “Yes, yes, yes. Please. Burn me.”

Her hands dropped to my thighs, and hot fire coursed through my body. It was far too much. I screamed as the feeling overtook me. Zuri seared not just my scales, but everything inside me. My orgasm shot from me like my fiery

breath as I sprayed the ground. The smell of cum burning wasn't pleasant. I'm just going to put that out there. The way it hissed and flared as if flammable—now that was always entertaining to see.

My head rang for so long that I wasn't at all surprised to find that we were laying in a big fucking pile when I managed to hear something other than the ringing in my ears. Though my chest still heaved with my breaths, and my arms flexed around a body.

Opening my eyes, I found Emrys's freshly burned skin in front of my face. "So beautiful," I murmured, touching the angry red lines from Julian, the white hot burn from Zuri, and the dark demonic print from Yarak. He shivered under my fingers.

"Your turn," he murmured.

"Mm," I said. "Same time, titus? Burn me too?"

He nodded and shifted further down my body so that his hand rested over my ribs, on the opposite side as Yarak's burn. I dragged my hand down his burned torso to the smooth skin of his lower stomach, below his navel.

"On three?" he asked.

I nodded, and I listened to him count. When he said three, I covered his mouth with mine and let our fires dance together. I groaned at the way it touched all the deep places inside me, at the same time I felt all his hidden corners with mine. He kissed me deeply, digging his fingers into my hair and pinning my mouth to his as we shared the fire in our lungs as well.

It ended with me nearly ready to come again. Sharing fire was an intimate trip, and I shuddered with the memory every time I thought about it. Every time I recalled the way it touched all my nerves and danced with my own.

"I love you, Em," I said as soon as his mouth left mine and our fires died down. Wrapping him in my arms, I pulled him harshly to me.

His quiet laughter brushed over my skin. "Love you too," he whispered. More bodies surrounded us, fingers stroking my

skin and moving through my hair. Quiet murmurs followed my declaration and we exchanged quiet promises of forever and love and all the sappy things that would have made the Nashes proud to hear.

Then we remained in the whispering fires of the coals for a while, enjoying each other's embrace and just being together. Feeling the completeness that this moment offered. The world stretched on, promising this forever.

Our family was whole. No matter what came in the future. If we got eight more calls telling us that a new wife or husband was waiting, maybe we'll find that there was always room for them. But right now, we're a complete family. We're not missing anything.

There wasn't that feeling like we were hanging around waiting anymore. Waiting for the chapter where it was just the three of us to end so we can begin a new book entirely. There's no more waiting. We've begun that new life. One that promises us together until the end of our long lives.

We laid under the stars for a long time, listening to our labored breathing even out. The coals pop and hiss. The birds in the trees and the crickets in the grass. It was peaceful and perfect. Being wrapped around each other like this in our own backyard oasis.

"Want to talk about marriage?" Julian asked, and my heart jumped with anticipation.

Please, say yes.

"Yes, definitely," Zuri said.

Quiet answered her words.

"Emrys?" Julian asked. His hand came around me and gently rubbed his arm.

"Mm?"

I grinned as my heart stopped racing. He hadn't tensed in my arms or anything. I thought he was either half asleep or lost in his thoughts and hadn't heard. It wasn't him hating the idea of marrying us.

“You want to talk about marriage?” Julian asked him.

“Oh,” he said and shifted. “Yeah, okay.”

“Let’s start by asking if you have any concerns. As we’ve recently witnessed, this marriage is forever. It’s not something that’s undone,” Julian said.

“My concern would be that it could be,” Emrys said. “You know that. I’m afraid of being thrown away. Kept forever is exactly the opposite of a concern.”

When I hugged him tightly, he laughed a little. “I’m alright, Fable. Really. I’m doing a lot better than I was two months ago.”

“You’re happy?” Yarak asked.

Emrys sighed. “I am.”

“I think we need to talk about Iskander,” Zuri said. “A dojem feels even more permanent than a marriage.”

Emrys shrugged. “I feel more at peace with my situation concerning Iska and his... Calling them family seems misleading now. But yeah. Having an answer, knowing that there’s a reason for feeling the way I do towards him, it’s kind of freeing.”

“Do you still want to be with him, though?” Zuri asked.

“Oh. That’s what you’re asking,” Emrys said, laughing. I smiled into his neck. He was thoughtful for a minute. “I do,” he answered at last. “In so many ways, he’s my yin and I’m his yang. We’re polar opposites that magnetically belong together. But I think there’s still a lot of value in *not* being together, where I’m with my family and he’s...”

He didn’t finish, even after several minutes ticked by.

“It’d be easier for you if he had somewhere he was happy,” Zuri noted.

Emrys sighed. “Yes. I hate knowing he’s wandering aimlessly and alone. Not just because he’s alone and dealing with a lot by himself, but because of the threats toward

monsters out there. Nymphs aren't hunted by Silence but if ORKA finds him alone, they won't hesitate to try to take him."

"Maybe you can convince him to live close for a while," I said. "Until he's in a better place."

"Noo," Emrys said, laughing, burying his face in my hair. "He can't be close for any length of time. You have no idea how hard it was to keep my hands off him for those few days. I did say it felt like we were magnetized, right? That would be torture."

"Are you really okay *not* being with him?" Julian asked. He shifted to lean over me. "If you—"

"Don't finish that," Emrys said quickly. "I'm already aware of what can happen to a family when not everyone is on board with someone new. Someone who doesn't belong. I can't live through that again. I need this to stay just how it is. Even if it means I'm always slightly heartbroken and... aching."

"That sounds awful," I admitted.

He chuckled. "Believe me when I tell you, I haven't been happier than I am right now in years. SO many years, I'm not sure I truly remember that time. Besides; he'll come to visit sometimes. And we can visit him. It just can't be a permanent situation where we're close or everything is bound to get fucked up."

"We'll take your word for it," Julian said after another minute had passed. "So then, let's talk about other things concerning marriage. Finances? Do we have any concerns?"

I shook my head. Though I was pretty sure Zuri was somewhere beyond Emrys's back, since there wasn't any verbal answer and Julian carried on with another question, I guessed she didn't have any concerns either.

"How do you feel about combining accounts? We have two shared accounts—household and savings. Then we each have our own savings and whatever other accounts. Does that sound fair?" Julian asked.

"Yes," Zuri and Emrys said together.

“Any family issues we should know about?” Julian asked.

I sighed as he continued to go down the list of things that we’d find in the contract. None of it sounded unreasonable, and neither Emrys nor Zuri voiced any concerns as they discussed it. For a while, I zoned out and just listened to the gentle thrum of their voices surrounding me. I loved how they settled everything inside me. How my beast knew that those voices were *mine*.

When I perked up to the conversation again, it was when Julian asked about kids. “We definitely have a clause in our contract regarding children. How do you feel about it?”

“Yes,” Zuri answered, making Yarak and Emrys chuckle.

“I’m not sure that really answers the question, pretty girl, but I love your enthusiasm,” Yarak said.

Zuri laughed, the sound of it making my insides flutter. “I want kids. I want a lot of kids.”

Yarak growled and Zuri’s laughter filled the night air for a minute.

“Emrys?” Julian asked.

“Yes, I want kids,” he said.

“You sound unenthusiastic and not very convincing,” Zuri said. I felt our little snuggle pile shift, and then her delicate frame was draped over Emrys and me. We shifted to accommodate her between us, and she petted his face. “What’s the truth, azizi?”

“As it turns out, I’m a bit of a worrier,” Emrys said wryly. “Yes, I want kids. But I’m hesitant to bring them into the current climate of our world. I don’t want them to live in fear. I don’t want that to be how they grow up, knowing that there are other monsters out there who want them dead. Just for existing at all.”

Not gonna lie; his words definitely dampened my excitement on the matter.

“There are dangers all over the world, there always have been,” Zuri said. “Even without the threat of Silence—or

ORKA for that matter—even if there wasn't any threat from monsters, you know that there are human monsters just as bad, right? I've seen their dark web. The things on there are chilling.”

Emrys bit his lip. “So you're telling me that no matter what's happening in the world, it's always going to be unsafe?”

“We all survived that environment. We're stronger for it,” Julian said. “And we're developing the tools and networks to keep each other safe. But, beautiful, you could just as easily be hit by a bus as be abducted by ORKA or Silence.”

“That's ridiculously reassuring,” Yarak deadpanned.

Julian chuckled. “My point is, we don't live in a utopian world. And we never will. That doesn't mean our kids will grow up only knowing terror. We're still going to give them the best childhood imaginable.”

Emrys sighed. “Alright, alright. I get it. I guess I'm always going to worry. Now that I realize the truth about the threats out there, it's just louder in my head.”

“We're not going to let anything happen to our family,” Julian said.

A phone rang in the distance, but no one made any move to answer it. We continued to talk about the contract. We might have continued to ignore it if it didn't begin to ring again immediately after it stopped. And then two more phones rang when we didn't answer the second attempt.

A pit formed in my stomach. This isn't good. I tried to swallow around the sudden lump in my throat as Julian got up to retrieve a phone. We'd left our phones and clothing just inside the door of the house. That put Julian far enough away that I couldn't hear the other end of the call, but I could hear him just fine.

“What's wrong?” he answered. Pause. “They have a death wish trying that.” Longer pause and then Julian swore. I tensed. “How many?” Pause. “Fuck. Yeah, we're on our way. We're dancing naked in fire right now, so give us a minute.

Are they going to be okay until—Yes, good. Where did they even get—?”

When Julian said we were on our way, I got up, pulling Zuri and Emrys with me. Yarak followed, and we made our way out of the fire.

“What the fuck? How is that possible?” Julian said as he reached for his jeans in the pile of clothes. “Are they hurt?”

“No. Koa has them hidden for right now, but they’re fucking surrounded from what Javan said.” I didn’t recognize the voice on the other end, but that was most likely due to my growing panic.

“We have a fire to put out here and then we’ll head to them. You coming?” Julian asked.

“No,” who I realized was Bastian said, and I could hear the frown in his voice. “Pax is... Well, let’s say he’s caught the demon equivalent of the flu and he’s likely to decimate everyone instead of a specific target if he sneezes.”

Julian paused, pulling the phone away from his ear and looking at the phone. His eyes met mine before he propped it back between his shoulder and ear. “I’m definitely going to need an explanation for that at a later time, but we’re heading out.”

“Good. Keep me apprised,” Bastian said.

Julian ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. Yarak turned on the backyard sprinkler system which surrounded our large fire pit. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“There’s a fucking army of ORKA invading the Savages’ home,” Julian said. “Koa has them hidden, but he’s getting stressed. Which, of course, has Calix stressed. ORKA has already demonstrated the new toys that they tried on Bellamy. Twice.” He looked at Yarak. “It’s improving. I get that the sorcerer is supposed to be dead, but I don’t know how to explain how his magic still exists and is evolving.”

Yarak pulled out his phone and dialed. No one answered for three rings and then Torin’s tired voice. “Is someone dying?”

“It’s possible,” Yarak answered. “The sorcerer’s magic that is supposed to be extinct? It’s evolving and being used on the Savages right now.”

Torin swore. “Fucking idiots. That magic is as likely to turn on them as it is to go where it’s pointed.” I could hear rustling on the other end and then silence. “Did you say the Savages?”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “I’m on my way. If for no other reason than I want to see the unicorn freak the fuck out. It’s been a while since I witnessed a massacre.”

“It was a year ago,” I said. “In Silence. You were a part of it.”

“Ah yes,” Torin said, his tone reflecting him thinking back fondly on the memory. “Good times.”

Julian shook his head. “We’re heading out. Meet you there.”



Zuri

WE PARKED THE CAR JUST OUTSIDE THE TRANSPORTATION portal and let the dragons shift into their monstrous forms. It was both for stealth and because a car would announce our arrival. I climbed onto Julian's sleek back as Yarak and Emrys climbed onto the black threat that was an enormous Fable. The two dragons couldn't be more different.

As we headed into the storm clouds, lightning streaked around us. Yarak lifted his hand, and I watched in slight horror as a bolt of lightning wrapped around it. My heart raced, thinking he was going to get electrocuted. All that happened was his hair stood on end and he laughed.

"The storms are here!" Yarak yelled.

My racing heart settled a little. "Which one is lightning?" I asked, as another streak raced across the sky.

"My favorite," he yelled back, turning his head to look at me. "Hadley."

I nodded and turned my attention forward. Not that I could see anything since we were covered in clouds. Which was probably a good thing. Fable might have been able to disappear into the night sky, but Julian looked like a fucking mermaid dragon. I mean, in colors. He was covered with pretty blues and greens.

When we finally broke the clouds, my eyes widened. There was smoke in the distance and fire burning in the trees. A low orange fire flared within the trees and I had to say, I was slightly impressed that the entire forest wasn't on fire.

“That’s not good,” I said quietly. “We’re sure they’re okay?”

Julian’s big dragon head moved up and down in the air as we glided silently through the sky.

“I suppose just lighting their asses up isn’t going to be a solution, right?” I asked.

He made a noise that was probably laughter. We circled around above them for several minutes, just looking to see what the situation was. Their house was on fire. Like, big time. It was going to burn to the ground if it wasn’t put out soon.

“Put me down over the house,” I said, leaning forward and resting my hand on Julian’s neck. “I’ll put out that fire. It looks normal enough.”

It did. I didn’t feel a magic pulse within it. The home was simply set on fire.

However, when Julian said a small army of ORKA, he wasn’t kidding. There had to be more than 100 of these stupid men (and a few brazen women) surrounding the Savages’ once beautiful property.

“Where are they?” I asked.

Because the dragons can’t talk, I didn’t get an answer. Julian dropped low, and I arranged myself on his back so I could slip from him. It didn’t take long for him to be spotted in the sky now that he hovered lower. Nor was I missed when I dropped from his back onto the top of the burning building.

My feet hit the roof and it creaked under me. Maybe it was too late for the structure. Without moving much, I bent down and placed my hands on the shingles. They were freaking melting under me.

Taking a breath, I inhaled deeply and pulled the fire into my lungs. There was a whooshing around my ears as it soared and circled, reaching into the sky. *Come to me, pretty flames.* They licked at my fingers as heat surrounded me.

It was so hot, I had to let my beast out a little. Scales started covering parts of my body, especially my hands and

feet, neck and parts of my arms. My eyes shifted, which I recognized because I could now see the heat spectrum too.

And I could taste the soot and burnt wood in the air.

I pulled on the fire, sucking it into me until I was an inferno inside. The whooshing in my ears got louder and louder until it was the only thing I could hear. When there was nothing left to pull in, I took a deep breath and expelled it. Now I could hear other sounds. Screams and yells. The unmistakable sounds of fighting. Explosions. The screams that split the air were the kind that you could feel in your bones.

The dragons had landed, remaining in their full reptilian forms. Emrys was walking around covered in fiery feathers, a walking inferno. Yarak... he was unmistakable—a demon with fire on his hands as he walked through the flames set by ORKA like they weren't there.

Panic consumed the too thick crowd as other monsters materialized. I knew the witches right away. Seneca didn't look any different than the last time I saw her, but the magic flying from her hands looked like I was watching a particular wizard movie.

Torin, on the other hand, looked like a fucking king as he commanded entire trees to do what he wanted. The ground heaved under and around him, though he remained untouched. ORKA agents were thrown sideways, only to be caught in the air by Torin and thrown with breakneck speed back into the crowd.

Then there were the two Valkyries, wearing their Norse armor and wielding terrifying looking blades. All around us were the storms, wreaking chaos and terrorizing the humans.

I had to hand it to them, though. Through their fear and impending deaths, they thought they were still at the advantage because they'd come in droves. They fought back, mostly ineffectually. But when they landed a hit every once in a while, as long as it wasn't on one of us firebreathers, it hurt.

It was when Seneca got hit in the leg with a wayward flame from an ORKA man that my presence was realized. I

screamed her name, trying to get her to move out of the way. In that moment, it felt as if all eyes turned to me.

So I jumped off the roof, intending to let my beast out. But before I got that far, something hit me on the shoulder and tore through my body like a knife. Sharp, unforgiving. Painful. I could feel the magic as it started coursing through my body, making my muscles seize and my beast freak out.

But that was it. For a moment, I felt like time stood still as I hovered in the air. Floated. Suspended as my body succumbed to the wound. No sound. No wind grabbing at my body as I fell. My vision narrowed so that all I saw was the moon hovering overhead, looking down on us. Witnessing this whole thing.

What was it thinking? Was it sad that so many people were going to die tonight?

Then it all came rushing forward. I dropped through the air like I was made of lead as a roar split the night and made my bones rattle in my body. But all I could feel was the pain that overtook every single one of my cells, no matter how hard my monster fought against it.

My monster and I—we might die tonight.



Julian

AT ONE POINT, WE HAD ESTIMATED THAT THERE HAD TO BE approximately 4,000 members of ORKA. But the number of agents that now surrounded the Savages pushed that belief. The Savages didn't live in a densely populated area. They relied on portals to get to and from their places of employment. In the three surrounding small towns, there was a population of less than 30,000 combined.

I knew this because I remembered when they were looking for a house to settle in. Their criteria were simple—no people and remote. Very little tourist attraction.

That meant these people had gathered in the surrounding areas with the intent of attacking this family. Those in the three towns should have questioned the sudden influx of people for no apparent purpose. For how long had they been there? How had no one noticed or grown concerned? Did they know they'd die tonight?

Even as I absorbed a shot of fire and then spit it back at them, I had to wonder if the timing was telling. Not even a week since governments across the world announced the existence of supernatural beings. I'd watched many of the public addresses and even those who hated us for existing, like the American secretary of defense, warned the public not to attack us.

Yet, here we were. One of the most dangerous families in existence having been attacked in their own home. The only thing that might have been worse was the Daemons. But after their surprise ambush a couple years ago, even Silence had left

them alone. Now that Ady knew how to kill with her voice, it was a smart and strategic move.

Also a concerning one, since we *knew* they had their sights set on our banshee. They'd had her for about the first thirteen years of her life. Maybe more. They'd done nothing but study and torture her for that long. I was sure beyond a doubt that they'd learned something in that time.

The storms were going to hold the perimeter. I could see the shapes of some of them hovering in the sky. Hadley's electrical sky demon moved around like an angry storm cloud. The twin quakes, Saar and Raiden, were literally walking the perimeter as two enormous horses made of sky and stone, making the ground shake with every footfall.

Then there was Gale, the fucking typhoon, who stormed above us with tentacle-like cloud formations, slamming into the ground around us and flattening whatever was in his path. The rest of the Igarashis were circling too, picking off anyone who tried to run.

They'd set this attack. They weren't leaving here alive.

The only monsters who didn't have an alternate shape were the witches. There was a hypothesis that stated witches and every other being like them—mages, sorcerers, enchanters, etc.—were the unholy offspring of monsters and humans. They kept their human shape but took on the magic of supernaturals.

I wasn't sure if I believed that. My thoughts tended to align with those who scoffed at that idea. For starters, nearly every monster had a human shape. My thoughts were that it was something we evolved in order to adapt to our environment. Especially when it became known that monsters and humans could reproduce together. Even as resilient as humans could be, they couldn't take my cock in my dragon shape.

While the humans came en masse, so far, they hadn't been showing to be much of a threat. However, the Savages wouldn't have called for backup if there hadn't been a solid reason for it. Fire they could deal with. I had no doubt about it.

Speaking of fire, the house was suddenly surrounded by a whirlwind of it. It funneled upward, reaching for the sky. Licks of flames shot out, making the humans scream and jump aside. They were brave behind their fire shooters, but sure as hell knew they were flammable. Stupid them. Yet another advantage monsters had on humans—we were immune to our own personal weapons. Fire didn't hurt me.

I watched the fire around the Savages' home for several long seconds before turning my dragon face back to the attack. One man got brave and came after me with a sword. I wasn't as enormous as Fable, so my bulk wasn't as large as a house. But I was still as big as a bus.

Watching him with one eye, I toyed with him with my tongue. Flicking it out and watching him dance away while swinging his toothpick of a sword. Perhaps they got the hint that firearms weren't much of a threat. Certainly not to those that they were attacking.

They had to have known that once a family of monsters put out an S.O.S. call that they'd be surrounded by more. Perhaps they thought their numbers were great enough that they could overwhelm us.

I was momentarily reminded of the Silence attack that came after the Igarashis last year on the mountain. Not only had they shown an actual, capable army of remote-controlled hybrid monsters, but monsters fighting other monsters was a genuine challenge. Not to mention the new toys they'd brought with them, specifically designed to neutralize the storms.

Picking up my head, I looked around for any such weapon. Did they already show everything they had? Fire was their main source of offense? Or was I missing something? Oh, right. Sorcerer fire. Since the man I was toying with was now too boring to give my attention to, I picked myself up and turned away, hitting him with my tail and sending him flying like a baseball.

The fire I'd felt was normal fire, albeit being shot at us like little magical balls of flames from... Narrowing my eyes, I

focused on what I was seeing. Sticks. They're still fucking sticks. No wait.

Moving closer, pushing my way through the crowd and making them disperse as quickly as they could, I picked one of the fire sticks from a human with my claws, taking part of their arms with it. His scream made my jaw clench, so I blew him a kiss of fire, engulfing him in flames.

Not so fun, is it?

He screamed and flailed. I watched as he barreled into his comrades and set more of them on fire. With stick in hand, I headed for Torin, dropping it into his outstretched hand when I got close enough. He gave me a sour look.

“I didn't need the body parts, Jules,” he deadpanned. “And I've yet to see the sorcerer's magic fire.”

I nodded, looking back into the crowd. I'd just been thinking that.

At that moment, shouts caught our attention and we turned. Our human friends were pointing at the top of the Savages' house, which was now out by the way. There stood my beautiful wife. Slightly covered in scales that glistened in all the fire surrounding us, with glowing snake eyes. Her white hair dancing around her in the wind caused by the storms made her look ethereal.

She grinned and then stepped off the roof.

Time stilled after that. Something shot toward her. Something small and reflective. Torin pointed, his voice sounding far away as he said, “There!” I might not have thought anything of it except that when it hit the front of her shoulder, it blew through the other end.

Streaks went through her body. I could see them as she hovered in the air—suspended like the goddess she was—moving under her skin like blood. Following the veins or her lymph nodes. Something. But they saturated her.

My heart stilled in my chest as the rest of the world faded away and she became the sole point of existence. I could

visibly see her life draining from her as she hovered there and everything in me screamed.

When time picked up, I was racing toward her. Emrys went up in flames, his body erupting into the bird he was as he screamed furiously. I caught my wife in my paws, stumbling slightly since I wasn't built for two legs like this. We rolled.

The magic inside her pricked my skin, making all my nerve endings feel like they were being stabbed with little needles. When we came to a stop, Torin stood over us. He climbed on top of me and shifted Zuri's almost lifeless body until he could look at the wound.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

A shadow fell over us and Yarak's demonic face stared down with tears in his eyes. Emrys and Fable were laying waste to the world, but I knew it wouldn't be long before their fury died down as they felt the loss of our wife. We'd barely had any time with her. We couldn't lose her yet.

Never. Not ever. But certainly not now.

Magic erupted around us as Torin turned into a damn light bulb. Only it was one of those electric things where you put your hand on it and the little rivulets of electricity moved to touch you through the glass sphere.

His rivulets of electricity were magic and they bounced off him in waves.

The next thing I knew, another enormous shadow fell over us, and out of it came the foukes before it died down, so just eyes looked out.

One fouke was carrying the other. The other had a hole ripped through his chest, much like Zuri.

"Fuck's sake," Torin said. "Someone call Lazarus or Cobalt. Hell, get them both here."

I growled, trying to tell him to just concentrate on my wife and the fouke. I wasn't sure which one this was, but I now understood why the Savages had called an S.O.S.

“Someone find the weapon and bring it to me,” Torin demanded as he moved a hand to the downed fouke.

They had no face. It’s just a solid white mask, as if there was a round piece of wood there, painted and chipping. Two black eye holes that looked just like that—empty holes. From their heads were jagged horns, roughly in the shape of a Z, the bottom end affixed to the sides of their heads. From these horns hung swamp moss.

They got even weirder as you went down their body.

The surrounding battle was mostly forgotten as I stared helplessly at Zuri. Torin split his magic, keeping it running through both of them until they were practically glowing as brightly as he was. Minutes passed as I watched the rivulets in our downed lovers pull back.

The fouke was *covered*. I could barely see through them. Not surprising that it was much slower going.

“Will he live?”

I glanced up to see Calix step out of the shadow. Oddly enough, I spotted a little boy in his arms, staring with wide tear-filled eyes at the fouke on my chest with Zuri. I knew it was Koa; I just wasn’t sure how I was seeing him like that. He was actually a heavily bearded and tatted forty-year-old man. Not a five-year-old little boy.

Torin didn’t answer, but swore when another streak of magic shot over his head. He looked up at Calix. “I have two hands, Calix. If another of you goes down, I can’t help. This needs to end. I need those weapons. No one lives, but those weapons need to survive.”

Calix nodded. He kissed the little boy and set him on my arm. “Watch over Bryn, okay, baby?”

Little boy Koa looked up and nodded as tears streaked down his face.

“Protect them all. Promise me?”

“I promise, Daddy.”

“That’s my good, brave boy. Keep being brave for Daddy, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Koa nodded. “I will.”

Calix pressed his forehead against the standing fouke, who must have been Javan if Bryn was the one on my chest. Then he touched my forehead, and the request was clear. *Please protect them.*

I understood that request. I had his entire heart right here on my chest. There wasn’t a way for me to answer him, but he knew what that answer would be. I’d protect them as my own. Always.

With every step Calix took away from us, his body shifted. His hands and feet turned to hard gems, purple and sharp. Glowing hot pink symbols carved into his skin, along his neck, his arms, his ribs, and down his legs. I wasn’t sure what happened to his clothes, but they were gone. Left behind was gray skin that looked like a hard shell. And a horn grew from his head.

Not something sweet and twisted like an ice cream cone. His was curved into a shallow arc, the top was sharp and lethal like a knife. His eyes glowed the same angry color as the symbols. In the next step, he was on all fours. His tail and the mane that ran from the top of his head to between his shoulders were lavender.

The next step had large shards of purple gemstones that looked suspiciously like projectiles coming from him. When he opened his mouth, the teeth were not that of an herbivore. They also glowed a disturbing color. And the sound that came out of his mouth made even my joints hurt.

I turned my attention back to the two who were succumbing a little more to death with every breath I took. Nuzzling my face against Zuri’s head, I implored Torin to work faster. Harder. Something. His gaze flickered to mine, and I didn’t like the look there.

Murderous screams filled the air, which I might have truly enjoyed any other day. Right now, they felt ominous.

Dooming. We hadn't gotten here fast enough. We'd been too brazen, too confident. Despite knowing they had the magic of a sorcerer at their disposal, we were careless.

"Okay, easy," Torin said, leaning away. "I'm not fire resistant, Emrys."

Blinking my eyes to focus again, I found Fable curled around us all, and Emrys's giant firebird perched on top of him, looking down. His tears were drips of fire, landing on my skin.

Yarak climbed up Fable and wrapped him up. "Shh, fiamma. Torin will save our wife and fouke. He will. But you can't set him on fire. It's harder to do if he has to put himself out every few minutes."

Torin snorted, though his concentration didn't shift again. The magic was still retreating but there was no life in Zuri's body. Thankfully, I could feel her breathing. Faintly. Which was more than I could say about Bryn.

More shadows fell over us and I opened my mouth to say, "Thank fuck," but what came out was a growl or snarl or something.

"Missed you too, sweetheart," Lazarus said, rubbing the end of my snoot. I sneezed, and he smirked, but his attention was on the two bodies on my chest. He crouched down and shifted little boy Koa. "Keep holding his hand, buddy. Make sure he knows you're here and you need him to breathe again, okay?"

Big crocodile tears filled Koa's eyes. "He's not breathing?"

Javan-fouke knelt and wrapped his arms around Koa. Together they stared at Bryn.

"Just make sure that he feels all your love, honey," Lazarus said. "Can you do that for me?"

Koa nodded as tears slipped from his eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

I was momentarily surprised when we were engulfed in complete and total darkness. It was disorienting enough that I

almost started to worry until Lazarus turned himself on like the light that shines out of the top of the Luxor in Vegas.

“Glowstick, indeed,” Yarak muttered.

I hadn't noticed Cobalt arriving, but in the next breath, he became a second beacon. They laid their hands on our fallen pair. The lights were so blindingly bright that I saw nothing else until it was over.



Emrys

THE SILENCE ON THE OTHER END WAS A LITTLE UNNERVING. Keeping my shirt up with one hand, I pulled the phone from my ear to make sure the call wasn't dropped. Nope. Iska's face still smiled from my screen with the timer counting up.

Replacing it, I said, "Where are you now? You're being careful, right?"

He chuckled, and my insides rolled. "I'm being stupidly careful. Don't worry."

"I worry," I said, sighing.

My reflection showed the new Agni tattoo over my heart, the size and placement matching those of my husbands. I couldn't stop looking at it or the glinting reflection of my ring.

"I know. Yet, you're the one who storms into a fucking attack and *you're worrying about me?*"

I worry more because you're alone. Though, I didn't say those words out loud. I couldn't. I felt like it would be a barrier that comes crashing down around us if I did that. A flimsy barrier. It was made of felt or something else tacky.

"We're fine," I said, downplaying the entire thing. That memory had revisited me no less than half a dozen times in the last two weeks. Watching Zuri die and not being sure that even a royal witch and two fucking Nephilim could bring her back. Chills raced down my arms. I'd woken in a cold panic more than once as I relived that moment in my nightmares.

“I know you,” he said quietly. “You might physically be fine, but I can feel that you’re not, Emmy.”

I smiled, dropping my shirt and closing my eyes. “You should have come today.”

“No way,” he said. “You know I wouldn’t be able to handle that. I want you happy, Emrys. More than anything. Especially after what I put you through—”

“You didn’t—”

“I did. Stop arguing.”

I laughed. We were never going to agree on this point.

“I want you to be happy,” he continued. “I need you to be. But it’s not something I can handle seeing for too long before I feel sick about it.”

“I know. I get that. But it felt like you were missing today,” I said.

“It always feels like I’m missing,” he said. He wasn’t wrong. It does always feel that way. I sighed. “We’ll figure it out, Emmy. Promise.”

“Where are you?” I asked again.

“Canada. Way the fuck up north. I might as well be in the Arctic.”

I scowled. “Why are you up there?”

He chuckled. “I can imagine the look you’re giving me. This place wouldn’t bother you. You’re made of fire. You literally wear eight layers of clothing on ninety-degree days!”

“That’s so I don’t burn, and my feathers show through my skin,” I argued. “Why are you there?”

“I find it ironic that you’re worried about burning when you’re actually a giant bird of fire. *You set yourself on fire!*”

“That’s not how it works,” I said, hearing the pout in my voice. “Besides, I don’t feel heat, but I sure as fuck feel the cold.”

“That’s only one way we’re so different. I don’t feel the cold, but I definitely can burn,” he said. His voice was sad.

I clutched the phone in my hand, meeting Julian’s eyes. He was standing in the door, leaning against the frame with his hands in his pockets. “You know that’s not why we didn’t—”

“I know. And I’m here looking for something. I don’t plan to stay long.”

“Looking for what?”

He didn’t answer, and I knew he didn’t want me to know.

“I’ll call you as soon as I’m back at the airport. Promise.”

“You can call me before then,” I said. “Whenever you want.”

His quiet huff said what we both already knew. He couldn’t do that. He shouldn’t do that.

“I’ll let you get back to your party. Congratulations, Emrys. You deserve this. You always have.”

My voice caught in my throat, and it took me several breaths to clear the lump. “I really, really need you to be happy too,” I whispered. That was the only tone I could manage right now. “Please. Find your happiness, Iska.”

He huffed. “Yeah. Someday. Hopefully.”

“I-I, uh,” I said, unable to get the words out.

“I love you too, baby,” he said, his voice quiet. “I’ll call you in a couple days.”

I nodded. Not that he could see that. The line beeped, and I knew the call ended. Once more, I gripped the phone tightly in my hand as I continued to keep eye contact with Julian. Now that the call was done, he crossed the room and took me into his arms, rocking me like I’d just been hurt.

But it wasn’t a new injury. It was old, remaining split wide open.

“I hate this,” I muttered, clinging to him for a minute.

“I know. But you’ve asked him to come here at least every time he’s called you. Whatever he’s really doing, he feels he needs to do. Maybe when he’s done searching for whatever it is he’s hunting, maybe then he’ll come back.”

“He’s alone,” I said, voice strained.

“He’s a nymph. They’re not hunted at all. By anyone.”

“That we know of. At this point, it’s probably safer to think everyone is hunted, regardless of species.”

“True enough,” Julian answered. “Come on. Let’s see how it’s coming along.”

He kissed my cheek and pulled away, taking my hand in his. Julian led me to one of the spare rooms, the only one that hadn’t been used since I arrived. The one Iskander used had been left in the state he left it in. Clean but used. He was there. I could still smell the fresh water lingering in the air. We kept the door shut. Whether it was to preserve the hint of his scent there or to keep anyone from disturbing it, I didn’t know. But I appreciated it all the same.

The third empty room we were using for the tattoos. We’d gotten married today. In the backyard with all our friends to watch. Then we’d come up here for a tattoo. The last thing to declare I had a forever now. This was my family. They weren’t ever going to leave me. They’d never change their mind about me.

When we walked in, the artist was packing up. He gestured toward the bathroom. Zuri was standing in front of the mirror, her breasts in her hands, as she looked at her tattoo that was partially obscured when her chest was free hanging. A smile touched her lips.

Squeezing Julian’s hand, I left him and walked up behind her, placing my hands over hers. “Need some help holding these?”

She laughed but dropped her hands, leaving her glorious boobs to fill mine. Zuri leaned back on me and sighed as she stared into the mirror.

There wasn't a single scar on her body from the massacre at the Savages'. She and Bryn were the only two who'd been hit with the sorcerer's magic. To our knowledge, Torin was now in possession of the weapons capable of such a thing. In fact, I thought he had all the weapons.

Blood had soaked the ground. There were bodies everywhere. Even when the death was done and the storms assured us that no one had gotten away alive, Zuri and Bryn had not yet been revived.

Zuri might have made it out without scars. She didn't even have nightmares. But Bryn hadn't been so lucky. There were some places along his arms especially, that glinted in the right light and nearly glowed eerily in the dark. Like he was painted with glow-in-the-dark paints in weird, snaking lines.

Torin promised that there wasn't any more magic in him, and checked on both Bryn and Zuri obsessively in the first few days that followed the Savage House Massacre. Fairly quickly, he gave Zuri a clean bill of health and the Nephilims supported it. He offered the same to Bryn, but someone in the house wasn't convinced.

Torin still visited daily.

"Wife," I murmured, pressing my lips to the shell of her ear.

Her smile made my stomach flutter.

"You two ready? We have dreams to make happen," Yarak said.

Zuri and I shifted to see him standing at the door with Zuri's bouquet. She sighed. "I don't like this pressure," she muttered as she reached for her shirt on the counter. I reluctantly let go of her breasts so she could dress again.

Leaving her to put herself back together, I joined our husbands in the doorway, and they immediately wrapped me in their embrace. My face was practically in the flowers, and I had the sudden thought of handing the bouquet to Iskander. He really needed a happily ever after too. We both were kind of fixated on the way I was treated, but he was hurt just as badly.

“Can I take one of these?” I asked.

Yarak handed me the bouquet, and I turned it around in my hand until I found a single flower, unlike the others. As if it wasn't meant to be there. It was a pretty sea green color. The petals were thin and plentiful. I could just imagine them moving around like hair underwater.

Carefully, I plucked it out, being mindful not to disrupt the rest of the bunch. Handing it back to Yarak, I squeezed between their hot bodies and back toward where I left my phone. I picked it up and scrolled through the pictures until I found one of Iskander alone. Not one that he's sent me in the last two months, but one from before. When he was truly smiling.

I set the phone with the picture still up on the dresser and then laid the flower on top. *For you. Please find your forever.*

After a minute, I turned away, not surprised to find them all waiting in the door. Waiting to pick me up if I fell apart. Or to give me whatever it was that I needed. But right now, I was happy. Despite the pang in my chest that was Iskander's absence, I was happy.

“I'll help you choose, Zuri,” I told her, and she smiled.

“Thanks,” she said, linking her arm with mine.

“Fortunately, our friends are almost all shackled up now,” Fable said. “I often think about how overwhelming it was for Ady two years ago when we were all sad and anxious.”

Julian kissed his cheek. “Big softy.”

We headed back downstairs and into the backyard. I watched for several minutes without moving. All these people who had welcomed me—us, Zuri and me—into their homes and lives as if we'd always been there.

I've spent countless hours musing over how very different this entire experience had been in comparison to everything else in my past. More recently, the Kaiyos, but there was a laundry list of heartache before them. That was cut so deeply because of Iskander. I knew that.

Zuri squeezed my arm and together we moved through the crowd. I was still learning names, but as we passed, I recalled more and more. The smiling faces. Their happiness for our happiness. The ease and familiarity of family. Together.

We didn't guide each other, but seemed to move through the crowd in a single direction. As if we were following a line. That line ended in front of the Nephilim.

Yep. This was right. I grinned as Zuri pushed the flowers into Cobalt's face. He burst out laughing and accepted the bouquet from her.

"Wait," their human said, practically climbing over them to get closer to the bouquet. "Wait; really?"

Zuri smiled. "Yeah. This definitely belongs to you."

The human launched himself at us, wrapping us both in his arms and squeezing us tightly. "Thank fuck," he said. "I was definitely on the path to dying of old age before we found our completion."

"You're not going to die until we do," Lazarus said, pulling him off us and back into his lap. "We've been over this."

"I age all the time," he said and pointed at his eye. "Look at these lines."

Lazarus rolled his eyes. "So dramatic. You're perfect, Aden. Fucking perfect. Lines and all."

Aden grinned. "Yeah, that wasn't the concern. I'm one step further into the grave with each breath I take!"

"We're just going to leave you to it," Zuri said. "Have fun convincing him."

"It's an ongoing discussion," Cobalt said, but he smiled at us and raised the flowers a little. "Thanks."

Zuri grinned, and we turned. My eyes caught back on our husbands. Fable was off somewhere, but Julian and Yarak were looking at something on a phone screen with Bastian, Hadrian, and Iker. Zuri and I exchanged a look. Their expressions weren't happy.

When we approached, Julian looked up, offering us both smiles.

“What’s up?” Zuri asked.

He sighed and took the phone from Bastian’s hand, offering it to us. Zuri accepted it and together we scrolled through a list of what had to be hundreds of names. Maybe more. One caught my eye. Malak. I glanced at Hadrian, and he gave me a wry smile.

“What is this?” Zuri asked.

“Silence has released a list of families that they’re actively hunting. They’re offering immunity to anyone not on the list who assists them in apprehending them,” Iker said.

A chill raced through my body. I took the phone from Zuri’s hand and scrolled up until I found the Ks. Kaas. Kaake. Kaba. Scroll. Kallan. Kaller. Scroll back. Khan. Kim. Kirk.

I sighed. Iskander wasn’t on the list. I took a deep breath and then scrolled up. It didn’t take long to find that Agni was on the list. So was Aves. Daemon. Darkyn. Basically, everyone in this backyard. I handed it back to Zuri.

“What are we going to do?” I asked.

“Nothing we weren’t already doing, beautiful,” Julian said. “But now we’ll be practicing a little more caution. If your name isn’t on the list, you’re a potential threat.”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Bastian said.

Zuri sighed. “What a way to begin a marriage.”

SPECIES INDEX

The Species Index has been removed from the digital copy of *House of Agni* due to Amazon claiming that it's causing a conversion error.

Due to this issue, it can now be found on my website, [here](#).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I know I say this time and time again but it's because I mean it: I love this world! What I wouldn't give for someone to make this a reality for us all! I mean, maybe without Silence and ORKA but someone set me up with my harem!!

This was a special book for me to write because of the hurt that Emrys felt going into this. That weight of constant rejection. I just loved the way that Agnis huddled around him to assure him that things would be different this time.

And then Zuri. Gah! How she was ready to throw down as soon as she met Emrys. To already have that kind of fierce protective instinct towards someone!

I just love them.

Up next is something that's a bit off the beaten path. Kallan isn't a family we've met. I hope you're ready to see what happens next!

For the next book, House of Kallan, click [here](#).

Only available on Amazon. If you read it anywhere else, it has been pirated/stolen!

BOOKS BY CREA REITAN

THE IMMORTAL CODEX

Immortal Stream: Children of the Gods

Mortal Souls

The God of Perfect Radiance

The Hidden God

The God Who Controls Death

Gods of the Dead

Gods of Blood

Gods of Idols

Gods of Fire

Gods of Enoch

Gods of Stone (2024)

INFECTED FAIRY TALES

Wonderland: Chronicles of Blood

Toxic Wonderland

Magical Wonderland

Dying Wonderland

Bloody Wonderland

Wonderland: Chronicles of Madness

The Search for Nonsense

The Queen Trials

Veins of Shade

Finding Time

Neverland: Chronicles of Red

Neverwith

Nevershade

Neverblood

Nevermore

OTHER/STANDALONES

Hellish Ones Novels

Blood of the Devil

House of the Devil

Harem Project Novels

House of Daemon

House of Aves

House of Wyn

House of Igarashi, 1

House of Igarashi, 2

House of Agni

House of Kallan (2024)

Brothers of Eschat

Unsolicited

Equipoise

Paranormal Holiday Novel

12 Days

Satan's Touch Academy

A Lick of Magic

A Touch of Seduction

Fae Lords

Karou

Sweet Omegaverse

Alpha Hunted

Knot Interested

Omeegas of Chaingate

Get Pucking Knotty (2023)

The Princess and Her Alphaholes Anthology (excerpt of *Wrecked*)

Wrecked

Hell View Manor

Stroking Pride (A *Sons of Satan* Novel)

A Tale of Steam & Cinders

Terror

Haidee (A *Ladies of the MC* Novel)

MM NOVELS/SERIES

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Shiver

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House of Daemon on [Amazon](#)

House of Aves on [Amazon](#)

House of Wyn on [Amazon](#)

House of Igarashi, 1 on [Amazon](#)

House of Igarashi, 2 on [Amazon](#)

House of Agni on [Amazon](#)

House of Kallan will be available on [Amazon](#)

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OMEGEVERSE**

SERIES OF STANDALONE NOVELS WITHIN A SHARED WORLD

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Alpha Hunted on [Amazon](#)

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Omegas of Chaingate on [Amazon](#)

Get Pucking Knotty will be available on [Amazon](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crea lives in upstate New York with her dog and husband. She has been writing since grade school, when her second grade teacher had her class keep writing journals. She has a habit of creating secondary, and often time tertiary, characters that take over her stories. When she can't fall asleep at night, she thinks up new scenes for her characters to act out. This, of course, is how most of her meant-to-be-thrown-away characters tend to end up front and center - and utterly swoon-worthy! Don't ask her how many book boyfriends she has...

When not writing, Crea is an avid reader. Her TBR pile is several hundred books high (don't even look at her kindle wish list or the unread books on her tablet). Sometimes, she enjoys crafting; sometimes, exploring nature; sometimes, traveling. Mostly, she enjoys putting her characters on paper and breathing life into them. Oh, and sleeping. Crea *loves* to sleep!

WHERE TO FIND ME

My Facebook page

My Patreon

By becoming a member of my patreon, you will be gaining access to exclusive stories, bonus scenes, first looks at cover reveals and projects, discounts on my store, swag, merchandise, and so much more!!

My Private Reader's Group: Crea's Godlings

This is an adult group. No drama. No judgment. No bullying, shaming, or being an ass in general. No one outside the group can see what you like, post, or comment so you're free to do as you please (as long as it's group appropriate - hot, half-naked men are allowed!). Here you will be the first to find teasers, new-release announcements, games, giveaways, and more!

My Instagram

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My TikTok

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If you follow me here, you'll get an email from Amazon every time I release a book! (Just in case you missed it in my group.)

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading Emrys and Zuni's story. I know I threw a twist at you right away but I hope you enjoyed it! And then, of course, I added a few more twists because I just couldn't help myself. But it all turned out okay. I hope you get ready for the next installment in *House of Kallan*.

Would you be so kind as to take a moment and leave a review? Reviews play a big role in a book's success and you can help with just a few sentences.

Review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), and [Bookbub](#)

Thank you!!

Crea Reitan

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