

IRON
HEART

FEATHER AND STONE BOOK 1

ALESSA THORN

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**Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the
stone of beasts, and the curses of gods.**

- Kitezhd Codex

Zori stood in front of a wall of glass windows and watched the snow fall over Moscow. She looked down at the street, waiting for the black town car to arrive, which would mark the beginning of her two weeks of freedom.

Come on, Maxim, leave already, she thought, hopping from foot to foot.

She needed to get out of the penthouse that she'd been locked into for days. She didn't like the memories of that place, crowding around and constantly trying to drag her under.

Zori's earliest recollection of being there was of Maxim taking her by the shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, and saying, "*Magic is not real, Zoria.*"

It was something he had repeated often, especially after her mother's suicide.

Some people would have told their four-year-old ward that her mother had been turned into an angel and flown to heaven. Not Maxim. He was a scientist who did not believe in anything other than what he could see under a microscope. Instead of an easy, comforting lie, Zori had gotten the truth.

Your mother was my best friend, and I cared for her deeply, but she was sick in her mind, and she killed herself. You carry the same sickness inside of you. Always beware of voices in your head that aren't your own, Zoria.

Like Zori would tell him if she did hear anything. Doctor Maxim Bogrov wasn't exactly God's chattiest person, but he had done his best with raising her and keeping her from dying. He had devoted his life to studying the brain disease that had eaten her mother's sanity away.

Zori had been taking his cure since she was fourteen to make sure it never happened to her. Now at twenty-six years old, she was beating the odds.

That was why whenever she got the chance, she escaped Maxim's security team and went to cause some trouble. She was on borrowed time, and she had to make the most of it in any way that she could.

Maxim had a conference in England for two whole weeks, and Zori was going to escape the building if it was the last thing she did. It was infuriating being locked up like a child.

Zori was planning on celebrating her first night out in months, and fuck, did she need it. A dying girl couldn't live on vibrators alone, and with any luck, she would get a few hours of freedom to find a big Russian boy with long hair and lots of tattoos to fuck her blind before Maxim's men tracked her down.

Zori checked the street beneath them again, impatient to get her night started. Her anxiety was up, and she needed to dance and fuck it out of her system. Still no car.

"Hurry the fuck up and leave already," she grumbled.

Zori fidgeted with the necklace she always kept hidden in her bra. It was a pendant with a woman holding a skull in one hand and a bundle of twigs in the other. She didn't know what it meant. It had belonged to her mother, and she had given it to Zori the night she had died.

Zori had memories of her mother, telling her stories of fairytales and magic and saints, but she couldn't remember who the lady on the pendant was meant to be. She carried it for luck and because it was the only thing Zori had left of her mother. Maxim had gotten rid of everything else. She made sure she kept it out of sight.

Zori sighed and stared out at the city of her birth and her mother's death. They hadn't been back to Moscow since her mother had jumped from the balcony on the other side of the penthouse.

After they had left Moscow, Maxim had promised to look after Zori, and they had lived all over the world. She'd had new teachers and tutors in every country they had lived in. She spoke Russian, English, German, and French fluently. She had a voracious mind, and Maxim had made sure to keep it busy.

She hadn't been allowed to go to public schools or universities, and with the way they moved, there had been no point. When she suggested that she get a job, it had been shut down immediately. Her job was to stay alive and help Maxim with his research.

It wasn't that she was ungrateful to him, but God, she was lonely. He was rarely around, and when he was, it was to make sure she was healthy and was studying whatever new thing had caught her interest. They weren't close in the way she had read other families were, but he was all she had.

The building they were now in was Maxim's main research facility in the Tverskoy District. Like all the other places they had resided in, Zori always had her own apartment-sized rooms, like some kind of princess in a tower.

Or a lab rat in a pretty cage, she thought gloomily and pressed her forehead to the cold glass.

It was why Zori made sneaking out of the buildings they lived in an art form.

Outside, snow was falling again over the city in steady drifts. They had spent the last few months in a warm, tropical climate, so seeing snow again was beautiful.

Zori stared out at the night, her heart fluttering strangely in her chest, yearning for something she couldn't name. All she knew was that she wasn't going to find it in her cage.

Down on the street below, Maxim's black Mercedes pulled up, and she saw him climb in. She held her breath as it pulled

from the curb to take him to the airport, and a grin spread over Zori's face.

"Finally!" She rushed to her wardrobe and pulled on a black low-cut top, her corset, and harness.

Zori might have been a shut-in, but she had full internet access and a weakness for online shopping and music. She had already found a club three blocks away and was going to make sure she blended in. She pulled on her leather pants and boots and went to check her make-up in the bathroom.

Zori had naturally Nordic silver hair and full lips like her mother's. Her blue eyes she got from a father she had never met. She unraveled her braid, letting the waves fall down to her breasts, and painted her lips red.

Zori pulled on a black fur coat that came to the back of her knees before she cracked open the door to her bedroom. It was almost 11 p.m. when the building's security teams changed over, and the daily cleaners left. If she timed it right, she could blend in with the group of people leaving.

It wasn't like the cleaning staff knew what she looked like, and if anyone asked, she would say that she had been working in the labs or offices on another floor. No one would ask. No one ever did because Maxim's staff was so big, there was always a new face.

The new security guard she had encountered that day certainly hadn't known who she was when she flirted with him and stole his key card off his belt.

Amateur, she thought and grinned. Really, someone should have warned him.

Zori had learned if she wore a tight enough top, she could pick most men's pockets.

Zori took a deep, calming breath, slipped out of her bedroom, swiped the card on the fire escape door at the end of the hall, and stepped inside. It was freezing cold, so she pulled on her leather gloves and hurried as fast as her boots would take her.

She'd learned from Maxim's other buildings that he never installed cameras on the fire escape stairs. Why? She couldn't guess other than he didn't want to pay for them. He might have been a scientist, but dear Uncle Maxim was also a businessman and didn't waste money on things he didn't need.

Zori's legs were jelly by the time she got to the ground level of the building and into the staff room where men and women were pulling on heavy coats and gloves.

Zori pulled the hood of her coat down further before joining the back of a group of women talking loudly about one of their daughter's new babies and how fat and sweet she was.

Zori's heart pounded as they moved through the underground parking lot and out of the staff door. No one stopped her or called her name as she followed the women down the street in calm steps. They rounded a corner, and she was free.

Zori tried not to do a victory dance, but there was a definite skip in her step as she followed the map on her phone. *Almost there, deep breaths.*

Zori heard the club before she spotted the door to it. Two bouncers stood on either side of it, smoking cigarettes. It was still early, so there wasn't a line yet. They both looked her over, and she threw them a flirty smile as they opened the door.

"Have fun, baby," one of them said.

Zori winked at him. "I always do."

The music was loud, and the club was dark, just the way she liked it. Zori left her heavy fur coat with the coat check and let the heady beats draw her down the hallways. There was a bar on either side of the dance floor and shadowy alcoves everywhere. The decor was black and silver with candles melting on tables and along the bar. It was full of people but not so packed that she would have to wait forever for a drink. It was *perfect*.

Zori let out a happy cry and allowed the pull of the dance floor to take her away.

Zori stamped her feet, trying to push out all her frustrations into the movement. The music was loud enough that when the cry of anguish and helplessness broke free from her, it blurred into all the other sounds.

This was what Zori had needed for months—the physical release of not feeling like the patient, the dead girl in waiting, the burden child of a man who wasn’t interested in being a parent but had taken on the task anyway.

She was still panting heavily when a tingle spread down her spine and a hand closed on her hip.

“Are you okay?” a deep voice asked in Russian by her ear. “You look like you were getting crushed in this crowd.”

“I’m fine,” she replied in English. She swore and repeated herself in Russian. She turned slowly, still moving with the beat, and let out a startled squeak. “Damn, you’re tall.”

The man’s face was sharp in the flickering lights. Straight black hair fell to his shoulders, and blue gray eyes shone in amusement. He was *exactly* what she needed, thank all the saints.

“Thank you. Are you sure you are okay?” He was frowning in concern, and she really couldn’t figure out why.

Zori took the chance. “I could use a drink. Can I buy you one...”

“Vladik,” he replied, his bulk already parting the crowd to lead her off the dance floor. “And I’ll have a vodka.”

“Of course,” she said, lips twitching into a grin. “I’m Zori.”

She headed for the closest bar. With a light touch of his fingers on her back, Vladik made sure he didn’t lose her in the throng.

Zori’s heart fluttered with adrenaline every time he grazed her bare skin. It had been over a year since her last one-night stand in New York, and the physical contact was jarring her in all the best ways.

Zori squeezed her way in at the end of the bar and gave the guy behind it a little wave.

“What can I get you, beautiful?” he asked, tugging on his lip ring as he stared at her tits.

“Two vodkas on ice,” she called over the noise, passing him the cash. The bar tender’s smile lost some of its shine when Vladik moved to take one of the vodkas. They moved out of the crush of the bar to one of the shadowy alcoves.

“*Na Zdorovie,*” Zori said, tapping her glass against his before they both took a drink.

“What accent am I hearing in amongst your Russian?” Vladik asked in English. Zori’s panties melted a little at his own deep accent.

“All sorts. I’ve lived in a lot of places. I’ve only just come back to Moscow from three years in America,” she replied and let out a small laugh. “It’s the first night out I’ve had in the city actually.”

“First night and all alone?” Vladik smiled, making his stern features soften. “It’s just my luck I found you.”

“Or mine,” Zori said, looking him over from his lace-up leather boots, black jeans, and shirt. He had enough stubble that it would burn deliciously against her skin.

Vladik was staring back at her just as intently. “I like these little straps.” He looped one of his fingers under her leather harness, stroking down it and lightly grazing the top of her breast.

Zori's breath stuttered. "You do?"

Vladik's eyes darkened, and he gave the strap a tug. "This harness makes me want to clip a lead to you and make you my little puppy."

Zori's pussy clenched, and she quickly had another mouthful of vodka. "You haven't even kissed me yet. I need to assess whether I *want* you clipping a lead to me."

Vladik tugged on the harness, bringing her closer. "If you wanted to be kissed, puppy, you only needed to ask." He tilted her head up and pressed his full lips to hers. It was a soft, tasting caress that had her rising up on tiptoes to meet it. She opened her mouth for him, and a deep growl vibrated through his chest.

Zori was suddenly pressed up against the wall, his leg between hers and his tongue sweeping into her mouth. Zori's hands dug into his shirt, and she kissed him harder, her teeth nipping against his lip. She was on fire, her heart pounding in her ears. He smelled crisp like a winter forest with a spice that she didn't know the name of.

"Fuck, puppy, you are delicious," he said, voice husky as he kissed along her jaw line. "I want to kiss you everywhere." His lips sucked against her ear lobe, and she ground herself against his leg. He chuckled softly. "Sensitive ears? Good to know."

His hands dropped to her hips and pulled her up against him as he kissed down her neck. Zori whimpered, her senses overwhelmed and pussy aching. She shouldn't have been this turned on by some making out and light grinding, but damn, she wanted more.

Vladik's hands slid up her corset. "Can I touch your pretty breasts, puppy?"

"Touch me anywhere," Zori stammered, her own hands tightening on his shirt. No one could see them in their shadowy nook unless they were really looking. She was fast becoming too horny to care.

Vladik lifted her up as if she weighed nothing. God, she loved strong men. She wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands moving over his chest. He had some thick muscles under his black T-shirt that she would love to get to know better.

Vladik's mouth took hers again, and Zori gasped as he cupped one breast, his thumb brushing over her nipple. He pulled back from her with a wide grin.

"Your nipples are pierced?" he asked and tugged at the small hoop through her top.

Zori let out an involuntary moan, her legs clenching around him. "Y-Yes. Fuck, that feels good."

"I have to taste them, puppy. Please let me," he said, and the hand still on her ass gripped her tighter.

"Yes, do it," Zori panted, her hands going around his neck and into his silken hair. He lifted her higher with one hand, the other one tugging down the side of her top and bra.

His mouth fixed over her nipple, and the soft, wet heat of it made Zori cry out. Fuck, it felt too damn good.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as he toyed with the piercing, sucking and tugging in a way that sent little shock waves straight to her clit. She was going to come with her pussy untouched if he kept it up. She needed to get him into a bathroom stall and get his dick inside of her before she ran out of time.

Vladik's fingers snagged on a chain, and her mother's necklace came free. He stared at the pendant, curiosity and confusion on his face. "What's this?"

"Nothing. Just a good luck charm from my mother," Zori said, taking the necklace from him and shoving it into the pocket of her pants.

Vladik cupped her cheek, his eyes searching her face. "You are not what you seem, my puppy."

"I'm exactly what I seem, and that's a woman who really needs to be fucked, so if you want to continue this in the

bathroom, I'm—”

“Zoria, it is time to go home,” a deep voice said behind Vladik. Zori jumped and quickly made sure she was covered. “Sir, please put her down before I make you.”

Vladik lowered Zori to her feet but didn't let her go. He moved to reveal Anton, Maxim's head of security.

Vladik's lip curled. “She's not going anywhere that she doesn't want to.”

“*Zoria*, you had your fun. It's time to go home. Dr. Bogrov is expecting your call,” Anton said firmly.

Vladik went to move, but she grabbed his arm. “Don't. It's fine, Vladik.”

Zori gave his hand a squeeze before moving around him and going to Anton. He somehow already had her coat and put it around her shoulders.

Zori swallowed hard and looked back at Vladik. His eyes were troubled, but his face was stone cold. “It was nice to... Nice to meet you.”

She turned away, her heart clenching, and let Anton lead her out of the club. There was no point in fighting. She'd learned that long ago.

Outside, the snow was falling heavily. Anton opened the back door of an SUV, and she got in. Vladik came out of the club entrance, and she gave him a small wave, helplessness crashing over her. She just wanted one night of freedom.

“You could have taken longer to find me, Anton. Let me have some fun for once,” she said, hating how sad she sounded. In the past, he'd given her at least three hours.

“I'm sorry, Zoria, but Moscow is a dangerous place, and I couldn't risk it,” Anton replied. “Dr. Bogrov has enemies in this city, and he would never forgive himself if he lost you.”

Zori doubted Maxim would notice she was gone, but instead of saying it, she leaned her head against the glass and said nothing.

Vladik stared at the black car disappearing through the snow before his body sprang into action. He bolted down a side alley and launched himself into the sky, his human skin melting away to the dark gray stone underneath. His wings snapped open, and he flew high up into the snow-choked clouds.

He didn't need to be able to see them; he knew exactly where that fucking car was going. Maxim Bogrov had been number one on his shit list for ten years. It was Zoria that had been the surprise.

Vladik had heard rumors of the ward Maxim kept hidden from the world. He just had no idea *what* his ward was, and by the looks of things, neither did she. She carried a relic of Kitez around her neck and didn't seem to know how dangerous that was either.

What the fuck was going on? It wasn't until Maxim's lackey had turned up that Vladik even realized whose pretty nipple he'd had in his mouth. He'd been one step away from carrying her to the nearest bathroom and fucking her brains out.

Vladik had wanted a drink after a long day of trying to track Maxim's activity, now that the piece of shit was back in Russia. Zori crossing his path had been pure luck.

Or Fate, the voice of the high priestess said in the back of his mind. She believed that Morana would give him the perfect

way to infiltrate Maxim's tower, and for the first time, Vladik believed her.

He had only been in the bar a few minutes when he'd heard Zori's cry of sorrow on the dance floor. It was pain and yearning, and Vladik had been drawn to her like a dying moth to a flame. His kind had been created to protect. He'd felt her soul reach out and grab him by the throat.

He hadn't felt her magic or smelled the creature within her, but he had been drawn to her all the same. Her taste had given it away, sweet and addictive. His beast had taken over, needing her to surrender to him so he could take care of her. His lust fueled brain had still been processing the presence of Morana's pendant in her bra when Anton turned up.

Vladik should have grabbed the man and forced him to let him into Maxim's tower. Instead, he had stolen Zori's phone out of her back pocket.

High in the clouds, Vladik welcomed the stinging ice on his face. Hopefully, it would make some common sense sink in. He landed on the roof of a building opposite the tower, his wings folding neatly behind his back. If anyone looked up, they would only see a gargoyle, not a beast on the hunt.

Vladik had used this perch more than once to check on Maxim's tower of death. The bastard had been out of Moscow for years, and when he did visit, it was only for a few days. Zori had never been with him.

The side of the penthouse that had always been dark, now had all its lights on. The door opened, and there she was.

"Zoria," Vladik murmured. The name suited her. The Zorias were the goddesses of the dawn, midday, and evening. His Zoria had tasted like midnight and had made desire burn like starlight in his veins.

He didn't understand his reaction to her. His people called him Iron Heart for a reason. He was not a gentle being, but he had wanted to be for her. Vladik yearned to kiss her until the sorrow melted from her eyes, her screams of sadness turning to pleasure.

Oh yes, he wanted that. He could still smell her arousal, see the stark desire in her pretty eyes.

Vladik's claws cracked the concrete beneath them as he watched her strip off her corset, the adorable harness, and the leather pants that clung to her curved, plump ass like a second skin. She was down to her bra and panties, a scrap of lace so skimpy, it could hardly be considered a garment. He wanted to rip them off her with his teeth, knowing they would still be wet and taste of her from their too brief encounter. He really needed to finish what he had started on her pierced nipples.

She disappeared into the bathroom, and he felt like he could breathe again.

Vladik *needed* to get into the building. His brother, Misha, had been captured by Maxim years ago, and he needed to find out what happened to him. Not knowing was eating him alive, and he couldn't get distracted by Zori unless it was to use her. The idea didn't give him any joy. She seemed to be a prisoner just as much as Misha was.

Did she have any idea what Maxim actually was? Vladik doubted it, or otherwise she wouldn't have gone with Anton so obediently. He had taken her phone in order to hack it for information, but perhaps it could be useful in other ways.

The bathroom door opened again, and Zori appeared, dressed in a long satin robe. Fuck, she was beautiful. She glided to her door and opened it. Vladik's claws squeezed the wall again as a woman in scrubs came in. He needed to know what was going on.

Vladik pushed aside his mental shields and reached out with his sensitive hearing. It took a moment, but he finally tuned out the sounds of traffic and noise around him and focused his attention on the two women.

"You ran away again? Please tell me it was worth it and you met someone handsome," the nurse said. She pulled a kit from her bag that Vladik recognized. It was for taking blood. What the fuck was going on?

“I did actually. He was so gorgeous, Nina. Tall and big and kissed like the devil. I was really enjoying myself until Anton turned up,” Zori replied.

A part of Vladik warmed. He was glad she had enjoyed their too brief encounter. He watched as the nurse began to fill vials of blood, one after the other. He wanted to burst through the glass and rip the nurse away from her. When she was finished, she gave Zori some pills and watched her swallow them.

“It was nice not to be the dying girl for a night,” Zori said, her voice sad again.

Panic flashed hot through him. What did she mean by dying?! He had smelled no sickness on her, only something that seemed to dampen the scent of her magic.

“You are not dying yet, little one. Maxim’s special medicine will make sure you never go mad like your mother did. Don’t let the memories of this place get to you,” Nina replied before wishing her good night and leaving Zori alone once more.

Vladik didn’t know what was happening, but he wanted nothing more than to go to her, hold her, and never let anyone touch her again.

Zori got up and walked to the windows, her arms wrapped tight about herself. For a moment, she looked right at him, and his heart pounded.

Yes, I’m here. I’m watching over you, he reached out to her telepathically. He met a blurred wall around her mind, and the mystery of her only grew.

Vladik waited until she had gone to bed before he shifted once more and pulled out his phone. He needed advice, and badly. He called the one person that might know how he could handle the mess he was now in.

“Vladislav, what are you doing calling me at this hour?” a grumpy voice answered the phone.

“Apologies, Aleksandr, but I’ve had the strangest night, and I need help,” Vladik replied.

“Spit it out then, boy. Is it about Maxim? Did you find a way in?”

“Maybe, but not one that I expected.” Vladik told his clan leader all about Zori and all the puzzle pieces he had about her. “I don’t understand. She was wearing a necklace from home.”

“Holy fucking shit, she lives,” Aleksandr said, his breath coming out in a whoosh.

“She who? What are you talking about? Who is Zori?” Vladik demanded.

“I need to talk to Irina before I can answer that. You have stumbled upon a fucking miracle. Stay in your human form and be ready for our call. I need to go and wake her up and hope she doesn’t blast me into oblivion,” Aleksandr replied and hung up the phone.

Worry tightened Vladik’s stomach into knots. What the fuck did Aleksandr mean by a miracle? This was shaping up to be the weirdest night ever. He had wanted a one-night stand and then a quiet evening in his loft. Standing in the snow, staring at a building with the lights out, wasn’t part of his plan, but then, Zori hadn’t been either.

He wanted to fly closer and check she was sleeping peacefully but couldn’t risk it. Maxim was a *volhv* of Chernobog, and every part of the building was warded up the ass. Vladik knew because he’d checked and double-checked for a weakness in the damn fortress.

Vladik moved to perch on the building closest to Zori’s bedroom. The curtains were closed, but he could imagine her naked and tucked up in soft bedding. Would she touch herself and think of him? He was certainly going to fuck himself when he got home to try and get the yearning out of his blood. He needed to think of something else, so he turned his mind back to the blood taking and tablets.

What’s wrong with you? He threw the question out telepathically again, trying to test that foggy wall in her mind.

I have a rare brain disease, and I’ll die in this gilded cage, her drugged and sleepy voice replied. Vladik’s whole body

locked up in surprise. Somehow, he'd gotten through to her.

I promise you, you won't be dying there, my puppy. He got no reply, and he cursed in frustration. He paced the rooftop, fighting his beast side that wanted to tear through the walls to get to her and get her out.

Vladik's phone rang, breaking him out of the rage that was choking him.

"Hello, Irina. I'm sorry about the hour," he answered, forcing his tone to politeness. She was their High Priestess of Morana and deserved the respect.

"Vladik, please tell me she's all right?" Irina replied. Her voice held something he'd never heard before. Tears. She was crying. *Shit.*

"Physically, I think so, but I'm not sure. She thinks she has a brain disease of some kind. Did Aleksandr tell you everything?" Vladik answered. He told her about the brief telepathic link that he'd managed to create. "Who is she, Irina?"

"She's a swan wife like all the women of our kind," Irina said and took a shuddering breath. "And she's my granddaughter."

"Fuck." She was as close to a *princess* as their people got, and Vladik had put his mouth on her nipple. "Apologies. I didn't mean to swear."

"I've been swearing a lot tonight too. Now, listen closely. I'm going to tell you a story, Vladislav, and when I am finished, I'm going to need you to make a plan to bring my baby home."

Vladik's gargoyle side straightened at the command in Irina's voice. "I'm yours to command, High Priestess."

Forty minutes later, Vladik hung up the phone. He was so fucked. He knew it, and it still wouldn't stop him. It didn't matter that Zori was a lost princess. His beast had tasted her, and now nothing would satisfy him but her.

He needed a plan. He took out the phone he had stolen from her, an idea sparking, and he began to smile.

Zori knew the nightmare was coming down on her, and she couldn't escape out of it. The drugs she had to sleep never let her have enough control to fight it; she just had to ride out the horror.

Her mother, Alisa, stood on a balcony, the cold air whipping around her. There were noises from a party inside. Mama had used it as an opportunity to leave her rooms undetected, and Zori had followed. Her mother took off her necklace and put it around Zori's neck.

"Don't worry, baby. This necklace will protect you. Mama's going to be okay because she's got magic wings of white and gold. She can fly but don't tell anyone. I'm going home and will come back for you as soon as I can," Alisa said, her hands gripping Zori's small shoulders. Her eyes were wide with madness, her silver hair lying in a greasy mess. She kissed Zori's head. "Trust in the magic within you, Zoria. We will be together again."

Alisa climbed up on the balcony railing, her thin, dirty nightgown blowing around her. "I'm going to fly far away from here." She turned to look back at Zori. "Mama loves you." Alisa stretched her arms wide and was gone.

Zori screamed herself awake, her blankets tight around her feet. Her cheeks and pillow were soaked with tears. She reached blindly for her phone to check what time it was but found her nightstand empty. That's right, she'd lost it at the club.

“Fuck,” she whimpered and sat up. Her bed was soaked from sweat. The nightmare had only felt like a few minutes but must have had her in its grip for longer.

Zori drained the glass of water beside her bed and stumbled to the bathroom. Her nighttime medicine always left her feeling groggy and off beat in the mornings. She stripped off her soaked slip and underwear before climbing into the hot shower. She hugged herself tighter, unable to stop the shaking that was rattling her teeth.

It had been six months since Zori had dreamed of her mother’s suicide. She knew it would happen as soon as she stepped back in this cursed building.

She hoped she would dream of Vladik and his strong arms around her. No, her brain didn’t want to be that kind to her.

The thickness in her throat told her that tears were about to start again, so she swallowed them down. Usually, she tried not to let her loneliness in. She would throw herself into whatever subject or language she was learning and block it out. She didn’t know if it was the dream or having her moment with Vladik interrupted, but now the chasm inside of her opened up, and her chest ached with a sadness that was threatening to choke her.

“Pull yourself together. You’re not dead,” she told herself. *Not yet anyway.*

Zori didn’t know if leaving Maxim’s care would mean her life was shorter but fuller. She could stay in one place, have some friends for once. Maybe have a job.

Who would hire someone with no job experience at your age? You don’t even have a driver’s license. Maxim’s secretary had her passport, but if she was going to leave, she had no idea where any of her IDs was. She only got into clubs because of her tits and winning smile.

Zori took some deep, shaky breaths and focused on trying to get her heart rate down. *You’re only acting this way because of the nightmare, and you’re frustrated. Once you calm down, you’ll remember this is the best place for you.*

She knew it would happen because it always did. No matter how many times she crept out to party for a night, she always came back willingly. She was so damn tired of the cycle, of being sick and unable to have a normal life.

Zori turned the shower on cold to shock herself out of the pity spiral she was falling into. It got her out of the shower fast. She needed to eat something, and then she would feel better.

Out of the darkness of her bedroom, a gloomy winter sun tried its best to shine. She pressed a button by her door to let the servants know she was up and ready for breakfast.

In the apartment's small kitchen, she made a coffee and went back to the windows. The statue of the gargoyle on the building across from her looked bigger and more menacing in the daylight.

Zori lifted her coffee to him. "Morning, bud. Looks like we are both going to be watching the world go by without us today." She stifled her laugh. Great. Now she was talking to statuary.

The door to her apartment opened, and a woman in a gray uniform came in with a cart. There was a yellow envelope sitting next to her covered plate.

"What's this?" Zori asked.

"Not sure, miss. It was brought by a courier this morning for you."

Zori waited until the woman had left again before opening the package. It was her phone with a scrap of notepaper inside.

YOU LEFT something at the ball, Cinderella.

Call me the next time you slip away from your bodyguards.

V.

P.S. 1234 is a terrible password.

A BIG, stupid smile spread over Zori's face. He'd even charged it for her. She typed the code in and found that he'd changed the background of her phone to one of him with no shirt on, holding up a small sign that said, 'You missed out on all this.'

"*Yebat,*" she swore, eyes wide. She opened her photos and zoomed in. Vladik was indeed as gorgeous as her imagination had made him out to be with solid muscles that spoke of brute strength and just the right amount of chest hair. She didn't know if she was relieved or disappointed that he hadn't added in a dick pic to her collection.

Zori opened her contacts and choked on a laugh when she saw he had put his number under 'Vladislav the Handsome.' Her finger was hovering over his contact number when it started to ring. Her stomach clenched, but she knew she couldn't avoid answering.

"Morning, Maxim," Zori answered and went back to her coffee pot. She was going to need it for the lecture she was about to get.

"Zoria, what have I told you about running away?" he asked, sounding put out and distracted.

"I wasn't running away. I just went out for an hour. I don't know why I can't do it sometimes. I take the tablets. I give my blood every night. I'm doing fine," she answered, anger flaring in her. "I should be allowed to leave sometimes. You know I'll come back."

Maxim let out a sigh. "It's not about your sickness. Moscow isn't like New York, Zori. I have rivals in the city that could do you harm to get back at me. I don't want to see you hurt."

"What rivals?"

"The pharmaceuticals business is more cutthroat than any mafia, pet. I can't have them taking you and using you against me. That's why I need you stay put. How have you been on the new tablets?" he asked, changing the subject.

“Fine. I’ve been having more nightmares, but it’s probably just being back here.” Zori went to the windows again and stared at the gargoyle on the building. Her eyes kept being drawn to it and its curved wings. “I’m lonely, Maxim. Keeping me locked up in this place where she died is torture.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Zori. You were so young. I’m sure you can barely remember her,” he said, making her flinch. “I can’t be worried about your safety right now. If you are good, I promise when I get home in another ten days, we will go out. Do tourist things, look at museums, whatever you want, hmm?”

Zori knew better than to argue. There was no point because she had no choice. “I’ll make a list of places I want to see. Enjoy your conference.”

“I will bring you back something shiny, pet. I promise.”

“Thank you, Maxim,” she replied, and he rang off. Maxim always brought her some trinket or designer outfit when he knew he was being unreasonable. She went out so rarely that she didn’t see much value in them, only that he wanted her to look good beside him when he did take her places.

Their relationship had never been paternal, but neither had he showed any interest in her sexually. She didn’t think Maxim even had those kinds of impulses. He called her *pet*, and someday that was exactly what she thought she was to him. Was being a pet better than being an experiment?

Zori took her mother’s pendant out of her bra and ran her fingers around the grooves of the engraving and over the tiny skull. Her mother had told her that it would protect her, but she didn’t know how. Zori knew that a woman holding a skull wasn’t one you should fuck with. Vladik had recognized it the night before; Zori was sure of it.

She looked at her phone and studied the little grin he wore in the photo. It was the kind of smirk girls would do dumb things for. Damn him. She opened up a message:

Zori: Thank you for returning my phone. Not sure about the glamor photo but grateful it’s not a dick. Do you

know who the woman on my necklace is?

She put the phone down on the kitchen counter and tried to ignore the way her heart raced. She needed to eat, and then she was sure she would feel better. She was halfway through her toast when her phone buzzed.

Vladislav the Handsome: You don't get dick pics until after we have our second date, puppy. The woman on your necklace is a goddess called Morana. You should look her up. I have a feeling you will like her.

Zori: Thanks. I'll do that. Confident of you to think we will have a second date. I don't do them as a rule.

Vladislav the Handsome: You are clever, puppy. I'm sure if you want to see me, you will figure out a way.

Zori laughed softly, and the tension in her shoulders eased. She really didn't know what it was about him that made her feel reckless.

Zori: It might be a few days.

Vladislav the Handsome: Don't worry, Zoria. You are worth the wait. ;)

Zori's heart fluttered dangerously in her chest. Yes, this man was definitely going to make her do very dumb things.

Vladik's face hit the rubber mat so hard, his ears rang. He tasted blood but managed to haul himself upright once more.

"Where is your head at today?" Kaspian demanded, hands on his hips. He was the biggest gargoyle that Vladik had ever met and ran a gym in one of the rougher sides of the city. He was the only other gargoyle in Moscow, and Vladik had needed to see someone from home even if he was destined to be getting his ass kicked all night.

"If I tell you, you have to promise not to mention it to anyone. I'm under orders," Vladik said, retying his sweaty hair. Kaspian's braid wasn't even a little bit messy. One would think having hair almost to his ass would be dangerous in a fight, but they would be wrong.

Vladik was a good warrior, a hard-ass by nature. Kaspian was a level all on his own. He had spent most of his life with the nomadic gargoyle tribe on the Mongolian Steppes, and it had shaped him in more ways than one.

Usually, Kitezsh sent their young warriors to the nomads for a season to harden them up. Kaspian had loved it and stayed for years. As a result, he was a little more feral around the edges than the others.

Vladik liked to tease him that he was a Dothraki wannabe, but only when Kaspian was in a good mood. He kicked his ass often enough.

“Orders, is it? Something to do with Misha?” Kaspian asked.

Vladik reached for his water bottle. “Something indeed. I’ve had an interesting few days.”

He ended up telling Kaspian about the entire mess. Vladik had few friends, but Kaspian was definitely one of them. He could trust the other gargoyle not to blab to anyone. Kaspian was a loner as much as Vladik was. By the time he was done, Kaspian was frowning.

“Well, you’re in the shit, aren’t you? I guess this explains why you wanted an after-hours session tonight,” he said. He grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat off his brow. “You made out with a lost princess, and now you have to try and save her from her tower. What’s your game plan here?”

“I’m trying to convince her to trust me. We’ve been chatting a little via text, but I can’t be sure that Maxim doesn’t have someone monitoring her phone. She’s going to sneak out again. She’s just waiting a few days to let things calm down,” Vladik replied.

It had been four days, and he was going insane watching her and unable to touch her. His inner beast was fighting not to try and smash his way into the building to get her out.

“Okay, so as soon as she’s free, you’re going to kidnap her and take her back to Irina? Simple plan. I like it.” Vladik stared at him and said nothing. Kaspian groaned. “You’re not going to kidnap her even though your high priestess has given you a direct order. What the fuck, Vladik?”

“If I take her like that, Maxim’s going to go mental. I’ll never be able to get Misha out. If I can convince Zori to help, I have a chance of getting them both,” Vladik replied. It was all he’d been thinking about for days. “They gave up on Misha years ago, but I can’t. He’s my only blood family. I’m going crazy wanting to protect Zori, but Maxim isn’t torturing her. She’s trapped yes, but she’s treated well. Goddess knows what state Misha is in. I can’t—”

Kaspian's big hands rested on his shoulders. "Breathe, little brother. You're ranting. You don't have to justify this to me. I would do the same thing."

"You would? Because I feel like I'm betraying everyone just by thinking it," he replied.

Kaspian let out a sigh, and his golden eyes softened. "Look, I know you're loyal to them. The high priestess has her own priorities. She wants her granddaughter and that want blinds her to everything else. She's not considering that Misha is a part of her clan, her family, as well. Do you think Zori will risk helping you?"

"I don't know. I only know that I have to try. Misha wouldn't give up on me, so I can't give up on him. If he's dead, I need that proof and closure."

Vladik had considered his brother's death many times over the last years, but until he saw his still body with his own eyes, he had no choice but to follow every lead through.

Kaspian nodded. "Do you need anything from me? I'm with you on this. You know that."

"Thank you. I might need you to help back up my story to Zori. I don't want her to think that she's going crazy. Maxim really made her believe Alisa had some kind of degenerative brain disease."

Kaspian's growl said it all. "Fuck, he's a piece of shit. We need to end that fucker once and for all. If Zori's been raised by him, you might have a hard task getting her to betray him."

"I know. Any suggestions?" Vladik asked.

"Be a charming motherfucker. I know you have it in you somewhere," Kaspian teased.

"I must if I got her nipple in my mouth that quickly."

"Poor girl is probably too hard up to care. I can't wait to meet her. She sounds like she needs a real male to—"

Kaspian's head rocked back as Vladik's fist smacked him hard in the jaw. He stumbled back a bit and then grinned through bloody teeth.

“There it is. I’ve been waiting for a bit of fire all goddamn night. You still want to get in the princess’s panties, do you? What makes you think you got a chance once you get her home and every male in Kitezsh is going to want to mate her?”

Vladik tackled Kaspian to the ground, and they wrestled across the mats. He wasn’t saying anything Vladik hadn’t said to himself over and over again in the past few days. Zori deserved someone better than him, but he couldn’t help craving her. He wasn’t going to give her up without a fight.

Kaspian’s legs locked around Vladik’s waist, and he punched him hard in the ribs as he rolled him. Two seconds later he had Vladik pinned and was sitting on his back, his arm around his neck in a headlock.

“You really do need more wrestling practice, Iron Heart. That was too easy,” Kaspian said with a deep chuckle. “You better brush up on those skills if you’re planning to fight off every warrior that tries to court your girl.”

“Get your sweaty ass off me,” Vladik complained. Kaspian only laughed harder, but he relented and shifted off. “I hate that you’re right. I think I’m going to start a brawl every time someone looks at Zori the wrong way. It’s so fucked up. I can’t control my beast when it comes to her.”

Kaspian hummed. “You know, its instincts are better than yours. Out on the Steppes, you learn to listen to your beast more because you need it to help you survive. If it’s feeling that protective of her, then there is a reason. You grew up around the most beautiful women in the world in Kitezsh, and you didn’t have that reaction.”

“I know.” Vladik rolled to a sitting position. “The goddess created us to protect her women. Maybe it’s magic. She’s Irina’s granddaughter, so her magic has to be powerful. Morana could be pulling my strings to make sure I protect those she’s blessed.”

“I don’t think it’s the goddess.” Kaspian held out a hand and pulled Vladik to his feet. “I think you’re mating.”

“Fuck off,” he said automatically.

“I’m serious. I’ve seen it before, and you better start considering it. Your beast knows its mate. You have to listen to it, or it will drive you insane.” Kaspian ruffled his hair. “Looks like Iron Heart’s heart has a soft spot after all.”

Vladik swayed. He hadn’t considered mating. Someone like him couldn’t mate with a princess. She couldn’t possibly be... Could she? He had acted out of character since he’d met her. He was haunted by her scent and taste, his need of her. He must have been wearing his concerns all over his face because Kaspian’s grin widened even further.

“Oh, fuck me,” Vladik groaned.

Kaspian laughed. “Nah, you’re not my type. Too skinny.”

“Shut up. I really am fucked, aren’t I?”

The big gargoyle nodded. “Yeah, you are. Don’t let the mating thing worry you just yet. You still need to get your brother and her out of the hands of one of the most powerful priests of Chernobog alive. Focus on your next steps there.”

“You’re right. I can’t get distracted by a *maybe* anyway.” Vladik really needed to convince Zori to come out of that building and soon.

The goddess must’ve thought the same because when he went to get his clean clothes out of a locker, he had a message from Zori waiting.

Puppy: I have a window of opportunity tomorrow night, but I’ll have two hours tops before I have to be back in the tower.

Vladik: Two hours is more than enough. Have you tried any Pelmeni since returning to Moscow? There’s a good place not far from your tower that’s quiet.

Puppy: Pin me a location, and I’ll be there.

Vladik let out a long breath. There were so many things that could go wrong with his plan. He shook his head. Kaspian was right. He needed to focus on his next step and not the ones in a future that hadn’t happened yet.

He smiled at Zori's messages and then felt like an idiot. It didn't change the fact that he couldn't wait to see her again. Then the real challenge would be not to kidnap her after all.

Zori knew that sneaking out again so soon was risky. When she'd overheard Anton mentioning his night off for his wife's birthday, she knew it was too good of an opportunity to pass up. He'd said it loudly, just outside of the gym in the penthouse when she'd been on the treadmill. It was like he was giving her permission. If not, he really should stop underestimating her.

The card Zori had stolen the previous week still worked. Maybe Anton was helping her. She didn't know why, but she was thankful. She was still smart enough to wait until the guards were due to change over to make her move.

Zori swiped some scrubs out of a supply cabinet in one of the employee areas and put them over her sweater and jeans before adding a jacket over the top. She walked calmly through the cold parking lot towards the smoking area like she was meant to be there. She had a black beanie on to cover her hair, and with any luck, anyone watching the feeds would think she was on a break.

It was freezing outside so the one nurse that was in the smoking area was quick to get his nicotine fix before leaving her alone.

Zori pulled off the scrubs, folded them into a tight ball, and tucked them into her satchel bag. Pulling on her gloves, she kept her head down and used the smoking area exit to walk out onto the snowy streets. She didn't raise her head until she was a full block away.

Don't think you're safe until you're back in the penthouse, she told herself. It might have been easy to get out, but getting back in was always trickier.

Zori pulled out her phone, checked the location again that Vladik had sent her, and turned down a narrow side street. She didn't know why she was risking Maxim's wrath for some guy she'd met once. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about him, to the point that it had bled over into graphic sex dreams that made her wake up wet and unfulfilled. She had to admit, they were better than her usual nightmares.

At the very least, maybe meeting up with him again outside of a club situation would help her see if their attraction was all heat of the moment. She had never attempted a second date.

She'd dressed casually in warm jeans and a black knit sweater. It was only dumplings. That's what she told herself anyway.

Zori stared at the alley she found herself in. Had she taken a wrong turn by accident? Vladik said it was a tiny hole-in-the-wall sort of establishment, but this felt wrong.

"You lost, little kitten?" a voice said, and she whirled around. Two men had appeared in the darkness.

"No, thanks. I'm fine. Just waiting on my boyfriend," Zori replied, her hand gripping her phone.

"He must be a terrible boyfriend to let you out alone and unprotected. You should come and play with us instead. We'll take good care of you," the second man said, and they began to close in on her.

Zori backed up. Her boot caught the edge of a patch of ice, and she went backwards, hitting her ass hard. "Fuck." She started to scramble backwards, trying to find her footing.

"Oops, let me help you, kitten," the first man said, getting closer.

"Stay back! I'm fine. Leave me alone." Zori hit the dial button on Vladik's number before the men grabbed her. Zori screamed and kicked out with her boots.

A ring tone tingled somewhere in the darkness, and then an unnatural roar shook the alley. Zori froze as something huge and winged dropped onto the street. The man who had her legs released her as he was ripped away and sent flying into a parked car with enough force to bend the door.

“What t-the fuck are you?!” the other man said, dropping Zori’s arms and pulling out a handgun. He managed to fire off a single round that pinged off the creature’s chest before its clawed hand grabbed it, crushing the man’s hand and the gun. His scream was cut short as the creature grabbed him around the throat and slammed him once into the brick wall before dropping him.

Zori’s eyes bugged out of her head as the creature turned on her. It looked down at her with blue gray eyes, and she stared back in wonder. It was the gargoyle from the roof of the building outside of her window.

“Zori? Are you hurt?” the creature asked. The voice was deeper, but she knew it.

“V-Vladik?” she stammered.

“Don’t scream.” The gargoyle’s lips curved into a smile. There was a warm burst of air as the gargoyle in front of her shrank and changed into the man she’d met at the club. He lifted her up and placed her back on her feet. “Hey, puppy. Did they hurt you?”

“They didn’t get a chance to,” she replied, feeling numb. The men still hadn’t moved. “I don’t.... I...”

“Look at me, Zoria,” Vladik said, and her gaze automatically went back to his. “It’s okay. Let’s get you somewhere warm, and I’ll explain everything.”

“Everything like how you’re a gargoyle?” A hysterical laugh bubbled up Zori’s throat. This was it. She had finally broken like her mother.

Vladik cupped her cold cheeks. “Puppy, stop. You’re not going crazy, I swear it.”

Something in his touch and tone reassured her, and she managed to stop and take a breath. She was shaking and

freezing. Vladik shrugged off his wool lined leather jacket and wrapped it around her, enclosing her in heat. He put an arm around her.

“The restaurant isn’t far. You were on the right track. You just didn’t get far enough,” he said, keeping his tone casual.

Zori didn’t look back at the bodies they’d left in the street. Neither had moved. If it wasn’t for Vladik...she didn’t want to think about it. Whatever he was, he had saved her.

“T-Thank you,” she said, blinking back the tears building in her eyes.

“You’re welcome. And thank you for not screaming.”

Zori still wasn’t entirely sure she wasn’t losing her mind. “You never know. I still might.”

Vladik laughed and kissed the top of her head. “Okay, but do it after the pelmeni. I’m starving.”

The restaurant was marked by a single yellow bulb over a faded red door. There were no windows to even show that people were inside, eating.

“This looks like the dodgiest place ever. There was no way I was going to find this on my own,” she said, her voice still shaky.

“Don’t let looks deceive you. This is invite only, and they make the best food in Moscow. It’s a disguise to keep the tourists away,” Vladik reassured her and opened the faded door. Warm, fragrant air hit Zori, and her stomach rumbled as they stepped inside. A plump woman with gray hair smiled at Vladik, and he bent to kiss her cheek.

“Who is this pretty girl you brought tonight? I didn’t think you knew how to date,” she said and looked Zori over. “He didn’t kidnap you, did he?”

Zori laughed awkwardly. “Yeah, kind of.”

“I’ll make sure you eat well to make up for it, hmm?” the woman replied and patted Zori’s cheek. “You are frozen solid! Take a seat, and I’ll bring you some *sbiten* to warm you up.”

Vladik led her into a small dining room that only had eight tables. They were packed except for one in the far corner. He hung up their coats on wall hooks beside the table and pulled out a chair for her. “This is us.”

“What’s *sbiten*?” Zori asked.

“It’s kind of like a mulled wine but made with honey and spices. It’ll chase your chill away.” Vladik sat down and studied her face. “You still haven’t screamed.”

Zori chewed on her lip. “I’m in shock, I think. I might need you to reassure me that I’m not crazy a few more times.”

“You’re not crazy. Not even a little.” Vladik lowered his voice. “Give me an hour without walking out on me, and I’ll change your world.”

Zori toyed with her napkin. “Only one hour? You’re going to have to talk quick.”

“Then let’s start with the biggest thing.”

Vladik placed a large hand over her fidgeting one, and she looked up into his calm eyes. He smiled at her, making her heart skip a beat, and then said the words that she’d been taught never to believe.

“Magic is real.”

Zori placed her head in her hands. “I knew I was going crazy.”

Zori was still trying not walk out of the restaurant when the server came back with her steaming drink. She took one look at Zori's face and walked back into the kitchen, returning with shots of vodka.

"Don't make this nice girl cry in my restaurant or there will be trouble, Iron Heart," she grumbled.

"I promise," Vladik said, giving her a wink that made the older woman blush.

Zori's lips twitched in a smile. Damn it. She gulped down the shot of vodka. "Okay, so you think magic is real."

"No. I know it is. You just watched me turn from a gargoyle into this form, and still, you doubt that magic exists?" Vladik drank his own vodka. "Just because Maxim wants you to think you're crazy for his benefit doesn't mean you are, puppy."

Zori's world tilted again. "H-How do you know about Maxim?"

"I know lots of things, but before I continue, there's something you need to hear first." Vladik reached across the table and placed a hand over hers again. "When I met you in the club, I had no idea who you were. What we felt between us, that was all us."

Heat curled in Zori's gut as his long fingers stroked over the back of her hand. She was confused as hell, but this one thing he was definitely right about. It didn't matter what she

had seen in the alley. He made something in her hum with desire and longing.

Zori nodded as the vodka helped calm her nerves. “So, magic is real. What else?”

Vladik left his hand on hers and gave her another of his punch-in-the-gut beautiful smiles. “I’m going to tell you a story, puppy. It’s about Morana, the goddess of winter and magic, and how my kind came to be.”

Zori suddenly felt like she was a little girl again. No one had told her stories since her mother had died.

“Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the stone of beasts, and the curses of gods,” Vladik began, keeping his voice low. “Long ago, there was a priestess of Morana, named Yelena, who was more powerful than any that came before her. She was so beautiful that kings, sultans, and emperors wished to marry her. She refused them all. Yelena was devoted to her goddess, and that devotion made Chernobog jealous.

“Chernobog is a god of dark magic, chaos, winter, and death. He had many *volhv*, shaman priests, that followed him, but it wasn’t enough. He commanded his followers to kill Yelena because the rivalry between the gods still burned hot, and he didn’t want the goddess to have the power of her worshippers.

“They hunted Yelena relentlessly until she was forced to flee with some of the other priestesses to a sacred place of Morana, deep within the Ural Mountains. There, the *volhv* cornered them. Yelena prayed to Morana, begging her to help her followers escape. Morana heard her and transformed all the priestesses into beautiful swans so they could fly away.

“So angry was Morana at the audacity of the *volhv*, she carved warriors from the stone of her sacred caves and gave them life. They slaughtered Chernobog’s *volhv* that dared try to harm Morana’s holy. They were the first of the gargoyles, destined to protect the swan priestesses with their lives and bodies forever.”

Vladik sipped on his warm drink, letting Zori absorb the story. There was something familiar about it.

“I think my mother once told me a story like that,” she said, searching her memory.

“It wouldn’t surprise me. Your mother was the daughter of our current high priestess, Irina,” he replied.

Zori’s eyes went wide. “What?”

They were interrupted by the server returning with bowls of steaming dumplings. Vladik gestured to her food. “Eat, and I will tell you. You’ll need something in your stomach for this next part, puppy.”

“Why are you being so bossy?” she grumbled, picking up her fork.

“Because I’m a gargoyle, and I’m meant to protect the swan wives of Morana.”

Zori coughed as sour cream went down the wrong way. “I’m sorry, what? You think I can shift into a swan?”

“Your mother could, so yes, you can,” Vladik replied.

Zori’s shoulders curled inward as the night of her mother’s suicide came back to her. The way she had been so sure that she could fly as she climbed up onto the balcony railing.

Mama’s going to be okay because she’s got magic wings of white and gold. She can fly, but don’t tell anyone.

“She said that she could fly, but she didn’t. She died by jumping off the building, Vladik,” Zori said, her eyes filling with tears.

“I know. It’s because Maxim took her cape that allowed her to shift. When swan wives go through puberty, they grow their feathers for the first time. After their first shift, they are left with a cape that they need in order to shift,” Vladik explained. “When a woman is mated, they can shift at any time, and they keep the cape as a unique piece of their life. Your mother and two other unmated swan wives were kidnapped by a group of *volhv* before her mating ceremony to

your father. She must have already been pregnant with you when she was taken to Maxim.”

Zori wiped her tears away with her napkin. “Is my father dead too?”

“Yes. He died trying to save the women, but there were too many of Chernobog’s followers, and they overpowered him.”

Zori had expected it, but it still hurt. “Why would they kidnap my mother? Why are they still hunting them?”

“In a word? Magic. All women of our kind have magical abilities. It’s in their bones, but mostly in their blood. A *volhv* of Chernobog can use that blood to enhance their own spell work. Maxim and his inner circle are all blood mages, Zori.”

“But that’s impossible! He’s a scientist. He’s always, always said that magic isn’t real. I wasn’t even allowed to have fairytale books growing up because he said he didn’t want my mind filled with nonsense,” Zori argued. Maxim wasn’t a perfect guardian, but he’d always taken care of her. Hadn’t he?

“He’s both scientist and *volhv*, Zori. Why do you think he takes your blood every night?” Vladik asked. “For his tests to see if you’re going crazy like your mother? No. She wasn’t sick. She was a prisoner who was driven mad by whatever the fuck he was doing to her.”

Zori shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. The medicine he gives me is to stop me from getting sick. What else would it be?”

“A blocker. I can smell it.” Vladik touched his nose. “Your magic is being smothered. You also have a fog in your mind that prevents any kind of telepathy. You never grew your cape during puberty because he made sure to keep you drained of your magic. I know it seems like he’s always taken care of you, but he’s a fucking monster, Zori. I know that intimately.”

“What do mean by that? How would you?” she demanded. She didn’t know how to process all the things that she was feeling. She couldn’t comprehend why Maxim would do such a thing.

Vladik's eyes went cold. "My brother and a group of other gargoyles clashed with Maxim and his *volhv* a few years ago. Misha went into your tower and never came out again. It's why I'm in Moscow and not safe in our hidden city of Kitez. I've been searching for a way into the tower in case he's still imprisoned there. Imprisoned like you are."

"I'm not imprisoned," Zori said meekly. But that wasn't true, was it? She'd felt like a prisoner more and more as she grew older. "Maxim's my guardian."

"You're his experiment, Zori. A fucking pet that has magical blood and trusts whatever bullshit he says," Vladik snapped, making her flinch back from him. "Shit, I'm sorry. I'm not angry at you. I want to tear that fucker's head off."

After the alley, Zori knew he meant it literally.

"So you're using me to get to Maxim, is that it?" she asked.

Vladik shook his head. "I wish I was that callous, but no. I'm under orders from your grandmother to get you out. I should be throwing you over my shoulder and flying you back to Kitez this minute."

"Then why aren't you?" she demanded. She ate some more dumplings, which were as delicious as he'd claimed they were going to be.

"I don't want you to hate me. You need to see what Maxim is for yourself before I help you leave him. Otherwise, you will always doubt it. If you search his office, I know you'll find the proof of what I'm saying," Vladik replied. He leaned back in his chair. "I'm also hoping once you find that proof, you will help me so I can find out what happened to Misha. I'll get you both out, I promise."

Zori felt that promise hit her in the chest. He meant everything he was saying. "I don't know if I believe any of this."

"I know, but you will once you give yourself the time to consider it. If you can't get into his office, at least stop taking the poison he's feeding you. You will see for yourself it's

harming you,” Vladik replied. He looked her over, curiosity sparking in his eyes. “I can’t wait to see what your magic can do. It must be amazing if I can feel the hum of it with all the drugs in your system.”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not some special magical person. I’m an orphan who has been told I’m sick and dying my entire life,” Zori said, her heart racing too fast.

What if that was all bullshit? What if it was because Maxim just wanted her blood?

Pet. That’s what he called her. What if he’d always meant it literally and never cared for her at all? Zori’s stomach clenched, and she stopped eating. This was all too much...

“Look at me, Zoria,” Vladik said, the command in his tone cutting through her spiraling panic. “You’re going to be fine. Your grandmother is still alive and waiting for you to come home. You have people that aren’t Maxim. You’re not alone.”

Zori pressed her hand to her chest. “I’m always alone, Vladik.”

“Not anymore, puppy. I’m going to be watching over you until you’re ready to believe all of this for yourself.” Vladik smiled gently at her. “I can be patient until you learn the truth. As I said before, you are worth waiting for, Zoria.”

Zori was eating her desert, trying to absorb everything that Vladik had told her when her phone buzzed.

Nina: I came to give you your nighttime medicine, and you aren't here. I'll give you twenty minutes before I have to raise the alarm.

“Shit. I have to go, or they are going to be onto me,” she said, rising to her feet.

“You’re not walking back alone at this hour,” Vladik replied, grabbing their coats. He passed the old woman a handful of notes and kissed her cheek on their way out.

“Come again soon, Iron Heart,” she said with a wink.

“Why does she call you that?” Zori asked once they were outside.

Vladik shrugged. “It’s a nickname from home.”

“Is she...”

“She’s a follower of Morana, but no, not a swan wife.” Vladik straightened the collar of her jacket. “Are you warm enough?”

Zori nodded. “I’m fine. Let’s get moving, or I’ll never be able to come out again.”

Vladik grinned. “We can’t have that.”

“I still haven’t decided if you’re a total nut job or not,” she said.

“And you still haven’t run away. That says a lot about you.”

“Probably bad things, like how I’ve a terrible taste in men,” Zori replied.

“But an excellent taste in gargoyles.” Vladik took her hand and kissed it, sending a thrill straight through her. It answered her question about their chemistry. Nothing he’d told her that night had changed it.

Hand in hand they started walking back towards the tower, Zori following Vladik because he knew the streets better than her.

“It’s okay to think what you need to right now, Zori, including if I’m crazy. If I was in your position, I’d want some more evidence too,” he said.

Vladik didn’t seem concerned that she was struggling to believe it all. He wasn’t judging her or demanding anything of her. She didn’t know why he made her feel so safe. Was it a gargoyle thing? At least she knew that part of the story was definitely true.

When the back of the tower came into view, Zori paused on the sidewalk. There were guards standing at the staff smoking area and at the other service doors.

“Shitttt, I think I’m going to have no choice but to get busted,” she said, looking at them. They were smoking and looked like they weren’t going to be leaving any time soon. She only had five minutes left to get back to the penthouse. Nina was understanding of her escapades, but she wouldn’t risk her job over it.

“I can get you to the penthouse balcony,” Vladik said, seeing her predicament.

“What? You mean, fly?” she squeaked. She hadn’t been back on the balcony since her mother had jumped, but she *really* didn’t want to be caught again.

“Yes, puppy. We are going to fly.” Vladik stepped back into the shadows and heat rolled off him before he shifted back into a gargoyle.

“Holy shit,” Zori whispered. She stepped closer so she could study the large wings coming from his back, the dark blue-black hue of his stone skin, the long tail that curled behind him. With his long black hair blowing in the cold breeze, he was a work of art.

“Trust me, puppy. I won’t drop you,” he said, his voice a growly version of his human one. He held out his hands to her. They were tipped with claws that had her swallowing hard.

“Okay,” she replied and stepped toward him. His huge hands lifted her easily, and she wrapped her hands around his neck. His smell of spice and winter forest was even stronger than usual. She touched his skin that was impossibly warm against hers. “I thought you’d be cold.”

“I am in my full stone form.” Vladik grinned, showing his fangs. “Now, hold on tight to me.”

Zori swallowed her yelp as he launched them up into the sky, his powerful wings beating. She clung to him, her eyes shut tight as the ground fell away, and they were gliding between buildings.

Vladik made a rumbling noise that sounded like laughter. “You can open your eyes, Zori.”

“No, no. Bad idea,” she said.

“You’d better open them because we are about to be over the balcony, and you need to see where I’m going to drop you,” Vladik replied, and she opened her eyes.

“What do you mean drop me?” she squeaked in terror.

“I can’t land on the balcony because of the wards Maxim has all over the building. I’m going to lower you onto it while I hover,” he explained.

The top of the tower was underneath them as they sailed around the penthouse. Zori kept her eyes on it, and not the drop beneath her.

The balcony came into view, warm lights illuminating it and the concrete barrier around it. It was higher than she remembered. Vladik moved over the balcony and began to

lower towards it. He lifted Zori down and dropped her to her boots.

“Message me, but be careful what you say. We don’t know if your phone is being monitored,” he warned her.

“Thanks for dinner,” she managed to call before he was disappearing into the night.

Zori went to the glass sliding door and was relieved when she found it unlocked. She stepped inside and scanned for any guards. There was no one, and there should be no need of them with Maxim away.

It would give you a good opportunity to snoop around, Zori thought as she stared at the door leading to Maxim’s office. It would have to wait until tomorrow at the earliest, or Nina would bust her.

Zori walked out into the hall and slipped in through her bedroom door just as the elevator binged.

There was a knock on the door before Nina came in. Zori smiled sheepishly at her.

“Thank God you’re back. I really didn’t want to have to tell on you, dear,” she said, looking her over. “Should I ask where you’ve been?”

“I went out for some dumplings, that’s all. I just needed the fresh air,” Zori replied. The air had been damn fresh high in the sky. She pulled off her jacket and rolled up the sleeve of her sweater.

“I never asked you what Maxim needs my blood for every night. Do you know?” she said.

Nina shrugged. “It goes to the lab. He’s monitoring for any daily changes. It’s a little above my pay grade. Why? Have you been feeling dizzy or anything? I can make sure you have more iron in your diet to help with it.”

“No, nothing like that. Just curious.” Zori watched her fill the vials and thought about what Vladik had said. Her blood had magic in it. It seemed like such bullshit, but she *had* flown

with a gargoyle that night. What she classified as bullshit was changing rapidly.

Nina finished with the vial and handed her the pills. Zori took them and hesitated.

“You okay?” Nina asked.

Zori got up and clutched her stomach. “I think something was wrong with the pelmeni. I’ll take them, don’t worry. Thanks for tonight, Nina.” She didn’t wait for a reply before hurrying to the bathroom and shutting the door behind her.

Zori sat on the edge of her bathtub and stared at the red and yellow pills in her hand.

At least stop taking the poison he’s feeding you. You will see for yourself it’s harming you, Vladik had said.

On one hand, it would be the quickest way to find out if what he said was true. On the other, if he was lying to her, she would get sick not taking them.

Zori chewed on her lip. She had never questioned the blood or the pills. She’d just taken Maxim at his word, even as she became an adult. The fear of losing her mind like Alisa had been enough to do whatever he asked.

But Alisa hadn’t been crazy, and Vladik said that her grandmother could prove it.

Her grandmother.

Zori couldn’t help feeling a brief flicker of hope in her chest. She’d given up on the thought of having any family out there at all.

Maxim had shut those kinds of questions down by the time she was ten years old. He had been her mother’s best friend. Zori had no family to look after her; only Maxim was there to take responsibility for her. She could’ve ended up in an orphanage without him, and he’d made sure she knew it.

If Vladik was telling the truth and Maxim had been using her that whole time, she *needed* to see it for herself.

Taking a deep breath, Zori said a prayer, hoped she wasn't making a huge mistake, and flushed the pills down the toilet.

For the first time since Zori could remember, she woke up without feeling foggy in her head. She stood under the shower, the water feeling amazing on her hypersensitive skin. She felt...*good*.

Zori had an appetite which she never had either. When her breakfast arrived, she all but stuffed toast into her mouth before starting on her eggs. Her eyes caught on the building outside. A gargoyle was watching over her, just as he promised. The thought made her feel soft all over.

Zori had been too caught up in trying to process everything Vladik had been saying the night before to kiss him goodnight. She suddenly really regretted that oversight.

What would his lips feel like when he was in his gargoyle form? His skin hadn't felt hard as stone when he'd carried her. She needed time to check him out properly when he was like that. For science. The thought made heat curl low in her stomach and her nipples harden.

Zori groaned. What was wrong with her that she had such a reaction to him? Was it because he was a gargoyle and she was, allegedly, a swan wife? Was it some kind of chemical reaction?

If the pills she'd been taking had smothered her magic and the swan wife side of her, what would she be like around Vladik when she wasn't on them? She shivered. Probably not the best thought to have when she had no way to find out. Not yet anyway.

Zori found her phone and pulled up their messages. He had warned her to be careful with them in case they were being monitored. Would Maxim really violate her privacy like that? She didn't even know how someone *would* monitor them, but she knew it would be better to never put a record of her asking Vladik about his gargoyle form.

Zori made more coffee and tried to think of where she could investigate first. She spared a glance out in the hall and saw that the cleaners were in the other side of the penthouse, which ruled out her snooping until that night.

She found her laptop and tried to find the myth that Vladik had told her about. She didn't find it, but she did find a lot of information on Morana, Chernobog, and Kitezh.

The latter was the real mystery. The city of Kitezh had been located on Lake Svetloyar, and there was a legend that the Golden Horde lead by Batu Khan had tried to attack it in 1237. When the scared citizens had prayed to God to save them, it had sunk into the lake like some Russian Atlantis. Now the hidden city was legend.

Maybe it wasn't hidden by God, but a whole bunch of priestesses of Morana? Zori couldn't rule it out. Magic *was* real. She had seen it for herself in the form of a massive, hunky gargoyle. All the research did was leave her with more questions than answers.



ZORI WAITED until Nina had visited her before she attempted to check the other side of the penthouse. She had held the tablets under her tongue until the nurse had left, then she'd spat them out into the toilet.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket, and she pulled it free to find a message from Vladik.

Vladik the Handsome: How are you feeling?

Zori: I took your advice and feel better than I have in a while.

Vladik the Handsome: That's good to hear, puppy.

Zori wanted to say more, but now she was feeling paranoid about her phone. This was the worst. She checked to make sure the hall was empty before tiptoeing her way down to Maxim's side of the penthouse. Her phone buzzed, and she glanced at the message.

Vladik the Handsome: It's a nice night if you have a balcony to look at the moon.

"What?" Zori didn't know what he was playing at. She risked turning on a light and went out to the balcony. On one of the chairs was a phone. She looked around, but there was no Vladik flying about.

Zori picked up the phone and found another picture of him had been set as a background. A message was waiting for her.

Vladik the Handsome: Thought you might need this, seeing how we can't trust your other one.

Zori: I've wanted to message you all day but have been too nervous to. I saw you hanging out on the building opposite. Do you do that often?

Vladik the Handsome: Irina has commanded I keep an eye on you. Not a hard task, especially when you walk about in your lingerie.

Zori: Good to know I need to start closing my curtains.

Zori was smothering an embarrassed laugh when Vladik sent her back sad face emojis. She stood in front of the door to Maxim's office and tried not to feel like a naughty four-year-old. She had always been forbidden from going into it, and it was another boundary she'd never tried testing as she got older.

Zori needed answers one way or another. She opened the door and switched on the light. It was obsessively neat, masculine with the decor of leather and dark woods, and there was a lingering smell of Maxim's expensive cologne in the air.

Zori studied the books on the shelves that varied from Greek philosophy to quantum physics. There was an

impressionist, almost abstract oil painting of a lake surrounded by forest on the wall behind the desk. Zori loved art, and she went for a closer look. The reflection in the water was strange, like it didn't match the forest. It took her a moment to realize why. The artist had painted the blurred lines of a sunken city.

“Kitezh,” she said in awe. Something beeped, activated by voice, and the picture swung back. A glass trophy case had been hidden behind the painting and inside was a cape of white and gold feathers. It was placed on a mannequin bust of a woman and at the base were two large stone claws.

“Oh, my God.” Zori’s stomach plummeted to her feet, and she put her hands over her mouth to stop from screaming.

Alisa had been talking about her white and gold feathers just before she’d leaped off the balcony.

Zori’s new phone buzzed, making her jump and tear her eyes away from the cape.

Vladik the Handsome: What’s happened? Are you hurt? What is wrong?

Zori: I found something.

She took a photo of the cape before closing the painting over the top of it, unable to look at it anymore. She hurried out through the penthouse and into her rooms. She made it to the sink in the kitchen before she vomited up her dinner.

How could this be happening? What had Maxim done to her mother to make her jump that night?

Zori washed her face and hands before rinsing out the sink. With shaking hands, she sent the photo to Vladik. The phone rang a second later.

“Are you okay, puppy?” he asked.

Zori sniffled. “Not even a little bit. He has it like a trophy! Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s a sick fuck, that’s why. I’m so sorry you found it that way.”

“There were claws in the case too. They looked like yours,” she said, wiping at her cheeks.

Vladik’s growl was low and threatening. “They might have belonged to your father or another gargoyle he’s killed.” He didn’t have to mention his brother; they were both thinking about it. Zori knew it was too late for her mother, but maybe she could help Misha.

“How can I help you get into the building?” she asked, anger now replacing her tears. She needed to know the full extent of what Maxim was doing, even if it broke her heart along the way. If he was hurting others like Alisa, she needed to stop him.

“Are you sure you want to get further involved in this, Zoria? It’s not going to get any better, only bloodier,” Vladik warned her.

“I have to know the truth about my mother. All of it.” Zori went to the wall of windows. Sure enough, Vladik was standing on the roof where he usually crouched as a gargoyle. She placed a hand on the cold glass. “If Misha is still alive, I have to help him. I lost my mother because of what Maxim did to her. I don’t want you to lose your brother too.”

Vladik lifted his hand in acknowledgement. “If we do this, we do it together, and you don’t take any risks that could get you hurt. I’m not going to lose either of you because of Maxim.”

“Because you’re sworn to protect swan wives?” she asked, hating how small her voice sounded.

“Not just that. We have something more between us, and you know it. I’m not going to give up on you. I won’t leave you in the hands of Maxim for any longer than what we need to. Understand?”

“Yes.” Zori stared at his silhouette, an ache of longing spreading through her. “I wish I could hug you right now.”

“I wish you could too, but I’m right here. You’re not going to go through this alone, Zoria. I promise,” Vladik replied.

Zori wrapped an arm around herself, trying to feel anything but numb. “Okay, what do we need to do first?”

There was a thoughtful pause on the other end of the line. “I could really do with a map of the interior of the building.”

“I should be able to manage that. There are evacuation fire routes on the floors. I’m sure there’s something like a map for the employees,” Zori replied.

“Only if you can get them easily. I don’t want you to put yourself at risk. We still haven’t had a proper date yet,” Vladik said, his tone turning playful.

Zori smiled, unable to help the heat in her cheeks. “Last night *was* a second date, I’m sure that means you owe me a dick pic. Pretty certain that was the deal.”

“That wasn’t a real date,” he replied, his voice dropping deeper. “You need to *earn* the dick pic, sweet puppy.”

Zori’s lady parts clenched, completely onboard. “Oh? And how am I meant to do that from way over here?”

“You can start by trying to eat something to make up for what you have thrown up. You’re going to need your strength in the coming days.”

Zori sighed dramatically. “Here I thought it was going to be something fun and sexy.”

“Fun and sexy can happen later. You need to take care of yourself until I can do it for you.”

“Alas, in more ways than one,” Zori replied. Vladik growled something low. “Sorry, I don’t speak gargoyle.”

“When you touch yourself tonight, think of me,” he purred, turning her insides liquid. “And then tell me all about it tomorrow.”

Zori hummed, unable to help being a brat. “No, I think I’ll make you earn it. You can start taking care of yourself and eat something.”

“Oh, when I get my claws on you again, I’ll be eating something all right,” Vladik snarled, making goosebumps rise

on her skin. The thought of his claws digging into her soft thighs made her whole body turn hot. Zori laughed, the flirting making the heaviness in her ease a little.

“I’ll see what I can do about that map tomorrow, Iron Heart,” she said and blew him a kiss before hanging up.

Despite the teasing, Zori still went to the fridge to see what snacks were in there. She was sickened by Maxim’s trophies, but Vladik was right. She needed to be strong to get through whatever dark, bloody rabbit hole she was about to fall down next.

Zori knew she would raise suspicion if she changed up her routine too much, so she studied, did her workout in the gym, and played her heavy metal too loud as per usual.

She had a rough night trying to sleep, and in the end, she really had taken matters into her own hands. She had come with Vladik's name on her lips, and the burning need for him grew even more. She had never had a reaction to anyone like him before.

Maybe it was a magic swan wives and gargoyles thing? She wished she knew more about the myth, but there was nothing she could find about it.

Her grandmother would know. She was the high priestess after all.

Zori tried to imagine what she would be like. Would she like Zori? She hadn't had any women around her that weren't nurses and had no idea how to act around them.

Don't worry about it now, she scolded herself. She had bigger things to think about—how to get a map of the building for starters. Luckily, a visit from Anton gave her the perfect idea.

“Maxim asked me to look in on you and make sure you're settling in okay,” he said, staring about the apartment.

“That's nice of him.” Zori forced herself to smile and not think of the cape of feathers in his office. “I have been having bad dreams about the building burning down. I was wondering

if there's an evacuation plan of the tower. It might help me feel a bit safer and put my mind at ease if I know how to get out."

Anton chuckled. "I think you already know how to get out, and the security would make you a priority if that happened. If it will help you sleep better while being here, then I'll email you one."

"Thank you so much. I thought I'd be having nightmares about my mother while we were here, not fires. Did you ever meet her?" she asked, making her eyes go wide with innocence. She couldn't remember a time when Anton hadn't been around.

Anton shook his head. "Sorry, Zoria, I didn't. I know Maxim was very upset over her loss and fired my predecessor over it."

"It's a shame. Sometimes I wish I knew more about her, that's all," she replied with a shrug. It wasn't a lie.

"Maxim knew her best. Maybe ask him when he comes home. I know he wants to take you out and spend some quality time with you." Anton patted her on the shoulder. "I'll send you through the fire plan, okay? No more bad dreams."

"Thanks, Anton. I appreciate it," she said, giving him her biggest smile. She was sure Vladik would appreciate it as well.

After Anton had left, Zori noticed that her gargoyle was back on the building opposite her.

Hello, handsome, Zori thought, grinning at him.

Hey back. Vladik's voice rolled through her mind, making her jump. ***Don't be frightened, Zori. That poison you were taking must be out of your system enough to allow me to reach you telepathically.***

That could be dangerous. I don't know if I want you knowing my thoughts, she replied, hoping she was doing it right.

I'll always respect your privacy. It might be a good thing for me to be able to talk to you secretly and be able to find you quickly.

Zori would have to be really careful with her dirty thoughts about him going forward, that was for sure. *If I can talk to you like this, that means I must have some magic, right? Like my mother?*

Of course. I bet you must be feeling a lot better not taking the pills.

I am. I've been a lot clearer, especially in the morning. Last night I had some trouble sleeping, but I'm sure that had nothing to do with the pills and everything to do with those trophies.

You're not going to go through this alone. The sooner I can get you to Irina, the better. I don't know what will happen with your swan side either because you never grew your cape.

Zori's stomach flipped. She hadn't thought about that at all. She pushed down her anxiety. She needed to focus.

I convinced Anton to email me an evacuation plan of the tower. I'll send you a photo of it when it comes through, and we can start planning on how to get you in.

I'm so proud of you, my clever girl. Humor and affection filled Zori, making her gasp. She could feel him as well as hear him? What the hell? Was that normal?

No, it's not normal. I told you; we have something special going on. That you can sense when I push my emotions to you proves it. Don't let it scare you, Zori. I'll be careful not to push or pry, but you should know, I dream about you every night. In case you wake up and feel it.

Zori's curiosity prickled. *What kind of dreams? The sexy kind?*

Again, that deep humor rushed through the connection. ***Yes, puppy. The sexy kind. I can't stop thinking about what would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted in the club.***

I think we both know what would have happened, she replied, imagining his mouth on her nipple, sucking her piercing.

Zoria. Be careful with those thoughts of yours. I'm male after all, he growled.

Zori's naughty side rose up, needing to tease. *I know. I felt how very male you are when I was pressed up against the club wall. I did think of you last night, just in case you wanted to know.*

Vladik's hot, burning lust poured through the connection, making her clamp her thighs together. Oh, *fuck*. She stumbled to her bedroom and locked the door.

I told you to be careful, puppy. His voice rasped in her mind. ***Did you just go and hide in your bedroom because you're going to be a dirty girl and touch yourself?***

Yes, she admitted, shimmying out of her tights. She didn't know why Vladik calling her out somehow made it hotter. She lay down on her bed and slid her hand down her lace panties. Fuck, she was soaking wet already.

I bet you are. You were so ready and eager at the club for me. That sweet pussy of yours knows it needs only what I can give it, Vladik replied, sending more of his own arousal for her over their connection. He craved her as much as she craved him, desperately wanted it to be his fingers moving over her.

Fuck, this is crazy, she said, her other hand moving to squeeze her breast.

Who cares if it is? Circle those fingers over your tender little clit for me, he replied, and Zori obeyed him, sending a jolt through her. ***That's a good, dirty girl. I can't wait to get my mouth on you. Taste the delicious wet heat of you. I could smell how sweet it was at the club. I knew how badly you wanted to get me to fill that cunt of yours.***

"Fuck," Zori sobbed and fumbled for the vibrator in her bedside table. She needed to have something inside of her, even if it wasn't him. She was wet enough that she didn't need any lube. She ran the soft head of it over her wet clit, her back arching.

Tell me what you are doing, dirty girl. I can feel how much you like it, Vladik growled, making her moan.

I'm using my vibrator, she replied, too caught up to feel embarrassed about any of it. I'm moving it in circles over my clit, imagining it's you.

Vladik's response hit her in a wave of frustration and desire so strong, she almost dropped her toy. ***Fuck, puppy. Put it inside of you. I can feel your need for it.***

Zori pressed the vibrator inside of her, her hips shifting and moving to take it all in. Her pussy clenched around it, knowing it wasn't the dick she really wanted but having to settle. She rolled onto her stomach, her hips thrusting down harder, chasing her orgasm.

You're getting so close. I bet you look like a fucking dream right now, cheeks all flushed and pretty ass bouncing in the air.

Zori's body was getting tighter and tighter as her orgasm built. If this was what it felt like to lose her fucking mind, she didn't want it to stop.

Come for me, dirty girl. I want to feel how good it is for you. I want to know it's my voice in your head when you do.

"Vladik," she moaned, and her body exploded, her vision blurring and mind falling offline as the orgasm rocked her in wave upon wave. She struggled to breathe. It was too much for her to process. She fumbled to remove the vibrator and switch it off, her body too hypersensitive to keep going.

Fucking hell, Zoria. Vladik's voice was pure awe. ***Look what you made me do, untouched.***

The spare phone buzzed in the pocket of her tights, and she shifted to find it. She clicked open the message from Vladik. He was holding the biggest, prettiest dick she had ever seen, smeared in come. Zori's whole body tightened with lust and pride that she had made him do that.

You're welcome for the orgasm. She sent him a picture of her own dreamy, post-orgasm smile.

Now how am I going to concentrate on breaking into that building?

Zori laughed softly. *Think about the prize waiting for you in the penthouse. That is if a big, strong gargoyle like you can get to it.*

You do know how to motivate a male. I need to be in my own head to plan. Be good and send me that map so I can get to work at once.

Zori felt the connection to him break off, and her mind was her own again. She stared in wonder at the ceiling. “Damn, magic *is* real, all right.”

She suddenly couldn't wait to find out what happened next.

Zori didn't have to wait long before she found out. The next day she woke with her skin itchy after tearing at it in her sleep.

What the fuck is happening to me? The only change Zori had made was to stop taking her meds. Was she having some kind of reaction? She stumbled into the bathroom and switched on the light. The skin on her arms was covered in raised slim bumps.

Zori swallowed down her growing panic and horror as she checked her shoulders and back. She was covered in them all over.

Zori went back in her room and found the burner phone. She took a few photos and sent them to Vladik, along with a *'Please help, I'm freaking out'* message. It was early, but she hoped he would still get them. She sat on the edge of the bed, her knee starting to bounce up and down.

Seconds later, the phone started to ring, and she hurried to answer it.

"Hey, Zori, don't freak out," a sleepy Vladik said.

"What is it? Am I dying?" she demanded, keeping her voice to a whisper in case anyone could overhear her.

"You're not dying. You are growing your cape. I didn't think it would happen so soon. It's what every teenage girl in Kitezhd goes through the first time they get their feathers. It's a

good thing. It means your magic is strong,” he replied. That thought didn’t soothe her in the slightest.

“I look hideous. There’s none on my face and neck yet, but the bumps are *everywhere*,” Zori complained.

“You’re not hideous. It’s natural for your body to be doing this. It’s good that it’s wintertime, so no one will question why you’re so covered up.” There was a rustling of blankets. “If you want, I can give this number to Irina, and she can tell you what to expect.”

“Maybe she can message me? I don’t know if I’m ready to actually talk to her. I feel like I need to meet her first. What if she hates me?” Zori laughed nervously. She didn’t know why she was voicing the concern to Vladik either. She felt like she could tell him anything, and he wouldn’t judge her over it.

“I can ask her to text you. Irina can be a lot. She is the high priestess after all. When I told her you were alive, it was the first time I ever heard her cry. That’s how relieved she is to know you’re still alive,” Vladik said, his rough voice soothing her nerves. “She could never hate you.”

It was still dark outside, and in the gloom, Zori found it a lot easier to talk about what she was really afraid of.

“I don’t know how I’m going to handle living on the outside. I’ve been shut in my entire life. I don’t know how to drive or how to work a real job.” Zori tucked her knees to her chest. “I have no idea what I’m going to do, Vladik.”

“You will find your way. Irina will probably want to fuss and smother you for a while. Let her get to know you.”

“I don’t know how I will handle that either. I’ve been smothered a lot by Maxim, and I think once the numbness wears off, I’m going to be raging.”

“Then you will rage. I will look after you, whatever you’re going through,” Vladik promised.

Zori huffed out a small laugh. “You’re intense, you know that? Most guys wouldn’t be signing up for that after knowing a girl for only a week.”

“They clearly haven’t met the right girl,” Vladik replied in his matter-of-fact way. “I’ve told you once, and I don’t care if I need to say it a million more times until you believe it. You’re not alone anymore, Zoria. Whatever happens next, we are going to be in it together. I’ll get you home safe.”

Zori’s throat clogged with emotion. It was not like Maxim hadn’t given her whatever she asked for. She had a privileged life, but there was something in the way Vladik said he’d take care of her. It sounded like warmth and comfort. Two things she’d never gotten from Maxim and had so desperately needed. She’d learned to hide it, but that yearning for connection was always there.

“Did you find a way into the tower with those plans I sent?” she asked, needing to change the subject before she started to cry her lonely heart out.

“I think so. I’m going to get Kaspian to help out. He’s another gargoyle here in Moscow. I’ve also received a talisman from your grandmother that will portal people to Kitez. Something else in the arsenal,” Vladik said, though his voice sounded strained. “If she had her way, I’d scoop you off the balcony this minute. I can’t say I’m not tempted to do it.”

Zori smiled. “Yeah, but if you do that, you will never know what happened to Misha, and I will never forgive myself.”

“You don’t even know him, and you’re risking your own happiness for him.”

“I don’t know him, but I know *you*. At least enough to know that this is the right thing to do. I doubt Maxim is treating Misha as well as me. I am...his pet.” It hurt Zori to say it, but she knew it was true. She’d had the same thought herself more than once, and yet knowing the truth of it was still a kick in the guts. “You really were right about that. I’m a pretty little doll that he keeps around for his own purposes. I’ll be okay playing that role for a while longer.”

“You’re no one’s fucking pet. No matter what happens, you’re not staying in his hands.”

Zori could hear Vladik getting out of bed, and she wondered how he would look, sleepy and rumpled. Damn fucking fine as usual.

“Sorry for waking you up,” she said.

“Don’t be. You can message me any time, Zori. My body needs some coffee because I’m not going to get back to sleep,” Vladik replied with a yawn. “Tell me about something that you like.”

“Art history. Any history really. I’m learning Ancient Greek at the moment. I like how precise the language is and how the letters look,” Zori said, a smile creeping into her voice.

Vladik chuckled. “Sounds like an unusual way to have fun.”

“You should have seen me in my hieroglyphics phase. I’m still trying to convince Maxim to take me to Egypt,” she replied, laughing with him.

“I’ll take you if you want to go. I’ve always wanted to see the Sphinx. There are some gargoyles that believe they were made by Isis like Morana made us,” he said, and Zori’s smile grew even wider.

“Really? I suppose it’s as good a theory as any. The sphinxes do act as protectors too. Could you imagine if there’re shapeshifting sphinxes out there? That would be so cool.”

Vladik laughed. “Oh boy, you are going to love Aleksandr.”

“Who’s Aleksandr?”

“He’s the leader of the gargoyles. He’s the one who gets all excited about there being other creatures like us in different parts of the world. He goes one step deeper into speculating if the myth of Morana isn’t real, we were still created by *something* to be protectors. Massive nerd.”

Zori could hear the genuine affection in his voice. “How does my high priestess grandmother take his theories?”

“She calls him a heretic, but in a fond way. She leads the swan wives the way he leads the gargoyles. They aren’t together, but they are a team. They look after us all. Kids belong to the clan, not just their parents, so the clan raises them,” Vladik explained.

The lump was back in Zori’s throat. “It sounds like a nice place to grow up.”

“It was. I’m sure the clan is going to make up for the lost time with you. You’re proof that the women who were taken by Chernobog’s priests weren’t just killed straight away. You are...hope,” he said, his voice going soft again. “If you lived, maybe there would be traces of the others remaining as well.”

Zori got up off the carpet and went to her dresser. “If that’s the case, answers will be in Maxim’s office. I’m going to get dressed and go and look today. I can’t go back to Kitezsh with nothing to offer.”

“Zori, you don’t need to offer anyone anything to have a place there. They are your people, your family,” he growled.

“Yeah, you might say that, but I’m not going to believe until I see it. It still doesn’t change the fact that we have another week before Maxim comes back. This is our only chance to get in that office. I’m not going to pass it up because my orphan ass has heart eyes over the idea of having a real family,” Zori snapped. She flinched, hating just how bitter she sounded. “Um...sorry.”

Vladik let out a sigh. “I can’t say anything to stop you, so maybe just be careful? I don’t want the guards getting suspicious of you.”

“I won’t. Besides, I might be a shut-in, but I’m a pro at bluffing my way out of situations. I also need something to stop me from freaking out because in less than a week I’ve not only found out my guardian is a liar, but magic is also real, gargoyles exist, and now I’m growing feathers,” Zori said, voice cracking a little. She sounded fucking insane.

“You’re doing amazing to take in so much so quickly. Please don’t be so hard on yourself,” Vladik replied, his tone

going soft again. “What you’re doing is very brave, Zoria, and any information you do find will be useful.”

Zori didn’t feel brave. She felt like a dumb kid in over her head. “I’ll send you photos of anything I find. And Vladik?”

“Yeah, puppy?”

“Thank you for the chat. It’s calmed me down a bit, and I appreciate you picking up the phone,” Zori said, her heart skipping.

“Any time. I’ll get Irina to message you about the feathers thing. She’ll know what to do.”

They rang, off and Zori headed for the shower.

A few years ago, she went through an intense true crime investigation phase that made her do a course in criminology. Now, she had her own sleuthing to do, and she would finally get to put all those skills to the test.

Unfortunately, Zori's window of opportunity didn't arrive until late afternoon. She spent the morning with the personal trainer who weighed and measured her. It was always embarrassing no matter how big or small she was.

What use would Maxim have for that data anyway? She was starting to feel like an idiot for never questioning things more.

Zori had learned it was easier to just go with the flow. She grew up never wanting Maxim to be mad at her, so she didn't fight for independence. She should have. She just didn't know anything else was waiting for her out there.

Now, she had a grandmother, and Vladik was... She didn't know how to classify him just yet. Friend with telepathic sex benefits? Protector and flirt? Gargoyle with the epic dick? She knew she would have to wait for clarity until after she was out of the tower.

As Vladik had promised, he'd given Zori's burner phone number to Irina. Her grandmother had sent a short text: *I'm looking forward to meeting you, Zoria. Rub aloe vera on the feathers to stop them from itching. Try not to scratch or it will tear them free before they are ready.*

Zori thanked her and left it at that. She didn't want to push her luck or try and build a rapport with Irina before they met. It didn't feel right, no matter what Vladik said about her.

Zori walked down the hall to Maxim's side of the penthouse as casually as possible. As if she was meant to be

there, about to violate his privacy.

She shouldn't be giving a shit about it, not after finding the cape. It was still hard to fight the conditioning she'd had her entire life. Never touch Maxim's stuff was a number one rule.

Zori slipped into his office and shut the door. Nerves clenched her stomach, but she forced herself to go to his wall of black leather notebooks. It wasn't just about her anymore. Or Alisa. It was about Misha and the other swan wives that still could be out there.

Or locked somewhere else in the tower. It was a troublesome thought.

The notebooks were arranged in date order. Zori had never seen Maxim without one, as if he was always keeping notes on every aspect of his life. He was a brilliant scientist, and his mind never stopped. He'd always said that the notebooks helped keep his thoughts in order. He'd never bothered to hide them either. He had trained Zori to respect his privacy to the point she feared to touch anything that was his.

Zori ran her finger along the notebooks and decided to start with the most recent one. She flipped through the pages of Maxim's barely legible scrawl. A photo of a man caught her attention. He looked like he'd had the shit beaten out of him. There was a note underneath the photo: *Subject four still refuses to shift into his gargoyle form. The moment he does, he will be harvested, and he knows it. I should kill him, but I have learned patience over the years. I want all of him in his natural and most magical form. If we are to ever find a bioweapon solution for these monsters, it will be held in their own bodies.*

"Oh, my God." Zori put the notebook down and started taking photos. She would collect shots, as many as she could, before she sent them to Vladik. She shut the book and began searching back the dates to when her mother was alive.

Zori found the book covering the time of Alisa's suicide. She scanned the dates until she found what she was looking for. There was no photo, only a note: *Subject two has killed herself. The swan wives have a much more delicate disposition*

to treatment than gargoyles. Perhaps she was too old, and her mind couldn't take being cut off from her magic? It doesn't matter. There was enough of her left to harvest and prove useful. The daughter shows a lot more promise. Perhaps her young age will make her malleable and easier to treat. She can be trained, and she can't miss what she has never had.

Zori took photos, her eyes blurring with tears. Her chest was too tight. This was a terrible mistake. Maybe she had been better off not knowing any of this? Vladik had tried to warn her what she would find. A part of her had wanted him to be wrong.

She found pages of strange symbols and signals and took photos of them too. She had no idea what any of it meant, but Vladik or Irina might.

Zori, can you hear me? Vladik's voice filled her mind, sounding panicked.

I'm here. What's wrong?

You're about to have company. I didn't want to risk calling you in case they heard it. Anton is heading your way. Get out of there!

Zori quickly shut the book and stuffed it back into the bookshelf. Someone opened the penthouse door. There was no time to get away, so she dived under Maxim's desk and pulled the chair in as much as she could.

"Yes, boss, I'm checking now. Don't worry, she won't be escaping again," Anton said.

"She better not," Maxim replied, the volume on the phone loud enough for Zori to hear. "I don't want to have to remind you what's at stake here. She is the best subject we still have, and her blood is the gift that keeps on giving. I saw Viktor's pet while I've been here, and she's had another suicide attempt. She is high maintenance and so dramatic. Thank the dark god I trained mine better. We need to keep Zoria happy and pampered."

"I understand, Maxim. She snuck out because she is lonely, I think. Spend some time with her, and she'll stay

loyal. Even with her adventures outside, she knows where her home is,” Anton replied. He turned the light in the office off and shut the door.

“I’m telling you, Anton. The younger the better. That’s the answer,” Maxim’s voice grew more distant. “I’ll be coming home early. I don’t like being away from the tower for so long...”

Zori covered her mouth to stop herself from breathing too heavily. Tears were running down her cheeks. She had to move.

Zori? Anton has gone into the gym. Now’s your chance to run, Vladik said, his voice lighting a fire under her. Zori scrambled from under the desk and out of the office. She opened the main penthouse door and checked the hall. She could hear Anton still in the gym and sauna area, so she bolted back to her rooms.

He’s coming, Zori!

Okay, get out of my head! I have an idea. She felt him leave without question. She was never going to get used to that. She went into her bedroom, rumbled the blankets and her hair.

“Zoria? Are you in here?” Anton called.

Zori counted to three and tried to steady her heartbeat. She opened her bedroom door and rubbed at her eyes to explain how red they were.

“Anton? Sorry, I fell asleep after training. What’s wrong?” she asked.

Anton smiled at her. “I have good news, but you need to keep a secret, okay?”

Zori forced herself to smile back. Everything was fine. “A secret? Should you be telling me this at all?”

“Probably not. I just want to make sure you don’t try running away again. Maxim is coming home the day after tomorrow. He’s finished up his work early, so he can spend

some extra time with you before his next conference,” Anton replied.

“That’s great,” Zori said, her smile cracking even wider. “It will be so good to have him home again.”

“I know you’ve been lonely without him. He’s also asked me to organize a few days of fun tourist things for you both. There’s also a very pretty dress headed your way for the ballet,” Anton added with a wink.

We need to keep Zoria happy and pampered.

“That sounds... Wow, that’s wonderful.” Zori forced herself to be happy about it. “It would be great to see the ballet.”

“That was my suggestion. All ladies love the ballet,” he replied before heading back to the door. “Get some rest. You have a lot of fun in your future, little one.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Anton. I appreciate it,” Zori said, giving him a small wave. As soon as the door closed, Zori went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She couldn’t fall apart. Not yet. She was breaking inside.

Zori...are you okay? I can feel your distress.

The parking area is the easiest way to get in the building, Zori told him, her mind racing. There are two staff rooms—one for men, one for women. They have large supply cupboards that have new scrubs for people to put on as soon as they enter the facility. There are huge, dirty laundry carts that you might be able to use.

Zori, please stop. You’re babbling. Tell me what has got you so spooked, puppy.

You have to get Misha out tomorrow night. Maxim is coming home early, and it’s your last chance to get him. Zori sent all the photos of what she had discovered in Maxim’s office. I’m sorry that’s all I could get before Anton turned up. Misha must still be alive.

We need to get you out of there too. You shouldn’t have to be there a second longer.

I'll be okay. Maxim is determined to keep me happy and pampered. Zori quickly told him everything else she'd overhead. The anger that poured through the connection left her dizzy.

I will get Misha out tomorrow, and then I'm coming for you. Wherever Maxim takes you, I will follow. I won't stop until you're free.

Zori was crying again and couldn't stop. She hadn't been scared of Maxim before, but she was now. She didn't know the man from the journals at all. She had no idea what he was capable of.

Zori's hands began to burn, the sensation travelling up her arms. She pulled back her long sleeves. The ridges on her skin were even higher. How was she meant to hide them from Maxim? What if he wanted her to wear one of the dresses he'd bought for her? They all showed enough skin that there would be no way to hide the bumps. He would know straight away she'd stopped taking the tablets.

The thought of Misha's busted face flashed in her mind. Would he do that to her for misbehaving? When she stopped being useful to him, would she be harvested for her parts like her mother's dead body had been?

"One more night, Zori. That's all you have to deal with," she told herself. She would find a way out, with or without Vladik's help.

Vladik was losing his goddamn mind. He paced his loft, his tail whacking irritably on the floorboards. He only had to wait until midnight, and then he was going to get his brother out of that fucking tower. He'd spent the last day going over his plans, checking and re-checking. Zori had helped, telling him exactly how she had gotten out and what to expect when entering the building.

Vladik only had to get one more piece, and that was the security cards off one of the guards. He knew their schedules from watching the building and knew the one that always walked home from work. He would be easy to pick off in the darkness.

Vladik pulled up the picture of his brother again. His hair and beard were ragged and long from his imprisonment, but there was no mistaking it was Misha. He had aged prematurely, his dark hair streaked with silver.

If Maxim's notes were to be believed, Misha had been holding out from shifting into his true gargoyle form. For fucking *years*. They wouldn't need to try and beat his brother to make him suffer. Not shifting for a few days was a living hell. Misha would be all but dead inside by now.

I'm coming, brother. I'm coming.

Vladik pulled the teleportation charm from its velvet bag. It was a silver pendant carved with sigils. It had arrived unexpectedly on his dining table with a note on how to use it.

It was meant for Zoria, but after seeing the state Misha was in, Vladik knew he'd be using it to get him the fuck out of there.

As horrible as it was, Zori was right. She was a pampered pet to Maxim. There would be other opportunities to get her out. Misha was in no condition to fight or to fly back to Kitez.

There was a knock on the heavy metal door, and Vladik shifted back to his human form before opening it. Kaspian took one look at him and lifted bags of takeout.

"You look like shit. You need to eat something if you're going to be at your best tonight," the big gargoyle said. "Do you have everything ready?"

"I just need a security pass," Vladik replied, leading Kaspian through to the kitchen. "Maybe you should think of coming back to Kitez for a bit too. Maxim is going to go nuts after the break-in."

"You mean *if* it's successful. Don't scowl. You know it's a possibility. No one who's gone into that place has ever come out again," Kaspian said. He'd brought Chinese food from a place nearby, and Vladik's stomach grumbled as he opened a box of noodles.

"No one who has gone into the tower has had inside information before," he pointed out.

Kaspian grinned. "And how is our princess?"

My princess, the beast growled inside Vladik.

"Zori is scared but holding it together. I think a part of her hoped I was lying about Maxim. His journals and what she overheard have proven he doesn't really give a shit about her. She's focused on helping me right now and not her own feelings. I can feel her sadness," Vladik replied.

He was worried about her. He could feel that she was holding back in their telepathy as well. He could also feel just how much her magic was growing. She was already a natural with telepathy, and he wondered what else she'd be able to do with some training.

“She sounds like a brave girl. I can’t wait to meet the woman who has old Iron Heart tied up in knots,” Kaspian chuckled.

Vladik rolled his eyes. “Fuck you. I’m going to keep her away from the likes of you as long as possible.”

“You know you’re putting her at risk by not grabbing her the way Irina ordered.”

“I know, but she won’t have it any other way. She wants to help, and she’s right. Maxim might be a fucking pig, but he’s not torturing her. She’s safe if she continues to play his game.” Vladik rubbed at the pain and longing that was building in his chest. “I’m not going to leave her in that place. I wanted to get her the same time I got Misha, but he’s too busted and broken. He’s going to need to be carried out of there.”

Vladik didn’t mention using the portaling talisman. He would get Misha out of the building wards, and then use it to send him home.

Depending on how that went, Vladik planned to fly up to Zori’s balcony and pluck her clean off it. He didn’t want to voice any of it aloud because Kaspian was right—people who went into the tower never came out again.

Kaspian patted him on the shoulder. “I know you have some other shit going on that you’re not saying, but I’ll have your back no matter what.”

“I want you to have plausible deniability if it all goes to shit,” Vladik replied.

“I know, and that’s why I like you.” Kaspian grinned wolfishly. “Besides, if you die, I get to be the one to rescue the princess from her tower.”

“Just as long as someone does,” Vladik murmured. As much as he wanted Zori, if he failed, he needed to know that she wouldn’t be left in Maxim’s hands. Kaspian was right. Now that Irina knew her granddaughter was involved, she wouldn’t stop until Zori was safe.

“If you really want to help, I could use your van,” Vladik said. It was unmarked and black like so many of the service

vans in the city.

“You tell me when and where,” Kaspian said and gestured with his chopsticks. “Now, eat your noodles.”

Vladik laughed and finished eating. He needed to focus. He had a long fucking night ahead of him.



THE GUARD DIDN'T EVEN GET a chance to put up a fight. Vladik dropped on him from above, driving the man to the ground and knocking him out in one swift, deadly move. He dragged the unconscious body behind a dumpster before pulling out his bundle of key cards and security passes.

They both had dark hair and beards, and a quick flash might be enough to satisfy anyone too curious. Vladik found the guard's uniform in the bag he was carrying and quickly put it on. It wasn't a perfect fit, but with Vladik's coat over the top of them, hopefully no one would notice. It only had to get him through the doors. He took the man's beanie and pulled it down over his long hair.

Vladik could sense Kaspian already in place a few streets away. The gargoyle was determined not to stay out of it, and Vladik hoped he wouldn't have to put him in danger unnecessarily.

Vladik moved towards the tower, keeping his stride confident. He swiped the card at the gate leading into the smoking entrance. Zori had claimed it was the least guarded way in, and he believed her. She had escaped the tower twice without breaking a sweat.

Vladik strode through the empty smoking area and into the parking lot. There was no one around this late; the night shift workers had clocked on a few hours beforehand.

Vladik knew that the doors that had the least powerful protection wards were the staff entrances. They needed to let people in after all. Vladik swiped the lock on the 'Staff Only' entrance, and gritting his teeth, he pushed his way through the

magic. It stung for a moment and was over as soon as he got into the hall. He was in the frying pan now. He just needed to keep his cool a little longer, so he didn't end up in the fire.

Vladik took a packet of scrubs from the supply closet and went into the men's locker rooms. Two other men were showering, but they didn't look his way. Vladik went into one of the toilet cubicles and changed into the scrubs, placing the uniform into the plastic packaging. He might still need it, so he tucked it into the waistband of his pants and hoped the baggy scrubs shirt would hide the strange bulk. He tied his hair back and put on a cap and mask before stepping out into the main halls.

The place felt like a hospital. The florescent lights were bright enough to make his eyes burn, and his sensitive gargoyle nose was going to be smelling bleach for days.

Vladik had studied the map of the building until it was imprinted in his brain. He walked to the far end of the floor to the laundry room and took an empty hamper cart that was used for collections. He put the guard's uniform into one of the side pockets and pushed the cart out into the corridor.

Vladik didn't know if Misha was going to be able to walk or not and would need something to hide him in. It had been another of Zori's brilliant ideas. Maxim's manipulation of her had been so good that he was lucky Zori had never thought to leave him permanently. She had a good mind for escape plans, that was for sure.

Vladik moved to the elevator and waited. Zori had told him that the main labs were held on levels two and three. It was the best place to start.

Vladik kept his eyes down as the elevator opened and three people dressed in scrubs stepped out.

"I just knew it was going to be a long night with the medication change. I don't know why we are bothering keeping that monster alive. Maxim should put it down for everyone's sake," one woman grumbled to another.

"Hey, laundry guy," the man called, and Vladik looked up.

“Yes, sir?”

“There’s a mess in lab two, level three. Can you grab the soiled linens and call a cleaning crew? I don’t want to have to smell blood and vomit for the rest of my shift,” he ordered.

“Sure thing, boss. How long do we have?” Vladik asked, wanting to punch the man in the throat.

“I have a thirty-minute break, so just get it done. Don’t worry about the patient. He’s too fucked up to cause you any problems,” he replied.

“Not a problem. Consider it done,” Vladik said, going into the elevator and pressing the button for the third floor. He didn’t know how many *monsters* Maxim could have in the building. He prayed like fuck to Morana that it was the one he was looking for.

Vladik took deep breaths to calm himself down. He would love nothing more than to go on a rampage and break everything and everyone that had ever thought it was okay to treat his family like science experiments.

The elevator doors opened, and Vladik kept his head down and pushed his cart. Everyone treated cleaning people like they were invisible, and that was going to work in his favor. He didn’t look at the people working at computers or staring under microscopes. He was there to get laundry.

There was a set of glass doors that had white blocky letters stuck to the front, announcing it as Lab Two.

“Thank Chernobog, you’re here. It’s a fucking stink in there,” a nurse said as Vladik passed him.

“Not a problem. Here to help,” he replied. He swiped his card, and the red light beeped. Fuck. “Goddamn it, not again. Can you open the doors for me? My stupid card has been glitching all night.”

“I got you. Mine was playing up last week too. With all the money around here, you think that security would fix the damn card system,” the nurse said and tapped his card to the panel. The doors swung open. “There you go. You’d better be quick —”

“Yeah, I know. I have half an hour. The doc briefed me.”

“Good man,” the nurse said before heading back to his station.

Vladik tried not to recoil at the stench that hit him. It wasn't just blood and vomit. The air was sour with the scent of fear and suffering. He pushed the cart to the center of the room and pulled back the curtain. Lying on the bed was an unconscious man. He was skin and bone, with vomit smeared in his beard and his arms cut up with defensive wounds. They were shallow and had stopped bleeding, thank the goddess.

“Misha,” Vladik choked. He went and checked his brother's pulse. It was fluttery and barely there. Vladik didn't bother trying to wake him. He undid the harnesses around his brother's feet and hands.

“I got you now. I got you,” he whispered, lifting him up off the bed. “I'm sorry about this, but we need to hide you.”

He laid Misha into the bottom of the laundry hamper. He looked so small and fragile. Nothing like his big brother.

Vladik swallowed the lump in his throat before he stripped off the soiled bedding and the towels that had been put on the floor to mop up the mess.

“I'm so sorry,” Vladik repeated before covering his brother with the stinking mess of linens. Making sure he had them all, Vladik wheeled the cart out of the lab. He nodded to the helpful nurse. “I'm done. Cleaning crew is on their way. Just finishing up another work order.”

“Thanks. Have a good night.”

“You too,” Vladik said. He tried to keep his pace measured as he pushed the cart to the elevators. He had his brother, and that was the hard part done.

Vladik barely breathed as he made his way back down to the laundry room.

He couldn't wheel the cart out into the parking lot. He would have to carry him. Vladik spotted the knotted-up bags

of laundry and got an idea. He undid the ties holding the laundry bag in the cart and tied them into a sack.

Zori? He reached out to her.

I'm here, she touched back instantly.

I have him. Can you text Kaspian to meet me in the parking lot?

Onto it. Zori pulled back from his mind, and Vladik let himself smile. She was so damn perfect.

With an inspired thought, Vladik found a pen and some paper at a folding station and wrote an Out of Order sign before sticking it on top of the washer.

He lifted the bag with his brother inside and slung it over his shoulder before grabbing another full bag from the line of them, next to the dryers.

Vladik walked out of the laundry room, his shoulders burning. His brother had lost so much weight, but he wasn't exactly tiny. He was a gargoyle and that meant bones of stone.

"Where are you going with those?" a man in a guard's uniform demanded.

Vladik froze and shifted the bag's weight. "Outsourcing the laundry. The washer is fucked again, and we can't get the fix it guys out until morning."

"We weren't made aware of that change," the guard said.

"Look, man, I'm just doing what I was told. I have a bag of vomit sheets stinking up my clothes right now," Vladik complained.

The guard's nose wrinkled as the smell hit him. "Yeah, okay. Settle down. I had to ask."

"No problem. Mind getting the door? I have a delivery van about to arrive," Vladik said, his heart racing. The guard opened the doors for him and waved him through. "Thanks, I appreciate it. It's been a fucking night."

"Just get it out of here before it makes me throw up," the guard complained.

Vladik walked out into the loading dock as Kaspian backed his van up. Vladik lowered the light bag before opening up the back doors.

Vladik?! Zori's voice had him almost dropping Misha.

I'm here. What's wrong?

I've just heard the guard on my floor on his radio. The lab has reported that Misha is missing!

“Fuck,” Vladik growled. “Get ready to drive, Kas. We got trouble.” Vladik put the laundry bags inside the van. He hadn't planned on leaving with Kaspian. He wanted to maintain the cover.

Zori must've sensed his hesitation. I'll create a distraction. Just go!

Thank you, Zori. Vladik managed to get in before she tore free from his mind. He jumped into the back of the van just as the fire alarms started to scream overhead. “Drive, Kaspian!”

Kaspian didn't hesitate. He just put the van in gear and tore out into the icy streets. Vladik pulled open the bag that held Misha. He was still unconscious.

“You're okay, big brother. You're going to be okay,” Vladik said. He found the bag he'd packed into Kaspian's van earlier that night and pulled the talisman from its pouch. “I'll see you at home.”

He placed the necklace over Misha's head and said the incantation. Kaspian swore as magic exploded through the van, and with a flash of light, Misha disappeared.

“You little prick. If the high priestess asks, I was never fucking here tonight,” Kaspian growled. Vladik slumped against the wall of the van and put his head in his hands. He'd done it. He'd finally saved his brother.

The fire alarms were still going off, the warnings to evacuate blaring through the speakers in English and Russian.

Zori scratched at her arms, the heat and itching too unbearable to ignore. She stepped out into the hall just as Anton came out of the elevator. He lifted the radio up. “Yeah, I see her.”

Zori tried to stop scratching, but she couldn’t. She must have looked like a junkie. She tried to smile at Anton as he closed in on her.

“Tell me you weren’t a part of this,” he demanded. He’d never raised his voice at her.

“A part of what?” she stammered, taking some steps back from him.

“I know the alarm was pulled in your rooms, Zoria.”

“Yeah, I smelled smoke! I told you I’ve been having nightmares,” she said.

Anton grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a hard shake. “Tell me how they got to you!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, shoving him.

Anton’s eyes narrowed and then widened. “The man at the club that was all over you. *He* got to you.”

“He didn’t! I don’t know—” Zori’s head snapped back, and pain burst through her cheek. She stumbled but didn’t fall. Anton had hit her. Her eyes filled with tears.

“You need to tell me everything that happened, girl. Only I am standing between you and Maxim right now,” Anton snarled. “If you co-operate, he may forgive you.”

“Or I might end up on an operating table. Right, Anton? Will you stand by and watch as he harvests my organs too?” Zori demanded angrily, rage choking her grief.

Black mist began to pour out of her like smoke. It was hot, burning her skin as it crawled around her.

“Z-Zoria...” Anton moved back from her. “What is this?”

“*Answer me,*” Zori demanded, her voice going cold. She felt possessed, her body moving of its own accord. “Will you watch me die too?”

“Give Maxim what he wants, and you won’t die, Zori. Trust me.” Anton tried to reach for her. The black mist shot out of her, striking him in the chest and flinging him back against the wall.

Zori didn’t wait for him to get up. She ran to the penthouse and locked the doors. Anton was shouting orders as other guards joined him.

Zori tore at her clothes, the black mist covering her. She needed to escape. Needed to get out. Pain shot through her, twisting her insides.

Vladik! Help me! she called. There was no reply from her gargoyle, but another voice answered.

Fly, child. Fly, a woman said, her voice colder than ice, darker than midnight.

Blinded by the black mist, Zori stumbled to the balcony door and pulled it open.

Zori sobbed. She was going to die, just like Alisa had. Power rolled through her, and she screamed as black feathers burst through her skin. Zori couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

Something else was taking over her, and she had no power to stop it.

“There she is! On the balcony!” Anton’s voice broke through.

Help me! Zori begged the strange woman. She scrambled onto the concrete railing that had been the last place she had seen Alisa.

Fly, little swan, the voice replied.

Wings tore out of Zori’s arms, and as Anton reached for her, she jumped. Wind roared around her, and stars burst in front of her eyes. The other part of her took the lead, and she flapped her wings.

The swan soared upward, the wind catching her feathers and sending her higher. Something burned in the swan’s breast, telling her where to go. It was like a thread of light wound through the buildings, guiding her. She knew where safety was.

The night hid her from watchful eyes, and magic left stars in her wake. This was what freedom felt like, something the swan had never felt before. Elated, she flapped her wings harder, the world passing beneath them.

Magic boosted her, guided her, until she soared over a warehouse. She floated softly on the wind before circling down. There was a small balcony, attached to a fire escape. The swan swooped for it and crashed on the wet landing. She was so close; she just needed to get inside.

Two men were inside, sitting at a table. The swan beat against the door, trying to get their attention. Eyes swiveled to her, and she called out again.

The man hurried to the door and opened it. The swan launched itself at him, and the man caught her. He didn’t smell like a man. He smelled like magic and home. The man lifted the swan so she could see his brilliant blue eyes.

“Z-Zori?” he stammered.

Zori. The swan knew that name. It was *her* name. She rubbed her feathered head against the man's cheek.

"Zoria? Can you hear me, puppy?" the man said.

*Vladik...*a voice inside the swan replied. The swan didn't want to be human again. *Need him. Need Vladik.* The swan stilled. They did need him. *Home. Home. Safe.*

"Zoria, I need you to follow my voice. Come back to me. You can do it. I know you can," Vladik insisted.

Black mist began to pour from her once more as the woman fought the swan for domination. She flapped out of Vladik's arms and landed awkwardly on the floor.

"Careful, careful, don't hurt yourself. It's going to be okay," Vladik crooned softly, hovering over her.

"Give her space. This could get messy," a deep voice said from the other side of the room.

Zori needed Vladik. Needed her own body. Heat roared through her, and she cried out, her swan song changing to a human scream as her body shifted back. She was crouched on the floor, blood and feathers all around her. A cape of black feathers covered her shoulders. She stared up at Vladik.

"H-Help me," she begged.

"I'm here, puppy. I have you," Vladik said, picking her up off the floor.

Zori pressed her bloody face into his neck, breathing in his scent. "Home. Safe."

"Yes, puppy," he replied. "Kaspian, tell the high priestess we have her granddaughter."

"Will do. I'm making myself scarce. This is too much excitement for me," the stranger said.

Zori couldn't stop shaking, her mind fractured. "C- Cold."

"I know. It's going to be okay." Vladik carried her into a large bathroom. He tried to put her down, but her grip on him tightened.

“No, no,” she sobbed.

“Okay. Just let me get your cape. Wouldn’t want to get that wet when it’s so pretty.” Vladik held Zori with one hand and gently tugged the cape from her shoulders. He placed it on the counter, and she shivered just looking at it. Vladik carried her into a large shower and turned on the hot water.

“Here we go, beautiful. Let’s get you warm,” he whispered softly. He carried her under the spray and sat down on a tiled bench, Zori still in his lap. Blood and feathers poured off her and onto the gray tiles. Vladik soaped up a soft cloth and began to gently rub it over her shoulders. Zori leaned into the touch, her skin hypersensitive.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Vladik asked. Zori shook her head and then rested it against his shoulder. She was so tired.

“Home. Safe,” she murmured against his neck, inhaling his warm, spicy scent.

“Yes, puppy. You’re home and safe.” Lips pressed to her forehead. “Sleep now. I’ll look after you.”

Zori curled further into him and closed her eyes. *Thank you, stranger*, she said to the darkness and the stars.

You’re welcome, little daughter, the stars said back.

Vladik watched Zori sleep soundly in his bed, wrapped in blankets to keep her from shivering. It had been a long, strange night. He didn't expect her to shift or find him. How *did* she find him in this city of thousands? He had wards on the warehouse as well. She... She was incredible. She could also barely talk when she arrived, so he was happy to let her sleep as long as she needed.

Vladik shut the door quietly behind him and went to find his phone. He couldn't avoid it forever. He found Irina's number and held the device to his ear.

"About time you called me, Vladislav," she answered coolly. "Tell me what's happening? Kaspian sent me a message saying, 'Got her' and a fucking smiley face. Why is she still there, and why did a half dead Misha drop into my living room?"

Vladik went to the kitchen and poured himself a vodka. He was going to need it. "There was a change of plans, and before you start yelling at me, it was Zoria's idea," he said firmly. He ended up telling Irina everything. He was too worried about Zori to hold anything back. "I don't know what happened to cause her to shift. All I know is she crashed right into my arms, Irina. She was glittering with magic like stardust. It was...incredible."

"What else?" Irina said.

Vladik stared at the cape that was on his kitchen table. "She's a black swan. I've never seen a black swan wife in my

entire life.”

“Goddess knows she’s been through so much. Black swans are so rare. It’s not genetics that causes it. It’s Morana. She’s chosen of the goddess. The poor girl must be terrified,” Irina said, her voice full of tears.

“She wasn’t terrified, just confused and disorientated. It took a long time for her to settle, but as long as I was holding her, she seemed okay,” Vladik replied and then wondered if he had said too much.

“She found you. Her swan sought you out.”

“It did.”

“When she shifted back, what did she say to you?” Irina asked.

Vladik drained his vodka. “Home. Safe.”

“Ah. Well, that’s going to be interesting,” she replied. She didn’t exactly sound pleased.

Well, fuck, Vladik couldn’t say he would be pleased if their positions were reversed. He wasn’t exactly consort to a princess chosen by Morana material. He knew it and still wasn’t going to give Zori up without a fight. And knowing his beast, it would be a fight to the death.

“I’m going to start flying her home tonight,” Vladik said, clearing his throat. “The roads are going to be watched, but Kaspian is checking just in case. We’ll stop at the safe house for a few hours before moving on. I will keep her safe, High Priestess. I swear it on my life.”

“I know, Vladislav. You’ve already proven that there’s going to be no separating you two,” Irina said.

Vladik gripped his phone tight. “Is Misha... Is he okay? I can send you some notes Zori found on him, but I think not shifting for years is going to be his biggest issue.”

“He’s with the healers and is awake. He was disorientated and thought he was hallucinating. He didn’t hurt anyone, but it took quite a bit to convince him he was really home. He still won’t shift. The sooner you can get here to ground him, the

better it will be,” Irina replied, her voice going soft. “I’m sorry that I didn’t believe you when you said he was still alive.”

Vladik never thought he would hear those words come out of her mouth. He pushed aside his years of frustration. “He’s home now, and that’s what matters.”

“Please be careful getting Zoria home. I’m worried that Maxim will use her blood to find her. If you can get her to the city and behind the protection wards, the safer she will be,” Irina said.

“We’ll be there as soon as possible. I just want her to sleep as much as she can first. She’s been through a lot, and first shifts are always traumatic,” Vladik replied.

“I know you’ll take good care of her,” the high priestess said, a touch of amusement in her voice. They said their goodbyes, and Vladik’s shoulders finally relaxed. He had expected a lot more anger and shouting over sending Misha back instead of Zori. He didn’t regret it. His perfect puppy didn’t need his help escaping her tower; she’d done that all on her own.

Vladik’s beast clawed at him, and he shifted into his other form. Instantly, he could smell Zori’s sweet fragrance. He went into the bedroom to check in on her. He wanted to climb into the bed beside her and rub his nose all over her. He was contemplating doing it when he heard someone coming into the loft. Vladik tore himself away from her and shut the door behind him.

Kaspian was trudging up the stairs, his arms full of bags. “Is the princess awake yet?” he asked, and Vladik shushed him.

“No, and she doesn’t need you waking her up by talking at the top of your lungs,” Vladik hissed.

“Touchy, touchy. I’ll be quiet. I just thought she might need some gear so she’s not walking about bare ass in your shirts,” Kaspian said, dumping some of the bags on the couch.

Vladik scowled. He actually liked seeing Zori in his shirts, getting covered in his scent. He wanted his essence buried so

deeply in her skin, she could never wash him off.

“Wow. You really are in overprotective beast mode, aren’t you?” Kaspian chuckled and headed for the kitchen. “Sit your ass down. I’m going to make you some pancakes. You will need the calories tonight, and she definitely does. Did Maxim starve her or something? I like my women with a bit more meat on them.”

“Lucky she’s not yours then, isn’t it? She’s mine, and she’s perfect,” Vladik grumbled.

Kaspian rolled his eyes. “Fucking hell, you’re ridiculous. I can’t wait to see how you are going to handle Irina and everyone else demanding Zoria’s attention when you get home. She’s not yours, idiot. You can’t lock her in your bedroom.”

The fuck I can’t, Vladik thought. He rubbed at his face. Kaspian was right; he was being ridiculous. “I’m sorry I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“I do, but you don’t want to hear it because you love to suffer. So suffer.” Kaspian pulled out a frying pan and mixing bowl. “Do you know if she likes berries? Everyone likes berries, right?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe leave them out so she can choose them for topping,” Vladik suggested.

“I like berries,” a soft voice said, making both men turn. Zori was standing in the bedroom door, looking disheveled and sleepy. She had found the robe Vladik had left out for her, and seeing her in his oversized clothes made him want to carry her off and do naughty things to her. Vladik didn’t want to frighten her, so he shifted back to his human form.

“I’m sorry, did we wake you?” he asked.

“A little. Um, I don’t think we’ve met,” Zori said, looking at Kaspian. He was a giant, even in human form, but he wasn’t looking intimidating with the big shit-eating grin on his face.

“I’m Kaspian, another gargoyle if you were wondering,” he said, moving to Zori. He took her hand and kissed it.

Vladik's vision hazed red. "Vladislav didn't tell me you were so pretty."

"He didn't tell me you were so pretty either," Zori replied with a grin. "What are you making?"

"Blini. There're some bags of stuff over there I thought you might need for your trip home."

"Thank you." Zori picked up the bags and looked at Vladik. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure, puppy," he replied.

Kaspian snorted, and Vladik shot him a glare. "No fucking, you two. I won't have food going cold."

Vladik glared at him before following Zori into the bedroom. Like he would fuck Zori with another male around them.

"How are you feeling?" Vladik asked her. Zori had sat on the bed, so he crouched down in front of her. "Talk to me."

"I'm confused about a lot that happened last night. I feel like I finally went crazy. I'm not crazy, am I?" Zori said, her eyes wide.

Vladik placed his warm hands over hers. "No, you're not crazy. You shifted, and you found me. That's all that matters. You're here and safe. I'm going to take you home."

Zori moved her hands so she could touch his face. "How did I find you?"

"I'm not sure. Instinct maybe? Irina will know. I don't care about the how. All I know is you did, and you're here with me where you belong," Vladik replied.

Zori moved her hands into his hair, and he almost groaned at the touch. She kissed him softly, and he melted. His arms went around her, pulling her closer as he kissed her back. She tasted like heaven and stars combined. His memories of the club didn't do the softness of her lips any justice.

Zori's tongue moved against his mouth, and he opened for her. He was letting her control the kiss, letting it be whatever

she needed. His dick was already starting to get hard, and he couldn't stop it. She was like kissing starlight, like the magic that had been pouring off her the previous night.

A heavy thump on the wall had them jumping and breaking apart.

“What did I say?” Kaspian boomed.

Zori blushed and then laughed. “Sorry. I couldn't help it. I had to know you were real.”

“If that big idiot wasn't here, I'd show you how real I am, puppy,” Vladik said, making her blush deepen. Her stomach growled, and it killed his hard-on. His protective instincts took over. “You need to eat. I'll go and make sure he's cooking enough. We are going to have another long night, and you'll need the calories.”

Vladik bent down and kissed her cheek before leaving her to change. Kaspian was at the stove, whistling a folk song from the Steppes.

“Thanks for that, asshole,” Vladik grumbled.

“What? I told you not to get carried away,” Kaspian replied and smiled at him. “You know she's way too good for you, right?”

“I know, but I'm still going to do everything I can to make her mine,” Vladik growled.

Kaspian chuckled and poured more batter into the pan. “I thought you might say that.”

Zori got dressed in comfortable black tights and a flannel shirt. She didn't know how Kaspian knew her dress size, but they were pretty accurate. He seemed to have known better than to try and pick out a bra size because she had received one-size-fits-all yoga bras. They were fine if she didn't have to run anywhere.

Zori braided her hair and checked her reflection in the mirror. She didn't look any different, but she felt it. Her skin was back to normal, and there was a well of energy inside of her that it hadn't been there before. It made her want to dance about, cry, and fuck.

You need to eat before any of those things, she told herself. Maybe food would stop her feeling so giddy and erratic. That was if Vladik stayed in his human form.

There was something about seeing him in his gargoyle form that made her want to lick him all over while purring. It was weird, but it was probably the least weird thing going on in her life at that moment.

Zori's stomach grumbled again, and she sighed. She couldn't hide forever. She had two gargoyles in the kitchen, cooking.

She'd thought Vladik was huge, but Kaspian was a giant. Her brain took one look at his bulk and long hair and thought 'barbarian.' And now, he was making her blini. She bit back a hysterical giggle at the turn her life had taken.

Vladik and Kaspian were whispering when she came back out and both stopped immediately. Her eyes narrowed a little. “What are you two talking about?”

“Only how Irina is going to lightning bolt Vladik’s ass if he ogles you too much in her presence,” Kaspian replied, and Vladik let out a pained sigh.

“Sorry, Zori. He’s always like this.”

“And by this he means handsome, charming, and a damn good cook,” Kaspian clarified and offered her a plate piled high with thin pancakes and berries. “There’s syrup if you want it.”

“Thank you,” Zori replied and sat on the chair Vladik had pulled out for her. “Why is Irina going to lightning bolt you? Can she actually do that?”

“She can, but she won’t,” Vladik said, sitting down beside her. “Kaspian is being dramatic.”

“Realistic,” the other gargoyle grumbled and sat down opposite her. “Your grandmother can be terrifying, and I don’t think she’s going to appreciate this one perching on her roof because he can’t leave you alone.”

Zori smiled around her mouthful of pancakes. “You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“I might. I don’t know. I’m overprotective of you, and now you’re finally out of that tower, so I want to spend time with you,” Vladik admitted, surprising her.

Zori’s grin widened. “I would like that too.”

“Goddess, save me. You two are like sappy teenagers. Your reputation of being badass is going to be completely ruined, Iron Heart,” Kaspian said with a deep, booming laugh.

“I’m okay with it. What do you think, Zori?”

“Totally fine,” she replied, playing along.

Kaspian snorted. “Well, can you at least stop staring at him like that? It’s putting me off my breakfast.”

“Nope,” Zori said, biting into a strawberry as she looked Vladik over. “As a woman who’s been locked up most of her life, I got needs.”

Vladik’s eyes glowed with a feral animal sheen. By the looks of things, she wasn’t the only one.

“You need a freezing cold flight tonight to cool you both off.”

That got Zori’s attention away from getting underneath Vladik’s clothes as soon as possible. “What flight? You’re not going to make me try and shift again, are you? Because I’m not sure how I did it the first time.”

Vladik rested his hand on her neck. “I wouldn’t force you to do anything, Zori. I’ll carry you tonight to get us out of the city. I am interested to know what triggered your shift last night.”

Zori touched her cheek. “Anton hit me.”

“He *what*?!” Vladik hissed, eyes flashing with gargoyle.

“Take a breath, brother. She clearly handled herself,” Kaspian tried to soothe him.

Zori took a sip of her coffee. “A lot of it is blurry, but Anton accused me of helping you because I pulled the fire alarm.”

She told them about the black smoke and the way it attacked him, the strange voice and how she’d jumped. Vladik’s thumb was rubbing against the back of her neck, and she didn’t know if it was to reassure himself or her. She tried to tell them about how it had been to fly and the string of light she had followed to Vladik.

“The swan seemed to know exactly who she felt safest with. It led me here. It’s the only way I can describe it,” she finished.

The gargoyles were looking at her in impressed amazement.

“I think the sooner you get to your grandmother, the better, princess,” Kaspian said finally.

“She will know exactly how to help you and your swan. The voice you heard? If I had to guess, that was Morana. It makes sense,” Vladik added thoughtfully.

Zori shook her head. “How does a real-life goddess talking to me make sense? I’m not sure I believe in her!”

“Doesn’t matter. She believes in you. Black swans are very rare, Zori. Irina said they are always the chosen of Morana,” he replied.

“That’s the most insane thing to come out of your mouth yet. I’m not a chosen anything. I’m the girl who has been locked up in a tower by an evil sorcerer scientist my entire life and had no idea about it because he made me believe I was dying and magic was not real!” she said and then clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. I’m just...”

“Freaking out? Totally natural and okay to do so,” Kaspian said and placed another pancake on her plate. “Keep eating. You will feel better.”

Vladik’s thumb continued to rub soothing circles on her skin. “You shouldn’t worry about any of this for now. You’re here, and you’re safe. You didn’t need to be rescued, puppy. You did it all by yourself. You’re incredible. Let me take it from here for a little while, okay?”

Zori nodded, emotionally exhausted. She wanted to curl up around Vladik and sleep for a month. She knew Maxim was the enemy and that he didn’t really care about her the way she thought. She still couldn’t help feeling sad over it.

There were times that had been good with him. He’d never hit her or tried to fuck her. He’d always let her study whatever she wanted and never held back that side of her curiosity.

“Is it bad that I feel upset over Maxim?” she asked in a small voice.

“No, of course not. You had no idea what he was really like, Zori. He was...your family. A fucked-up version of it, but the only one you had,” Vladik replied. She knew how much he hated Maxim, and he still wasn’t judging her over it.

Zori leaned into his side, and he moved his hand from her neck to wrap around her shoulders. The touch and the warmth of him made her feel grounded and safe. She was so touch starved that she marveled at the comfort he gave her with a simple hug.

“I have packed you both some supplies for the journey in case no one has stocked the safe house for a while,” Kaspian said and started clearing the dishes and stacking them into the dishwasher.

“Thanks, Kas. I don’t trust the roads at the moment,” Vladik replied.

“So you shouldn’t. Maxim’s not an idiot. He’ll have people watching them. Zori has cold weather gear so she doesn’t freeze. I’d stick to the clouds even at night.”

“It’s okay I’ve got it covered.” Vladik frowned. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to come with us? It’s not going to be safe in Moscow for a while.”

“I can’t just leave the gym. I’ll follow once I can organize someone to take over running it. Besides, we all know Irina isn’t going to let this go. You might need eyes in Moscow for whatever happens next,” Kaspian replied. He smiled at Zori. “It was nice to meet you, princess. You’re good for old Iron Heart.”

Zori tried not to blush at the praise. It was strangely nice that Vladik’s friend approved of her. “Thank you, especially for the clothes and pancakes. I hope we can catch up again soon.”

“Me too. Get some rest. And I mean *rest*,” he said with a pointed look. Vladik flipped him off, making Zori giggle. She didn’t know what it was like to have friends, but it was nice to see them bantering with each other.

Vladik came back into the kitchen, a smile on his face. “I really like seeing you in my house.”

“Do you?” Zori bit her bottom lip. She still didn’t know what to do with the surge of desire every time he focused that grin on her.

Vladik stroked her cheek. “I do. I can keep you safe here, so it calms my beast down. It’s the first time since we met that he’s stopped clawing at me.”

“Really? That’s kind of sweet.”

“You think so? It’s been torture. Now all it wants to do is rub itself all over you. It has no manners at all.”

Zori’s whole body clenched with sudden desire. Vladik’s smile widened, like he somehow knew.

“You know, puppy, you do need to get some rest, and I know a good way to help you sleep,” he said, helping her out of the chair.

“Oh? And what’s that?” she asked innocently. Vladik tilted her head back and kissed her. It was slow and sweet until she nipped at his lips and a growl rumbled through his chest. He picked up and carried her back into the bedroom, his tongue flicking against hers.

God, the man could fucking kiss. It was like he couldn’t get enough of her.

Vladik laid her back on the bed, his mouth moving its way down her neck. She felt the scrape of his teeth against her skin and her pussy clenched.

“Fuck me, please,” she begged. Vladik rolled his big body against hers, and her breath stuttered.

“We don’t have time for all the things I would want to do with you, and you are still recovering from your first shift,” Vladik said, lifting his head long enough to kiss her again. “I am going to make you come for me, puppy. You need it, and I need it.”

“I do need it,” she stammered, her brain and mouth not able to work properly with his hands on her. He unbuttoned her shirt, tossing it to one side with her bra. She didn’t hide her breasts from him, just let him look.

“Damn, you’re gorgeous,” Vladik said, his big hand cupping one of them and running his thumb over the small ring she had in her nipple. “I love these. One day, I’m going to

tie a pretty little ribbon to them so I can tug at them while I fuck you.”

Zori’s breath caught just thinking about it. “You can’t say things like that and *not* fuck me.”

Vladik chuckled, leaning down to suck her other nipple into his mouth, tugging a little on the piercing in a way that soaked her panties in seconds.

Zori buried her hands in his thick hair, needing something to hang on to while he drove her crazy with every suck and nip. He worshipped her breasts, leaving trails of red marks over her pale skin.

She rubbed herself against him, needing the friction, anything to relieve the pressure building inside of her.

Vladik gripped the top of her tights and pulled them off along with her panties. “Fuck, Zori. You are drenched.”

He dragged off his own shirt, and she stared at all his cut muscles and the scattering of dark hair. Damn, he was hotter in real life than he was in the photo he’d sent her.

Vladik lifted her feet so her knees were bent, and he spread her wide. She was so exposed, so open that she fought not to close her legs in embarrassment. He seemed to be able to read her thoughts because his hands rested on her knees.

“Don’t you dare. You’re so fucking beautiful right now, puppy. Look at you, so wet for me already. It’s dripping out of you because it knows I’m going to give it what it needs,” he said, his voice dropping lower as his eyes flashed with gargoyle.

“Fuck, Vladik. Stop torturing me,” she complained, feeling like her whole body was bright red. She wasn’t used to this kind of attention. Her previous hook-ups had been rushed encounters in restaurants or club bathrooms. They weren’t slow studies of what pleasurable things her body could feel.

Vladik stroked his hands down her thighs as he lowered himself between them. “Have you ever had anyone eat this perfect pussy for you?”

“N-No,” Zori stammered, unsure of what to do. She’d read about it, like she’d read about a lot of sex she never got to have.

Vladik’s smile turned wicked. “Good. I don’t like the idea of anyone tasting what’s mine.”

Before Zori could process that possessive comment, Vladik lowered his mouth to her pussy, and she let out a strangled cry. His tongue licked over her, and her brain turned to mush. He growled against her clit, and her hips lifted off the bed.

“You taste so good, puppy,” he said, lowering his mouth to her once more. He spread her wider as he held her up, his tongue leaving no part of her untasted. Zori thought her soul was about to burst out of her skin. She’d never experienced anything like it.

“God, Vladik, please fuck me or I’m going to die,” she begged.

The bastard only laughed. “Does this eager little pussy need to be filled that badly, puppy?”

“Yes, fuck.” She was desperate, no matter how good his mouth felt, she craved to have him inside of her. She couldn’t stop thinking about the picture he’d sent her of his beautiful dick. Vladik lowered her hips to the bed, freeing his hands. He stroked his fingers over her before sliding one inside of her.

“Goddess, you’re tight,” he said, his voice cracking. Zori moved her hips against him, and he added another long finger, stretching her. He stroked deeper, and she cried out. It felt so fucking good. “That’s it, puppy. Fuck my hand the way you need.” His other hand pulled his dick free from his sweats, and her eyes went wide.

“That’s a gorgeous cock you have,” she said, staring at it. Her mouth watered, wanting to taste him.

“I’m so glad you like it. When the time comes to bury it in you, I’m going to take my time doing it,” he replied, stroking himself as he stroked her.

“Will you let me see you in your gargoyle form?” she asked, her pussy clenching around his fingers just at the thought.

“You like that idea?”

Zori nodded and then gasped as his fingers curled inside of her. “Yes. I think your gargoyle form is hot.”

“Fuck, I’d shift right now, but I can’t pleasure you like this with claws, puppy.” Vladik leaned down and sucked hard on her clit and added another finger.

Zori’s eyes rolled in the back of her head and lightning streaked through her body. He hit something that had her crying out his name and coming with an intensity that whited out her vision.

“Fuck, Zoria. You are so fucking perfect,” Vladik growled, pulling his fingers from her and stroking himself with her wetness. “Look at the state of you, all flushed and fucking swollen. It’s the sexiest fucking thing I’ve seen.”

Zori was staring at him, jerking himself with her come, and she almost lost it again. “Come on me, Vladik.”

Vladik’s whole expression shifted. “You want me to mark you up, puppy?”

“Yes, do it,” she said, her hand moving to lightly stroke her hypersensitive clit. Seeing him losing his mind over giving her pleasure was so fucking hot.

Vladik growled and stroked himself twice more before he leaned down and came all over her tits, her belly, and her pussy. He was staring at her in utter awe. “Fucking hell, Zoria.”

“Back at you,” she said.

Vladik bent down and licked over her come soaked pussy. Zori groaned, her body on fire. He stroked his fingers through his mess and then over her lips. Zori opened her mouth and sucked, the taste of both of them together making her want to come all over again.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he groaned before kissing her roughly. He tasted of them, and something that was pure Vladik. Zori’s tongue tangled with his, wanting to drown in that taste. When he finally pulled back, her muscles had turned to warm jelly.

“Stay here, puppy. I’ll get something to clean you up,” he said, stroking her hair softly.

Zori couldn’t move even if she wanted to. She was dozing when Vladik returned and gently ran a warm, wet cloth over her. When he was done, he climbed into bed beside her and pulled the blanket over them. He curled his massive body around to spoon hers and buried his nose in her hair.

“Sleep, Zoria. I’ve got you now,” he whispered, and she let the sweet exhaustion drag her under.

Vladik didn't sleep. He held onto Zori like the treasure she was. He could still smell his scent on her skin. Every gargoyle in Kitez h would be able to as well. Inside of him, his beast purred with happiness at the thought.

Vladik had never wanted to be inside of someone so much. He had to hold back though because he didn't trust himself not to claim her.

Vladik had never been self-conscious before, but Zori had options—whether she realized it or not. She was a princess of their people, and he was a grunt warrior at best.

There wasn't much of a class system in Kitez h, but one thing was absolute law—swan wives picked their mates and not the other way around. It had to be Zori's choice, and he wouldn't take it away from her because she didn't know any better. Her entire life had been dictated by a man, and he wouldn't be another one.

It didn't matter how much a part of him yearned to make her his as soon as possible. If he was a better male, he would have resisted her entirely. He wasn't. He wanted to be with her in the ways he could, for as long as he could.

He only had two days to get her to Kitez h before he would have to share her with Irina and everyone else. They would be so pleased to see the lost princess, and a chosen of Morana to boot.

Vladik kissed Zori's head before slipping out from under the covers. He had to make sure he had everything ready for

when she woke.

He had an itching between his shoulder blades, warning him of trouble. Maxim would have returned to Moscow by now. Who knew how much of Zori's blood he had, and Irina's warning about Maxim being able to use it had made Vladik doubly paranoid.

Vladik went through the gear that Kaspian had brought and packed it into a leather pack. It was made especially for gargoyles to carry things as they flew. Kaspian had also packed him a harness to tie Zori into so he wouldn't have to hold onto her the whole flight. He had to give the big gargoyle credit; he'd thought of everything.

The sun was setting when Zori stumbled out of the bedroom, her braid a mess and eyes sleepy.

"Hey," she said, giving him a shy smile. It was so fucking adorable.

"Hey, yourself. Ready for a night of being strapped to a handsome gargoyle?" he asked, opening his arms to her. She went into his embrace without hesitation, and his ridiculous heart soared. He had wondered how she would respond to affection after a lifetime of not having any. Instead of shying away, Zori soaked it up like a sponge.

Gargoyles and swan wives were affectionate and physical by nature. To have denied Zori that part of herself made Vladik want to wring Maxim's selfish, weaselly neck.

"I can be ready soon. I like the idea of flying with you," she said, rubbing her face against his chest. "How will no one see us?"

"We have glamors for that. We are going to be using one the whole trip. I won't risk anyone or anything being able to see us. Some of the priests of Chernobog can warg. They can use the eyes of animals to spy," Vladik tried to explain for her benefit.

Zori's grip on him tightened a little. "He would be back in Moscow by now. Maxim."

Vladik stroked her soft hair. “I won’t ever let him hurt you again, Zori.”

“I know. I just want to be as far away from him as possible. There’s still a part of me that believes none of this real. I don’t think I’m really going to be able to believe it until I see Kitez and my grandmother for myself,” she replied, pulling back from him.

“I’ll get you there, puppy,” he said and kissed her forehead.

“I know you will. My swan brought me to you because it knows I’m meant to be with you. It trusts you,” she replied, making his beast preen.

“It has good instincts. I have wrapped up your cape for you and stored it in the pack. I don’t want you to fear what you are. Irina will help you learn to control the shift, and it won’t be frightening for you.” Vladik picked up the pile of cold weather gear and held it out to her. “In the meantime, you’re flying with me, gorgeous.”

Zori took the gear with a smile. “This is going to be interesting.”



AN HOUR LATER, they were on the roof of the warehouse. Zori looked adorable in the heavy gear, her hair in braids and hidden under a thermal beanie.

“I look like I’m about to go skiing,” she said with a laugh. “Why am I suddenly terrified?”

“Don’t be. You’re going to be perfectly safe. You can sleep the whole time if you like.” Vladik helped to buckle her into the harness while he still had human fingers to help.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” Zori said and lifted a brow at him. “Why are you smirking right now?”

“Because when we met, I did say to you that I wanted to clip a lead to your harness, and here we are, my sweet puppy.”

Zori laughed. “Not what I thought you had in mind, but I’ll take it.”

Vladik stepped back from her and let his gargoyle side take over. He shook out his wings and cracked his neck. He stopped stretching when he realized she was staring. “What?”

“You’re just...beautiful,” Zori replied, stepping closer so she could touch him. He let her stroke his wings and tried not to get hard when she studied his tail. She ran her fingers over the sensitive tip, and he growled in warning.

“That tickles,” he said, moving it out of her reach.

“Is it sensitive?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, it’s like another finger.” More like another dick, but she didn’t need to know that yet. It would make her ask more questions, and he would end up flying with a raging hard-on all night.

Zori pointed to the black leather kilt around his waist. “What happens to your other clothes?”

“They belong to the human. They stay with him. No one really knows how,” Vladik said, picking up the pack and strapping it into place between his wings.

“Magic,” Zori whispered with a shake of her head.

“You’ll get used to it.”

“I doubt that.”

Vladik shook the pack to make sure it was secure before hooking a clawed finger around Zori’s harness and tugging her closer. She touched him, gloved fingers moving over him as her cheeks turned pink.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I...like your claws,” she admitted, going pinker.

Fuck. Vladik cleared his throat and gestured for her to turn. “I wasn’t sure if you would be scared of me in this form or not.”

“Scared isn’t the word I would use,” she said, a little breathily.

Vladik tried to think unsexy thoughts as he looped the carrier straps over his shoulders. “Jump for me.”

Zori jumped, and he tightened the straps at the same time, pulling her soft body tight against his and leaving her feet dangling.

“This is so weird,” she said, laughter in her voice. She pulled her goggles down over her eyes. “Tell me something before we take off?”

“Anything,” he said, securing the straps in place.

“Is your gargoyle dick different to your human one?” she asked.

“Anything but that.” Morana save him, this woman.

“Aw.”

Vladik huffed out a laugh before whispering in her ear. “Don’t make me fly with my big gargoyle dick poking you in the ass the whole trip, puppy.”

Zori giggled. “Okay, okay, I promise, but I get an answer as soon as we land.”

“As soon as we land, I might let you get acquainted with it,” he growled. He stretched out his wings. “You ready, puppy?”

“I’m good,” she said, reaching up to stroke his face. “Let’s go home.”

Zori couldn't remember much about being a swan apart from the sheer elation and sense of freedom that came with being in the air.

Flying with Vladik wasn't frightening like she thought it would be, it was thrilling. Vladik's body was a warm furnace at her back, and it was only her mouth that was cold.

She didn't know how fast they were going, but Moscow had disappeared already, and she felt like she could breathe properly knowing Maxim was far behind her.

Are you doing okay, Zori? Vladik's voice gently brushed against her mind.

I'm good. This is incredible! She couldn't hide her excitement. They had left the main roads behind, flying over dense forests and only the occasional town. It wasn't snowing, and Zori felt like she was gliding through stars.

I knew you would love flying once you got used to it. Our kind belongs to the skies.

If that's true, how come the city is hidden under the lake? Zori asked. It was something she couldn't quite figure out.

Vladik's humor rumbled through the bond. *It's not hidden under the lake, puppy. That's just a myth that we like to encourage so people don't come looking for us. The city used to be by Lake Svetloyar, but after it was harassed by Batu Khan, the priestesses moved it.*

Zori frowned. *How could they move a whole city?*

You underestimate magic. When all the swan wives put their minds to it, they can move mountains. Literally. They moved the city deep in the Ural Mountains, close to where Morana's sacred caves are. It is where we were first created. The city is protected by the mountains and forests. Combined with the warding over it, no one can find it if they aren't a gargoyle or a swan wife.

It sounds amazing. You must have really missed it.

I did, but getting Misha back was more important. We have a family home in Kitez, and it will be good to be living there. Especially when Misha recovers enough to come home.

Will I get to meet him? Zori asked. She was excited to be going to meet her grandmother, but Vladik was the only person she really knew already. She didn't want him to disappear on her.

Vladik must've sensed something through the bond because his big arms came around her. *Of course you will meet him. Without your help, he would have still been stuck in that tower. He will want to thank you. I'm not going to pretend that your life isn't going to be busy once we get to the city, but I'll be around for as long as you want me, Zori. You're not going to get rid of me that easily.*

I don't want to get rid of you at all. I'm just nervous, I suppose.

Having relationships of any kind was all so new to her. She didn't want to fuck it up and lose him. She wrapped her hands around his, hugging him back and taking reassurance that for now she was completely safe.



DESPITE SAYING SHE WOULDN'T, Zori ended up falling asleep as they flew. She woke as dawn began to turn the sky pink and gray. Vladik had landed in a snowy yard in front of a log cabin.

“You awake, Zori?” he asked, rubbing his knuckles gently over her cheek.

“Yeah, just now. Where are we?”

“This is the safe house. We are about halfway to Kitez. We’ll sleep here for a few hours before going on to the city. Be careful, your legs are going to be wobbly.” Vladik loosened the straps holding onto her harness and lowered her to the ground. Zori’s knees buckled, but she managed to remain upright.

“Oh, man, you weren’t kidding. I feel like jelly. And I really, really need to pee.”

Vladik laughed and pointed to a key safe next to the front door. “The code is 2764. Go inside, and I’ll be there in a minute. I just want to do a check of the perimeter and make sure the wards are still in place.”

Zori stumbled through the snow on wonky feet and opened up the cabin. It smelled like lemons and cinnamon, and she fumbled through the half-light to where the toilet was.

By the time she was done, Vladik was inside and had a fire lit. He was back in his human form and was checking the cupboards.

“Food options are vegetable soup or Kaspian’s supply of chocolate protein bars,” he said.

“Soup,” Zori replied with a soft laugh. “I need something warm, and no offense to Kaspian, but protein bars are only for when there is no other choice.”

Vladik chuckled. “I agree. You sit by the fire and get warmed up. I’ve got this covered, puppy,” he said, waving her out of the kitchen.

Zori didn’t argue. She wanted to get out of the snow gear that made her feel like a dumpy little eskimo. She wriggled out of the gear and immediately put her butt to the fire.

The chill was leaving the cabin, and she began to notice the small things. The chairs were sturdy with the backs shaped

strangely. It took her a second to realize it was to accommodate gargoyle wings.

Her gaze slid to Vladik, moving about at the stove. She wanted a chance to study him properly in his gargoyle form. All of him.

“What are you thinking about over there that’s put such a big grin on your face?” Vladik said, catching her out.

“How I don’t even know how to cook soup,” she lied.

“This isn’t really cooking soup. It’s stirring it on a stove until it heats up.” Vladik took some bowls out from a cupboard. “You never learned how to cook?”

“I wanted to, but Maxim didn’t want me messing with what I ate. I always had nutritionists and chefs that dictated everything about what I put in my body,” Zori admitted, trying not to fidget under the furious look that was now on Vladik’s face. “Maxim said that keeping my weight down and fitness levels high would help fight off my condition.”

The bowl in Vladik’s hand shattered. “Every time I think I’ve reached my capacity to want to murder that man, I learn something new.” He tossed the broken pottery into a bin.

“Please don’t be mad on my behalf,” she said, going into the kitchen. She took his hand and turned it over, but there were no cuts. “I’m really healthy. That’s not a bad thing. I just don’t know how to do anything normal like cook myself food.”

Vladik pulled Zori into a tight hug. “You can learn all of that if you want to. Don’t let it worry you too much. Irina is a feeder. She won’t be able to help herself. Work with her in the kitchen, and you’ll be cooking in no time.”

Zori leaned into the hug. “I don’t like feeling useless.”

“You’re not useless, puppy.” Vladik let her go and kissed her forehead. “Take a seat. I’ll bring you some of this soup.”

Zori sat down at the kitchen counter, and Vladik got out another bowl from the cupboard to fill for her.

“Eat up,” he said, putting it in front of her before fixing his own bowl. Zori ate and the soup chased away the last of the chill from her bones. She didn’t know why she was so tired when she was the one being carried.

“How long are we going to stay here?” she asked with a yawn.

“For a few hours. I just need to eat this and some of Kaspian’s disgusting protein bars to get my calories back up.”

“You’re not going to come sleep with me?” she asked, her neck heating.

Vladik lifted a brow. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes, and I want you do it in your gargoyle form,” she said, hopping down off the chair and heading for the couch in front of the fire.

“You have mischief in your eyes, puppy. Should I be worried?” he asked playfully.

Zori shrugged innocently. “Maybe a little.”

Vladik laughed and put their dishes in the sink. “I can’t deny you anything, it seems.”

“Except your dick,” she said before she could stop herself.

“There’s a good reason for that,” Vladik replied. He shifted, and Zori’s whole body clenched in excitement. “I’d get too lost in you for a start. Besides, there’s other ways to give you pleasure if you need it, puppy.”

He sat down on one of the chairs, his wings tucking back behind it. He looked like some kind of monster king, the firelight dancing on his blue-black skin.

Zori stepped in between his slightly spread thighs. She ran her fingers over the lighter blue lines over his chest, like he was some kind of dark marble. “You are really beautiful.”

Vladik’s tail moved around her waist in a possessive grip. She touched it as well, stroking over the tip and making him swear softly.

“How sensitive is it?” she asked.

Vladik's blue eyes shone dangerously. "It's almost like another dick."

"Huh, good to know," Zori said and gave it a slow stroke.

"Playing with fire, puppy."

"I like fire." Zori leaned down to kiss him, her hands burying into his thick black hair. His clawed hands stroked over her hips before grabbing her ass. He was bigger as a gargoyle, the size of him making Zori feel petite and breakable. She pulled back from his lips to kiss along his jaw and down his neck.

"Let me see you," she said, her hands going to the tie of his leather kilt.

Vladik loosened his grip on her. "Only if you let me see you."

"Fair is fair." Zori pulled off her thermal shirt and bra.

"All of it," he growled, making her pussy clench. Her reaction to him should've embarrassed her, but she was too horny to care. Zori pulled off her tights and panties. The fire was hot and turned her pale skin golden.

"Satisfied?" she asked, reaching for the leather ties.

"I'm never satisfied when it comes to you, Zoria," he replied, his eyes raking over her. "I don't think I ever will be. I still can't believe you find me attractive in this form. I thought you would be scared of it."

Zori undid the loin cloth. "I could never be scared of you."

She looked down at his dick, and her mouth popped open. It was a lot bigger than his human dick for a start and was the same dark blue gray shade of his skin, the head an almost purple color. There was a raised ridge along the top and bottom of it that really got her attention.

"Does those do anything in particular?" she asked, her face burning.

"They swell up a bit, and apparently, it feels amazing," Vladik admitted with a slight smile. Zori wrapped a hand

around him, and the smile slipped. “What have you got going through that head of yours?”

“All kinds of mischief.” Zori lowered herself to her knees. “I want to return the favor from that amazing head job you gave me earlier.”

Vladik’s claws dug into the chair arms. “You’re not obligated...”

Zori gave his dick another hard stroke. “I really, really want to.” She wet her lips before leaning forward and kissing his tip. The spicy smell of him was stronger there, mixed with a touch of salt. She licked him again, and a deep growl reverberated through his chest. She wasn’t really sure what she was doing, but she was determined to make up for it with enthusiasm. She took him in her mouth, sucking him down.

“Fuck, Zoria,” he groaned. She took that as her cue to take him deeper, her hand making up for the rest. “That’s it. So good, my puppy.”

Vladik’s clawed hands curled around the tails of her braids, gripping her tighter and sending a shot of pleasure through her. She dropped her hand to her pussy, stroking herself.

“Let me take care of that. You focus on that mouth of yours,” he said, pushing her hand away with his tail. A second later the tip of it rubbed over her clit, making her moan around his cock.

“You are so wet. Do you like sucking me, puppy?” he asked, staring down with adoration in his eyes.

Zori pulled off him to catch her breath. “Yes, Vladik.”

He stroked her cheek gently with his claw, careful not to hurt her. “Then take me deeper. I want my dick so far down that pretty throat, you’re gagging on it.”

Zori’s thighs pressed together at the command, and she took him back into her mouth. She was so turned on, she was almost crying. Only Vladik could make her feel this insane.

His tail moved over her pussy, teasing her clit and down over her holes. She sucked him down, her jaw hurting and drool coming down her chin. The tip of his tail thrust into her, and Zori cried out, the relief of being filled overwhelming her. She moved her hips, taking it deeper and letting it stretch her.

“Goddess, you are so fucking insatiable, and I love it. Does my tail feel good in that pretty cunt?” he asked, tugging her hair so she was forced to look at him. Zori nodded, her eyes full of tears. “Good. Fuck it, Zori, because I can’t. If I do, I’ll never be able to let you go.”

Zori didn’t know what he meant by that, but she was too lost in pleasure to care. She felt so full, his dick down her throat, and tail hitting her limit. She stroked him, her fingers running over the ridges that grew harder with every pump.

Vladik swore, his head going back. “I’m going to come, puppy, and you’re going to take all of it.”

Zori groaned, her pussy squeezing his tail tighter. Her mouth began to fill with the salty, spicy taste of him, and her orgasm exploded through her. She tried swallowing him down, but there was too much. It was running down her chin and breasts as she pulled off him. Vladik was breathing heavily, his gaze burning into her. He lifted her up to straddle his thick thighs.

“You look so fucking debauched right now,” he growled and licked the come off her chin and down her neck. His tail flicked inside of her, and she groaned, her back arching. Vladik’s claws dug into her soft ass. “You need to come again.”

It wasn’t a question. He lifted her so he could bury his face between her breasts, the tips of his fangs dragging over the soft skin. Zori grasped his hair, needing to hang on to something as he fucked her harder with his tail.

“Fuck, Vladik. I can’t...”

“Yes, you can. If this is how you take my tail, I can’t wait until you surrender to me and let me fill this tight pussy with my cock. Now, come for me again, my beautiful Zoria.” His

voice was pure sin as his tail flicked repeatedly against her G-spot. Darkness and stars crept into her vision, and her orgasm exploded through her again.

She came back to herself, sobbing his name against his neck. Vladik ran his hands down her back, soothing her as her body came down. Exhaustion hit her, and she melted further into him.

“Sleep now, my lovely black swan,” he said, his wings curling around her, enclosing her in warmth.



ZORI DECIDED that flying was her favorite way to travel. Vladik had woken her after midday, and she had pulled on her snow suit once more. Her muscles felt achy, and pussy well used. She could barely look at Vladik without grinning like an idiot. She knew she would have to stay with Irina once they got to Kitez, but she didn't like the feeling of being apart from him.

The snow fell steadily for most of their flight, and swathes of dark forest stretched beneath them. She had no idea where they were, only that they were heading towards the mountains in the distance.

The sun was falling as they reached the mountains, Vladik's hand tapped her arm, and he pointed. At first, Zori couldn't see anything, just more mountains. They glided between two peaks, and a warm breeze washed over her face. Underneath her, the forest melted away to reveal wood and stone buildings, painted in pretty colors. There were onion domes of all sizes and colors and smoke rising from chimneys. Everywhere she looked, there were gargoyles and swans flying around them or landing on platforms attached to the houses. It was like a fairytale city in an enchanted forest.

Vladik's voice brushed softly against her mind. *Welcome home, Zoria.*

Zori would've liked to get cleaned up a bit before meeting her grandmother, but Vladik had other ideas.

"She will know you are here and would flay me if I didn't take you to her straight away," Vladik said by her ear. He pressed a kiss to her neck. "I needed to get one in case it's a while before I get another."

Zori didn't like that thought at all. Vladik landed on a wooden platform on the roof of a house with painted wooden tiles. He was unhooking her from the harness when a door banged open, and a tall woman appeared. She had hair the same silvery white as Zori's and eyes so sharp they could cut. She stared at Zori, and she wondered what kind of mess she saw. She was windswept and cold and nervously sweating at the same time.

"Here you are at last," Irina said before crashing into her. She squeezed her tight, and Zori didn't know what to do but hug her back. She smelled familiar, of lilacs and baking bread.

Irina pulled back and cupped Zori's cheeks. "You look so much like your mother."

"You do too," Zori said with a nervous laugh.

Irina turned her blue gaze onto Vladik. He bowed low. "High Priestess."

"Iron Heart, thank you for bringing me back my granddaughter. Please check in with Aleksandr. I know he is expecting you," she said, dismissing him with a warm smile.

“I will, High Priestess,” Vladik said, flexing his wings to take off again.

“Wait,” Zori untangled herself from Irina’s grasp and grabbed Vladik’s hand.

He smiled softly down at her. “It’s okay, Zoria. Go and enjoy your grandmother. I won’t be far away.”

Let her have some time with you. I promise I’ll see you tomorrow, he replied telepathically.

I better, Vladislav, Zori said and dropped his hand. He winked at her before launching back into the sky.

Zori picked up the pack that held her clothes and turned back to Irina. She had her head cocked a little to the side as she watched her and then the figure of Vladik in the distance.

“You must be freezing. Come inside and let’s get you into a warm bath,” Irina said, opening the door for her.

“A bath actually sounds amazing,” Zori replied. She swallowed her nerves at being without Vladik and stepped inside.

The house was made of wood, with rag rug mats on the floor, and everything smelled of coffee and drying herbs and flowers. Sprigs of rosemary and lavender hung in small bunches from the door frame.

The house was three stories, with the bathroom and sauna on the bottom floor with the kitchen. The tub was better than Zori had hoped for. The bath had a large tub that was already full and had herbs and flowers soaking in it. Vladik had said that Irina would know they were in Kitez, and he hadn’t been kidding.

“I wasn’t sure what size you were, so I brought you some warm tights and looser knit sweaters. We can get you some proper things now that you are here,” Irina said, passing her a bundle. “Take your time, Zoria. Find me in the kitchen when you’re done.”

“Thank you,” she said. Irina smiled and shut the door behind her. Zori was sliding off her boots when she thought

she heard a sob from the other side of the door. She had made her grandmother cry. She had barely said two words to her. Maybe it was because she looked like her mother.

Zori tried not to let it bother her and focused on stripping off her clothes and getting into the steaming water. She'd had a brief wash down at the cabin, but it was heaven to sink into the fragrant heat. Warmth soaked into her bones, and she rested her head on the lip of the tub. She was there; she'd finally made it.

The stress of the last few weeks hit her hard, and tears welled up in Zori's eyes. She pulled her knees to her chest and let it out. She cried for her mother and for never searching for the truth about her earlier. She cried for all the good times she'd had with Maxim and all the horror of finding out that she had only ever been a valuable experiment to him. She cried for poor Misha, who had been tortured for years, and the women who were still lost.

What if they had children like Zori? They would have no idea who they were either. She hadn't known any better. She should have fought for her freedom earlier. Now she had no idea what to do with her life. She had magic she couldn't use and wings that she didn't know how to fly with.

You won't find out weeping in a bathtub, she told herself firmly.

She missed Vladik. He seemed to ground her and keep her from spiraling. She could smell him on her skin, taste him in her mouth. It was like he had imprinted himself onto her, and not having him with her hurt.

Zori washed her face with the warm water and picked up one of the tiny blue soaps. She needed to pull herself together and make herself presentable. Irina had answers that she needed about her mother, magic, and Morana.

Zori refused to be a snotty, weeping mess when she faced her again. She pushed aside the ache in her chest that she didn't understand even though she knew what it wanted.

She would see Vladik tomorrow. He had his own family to see, and wanting to keep him by her side was just selfish.

Zori unraveled her braids and washed her hair. She tried and failed not to think about Vladik's clawed fingers in them hours before. Her treacherous body missed him as much as she did.

With a sigh, Zori got out of the bath and got dressed. She found a brush in one of the drawers and used it to get the knots out of her hair. She studied her face in the mirror. Her eyes and lips were a bit red from crying, but she didn't look too bad.

"You can do this," she told her reflection. If she could escape from a tower full of guards, how hard could a conversation with her grandmother be?

It turned out having a conversation with Irina was worse.

“Have you been having sex with Vladislav?” Irina asked Zori as soon as she sat down at a scarred wooden table. She almost tumbled off the bench seat.

“Ahhh,” she said, wondering how to answer. “Depends on what you classify as sex. Also, I don’t know why it’s any of your business?”

Maxim never asked about what she got up to on those nights she went out. He probably guessed.

“I don’t mean to offend you,” Irina replied, placing a steaming bowl of stew and a plate of sliced bread in front of her. “I ask for a few reasons. The first is that Vladik told me that you found him when you shifted. Can you tell me what happened?”

Zori wanted answers about other things, so she had to meet Irina halfway. “I don’t know how much of it will make sense, but I’ll try.”

Zori ate and talked, explaining about the medication Maxim had given her to stop her from shifting and what had happened the night of the escape. She told her about Alisa’s suicide and how she’d leaped off the same balcony at the mysterious woman’s instructions.

Zori still couldn’t find the right words to describe the threads of golden light that had led her to Vladik. She’d only known that she had to get to him. There was a dull ache in her

bones when she talked about him. She knew it was silly to be missing him already, but she couldn't help it.

Irina listened without interruption. When Zori was done, Irina fetched a bottle of vodka and two small glasses. Irina downed her glass without ceremony.

"I'm going to kill Maxim once and for all," Irina said, filling the glass again.

"You're probably going to have to get in line at this point," Zori replied. She cradled her drink. Getting wasted wouldn't help her feel any better. "Can you tell me how I found Vladik?"

Irina blinked back her tears. "It's an instinct for us, especially during our first shift. We seek out the people who connect us to our humanity and who we know we are safest with. When we choose a mate, it's a way for us to always find them."

"A mate?"

Irina lifted a brow. "Vladik hasn't told you about this?"

"Not really. He said that swan wives can shift without their capes if they are mated, but that's about it."

Irina hummed, a small smile on her face. "That's interesting. It could explain why you two haven't had sex yet, but you smell like him."

"Um, okay." Zori drank some of her vodka. She wasn't shy about sex, but talking to her grandmother about it was weird as fuck.

"The females of our people choose their mates, not the other way around," Irina explained. "The power in you knows who is going to be the best protector for you. If Vladik hasn't mentioned this, it's probably because he understands your position here better than you do. You are my family, and a chosen one of Morana."

"So? What's that got to do with anything?" Zori asked, brows drawing together.

“It means every unmated gargoyle in Kitez is probably going to want to date you, Zoria. Vladik is ensuring that he doesn’t take the choice from you and is going to allow you to see the competition.”

Zori choked on her vodka. “I don’t even know where to start with that.” She wasn’t interested in anyone else. Kaspian was gorgeous, but she felt nothing towards him. She only had seen Vladik once, and she wanted to crawl into his clothes and never leave.

Irina smirked, as if she knew exactly what Zori was thinking.” You don’t need to worry about it. Your magic will tell you who is going to be the best person for you, darling.”

“My magic that I have no idea how to use,” Zori said. She put her head in her hands. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Don’t worry, I will teach you. You are my granddaughter, and I know we don’t know each other, but I am going to make up for lost time with you, Zoria. I want us to be a family.” Irina reached across the table and gently tugged Zori’s hands away from her face. “I’m so sorry that I didn’t know you survived earlier. I had suspected Alisa was pregnant before she was taken, but she never said anything to me. I thought she was waiting until after the wedding to your father.”

“What was he like?” Zori asked.

“One moment,” Irina said, getting up from the table. She disappeared into another room before returning with a photo album. She passed it to Zori, and she opened it up. It was full of pictures of Alisa, smiling and healthy. She looked so different. Zori could see herself in the hair and lips. She turned a page to where Alisa was sitting in the lap of man with dark curly hair and Zori’s blue eyes. He was looking at Alisa like she was the center of the universe.

Zori swallowed back her tears. “What was his name? Alisa never talked about him.”

“Nikolai. He was a smart boy, very pragmatic and not easily flustered. He grounded your mother, who was always passionate and dramatic. From what Vladislav has told me,

you're like Nikolai. Vladik was surprised that you were so calm when he explained everything to you," Irina said and smiled fondly. "I wasn't. You're just like your father."

"I was freaking out, just not in front of Vladik," Zori replied with a small laugh. "Having a meltdown wouldn't have helped me get the evidence I needed or escape from that tower any faster."

Irina smiled. "Definitely like Nikolai. He was good with languages and puzzles."

"And Alisa? What did she like?" Zori's memories were few, and she didn't have many that were good.

"She loved to tell stories and paint. She was a natural with earth magic and worked a lot with the other budding mages. Not all of us are priestesses, but we all have some kind of magic. Alisa's abilities could bring life to the plants that were sleeping at the end of winter. If she was any more of a green thumb, I would have thought she would be better serving Kostroma, our spring and fertility goddess." Irina gave Zori a warm look. "Looks like Morana is making up for that in you."

"I don't know about that. I couldn't find much about her online. I don't even know why Maxim hates us so much. Vladislav said it was about magic," Zori replied. She closed the photo album, unable to keep looking at the pictures without crying. She was so tired of crying.

"It is about magic, but it's also about the conflict with the gods themselves," Irina said, topping up their glasses. "Morana is a goddess of winter, death, darkness, and magic."

"Sounds morbid," Zori said.

"Depends how you feel about death. It's a part of a cycle, just like everything else. The darkness is restful, peaceful. It's not like Chernobog's darkness. The conflict between him and Morana came about because he wanted her for a consort."

"I thought it was about Yelena, her high priestess," Zori interrupted.

"That came later, after the fighting between the gods had already begun. Morana and Chernobog have...similarities.

Both are gods of winter and death. Chernobog isn't about a natural cycle, unlike Morana. He is a god of chaos, of a winter that never ends, a destructive and violent force, and a god of blood. The *volhv's* main purpose is to make sure he is appeased. If he's not, Chernobog will destroy the world. Those like Maxim see the god as a way of getting more power, more magic." Irina shook her head. "It is foolish. He and those that follow him don't truly understand what they are dealing with. If Chernobog is communing with them, promising them things, it's to fuck with them, and it will blow up in their faces. He's not a giving god. That's more of his brother's nature. Belobog is the light to his darkness. His balance."

Zori drank her vodka. "So why would a god like Chernobog want to marry Morana?"

"They have a lot of similarities, even if they are on opposite ends of the spectrum, and that kind of combined power would be unstoppable," Irina said, resting her chin on her hand. "Chernobog wanted a powerful consort, one like him. With Morana on his side, he could destroy the world. She refused to do that to the humans that worshipped them. Chernobog has been trying to make her suffer for that refusal ever since. The business with Yelena was because he was trying to lure her away from Morana, and she refused him too. Morana couldn't let him get away with the insult, so she made sure her priestesses were protected after that."

Zori's brain was starting to melt. "And Maxim wants to prove his loyalty to Chernobog by finding a way to enslave us and destroy the gargoyles. I saw in his notes that he wanted to harvest Misha in his gargoyle form so that he can find a way to create a biological weapon."

Irina had gone pale as chalk. "We have to stop him. I knew he was an insane murderer, but to try and wipe us all out? It could start a war between the very gods themselves."

"Kaspian said that you would want to retaliate," Zori replied.

"Kaspian is a very smart male. All the time out in the Steppes turned him into a true masterpiece of a gargoyle."

Irina laughed at Zori's expression. "I'm not dead yet. He's a fine male, and when he finds his mate, she will be very lucky. We will need him when we take out Maxim."

Zori yawned, the vodka and the warm food hitting her. "Taking out Maxim isn't going to be easy. I know him well enough to understand how tenacious he is."

"It's not something for you to worry about. It's up to others to plan the defense of the city."

That woke Zori up. "The city? You think Maxim will try and come here?"

"He has your blood, Zoria, and a lot of it. He's one of the most ruthless *volhv* I have ever seen. Maxim will be able to use your blood for tracking spells. He's not going to let the insult and the loss of you go unchallenged," Irina replied, her eyes going steely. Gone was the grandmother. This was the high priestess. "He also lost Misha, who he clearly had plans for. I don't believe it is a matter of if Maxim comes for you. It's a matter of when. He is arrogant enough to think he will win against us, and that will be his downfall."

Zori swallowed hard. She still felt such horrible conflict inside of herself when it came to her feelings towards Maxim. She knew she couldn't voice those to Irina. She wouldn't understand, and she was so confident, thinking he would be defeated.

"I don't want anyone getting hurt because of me," Zori said.

"If he comes to Kitez, it won't just be for you, granddaughter. It will be for all of us," Irina replied. "We need to be prepared for whatever happens. That means tomorrow we are going to work on you shifting and accessing your magic. Morana intervened with you once, and we can't expect her to do it again. She's a goddess, not our own personal Santa Claus to grant us wishes."

"It scares the shit out of me, but I will try my best," Zori said, sounding a lot braver than she felt.

“Try not to be scared. Your swan, your magic—they’re part of you as much as breathing. It’s natural for us, and it will feel like the missing piece of yourself has finally been returned to you,” Irina said, taking Zori’s hand. “Your magic is a gift from Morana. She will guide you on what to do with it. You don’t need to worry about it now.”

“Everyone keeps telling me not to worry. I can’t just stop. I know nothing about living out in the world, Irina. I was told I was sick and dying. To go from that to all of this...” Zori gestured at her, and the pretty house around her “It’s like a big make-believe dream. The orphan child with no last name finally gets family. The dying girl secretly has magic and has been controlled by an evil sorcerer. It’s like one of the fairytales Alisa used to tell me as a girl.”

“You have a last name. It’s Nikolaeva.” Irina’s expression shifted to one of grief. “I’m so sorry you had to live through all of that, Zoria. If your mother spoke to you of a story like this, maybe she was trying to tell you something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Alisa had visions. Sometimes they were of the future. Perhaps she had one about you and tried to tell you as a child in a way that you could understand,” Irina replied. She looked upset but thoughtful at the same time.

“I don’t know anything about that. I’m happy I’m here and that I have family. It’s just going to take me a while to process it all,” Zori said. She was so overwhelmed, and a part of her was grieving for Maxim. It hurt, but she could do nothing to stop it, no matter how evil they all said he was. She was so tired.

“Everything can wait until tomorrow, Zoria. For now, you should go and try to sleep.” Irina opened one of the small kitchen cupboards and took down a small vial of lavender liquid. “This is a potion that will help you rest.”

Zori took it from her but didn’t drink it. “No offence, grandmother, but I spent my whole life taking whatever pills I was handed. I’m not... I’m not going to do that anymore. I’ll

be fine.” She gave the vial back. Irina didn’t look offended or angry.

“It’s okay. I’ll never force you to take anything against your will. I’ll leave it on the table if you change your mind,” she replied and sat the vial down.

Zori bid her good night and headed back up to her room. Her legs felt like they were full of lead. She collapsed into bed without getting undressed and pulled a pillow close. Her head felt too full of everything she had learned. She thought about how happy her parents looked in the photos, Irina’s sadness, Chernobog’s anger. Mostly, she thought about Vladik and what Irina had said.

“Mates,” Zori whispered to the darkness. She didn’t know how to feel about that either. She fell asleep and dreamed of stars whispering secrets to her and a golden string of light leading her to the place that she belonged.

Vladik walked through his family's two-story house and breathed in the scents of wood and winter. He lit a fire and inspected the fridge and cupboards. Aleksandr must've thought he needed feeding because both were full of fresh produce. The place had also been dusted and aired out. Sprigs of lavender and rosemary hung over the doorways.

Old busybody, he thought fondly. He made a mental note to thank him and whoever had been wielding the duster. Vladik lit a small cone of incense on the family altar to Morana. The statue had been in the family for generations, and he'd neglected it for over a year.

The year in Moscow really had been a blur of endless days watching the tower and tracking the *volhv* that visited the city. He seemed to have forgotten how peaceful Kitezsh was as opposed to being out in the world. It was built as a sanctuary. It didn't struggle with its identity like other places.

Vladik had a long, hot shower and tried not to miss Zoria. She needed time with Irina. He was selfish to want to keep her to himself. Especially when they weren't mated.

Not mated yet, his beast rumbled inside of him.

"It's up to her, not me," Vladik replied. Maybe he should have told Zori about it. He was positive Irina would. She'd know that Zori and he had been fooling around.

Nothing foolish about it.

“Shut up. We have other things to do than pine,” he muttered. Sometimes he wondered if other people talked to their inner gargoyle or if it was only him that argued with it.

Kaspian had told him to listen to the beast’s instincts. The problem with that was that its instinct was to throw Zori over his shoulder and carry her off like a horny, old dragon.

Vladik pulled on fresh clothes, grabbed his keys and phone, and headed out into the snowy streets. It was so clean and picturesque compared to the grime of the human cities. He wanted to hold Zori’s hand and show her all the pretty shops and galleries, the greenhouses and gardens that made Kitezha a self-sufficient city. He had no doubt that her quick mind would love all of it. Aleksandr would take her to the Great Library, and they would talk history together while Vladik looked on, smiling. He was turning into a ridiculous sap of a male with all the future dreams he was having.

Vladik stuffed his cold hands into his pockets and made for the Temple of Mokosh. They might have been the chosen ones of Morana, but that didn’t mean they didn’t honor other gods. Mokosh was a goddess of health and healing, and she had many followers.

A large wooden statue of the goddess stood outside of the temple, candles and small offerings placed in the snow at her feet. Vladik leaned down to light a candle of his own before walking through the large wooden doors.

A woman dressed in blue and white healer’s robes approached him with a serene smile on her face. He didn’t know how, but all the healers had such gentle, calm energy that to be around them made you feel like you were getting hugged.

“I’m here to see Misha, the gargoyle that was refusing to shift,” he told her.

“Ah, you must be Vladislav, his brother, yes?” she said and gestured. “Come this way. We have placed him in one of the separate suites away from others.”

“Why? Was he... He didn’t hurt anyone?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. We thought it would be more peaceful for him. He has many nightmares and sometimes doesn’t know where he is. It is good that you are here. He needs a familiar face.”

The healer led Vladik through the softly lit wards and to the far western side of the temple. She opened a door for him. “Go ahead. I only ask that you don’t wake him if he is sleeping.”

“I pulled him out of hell. There’s no way I’d wake him,” Vladik assured her. The room was decorated in soft blues and lavenders. Misha was lying in a comfortable looking bed with fluffy white blankets tucked around him. A diffuser was puffing in the corner, sending scented clouds of serenity into the air.

Vladik sat in one of the soft guest chairs and stared at his big brother. Someone had trimmed his beard and brushed his long hair. The gray that was now streaking it made him look more like their father than ever. He had a little color to his skin but was still far too skinny. Eyes the color of storm clouds opened and focused on him.

“Hey, big brother,” Vladik said softly.

Misha’s brow lowered. “Vladislav?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Mish. How are you feeling?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Misha’s face crumpled, and he burst into tears. Vladik moved to the side of the bed and hugged his brother as he cried and cried.

He’d never seen Misha cry. Not even when they were children. He was always the biggest and bravest. If he got knocked down in training, he got back up without a whimper.

“You’re okay, brother. You’re safe now.”

“None of us are safe. They are going to kill us all any chance they get!” he shouted.

Vladik held his brother’s face. “Look at me, Mish. I got you out of that tower. None of our people are ever going in there again. We will make a plan and wipe it off the fucking

map. I promise we will get revenge for what they did to you. You only need to focus on shifting into your gargoyle so you can heal.”

“I don’t... I don’t know how. He’s gone, and I don’t how to bring him back out,” Misha sobbed.

Vladik hugged him close again. “Don’t worry, Misha. He’s not gone. You will shift again. I know it.”

“How? I’m a fully grown adult who can’t shift. I’m a freak.”

“Actually, you’re not the only one I know at the moment,” Vladik told him.

“What? What are you talking about.” Misha lifted his head. “Who?”

Vladik rubbed at his neck. “Well, there’s this girl I met. She was the one who helped me get you out...”

They sat side by side in Misha’s bed, just like when they were boys, and Vladik told him all about Zoria. His princess locked in the tower. It was hard to believe so much had happened in a few weeks. By some miracle of the goddess, both his brother and Zoria were now safe from Chernobog’s minions. Vladik knew his brother, and if anything would bring out his beast again, it would be the idea of revenge.

“I heard whispers in my imprisonment of the girl. She’s not the only one that the *volhv* have. There were two others that were taken the same time as Alisa, and that was over twenty years ago. There could be others like Zori out there,” Misha said once Vladik was done. There was a feral light in his stormy eyes that had always meant someone was about to get their asses kicked.

“We know. Zori found information about them and overheard Maxim talking about another one. Zori isn’t going to let it go. She was so furious about it. Irina will be forced to act on it.”

“Good,” Misha growled. He looked at Vladik. “I really need to get better. If anyone is going to be hunting *volhv*, I want to be in on it.”

Vladik nudged him with his shoulder. “That’s my big brother.”

Zori stood in Irina's small, frozen garden while her grandmother looked on. Zori's nose was numb, and she wanted nothing more than to go inside and sit by the fire.

"Again, Zoria. You must focus," Irina said, her voice all high priestess.

"I'm trying to!" Zori adjusted the black cape of feathers around her shoulders. If Irina had her way, Zori would be naked, trying to shift. Irina said that making Zori uncomfortable would force the swan out.

Zori had flat out refused to stand naked in the snow in the hope that her magic would work. She shut her eyes and tried again.

"Imagine your power like a lake inside of you. You want to draw water from it, a little at a time," Irina coaxed.

The problem was that visual cue didn't feel right to Zori. The night her magic worked, it wasn't a lake. It was dazzling darkness and an ocean of stars. It was fear and instinct. It was the goddess moving through her.

Zori changed tactics and focused on the stars and how it had felt to shift. She felt a tingling in her fingertips, but nothing she did would draw her swan out.

"Perhaps we should call it a day," Zori sighed in frustration.

“You can give up if you wish.” Irina inspected her nails. “But I’m going to forbid you from seeing Vladislav until you shift.”

Hot anger punched through Zori. “You can’t do that. I’m not your prisoner.”

“I’m the high priestess. I can do what I like,” Irina replied, unmoved by her glare. “I need to see you in your swan form if I am to assess your abilities. You need proper motivation to try and bring it out. Vladislav is probably too busy to see you anyway. He is very popular, and the ladies of Kitez have missed his absence.”

Panic and jealousy mixed with Zori’s anger. If anyone laid a finger on Vladik, she was going to tear it off.

“Vladik is mine,” she hissed, the heat in her hands searing its way up her arms.

Irina’s lip curled. “Don’t be naive, Zoria. He is an unmated male. He is anyone’s to claim. Just because you two fooled about means nothing. Gargoyle males have a high sex drive. They will fuck anything.”

“He’s not like that,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Really? And of the two of us, who actually has the most experience with gargoyles?” Irina replied.

Black mist rolled out of Zori’s skin. She’d had enough of this shit. She wanted Vladik. Needed to see for herself that he wasn’t with anyone else. If he was...Zori didn’t know what she would do. She had to get out of there and find him. Pain tore through her, splitting skin and cracking bone.

“He’s *mine*,” she repeated and let the agony drown her. Feathers exploded through her skin, her arms transforming into wings. She beat them angrily, hissing and squawking at Irina. Her grandmother’s eyes were wide.

“Fly to him, Zori. See if you can find him before another swan does,” she said.

Zori wasn’t listening. She wouldn’t stay there a second longer. She needed to see her... The human inside of her

hesitated. The swan didn't. She knew what he was to her.

The swan beat her wings again, lifting herself in the air. Stars and darkness swirled around her, and she soared through the air. The golden light was back, leading her to the place she felt safest. She was vaguely aware of creatures in the air with her, swans and gargoyles soaring and looping in curiosity when they saw her. Another swan tailed her, but she didn't care.

The golden light ended at a house that had been painted a gray blue color. She could feel him, moving about inside. The gargoyle she would claim as her mate. The one who would protect her best.

The swan dropped onto the wooden landing on the roof and squawked loudly. A door swung open almost immediately, and Vladik stepped out in his human form. There he was.

"Zori?" he knelt down to pick her up. The swan rubbed her head against him.

Another swan landed and shifted into Irina. "I knew she would come here. I apologize for how angry she's going to be when she figures out how to shift back."

"What do you mean?" Vladik asked. The swan that was Zori snapped her beak at Irina, and the high priestess smiled.

"I may have used you as motivation to get her to shift. She came here, just as I knew she would." Irina gave him a hard stare. "You had better be worthy of her, Iron Heart. Bring her home by sunset." With that, the high priestess shifted and flew away.

"Okay, Zori, you have to focus on changing back now so I can kiss you," Vladik said, placing the swan back on her feet.

Inside the swan, Zori stretched and clawed. Kissing was good motivation. The swan relented, knowing it was where it should be. The feathers shifted, changing back to sweater and jeans. Zori came back to herself, crouching on the cold wooden boards with the cape around her shoulders.

"Are you fucking other people?" she said, the anger still riding her.

Vladik reared back like she had hit him. “What? How could you possibly think... Bloody Irina. Did she say that to make you shift?”

Zori straightened up, her face flaming. “Maybe? She basically said that gargoyles are super horny, and because I haven’t claimed you, you would be out fucking other people.”

Vladik slapped a hand over his face. “Your grandmother is the worst sometimes. She purposely made you angry to force your swan out. It was a shitty thing to do.”

“Yeah, well, it worked, so I suppose she knew exactly what button to press,” Zori grumbled, crossing her arms.

A grin spread across Vladik’s face. “Were you flying over here in a jealous rage, puppy?”

“No! I just wanted to see for myself and murder anyone I found you with,” she said with a sniff. She was such an idiot. Her grandmother had baited her so easily. The swan inside of her made angry noises. *My mate.*

Vladik grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up. “You are so cute when you’re mad.”

Zoria kissed him, her hands gripping his hair tight. “Mine.”

“No doubt about it,” Vladik said, kissing her back viciously. He pulled her into the warm house and pressed her up against a wall. His hand slid under her sweater to squeeze her breast. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too,” Zori gasped, her hands running over his firm chest. “Need you naked.”

“So this is a booty call? I don’t know if I should be offended or not,” Vladik teased.

Zori nipped his neck. “If you don’t want me, you should just say so.”

“I always want you,” he said and ground the hard bulge in his pants against her. “See?”

“Kiss me again.” Zori let all her frustration and desire out. She had barely slept because he wasn’t with her. That morning of training had been a disaster because his warmth and his taste were all she could think about.

Vladik carried her into a bedroom that smelled of him and dropped her onto her feet. She pulled off her sweater and bra, eager to get out of her clothes.

Vladik laughed softly. “You have a burning need, do you, puppy?”

“Yes. Now shift for me.” She wanted the beast, not the man. The swan needed him more.

Vladik stepped back from her and let the shift take over him. He loomed over her, making her feel small and soft. “Get the rest of those clothes off. I want to see what’s mine.”

Zori kicked off her boots and shimmied out of her jeans and panties. The gargoyle in front of her looked like he was going to eat her alive, his huge dick already hard. She went to reach for it, but Vladik caught her wrist.

“Not yet,” he growled, lifting her up onto the high bed. “Need to taste you first.”

Zori was still sitting up straight, her feet dangling over the edge of the mattress. Nerves and anticipation danced up her spine.

Vladik went down on his knees and lifted her feet to rest against his shoulders. He massaged her breasts, his dark claws digging into her but not hard enough to break the skin. Zori whimpered, wet heat dripping out of her. There was something about a big monster determined to devour her that made her wild.

The gargoyle between her thighs let out a growl and lapped at her pussy. Zori gripped the sheets, her body clenching up. His gargoyle tongue was a lot bigger than his human one, fangs brushed over her softly, and she almost came.

“Fuck, Vladik,” she groaned. She went to lean back on the bed, but he stopped her.

“No. You watch,” he said, blue eyes shining with lust. His tongue and lips were all over her, making her mind haze. She didn’t look away. He thrust his long tongue into her, and pleasure pierced her, robbing her of breath.

Zori gripped his hair tight, holding him while she fucked his beautiful face until she was coming hard. Vladik licked her all the way through it, his gaze locked on hers and worshipful.

“Get on the bed with me right now,” she demanded, letting his hair go. “On your back.”

Vladik grinned and did as he was told. “Good to know you can be bossy when you want to be.”

Zori climbed on top of him and kissed him deeply. “You have no idea.” She licked and sucked her way down his neck to his chest. Vladik made encouraging sounds which let her know he was enjoying himself. She slid back on his thighs and gripped his dick.

“Are you going to let me ride this?” she asked.

“You know I can’t. If I do, I’ll try and claim you,” he groaned, his hips lifting up.

Zori remembered what her grandmother had said about females doing the claiming and not the other way around. She didn’t know how to do it, and until she did, they would find other ways to get off.

“Such a shame because it wants to get in me.” Zori rubbed her still wet pussy over his dick, making him growl deep in his chest. “See?”

“Fuck, Zoria, my self-control has limits.”

Zori jerked him again, and his hips lifted. “Fine, we’ll keep playing pretend.” She pressed his dick against her pussy, holding it to her as she rubbed herself up and down his shaft.

Vladik gripped her ass, the claws digging into her. “You are playing with fire, dirty girl.”

Zori was about to sass him when the tip of his tail slid up her inner thigh.

“Yes, more,” she gasped and guided it to her pussy. “Fuck me with it, Vladik. I want you in me any way I can.”

“I can’t wait until the day I get to have you properly,” Vladik said, thrusting his tail inside of her. “I’m going to claim every part of you so deeply, no one can ever take you away from me.”

Zori was losing her mind, her clit going crazy as she rubbed herself on the ridged underside of his dick, his tail filling her to her limit with each fast stroke.

They came together, Vladik crying out and lifting her up off the bed as his back bowed, and hot wetness splashed over her tits and belly. Zori was shaking, the intensity of her own release sending sparks through her, her pussy throbbing and sensitive.

Vladik sat up so he could kiss her, his long tongue flicking against hers. “Stay with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she promised him. She didn’t want to be apart from him; she hated it and so did her swan.

My mate, the swan said inside of her.

Our mate, Zori clarified and kissed him again.



THEY ENDED up in Vladik’s huge bathtub. It had been built for a gargoyle’s bulk, and so they could sprawl out properly. Zori sat in his lap and listened as he talked about Misha. In return, she told him about all the things Irina had said about her mother, and how she had been struggling to touch her magic that day.

“If it wasn’t for Irina goading me, I’d probably still be standing in the snow,” Zori said while she ran a cloth over his broad chest.

“I don’t like that she put it into your head that I would be with anyone else but you, but I’m glad it brought you here.”

He lifted her chin with a claw. “You do know that you’re the only woman I want, right? Because you are.”

Zori smiled, the tangled knot of emotion inside of her unclenching. “I know that now. We never made any promises to each other.”

“I’ll remind you I want you every day if I have to. I know Irina did it to bring your swan out, but I’m shitty with her right now,” he grumbled, pulling her into a possessive hug.

“Don’t be. She knew I’d react that way because she knows we have been...together,” she said, shifting awkwardly. “She actually asked me this morning if I would like to be shown how to brew a contraception tea. It was so embarrassing.”

Vladik chuckled. “I bet it was. You are going to learn just how nosey family can be.”

“Family,” Zori whispered, and her grip on him tightened. “I still feel so disconnected from the concept, even after meeting Irina.”

“Give it time. You’ve only been here a day.” Vladik rubbed her arm gently. “Actually, I have an idea. Time to get up, puppy. I’m going to take you somewhere that will help.”

Zori hung tightly to Vladik as they soared over the city buildings. They got some odd looks from a few of the other gargoyles in the air, and the swans circled them in confusion.

“Ignore them. They are just curious because they don’t understand why I’d be carrying a full-grown woman about,” Vladik explained.

“Maybe I should have tried to shift again,” Zori replied. She had thought about it, but she had also really wanted to feel his strong arms holding on to her.

Vladik nuzzled her neck. “There’s time to learn that. You already did it once today. That’s enough. Besides, I like holding your perfect ass as I fly.”

“You’re such a man,” Zori said, laughing softly. He always knew just what to say to distract her.

A huge gold and black building came into view, and Vladik began to descend fast. They landed in the stone courtyard in front of the building, and he placed her back onto her feet.

A shiver swept up Zori’s spine. The building looked like a stave church with an Eastern Orthodox flare. “What is this place?”

“It’s the main temple to Morana here in Kitez. There’s something I want to show you,” Vladik said. He held out a

hand for her, and Zori wrapped her tiny fingers around his massive, clawed ones.

It may have been silly, but Irina's goading had hit a vulnerable part of Zori that she didn't know existed until it was hurting. She couldn't handle the thought of Vladik being with anyone else, and the sheer intensity of her possessive feelings scared her. Vladik wanting to hold her hand soothed her insecurity like nothing else.

Is this what Irina meant about my swan choosing its mate? There was so much she didn't know, and she didn't want to freak Vladik out by asking him directly. He had said that he was scared that his beast wanted to mate with her, but not that *he* wanted it.

All thoughts about mating vanished as they stepped into the reverent hush of the temple. Zori's eyes adjusted to the golden glow of thousands of candles. Above her was a Byzantine style mosaic, but instead of Christ in the cupola, it was Morana looking down at them. Around her were flying swans and gargoyles and other symbols that must have been representing the goddess.

Zori wished she knew the stories that they were trying to tell. She made a mental note to ask Irina to give her a personal tour.

There was a large carved wooden statue of Morana on a dais that looked ancient, its gold leaf flaking in places. Offerings of food and flowers were laid at her feet. Women wearing feathered capes and other gargoyles were praying and lighting candles around them.

On the wall behind it were small painted ikons, all looking down at them with somber and kind faces.

"Who are they all?" Zori whispered to Vladik.

"They are our saints, high priestesses, and chosen ones of Morana," Vladik replied. He pointed to an arched doorway. "What I really want to show you is through there."

Zori followed him, her eyes trying to take everything in. She loved art and ancient churches and temples. She could

have spent a day in that one room studying the mosaics alone.

Through the archway was a maze of tombs. Across the top of the wall were written the words: *Our history is written in the blood of the holy, the stone of beasts, and the curses of gods.*

“I remember you saying that at the restaurant,” Zori said, staring up at it.

Vladik smiled. “It is a part of the Kitezhd Codex, our written history. This place is where we are put to rest.”

They walked slowly through the maze of names before going in through another door that led down under the church and through rock. Here there were alcoves carved into the stone; feathered capes were arranged inside of them, and others held gargoyle claws. Candles were burning in carved holders. Flowers in states of decay were set out for their loved ones.

“Are your parents down here?” she asked. He had never spoken about them.

“They are. They have been for a long time. I don’t know if Irina mentioned it, but our lifespans are longer than normal humans’. It’s got something to do with our healing magic,” Vladik replied.

Zoria squinted at his face. “How old are you?”

“Old enough to know better,” he said and kissed her forehead. She put her hands on her hips, and he relented. “I suppose I’m about seventy in human years.”

“Wow. Talk about an age gap. And you never mated or wanted to?”

“I’m still considered quite young for a gargoyle, and no. I’ve never wanted to mate. I didn’t think it was something the goddess wanted for me.” Vladik stared at her a beat too long and then cleared his throat. He gestured to the memorials around them.

“This is your history, Zori. These are your people, your ancestors. They are the honored dead. You might feel alone,

but they are always with you, and always have been.”

As they walked, tears welled in Zori’s eyes at all the little notes and presents left for the dead. A wisp of dark power fluttered through her veins, the feeling of the goddess’s power all around her.

There had always been a hole inside of her, a disconnection to her past and her family, making her feel like she didn’t belong anywhere. Standing amongst the dead, that wound finally healed.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” she whispered, not knowing what else to say.

Vladik pulled her close. “You’re welcome. I wanted you to know that you belong here with us, even on the days you struggle to understand your power or your place.”

Zori went up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. Her beautiful gargoyle who was so savage when he needed to be and yet so kind and thoughtful. Vladik kissed her back, cradling her head gently, his wings wrapping around her.

“Now that we have visited the dead, my sweet Zoria, how do you feel about visiting the living?” he asked.

“Lead the way. You’re my sexy tour guide for the day,” she said, making him laugh softly.



ZORI WAS SURPRISED to find they ended up at another temple. Vladik told her all about Mokosh, the goddess of healing, as they walked through the halls to Misha’s room. Zori fiddled with her wind-blown braid, suddenly nervous.

Vladik noticed her fussing and grinned. “You look perfect, Zori.”

“Sure I do,” she said, fixing her sweater and making sure there wasn’t anything on her black jeans. She really needed to talk to Irina about choosing some clothes for herself.

Vladik pulled her to him in a deep, brain-blistering kiss that left her with a dopey smile on her face. She was still dazed when he opened the door to a room and led her in. A man was sitting on a bed, reading a book. He looked like Vladik in ten years' time. Zori had to admit the sight wasn't bad at all.

"Baby brother, you should have warned me you were bringing a guest," he grumbled in a deep voice and ran a hand through his thick hair.

"Misha, this is Zori," Vladik said and took a seat on one of the plush chairs.

Light danced in Misha's gray eyes. "Ah, my savior. Now I know why Vladik was so bashful when he talked about you."

"I don't know about savior, but I'm glad to see you on the mend," Zori said with a smile. "It's nice to finally meet you in person." She went to sit down on the spare chair, but Vladik pulled her into his lap instead. She struggled half-heartedly, and his grip only tightened.

"Let her breathe, Vladislav. You don't have to be marking your territory," Misha said with a disapproving look at his brother.

"Yeah, Vladislav," Zori added cheekily.

"Excellent! You are all here," a deep voice boomed, making them all jump. A tall, broad man strode into the room. He had silver hair, a salt and pepper beard, and bright hazel eyes. Zori sat up a little straighter at the easy authority radiating off him. He put his hands on his hips and looked down at Misha. "You look like shit, my boy."

"Thanks, Aleksandr. I appreciate that," Misha replied with a sigh.

Aleksandr poked him. "Are they feeding you enough? I'll talk to Olena and get her to put extra meat on your plate."

"Don't bother her, old man. I'm fed well enough."

Aleksandr's hazel eyes whipped to Zori, and she had to force herself not to shrink inwards. He surprised her by

bowing deeply.

“Zoria Nikolaeva, it is an honor to meet you. I see you have found a throne already, my princess.”

“Ah, he wouldn’t let me sit anywhere else.” Zori blushed vividly. “And I’m just Zori, not a princess.”

Aleksandr raised a brow. “Yes, you are. Vladislav, what else haven’t you told her?”

Zori had thought that Kaspian had called her princess as some kind of nickname. She turned to look at Vladik.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm you. It’s only a title,” he said, as if it explained everything.

“But Irina is a high priestess, not a tsarina,” Zori pointed out.

Aleksandr shrugged and sat down on the other chair. “It’s the same thing in Kitezsh.”

“If you rule the gargoyles, does that make you the tsar?” she asked.

Aleksandr’s laughter boomed around the room. “Goddess, no. I keep the rabble in line. We are a matriarchal society, blossom. Irina is the boss, not me. Speaking of which, she told me to bring you both home for dinner tonight.”

Zori tried not to pout. She had wanted to stay with Vladik that night but clearly her grandmother had other plans.

“Now, Misha and Zoria, I want you to tell me everything you can about Maxim and his tower of horrors,” Aleksandr said. The cheerful fatherly vibes were gone, and suddenly a general was in its place.

“He’s a dead man walking,” Vladik growled.

Aleksandr’s smile sharpened. “I know that much. I want to know how he’d mostly strike against us.”

Misha fidgeted with the corners of his battered paperback. Zori didn’t feel like talking either. Unlike her, Misha had only seen the violent and vicious side of Maxim. Dark magic rose within her, stars blotting out her eyes.

“Zori?” Vladik asked, but she couldn’t answer him.

Zori’s hand moved against her will and took Misha’s. She held it tightly, her mouth opening. **“Tell them everything, dearest child of stone. I need you to get strong once more and fight for me. Find my lost daughters, Mikhail, and I promise, I will help you get revenge on all they did to you.”**

The stars and darkness cleared, and Zori shuddered back to herself. She was still holding on to Misha’s hand. The three gargoyles were staring at her, their eyes as wide as saucers.

“What the hell was that?” Misha whispered, pulling back from her like she was going to bite him.

“I believe that was the goddess,” Aleksandr said, looking at Zori in a whole new way. “Irina didn’t tell me you were a vessel.”

“A vessel?” Zori squeaked, becoming more freaked out by the second. She didn’t have any warning; she just suddenly had no control over her own body.

Aleksandr gestured with his hand. “You know, an avatar? A human chosen for the goddess to possess at will to be her hands and voice.”

“Possess?” Zori touched her throat. “It’s just getting worse.” She had recognized that voice as the one that had told her to jump from the balcony the night she had escaped. It really *had* been Morana like Vladik had said. He pulled her tighter against his chest as she started to shake.

“Breathe, puppy. You’re okay,” he whispered in her ear.

“Well, things just got a whole lot more interesting. No wonder Maxim guarded you like a dragon.” Aleksandr leaned back in his chair and stared at Zori. “Okay, blossom, you had best start from the beginning.”

By the time Zori, Vladik, and Aleksandr made it back to Irina's house, the sun was setting, and the snow was falling once more. She had told Aleksandr about what she had found in Maxim's study and his plans for Misha.

Misha himself said he would speak to Aleksandr alone about the things he had gone through. Zori couldn't shake the feeling that Misha wanted to protect Vladik from the details. He was tense enough with Zori's part of the story.

Aleksandr hadn't pushed Misha either, though he was clearly worried about Maxim and his inner circle.

"Irina said that Maxim could track me here using my blood," Zori said, her hand gripping Vladik's tightly as they walked with Aleksandr.

"He's powerful enough to do it, but whether or not he had the balls to try and attack the whole city is another matter," Aleksandr replied. "He and the *volhv* got close enough last time to snatch Alisa and the other women. They have a rough idea where the city is already, but they aren't ready to face us in an all-out assault, or they would have done it already."

"That was before Zori learned the truth and we stole Misha back," Vladik argued. "Maxim isn't going to let it go. It's not in his nature."

"We should take the tower from him," Zori said, thinking out loud. "I'm sure there's information about the other *volhv* in there."

Aleksandr smiled viciously. "I like the way you think."

"I don't. There's no way I'm going to let you walk back in there," Vladik growled.

"I'm not talking about me personally. I don't know how to fight. I just can't stop thinking about the other women who are being locked up right now like I was," Zori replied.

"Let's see what Irina has to say," Aleksandr replied, opening the gate to her grandmother's garden. He gestured for her to go first. "I have no doubt this isn't a social dinner, but a scheming one."

"When do I ever scheme, heretic?" Irina demanded, coming out of the small green house with a basket.

"You came out of the womb scheming, woman. It is why you are now high priestess," Aleksandr replied. He gestured to Zori. "Don't call me a heretic in front of the vessel either. I don't want Morana sending a winter storm to destroy my house."

Irina looked the three of them over. "A vessel?"

"Morana spoke through Zoria. I witnessed it myself," Aleksandr said.

Zori leaned into Vladik. "Are you sure we can't just go back to your tub?"

Vladik gave her a heated look and went to open his mouth.

Both Aleksandr and Irina turned on them. "No."

"There is no escaping them, I'm afraid," Vladik said with sigh. He rested a hand on her lower back and nudged her forward. "They will just make a scene if we don't go in."

"Can we meet you inside? I just need to talk to Vladik super quick," Zori said to Irina. She looked about to object when Aleksandr put a hand on her arm.

"I'll talk about what I saw when Morana spoke through Zoria," he said and steered Irina towards the door. "Five minutes, you two."

Vladik waited until they were alone before asking, “What’s wrong?”

“You all seem really calm about an actual goddess talking through me. I need to know you aren’t freaking out on the inside because I am,” she said, pacing the snowy garden path.

Vladik watched her, a small smile on his face. “You are still my puppy. Morana borrowing your voice occasionally isn’t going to change that.”

Zori pushed her hands into her hair. “Just when I think I’ve got a handle on all of this, something changes. I still have moments where I wonder if I’m losing my mind.”

Vladik’s wings twitched. “I know it’s a lot, but you have to try to think about it from a different perspective. For a start, none of this is weird to us. You being a princess, a black swan, Morana speaking through you, all of it. It’s not everyday occurrences, but it’s not out of the realm of possibility either.”

“I don’t want anyone getting taken or hurt by Maxim because of me,” Zori said, wrapping her arms around herself. The haunted look in Misha’s eyes spoke volumes about the trauma he’d sustained. She didn’t want anyone else to go through what he had. “If Maxim ever got his hands on you, I’d never forgive myself. If he gets to the city—”

“If it did happen, it wouldn’t be your fault, Zori.” Vladik rested his hands on her elbows and let his wings curl around her to protect her from the falling snow. “Chernobog’s *volhv* have been threatening Kitezsh since Morana made us. That you are here is just extra motivation for Maxim to come. We know they can’t get past the wards, or they would have done it already,” Vladik reassured her. “I’m not going to let Maxim ever hurt you again, Zori.”

Zori leaned her head against his hard chest and tried to get her worry under control. “You’re the only thing that makes sense to me in this whole mess. You know that?”

“I can’t say I’m sad about it,” he replied, a smile dancing along his lips.

Zori took a deep breath and asked the thing that she'd been wondering all afternoon. "Are you reluctant to mate with me because I'm kind of like a princess?"

Vladik's smile slipped. "That's not the reason. Mating isn't like a human marriage, Zori. It's forever. I won't take your choice from you until you know what it means fully. Yes, you are a princess and I'm just...me. A grunt in the army that will do anything to protect you and this city. It's my whole purpose. If you decided you needed something more than that, I would have to deal with that."

Zori didn't care what their status was. She just wanted him.

"Deal with it? So what you're saying is you would be completely fine if I started dating other people," she said, stepping back from him. She bumped into his wings, but he didn't release her. His eyes were shining with a feral animal sheen. It told her everything. "That's what I thought. You are full of it."

Vladik's jaw worked, forcing the words out. "If that's what you really wanted, I would respect it."

"You would give me up without a fight?" she asked. She was playing with fire, and she knew it. She couldn't help it; she loved when he got stirred up.

"There would definitely be a fight. I wouldn't be able to stop myself because I would need to know they could protect you better than I could," Vladik replied, more growl than words. Zori knew she shouldn't be turned on by that, but damn, her whole body lit up like it was Christmas. She bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from grinning like a fool.

Vladik's eyes narrowed as he reached out and ran his claws through her hair. "Are you trying to stir me up, puppy? See how crazy you make me before I snap?"

Zori smiled sweetly. "I'm just trying to learn more about gargoyle culture."

"You will learn all about gargoyle culture when I bend you over and make your pussy—"

The front door to the house swung open. “Inside, now! I’m not waiting all night,” Aleksandr called.

Zori patted Vladik’s chest. “Hold that thought. Dinner is ready.”

“I’d rather you sit on my face so I could have you for dinner instead,” Vladik replied.

Zori pulled that beautiful face down to hers. “Please don’t make me horny before I have to have dinner with my grandmother. I’m sorry for stirring you up.”

“No, you aren’t, but you will be the next time I get you alone,” Vladik huffed and kissed her hard. It was deep and savage and utterly possessive. Zori’s hands tangled in his hair, and Vladik pulled her up into his arms.

She was wrapping her leg around his hips when snow hit Vladik’s wing, spraying them both with ice and making Zori squeal.

“Did you just throw a fucking snowball at me?” she demanded, whirling on their attacker.

Aleksandr was making another ball in his massive hands. “There’s more where that came from if you two don’t stop sucking each other’s faces.”

“Fine! We are coming, keep your pants on,” Zori said and moved away from Vladik. “We’ll pick this up later?”

“This better be the quickest dinner ever,” Vladik groaned, and they walked to the house together.



SADLY, it was not the quickest dinner ever. Zori sat back as the others talked about defenses they were putting in the forest around the city to hinder any attackers. Aleksandr and Irina argued like siblings, and at the same time, Zori could see that they still worked well together. It made her wonder what it would be like to have a friendship that close.

Vladik's tail stayed curled around Zori's calf under the table, and when Irina insisted she stay with her that night in case Morana's possession had any side effects, Vladik hadn't argued. He'd kissed Zori's cheek good night and had left with Aleksandr. The older gargoyle needed to talk to him alone, and being with her grandmother when Zori's magic was volatile was the safest place for her.

Zori clutched her pillow to her chest, trying her best not to miss Vladik's warmth and strong body.

She rolled over and stared at the painted patterns on the ceiling. *This must be what love is.* It was like everything was spinning out of control, but when she was holding his hand, there was one calm space.

Zori held up her hand and reached for that starry sky of magic inside of her. Black tendrils of smoke danced around her fingers.

Why did you give me this power, Morana? Why would anyone want me as their vessel? I don't even know how to use this.

The goddess's presence filled her mind like Vladik's telepathy did, but instead of warmth, it made the hair on the back of Zori's neck stand on end.

I chose you because you are the only one strong enough to help save the others. You understand the enemy you are fighting against. A time of reckoning is coming to Chernobog's volhv. They will pay for hurting my holy followers.

I don't think I'm strong at all. I feel like a naive child, stumbling through a world I don't know how to be a part of.

You will learn, little swan. You have everything you need right in front of you. Stop fearing your magic and your animal. They are a part of you. Claim your mate, and you will have his strength to protect and guard you.

"But I don't know how to claim him," Zoria whispered, sitting up. She tried to listen for the goddess again, but she was gone. "Damn it."

Zori got out of bed and went to her cape that had been placed on top of her dresser. She blew out a long breath and put the cape on.

Moonlight streamed through the window, making her skin glow starkly against the black feathers.

“Okay, I’m going to stop fearing you. You are a part of me, so let’s work together.”

Nothing happened. Zori flexed her fingers and imagined the starry sky of magic inside of her like she had in bed. Black tendrils of smoke appeared, and amongst the darkness, there were now flecks of gold. “I’m not afraid of you. I’m not afraid of you. Please, please come out.”

This time she felt the feathers rise up in her skin. There was no pain when her skin melted away and the human Zori was pulled deep into herself. It was over in seconds, and she snapped out her wings. She moved her long neck, feeling the shape of her new body and her webbed feet.

Want mate, the swan demanded. Zori wanted him too, but they needed to wait. They needed to get control of themselves first. She would not feel like she was useless any longer. If they worked together, they would both get what they wanted sooner.

The swan fluttered her wings in irritation before she let the human side of Zori take control once more. She sat crouched on the floor, panting heavily but whole and human once more.

Zori’s fingers gripped the rag rug underneath her and steadied her breathing. “Again.”

The following afternoon, Zori stood in front of the mirror in her room and applied the finishing touches to her lipstick. It was some kind of feast day for Morana, and Irina had taken Zori shopping for everything she needed. The feast was a big deal, and Irina wanted to combine it with an official coming out party for Zori.

No pressure at all, grandmother. Zori wanted to look good, so her hair was now in a braided crown with a few soft curls framing her face, and her make-up was her favorite bold eyes and red lips combo.

She had been surprised by the selection of clothing stores in Kitezsh too and had found the perfect outfit. Irina had agreed with her choice to wear black. She was the first black swan Kitezsh had seen in centuries, and it was a power move for her to wear her black cape and a matching outfit.

It was too cold to wear a dress, so she had settled on leather pants lined with flannel, knee high boots, a black peasant style top and a tight waistcoat that made her boobs look amazing. Over the top she had a *shuba* coat. It was black felt with golden embroidery, and black fur lined the inside. The coat had small gold rings on the shoulders that her black feathered cape was tied to with velvet ribbons Irina had helped her stitch on. She wore her mother's necklace and some elaborate golden earrings that Irina had offered her.

Zori studied her reflection, her scarlet smile widening. She looked like she was about to go hunt vampires with Van

Helsing, which was her dream aesthetic.

“Oh, Zoria, you look so beautiful,” Irina said from the doorway. She was dressed in dark purple, fur lined kaftan, and wore a headdress of golden bird skulls, silver feathers, and amethyst jewels.

“So do you! Wow, you look like some kind of witchy saint,” she replied. If her grandmother was any indication of how she was going to age, Zori was going to look *good*.

“Thank you, it is a special night to Morana, and I can feel her magic in the air,” Irina replied, her cheeks glowing.

Zori could feel it too. It was like her veins were filled with liquid night. She was now shifting between her swan and back again with ease. The extra training the night before had both sides of herself finally in agreement with each other.

“Vladislav is going to have a heart attack when he sees you. He’s not allowed to throw you over his shoulder and fly away. I want people to see you. It’s important,” Irina said, but she was smiling as she did so. “He can wait a few hours to drag you away.”

Zori’s cheek flamed. “I might not come home tonight if that’s the case.”

“That’s fine. I’m not your jailer, Zoria. You are a grown woman. I just need to know where you are. That’s all I ask.”

Zori hugged her. “Thank you for everything.”

“You don’t need to thank me, little one. We are family.” Irina patted her on the back. “You are everything I hoped you would be, just as you are.”

“Don’t make me cry. My eye make-up looks too good,” she complained, sniffing back tears.

“No tears allowed. Tonight is a celebration,” Irina said, cupping Zori’s cheeks with her hands. “Now, let’s go. I need some spiced wine and to find someone to dance with.”

Zori laughed softly. They definitely were related.



THE TOWN SQUARE was decorated with buntings made of fake flowers and greenery. Food carts selling spiced nuts, pierogi, pancakes, and baked treats were doing a busy trade. There were people with hot chocolate, coffee, wine, and ciders. A band was playing, and people were dancing.

Gargoyles walked about in their true forms, sporting fur capes around their shoulders with slits in the backs for their wings. All the women were in warm dresses and had their capes about their shoulders.

Zori stuck close to Irina, who was greeted everywhere she went. She introduced Zori to so many people that she lost track of their names. Everyone was polite and welcoming. A few gargoyles were giving her an appraising eye, but not the gargoyle she was looking for.

Zori was getting another spiced wine when she felt awareness dance down her spine. *Vladik?*

His warm presence brushed into her mind. ***Where are you hiding, my sweet puppy?***

Zori got an extra wine from the vendor and walked through the crowd. She felt the second Vladik's stormy eyes found her. He was standing still like he was frozen to the spot.

Zori smiled and may have added an extra bit of sway to her hips as she moved towards him. He wore a black cloak and had a golden torc about his neck. They had somehow dressed to match.

"Wine?" she asked, offering him the mug.

"I'm going to need something stronger to keep my hands off you tonight. You look stunning," Vladik said, accepting the wine but not drinking any.

"You do too. Irina took me shopping. She also said you're not allowed to throw me over your shoulder and fly away. At least for a few hours," Zori replied with a wink. Her swan

preened inside of her. She was on board with the being carried off idea.

Vladik looked at the crowd around them. “How many gargoyles have introduced themselves to you already?”

“A lot. I don’t know how I’m going to remember any of their names.” Zori’s lips twitched at the way his eyes narrowed. “I didn’t let any of them touch me though a few tried to kiss my hand.”

“Which ones? Can you point them out?” he asked, the hint of a growl in his voice. “I told you they will have to prove they can protect you.”

“Oh, you big idiot. You’re the only one I’m ever going to want,” she said and went up on tiptoes and kissed him in front of everyone.

Vladik’s body locked up before his hand went to her waist and pulled her closer. There was a hush around them, but Zori didn’t care if they did see. She wanted everyone to know who she wanted. Including Vladik.

“All right, that’s enough, you two,” Aleksandr said as he joined them. “We can all smell you on her, Vladik, for Morana’s sake.”

Zori wiped some of her red lipstick off Vladik’s lower lip. “I wanted to make a point.”

“Well, you’ve done it,” Aleksandr chuckled.

It was the first time Zori had seen him in his full gargoyle form, and she had to take a step back. He was huge, almost the size of Kaspian, with his silver hair tied back with a golden clasp, revealing an undercut Zori didn’t know he had. He wore a dark gray and silver cloak about his shoulders, lined with wolf fur, and his skin was a pale gray, almost like marble. There were slashes of white in places, which Zori realized were battle scars. He was the leader of the gargoyles for a reason. The scholar, fatherly side of him wasn’t all he was.

“You look amazing,” Zori said, grinning up at him before kissing his cheek.

“Thank you, blossom. You are too kind,” he replied, giving her a fond smile. “You better be careful, Vladik. I might change her mind yet.”

“You wish, old man,” Vladik grumbled. It only made Aleksandr laugh harder.

The three of them walked together through the crowds, Zori keeping her gloved fingers holding tightly on to Vladik’s hand. They ate and drank and laughed. Everyone was having a good time.

Zori thought there would be some kind of religious ceremony and mentioned it to Vladik.

“This is the ceremony,” he said, gesturing at the partying people. “It’s to celebrate Morana’s time in the best way we know how.”

“Well, I’d like to celebrate with another glass of wine if I could convince you to go and get me one,” Zori asked, fluttering her lashes at him.

Vladik pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “I’ll be right back. Don’t wander too far.”

“I won’t. I’m going to watch the musicians,” she promised.

Vladik headed off one way, and she went the other. Everyone seemed so...happy. Zori had always felt on the outside looking in, and now for the first time, she was allowed to join the party. She breathed in the smells of smoke and sugar and was so overwhelmed at being a part of something that she didn’t notice the man until he was standing right in front of her. He was wearing a tattered overcoat and had a gray pallor to his cheeks. He looked unwell. He smiled at her with broken yellow teeth.

“Oh! Hello,” she said, startled. There were a few men about—Zori assumed they were gargoyles preferring their human form for the night—but he didn’t feel like a gargoyle. He was too small and slender.

“Zoria, I have come with a message for you,” he said with a bow of his head. “Return to Maxim and no one has to die.”

Zori stumbled back. “W-What did you say?”

The man’s eyes went from brown to red, and a different voice came out of him. It was deep and ancient. **“Zoria Nikolaeva, at last we meet.”**

Zori couldn’t move. Fear had locked down her limbs. “Who are you?”

“You didn’t think that Morana was the only god to speak with humans?” The man gave her a disbelieving look.

“C-Chernobog?” Zori whispered, her throat dry.

He bowed. **“I must say you are a lot prettier than her last vessel. You are positively brimming with power. I can see why Maxim was so eager to keep you locked up. It’s a shame he didn’t introduce us earlier. We could do great things together. Greedy little volhv.”**

“I don’t want anything to do with you,” she said. She needed to get away, but her body refused to move.

“You don’t even know me, sweet swan. You think your new goddess has your best interests at heart? Morana will use you up just like she did with her last vessel. She breaks her toys like a petulant child. I’ll make you a deal. You come to me willingly, and I will honor you above all others. You want revenge on Maxim? I’ll give it to you. You want to rule the world? I’ll make it happen. Come to me, and I will even spare this new family you’re trying to build.”

Zori shook her head. “Get away from me. This city is protected, and Maxim will never get in.”

“I did,” Chernobog said. He lifted a brow. **“You need a demonstration? I’m happy to provide one. Just remember, little swan. If I have to come in there and get you, I will slaughter everyone in my way.”** He shuddered, and the man’s eyes went brown again. He started to chant, and Zori backed away from him, fear dumping down her spine. Midnight power rushed through her.

“Stay back!” she shouted at him. People turned to look at her like she was crazy. “Everyone, get away! Get away from him!”

The man laughed wildly, showing his fangs. Claws burst from his hands, and scarlet power shot out of him. It struck her in the chest where her pendant was, and it ricocheted off her. Morana's power filled her so quickly she gasped. Someone was calling her name, but she couldn't turn. The man was readying for another attack.

“Die, *upiór*,” Zori snarled in Morana's voice. She raised her hand, and magic shot out of her. It collided with the man, and he exploded in a rain of flesh and gore. The magic vanished, and Zori's knees gave out. Vladik caught her before she hit the ground, and everyone started to shout and scream as one.

“Zoria! What happened?” Irina and Aleksandr were suddenly by their side. Her grandmother gripped her hand.

“He was with Chernobog. They are going to attack the city if I don’t go to him,” Zoria said, her teeth chattering.

Aleksandr’s face went cold. “Vladik? Leave Zoria with Irina. We need to mobilize, get this contained, and check the patrols. We need to find how the fuck he got into our city.”

Vladik made sure Zori could stand on her own before he kissed her quickly. “Stay with Irina. Do not leave her side.”

“I won’t. Be careful! Morana called him an *upiór*,” she said, gripping his arm.

“Fuck,” Aleksandr muttered. “We need to go now, Vladislav.”

“Be careful,” Vladik whispered, letting her go and disappearing into the panicked crowd.

A group of women appeared, dressed in the priestess robes of the Mokosh temple. They circled the chunks of the dead man and made a barrier between it and the people. Those that had been hit by exploding debris were hustled behind the barrier to be checked over for injuries.

Irina squeezed Zori’s hand once before climbing up onto the nearest table.

“Citizens of Kitez, please do not panic! This matter is being looked into, and we will inform the city of what we find. Please go home and allow us to find who is responsible,” Irina called, her voice magnifying as if she’d spoken through a megaphone. Some people gave Zori suspicious looks, and she tried not to take it personally. She looked at her hands and at the mess that her magic had caused. She made it to a nearby garbage bin before she threw up her wine.

“Here, drink this,” one of the priestesses said and passed her a bottle of water. “Come and sit.” Zori allowed herself to be led to a wooden bench. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “No. I feel a little weak. The magic came out of me so fast.”

“It’s a good thing it did. If the *upiór* had started attacking civilians, it would have done a lot of damage,” Irina said, joining them. “Come, Zoria, I will take you home.”

“We will inform you of our findings, High Priestess,” the Mokosh priestess said and gestured to where the remains were being bagged up. “This magic feels very strange.”

Zori opened her mouth to tell them about Chernobog, but Irina squeezed her arm. “Thank you for the water,” she said instead and allowed Irina to lead her away.

“We’ll talk about it in the house. Now, shift,” Irina said and turned into her swan. Zori reached for the power, relieved when it responded, and her black wings stretched out. She launched into the sky, following Irina through the narrow buildings and back home.

Zori felt the pull of the golden magic that led to Vladik, but she fought following it. He had to help Aleksandr and find out if there were any other monsters finding their way into the city.

Zori landed next to Irina on the roof and shifted back into her human form. Her shoulders and back were aching, her breastbone sore from the force of the magic that had bounced off her pendent.

“Tell me everything that happened,” Irina said, ushering her inside. “If I had let you talk in front of people, the whole city would be in a panic.”

Zori took off her coat and hung it up inside the door before she followed Irina downstairs to the kitchen. She sat at the table and put her head in her hands. Irina moved about, making tea.

“It happened so quickly,” Zori said and tried to remember everything about the thing that Chernobog had spoken through. “This is all my fault.”

“No. It’s Chernobog’s fault,” Irina replied, placing the tea in front of Zori. “Sip on that. It will calm your stomach and your nerves.”

Zori drank her tea and tried not to have a panic attack. “What are we going to do? I can’t stay here if the *volhv* are coming for me.”

“Don’t be silly. You can’t run. They had wanted to attack us for years, Zori. This is not on you to fix all by yourself.”

Zori thought about the suspicious looks people had given her. “People will blame me if anyone else gets hurts.”

“They wouldn’t dare. Those who saw you in action tonight cannot doubt that the goddess is with you. I’ve never seen a spell that would do that to a body, even a dead one.”

“What do you mean dead?” Zori asked.

“That’s what *upiór* are. They are the cursed dead, pulled from their graves by magic. There are different types, but this one seemed to be the vampiric kind, going by its fangs. The Mokosh priestesses will be able to tell us more. Chernobog is bold to send one of those foul things into this place,” Irina said, folding her arms. Seeing Zori’s confused expression, she added, “He can summon and raise the dead. The creatures like the *upiór* heed his call and will do as he commands.”

Not only did he have devoted blood mages, he also could summon an undead army of monsters. Perfect. Zori put her head in her hands again and desperately wished Vladik would turn up.

There was a knock on the front door, and a tall gargoyle entered. “Apologies for the interruption, High Priestess. The general has requested your presence at the northern ward stone.”

Irina nodded. “I’ll come with you. Zoria, stay here. I’ll be home soon.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured her grandmother. She didn’t feel fine, but Irina was too important to stay away from the investigation. Irina kissed Zori on the forehead and followed the gargoyle out into the night.

Zori drank her tea and got up to pace. Chernobog’s words and power crawled over her like spiders. *Morana will use you up just like she did with her last vessel. She breaks her toys like a petulant child.*

Zori knew he was trying to fuck with her, and she was fighting hard not to listen to the doubt he had placed in her. Just because Morana was their goddess didn’t mean she didn’t have her own agenda. She said she wanted Zori to find the other swan wives who were lost, but the magic that had killed the *upiór* was so dark and angry.

Zori hugged herself and did another lap of the carpet. She wanted Vladik to tell her everything was going to be all right. It didn’t matter if it was a lie.

Claim your mate, child. I told you that you will need his strength and protection for all that is coming, Morana said, her presence filling Zori’s mind.

“Really? After all that has happened tonight, that’s all you have to say?” she replied out loud, too tired to concentrate on telepathy.

Chernobog lies, Zoria. I do not break what is precious to me. I protect it. It’s why the swan wives and gargoyles exist at all. You might not like to kill, but sometimes it is needed to protect those we love from monsters. Morana’s presence bore down on her. **And make no mistake, Chernobog is the worst monster of all.**

The goddess left, and Zori keeled over, trying to catch her breath. First magic, and now monsters. True evil monsters that wanted to take her to Chernobog.

Mate, mate, mate, the swan demanded, trying to push its way through. *SAFE*.

“Okay, we’ll see if he’s back home yet,” Zori said. She scribbled a note to tell Irina where she had gone before climbing back up the stairs toward the roof.

Zori grabbed her cape from the hook and wrapped it about her shoulders. She doubted he would have returned yet, but she needed to be there when he did. There was no chance she was going to sleep without him that night.

The transition into the swan was the smoothest one yet. She was in the air in a blink, the swan knowing how to find Vladik’s house unlike Zori. There were gargoyles with weapons flying in formations, patrolling the streets. She prayed there was no other *upiór* in the city.

They all seemed so sure that none of Chernobog’s followers could get in. Maxim had found a way. She knew he was smart enough to figure it out. He would’ve loved the challenge of trying to get through the magic because that was the way he was built. Methodical, precise, and relentless.

Zori landed on Vladik’s roof, shifting back into a human. A search through the dead potted plants produced a rusty spare key, and Zoria opened the door.

“Vladik? Are you home?” she called. Her magic thrummed under her skin, but she couldn’t feel anything in the house. Zori walked in anyway and switched on the lights. She went downstairs to his lounge room and lit the fire that had already been laid in the grate. The house smelled of Vladik, and Zori let it soothe her frazzled nerves. She took off her coat and sat on the couch. Wherever he was, she hoped he was okay.

Zori woke hours later to heavy footfalls on the stairs. She'd fallen asleep on the couch, waiting for him.

"Zori?" Vladik called.

"I'm here," she said. He had a wild look in his eyes as he closed in on her. Zori held her arms out to him, and he picked her up off the couch and into his arms. "I'm sorry I broke in. I just needed you."

"Thank the goddess. I just went to Irina's and couldn't find you. She sent me back because she doesn't know how long she will be. I almost went crazy when I found the house empty," he said in a rush, pulling her tighter to him before sitting back down on the couch.

"I left a note," she murmured against his neck. His hair smelled of night and winter air.

"I didn't see any note. Are you okay?" he asked, rubbing her back.

"I'm fine. A bit shaken up by a god speaking through a corpse, but I'm unharmed. I knew nothing was going to feel right unless I was with you." Zori rested her forehead against his. "I need to tell you something, but I'm scared you will freak out."

Vladik's grip on her tightened. "What is it, puppy? You can tell me anything. You know that."

"The goddess told me I needed to claim my mate so that I could be stronger and protected," she said, not daring to open

her eyes. “I love you, Vladik. More than I can understand or articulate. I want you as my mate, but I’m not going to force you. Not because I’m scared, and certainly not because some goddess told me to do it.”

“Zoria, look at me,” Vladik said, and she opened her eyes. He didn’t look freaked out by her announcement. He looked relieved. “I knew you were mine from the second I saw you at the club. I’ve never prayed for something so hard in all my life. I’ve been waiting for you to catch up to how I’ve been feeling. I love you, puppy, and I will protect you and care for you until there’s no breath left in my body.”

Zori laughed with relief and kissed him, her arms going around his neck. “Take me upstairs and make me yours,” she begged.

Vladik stood up and tossed her over his shoulder, making her squeak. “You don’t have to ask me twice, sweet mate. I’m never letting you go now.”

“I don’t want you to let me go,” she replied, and patted him on the ass as they went up the stairs. “The view is great here.”

Vladik laughed and laid her down on his bed. He tugged off her boots and socks. His expression turned serious once more. “You almost stopped my heart tonight, you know that? I turned around to get you wine and you got attacked. I won’t be leaving your side again. *Never* again.”

“The goddess protected me. I’m here. I’m fine,” she tried to reassure him. He helped her out of the rest of her clothes. Red and purple bruises bloomed over her sternum where the pendent had absorbed the attack.

Vladik leaned down and placed a gentle kiss over it. “This could have killed you.”

“No, just wounded. Chernobog wants me alive so I can join him.” Zori ran her hands through his hair. “I’m okay, Vladik. I swear.”

“You might be okay, but I’m not. I’ve never been so afraid as I was tonight.” He lifted his head, his eyes filled with

heated promise. “I’m done living without you. No more sleeping alone. No more being alone at all. If Chernobog wants to have another crack at you, we face him together.”

Zori swallowed down the tears in the back of her throat. “Tell me what to do to mate with you, Vladik. I don’t know how.”

He kissed the soft mound of her breast. “It will be instinctual. Let me worship you, and it will happen. If you really want me, you will know.”

Zori wanted to say that it didn’t make sense, but his tongue looped over her nipple piercing, and that was the end of coherent words. She didn’t want to think about dark gods, vessels, monsters, and chosen ones. She wanted her beautiful gargoyle to wipe everything from her mind but him.

Vladik’s mouth left fiery trails over her, licking patterns down her too hot skin before spreading her wide and eating her pussy.

“I don’t need foreplay. I just need you inside of me,” she said breathlessly.

“My sweet Zoria, if we don’t have foreplay, I won’t get inside of this tight, perfect cunt of yours,” he replied and shifted back into his human form. Any complaint Zori might have made vanished as he slid two fingers inside of her. “I’m going to fuck you as a man, loosen you up with orgasms, and then fuck you as a gargoyle. I must have you every way I can. I need you to surrender to the man and the beast. Can you do that for me, puppy?”

“Y-Yes?” she replied, her body tightening with excitement and anticipation. He was already working her towards her first orgasm of the night. His soft mouth lowered back to her clit, and her legs trembled around him. She was never going to get enough of him, her strong, perfect mate. Vladik knew exactly where to stroke and suck to get her to light up. The first orgasm shot through her fast, her fingers gripping his hair tight.

“That’s it, breathe through it because we aren’t stopping,” Vladik said, nipping her soft inner thigh. He pulled his soaked fingers free from her and used the wetness to slick down his cock. He kept his other hand busy on her clit, not giving her a second to recover.

“Look at me, Zori,” he commanded. Zori stared at the feral edges of his features, the soft grin, and powerful body. He lifted her hips and lined himself up. “I love you so damn much.”

“I love—*fuck*,” Zori’s breath left her body as he thrust into her. She shifted her hips, adjusting to having him filling her. It had been over a year since she’d had anything but a vibrator in her, and he was huge.

Vladik stroked her cheek. “You okay, my puppy?”

“Yes. God, you feel so good,” she panted.

Vladik let out a very male chuckle. “I haven’t even started moving yet.”

“Kiss me,” she begged. He leaned down and obliged her. His tongue fucked into her mouth as he thrust into her. Zori gripped his shoulders and ran her nails down the broad curve of his back. He loomed over her, his dark hair curtaining them as he kissed down every whimper and cry.

“You feel so fucking good, Zori. I’ve been dreaming of this since I first saw you. I knew I would do anything to get inside of you,” he whispered. He ran his thumb over her bottom lip, and she sucked on it. “Come on my cock, puppy. Get me good and wet before I fill you up.”

He bent his head to her breast, his teeth scraping over her piercing and giving it a tug. Zori’s nails clawed up his back, her legs squeezing tight together as she came in a shuddering gasp.

“There it is. Fuck, your pussy has a grip,” he growled. He grabbed her ass with both hands and drove into her, his thrusts violent and deep and everything she wanted. He knew exactly how to drive her wild, give her what she needed and couldn’t

voice out loud. He swore as he came, his body trembling as he kissed her through it.

Vladik gently pulled out of her and stood back to enjoy his handy work. Zori was still trying to catch her breath, her legs splayed, chest flushed, and come leaking out of her onto the bed.

“Hmmm, I like seeing you like this, my lovely mate,” Vladik said, brushing his fingers through the mess and pushing his come back inside of her. It was a feather light caress that had her trembling in seconds. She wasn’t sure how she was going to survive the night if he kept blowing her mind to pieces.

“Has anyone ever taken you here?” he asked, his slick fingers circling her ass.

Zori’s blushed so red, she thought she would turn purple. “Um, no?”

“Good, another first that we will have together,” he replied, his grin smug again. He moved back from her and shifted back into his gargoyle form. The sight of his huge, ridged cock had Zori’s breath catching.

Vladik picked her up like she weighed nothing and reclined back on the pillows, placing Zori down on top of him.

“I’m nervous that if you leave it up to me to get my dick in you, I’ll hurry and hurt you without meaning to. I’m going to let you do it,” he said, running the back of his hand over her arm. He sat up to kiss her, his fang nipping her bottom lip. “Claim me as your mate, Zoria. I want everyone to know who I belong to.”

Zori kissed him again, craving his heat, his taste. She’d been living a half-life when she met him, and it was like her world had gone from black and white to technicolor. He was her home, her comfort, her safe place. There was still so much about her new world that she didn’t understand. The one thing she knew with absolute certainty was that she wanted him by her side forever.

Zori gripped his hard dick and lined it up to her drenched pussy. She had many sleepless nights, wondering about what he would feel like inside of her.

Vladik swore as she eased the tip of him in. The reaction made her bolder, and she used her body weight to slide down another inch. He was so big, she was riding the edge of pain, but she was too horny and determined to stop. She gripped the dark muscles of his chest and moved her hips gently to take him bit by bit until he was all the way in. She could barely breathe; she was so full.

“Zoria, my love...” Vladik stammered, his stormy eyes looking at her in utter devotion and desperation. “Claim me. Please. Claim me.”

Zori moved in gentle motions, making sure her body was okay before she began to ride him. Her magic fluttered to life in her veins, sliding up her spine and wrapping around her heart. She blinked, and she could see the golden filaments in the air like the ones that she followed in her swan form to find him. It was trying to show her that he had been her mate all along. Zori’s eyes filled with golden power, and she fucked him harder.

“My perfect mate,” she whispered, placing her hand over his heart. “I claim you forever as my own.” Magic flared under her palm and soaked into him. Vladik groaned, his back bowing, the golden magic lighting up the pale lines in his stone patterned skin.

“Yes, Zori, I accept you too. To protect and care for you always. I promise... I promise...” he replied, barely able to form words.

Wild euphoria gripped Zori, and she rode him harder, needing her mate lost in the pleasure that only she could give him.

“Harder,” Vladik snarled softly, his tail wrapping around her waist. It gripped her tight, lifting her up and down on him until she gave up any semblance of control and let him use her however he wanted. She came hard and blinding, his name on her lips.

Vladik kissed her, his clawed hands burying in her tangled hair. “Breathe, love,” he said. The ridges of his cock swelled, and Zori could do nothing *but* breathe. She really was losing her mind, and for the first time, she didn’t care. She would give Vladik her sanity and all the rest of her.

The swollen ridges hit different parts of her over and over until she was sobbing her way through another orgasm.

Vladik kissed her and kissed her, his hips working until he gasped his own release. Zori collapsed in his arms, unable to move or think.

The golden light was shining under their skin where they touched, illuminating where they were bound in their very souls, and it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Vladik kissed Zori's hair, breathing in her scent and how it had changed to be mixed with his own. *Mine forever.*

He had almost blacked out from the pleasure of feeling her magic inside of him. She was what he'd been searching for his entire life without knowing it. Everything had always been moving him towards her.

Vladik's phone started vibrating, and he ignored it. He didn't want to talk to anyone that wasn't Zori. He was scared to go to sleep in case he woke up and realized it had been a dream.

Downstairs the house phone began ringing. Vladik shifted and Zori murmured something in her sleep.

"Shh, it's okay. Stay here," Vladik whispered. He unfurled his wings from where they had been wrapped over them and pulled the blankets around her as he got out of bed. He shut the bedroom door so he wouldn't disturb Zori and headed down the stairs. He was going to murder whoever was calling him. He shifted back into a human before finding the phone that wouldn't stop its infernal vibrating.

Kaspian.

"Someone had better be dead," Vladik answered with a soft snarl.

"I thought you were right now," Kaspian replied. "Why the fuck didn't you answer the first fifty times?"

“Because it’s four in the morning, and Zori just claimed me as her mate,” Vladik replied, pride swelling inside of him.

There was a long silence at the other end of the phone.

“Are you sure you’re claimed?” Kaspian asked.

“No doubt about it. Why?”

Kaspian clicked his tongue. “The poor girl is stuck with you for eternity.”

“Fuck you,” Vladik said with a laugh. “You told me to listen to my beast, and it knew she was my mate. I was just waiting for her to catch up. Why are you dragging me out of her arms right now?”

“Because I’ve been watching Maxim’s tower, and it’s going fucking crazy right now. Cars are pulling up and people are running inside like there’s a crisis or a fucking orgy going on. They are all *volhv*. They aren’t even bothered to hide their magic. You could see their auras from space,” Kaspian said, all traces of teasing gone.

“They are mobilizing. We had an incident in the city tonight that probably kicked it off,” Vladik replied. He told him about the *upiór*, Zori vaporizing it, and how they had spent half the night trying to track down how it got in. “We found where it had been set loose at the northern border. It was being controlled remotely by a *volhv*.”

“But how did it get through the wards? Not even humans pass through the magic!” Kaspian demanded.

Vladik’s stomach turned. “They had painted him in Misha’s blood. It was enough to recognize him as a gargoyle. We found the place where it had been splashed onto the forest floor.”

“Fucking hell. Have you told him?” Kaspian had known Misha before he had been taken. He had been intensely dedicated to the city. If he found out that his blood was the cause of an attack, who knew how he’d react.

Vladik ran a hand through his hair. “No, and I will be very careful when I do because he’s still healing and is in no

position to hunt the *volhv* down. They had him for years. Morana only knows how much blood Maxim took out of both him and Zori. They might not have gotten Misha to shift, but his blood is who he really is.”

Kaspian’s growl was threatening enough to make Vladik pause. He had seen Kaspian go into berserker mode, and not much stopped him if he was pushed too far.

“They want your girl enough to attack the city itself. Mercenaries have turned up with the *volhv*, and if they are going to strike, it will be soon. I should come home...”

“I’d love to have you by my side, but wait until Irina and Aleksandr say so. They are plotting; I can tell. Tonight’s attack has spurred them into action,” Vladik replied. He had seen the looks that had been passed between them at the ward stone. They were furious and weren’t going to stop until they had their fill of revenge. Protecting the city came first, but they *wanted* Maxim and the others to come.

“Fine. I’ll keep watching over the building for now, but tell them to make up their mind about what they want me to do. I get twitchy when I see so many of Chernobog’s flunkies that need killing.”

“Keep your temper in check, Kaspian. I’ll call you in the morning if Irina doesn’t call you first,” Vladik reassured him.

Kaspian let out a long sigh. “Fine, fine. I’ll go sit in the snow and watch the tower while you go back to bed with your little mate. Try to let her sleep.”

“I’ll try,” Vladik said. “And Kaspian? If there’s any other excitement, call Aleksandr.” He hung up before the other gargoyles could answer. He wanted his mate for as long as he could have her.

The gods only knew what the day was going to bring them.

Zori and Vladik flew back to Irina's when the sun was up again. Zori had wanted to stay in bed, but they had a warrior knocking on Vladik's door not long after dawn with a message that they were to go to Irina's for 'brunch and a briefing.'

They landed on Irina's roof, and Zori shifted seamlessly back into her human shape. It was so easy that she'd barely felt the twinge in her bones. Mentally, she was preparing for her grandmother to lose her mind when she saw Zori had mated with Vladik.

Deep down, Zori didn't care if she did. She'd had all the decisions made for her in life, and she was done with being bossed about. Mating Vladik wasn't something she was ever going to regret. It was the first thing she had really chosen for herself. She felt settled in a way she never had before, as if he was the anchor that kept her steady. Zori looked up at him, her heart about to burst. She loved him so damn much.

"She's going to be angrier at me more than you," Vladik chuckled, reading her mind.

She stood up on tiptoes, and he met her lips with his own. It instantly calmed the nervous flutter inside her. She leaned into him, making him growl.

"None of those games, puppy. I'm having hard enough time letting you out of the house," he said, giving her ass a firm squeeze.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied sweetly. Zori was already walking funny from the previous night and was so hungry she could have eaten a horse.

Zori opened the door to the house, and her stomach rumbled. She could smell coffee, pancakes, frying sausages, and eggs. They found Irina in the kitchen, setting out plates.

“I was about to send a search party,” her grandmother said. She glanced between them and let out a low curse. “Really? You couldn’t have waited so we could have a proper ceremony?”

“No,” Zori said, straightening her shoulders and staring her grandmother down. “The attack last night makes me realize we were both at a higher risk not being mated. I need to be able to shift without using my cape, and Morana said I needed to be able to pull on Vladik’s strength. Besides, it will be a way to get Maxim to think I’m vulnerable when I’m not.”

Irina gestured for them to sit and stared pouring coffee. “You don’t have to defend yourself to me. I just would have preferred to throw a proper party before you did it.”

Zori glanced sideways at Vladik and grinned. “We had a private party, just the two of us. Clothes were optional.”

“Okay, that’s all I need to know. I’m happy for you both. I knew as soon as I saw you together that it was inevitable,” Irina said. She put her hands on her hips. “Kaspian called and told me about all the *volhv* and mercenaries gathering at the tower.”

Vladik had caught Zori up on all the news when she had been in the shower, the big gargoyle soaping her back. She felt so sorry that Misha was still being violated. He had been through enough. Nausea clawed at her whenever she thought of her own blood that Maxim had taken.

“Aleksandr has thoughts he wishes to share if he ever turns up,” Irina grumbled, checking the time on the carved pine clock hanging on the wall.

As if her words have summoned him, there was a heavy knock on the back door, and Aleksandr called out a greeting.

He was in his human form and had two huge swords strapped to his back. Zori bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from making inappropriate *Witcher* jokes. He looked like he could be Geralt's dad.

"Busy already this morning, Alek?" Irina asked, noting the swords.

"Seems prudent to carry monster slaying swords when we could have monsters hidden in the city," he said, lifting the leather holsters off his shoulder. He sniffed. "What smells like sex in here?"

"They are mated," Irina said before Zori could.

Aleksandr looked at Vladik. "You're a brave male. I hope you're up for the challenge."

"I am," Vladik answered with no boast in his tone.

Aleksandr laughed deeply and chucked Zori under the chin. "Welcome to the family, blossom. I'm sure you could have done better than this one, but the heart wants what it wants, I suppose."

"It does, and I'm happy with my decision," Zori said sweetly and with just enough steel that Aleksandr's eyes flashed in amusement.

"Let's get the children fed, Irina. I'm sure they are famished after their busy evening," he said, sitting down opposite Vladik.

"Have you seen Misha yet?" Vladik asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"No. I figure we wait to tell him about the use of his blood afterward. If we tell him beforehand, he's going to drag his ass out of bed and get himself killed," Aleksandr replied, filling his plate with food.

Vladik nodded. "Probably for the best. He doesn't like feeling useless, and it would kill him to know his blood was used to attack Zori." Underneath the table, his tail wrapped around Zori's calf. Her need to touch him was worse than ever, so she pressed her leg into his.

Zori downed her coffee, and between Vladik and Irina, her plate filled on its own. It was such a different way to be taken care of than she was used to. There was love behind their actions, and it made their breakfast intimate and comforting. It didn't seem to matter that they could be attacked any second. Having breakfast was more important.

“What are we going to do if Maxim attacks the city?” Zori asked, once her initial hunger had been eased.

“We have set up patrols and magical traps through the forests. We'll know as soon as anyone enters our outlying borders,” Aleksandr said, refilling his coffee. “I'm still hoping Maxim wises up and knows it would be a losing battle to try.”

Zori shook her head. “That's not how Maxim is. I might not have known about him being *volhv*, but I know him. He is meticulous, strategic, and tenacious. He will find a way into the city, just like that creature did last night.”

“What are you thinking, Zoria?” Irina asked. She was studying Zori carefully, and she fought not to shift awkwardly.

“I might not know a lot about magic. Okay, I know nothing about magic, but I spoke with Chernobog last night. He's not going to stop or be dissuaded. He wants to take me from Morana. He said he would go through the whole city if he had to,” she said.

“It makes you a target,” Vladik muttered. His tail around her calf tightened even further.

“Yes, but it also makes me the perfect bait.” All three of them turned to stare at her like she had lost her mind. “Hear me out. Maxim has my blood that he can use to track me. If they are using that as some kind of a beacon, we need to use it against them. I'm not saying I have to run away from the city. I mean that we should use me to lure them to a place of our choosing, where we can minimize innocents getting hurt.”

“Zori, I don't think—” Vladik began, but she cut him off.

“I won't have people dying because of me!” she said, her magic flickering under her skin. “You all believe Morana has chosen me. What kind of chosen one would I be if I let her

people die? Chernobog can summon the dead. He has a never-ending supply of warriors. We don't."

Aleksandr rubbed at his beard, a small smile on his face. "I like the way you think, blossom. Chernobog can't cause us problems if we kill all the *volhv* that he is working through. Any ideas what would make a good kill zone, Irina?"

The fork in Vladik's hand bent. "You really think risking Zoria is a good idea? She is your granddaughter."

"And she liquified Chernobog when he was using an *upiór* as a vessel. She might be the best weapon we have," Irina replied. She was thinking as a high priestess, not a grandmother.

Vladik wasn't amused. "We can't rely on that! That was Morana working through her. What if the goddess doesn't decide to show up?"

"Why wouldn't she? She hates Chernobog. I could feel it," Zori replied. She took Vladik's hand and squeezed it. "The *volhv* don't want to hurt me. They want to turn me to their cause. I'm less in danger than you are, my love."

Vladik pulled her to him and squeezed. "I hate this."

"I know, but I can't let the people in the city be hurt because of me."

Irina cleared her throat. "What about the Womb?"

"Oh, very symbolic. I like it," Aleksandr replied.

Zori kissed the side of Vladik's neck before pulling out of his embrace. "What is the Womb?"

"It is the cave where Yelena went to hide from Chernobog and where Morana created the first gargoyles," Irina explained. "It's our most sacred place. Maxim won't be able to resist it. They have always wanted to destroy the place. It represents their defeat."

"And it will again," Aleksandr said with a firm nod. He rose to his feet. "I'll grab some mages and warriors and go lay a path through the woods and up to the Womb. Thank you for

the food, Irina. And for the idea, Zori. Come on, Vladik, you are with me.”

“But—”

Zori leaned over and gave him a firm kiss. “Go. It will make you feel like you can protect me better if you know the exact layout of the plan and the forest.”

“I don’t like how well you can read me already,” he said, resting his forehead against hers. “I feel like I’ve been completely outmaneuvered.”

Zori laughed softly and kissed him again. “Get used to it, lover.”

It was dusk the following day when the call came from Kaspian that Maxim was leaving the tower with a retinue of *volhv* and mercenaries.

It had taken a lot of convincing on Aleksandr's behalf to stop Kaspian from following them. A group of twenty gargoyles and three mages of Morana was going to use their departure to take the tower.

It was the only way to get the information they needed on Maxim's experiments and the locations of the other swan wives. Kaspian would lead them, and Zori had spent a long time on the phone with him going over what she knew of the building's layout. Zori had told them how Maxim's study was the true treasure trove.

"Congratulations on mating with Iron Heart. I never thought he would do it," Kaspian had told her with a deep rumble of laughter.

"He just needed the right woman. We'll find you one next," Zori had teased.

Kaspian had laughed even harder. "She would have to be quite a woman, and I would have to survive the assault on Maxim's tower first."

"Once you're done, come home so we can drink to my mating," Zori had told him before hanging up.

Kaspian had called only four hours later to say that the assault on the tower had begun.

Zori didn't have time to wonder or speculate how he and his team were doing. They had their own battles to fight that night. Maxim was heading for the city and fast.

Zori slid a knife down the side of her boot and put on her black *shuba* with her feathered cape on the shoulders. They didn't want Maxim or anyone else to know that she was mated. The more they underestimated her, the better. Irina had cast a glamor over her to diminish the feel of her magic and had slyly given her some contraceptive tea and a healing balm.

Vladik straightened Zori's collar before bringing her close and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Whatever happens tonight, I want you to know that I love you, and I'm so glad you chose me to be your mate. You are my soul. I'll protect you until my heart stops, my dearest Zoria."

"I know you will. I love you, and I promise we will have many more nights together. There will be no dying for us tonight," Zori replied, wrapping her arms around his neck. He drew her into one of his bone melting, soul burning kisses that silenced all her nerves and fears. This was what Maxim and Chernobog was trying to take from her, like they took it from her mother. Never again.

Morana had said that Zori was strong enough to face them, and she had to believe that the goddess wouldn't abandon her when it mattered most. Zori's faith in Morana might be shaky, but her faith in Vladik, Aleksandr, and Irina was unshakeable. They loved their people and would do what it took to keep them all safe.

"We need to go," Vladik said, pulling away from her.

"Let's go kick their asses so I can get my honeymoon. That's a thing after mating, right?" Zori asked, walking up the stairs to the roof access.

"Definitely. I'm planning on some uninterrupted quality time with you in my bed," Vladik replied, his eyes shining hot with promise.

Zori shook her head at him. "Horny even going into battle. Unbelievable."

“Puppy, if you are standing in the same room as me, I’m going to be horny. I can’t help it.” Vladik picked her up in his arms and spread his wings.

Zori snuggled into his neck and nibbled on his ear lobe. “Fight now. Fuck later.”

“We have a deal,” he said, and they launched into the air.

Aleksandr’s scouts had spotted Maxim and the mercenaries clearing the first check point towards the city. They had used some of Zori’s blood to draw sigils on trees in an effort to confuse Maxim and his *volhv* if they tried to use tracking spells.

They were following the path Irina had laid out for them. They only needed to get Zori in place before the *volhv* hit the final point.

Zori didn’t know how she was going to feel when she finally was face to face with Maxim. She had seen him as an uncle, or as close to one as she understood, and his betrayal was like a wound that wouldn’t stop bleeding. She didn’t want to kill him unless she had no other choice, but she didn’t know how else to stop him either.

Morana, please help me get through this, she prayed, not knowing if the goddess was listening.



THE NIGHT WAS clear and dark. The stars were shining, but there was no moon. It felt like a night for the goddess to be walking. Zori could feel power in the air and hoped it would be enough.

Vladik flew fast and silent over the city and to the forest. They were nearing the city walls when Zori spotted the bright flashes of light through the trees.

“Irina’s mages are slowing them down,” Vladik said, pointing them out. As they flew closer, Zori could hear the guns and shouts of battle. Roars shook the night. Gargoyles

ambushed the mercenaries, ripping huge guns off the top of Jeeps and crushing them with their claws.

Zori's hair lifted on the back of her neck, and her head swiveled. There was a group of red robed priests, all standing around the one in the center.

"Maxim," she breathed.

Her old guardian looked up, and she saw the recognition burn in his gaze. He lifted a staff, and a red bolt of lightning shot through the sky towards them.

"Dive, Vladik!" Zori shouted, and he dropped, banking to the left. The bolt shot past so close that the heat of it burned her cheeks. More bolts were flying towards them, the priests joining Maxim shooting off their own spells.

Mages appeared through the trees, attacking the *volhv* and drawing their attention away.

Blue light flashed by Zori, and Vladik swore as the spell clipped his wing. They began to fall, and he pulled Zori tighter to him as they crashed through the trees. Vladik twisted at the last second, flicked out his good wing, and they slowed enough to land.

"Are you okay?" she asked, untangling herself and checking over his wing.

"It will be fine. I was clipped, that's all. Let's go. We are almost at the meeting place." Vladik grabbed her hand, and they hurried through the dark forest. Zori had no idea where they were, but she trusted Vladik and his night vision. He knew where the pit traps were and the magical bindings. Zori just had to keep up.

A man in black gear crashed through the trees in front of them and fired. Vladik shoved Zori aside before moving faster than she'd ever seen. He seemed to almost teleport as he dodged the mercenary's gunfire.

With a roar, Vladik yanked the rifle out of the man's hand, crushing the barrel before slicing his claws over the man's throat. He collapsed into the snow, his hands clutching his

neck as he bled out. Zori didn't look away. She couldn't afford to be soft, not tonight.

"They are coming!" Vladik picked her up and ran. Over his shoulder, Zori spotted Maxim and his remaining *volhv* following the track leading up to the Womb.

At the entrance of the cave, Vladik put Zori back on her feet and gave her a quick kiss. "I'll be inside in position. However it may look, you aren't alone."

Zori nodded. "Go before he sees you."

Mages and gargoyles poured out of the trees, heading for the caves in retreat. Zori stayed out of their way and tried not to feel responsible for the wounds they were nursing. Bright headlights appeared, and an armored truck pulled into the clearing.

"Zoria!" Maxim shouted. He appeared from behind the truck with two *volhv* flanking him. "Stop this, and no one else will have to get hurt."

Zori backed up towards the cave. "No one but me, right? What did you think? I would just come back willingly to be locked in a tower or harvested like you did to my mother?"

Maxim was getting closer, and she could see the coldness in his eyes. He wasn't trying to hide it like he always had. "Stop acting like a child! There is much that you have taken out of context, Zoria. Come with me, and I will explain everything to you. You were my daughter—"

"I was your *pet*! I won't go back. You'll have to kill me first!" she shouted and ran into the caves.

The winding rock path into the Womb was lined with torches, and Zori hurried as fast as her feet could carry her. It opened out suddenly into a cavern, and her breath stuttered. All around the walls were stone gargoyles. They stared down at the two statues of Morana and Yelena turning into a swan that had been placed at the center of the polished stone floor. Flowers, candles, and other offerings were placed at their feet.

Zori couldn't spot where any of the mages had disappeared to, but it was too late to wait for anyone. Footsteps sounded on the stone behind her, and Maxim and his two *volhv* came towards her. Behind him, mercenaries filled the cavern like ants, and she could sense *upiór* amongst them.

"You are trapped, daughter. Stop this nonsense now, and come back to your family," Maxim said, his voice no longer stern. It was just her Uncle Maxim.

"My family is here. It has always been. You stole my mother. You stole *me*," Zori replied, her voice catching. There was no need to fake her tears or her heartache. They were tearing free from her. "You killed her."

"She killed herself, Zori. You saw it with your own eyes. All I did was clean up the mess," Maxim said. The two *volhv* were moving away from him, trying to flank her. "I raised you as I would my own family."

Zori's eyes burned. "Really. You would feed them drugs and tell them they were dying? You lied to me! You

suppressed every part of me. You stole my blood for your magic.”

“I was under Chernobog’s orders. You met him for yourself. What chance does anyone have against that power?” Maxim shook his head. “If he knew what level your magic really was, he would have harmed you himself. He knows now and is willing to make a deal with you. Come home, Zori. It will be different this time. I promise.”

Zori’s heart was breaking to hear the genuine plea in his voice, but she shook her head. Before she could speak again, Morana forced her way through. Dark power filled Zori’s veins, and the goddess took charge of her tongue.

“Enough. You come onto my sacred ground and demand what belongs to me. Leave now, or you will regret it,” Morana said, her voice echoing from Zori’s mouth.

Maxim’s eyes widened, shock splashing across his features. “What is this...” Red light filled him, and he cried out before Chernobog pushed his way through. He bowed deeply.

“Goddess of magic, it is a joy to meet you on this auspicious night,” Chernobog greeted. He gestured to the gargoyles. **“Do you remember the last time we tangled here?”**

“Yes, and my answer is still the same. I will not join my power with you and let you use it to destroys the humans. I do not wish war with you, dark one,” Morana replied.

Maxim’s face pulled into a twisted caricature of a smile. **“Too bad. You will have one, my dearest.”**

Chernobog’s power blasted out of him, and the cavern of stone gargoyles shifted into vicious life. The mercenaries opened fire at them, their cries of alarm echoing off the stone. Zori couldn’t control her body as Morana moved her about like a puppet. Magic surged through her, and she tossed it back at the other god. Vladik fought his way to her side, tossing aside mercenaries to reach her.

Chernobog saw her gaze and laughed, **“So that is what is keeping you here, little vessel. I can remedy that.”**

Magic shot out of Maxim’s hand, streaking through the crowd to get to Vladik. Zori fought the goddess inside of her, and she launched herself in front of the bolt of power. It smashed into her, rattling her bones.

She could hear Vladik’s cries of fear and alarm, but she couldn’t acknowledge them. Her rage was absolute. Magic tore through her and black and gold wings exploded from her back. Feathers pushed out from her face and arms until she was half bird, half woman.

She was fury incarnate as she rose in the air, spread her wings wide, and screeched out all the pain and heartache inside of her. Golden power blasted out of her in zigzagging bolts of lightning. Mercenaries and the *volhv* tried to flee as it began to strike at them. With every hit, her targets burst into charred gore.

Chernobog stumbled backward as she began to close in on him.

“This isn’t over, Morana! I will raise an army and wipe your minions from this earth,” he shouted before a portal opened, and he flew backward into it. Zori’s bolt of lightning hit the portal, collapsing it on itself. Silence fell around her, and she whirled to face her people. They were staring with wide eyes; some had lowered themselves to their knees.

Vladik came forward and stared at the creature she had become. There was no fear in his eyes. Only love. “It’s over, puppy. Let the magic go. You saved me. You saved all of us.”

Zori struggled against the words and finding her way back to him. The magic felt so good. After a lifetime of being suppressed, it was free for the first time, and it didn’t want to be caged again.

“Come to me, puppy. Let me take you home,” Vladik said and held a hand out to her. Zori’s fingers touched his, and she floated back down to him. The magic receded, the wings and

feathers and rage ebbing away. She dropped into his arms, a human girl once more.

Vladik pulled her tight to him, and she buried her face into his neck, breathing in his scent and letting it ground her. She was so tired.

“Vladik,” she whimpered before the darkness claimed her.

Zori woke slowly to a cool cloth being placed on her forehead and Irina's low whispers. She cracked open an eye and found herself bundled up in Vladik's bed. Her grandmother was murmuring softly, and light was pouring from her hands as she moved them an inch above Zori's body.

"What happened?" Zori asked, her voice cracking.

Irina started in surprise and then threw her arms around Zori. "Oh, my baby. You are okay. You are okay."

"I feel fine," Zori replied and patted Irina's back. She didn't feel hurt or tired, merely drowsy.

Irina leaned back, quickly swiping the tears off her cheeks. "You've been asleep for over twenty-four hours. I was so worried Chernobog's spell had gotten you. Or that Morana's magic that morphed you into that thing..."

"It wasn't Morana's magic," Zori said and slowly sat up. She was in one of Vladik's T-shirts, and her hair had been unbound from its braids.

Irina offered her a cup of water. "What do you mean?"

Zori sipped the water slowly and tried to sort through her memories and feelings of the attack. "I saw Chernobog and Maxim go for Vladik. Morana was possessing me and wasn't moving to save him. I...shoved her out."

"You are saying that creature you turned into...was you?" Irina sat down, the air whooshing out of her. "How can that be?"

“Protective mate crazy mode? How am I meant to know? I don’t know much about my magic. Most of the time I am running off instincts.” Zori looked about the room. “Where is Vladik?”

“I’m relieving him. He hasn’t left your side, and Aleksandr had to come and drag him away to discuss what they are going to do with Maxim’s tower.”

Zori’s brows rose. “They got it?”

“They did. The mages have changed the wards too, so Maxim and his *volhv* can’t get back into it. It’s a lot to sort out. Maxim never returned there, and we have no way to track the portal that was created by Chernobog,” Irina explained. She took Zori’s hand. “You were very brave to face him that way. I’m sorry for any grief you might be feeling over him.”

A lump rose in Zori’s throat. “It might take me some time. I don’t... I don’t know what to do now.”

“I might have an idea about that,” Irina said, toying with one of her earrings thoughtfully. “There is a witch I used to know that had a daughter. They were blessed as vessels for the goddess Louhi and could also change forms into swans. You could say they are cousins to the swan wives. She might be able to help train you in your abilities because there is no one in the city that is a vessel. There certainly isn’t anyone that has a third form like you showed. If you wish, I’ll send someone to fetch her.”

Zori pushed her hands through her hair. “Do what you think is going to be best. As for me, I’m to have a shower and find my mate.”

“I believe he will find you first,” Irina said, rising to her feet. She kissed Zori on the forehead. “Love him with all your heart, Zori. Cherish him. The connection you have is rare. Come by in the next few days.” She laughed softly and shot Zori a wink. “If he lets you.”



ZORI HAD a shower and was hunting food in Vladik's fridge when the back door banged open, and he charged in.

"What are you doing out of bed?" he demanded.

"Ahh, I needed a shower, and I'm completely fine—" Zori began.

Vladik lifted her up until they were eye level. "Don't you ever jump in front of a spell like that again. I'm meant to protect *you!*"

"We protect each other. I won't apologize, and you can't make me," Zori said stubbornly. His eyes narrowed and lust zinged through her.

"I'll make you," he growled. He pinned her up against the kitchen wall and kissed her roughly. Zori dropped the apple she'd been eating and kissed him back, her hands tangling into his cold, wind-swept hair. Her legs wrapped around his waist, desperate to hang on to him wherever she could. Vladik's mouth moved from her lips to her neck.

"I was so worried. I thought I was going to die of it," he murmured against her skin.

"We are both here, and we are okay, Vladik. Now kiss me," she begged.

"I'll do to you as I wish, puppy. You need to learn not to try and sacrifice yourself for me." His fangs scraped over her collarbone, and his tongue swiped over the sting, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to her pussy. He grabbed the front of the fresh shirt she had found in his dresser and tore it in half. Zori's gasp turned into a groan as his claw scraped lightly over her nipple ring.

"Put two of your fingers in my mouth," Vladik said, and she obeyed. He sucked on them, drenching them with his saliva. "Now, touch your pussy for me. Get it good and wet for me."

Zori dropped her slick fingers to her clit. He always knew exactly what to say to get her so hot for him. She hoped it would never change. Vladik kept playing with her breasts, his eyes watching every flick and stroke she made. Zori dipped

her finger in her pussy, feeling how wet she was, then thrust in two fingers. Vladik was so big that she needed to prep herself, and his eyes on her was making her burn in a whole new way. She bit her bottom lip, her orgasm flicking closer.

“Don’t you dare come until I’m inside of you,” Vladik said, nipping her neck. The tip of his tail moved up to brush against her lips. “Open up, puppy.” Zori opened her mouth, and he moved the tip into her mouth, thrusting it in and out until her spit soaked it.

Vladik groaned, and his tail moved from her mouth to her pussy. She moved her fingers out of the way, and he slid it inside of her, making her cry out. Zori would never get tired of the way he fucked her with such single-minded intensity.

Vladik bit into her shoulder. “You are always so hot and wet for me. So obedient. Having you surrender for me is fucking heaven.” He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding against hers. At the same time, his tail moved from her, and he thrust his cock into her in one powerful move.

“Vladik! Oh, fuck...” she gasped, her body forced to make room for him.

“Promise me you won’t risk your life again,” he demanded and pounded her hard enough to make the pictures on the wall bounce.

Zori dragged her nails over his chest. “No. You’re my mate, and we protect each other.”

Vladik snarled wordlessly and fucked her harder. The wet tip of his tail circled around her ass, and she clenched her pussy at the sensation.

“*Promise* me, or I’ll fill every gorgeous hole you have until you’re drowning in me,” he hissed, his teeth dragging over her lips.

Zori shook her head. “It would be a lie. I will jump between you and Chernobog until the day I die,” she snarled back and bit him on the shoulder.

Vladik kissed her again and sucked down her moans as the tip of his tail fucked into her. Zori wanted to scream in

pleasure, but he wouldn't let her. Vladik's tongue plunged into her mouth, working her as his dick and tail did. She was so full she could barely breathe. It didn't matter; she hurtled her way through an orgasm, nearly blacking out. Tears tracked down her cheeks as he ruined her, over and over until she whimpered, "I promise."

Vladik's face was pure joy and satisfaction. Three deep thrusts later, and he was swearing his way through his own release, filling her with so much come that it ran down her thighs.

"And don't you forget it," he said, holding her to him like she was the only thing that mattered.

That evening Zori and Vladik had only just gotten out of his bath and dressed when Kaspian and Misha appeared on their doorstep. Neither were too pleased about the interruption. Zori just wanted to be alone with her mate for one damn night.

“Open the door, you deviants,” Kaspian said, banging again. “I have brought food so you don’t pass out from starvation. Irina said that Zori needs to eat.”

Vladik mumbled something about interfering family members, but Zori opened the door at the mention of food.

“It better be ninety-eight percent carbs, or I am booting you out,” she said and held it open for them. “What are you doing out of bed, Misha?”

“I’m healed enough. I just need to put on some weight, and I’ll be fine,” he replied and kissed her cheek. “Happy mating, Zoria.”

Vladik caught his brother up into a hug, almost knocking the bags from his arms. “I’m so happy to see you on your feet again.”

“I had to get up. I missed all the action, and it’s unfair,” Misha said.

Kaspian offered Zori a white gift box. “Special delivery just for you. I thought about giving you a framed picture of me with no shirt on to keep you company when you grow bored of Vladik, but I think you’ll like this better.

“Where’s my present?” Vladik teased.

Kaspian pointed at Zori. “I believe you have enough presents, but I can get you a framed picture of me too if you really need it.”

“I’ll pass.” Vladik laughed and hugged his friend.

Zori placed the box on the dining table before lifting the lid. “Oh, Kaspian.” Inside the box were her mother’s cape of white and gold feathers and her father’s claws.

Vladik wrapped an arm about her. “We will put them to rest in your family crypt as soon as you are ready to.”

“Eat first, crypts later. I’m scared Irina will jump out and flay me if you don’t get some food into you,” Kaspian said. He didn’t look like he was joking either. “I need to know all about the battle I missed.” Zori placed the box safely in the bedroom before they all gathered about to eat. Vodka was poured liberally as Kaspian recounted the attack on the tower.

“The doctors and nurses were gone. There were only mercenaries guarding the place,” he said, reaching for another bread roll. “Maxim must have been worried enough to move them. We did get his notebooks from the penthouse and from a records room. It’s going to take a while to go through it all.”

Misha’s expression darkened. “As soon as we have a location of the next swan wife, I’m going in.”

“What do you mean?” Vladik said, lowering his fork.

“I’ve already talked to Aleksandr about it. While I can’t shift, I’m going to make a perfect spy. I’ll be able to fool them all into thinking I am human. I can get onto their staff, learn all that I can, and rescue whoever I find,” Misha explained. “I can’t sit back and do nothing, Vladik. I *need* to get them for...”

Vladik squeezed his brother’s shoulder. “I know. I understand. I’m only sad not to have more time with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere yet,” Misha promised him.

Kaspian leaned back in his chair with a groan. “I am. Irina is sending me to Inari in Finland.”

“What for?” Zori asked.

“Apparently, there’s a witch there that can help you with your magic. Irina doesn’t want you or Vladik leaving Kitez, so I’m going in your stead,” Kaspian said. He pulled a face. “I think she’s punishing me. I’ve heard rumors of this witch. She’s of Louhi’s bloodline, and anyone worshiping the dark witch queen of Tuonela should not be disturbed.”

Zori flinched. “I’m sorry. That’s my fault. Grandmother thinks she will be the only one to help me be a vessel and wield the kind of magic I have.”

“It would take a lot for Irina to seek outside help, so I will go and charm her into coming.” Kaspian grinned. “If charm doesn’t work, I’ll tie her up in a sack to get her back here. That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Right,” Zori said, her heart glowing as she looked around her friends.

Vladik pulled her into his side as they watched Misha and Kaspian argue about something trivial. “What are your plans now while we wait for the witch?”

“I’m going to help go through Maxim’s paperwork to try and find the others. This is what Morana has chosen for me to do with my mate at my side.” Zori twined her fingers with his. “We’ll get them back. I won’t stop until everyone has come home like I have.”

“I like that plan. As long as I’m with you, I’m going to be happy.” Vladik leaned down and kissed her softly until the other two complained, and they broke apart, laughing.

It felt like an ending and a new beginning. Zori didn’t know what her magic and her future had planned for her. She only knew she wouldn’t give up until Maxim was finally stopped.

Only then, would Zori put her mother and father to rest, and at last, they would all be free.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I believe that all monsters and villains deserve their happy endings. I prefer my clothes black, eyeliner winged, and books full of hot romance.

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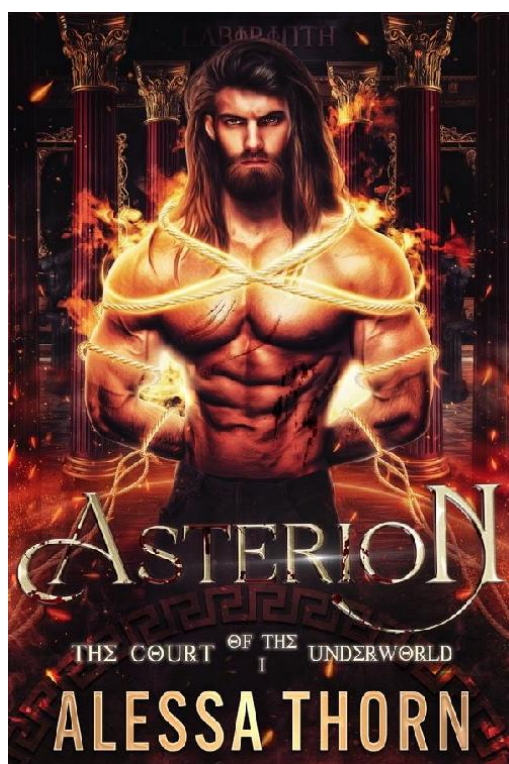
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ASTERION



PROLOGUE

Sing, O' Muse, of the seasons of the world and how all that was lost was found again.

Sing, of how gods and mythical creatures once roamed the lands of Greece, and of how Man became powerful, and the gods were forced into hiding.

Sing, of when Greece's economy collapsed and the land was on fire with the turmoil man's governance had wrought.

Sing, of how the gods returned to build a new world from the ashes.

Sing, O' Muse, of the new city of Styx, and the monsters that govern its underworld.

Sing to me a new song, of a Minotaur, a Labyrinth, and a Woman...

1.

Ariadne's hands were aching by the time the man's final breath came out in a wheeze of feta, onions, and sour wine.

"Gross," she muttered, as she unwound the braid of golden threads from around his fat, sweaty neck. She snapped off one of the threads from the braid before she twisted it back around her wrist, turning it into a harmless bracelet once more.

Using the broken golden thread, she tied the dead man's hands together in an elaborate cat's cradle. It was her *modus operandi*, a special way of letting his associates know just who was responsible for this kill. The cradle formed the symbol for 'abuser' in a language only Ariadne and her dead sister knew, her way of honoring Lia's restless shade in the afterlife.

Even gentle Lia would have approved of this death.

Ariadne scattered photos of Botsaris's beaten and raped wife around his body. Botsaris had been a pig of a man, and he'd squealed like one as he died. He'd given names, deals, offered her money, but she had held on until he stopped thrashing.

Ariadne shoved the little black dress she'd been wearing into her oversized designer tote, before pulling out a bundle containing her tights and a singlet top and putting them on. Without looking at the bloated Botsaris, Ariadne slipped out the back door of the house overlooking Korinthos beach.

Botsaris had been a cheating, abusive bastard, so no one would look twice at the blonde as she walked off the property and into the still busy nighttime streets.

Ariadne dumped the tote bag, and the blonde wig into a bin at the train station and cursed under breath when she saw the red lines across her calloused palms. Botsaris had fought harder than she expected, and even with her callouses, she would end up with some bruising. She had no time to worry about it as she ran to catch her train.

Wedge between a group of teens and two arguing old women, Ariadne settled back into her comfortable anonymity and watched the lights of the city of Styx grow closer.

Almost twenty years beforehand, the ancient city of Corinth had been burned to the ground in the civil war. The collapse of Greece's economy, and the riots and military action that followed, had left many of the major cities in ruined war zones.

Corinth had been one of the worst affected. That was when Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, arrived and claimed the rubble that had been left. In less than twenty years, the city had been rebuilt and was turning a profit again.

Hades wasn't the only Old God that had come out of hiding, but the new city of Styx recovered the fastest, and Greece's new currency, the Nea Drachmae, had come pouring in.

Ariadne had her doubts as to whether the god of the dead thing was true, but she did know they had to be something *other*. Hades had been prominent in the news since the Great Collapse, and whenever the cameras managed the rare shot of him, he still looked like a sleek forty-something businessman.

Whatever Hades was, his media queen Medusa was made of the same stuff. CEO of Serpentine Industries, her skyscraper sat only a few floors lower than Hades's own pillar of black stone and steel. She ran a constant PR campaign worldwide to encourage trade and tourism to Styx, and it worked. Her blood-red hair and green eyes were famous the world over.

As for the rumor that she had snakes in her hair, Ariadne had never seen them in any of Medusa's news programs. She

was a recluse, but with the internet at her feet, Medusa didn't ever have to leave Serpentine Tower again.

Like most kids in the Hellas District, Ariadne had grown up in the shadow of those two monstrous towers and with the rumors about the members of the Court of Styx.

There was a running joke internationally that Hades had come back to make the New York City of Greece and had ended up with Gotham instead. The people who lived in Styx didn't find this joke amusing because they knew that Hades Acheron would eat the toughest of Gotham for breakfast before picking his teeth with Batman's bones.

Only the tough survived on the streets of Styx, but despite its dark underbelly, Ariadne still loved the chaotic, violent, and often beautiful sprawl of it.

Ariadne made it back to her apartment just as the sun was rising. It was a tiny one-bedroom in a slightly less dodgy neighborhood than the one she was born in.

It was the one place in the world that felt like home. She had filled it with pieces of furniture and art from thrift shops and even managed to keep a house plant alive. It wasn't much. It certainly wasn't the opulent luxury she'd be living in if she had stayed at the Temple, but at least she didn't feel like every moment she was there, her debt was rising.

Ariadne had a long shower and climbed into bed, knowing she had precious few hours before Minos decided to summon her to the Temple for a full debriefing of the Botsaris job.

"One day soon, you'll never have to answer that bastard's call again," she said to herself like she did every day.

I'll kill him, Lia, I promise.

Curling into a ball under the blanket, Ariadne closed her eyes and let the nightmares take her.

Ariadne managed to get five hours of sleep before she was in a taxi, heading into the city center. The Diogenes District consisted of six blocks in the very heart of Styx, and it had more money than the rest of the city combined. It housed not only the Acheron and Serpentine towers but also five banks,

two courthouses, and more overpriced jewelry and luxury item stores than one city needed.

It never ceased to surprise Ariadne that the city she knew disappeared as soon as the taxi entered the 'Dio Bubble' and everything was clean, shiny, and expensive looking.

The taxi stopped in front of the Temple, and she paid the man a handful of drachmae before climbing out of the car.

The Temple had earned its name thanks to the row of shining marble columns that stretched out along the façade of the mansion. Minos had grasped firmly to the nickname, even going as far as to have bronze lettering bolted into the marble to announce it to the world. What he didn't want the world to know was that the Temple was the training ground for Greece's deadliest assassins.

Those that were rich enough or connected enough knew what the Temple really was behind its pretty architecture. Everyone else thought it was a finishing school for underprivileged girls, run by the philanthropist Minos Karros.

Minos had his grubby hands in a lot of Greece's pies, from the stock market and real estate to oil refinery and shipping, not to mention that all the little priestesses that were raised at the Temple owed Minos a hefty debt. Ariadne felt like she would be a hundred by the time she paid him off.

Schooling her face to pleasant neutrality, Ariadne walked through the polished black and silver doors and into the cold darkness of the mansion.

Girls walked together in huddled groups, all wearing the pleated white chitons with thick black belts that were the Temple uniform. Lynx, one of the teachers in weaponry, gave Ariadne a nod in greeting.

"The master is in the training rooms, Spindle," she said in greeting.

"Thank you, Lynx," Ariadne replied politely, ignoring the watching students' wide eyes.

Once they graduated, they would be able to refer to the other assassins by their chosen names, but until then, they

were restricted to titles only. Minos said it was a sign of respect to be referred to by their titles, but Ariadne saw it as just another way to prevent the girls in his charge from developing any personal attachments. If he could've found a viable excuse to give them all a number, Ariadne was sure he would have.

The training room was a rectangle pit of sand in a sunken floor. Minos was still physically fit enough to take on even his best students and liked to oversee certain aspects of their training himself.

Ariadne paused by a wooden pillar to watch him hold a girl's arm in a lock behind her back. She was about ten years old, and her small face was red with anger and embarrassment.

"Think, girl, how do you get out of this without a broken arm?" Minos demanded, sidestepping the kick the girl aimed at his knee.

Ariadne's right arm ached, and she fought the urge to rub the place where he'd broken hers around the same age. Minos still hadn't seen her, but the girl's pain-filled eyes rested on hers, and Ariadne made a small movement with her left hand.

The girl's left hand tightened into a fist and swung it back in a powerful strike aimed between Minos's legs. The strike cracked hard against the cup he was wearing, and he let her go with a jerk of surprise.

The girl rolled and was up on her feet in seconds, the folds of her training chiton smeared with dirt and sweat. Ariadne clapped her hands loudly, and Minos's furious attention turned to her.

"Well done, girl. I've found nothing slows down a handsy man like a good strike in the balls," said Ariadne.

"That's a compliment coming from the High Priestess herself," Minos replied as he straightened out of his fighting stance.

The girl turned to Ariadne and rapped her small chest twice with her fist. "Spindle."

“Go on, you have javelin training with Lynx,” Minos said to the girl, and she bowed before hurrying away. Minos watched her go before turning back to his visitor. “If she can keep her temper, she will be good priestess one day.”

“A bit of fire is a good thing.”

“Only if I can control it,” Minos said as he joined her at the top step. “How did the Botsaris contract go?”

“Easy. The man’s wandering eye made him a gullible target.”

“It was in the news this morning. Your cat’s cradle has all of Botsaris’s associates shitting their pants and thinking they are next. I can’t say I ever approved of you doing it, but it’s become a symbol to fear, and *that* I can appreciate.”

Ariadne laughed, just as he expected her to. Laugh at his jokes, make him think she loved and respected him, and keep pretending that she didn’t want to crush his eyes between her fingers.

“His associates should’ve taken the photos as evidence that he was killed because he was an abusive fuck, not for his illegal business dealings.”

“They are thinking about their own fat hides. I’ll let them squirm a bit before I make them pay me for the evidence I have against them.”

That was the price Botsaris’s own wife had to pay for the Temple’s services. Enough evidence for Minos to blackmail his partners and take a nice cut of their future earnings. The man was diabolical sometimes, but Ariadne couldn’t deny he knew how to squeeze out every drachmae he was owed. She followed him to his plush office and waited patiently until he told her to sit down.

“I do wish you’d come back to the safety of the Temple, little Spindle,” Minos said as he sat down behind an oak desk.

“You know me. I like my privacy and the quiet after living in the dorms with argumentative girls for so long.”

“You know I wouldn’t expect you to sleep in the dorms! You’d have a lovely space, bigger and much safer than that rat’s nest you currently live in.”

Ariadne bit her tongue. At least the rat’s nest was honest, and no one would try sneaking into her room in the middle of the night.

Minos opened his laptop and put in his password. Ariadne and half of Greece would’ve loved to get their hands on Minos’s laptop. Botsaris’s associates weren’t the only people he had dirt on, and if they all weren’t scared of it getting leaked, or having a visit from one of his priestesses, Minos would’ve been a dead man years ago.

“The Botsaris contract should prove to be the most lucrative one of the year. Your cut will make a nice little dent in what you owe me, and as always, a little bit extra in my Spindle’s account so she can keep her freedoms,” Minos mocked.

“Thank you, Minos. You know your Spindle will always come when you call her.” She gave him a sugary smile that made him sigh and nod.

“I know, my darling, but a father worries when his favorite daughter is living unprotected in this dangerous city.”

Ariadne held out her hand to pat his gently, and he lifted it to inspect the braided gold bracelet looped around her wrist.

“You are going to have to replenish the threads soon.”

“Well, someone has been keeping me busy the last few months,” Ariadne replied. She slowly removed her hand from his and fought the urge to wipe it down her black pants.

“That’s because you are my best, Spindle. Styx is changing, and I’m old enough to feel when the city is restless. I tolerate your freedoms for the time being, but if I start to get worried, I will recall you back to the Temple permanently. Understand?”

Ariadne felt the warning in his words settle like a cold weight in her gut. Was letting her have the apartment just

another of his fucking tests? She wouldn't put it past the prick.

“Of course, *pater*. I will always do what you think is best,” Ariadne said, ever the dutiful, devoted daughter.

He smiled at her indulgently, and she imagined the day when she'd have her debt paid off, and she wouldn't have to suffer through any more of his bullshit.

It was a favorite fantasy of hers, and it was right up there with the moment she'd wrap her golden braid around his neck and watch him squirm. She would get the revenge that she had spent the last fifteen years cultivating and enjoy every minute it took for him to die.

“I have been working you hard. How about a week off? No summons, just regain your strength.”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you. Is there anything else you need before I head out again?” Ariadne asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes. I've got a gift for you,” Minos said, opening the bottom drawer of his desk and pulling out a small black urn. Every thought in Ariadne's head shut down as he offered it to her.

“Lia. I should've given you these a long time ago. I was waiting for the right moment when I knew that I could trust you explicitly.”

“I thought you would've disposed of these,” Ariadne said, trying to keep the tremble from her voice.

There was a long wall in the Temple gardens that his best assassins got put to rest. Like the majority of the acolytes, Lia hadn't even made it to graduation.

“I was going to, but I knew how much she meant to you. Take them and honor her shade as you see fit.”

Ariadne took the cold jar and gripped it tightly. “Thank you, *pater*. Is there anything else you require of me?”

Minos looked her over in a non-fatherly manner. “Maybe stop by the kitchens and eat something. I worry about what you're putting into your body out there.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I haven’t eaten breakfast this morning.”

Ariadne had reached for the door when he cleared his throat. “One other thing, Spindle. If you interfere with my training again, like you did today, I’ll break more than the girl’s arm. Understand?”

“Yes, *pater*. I’m sorry,” Ariadne said and left his office before she climbed over the desk and shoved her fist down his throat.

Ariadne was still fuming by the time she made it back to her apartment in the Hellas District.

With the anger came the inevitable hopelessness that no matter how much money she saved or how hard she fought, Minos was never going to let her go.

Giving her Lia’s ashes was just another move in their silent game of wills.

“Don’t forget your mail, Aria,” the ancient landlady demanded from her desk in the foyer.

“Thanks, Mrs. Contos,” Ariadne said politely. It was so rare for her to get any mail apart from the marketing flyers of the local shops that she had a habit of not looking in her box for weeks. She made a show of unlocking the box to appease the still watching Mrs. Contos, and she was surprised to find a yellow package inside of it.

Ariadne stilled when she noticed it was addressed in her full birth name, knowledge she thought only she and Minos had.

It would be impossible for anyone to identify her from fingerprints or DNA left at crime scenes. Minos paid good money to ensure that his priestesses didn’t exist in any police or medical databases.

Ariadne had burned her fingerprints off years ago, back when she believed all of Minos’s bullshit and wanted to impress him with her devotion.

Ariadne placed Lia's ashes on the mantel of the broken fireplace, turned on her coffee pot, and stared at the package on her kitchen counter. If someone knew who she was and what she had done, then the envelope could contain anthrax or any other number of nasties sent for revenge.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ariadne huffed and tore open the package and tipped out its contents. Inside was a smartphone with a pin code written on a scrap of paper.

"What the..." Ariadne tapped in the code just as the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"We are the Pithos, and we have a job for you, Spindle," a digital voice replied, and Ariadne's safe, anonymous world fell out from beneath her.

2.

Ariadne took three deep breaths before she demanded, “If you know so much about me, you know I don’t work freelance or take private contracts.”

“Minos Karros likes to keep a tight grip on his pretty assassins. Tell me, Spindle, how’s that working out for you?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Ariadne said, even as her pulse raced.

“We are offering you a contract. Your reward will be five million drachmae and a way to keep out from under Minos’s dirty thumb forever.”

“Why?” It sounded too good to be true, and Ariadne was too smart to bite that bait.

“Pithos wants to get rid of scum like Minos that seek to corrupt Greece.”

Ariadne snorted. “Sounds too idealistic to be true.”

“I’m sure it does to a woman raised by a monster. We are monster hunters, Spindle. Destroy our monster, and we will destroy yours.”

“I’m not dumb enough to take you at your word. For all I know, you are Minos trying to fuck with me and test my loyalty.”

“There will be another package delivered to you within the hour. You have until sunrise tomorrow to give us your final answer. Consider what a life of freedom is worth to you.”

Ariadne knew she should call Minos straight away, tell him that some jerk gang called Pithos was out to fuck with his business.

Instead, she drained her coffee, stuck the phone into the back pocket of her jeans, and went out. If another package was going to turn up in the next hour, she was going to make sure she saw the face of the person doing the delivery.

“By the saints, I thought you’d died, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you,” Dimmi said as Ariadne made it to the food van permanently parked across the road. Dimmi was probably the closest thing she had to a female friend, so Ariadne made a point of giving her business at least once a week. Their friendship was another weakness, like the apartment, but one that she was determined to keep.

“Dim, I was here three days ago. Stop drinking on the job,” Ariadne said as she took the bottle of juice Dimmi gave her through the van’s serving window.

“My darling, I’m not drinking. I miss seeing your beautiful face. You want your usual?”

“Sure,” said Ariadne.

Ten minutes later, Dimmi’s curves appeared out the back door of the van, and she sauntered over to the plastic table Ariadne sat at. Dressed in a leopard print dress with her curling black hair pinned up in a perfect sex kitten look, Ariadne knew most of Dimmi’s customers weren’t interested in her cooking.

“Here you go; veggie kebab with extra hot sauce. You look like you need it.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Ariadne, with a roll of her eyes.

“I’m serious. Do you *ever* sleep?” Dimmi lit a cigarette and eyed her critically.

“Not well,” Ariadne admitted before having a bite of her kebab. The Temple had only fed them strict vegan meals with no sugar or salt, and when she had finally got the chance to eat spice, Ariadne thought she’d die from sensory overload.

“This lack of sleep better not be because of a fucking man. I would advise you to move to women, but they are just as crazy. My last girlfriend stole my good GHD hair straightener and sliced up my favorite dress before she left. Bitch. At least men wouldn’t think to steal your hair styling products when you dump them,” Dimmi said sourly.

I wouldn’t know.

Ariadne had a few brief messy encounters until she found better results doing it on her own. She had occasionally slept with a target to get close enough to kill them, but a real, adult relationship was beyond her experience.

“All sounds way too hard to me,” Ariadne admitted. She didn’t hear what Dimmi said in reply, as all her focus zeroed in on a bike messenger. She took out her new phone and took a shot of him as he came out of the building.

“Stalker much? What’s that poor kid done to earn that death glare from you?” Dimmi demanded.

“Nothing. Some jerk keeps putting creepy messages in my mailbox, and I want to find out who.”

“Guys are the worst. At least he hasn’t started sending you photos of his dick.”

“Not yet, anyway.”

“If he does, we’ll make a wall of shame, right here.” Dimmi pointed at the blank, pink side of the van. “If he’s a local, it’s bound to flush him out.”

Ariadne laughed loud enough for people to turn and stare. “Thanks, Dimmi. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Ariadne finished off her meal and an espresso before heading back into her building. A box was waiting for her, and when she opened it, she found a thin silver laptop.

“You guys love your tech, don’t you,” Ariadne said as she turned on the power button. She had to admit it was the smarter way to do it. If you had that much information on a hit, then you didn’t want to carry about piles of paper.

Handwriting could be tracked, so could the type of paper used if you were desperate. Digital files were traceable, but if Pithos had the stones to go up against Minos, then Ariadne doubted they'd give over anything that could be traced.

There was a single folder on the desktop, and when she opened it, the first thing she clicked on was a photo of the sexiest guy she'd ever seen.

Broad-shouldered and ridiculously tall, the guy had olive-brown skin, sun-streaked dark hair that fell past his shoulders in lazy waves and a short, clipped beard. Even dressed in an expensive suit, he seemed an unlikely candidate for a corporate manager or a banker.

"Gods, aren't you the prettiest contract I've ever been offered," Ariadne told the photo as she clicked open more files.

A full information form came up, including a name; Asterion Dys. Something scratched at her subconscious like she was sure she'd heard the name before but couldn't remember where.

"Have you been a naughty boy, Asterion? Oh my...it looks like it."

Ariadne read through each file carefully. She had to hand it to Pithos. They were thorough. They'd even noted down his weekly schedule and who his closest bodyguards and staff were.

According to Pithos, Asterion Dys was the owner of a nightclub in the Diogenes, and some type of illegal, gladiatorial fighting pit underneath it. It was a place that people died to entertain the rich, and millions were laundered through it every year to the benefit of Styx's worst criminals.

The cops couldn't touch Asterion because not only did he maintain relationships with some of Greece's most powerful people, but Hades fucking Acheron owned shares in the whole operation.

That made Ariadne pause. She'd killed mob bosses, politician's and other high profile people before, but she'd

have to be stupid to want to fuck with one of Hades's friends or members of his inner circle.

Besides, if Pithos had all of this on Asterion, why did they need her to kill him? Why not do the job themselves? Ariadne gnawed on her bottom lip as she thought about how she could do it.

Asterion looked like a big fit guy, so he'd be a fighter. It would make him hard for her to take down without the help of a sedative that she'd have to get him to ingest. That is *if* she could get past his bodyguards first who all had the look of ex-military or organized crime about them.

The only time someone like Asterion would be alone was in bed. Just the thought of it filled Ariadne with tense excitement. It would be a nice change to try to seduce someone who was that good looking.

Easy girl, you'd still have to kill him, remember?

Five million drachmae was a lot of money to pass up. She'd been through all the files, and she'd found nothing that would be useful against Minos. If she took the job and Pithos only had money to give, she'd use up that five million just trying to hide from Minos's wrath.

Ariadne woke at dawn, as the cell phone started to ring. She'd fallen asleep at the table, still reading.

"Spindle, what is your decision?" the voice demanded.

"I don't see anything on this laptop about Minos, so this job isn't worth the risk to me," she replied, stifling her yawn.

"Look again," said the voice. Ariadne moved the mouse, so the screen lit up, and sure enough, there was a new folder.

"How are you doing this?" she demanded. The laptop wasn't connected to the internet. She wasn't sure this part of Hellas could even support the network.

"*How* doesn't matter. That folder is only a small part of what we have hacked off Minos's laptop. You'll get the rest when the job is done."

Ariadne opened the file, and her jaw dropped open. Client names, targets, successful hits, ongoing bribes. She already had enough to burn Minos, but not enough to destroy him.

Feeling as if she could see the first glimpse of her freedom in years, Ariadne whispered, "I'll do it."



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