

THE *Monsters* BALL

*Bequiled By  
The  
Beastly  
Baron*

YD LA MAR

**BEGUILED BY THE BEASTLY  
BARON**

**YD LA MAR**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*To all my readers, thank you for giving me the chance. I hope I can continue to make you guys proud.*

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# MONSTERS BALL

*You are cordially invited to the Monsters Ball...*

In this fantastical version of Regency London, the ruined, the rejected, and the unredeemable wallflowers have only one option: to seek a match among the *monsters*.

Twelve authors have joined together to bring you twelve delicious, decadent tales of monsters finding true love within a glittering ballroom. Let marble gargoyles sweep you across the ballroom, viper viscounts capture your heart, and dukes covered in cold fire set your senses ablaze.

\*This is a shared world so each author will have a complete novella-novel length book. We're excited to sweep you off your feet!\*

Prepare to *swoon* over this Regency-inspired world of monsters, ballrooms, and true love.

[Monstersball.carrd.co](http://Monstersball.carrd.co)

# INTRODUCTION

Dearest Reader,

May is upon us and the infamous Monsters Ball has once again arrived for the women and men of the *ton*. This author has come upon some fascinating news of a particular baron who's finally made his appearance. No one anticipated his arrival. Rumor has it the Baron Louis Lockhart was a myth whispered on the lips of Ladies as they fantasized what he would be like if he ever made his presence known.

The first known rumor of his name was whispered thirteen years past when his invitation was first sent. Much to the Queen's disappointment, the Baron never made any appearance despite responding to all her missives politely, albeit neutrally.

This author expects this May's Ball to be full of surprises to say the least. What does this baron look like? How old is he? With the assimilation of monster kind into society, we've been privy to many different types. Would the Baron be one from the sea or land, we wonder? Our readers and I will have to wait and see.

Our dearest Queen has not acknowledged or mentioned anything of the baron since the gossip started. Is there a hidden scandal behind his lack of appearance? What is the actual time



frame a bachelor is allowed to hold before the Queen insists on proposing a betrothal for him?

Does it have anything to do with the abrupt arrival of a Miss Antônia Santos Pereira who's spent the majority of her life in Brazil while her father attended to "business" in London? The coincidence of their mutual arrival has not gone unnoticed by this author. Mister Pereira was well known for his gambling habits. Gossip has begun to question if Miss Antônia has been secretly ruined, or if her interest did not lean toward the male variety is a reason for her later age in attending the May Season of the Ball.

Witnesses at the docks have mentioned her masculine behavior and bold speech, unbecoming of a woman of her station, toward the ship members who saw to her safe arrival. Could this be the reason for her singlehood?

The human women of the *ton* will be allotted three days with monstrous bachelors at the Ball. Readers, we anticipate a most titillating and indelicate display this season, indeed.

This author shall be sure to deliver all the juicy news upon the next publication.

Until next time,

*Lady Grey*

## BLURB

*Dear Miss Antônia Santos Pereira,*

*at the bequest of your late father's will and on account of your potential ruined status and age, her majesty has hereby ordered you to attend the Monsters Ball to find suitable prospects for your family lineage.*

Antônia is back in London after the passing of her father. Living overseas most her life, without the burden of her family affairs, she is accustomed to a life that allows her to do as she pleases, when she pleases without answer to anyone. The missive changes everything, however, and affairs at court that weren't to have been her duty suddenly fall upon her. She will do as she must, but if her husband thinks he will rule her, he will be sadly mistaken.

Hiding behind the guise of a beastly baron, Loius Lockheart, the unseelie king has little patience for the giggling mass of women and the unsavory human world. He tolerates it for only one purpose: to find the one he was betrothed to long ago.

When fate brings him face to face with her at the Monsters ball, he is determined to take what her father promised him.

Through much headache and tribulation, he is intent on sweeping this innocent maiden off to the Unseelie Court, no matter the cost.

Can Antonia find love in this forced matrimony to a monster that both frightens and fascinates her, or is she doomed to be trapped in his courts lonely forever?

**\*\*The Beguiled by the Beastly Baron is a steamy regency monster romance and part of The Monster Ball collection.\*\***

## **COURTESY WARNING**

This story includes references to parental loss.

## PROLOGUE

“**D**o you not understand?! It cannot be done!” The walls rattled.

He had no reason to raise his voice at me like this. It was a simple question that required a simple answer.

“If you do not do this, I will walk out of here and never look back.”

The air around us grew thick and oppressing. Thorny vines crawled from utter nothingness, wrapping around his body as a reflection of his roiling emotions.

What once would have scared me no longer held the same power. He could bluff all he wanted, but I knew the truth.

“You *will* not leave this kingdom, Antônia.”

*Back to my full name I see.* He must really be angry with me. It was necessary. This was necessary. So much had been left unsaid and brushed under the rug. I needed to know where I stood.

“Who is going to stop me?” I threw down a challenge I knew I would not win. But I had to try. For the sake of this so-called marriage, I had to try. I will not become the one thing I detested. I refuse!

I stood there with my arms crossed and my head held high, though on the inside I was scared to death of his answer.

Vines shot out and broke through the walls as creatures from the darkness invaded our home. Their glowing red and blue eyes wisped around us as their forms took on varying shapes, morphing back and forth constantly, tricking the mind to believe it was insane.

But I knew better.

I didn't take my eyes off him. I stared right into the depths of his soul, willing him to say the words I needed to hear—the words that would easily keep me by his side, if he would just put down his pride.

“The realm of men *will* fall,” he declared with finality.

I snapped. It was not out of character for me around him. But this time, I even scared myself. “You threaten and you threaten, yet you refuse to just tell me what I need to hear. Just say it! What are you so scared of?!”

I couldn't contain my emotions any longer. It poured out of my soul through the tears that tracked down my cheeks and the way my voice broke with my plea. My lip wavered and I turned away, unable to face him with such raw emotion, with such vulnerability.

I was Antônia Santos Pereira. The woman who lived life the way she chose to. Not this sobbing pathetic thing standing here now. He had done this to me. He had made me into *this*.

Branches cracked and the building started to crumble under the weight of his destruction—his fury.

I didn't hear him move. I couldn't hear anything but the racing of my heart pounding in my temples, drowning out the

sounds of sobs. My hands clutched at my chest and slowly rose to cover my face from the world. *This is not who I am.*

Strong, inhuman arms wrapped around me from behind and I jerked away, angry at him, angry at everything that had happened in my life.

I was drowning again, unable to come up for air. My knees buckled, but he caught me against his chest tightly, the vines wrapping around us both as he nuzzled his face against the crook of my neck, growling in frustration. The feeling was mutual.

“You torture me with your human frailties. You cannot comprehend—”

I dropped my hands from my face and screamed. “Then help me understand!”

# ANTÔNIA

*Dear Miss Antônia Santos Pereira, at the bequest of your late father's will and on account of your potential ruined status and age, Her Majesty has hereby ordered you to attend the Monsters Ball to find suitable prospects for your family lineage.*

**A**s if the death of my father wasn't enough, the missive fell into my hands right after breakfast.

*Am I not even allowed time to grieve before more obligations fall onto my shoulders?*

"What are they talking about? Why do I need to attend this ball if I'm the only one left to receive my father's property?" I inquired aloud.

*What's left of it, anyway.* I wasn't sure entirely what my father left behind or what kind of trouble he found himself in during his stay in London.

Nonetheless, it did not make any sense. How many women out there continued their lives *without* matrimony?

My long-time cook, Isabella, gave me a shrug before refilling my favorite coffee cup. It was my mother's favorite; it

was all I had left of her.

From one patriarchal society to another, societal ideals and structures continued to leave me dumbstruck, though they shouldn't. The thought of this Monsters Ball I was forced to attend made my insides churn with unease. I was used to being on my own here, used to controlling my daily routines and destiny without the overhanging pressures of a present father.

Now, there would be the overhanging presence of a queen in a far away land I haven't visited since my youth. *And why should she care about a random woman in another country? Was there something I was not seeing?*

A pang of guilt hit me in the chest as if it were a physical thing. I did miss Pai, very much, but the situation his death had thrown me into had become more overwhelming than I initially realized.

I was beyond taken by surprise. Why would my status be ruined? I had no scandals; my reputation was clean here in Brazil. Besides the occasional flirtations with the workers and younger men, everyone knew that as the daughter of Senhor Gilberto. I was destined to marry within my station—if that was my choice.

And no one here was worthy of my station according to my father. It was why he left for London to begin with, so I had been told over the years.

My late mother's absence took a toll on him—took a toll on us both. As a child, I didn't realize it then, lost in my own grief. I was a young girl without anyone to look up to, without a shoulder to cry on when I stumbled, without the warmth of a bosom when I woke up in the middle of a darkened room plagued by nightmares.



My father took a lot of guilt and burdens onto himself during those times, telling me each night that he never wished for me to ever feel the kind of loneliness he did after my mother's passing.

He read me stories of knights who slayed dragons and saved princesses, providing them with safety and a loving home. He taught me that a man's place in a woman's heart was of utmost importance, and a man worth anything always makes sure to never let her doubt the fact of her position with him—the position of his most sacred treasure to be protected.

I was young then, naive enough to believe him. That was, until he slowly stopped returning home, leaving me to be raised by the maids and my assigned governess, Theresa. What, then, was he trying to say about my position with him? That I was no longer important enough to be treasured?

“You should go and make sure the estate does not land in anyone else's hands, Antônia. It is what your mother would have wanted.”

I dropped my cup onto the little porcelain plate a bit louder than necessary, cringing on the inside at the fact that I could have chipped it in my loss of control over my emotions. “You never knew my mother, so your assumptions hold no weight here, Theresa,” I snapped.

I didn't know when it started, but my mother had become a sensitive topic. Despite burying my feelings about it, just one mention of her brought all the pain of not having her around back like a fresh wound.

I should be more cautious with my tongue, especially once I leave for London. *What other choice do I have?* But in this moment, her words stung me in a way I never knew. Who was she to tell me what I should and shouldn't do at the age of nine

and twenty? Our relationship is no longer what it used to be because I was no longer that little unsure girl who hoped her father would come back home.

“I mean no offense, Antônia, you know this. I just wish to guide you in the right direction, since it seems you—”

I shot up and scooted my chair back with a loud screech, making her wince. “I thank you for your unsolicited guidance, once again, Theresa. But I will make my own decisions, especially regarding my family affairs. If you wish to continue to be by my side, I remind you of your place now that I am beyond my childhood.”

I stared at her confidently across the little breakfast table, and she cowered a few inches before catching herself and clearing her throat in an effort to hide it.

“Societal culture may dictate that, as a woman, I require a chaperone by my side until I am wed, but we both know society cannot keep me strapped to any of their ideals.” I leaned in and gave her a wicked smile. “London better brace itself for my arrival, because they’ve never met a woman like me.”

With that, I turned without waiting for her response and left the breakfast room and proceeded down the hall and into the foyer. I was running away from the truth, I knew it. A coward under the guise of calm, confidence, and knowing—when the only thing I knew was that everything around me was crumbling again.

*Think of what needs to be done. There’s no one else who can do this. All he had was you.*

Burying my outburst within myself, I let my rational mind control the direction of my thoughts.

The sickness that took the late king overseas, the *Queen's Curse*, was said to be monstrous in nature. Since his passing, monsters of all types have slowly begun integrating into society and mingling with us like regular citizens. They became the *bête monde*.

On top of my lacking childhood, I was thrown into a world that didn't make any sense. The abrupt changes forced on me weighed heavily on my young mind, and probably played a part in why I never gave much thought to settling down with any male—human or monster. I was barely able to settle my thoughts, let alone navigate growing up in an empty home full of servants.

Of course, it didn't mean I was exempt from attraction or blind to the visage of a virile male in his prime. But that was neither here nor there, especially not with what just landed on my plate.

The opulent home my father kept me in was nothing but an extravagant gilded cage. From the delicate fabrics my father shipped from who knows where to the fine porcelain he gained from who knows what. Could it have been an actual purchase? Of course. But the rate at which my father began accumulating these things left me curious.

He was never around for me to sate my curiosity. Convenient, that.

I passed by a painting of my late mother sitting in front of my father, his hand on her shoulder. I stopped and gazed upon it the way I always did, wondering what my father would have been like if she were still here. This was the only face I could remember of her—if I remembered her at all.

“Would you have still left us, Father, to attend to your business overseas?”

I guess none of us would ever know. I was the only child left with the Pereira name, the only family member left here in this home. Theresa, bless her soul, along with my father tried to provide me with all I may need growing up within these walls, from foreign tutors to instruction on proper mannerisms bequeathed to a lady of my station.

A slow smile crept across my face, erasing my morose mood.

She couldn't contain me once my hormones and stubbornness got the better of me as I entered my later teenage years.

Stubbornness was a Pereira trait, I had been told.

"Sir, you cannot be here!" one of my maids hissed, pulling me from my thoughts.

I turned to find Christiano standing just beyond the front door, slightly disheveled, and panting from exertion.

"I just heard," he admitted with a step toward me.

I frowned. How could he? I just received the missive today. I discreetly looked at my maids who were lingering around the foyer in the shadows. It was no secret that they all took great pleasure watching my many suitors come to my door to try and proposition me during my first few Seasons.

Against Theresa's advice, I accepted a few of the invitations I had received for the balls held in town. She feared that I was too young, too gullible. She quickly learned how wrong she was when time and time again, no man was ever able to pin me down with matrimony.

Christiano and I have had our stolen moments, but he knew from the beginning I was content in my life as an unmarried woman. The life my father left behind was all I

knew, one surrounded by strong women who helped pick up the pieces from his constant absence.

It wasn't men who held me together this long.

Pretending nonchalance, I stared at him. "You heard what, exactly?"

His eyes hardened for a second, the fire of his unbridled lust showing through his eyes the way it always did everytime he stole a chaste kiss from me when no one was around—when we would both attend balls just to freely touch one another through dance out in the open.

A game we played between us. But it seems he no longer wanted it to be only a game.

His tone changed and it piqued my interest. "Don't pretend you do not know what I speak of. When are you leaving?"

Fully turning to face him, I crossed my arms and his eyes darted to my modest cleavage that barely peeked over my empire dress, then back to my face. I quirked a knowing eyebrow.

"What does it matter to you, kind sir, what happens with my family affairs? I should question how you came about this knowledge when I've only received the missive this morning myself."

Pulling my attention away from him, I turned my head slowly to look at my maids who all suddenly pretended to be cleaning the surrounding areas intently, though I knew for a fact this foyer was spotless.

It seemed gossip flew fast in this home, not to my surprise.

"Antônia, I do not want you to travel alone. Let me accompany you to keep you safe."

*É mesmo—Oh really?* Christiano was anything but a chivalrous knight.

I scoffed under my breath. “The same way you’ve kept me safe... from you?”

Christiano’s extended hand jerked back as if scalded by boiling water. Gasps could be heard in the background, but I ignored them. The scowl on his face proved that my words cut as deeply as they should. I needed him to put an end to this little chase of his. He knew from the beginning that all I had to offer were flirtations and nothing more.

I didn’t have time to entertain such foolish notions like love, especially not now. The failing of men, I found over my adulthood, lay solely upon the simple fact that their eyes were inclined to wander the moment they felt that the vanity of beauty was fading. After all, many of these husbands at prior balls had cast looks my way when they thought their wives wouldn’t notice.

Not that I felt anything close to love with Christiano. Men were all the same. They enjoyed the chase the same way they enjoyed hunting deer. But once the chase was won, what was left?

I was no one’s prey to be felled in this lifetime.

The silence was heavy. I must have rendered him speechless. I was not known to be this callous between us, but things have changed.

Things always change.

“I thank you for your visit, Christiano, but I must ask that you take your leave. There are things to be done and important decisions to be made, *tá bom—do you agree?* Perhaps we will cross paths another time upon my return.”

He stared at me with disdain and something else I could not identify and did not care to. He could wallow in his hurt pride. He knew just as well as anyone else that a woman's reputation was all we had to barter with.

“*Origado—Thank you, my lady,*” he gritted through his teeth and bowed, his demeanor closed off. *Good.* “I hope you have a good trip.”

I plastered a kind smile on my face to soften the blow. “I thank you for your kind wishes, sir.”

And like that, our connection was severed with my coldness. It was the part of my personality that brought the younger men to my door in challenge.

I grew tired of these cultural games, the walls of my heart thickening with the years that passed me by—my tongue became a weapon of choice, while I kept my dresses pristine and presentable to the world who wanted nothing but to tear down a woman who chose to live life on her own terms.

Watching Christiano turn to leave, I cut a glare at my maids and they scuttled away into different rooms. The constricted life we lead here left room for drama and scandal. As if the uprisings in Rio De Janeiro weren't enough to keep gossiping mouths to themselves.

Listening to Christiano's manner of walking as he left my home, I let out a sigh. Maybe it *was* the perfect time for me to take a break from all this. Take the Queen up on her firm request for me to attend the Monsters Ball. After all, many humans had already labeled all my Seasons a failure in their eyes.

My mind drifted back to the missive I received this morning as I made my way toward the back courtyard for a

turn around the garden for mental clarity.

*Her Majesty has hereby ordered you to attend the Monsters  
Ball to find suitable prospects for your family lineage.*

I laughed under my breath. Who wouldn't be in want of a monster for a groom when all human options had labeled me a spinster and a potential lady of ill repute?



# ANTÔNIA

I barely survived the sea.

Theresa barely survived getting on the ship, being surrounded by human men who became more ripe than they should have the longer they baked under the sun.

“I won’t be consuming fish ever again,” Theresa gagged dramatically as she croaked out her declaration.

“Yes, well, I have a strange feeling we won’t be seeing home again at this point. It seems we’re both done with ships for the rest of our lives.” The trip left a bad taste in my mouth. Not only was the food wretched, but the ship’s crew members were uncouth.

If it wasn’t for my stubborn streak and sharp tongue, we probably wouldn’t have made it to our destination. And of course, coin was a convincing friend. *Thank you Father, for that.*

Well, I couldn’t ignore the fact that a certain monster who hailed from a kingdom beneath the sea helped to keep the wayward men at bay when they became under the influence of fermented drink. I offered him coin for his services, but he

declined and informed me that his integrity could not be bought.

*“Sir, I do insist—”*

*His webbed fingers halted mine and my eyes snapped to his. His face was an interesting mix of fish and man, with long, thin fins from his head instead of hair. His skin was covered with smooth, supple scales. I tried my best to not be rude in staring, but I couldn't help it. His audacity to touch me also intrigued me. I wondered if his kind had to put up with silly societal rules such as ours on land.*

*“Madame, I assure you it was nothing. Any one of my people would have done the same. Some of these human males need to understand the importance of protecting females, lest they run into the same problem we have.”*

*I cinched up my purse and handed it back to Theresa, who openly stared at the aquatic gentleman with wide eyes.*

*“And what problem would that be, may I ask?”*

*To my surprise, he leaned in quickly, bringing himself nose to nose, making any words I had lodge in my throat with his brash behavior. I had never been so easily flustered as I was at that very moment.*

*“The dwindling numbers of heart-song matings. It's precisely why I'm heading to the same location you are, I presume. There seems to be a certain ball that's come around.”*

Oh.

*“Will luck allow me another meeting with beauty such as yourself at the Monsters Ball?”*

Theresa clutched my arm, ending my strange daydream of the stranger, as the carriage continued to take us down the rough cobbled road. “We can’t possibly stay here,” she declared. “We need to complete our task, handle your father’s estates, and make preparations for our return home.”

I quirked an eyebrow up and gave her silence without looking at her, letting her mentally imagine the trip back overseas.

Her face turned an ill shade of green, not as attractive as the monstrous gentleman I was thinking of, and turned away toward the carriage’s window, trying to swallow down the bile that was threatening to come up once more. I was blessed to be lacking an empathetic stomach for such things.

At least the salty smell of the sea was far away, though I swore some of it was still stuck to my nostrils, burning into my memory like an unseen scar. I should stop all thoughts of the aquatic gentleman. I do not think I would be able to live by the sea, or in the sea, or whenever his home may be.

I patted her arm in comfort and ended our conversation for the rest of the ride.

The view of London was much more gray than I imagined—gloomy and drab. The buildings all had the same colors, none of them stood out more than the other. It was a contrast to the brightly colored homes we had back in Brazil—at least where we came from. It was only once we left the cobbled roads did I see more greenery reminiscent of home.

“How far is this place? We left town a while ago.” Theresa’s patience was wearing thin. Or maybe her stomach couldn’t take the shaking of the carriage any longer. Lord knows, my own bum was beginning to grow numb from all these bumps, despite having enough fleshy cushion back there.

“I see that, Theresa. But I have no answers for you, as you know. Father left us both behind. I do not know my way around the area besides the maps we looked over at home prior to getting on that ship.”

London was said to be a bustling town. So far, it had lived up to its reputation. Monsters and men of all shapes and forms were at the docks, working side by side as if they had more time to integrate together than Brazil had.

Theresa let out a shaky breath with the mention of the ship and I cringed in sympathy. Her stomach was just starting to settle.

In that exact moment, the carriage pulled to a stop and I instantly leaned over and looked through the window. Just beyond the cusps of trees, off to the side of the dirt road lay a charming home about half the size of the one back in Brazil.

“Father, what are you doing out here all alone?” I questioned under my breath.

Theresa shifted around, rearranging her dress. “Who’s to say he was alone the whole time?”

I scrunched my nose at that. I didn’t appreciate the image she put into my mind. My father wasn’t the most handsome man around. He was gangly, with a clean shaven face. He always made sure he was presentable, but it didn’t hide the fact that it was luck that brought my mother to him. She was a lower class woman who tended to her parent’s shop when my father happened upon her one fine evening on a visit home to his parents’ estate.

A simple love story of love at first sight.

And the rest, as they say, was history.

“Come along, Antônia, we must make haste before the sun sets on us.” Theresa’s sudden energetic voice told me she was relieved we had made it to our destination.

“Do the servants know of our arrival?” I didn’t see anyone outside. Perhaps they were all inside preparing for us.

“I sent a letter ahead of time, but the ship’s voyage took a little longer than expected.” Theresa’s voice wobbled a little at her mention of the voyage, and I held back a laugh. It really wasn’t that bad. No one died. At least, I didn’t think anyone did.

My imagination started to question all the fish we ate on our trip. *I do hope we weren’t eating anyone...*

Suddenly, I felt a little nauseous, and it was Theresa who was patting my arm.

We both exited the carriage and lifted our skirts just over the dusty ground as we made our way toward the front. Theresa pulled out her purse to pay the driver and he tipped his hat right before he directed the horses away from the property, kicking up dust in our faces.

“How very rude.”

Dusting my cleavage, I rolled my eyes. “Theresa, not everyone can meet your standards of propriety.”

She sputtered and I laughed as I looped my arm in hers and pulled her toward the small estate.

“It is quite modest, isn’t it?” she whispered.

“Theresa, let’s not start. We need to focus on the important matters of how we are to keep what my father has established here. I don’t want all his hard work to go to waste.”

This place must have held some great value to him for him to never return home to see me, right?

“If he truly was working hard, the estate wouldn’t look like... this?”

I slapped her arm and she shut her mouth. Theresa was given a new chance at life when my father brought her under his employ at a young age. Well, young in the eyes of a person of my current position looking back. She was five and twenty, resigned to a life of spinsterhood from my assumption.

What a pair we must have made to the eyes of others.

At six and thirty, she had become more than an occasional chaperone to me or a mother figure. She had become my closest companion, though there were moments like this one where I wished to act like she was unknown to me out of embarrassment of her behavior.

Though, I wager she felt the same about me at times.

As we both approached the open gates and took notice of the wilting bushes that lined the walkway toward the front of the home. How unassuming of Father. He was always one for vanity from what I recall in my childhood. After all, our home back in Brazil had the best gardeners. Our courtyard was one to be envied within twenty miles, so the local gossip went per my maids.

Suddenly, the doors swung open causing Theresa to pull me closer to her. A gentleman who looked close to his grave greeted us with a courteous bow.

“Welcome, Miss *Pereira*. *Tudo bem? Is everything well?* I hope your trip was without any problems.”

Instantly, my wary mood took leave. His use of Brazilian Portuguese put me at ease.

“Thank you, kind sir. May I ask where everyone is? I thought this place to be abandoned for a moment.”

His face crinkled in a grandfatherly smile. “No, Miss. I’d hate to disappoint you. Our gardener fell sick a few weeks past and we haven’t been able to obtain another on such short notice.”

“Ah, that explains—” Theresa started.

I jerked Theresa’s arm subtly to stop her train of thought. We did not need to come off snobby upon our first impression with the man who might be the one we need to rely on to navigate everything we need to get done here.

His smile didn’t waver. Perhaps he was hard of hearing in his old age. One could only hope.

“*Por favor*, come in, make yourself comfortable.” He took a few steps down and I wondered if I should rush to his side in assistance in case he took a misstep and tumbled to his death.

“*Obrigada. Yes, thank you very much.* It’s been a long trip,” I supplied before Theresa could say anything else. For a woman who was paid to teach me etiquette, she had her slip ups when her mood was beyond company.

“Yes, from the letter, I assumed it would be. I haven’t been back to Brazil since my childhood.”

Good gracious. That must have been a million years ago, judging by his age now. He must remember the time before the Queen’s Curse and the fall of King George III.

We made it through the grand double doors and were met with glistening marble floors and a beautifully decorated staircase that took you to the second level. One could never imagine the internal splendor after the outer observations.

This was the Father I remember. Always one to make sure he made a good appearance in front of visitors.

Was it wrong of me to feel guilty, angry, and sad over his memory now?

*“Falaram-me muito de voc. I have heard so much about you, Miss Antônia.”*

“You have?”

He nodded gleefully, and I was left confused. *What could my father have to say about a young girl he probably couldn't remember?*

“His stories of his beautiful family back home echoed in this estate every day. It was his choice of morning conversation and as well as his choice of evening tales. Especially about his amazingly smart daughter.”

*Funny, he never came back home to talk about you all. “Desculpa. I'm sorry, I hope he didn't burden you all.”*

“Never. He kept us all from... Well, that's a story for another time. Let me escort you to your rooms.”

Theresa turned her head to me but chose to hold her tongue. Our rooms? Did he mean that rooms were prepared for our arrival because of the letter? I chose to keep my thoughts to myself as well.

The gentleman turned to lead us toward the stairs and I asked him what I should have the moment he greeted us. *“Perdão, Senhor—pardon me, sir. Como é seu nome? We didn't catch your name out there.”*

“Ah, *desculpa*, in my excitement of greeting you, it slipped my mind. My name is Domingos.”



“It is very nice to meet you, Domingos,” Theresa piped in. “Thank you for preparing our rooms. I knew a letter sent ahead of time would lower the stress we would bring to your staff.”

Domingos chuckled as he led us up the stairs. “On the contrary, Senhora. These rooms were dedicated to you both the moment your father, Senhor Gilberto, obtained it.”

Theresa’s firm grip on my arm prevented me from taking a tumble from my misstep. *He made a room for us both? Since then?*

*Then why had he never come back to get us? To get me?*

Steeling my rattled nerves from this news, we followed Domingos to our destination. Two beautifully furnished rooms side by side awaited us, along with two elderly maids by the doorway, each with their hands clasped before them and a smile on their faces.

Why was everyone under my father’s employ here of elderly age, I wondered.

“*Origada*, Senhor Domingos. We can take it from here.” Theresa curtsied as Domingos bowed, leaving us as she instructed.

The friendly atmosphere here reduced my stress by a fraction. *What else will I learn on this trip?*

“Do you need us to assist you with anything, Senhoras?” The maids eagerly awaited our answer. *They should be taking a nap, the poor souls.*

“No. No, thank you,” I politely declined. All I really wanted to do was to be left alone to mull over what I’d learned about my late father.

“Yes, of course. You both must be tired from your trip. We’ve never been overseas. Both of us were born here in London, though our parents are from Brazil.”

*How did my father come to find so many of our people here in London? Did he employ them all under his estate? More mysteries arose rather than answers.*

“Maria, stop running your mouth. They need rest. My apologies, *Senhoras*.” The second maid curtsied and scooted the first maid away from our doors. “Supper will be ready in two hours. Please, make yourself at home.”

They quickly exited without looking back. Theresa let out a groan at the thought of putting anything into her stomach, making my lip waver into a smile.

I still had questions about the fish we consumed.

“Come on now, Theresa, you have two hours to build your hunger back up. It’s not good to go to bed on an empty stomach,” I teased.

“Anything but fish...” she mumbled under her breath, leaving my side to head to her chosen room on the left.

I took a deep breath and headed toward my own, my eyes took in everything from the decoration to the furnishings. My heart constricted when I realized the room was colored in varying shades of pinks and purples, reminiscent of my own childhood room back home.

*Why didn’t you come back, Pai? You wanted to, didn’t you? What stopped you?*

Why was I mentally talking to a ghost? The phantom memories of his kind smile and empty promises in my mind were driving me into madness. Perhaps this was why women turned into spinsters after a certain age—memories of what

could have been plagued us like a sickness. Sometimes headstrong and obstinate, we're threatened to be rehomed in asylums that promise to fix the problem within us.

They just didn't realize the problem started *around us* initially.

My fingers trailed along the fine foreign fabrics, intricately woven with patterns from far off lands. The drapery was nice and heavy to keep the warmth within. I stood at the window and looked out over the dreary view. The sun had already set, casting shadows across the wilting courtyard of this estate.

"Maybe it was so nice here, you forgot about little Nia. Left me to wither like the bushes of your garden."

"Oh, my dear, it was nothing like that, truly."

Startled, I turned to find one of the maids with a soft smile. It was at that very moment, my eyes began to burn with tears. The walls around my heart crumbled without warning and my lips trembled, no matter how hard I tried to force them not to.

"Then tell me. I insist on knowing your meaning. I—"

"Your father thought only of you. You were all he ever spoke of from the moment he woke to the moment he slept."

I crossed my arms, afraid of hope, afraid of letting my protective walls down. "Then why did he never return? How could he abandon me?"

She stepped forward and I flinched back when her arms reached out to pull me into a matronly embrace with my arms still wrapped around myself as if it could hold the shattered pieces of my heart together for a few moments more.

"Because despite his failings, he fought until his dying breath to make sure he was something you could be proud of."

# ANTÔNIA

“Who was his accountant?”

“A thieving man. One that left with half of your father’s fortune before he realized what went on behind his back.”

Domingos finished telling us about all my father’s bad luck in regards to his finances. He tried multiple times to find other help only to have his reputation as a gullible man precede him. The estate had to be salvaged through gambling with high society members in gentleman clubs. My father was barely able to keep the estate afloat until he came down with a cough that he could not be rid of.

The rainy season in London was not agreeable with his aging body—one he refused to feed for the sake of keeping food costs down so that he would still be able to pay the staff.

Over the course of the past few days, my opinion of my father had morphed into something entirely new. There was so much I didn’t know, so much I wish I knew back then instead of allowing myself to cultivate bitterness like an overgrown vine that refused to let go.

“Where do we go from here?” I inquired, unsure myself.

“Most of the staff abandoned the estate not long after his passing. Those that remained agreed to offer our pay to help.”

My heart stopped.

Theresa exclaimed with the exact thought that ran through my mind. “What? Senhor Gilberto has been gone for close to two months now.”

Domingos’ smile didn’t leave his face. He continued to stare into my eyes with confidence. “Your father was a great man, Senhora. He took us in when no one else would employ us. He not only gave us not only a safe roof over our heads, but a place we could confidently call home.”

I turned my face to look out the window, trying to blink back my tears. There was nothing to be done now, not where we currently stood. Our home was self contained with the constant income received from tenants on our land. I wondered if there was a way to funnel money from our home back in Brazil to this one in order to save this place.

My father had blessed me with a good education, one where I excelled in numbers.

Turning to look at the old gentleman, I addressed him calmly. “Domingos, can you please bring me all of the household books. I will be spending the next few days seeing what can be done. Theresa, you will be assisting me.”

“Of course, Senhora. Whatever you need,” he easily agreed.

“*Origada*. Thank you.”

Domingos flicked his finger to someone behind my seat. “Maria, please bring Senhora Antônia some food and drink.

We want her to have enough energy for the task ahead.”

“Of course. Right away.” She curtsied and gave me a bright smile. “We are so happy to have you join us. Thank you, Senhora. Thank you. Please, save our home.”

With that, I felt like the weight of the world—their world—was on my shoulders.

“Don’t forget about the ball, Antônia. We’ll allow ourselves to drown in numbers for tonight, but the ball is in two days time.”

“Rats. I completely forgot about that. Is there any way for me to—”

Theresa placed her hand on the desk before me and leaned in, cutting off my sentence. “No. You must attend the Monsters Ball. The Queen insists.”

“I do not have anything appropriate to wear.” I was making excuses at this point. I knew it. She knew it.

“Senhora! My daughter owns a clothing shop. She can lend you the perfect dress!” Our other maid declared with triumph, as if she just solved all the world’s problems.

The problem was not the dress. It was me.

“Antônia. You *will* attend this ball by Her Majesty’s order. You must put forth your best performance in the name of your father and save his legacy. Who knows, you may find the perfect match there that will help us get out of this problem we have.”

I stood immediately, turning away from her, unwilling to hear any more.

“I do not *need* a man to help me with this problem. We are more than capable of fixing things.”

Theresa followed me out of the study and the maid stepped out of my way, still with a hopeful smile on her face.

“Antônia, I didn’t say you needed a man, but that perhaps you would choose one.”

I stopped in my tracks and she ran into my back, almost tumbling us both. I turned and glared at her.

“I highly doubt there would be anyone who would fit my needs, if I had any, which I *do not*. I have been taking care of myself just fine, as you very well know. Our home in Brazil is running perfectly. Any issues that arise with the tenants are taken care of and—”

She stepped toward me and placed both of her hands on my shoulders. “And yet you still weep at night and awaken with screams from constant nightmares. I find you rocking yourself in comfort when the anniversary of your mother’s passing comes around each year. You put on such a strong facade in front of the world and ask nothing for yourself.”

I shook my head in denial. “I do not need—”

She pulled me into a tight embrace and I let out a shaky breath. Why was she doing this to me right now? She was supposed to be helping me solve problems, not create more.

Her next words tore at my being like an invisible blade.

“Antônia, you deserve the world, not to hold it by yourself. It’s a weight no woman should have to carry alone. Even if she is capable, it’s nice to have another who stands confidently by her side in case she needs to catch her breath. A man with strong arms to hold her at night when everything becomes too much to bear.”

I rubbed my wet cheeks against her shoulder. “Father was wrong,” my voice wavered out of my control and I hated

myself for it. “There are no such things as knights who come to slay my dragons. I had to handle them on my own and I’m okay with that, truly. I’ve done it this long.”

She leaned back and brushed my dark hair out of my face. “But my dear, that’s the thing. You *do not* have to. All your dragons have been held at bay, you’ve made sure of it. They fear every step you take, as they should. You’ve grown to be one of the strongest women I know—and have come to admire. But, it’s time for you to rest your spirit. It’s weary. You are only human.”

I don’t do well with baring myself. I instinctively changed the subject. Pulling away, I wiped my eyes and plastered a calm expression on my face as if everything was okay. “Well, yes. I am only human. One that must attend Her Majesty’s Monsters Ball.”

I dodged her and walked back toward the study. Our maid stood there, with her hands clasped before her after having just witnessed our awkward moment. Well, there was nothing I could do about it. Theresa and her logic outweighed my irrational emotions in the moment.

“Giselle, please introduce me to your daughter. I will need a dress in haste.”

“Yes, Senhora!”

Giselle lifted her skirts and moved swiftly for her age, as if the house was on fire. I watched her clutch her bonnet as she ran to Domingos and quickly spoke with him. He nodded and smiled, also moving quicker than I ever thought he was capable of out the front doors.

“Well, I say...” I started.



“Come Antônia, we have numbers to tend to. Let Giselle and Domingos handle the rest.”

I nodded my head and followed her, wondering what I’ve gotten myself into.



WE WERE ABLE TO FIGURE OUT WHERE MONEY WAS LEAKING. It wasn’t as bad as we thought, but it wasn’t good either. Some of the staff who left took things that didn’t belong to them. It seems they felt that my father’s accumulation of foreign pieces was enough of a last payment, and that it was within their right to claim it. I was able to send a missive back to Brazil to inform Isabella, the person I left in charge, to channel some of the funding this way so that the staff would at least have this month’s pay.

Theresa grabbed one of my wayward dark strands and curled it with her finger. I turned to look at her with a smile until I saw her lick her ungloved finger to do it again.

“Theresa! That’s disgusting!”

“Your frizzy curls will be labeled disgusting if I don’t do something about them! Now hold still!”

I slapped her hand and she slapped mine. We immediately began battling for domination in a flurry of hands until the carriage pulled to a stop in front of our destination, stopping us both.

We leaned out the window and looked at the building in awe. The sheer magnificence of the structure and the amount of guests made me audibly swallow in mild panic. It was

massive and intimidating. Our home back in Brazil would be labeled humble and quaint compared to this monstrosity.

A strange, nervous laugh slipped through my lips, sounding like a dying elephant more than anything. At least, what I thought it sounded like. I had only seen pictures in my textbooks.

Theresa slapped me with the back of her hand to get my attention. “Hold yourself together now. You do not know who might be watching.”

At that exact moment, someone’s tentacles waggled at me from my periphery. My eyes widened as I watched what looked like a man with a sea creature for a head bow and wink with his non-monocled eye.

I had come to presume that the *bête monde* was a flirtatious sort. More so than the human bachelors I had encountered back home.

“Come on, then,” Theresa nagged.

The footman opened the door for us and the tentacled man came forth with an amicable greeting. I grabbed my fan and flicked it open, covering my face. From the gentleman on the ship to this, these monsters had quite bold personalities.

“Well, now I *am* glad to have attended this Season’s ball. Seems the ladies of the *ton* are quite the catch. I am glad, for once, to see that the rumors in the *bête monde* hold true. I’m Lord Edulis of Lindhall.”

*What does one say to that?* Theresa’s voice niggled inside my mind, scolding me that it would be too forward of me to ask him what those rumors entailed. “I thank you, kind sir.”

Theresa choked under her breath, knowing full well there was more to what I said, right before she pinched my arm out

of sight.

I grimaced, morphing it into a dainty smile, and let out a forced giggle. She seems to think it portrays me younger than my actual age if I act a fool.

*Who in the world would want to marry a fool, anyhow?*

“I’m Lady Antônia Santos Pereira and this is my lovely chaperone, Miss Theresa.”

The tentacles that looked reminiscent of a mustache wriggled in delight. His monocle almost fell off his face, and he cleared his throat, fixing it before it could.

“Charming. Yes, well. Would you lovely ladies grant me the pleasure of escorting you both to Broadstone Hall?”

I looked to Theresa for guidance and she subtly nodded her head. I was well versed in the men back home. Here? I felt like a fish flopping on dry land. I wasn’t quite sure how much of myself I was allowed to be without being scandalous.

“Yes, of course. Thank you, sir,” I politely replied.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he purred—as much as his tentacles would allow him. It almost sounded garbled.

Without warning, he took liberties in taking my arm to wrap around his right elbow as he led us down the beaten path to the front entrance.

I quietly observed the sea of colorful dresses and dark menswear against the rich green of the neatly kept grass of the front courtyard. Each monster had such unique qualities to their body shapes, none of them the same.

It was said that Broadstone Hall was built atop the ruins of a medieval keep. How hauntingly beautiful was that? After the disillusionment of my father’s stories of beautiful castles and

keeps, I drowned my teenage years in darker tales of medieval times and bloody wars. The men of those ages were portrayed as bold, confident, and willing to do and take what they wanted.

Walking toward the Hall, I inwardly sighed with resignation that men of those times were obsolete. Life in the *ton* harbored much different personalities.

Like Lords and Ladies being accumulated in a single location in order to find matrimony as if sifting through a catalog.

Halfway there, someone's wing almost hit me in the face. The gentleman on my arm jerked me away just in the nick of time as he let out a wet hiss.

"Oh, my sincerest apologies. These things are such a nuisance at these functions. I should really tie them down next time," the stranger apologized as he turned to face me. His face reminded me of an eagle, and the color of his feathers were something out of a fairytale with their gray and purple luminescence.

"If you keep hitting ladies in the face, there won't be a next time, Hesperis," my escort growled threateningly.

*Did these two know each other?*

"Well, Edulis, if you would kindly escort these lovely ladies *further away from the extremities of others*, we wouldn't have this problem, now would we?"

*Oh dear. This just got interesting.*

"The problem is your posturing when confronted with your failures, *Lord Hesperis*. Every time you get worked up over something, your wings expand beyond reason."

The monster's feathers became ruffled as he turned his beaked face toward my self-appointed escort menacingly.

I looked to one then the other, lost in whatever was about to unfold before me. Was it wrong of me to get flustered at the thought of these two tangled in limbs?

Theresa chose this exact moment to loop her arm in mine and slowly, but firmly pull me away from the scene.

“If you would stop working me up, none of this would be an issue, *Lord Edulis*.”

Unable to ignore their very loud bantering any longer, others nearby were turning their heads to fully witness what was happening. Good thing I was privy to the front row.

Edulis's tentacles writhed and Hesperis's wings vibrated. I had been around men—well, human males—long enough to know that this kind of energy went beyond a personal tiff.

The sexual tension in the air was suffocating and judging by the flushed faces of the women around us, I would wager everyone felt it the same way I did.

I was reluctant to leave, my curiosity getting the better of me. This was better than the married men getting caught casting their gazes at me back home.

“Come, let's go before it gets any worse,” Theresa whispered behind me.

“But I want to see—” I whined but she cut me off sternly.

“No! You will be guilty by association, and we cannot afford that as our very first impression here. Let's go!”

Her logic vexed me. Resigned, I took a deep breath and put on another smile as we both escorted each other away from the juicy drama.

*All this excitement and we have yet to enter the doors.  
What other types of entertainment await us inside?*

The answer quickly came when the bustle of women and monsters alike in an overly opulent space overtook my senses. Besides the massive oak doors with twisting shapes of monsters, the myriad of variations of guests I had never seen or could even imagine were in attendance at the Queen's Ball. That alone stole all my attention. From horns, to gills, to spikes that grew out of tails.

My face flushed at imagining what that particular body part was capable of in a marriage bed.

I discreetly fanned myself while chastising my inner thoughts with a muffled squeak. *Where did that come from?* I was never one to be this easily flustered. Perhaps it wasn't the male variety that failed me in the past, but the *human* one.

The saturated palette of mahogany and fabrics cast an old world feel to the room. The tapestries lining the walls had imagery of beasts and courtly ladies, making me wonder if the interior designer of this place was of the *bête monde*. I should probably see how much I could sell my father's exotic fabrics for. Maybe this trip to the ball would allow me to run into someone who could appraise it for me.

Walking further into the room, I realized that there were many more people than the balls I had attended back home.

*Was it always this packed or was it just this particular May Season, I wonder.*

The music floating from the middle of the room lulled everyone into a false sense of security and ease among the people here. Except for me. It was easy to see the women who lusted after particular monsters and the monsters who did the

same, though they stood a room apart. It reminded me so much of myself and Christiano so long ago.

“We should make some acquaintances, find new friends amongst the people here.”

She was right. We best take good opportunities with our time here. Who knows, we may find someone who would be useful to us and our current predicament at my late father’s estate.

“You do that, Theresa. You’re better at it.” Not necessarily, but I wasn’t in the most friendly of moods at the moment, especially when I had to keep up my false performance as a younger woman in her Season. It was all utterly ridiculous. I needed some time alone, away from people to collect myself until I had to perform again.

She hissed at me, knowing full well what I was doing, and I struggled to hold back a laugh.

“You will not be getting rid of me that easily. I need to keep an eye on you. No games, Antônia. Her Majesty wants you to find your future husband at this ball. You need to take this seriously.”

I rolled my eyes. “I am. I’m here, aren’t I?” What more did she want from me?

I smoothed down the beautiful dress Giselle’s daughter lent me. It was a striking shade of dark lavender, almost jewel toned. It brightened my skin and brought out my eyes, contrasting beautifully against my dark hair that was coiffed in an upward style. Of course, some of my curls could not be contained—a reflection of their host, I was sure. I left them to their own devices, the same way I wished Theresa would leave me to mine.

“Perhaps we can start at the refreshments,” I suggested. “I’m sure we’ll find some acquaintances there.”

Many of the unpartnered women were known to hang around the area, flocking together as if there were safety in numbers. The music had not shifted to anything upbeat as of yet, so our appearance there would not look as miserable.

Theresa nodded in agreement. “Yes, we can start there. Let’s make haste so we are not aimlessly wandering around like lost geese.”

Theresa had the strangest analogies.

The moment we arrived, we spotted a few very young ladies, as well as a few who were closer to my chaperone’s age.

One of the older ladies gave us a warm, motherly smile and I automatically dragged Theresa toward her. Seemed like the best place to start.

“I hope you both are enjoying your time here.” Her tanned skin was beautifully showcased against her moss green, velvet gown. The matching fascinator with feathers that sprayed straight into her hair made her stand out of the crowd. But it was her very welcoming air that pulled me in.

“*Obrigada*—I mean, thank you so very kindly for your welcome. This is my lady’s maid, Theresa, and I am Lady Antônia Santos Pereira.”

Theresa curtsied and I did the same.

“I cannot place your accent, it is beautiful,” she noted.

I blushed with embarrassment. I had forgotten that it would stand out in a crowd like this, not used to being away from home.



“Yes, thank you. We left from Brazil not too long ago at the behest of the Queen to attend the Ball,” Theresa supplied.

“Ah, you must be the late Lord Gilberto’s daughter. We’re excited to have you here with us this Season. The rumors of your beauty do not do you justice. You are quite a sight to behold.”

I fanned myself, unsure of how to take a compliment from such a regal woman as herself. There was nothing special about me. My looks did not stand out from any crowd back home. It was my reputation that preceded me there. But here in Dorset, where Broadstone Hall was located, I was not sure what was said about me, if anything was said at all.

“Countess Stalbridge, do not be so bold. You will scare off our guests,” a masculine voice cut in.

I looked over my shoulder to see a lizardman daintily holding a cup of refreshment. His long, thin tongue slithered out, and my eyes widened in surprise and intrigue.

“I was merely stating an observation, Lord Rej.” The Countess’ eyes were steely, but had a hint of mirth behind them.

“Yes, of course, Countess. After all, who could contain any compliment around such a lady?”

“As Lord Rej so rudely interrupted, I am Countess Stalbridge, the hostess of this lovely Ball.” She gestured to the gentleman. “Lord Odken Rej of Stanbrick.”

I did not know when Theresa snuck around to grab some refreshments, but it was perfect timing when she handed me a glass to cool my face.

“Very lovely to meet you both,” I replied softly before taking a sip.

Lord Rej's tongue flickered out once more as if tasting the air around me.

Our attention was stolen when the crowd around us began to mumble under their breath in unison. The Ladies around the refreshment tables gasped with their gloved hands dramatically over their mouths. The music stopped for a few seconds, but quickly resumed.

With a crease in my brow, I turned around to see what everyone was reacting to.

My heart raced. If I thought I was getting used to The *bête monde*, I was sorely mistaken.

# ANTÔNIA

The air around me grew oppressive with everyone's unease. The crowd parted like the red sea as a very tall and large, monstrous gentleman made his way into Broadstone Hall.

With a face reminiscent of the dead creatures found in swamps, his boned cape extended behind him like a barrier, keeping everyone at least the length of an entire being away from him. I could have sworn there were hints of vines that moved as if they had a life of their own, weaving around his very being with every step. The spikes protruding from his head added at least another thirty centimeters to his height, making him downright tower over the crowd.

“So, it's true. He made his appearance after all these years,” the Countess whispered under her breath.

“Who is the gentleman, may I ask?” Theresa inquired. I was wondering the same.

But what did the countess mean, *all these years*? Has he been here before? With every step he took toward us, my eyes took him in with morbid fascination. Large fangs were

unhidden, out for all to see. What I thought were gloved hands were actual calcification of bone over the darkness of his skin.

It was horrific.

It was captivating.

“The bastard actually left his realm,” one of the masculine voices nearby stated.

“I didn’t think he would ever come back,” another monster growled.

“Didn’t you hear?”

“No, what?”

“Ever since...”

The voices all started to meld together and become incoherent as the gentleman stopped right in front of me. *Me*. Of all the ladies standing here at the table. Or perhaps he was trying to speak with Countess Stalbridge and I was in his way?

I tipped my head back and back some more to give him my attention. The vines around his cape slowly slithered and wrapped around his shoulders like deadly thorned snakes. I couldn’t tell where his eyes were looking as the hollow sockets of his exposed skull glowed between a blue and purple hue.

“Good evening, Baron, so glad you could join us for this Season’s Ball,” Countess Stalbridge cut through the awkward silence between us, thankfully. “My dear Ladies, may I introduce you to Baron Louis Lockhart of Grimwood.”

He didn’t respond. I thought it was quite rude. Theresa had somehow slipped behind me, but still had her fingers on my hip to let me know she hadn’t gone far.

Blinking a few times, I nervously casted my gaze away, took a sip of refreshment, placed my cup back onto the table and slipped away while fanning my face.

Let Countess Stalbridge handle the stranger. I still had important matters to tend to. Like finding out when the food was being served. Giselle and Maria provided us with a simple snack before we headed out today, but it had been quite some time since.

I called for my chaperone, who was right behind me. “Theresa—”

“Antônia, he’s following you!” Theresa shook my arm and clutched it firmly against her breast.

“What?” I looked over my shoulder and my eyes widened. *Why is he following me?*

“Baron! Lord Lockhart!” The lizardman called out, but the stranger ignored him and continued to pursue me like a predator.

My heart raced and a shiver of fear ran down my spine. I didn’t know whether to be flattered or to tell everyone to run so that they would make way for me to make my escape.

“Antônia, walk faster!” Theresa screeched.

“I’m trying!”

The music changed to an upbeat tune as I excused myself around the people mingling with one another.

“I beg your pardon, miss!” one of the monsters huffed.

“*Desculpa!* My apologies!” *Was everyone blind to what was happening?*

I looked over my shoulder as another monstrous patron separated me and Theresa. In my irritation, I turned back around only to run into a very large and hard body.

His arms caught me, and the sound of the vines snaking across his deep green fitted tailcoat reminded me of serpents in the grass found back home.

The fan dropped from my hand as I tipped my head back to gaze once more at the gentleman that caused such a ruckus upon his arrival.

The glow of his eyes shifted and reflected the color of my dress eerily before he opened his maw and let out the most deep, baritone voice I had ever heard.

“May I have this dance, Lady *Pereira*.”

*How did he know my name? How does he know who I am? Did the Countess tell him?*

My sight quickly darted left and right in panic, looking for my chaperone, for guidance. It wouldn't do to decline the first offer for dance in front of all these strangers. People might be led to believe that my opinions of myself were too high. I didn't want that kind of reputation, especially when I was still trying to make acquaintances.

Everyone around us—human and monster alike—were watching with bated breath for my answer.

The room felt like it was closing in on me. His hands were still firmly on my upper arms in a tight grip. I swallowed my fear and did the only thing I could do.

I nodded in hopes of him at least releasing me.

Out of the corner of my eye, it seemed like a small, dark, shadowy figure appeared and disappeared as my fan floated to

his open palm.

“You dropped this.” *Was he controlling the shadow?*

“Y-yes, thank you.” I accepted his strange offer of my fan back into my hand. Did the members of the *bête monde* have magical abilities on top of their other differences with humans?

Someone in a light blue dress frantically waved at me behind a few of the patrons gathered in a corner. It was Theresa. Her eyes were wide as she mouthed in Portuguese that I should only offer him *one* dance.

*I already knew that, you silly old bat.*

A new song started and the gentleman grabbed my hand, pulling me to the dance floor. Something slithered around my shoe and I squeaked, skipping forward to avoid it.

It was such a strange experience, surreal almost, the way everyone parted for us and made room even though the floor was quite full of dancers already.

We both got into position around the others, some of which were glaring at his utter rudeness. The eyes of the human women around me turned into saucers, and I pitied them for a few moments for having to be beside him. *At least they were not obliged to be his partner!*

I forced myself to concentrate on the music and my dance steps as we twirled and turned. Gracefully stepping around the different dancers, I cleared my throat and found the courage I seemed to have left behind with Theresa. “It is a fine Ball, is it not, my Lord?”

His answer didn’t come until after a few short, abominable moments and more turns around the dance floor. I wanted to bury my face in embarrassment.

“It is tolerable.”

His abrupt tone was less than ideal for continuing any sort of pleasant conversation. But I was stubborn enough to try anyway.

“The music is different from where I—”

He rudely cut me off. “Lady Pereira, I wish to speak with you out in the garden.”

*What in the world? “Perdão, Why—”*

He pulled me away from the dance floor before the dance or music ended. The crowd around in the main room was packed as the monsters looked at him with open curiosity, and something else I couldn't place.

*Was he always like this?*

Halfway through the room and into the next, an announcement came for dinner.

My stomach took that moment to add to my embarrassment and growl. But the Baron ignored my awkward pangs of hunger by continuing to pull me entirely past the first room and into the next.

By luck, a dashing gentleman with tanned skin boldly stepped in front of the Baron, stopping his progress. The Baron's body vibrated with dark emotion and energy as the other man bowed with flare.

“Baron Lockhart, so happy you could make it to this Season's Ball. I see you have found favor in one of our young Ladies. I do say, she looks a bit famished from all that dancing. It would do for her to relax, and have a bit to eat and drink to build her energy back up for further conversation, don't you think?”



I inwardly sighed with relief, blinking a few times to gather my senses. The Baron was quite overwhelming. I looked around his broad back to witness a much shorter gentleman in a midnight velvet waistcoat and matching pantaloons. He wore a strapping tall hat to complete his look as well as a jaunty cravat at his throat. His light hair peeking from his head was quite the contrast against the color of his sun kissed skin.

But the one thing that stood out the most was his very, very friendly and helpful demeanor. I figured I would try my best to escape this strange situation I had found myself caught in.

“S-Sir—”

“Ah, how very rude of you. Baron, you’ve forgotten to introduce us. My lady, I am Lord Loren Bow, the Master of Ceremonies, as you might have already assumed.”

He waved his hand fluidly around his person and dress, and I couldn’t help but smile at his animated energy.

“I must say,” he continued, “I have never seen the Baron so discomposed before. Usually his only hurry is to leave the Ball the moment it starts. This is a nice change, I do say.”

The Baron’s voice came out low and almost threatening. “I will only ask you once to move, Lord Loren Bow. I have an important need to speak with Lady Pereira.”

I had never met the man before this day, and this was my first time at any of the Balls in the *ton*. What in the world would he have to say to me?

“Yes, that is very well and good, but perhaps *after* dinner.”

The Baron’s grip on my hand tightened uncomfortably, but my stomach, the rascal it was, chose that very moment to cut through the strange tension building between us all.

“Oh, you poor thing. Come, my Lady, I will find you the perfect seat so that you may replenish your internal stores. I cannot believe the Baron wanted to starve you for a bit of conversation.”

The Master of Ceremonies calculatngly slipped between us and transferred my hand around his arm, pulling me back toward the heart of Broadstone Hall. It was a nice reprieve from the monster that stole all my focus this evening.

Lord Loren gently led me to the table where some of the guests had already chosen their seats. He seated me next to Lord Rej and I felt a sense of ease being beside someone—more amicable—I had already made an acquaintance with. Theresa chose that very moment to come into view, grabbing her skirts to hurry to my side, except her path was cut off by a very large and looming figure who was currently staring down Lord Rej.

Lord Rej did not notice since he was currently facing me with a reptilian smile, his tongue flickering out once.

I watched with grisly fascination as a vine crept upward and crawled onto his shoulder. Lord Rej’s entire demeanor immediately went stiff right before he quickly excused himself, leaving his seat in a hurry.

The Master of Ceremonies, still lingering nearby, choked quietly under his breath at what was happening in front of me while the Baron sat down in the now vacated seat, pulling his chair in. Theresa sat on my other side and grabbed my hand beneath the table, squeezing it once in comfort before letting it go.

*What on earth was happening? This was all truly just bizarre.*

“It seems you’ve not only caught the eye of good Lord Rej, but of one we never thought would come back to society. I do say, you must have a magical presence, Lady Pereira.”

Servants began placing our food in front of us. I thanked them politely and grabbed my napkin to place on my lap. Across the table sat Lord Edulis from earlier. He adjusted his monocle as he stared at the Baron, who had his head turned toward me as if to willing my attention back on him.

“Lord Edulis, keep your silly notions to yourself. Some of us are trying to prepare for dinner. It is not the kind of conversation that goes well with human food.”

Five seats down sat Lord Hesperis, the back of his seat with cut outs to accommodate his wings. Did he come here often then? To have one made for him? I glanced at all the monsters at the table. Was matrimony difficult for the *bête monde* as much as it was for the *ton*?

Lord Edulis growled and turned his attention to him “And what, pray tell, would you start a conversation with that would be more pleasing to the ear?”

Lord Hesperis leaned forward and glared right back. “Since you asked so politely, I shall tell you.”

“It is no surprise why these two have remained unmarried this long,” Theresa whispered next to me.

I unsuccessfully stifled a laugh and flicked my fan open to hide my smile.

“You are not to hide your face from the world, Lady *Pereira*,” the Baron declared with chilling finality beside me.

I looked at him from the side of my periphery, refusing to let him steal all of my attention *again*—he had stolen enough of it already. The phantom sensation of his grip on my hand

from earlier lingered like an invisible brand. His eyes shifted colors as if he knew exactly what thoughts graced my mind.

“Is that your opinion, Baron Lockhart? Tell me—” I closed my fan and placed it beside my glass of water in front of me. “—what is it I should do with my face then?”

I tilted my head subtly, giving him hooded eyes to mask my unease. Alone with him, my confidence went missing, but around this table full of guests, I could find my comfort in familiar surroundings with the safety of numbers and witnesses.

“Its full beauty should be cast boldly toward the man she will marry.”

My face flushed. He was so forward with his speech, I could not prepare for what came out of his fanged mouth. Who said these things so boldly? At a dinner table, at that.

The soft chatter at the table quieted as all their attention cast our way.

I picked up a spoon and stirred my soup. Leaning in to place my face over the steam, I could pretend that my flamed cheeks were a result of the temperature of the soup rather than my embarrassment once again.

“Since I have not yet come upon the man I shall marry, I guess it is still within my right to hide my smiles.”

I lifted the spoon toward my mouth, but was stopped halfway with his response.

“I compliment you on your clarity of mind. You have not come upon a man you shall marry because you have not yet come upon me.”

Theresa gasped.

Someone dropped their utensil, clattering it against their bowl, splashing the soup onto their dress. She whimpered at the temperature while the gentleman beside her assisted in drying her with his napkin—very closely to her bosom, I might add.

The Baron had quite a very good opinion of himself and his behavior. Who, in their right mind, would accept such a bold statement after such brash behavior? I pondered on an appropriate response while taking in a dainty mouthful of soup, casually looking around the table at the other women.

Some of them stared at the Baron longingly, while some of them looked at him with offense.

“With all these amazing young ladies at the Ball, are you sure you want to make your decision so hastily? You’ve only danced once and there were many ladies who stood aside without partners. It would benefit you, kind sir, to take your time before making such an important decision.”

The Baron was the only gentleman at the table who was ignoring the food in front of him. I wonder what his kind ate back home. I thought the soup was agreeable.

“I must compliment you on your mature observations of my actions, but my decision was already made before the arrival of the Ball.”

My head snapped toward his and the color of his eyes reflected my dress once more.

“I’m glad you found yourself quickly captivated by our dear Lady Pereira, Baron. I was afraid you had permanently left the *ton* after your first attendance at the Ball.” The observations made by the Countess of Stalbridge created a frown in the middle of my brow.

If the Baron was in search of a wife, why would he not attend the subsequent Balls? This made no sense in my mind.

Without taking his sights off me, he answered our hostess. “On the contrary, Countess Stalbridge. The reason for my lack of attendance was because it came to my attention that a formal invitation never made its way to Lady Antônia. Perhaps the missives were lost at sea, or perhaps they were intercepted for other reasons.”

*...other missives?* What was the Baron inferring? That there was a conspiracy afoot in regards to me? But why?

“Baron, your accusations are offensive to say the least.”

“Then it is a good thing I care not for who I offend other than the woman beside me.”

An uncultured laugh exploded out of me, and I quickly cleared my throat to calm myself. This was absurd. The Baron had done nothing but offend my senses. Does he really think I would accept anything other than light pleasantries from him at this point?

# ANTÔNIA

“Indeed.” The Countess ended their conversation and everyone slowly resumed their dinners.

I silently finished my meal, dabbed my lips with my napkin, and excused myself. Of course, it couldn't be that simple. The Baron stood up the moment I did, pulling my chair out for me as Theresa nervously looked between us.

I politely addressed the guests at the table as a whole. “I would like to retire for the evening. I thank you all for your pleasant company.” I curtsied quickly, and pulled Theresa with me toward the next room.

“Antônia! *O que aconteceu? What is happening?* I did not even see you leave the room. Why would the Baron propose marriage after one awkward dance?” Theresa fervently inquired.

“Theresa, your guess is as good as mine. I don't have the slightest idea. He's the worst dance partner I've ever encountered.”

Our plan was to remain in Broadstone Hall in the third level rooms. Travel on Dorset roads could be dangerous,

especially if the day turned rainy. I wasn't sure if we would make it back to the second day on time. In addition to that fact, it was wise of us to save coins on unnecessary trips with the carriage.

“I was speaking with the other women in the room while you were on the dance floor and the only thing I could find out was the fact that he's attended the Ball but once, until now. Apparently he isolates himself in his world mostly.”

Arm in arm, we stopped to pretend to look at the paintings in the halls.

“His world? I wonder where that is.”

“Does it really matter? You've made it apparent that you harbor no interest in his proposal.”

I let out a raw laugh, now that we were away from most of the guests. “His proposal? It was more of a statement of fact in whatever false reality he's living.”

Theresa couldn't help but laugh with me. “Antônia, I do hope you are holding your tongue when you are around others. That was quite rude.”

“Rude? Did everyone not witness the way the Baron basically dragged me onto the dance floor as if he was trying to fulfill a list of obligations to be completed at a Ball?”

“It was quite funny once you think about it.”

“I wasn't laughing at all, Theresa, I was utterly in shock.” Despite my words, another laugh bubbled out of me joining in with Theresa.

“You'll have to excuse the Baron, ladies. His severe lack of interaction with the *ton* has forced him to forget his



manners.” The Countess slowly joined us in gazing upon the artwork.

Rumors of her late husband’s demise were whispered the moment we stepped foot in London. It was nice to finally be able to put a face to the name. Our initial introduction was abrupt, but now, standing beside us, I observed her more keenly.

I wondered why she chose to never remarry. Was she like my father, lost in her grief, unable to move on?

I looked upon her calm expression—one that said she did not have any care in the world, confident in herself.

Perhaps her late husband got on her nerves and she got rid of him. That would be a pleasant surprise. I wondered if I could dig into it and find out.

Countess Stalbridge turned her face to me the moment the thought entered my mind and I shrank a little behind Theresa in shame.

“I find great pleasure in helping the Ladies and Lords of the *ton* find their perfect matches, Lady Pereira. I do hope the Baron hasn’t turned you off from Balls altogether.”

“Oh, it was a dreadful introduction to his character to be sure, but I’ve come across plenty of unsavory—well, unpleasant—men before.” I ended the statement with a smile to reassure her. I was not a young woman who couldn’t handle herself around a rougher crowd, despite my noble upbringing.

“That is good to hear, Lady Antônia. But I’d also like to ask forgiveness for the Baron’s behavior. It is not a reflection of his *actual* character, to be sure.”

“And what kind of character would that be? One of a man that rudely takes what he wants?”

The countess laughed. “The Baron’s integrity is of utmost importance to him. He would never have taken any liberties if he wasn’t given consent to do so, Lady Pereira.”

My face flushed. She was right, of course. I nodded my agreement, didn’t I?

With my experience of learning new things about my father after his passing, my mind told me to have better control of my assumptions, especially one that came about with emotional ties, be it frustration or offended sensibilities.

But it didn’t explain what he revealed at the dinner table.

“Countess, have I—”

“Received other invitations to the Ball? That would be a question for the Queen, since she controls all matters in regards to that. I’ve only heard about yours recently, so it leads me to believe that there were no others before this one.”

“Thank you, Countess. We do not wish to take up too much of your time. We understand that the job of a hostess holds a lot of responsibilities,” Theresa cut in.

She was right, of course. It was rude of me to take up so much of her time.

“Thank you, Countess,” I added.

She smiled softly at us both. “I shall see you both tomorrow. I bid you all a good evening.”

“You as well.”

Other guests were starting to gather in the hallway, looking at nearby paintings. The long, dark hall was full of them.

A few minutes went by before some of the other conversations floated to our ears.

“I heard the Countess killed her husband,” one of the women whispered.

“Jillian! Stop spreading rumors. You know the Countess’ reputation is utterly spotless.”

“But that’s just it! How is that possible? I mean, everyone knew her marriage wasn’t a happy one and her husband *did* die rather *soon* thereafter.”

The other Lady shushed her and shut down the conversation, but not before my own curiosity got the better of me.

*Did I not just think the same? But she seemed so kind and matronly...*

“Isn’t the Baron just dreamy?” another voice cut into my thoughts.

“He’s utterly terrifying.”

“But he’s so tall, handsome. He seems like a man who knows what he wants, and the way he immediately claimed her...”

“Would you keep your voice down, she’s standing right there!”

Theresa cleared her throat and pulled my arm away from the growing crowd. “These young Ladies have no etiquette at all. They need to learn to control their tongue before false rumors start and ruin people’s lives.”

We continued exploring, noticing some of the Ladies waiting upon Master Bow’s services. I was able to make the new acquaintance of a very nice woman who seemed to be about my age, surprisingly. Her name was Miss Phillipa Willoughby. She seemed to be quite curious about a particular

wolven gentleman. She asked if I had seen him. I believed I did, but only in passing. When she asked me if there were monsters here who caused trouble, I couldn't hold in the laugh.

I blatantly told her that I heard the rules were different here—mostly, there were none judging by the way the Baron carried himself thus far. I didn't stay long to converse, sadly, my tolerance for company already worn thin by the Baron.

After asking one of the servants where our resting quarters were, we were led to the next floor.

“Yes, but aren't you curious, Theresa?”

“In silly *fofoca*—gossip? Especially once started by silly young girls? Absolutely not.”

I did not believe we were on the same line of thought. I was talking about the rumor about the Countess.

We thanked the servant and made our way to our adjoining rooms.

“Stay in your room tonight, Antônia. No weird exploring. I will be right next door if you need me.”

“Your warning is unnecessary, Theresa. I wouldn't want to get lost in this grand place.”

She gave me a knowing look. It wasn't hidden knowledge with the servants back home that I would slip away and find solitude in the gardens at awkward hours when sleep wouldn't come.

“I mean it,” she reiterated.

I rolled my eyes and left her without an answer, closing my door and sighing from the ability to finally be able to let my proper facade go.

I almost feared what the second day would bring. Hopefully, the Baron was put off by my behavior and response enough to leave, giving me enough breathing room to truly consider the men of the *bête monde* and find myself a suitable monstrous husband to help with my father's estate. Or, as Theresa wanted, to be a suitable, strong companion for the rest of my days.

Or perhaps I would just enjoy myself and leave the same way I came. Without matrimony.



“HAVE YOU SEEN HIM?” I WHISPERED.

Theresa looked around subtly while pulling me toward the courtyard after breakfast on the veranda.

The games to be held in the courtyard included archery, rowing, and riding among other things. I couldn't decide which one I wanted to attend, but I also wasn't allowed enough time to since I was purposely avoiding a certain baron.

My hopes of him leaving were quickly shattered the moment he forced a very kind and quiet, fawn-like gentleman out of his seat. The gentleman didn't argue, only adjusted his adorable glasses and silently left his seat, one he had taken before my arrival.

Another round of awkward conversation followed, one of which the Baron admitted that he detested London society—the *ton*—and only somewhat tolerated Dorset, and that it burdened him to leave his realm to attend such silly entertainment.

Theresa almost choked on her food, and the Countess glared in his direction. But of course, he paid no one any attention but me. It was unnerving.

He did compliment me on not bringing my frivolous items to cover my face this time around. I wasn't sure if I should punch him in the face to get him out of my way or to smile and humor him with a curtsy.

I excused myself with my chaperone to 'freshen up' shortly after.

Theresa and I made it outside and I took a deep breath of fresh air. It was difficult to lose him, but we managed.

I stared at the very strange maze in front of us—well, more so the statues that portrayed very specific naked body parts in motion.

“Oh dear,” Theresa blurted.

“Oh dear, indeed. This must be the fornicating maze, I assume.” I laughed. It definitely led one to seek a partner quickly for more reasons than one.

Needing a jovial reprieve from the stress of this morning, I took it upon myself to step boldly right into the maze's entrance. I was sure none of the other women would find themselves dead here, which made it perfect for me to find a bit of solitude.

“Antônia! What are you doing?” Theresa screeched under her breath. She was offended, I was sure. I needed a break from her too. After all, she was the one who convinced me to be here. I needed a break from everything. This whole Ball nonsense was too much for my sanity.

How long could one put up an act in the chase of finding a suitable partner? It was silly, really. The moment courting and

matrimony passes and the facade falls, were we really suitable at all?

My morose thoughts probably stemmed from my nightmare last night. I saw myself widowed and living in unending grief the same way my father had. Except, suddenly, I wasn't me, I was the Countess, hiding my husband's dead body in a closet after he said something offensive about my love for reading dark books of the macabre. I blinked in the dream and the imagery changed into wisps of black smoke, threatening to consume me with confusion and thoughts of self doubt over all the decisions I had ever made up to this point in my life.

The darkness around me solidified, and turned into the looming figure of the Baron who said everything and nothing through the glow of his eyes. The room we stood in appeared out of nowhere and crumbled, burying us both as one.

Bringing my thoughts back to reality, I found myself lost in the green labyrinth and in front of a statue of a naked woman with an aquatic tail. Her head was clean gone, one of her breasts broken off as well. Her hand was behind her, grabbing something very phallic, but the body it belonged to was also missing.

I frowned as I continued to stare at it, wondering what the artist was trying to portray.

“Is it not ironic that these statues portray a time that none of us anticipated? A time before the *bête monde's* existence—before the Queen's Curse.”

I gasped and turned, surprised there was someone else in the maze. It was the gentleman from the veranda this morning.

His antlers swooped over his head, making his height almost as tall as the Baron.

I chastised myself. Why was I comparing him to a man I was trying not to think about?

“Indeed, you’re right. That is quite peculiar.”

Only after a few moments of staring at the statue together, did I realize what this would look like. If anyone were to catch me alone with this gentleman, rumors would spread like wildfire.

I discreetly looked at him from my periphery without turning my head. Would I be willing to be wed to such a monster?

His strength did not lie in conversation, that was for sure. He hadn’t said another word after his initial statement about the statue. He had his hands clasped behind his back, his small spectacles sitting perfectly atop his abnormally tiny black nose, reflecting the spots on his face.

No. I did not want to lead a life of boredom. I was too mouthy. I would drive him mad. Though that could be fun, I gather.

*Not if the other person didn’t banter back.*

I quietly moved away, toward one end of the maze. He didn’t even notice my exit. Sighing to myself, I kept walking and taking turns down forks. After what felt like too long, I became frustrated with the fact that I could not find any sort of exit.

*That’s the point of a maze, isn’t it?*

I growled at my own thoughts and tried another left. Keeping my steps steady, I thought about my father’s estate.



How could he easily keep up with one and not another? What exactly happened here in London that changed how he managed his finances? It couldn't just be the people around him, could it? He had to be smarter than that.

“What truly happened, Father? What am I missing?”

“He should have told you before he left this world.” The Baron's deep voice from behind made my breath stutter. *How did he find me?*

I looked over my shoulder and gazed upon his formidable presence. He didn't have his intimidating cape on today, choosing only to be in a dark gray suit that hugged his form with little left to the imagination.

Or maybe it was the influence of this maze and its statues that made me think so.

My face flamed, thinking of what might be running through *his* mind after walking through such a maze.

“What do you mean? Told me what? And how do you know who my father is?” With no one around us, and the tall foliage to hide us from the view of the guests, I confidently confronted him. “Let me ask you plainly, sir, how do you even know about me and my family at all? This land is as foreign to me as I am to it.”

His head tilted and his eyes flickered from blue to red—the same color as my dress today. I chose it over the white one I also packed to help my confidence. It seemed to have worked beautifully.

“Your father should have told you of our betrothal,” he stated flatly.

“My what?!”

“Your betrothal. Why do you think I’ve declined all my invitations thus far? There was no reason for me to be in search of a wife when one was already promised to me.”

This could not be happening. This made no sense. Why would my father do such a thing? Was this why he didn’t return home? Because of his guilt for having casted this burden on me, leaving me back in Brazil with ignorance?

“I do not believe you,” I quickly objected.

“You shouldn’t. I am nothing but a stranger to you, though I’ve tried my best to... as they say, meet your acquaintance in the ways of humans and societal expectations in the *ton*.”

The way this monster’s mind worked baffled me.

“All you’ve done is force your way into my space and say the most offensive things in front of me. Why in the world would you think that would be considered meeting anyone’s acquaintance?”

I knew attitude was lacing my voice, but it was always going to come to this the longer he continued on the way he did around me. My tolerance and politeness could only go so far. I was tired of this Ball, and he was one of the main reasons for it.

“It was a courtesy I felt you were worthy of,” he remarked.

I scoffed and turned to face him. “A courtesy for you to be *rude* to me?”

“I do not believe you interpreted my words or intentions correctly, and I apologize for it. Our ways are not the same as yours and this society.”

His apology and explanation sounded genuine even if I was still wary of everything he was revealing. It didn’t explain

why it was so easy for all the other monsters to act courteous. What did he mean ‘our ways’? If not the *bête monde*, then who were we talking about?

I needed to know the facts in order to wrap my head around this. “How long have we been betrothed, may I ask?”

He didn’t answer. It felt purposeful. He took a step toward me, and I crossed my arms to protect myself. I couldn’t run. I didn’t know which direction to take. And if I found an exit, what kind of rumors would fly about the Lady Pereira seen fleeing from a maze of debauched statues with the Baron leaving shortly after?

I should have never come here.

“Lady Pereira, I do not have the talent of... conversing and pleasantries.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know, Baron.”

He lifted his head at that and a hiss leaked from his closed mouth. *What did that mean?*

His next statement floored me.

“There is no one in this realm that would be more suitable for me than the woman you have grown to be. I’ve waited, bided my time until you were ready to receive me.”

“Stop right there.” I lifted my hand in front of me. *Did he say what I think he said? This cannot be true.* “You... bided your time? The Countess told me that she was not aware of any other missives addressed to be besides the one for this May Ball. How could you be biding your time when I was never called to be here?”

His conspiracies mentioned the day prior, were just that, conspiracies based on nothing.

“You think I do not know of your trysts beyond the sea?” His voice was laced with such judgmental accusations I couldn’t hold myself back from my instinctive reply.

“My trysts? You have the wrong assumption of me, *kind sir*. There *were* no trysts. *How dare you?*”

I should have punched his face when I had the chance at breakfast.

His maws snapped at my announcement and I frowned right back. Who was he to stain *my* reputation? He knew nothing about me.

He took a few more steps forward, and my eyes widened. I should have expected it from a man that did not respect boundaries or space. Why did I think he would stand in one position and continue our conversation?

“You were mine the moment your father bartered your hand in marriage and lost.”

And like that, everything I was beginning to feel about my father shattered into a million pieces that could never be put back together.

Did I mean so little to my father that my hand in marriage was used in a simple gamble at a gentlemen’s club?

My eyes burned with equal parts heartbreak and anger. I ground my teeth, trying to hold myself together.

“You have a right to be angry. Your father should have never offered it.” His voice was soft, sympathetic.

From accusations to statements of chivalry? What was wrong with this man?

“You know nothing about my father or my family,” I ground out.

“I know that I could provide you a home. Safety. The promise of giving you anything your heart desired.”

I laughed bitterly through the tears that began to fall of their own accord. This was horrible timing on his part. “And what if I desired to be away from you?”

He paused, and took a deep breath as if weighing his next words. He should, because I was ready to run out of this maze, my reputation be damned. I would sell my father’s estate and return back home to Brazil.

“Allow me the chance to change your mind. You will come to see that being with me is not as bad as you might imagine.”

How presumptuous.

“And what exactly do you think I’ve been imagining between us? If there is an us to begin with? You’ve done nothing but prove to me, time and time again, that you refuse to take no for an answer. I barely have room to breathe, let alone have my own thoughts when you are around.”

“You should think of nothing but me, but us,” he snapped. “The purpose of this Ball is to find our suitable partners, resulting in the best match for matrimony. I can tell you everything you need to know about any of the monsters of the *bête monde*, and *none of them* are worthy of what you have to offer. Not even close.”

“And *you* are?” I spat out. It was the first time his compliment hit true, sending an out of control fluttering through my insides. I didn’t want to feel this way about the Baron, not after this conversation.

He took another step forward, and I took one back.

“If you’ll allow me, I will spend the rest of my life proving my worth to you. I would be honored to stand beside you as your husband. Lady Pereira, you are my betrothed and I take that very seriously.”

“Yet, in the game of men, you all never gave *me* the chance to take anything into consideration. And I am to take pleasure in this fact? You are all out of your bloody minds if you think so.”

His pause, this time, caused all my fluttering to die a quick death within me. I felt defeated in a game I didn’t know I was in.

“If you cannot believe anything I’ve said, please believe this. It was for the best.”

# ANTÔNIA

I had heard enough. Who was he, or Father, to decide what was best for me? A grown woman who had done well enough on her own. I turned and walked away.

I didn't know how much distance I had covered, but it felt like another lifetime. Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I told myself it was a blessing to be lost in this labyrinth a bit longer, until my face dried. I couldn't face the other guests looking like a complete wreck.

...Looking like I was heartbroken by a lover. For what else would anyone assume?

I growled out loud and stomped my foot. This was utter madness. I was already ruined, wasn't I? How could I make sure to remove myself from this maze without anyone watching?

My only witness thus far was the fawn-man. Would he say anything about me?

“Lady Pereira.”

I turned, and snapped, “Why are you following me? Do you *not* understand that I need space to think about everything

you've thrown at me? What woman in their right mind would simply turn over and accept all this?"

"I don't want any other woman. I only want *you*."

I clutched at my heart and stepped back. How could he say these things after eviscerating me?

"Th-This doesn't make any sense, Baron. How could you want someone you do not know?"

"Because I *do* know you, Antônia. From the moment your father brought you here the first time, my soul was pulled to the realm of men."

"What? I haven't been to London since—"

"The tender age of your youth. It's hard for me to explain without sounding horribly wrong according to how humans think. It is not what it seems."

I was both creeped out and dying to know what exactly he thinks it seems. "Try me, Baron. I'm not as stupid as you take me to be."

"Never," he growled out. "Never have I ever taken you to be a stupid woman, and I command you to never speak of yourself as such."

There he went again, blending his confusing moments with words that bury themselves under my skin. He was playing mind games with me, trying to get my guard down. I didn't know whether to save us both the trouble and decline whatever proposition he was trying to make or to stay here and be reasonable, think things through without my hurt emotions.

I turned and walked away again, not wanting to make any decision at all, but this time he grabbed my arm and pulled me back toward him until my chest hit his. I gasped at his



audacity, my arm lifting before my mind knew what it was doing.

The palm of my hand stung worse than his face from the slap, I was sure of it. He didn't move a muscle. Instead, his arms slowly glided down mine and around my lower back. My heart was beating out of my chest, my pulse raced until my body became overheated.

Was it wrong of me to be turned on by the simple fact that he was willing to take my fury? The fury *he* caused.

“Your scent permeates all of my senses. I can think of nothing but you and only you from the moment I wake to the moment the day ends. You do not understand how much you've bewitched me. My very being is so consumed by your presence that rational thought leaves me.”

“It doesn't make any sense,” I let out breathily. My face was burning from how close we were. If anyone were to catch us...

“It makes perfect sense. Lady Pereira, though my failings in these past days have possibly outweighed any of my virtues. I ask that you allow me the pleasure of your hand in marriage.”

The persistent bastard.

I couldn't deny the fact that it was somewhat of a charming trait—to have a man be obsessed with you and chase you consistently. How many of the wives back home could claim that about their husbands?

Would the Baron continue to stay in character after matrimony?

His face was so close, I turned mine away to gather my thoughts. Vines crawled up his leg and wound themselves

around mine as if to unify us right then and there in the mystery of this maze.

His skeletal face nuzzled me and my breath caught. We shouldn't be doing this. I haven't yet agreed to any sort of proposal.

*But he was so good at convincing.*

"This is all happening so quickly," my voice faltered embarrassingly.

His tongue caressed my jaw and I whimpered.

"Not soon enough."

When his hand crawled up my back and toward the bare skin of my neck, I panicked. "I-I need time."

It was all I could say as I shoved him away, lifted my skirts, and ran through the maze until I finally came upon the exit. I willed my heart to slow down as I forced myself to walk slowly, looking everywhere for my chaperone as well as hoping she wouldn't stumble upon me in such a flustered state.

*I need to calm myself before I face the other guests.*

I walked and walked across the grass until I was far enough away from all the games.

As I came upon the lake and noticed some of the monsters preparing for rowing. I had forgotten about that. Finding a stone bench nearby, I seated myself beside some of the Ladies that were already occupying it.

"He's so strong. I can't stop looking at the way his scales flex with every movement," the girl in the blue dress whispered.

The other girl guffawed. “Do you think they change color when he...”

The two young Ladies turned into a giggling mess, and I was left with thoughts of what the Baron looked like beneath his form fitting suit. Was he skeletal all over? Did he have skin? If he did, what would it feel like beneath my fingers and against my...

I fanned myself discreetly and placed my cold palms against my cheeks. The other girls ignored me as they continued to gaze upon the men at the rowing game.

Taking a deep frustrating breath, I excused myself and made my way back toward Broadstone Hall, ignoring everyone around me. My mind was too full of decisions that had to be made.

Would marrying the Baron really be the answer? My father’s estate wasn’t in that bad of shape, not truly. And what of this promise he had made to the Baron before his death? Surely, I couldn’t break that promise...

The Baron, for all his vices and driving me mad, stirred something within me. I couldn’t deny it.

Stopping to take a short break on my walk, I heard my name being called from afar.

“Antônia! I thought I’d lost you! Oh, don’t you have sympathy for my nerves? How could you leave me like that? I wasn’t sure whether to tell everyone you were lost forever. Don’t you dare leave me in this country alone! Because we both know, I refuse to step foot on another ship with nothing but fish—”

“Theresa, don’t be overly dramatic. I would have shown up one way or another. If it was my corpse, I’m sure the

wolven gentleman we saw today would have sniffed me out before anyone else could.”

“Don’t play like that, Antônia! My nerves!” Theresa shook out her cloth and covered her face as if she was going to burst into tears.

It was all an act. She was mad, and didn’t want to scold me in front of everyone out in the open. She played the part for the sake of my reputation. I rolled my eyes and patted her shoulder in appreciation.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her along the rest of the way with me back toward Broadstone Hall.

Once we were close enough, she hissed. “Think of your reputation, Antônia! You cannot go off on your own in secluded places! What if one of these monstrous men took advantage of that fact and took liberties with you! Who would be there to help you? I’m supposed to be your chaperone!”

Her words brought back the memory of the Baron holding me against his chest and the way he leaned in. I let out a stuttered breath and changed the topic of conversation.

“Theresa, let’s explore the inside of the Hall. I’ve had enough of the outside air and tire of it.”

Theresa was puzzled. “Most of the guests are out there, are you sure you don’t want to observe the other monstrous men? Have you decided against them all already?”

“I just tire of the activities. You know they’re not of my interest. I’d rather sit inside somewhere and read in silence.”

Narrowing her eyes, Theresa didn’t question my tactic, instead going along with it. “Yes, you are that sort. Perhaps we will find a library within these walls. The place is big enough to house five of them at the very least.”

The second floor of the estate extended farther than either of us could imagine. Beyond the hall of dark monstrous paintings lay a study dominated by a large walnut table.

“Do you think they’ll have some literature here, Theresa?” I wondered.

“It looks like a meeting room of sorts with a table this big.” Theresa was touching some of the chairs that were intricately carved and high backed.

The large bookcase caught my eye the further I stepped into the room. It was along the opposite wall with what looked like numerous old books. Some of the spines had faded away, leaving their contents a mystery. *I do so love mysteries. Much more interesting than watching men play badminton.*

One of the books stuck out further than the rest, and I decided to pull that one out. I held it against my chest and brought it to the table. Seating myself comfortably, I opened the front cover to find the pages predominantly already divided a quarter of the way through. Opening the book further, an old, folded piece of paper stuck out between the pages.

“What do we have here?” I asked aloud.

With my mind successfully off the Baron, my fingers carefully pulled the piece out and turned it over to find their folds. Slowly opening it up, I was tickled to find that it was an old love note!

“Theresa! I’ve found something!” I excitedly exclaimed.

“Found what, exactly? Was that hiding in the book?”

“Yes! And I think it’s an old love note to someone.”

Theresa, unable to ignore the potential for juicy gossip, quickly slipped into the chair beside me and leaned in to see what the letter held.

We both read it silently and gasped in unison after finishing.

“The Countess has an unknown admirer?” Theresa declared.

“It seems so from the second letter written to a Miss Penelope. How very intriguing.”

“Antônia, you should put it back. What if it was not meant to be found?” Theresa’s nervousness was spilling over to me.

The woman always vacillated with her moods over gossip.

“Seems it was already found. Read the second letter again.”

Why would anyone leave it in such a public location if it was a secret? Then again, it *was* hidden within the pages of an unknown book... or perhaps this was a very specific book meant to be found? Was it not sticking out much further than the others to begin with?

“Antônia, let’s put it back,” she insisted.

“Okay, okay. Stop making me nervous.” I quickly refolded the letter and stuck it back into a random location of the book and returned the book to the bookcase.

“There.” I hoped she was happy, because I wasn’t. I was full of questions.

“Come on, Antônia. Let’s go.”

I slapped Theresa with the back of my hand as we both moved out of the room. “Would you stop acting with such

suspicion! We did nothing wrong.”

We exited back into the hall of paintings and let out a collective breath.

“Would you please calm yourself, Theresa?” I pleaded.

“*Fofocus*... Gossip gets enough people in trouble.”

I turned to look at her with astonishment. “You were the one leaning in just as much as I was to see what it said!”

“That’s not the point. The point is, we must keep this to ourselves,” she explained with a hint of righteousness.

“Who could we even tell? We do not have that many acquaintances here, besides the Countess herself.”

We both looked at each other with unease. It felt wrong knowing something about a friend we had recently made. Would she have wanted us to know that information about her?

It was said her reputation was spotless. Perhaps it was just filled with tight lipped secrets taken to the grave.

Suddenly my bladder screamed at me. “Theresa, I need to use the privy.”

“Do you need me to accompany you?”

“No, I think I’ll be alright. Broadstone Hall always has a servant or maid in the area. Go, enjoy yourself. I’ll come find you later.”

“Are you sure, Antônia?”

I chuckled. “Theresa? What on earth would happen to me while on a trip to the privy?”

# ANTÔNIA

**M**y journey to my room was uneventful.

It was the journey back that proved to be the opposite.

A scream escaped my lips when I ran into a looming figure a ways beyond my room's door.

A hand quickly covered my mouth, cutting my scream off short, as he walked me backward into a dark corner beyond the main hall.

My heart pounded when I realized who it was.

His hand slipped down my face and onto my shoulder.

“Baron!”

He was breathing heavily. I didn't understand why. *Was he as affected by my presence as I was him?* “Lady Antônia, I couldn't wait for your return. I was worried.”

“So you followed me to the privy?”

“So I followed you to make sure you were safe—”

“—from men like you?” I teased.



He leaned in, caging me against the wall with his arms on either side of me.

“No... I don’t ever think you would be safe from me. Not men, only me. I crave your closeness. When you’re away, I find myself... unsettled.”

I took a sharp inhale. “Well... We can’t have that...”

“Lady Antônia...”

My eyes fluttered with the way my name sounded so guttural against my ear.

“What can I do for you, Baron? I-I need to return to the activities outside before someone comes looking for me.”

I was bluffing. Well, not entirely. Theresa would at least come looking for me, I was sure.

He growled before he took a deep inhale, pulling in my scent. It was strange, primal, and something that reminded me of the warriors back in the medieval times.

I shouldn’t be turned on by his uncouth behavior.

“It’s rude to sniff someone out in the open like this, Baron,” I chastised.

“Even when that someone is *my wife*?”

I gasped and placed my hand against his chest, fighting the urge to pull him close by pushing him away instead.

“I am no one’s wife yet, kind sir. Do not forget that.”

“Not yet, Lady Antônia. Human notions of ceremonies and propriety only serve to slow down the inevitable.”

Oh, this new side of him was doing things to my loins. Wicked things. “You know not of what you speak, Baron. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to find my chaperone because

proper women would not find themselves in dark corners with strange gentlemen.”

He didn't budge. “You shouldn't be anywhere alone unless it's with me.”

I softly laughed under my breath, adding more pressure to my hands to push him away further.

“You sir, are no gentlemen, I've come to find. Now, if you'll excuse me.”

He tried to stop me but our differences in height allowed me to quickly slip beneath his arm and swiftly re-enter the hallway.

A woman jumped in fear when she saw me, slapping her hand over her chest in panic. “Good heavens! I thought you were a ghost!”

“My apologies, I was lost.” I curtsied with a smile.

After a few moments of blinking, she answered. “Oh, no worries. It is quite easy to get lost here. If it weren't for the fact that this is my second Ball, I would be wary of walking alone down these winding halls. But when the privy calls...”

I wasn't sure whether I should be sorry for the fact that it was her second Season at a Ball or to congratulate her for being at the Ball.

“A lady is to answer.” I nodded my head, and smiled as I turned and made my way back outside.

I found Theresa sitting at a table with some other women. Her face beamed when she saw me, waving me over animatedly. Once I was close enough, she introduced me. “This is Lady Pereira. It is her first time at a Ball in Dorset.”

“Charming. My name is Lady Stephana Skevington. A pleasure to meet your acquaintance.” Her words said pleasure, but her eyes said something else entirely.

Perhaps this was why Theresa waved me over. What had she been put through while sitting here?

“I do say, it seems the abominable Baron Lockhart has his eye on you judging by his humiliating behavior yesterday. He was absolutely dreadful and downright demented.”

My hackles rose. I felt defensive of the Baron since he wasn't here to be able to speak on his own behalf. “You know of him, then, I assume? It's been said that he's only visited the Ball once in the past many years.”

What was left unsaid was the simple fact that it would mean she, herself, had attended the same Ball years past. How many Seasons had *she* been passed over?

She unabashedly glared at me with a smile, almost as if she had perfected the look. She reminded me of the married women back in Brazil with their underhanded verbal challenges about the accusations of me and their husbands. All of which were untrue.

“Yes, well, my brother and I do find these Balls rather boring, don't you think? They're all the same and quite monotonous. A giggling set of gullible young ladies trying to sell themselves to the highest bidder. The males of the *bête monde* here at the *ton* are less than impressive.” She leaned into the table toward me. “Wouldn't you agree, Lady Pereira? It doesn't seem like you've had your eye on any of them despite the efforts of some to garner your attention. So you must agree.”

Theresa kept quiet, her eyes wide as she stared at me. If we were back home, she would have given this woman a piece of her mind. I could see her mind cycling through scenarios as she tried her best to keep her mouth shut.

“I thank you for your unsolicited opinion, Lady Skevington, but they are just that—solely your opinions.”

“The games provided at this Ball are quite exciting, don’t you think?” Theresa interjected, trying to change the topic.

“An opinion based on astute observation over the years as you have subtly pointed out.”

*Were we speaking plainly then? She will regret challenging a Pereira.* “I merely stated what I’ve heard during my time here.”

“And who, per say, did you hear this particular fact from?” she asked snottily. It matched her upturned nose quite well.

I turned my attention to the men of the *bête monde* competing in the archery course. The red, furry tail tipped in white of a tall predatory male with small batlike wings arched his bow. He was firm, confident, calmly breathing as he let the arrow fly right into the middle of the target’s bullseye.

“The Countess Stalbridge, herself. As you know she speaks with all of the guests, making sure they are welcomed,” I admitted calmly without any inflection to my voice.

Lady Skevington scoffed loudly and rudely. I didn’t know how much longer I wanted to sit here beside her pretending pleasantries with one another.

“Queen Charlotte’s favorite pawn. She has more secrets than the Queen herself. Isn’t the death of Countess Stalbridge’s late husband so very curious. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was her from how cruel his reputation was. I bet

she did it gladly. Probably at the behest of a lover,” she rebutted.

My ears perked. What did she know about the Countess? Did it have anything to do with the mysterious admirer we just discovered in the letter? Was she known to have many lovers?

“We all have secrets, Lady Skevington.” I was partly protecting the Countess and partly prodding to see if she would say anything more.

“I’m sure you do, seeing as you’re the only foreigner here.”

It felt like she raked her nails into my ears. I turned my head slowly toward her. She smiled and awaited my reply. If looks could kill, mine would have peeled her skin off her face and shoved it down her throat.

I could say many things at this point. I could beg her pardon. I could educate her about the mortality rate of women who said inappropriate things at the wrong time. I could specifically detail her how royalty chopped off people’s heads with the guillotine just so I can watch her squirm with my descriptions.

I imagined her haughty look would be frozen in place even after her head rolled into the bloody basket.

Instead, I chose to smile, nod gracefully and excuse myself and Theresa with etiquette. “*Comprendo perfettamente*. I understand completely. Theresa, I ask that you accompany me to the lake. I wish to take a turn around it with my beloved chaperone.”

Theresa, bless her soul, was quick to take the excuse. “Yes, of course. The weather is perfect for it. Let us make haste

before we miss the opportunity. It is not everyday one gets invited to such a magnificent place for a ball.”

Of course, I had to watch out for my reputation here. Theresa had drilled that into me the moment we left my father’s estate. “It was very... lovely meeting you, Lady Skevington.”

She nodded and looked at me from head to toe before dismissing me by turning her face away.

“I do hope you find matrimony this time around. Time passes quickly, stealing our beauty with it I’ve come to find.”

Theresa and I left the area in haste, more than eager to leave that witch behind. It didn’t matter what her response was. Let her simmer in that thought of her age catching up with her. It was no wonder she remained single for so long. I was surprised the Queen consistently sent her an invitation to the Ball at all. Surely, the other guests have filed complaints about her behavior if she was this way with everyone.

*Or perhaps, she was only this way with me.* A curious thought if that was the case. Did I intimidate her for some reason? Why else would a person try to tear someone down when they had only just met?

Her attitude made the Baron’s initial one tame in comparison.

Speaking of the devil, he was coming our way on a large horse that looked more suitable for one ridden from the gates of Hell.

*Was it the Baron’s own personal horse?*

Black smoke floated from its dark mane, its eyes glowing blue. It seemed from the same world as he, matching its master in confidence and cadence.

I couldn't see any of the other gentlemen riding a horse like this one or the horse allowing anyone else to ride it. In fact, many of the riders were far from here, on the other side of the courtyard.

Some of the younger Ladies nearby were openly gawking at the sight, some of them with growing interest in their gazes. When a few of them flicked out their fans to fan their faces, a new emotion grew within me—one I had never encountered before.

It was akin to the feeling of being upset, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It made me uneasy and in response, I pulled Theresa's arm and turned away from him without a word.

"My lady, may I have a word with you?" he called out in his signature baritone voice. It shouldn't sound as sexy as it did, especially not in front of the younger, more easily influenced Ladies of society.

I ignored him. The fact that he chose not to say my name in front of others when he only recently whispered it against my ear... I was being irrational, I knew it. It didn't stop this ugly feeling in my chest.

"What is going on, Antônia?" Theresa queried.

"Nothing. I wish to take a different route to the lake, tis all." My response was too quick and instinctual. I was sure she knew something had happened.

"Oh..."

"Lady Pereira, I would like to state my intentions of staying beside you for the rest of this evening."

It felt like the ground disappeared beneath me and wanted to swallow me whole. I should let it. I was uncomfortable, mortified, flattered, and flabbergasted all at once.

The small crowd of Ladies around us gasped in delight, giggling and grating on my nerves.

*Did he just...*

“Well, now. Antônia, it seems...” Theresa teased.

“I know very well what it seems like, Theresa,” I snapped, then looked over my shoulder at him.

He stood there, stock still, in anticipation of my answer. His skeletal face revealed nothing of what was going on in his mind, an advantage he used on purpose. He knew exactly what he just announced, successfully removing himself from anyone’s chase—successfully pseudo-claiming me in front of everyone.

After a few moments, I felt relieved, and embarrassed. My rational mind made me realize the emotion I couldn’t name was a pang of jealousy.

Why did it upset me that the Baron was receiving attention from the gaggle of young women around him?

Why did it flatter me that he publicly chose me anyway, despite that fact. I was probably one of the eldest bachelorette’s here, besides Theresa and maybe Phillipa. Though he had made his intentions known to me in secret, I was still doubtful he meant it with how he had behaved in front of the other guests.

Like an uncultured beast.

*You like them that way.*

My bloody brain was suddenly teasing me as well.

I had never been propositioned like this before in any of my times at any balls back home. What did one say to this?



My lady's maid broke the silence. "The Lady Pereira will happily accept your offer."

"What?" I stared at Theresa. *Where was this coming from?*

"You don't think I see the way you look at him or the way he looks at you. You would have had a witty comeback by now, but instead you are standing here like an empty headed young woman in her first Season. Get a hold of yourself, Antônia!" she quickly whispered, for my ears alone.

"I was getting hold of myself, Theresa. I was gathering my thoughts!" I hissed.

We glared at each other. This entire Ball felt like an utter disaster. If the skies rained down in flames, I wouldn't be surprised, because what else could go wrong?

The Baron got off his horse and patted it on its side. Instead of any sort of normal creature response, its eyes glowed brightly and then dimmed. Its mane looked as if to be floating in a breeze that was currently nonexistent.

They were both not of this world, indeed. Which then led me to wonder what marriage to the Baron would be like. Would we still live here? Baron Louis Lockhart of Grimwood. Where exactly was Grimwood?

"My Lady—"

"Well, this is turning out to be quite entertaining," came another masculine voice I did not recognize.

Turning to my left, I found the face of a partially human man who looked strangely similar to a certain witch I had just left behind.

"That's peculiar, because I wasn't here to entertain you. Do not interrupt me next time, Lord Skevington. I will not state it

again.”

“Touchy, touchy, Lord Lockhart. Why, I’ve never seen you so... territorial before. Has the lovely Lady cast a spell upon you, perhaps? How else would anyone be able to lure the mysterious Baron of Grimwood?”

The Baron’s horse neighed and a darkness seeped from the Baron himself. Vines began slithering around his being and crawling into the grass toward the newcomer.

Women screamed and ran, some falling onto the ground into tears. Other monsters, who stopped what they were doing, ran toward us and were trying to calm the Baron down, but he kept his focus on the newcomer who’s eyes widened in pure fear.

“It was all jest, My Lord. Surely you know how to take humor,” he tried to backpedal.

“My Lord, may I have your attention?” I interjected, hoping with all my heart he would hear me in his strange trance.

Immediately, the darkness dissipated. Monsters escorted Ladies away, leaving the rude stranger out in the open, unprotected. His hands were shaking though he tried to keep a confident air about him—unsuccessfully I might add.

I glared at him, trying to communicate with him with my mind that he should remove himself this instant before the Baron changed *his* mind.

Upon my address, the Baron turned his face to me and it was as if nothing had happened earlier—as if we were not all about to die some sort of horrible death from his anger at being interrupted.

“Lady Pereira, you always have my attention,” he replied without thought.

I flushed.

The stranger quickly escaped. *Good.* We didn’t need any weird scandal at this Ball involving the poor Baron who was only trying to speak to me.

“*Quão encantador.* How charming. He’s making me blush and he’s not even addressing me,” Theresa whispered.

“Would you stop it,” I whispered back.

“I can see why he makes you flustered. Take him on his offer, Antônia. Or else you’ll be spending another dreadful day at this Ball.”

Her threat worked. With guests like the Skevington siblings, I dreaded spending another day in this place.

“Baron, I will accept your offer to remain by my side for the rest of this evening,” I croaked out.

*Get it together, Antônia!*

A new energy emitted from him and it made goosebumps pebble my skin.

“Would you do me the honor, my Lady, of taking a turn around the lake so that we may have some... privacy to discuss certain things.”

Truth be told, I had enough age on me to take a simple turn without a chaperone. But at this Ball, and with a gentleman who was known to be bold in his personality, I was unsure if I should drag Theresa with me.

“Baron...”

“Oh, I think I hear someone calling me,” Theresa blurted out.

How could she hear anyone at all? They were all on the opposite side of the yard, having vacated the area around us after the Baron calmed down.

I frowned at her, but all she did was smile and wave before she turned, lifted her skirt, and left me.

“Lady Antônia.” *Oh, he knew just how to affect me, the scoundrel.*

“Baron, you have quite a way with your...”

“Ability to persuade the woman who has stolen my heart.”

I whimpered like a silly girl. Why was he laying it on so thick as such?

*It could be because you still haven't agreed to his proposal.*

Yes, that could be it. For a man who thought he did not have a way with words...

“Shall we, my Lady?”

I couldn't ignore the fact that even his address was possessive. Or was I seeing something that was not there?

“We shall, Baron.”

We silently walked side by side along the lake, watching monsters row on the water around the small island in the middle.

“I should ask if you are enjoying yourself at the Ball, but I fear I do not want to hear about any of your enjoyment spent away from me.”

I laughed. “My goodness, you really are arrogant, aren’t you?”

“Is it arrogant to be confidently aware of what one wants?”

I looked at him from beneath my lashes. “Why, Baron, are you actually conversing with me instead of making demands?”

“I only aim to please you, Lady Antônia, and if conversation and propriety is what you wish for, then I shall give you my utmost effort.”

I switched the attention back to him, unable to give him a proper reply to what he so boldly confessed to me. “Are you enjoying yourself at the Ball, Lord Lockhart?”

“Only because I’m able to be with you, Lady Antônia.”

He used my name almost formally, but it was intimate all at once. How did he do that?

“Do you have any siblings, Baron? Or are you like me, destined to carry on the family line alone?”

I did not know how it was possible, but his skeletal face reddened in the cheeks. What kind of sorcery was this?

“I am an only child, the same as you, my Lady. Destined to —” He swallowed audibly. “—carry on the family name.”

Images of the statues in the maze flashed before my eyes, and my own cheeks heated up. I placed my cold hands on my cheeks and stifled a laugh.

“Baron, control your thoughts please. I’m empathetic to the emotions of those around me.”

He barked out a weird, growly laugh, and I was taken aback.

“Hardly. You jest, my Lady. I know for a fact you easily express yourself, as well as wittingly dismiss others with your quick tongue when they offend your sensibilities.”

The bastard was following me. I wasn't surprised.

“And do you and Lord Skevington have a history to be so abrasive to one another?”

The Baron growled. “I ask that you not mention his name in front of me at this moment. I've only just controlled my fury.”

I leaned back a little while we continued to walk side by side. “There was nothing to be furious about. I did not understand your reaction.”

“You wouldn't because you are humble about your qualities.”

Years of Theresa nagging me about my stubbornness ran through my mind. Of her telling me she told me so when I would fall out of trees and get angry over little mean girls who pretended to be my friend solely because of my station and nobility.

“I do believe you might be disillusioned, sir. I have more faults than qualities.”

He stopped and turned to me.

“Lady Antônia, it is you who are disillusioned about who you are. Each day I waited I questioned my worth as your husband. Each moment that brought me closer to seeing you again tortured me because it wasn't soon enough. The moment I obtained the promise of your hand—”

“We're going to revisit that conversation another time, Baron. Do not think I've forgotten.”

He chuckled and eliminated the short distance between us with a step as we both stood under the shade of a large tree. “Never. I will never regret the treasure that landed in my life even though you were still yet unaware of it all.”

“Baron, your flowery vocabulary only hides the true purpose of your words. Please speak plainly because I am beyond confused over it all. I—”

“My lady, your father is no longer here for me to address, but I will not apologize for the transaction that happened between us. I will once again ask you here, beneath the shadows and in front of the *bête monde*.”

*Oh dear heavens he’s getting on his knee.*

“Accept my hand in marriage. Fulfill the promise your father made to me and make me the happiest man to live in two realms.”

# ANTÔNIA

**S**ocietal standards dictated that the only power a woman held during these situations was the power of refusal. Despite having not answered this man multiple times... I never *truly* refused him.

Perhaps it was my subconscious testing the depth of his devotion for me. Did that make me a petty woman? I didn't think so. Logical, perhaps. After all, one had to be sure of her decision.

I admitted that the change I had seen in this man was astounding. From our first encounter to this one, we crossed the invisible bridge that was erected between us.

I couldn't deny that my heart was being pulled and that my rational mind was in agreement. What harm was there to take this man's proposal? If Theresa's actions were anything to go by, she had already given her approval, though I didn't necessarily need it. But it was nice knowing that my closest friend and confidant was confident in this union, enough to push me toward him when it was me who proved to be the one reluctant. Possibly out of sheer stubbornness of having been single this long.



His large, skeletal hand lifted to grasp mine. I bit my lip and stared into his eye sockets, the glow of red shifted to violet and back again. His face was reddening the longer I stood there without an answer.

He deserved that little bit of torture with what he had put me through.

Finally, I sighed. “Yes.”

His hand gripped mine harder.

“Yes, I accept your offer of marriage, Baron Lockhart.”

He shot to his feet with my hand still in his, staring down at me longingly. I was sure I was doing the same. I could only imagine Theresa gagging if she were here. None of the men back home had ever elicited such an emotion from me like the Baron did right now, and that should be telling.

Perhaps I only thought I was okay with being alone because I hadn't yet met the one that would turn my world upside down.

*Ugh. Was I truly waxing pathetic poetry in my mind right now? What has he done to me?*

Hands clapped and gasps floated around us. I didn't realize there was a crowd watching our interaction because they kept a wide berth of the Baron.

“My congratulations, you two!” the Countess boomed, walking toward us. “It brings me great pleasure to know that the Ball has yet again secured a most pleasing match.”

“I cannot believe the old Baron found someone before me,” one of the monsters mumbled with a very familiar wet, garbled hiss.

“If you tried harder to be as charming as the old bloke, you might get somewhere,” someone answered.

“Charming? He’s the most miserable bastard in the realm. This is beyond belief!”

Theresa’s voice piped in. “If you would expend your energy in adapting to what a lady wants, you wouldn’t have time to complain as you are now. Is the Baron perfect? Far from it, but his willingness to learn is what makes him charming.”

I giggled at Theresa mouthing off the bachelors beside her. Why were those two always around each other anyway? They should just marry one another and be done with it.

I reluctantly tugged my hand from his firm grip, and he released me, allowing me back to Theresa’s side. There was still one more day to this blasted Ball and I wasn’t sure if I would survive it.



“I STILL CANNOT BELIEVE YOU ACCEPTED THE FIRST MAN’S marriage proposal.”

I threw a pillow at Theresa as we both got ready for the final Ball of the evening. The prior days’ events still haunted my every waking thought.

Breakfast was charged with sexual tension between us as we both tried to keep our composure beside one another.

“Oh, stop teasing me. It wasn’t *his* first proposal, you know.”

“Oh, rumors have already started. I know. We all know.”

My mind flashed to breakfast this morning on the veranda.

*“Oh, this looks utterly delicious. Thank you for being such a gracious host,” one of the younger Ladies conversed.*

*Some of the other women join in on the conversation, commenting on the lovely weather and each other’s dresses.*

*I had reached over into my plate for a bite when a warm hand touched my thigh, stopping me midair. I quickly recovered and veered my hand toward the glass of water instead, sipping it to hide my emotions as the Baron’s hand continued to run down to my knee.*

*I should have brought my fan, but I remembered his statement about hiding my face and secretly wanted to please him.*

*It seemed I pleased him very much when I cast my gaze toward him beneath my lashes and gave him a soft smile, only to delightfully witness his skull pinken once more.*

Shaking my head, I concentrated on the beautiful necklace Theresa was securing behind me. It was a gift from the Countess in congratulations for my proposal. I touched in, and the small void I had within me for lack of a mother was temporarily filled to the brim. I wondered if Mother would have approved of this match or if she would have found him appalling after his behavior on both days.

Or would she have teared up and spoken fondly of love at first sight, reminiscing of her own love story.

My eyes teared up, and I quickly fanned my face with my hand to dry them before they could fall.

After putting on my white dress, and Theresa her green one, I realized how coincidental it was that my final day here would be in something akin to a bride’s outfit.

“Fitting,” Theresa teased.

“Would you stop that? It’s embarrassing enough to have the Baron pacing until he received news of us leaving our rooms for breakfast this morning.”

Rumors reached my ear quickly that the Baron was practically threatening some of the servants to relay a message for me to hurry in readying for the day.

Did he not realize what a woman had to go through to get ready?

“I have to say, that is quite romantic.”

I rolled my eyes at Theresa. When did she become so into all this? She never once showed interest when we were back home.

Once we were done getting ready, we both exited the room and made our way toward the ballroom.

We entered the double stairway, my eyes gazing over the guests below. Slowly taking the right stairwell, I descended with as much grace as I could muster. My dark curls bounced with each step despite my efforts to keep my steps light.

My future husband-to-be was there, waiting at the bottom of the main floor for my appearance. My face flushed the moment he turned to give me his undivided attention. He was magnificent in his black suit with purple piping, complimenting the purple brocade of his vest. I watched as he maneuvered himself around the other guests until he was able to meet me at the bottom of the stairs.

“Lady Pereira, your beauty is beyond breathtaking.”

*Oh, heavens. His compliments just get better and better.*

“I thank you for your compliment, sir. You look rather handsome yourself.”

The Baron lifted his arm, and just as I was about to take it, another voice cut in.

“Your dress is beautiful, my lady. Fitting of a bride-to-be.” The Master of Ceremonies gave me a slight bow with a huge smile.

I smiled back and the Baron growled under his breath. It was cute, really.

“Behave, would you?” I whispered to him, and his growl cut short.

“It seems the other gentleman of the Ball will not be able to ask you for a dance at the final Ball today?” Lord Bow inquired with mirth.

“All of her dances belong to me, Lord Bow. It’s best to get that information out now so that there will be no misunderstandings among the others. We wouldn’t want to have any... misfortunes happen tonight.”

Lord Bow kept his smile, though now strained, as he looked between the two of us. He seemed worried for me. I couldn’t help but laugh to lighten the mood.

“Baron has quite a sense of humor, does he not?” I forced out another laugh. “Come, let us find some refreshments before we are to dance for the rest of the night.”

Lord Bow bowed once more and left us to go mingle with the other guests.

I pulled the Baron away from the crowd so that he could stay out of trouble. “What is with you?”

“Me? I only said what needed to be stated.”

“That my dances *belong* to you? What if I do not wish to dance at all?”

“Then we shall not dance. It is as simple as that. I do not understand what you are getting so emotional about.”

I prayed for patience under my breath, and for the restraint to hold myself back from murdering this man.

“I spoke only truth,” he whispered, leaning into me. He knew exactly how it affected me and was using it like a weapon. “Your beauty is beyond words, and the others here do not deserve to see you in such splendor.”

Like that, the Baron had successfully tamped down my anger into something else entirely. The bastard.

I didn’t want to give in so easily. He needed to understand the exact woman he was getting involved with. “You need to watch your tongue around others, and especially around me. I do not take kindly to some of the things you say, Baron.”

He reached across me suggestively to flag down a servant with a tray of cups, his arm much too close to my bosom.

“Baron...”

“I only wish to grab your refreshment as you insisted.”

I smiled and shook my head. This was going to be an interesting union indeed.

The music changed and guests started to pair up on the floor.

“Shall we?” I asked him and he stared at me.

“I thought you wished not to dance. Is that not what you said?”

I chuckled, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the dance floor. “Baron, one thing about us women that you must learn is that there is more said than what is just said.”

He shook his head as we got into position. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

He took the appropriate steps and moved around the other dancers before coming back to each other.

“That seems to be the consensus about us women, sir. It is your duty to decipher the puzzle we present. In fact, it should be your life’s mission.”

The music changed to a waltz and the Baron grabbed my hand, pulling me against him, staring down at me with pure interest in everything I had to say.

He was winning me over with these humble moments of willingness to learn.

“Are you volunteering to be my instructor in such matters?” he asked seriously.

We danced side to side slowly.

“Are you proposing that you’ve been harboring admiration for your instructor, Baron? Is it the forbiddenness of our student-teacher relationship that turns you on?” I teased.

“I’m willing to allow my instructor to teach me in all the ways of what turns a person on.”

*Oh...*

A few more steps between us and I placed my hand on his chest, then pulled his head down toward me. “Don’t tempt me, Baron. We are yet to be married. It would be downright scandalous for us to start anything until then.”

He lifted his head abruptly and turned me on the dance floor, further and further away from the others.

“My lady, no one has to know,” he whispered conspiratorially.

I gasped.

The music ended and we parted briefly. I needed breathing room from all the sexual tension between us. Who knew the Baron would be so quick with his responses. My mind began to wonder how experienced he was in comparison to me—one with no experience at all besides stolen kisses in the shadows. I was versed in the performance of a confident, experienced woman, but secretly I was scared to death at how fast this was all going.

“Antônia, you’re looking quite flushed. Are you alright?” I was glad it was Theresa who found me and no one else.

Or so I thought. The Countess’ voice joined in on our conversation “With how she was dancing with her soon to be groom, I’m not surprised. I’ve never seen the Baron pine over a brief dance recess before.”

I turned to question what she was talking about and caught my Baron’s eyes directly on me, waiting impatiently for my return.

Some of the unpartnered women looked at him with longing, but kept their distance. Only one person was brave enough to approach him when they thought I wasn’t looking.

Stephana Skevington.

My hackles rose and I saw red. A glutton for punishment, I allowed her to speak with him, wanting to see how he would react to another’s attention. I focused all of my being on them, straining to hear every word that passed between the two.



“Baron, I see that you are not partnered for this dance,” she purred.

My eyes zoomed in on her hands, just willing her to try and touch him. I was well versed in using garden shears.

He ignored her and she tried again. “Baron, would you be so kind as to assist a lady in avoiding embarrassment by offering her a dance to save her reputation.”

“Your reputation for wrecking relationships proceeds you, Lady Skevington. I wouldn’t be caught dead with you on my arm and ask that you keep your distance. You know, as well as everyone else at this Ball, that I have already declared my intentions to the lovely Lady Pereira yet you still chose to slither your way here assuming that she is not holding herself back at this very moment from a possible murderous scandal. It is her fury that ignites my desire the most, and the simple fact that she has the power to control her emotions better than I that continues to draw me to her with utmost desire and adoration.”

The organ inside of my chest felt full to the brim, threatening to burst out from my ribs with his declaration. I had never seen myself that way.

He turned to look at her, finally breaking eye contact with me. “I bid you good day, Lady Skevington. May you and your brother find nothing but misery at the next Ball, for surely your connections will continue to provide you with invitations. Grant yourself lucky you still have a brother at all. Consider it as Lady Pereira’s gift to you, though you do not deserve it with how wretched your attitude has been toward her upon your initial meeting.”

Out of everything that had happened between us, it was this very moment that my husband-to-be, the abominable

Baron Lockhart, had fully and successfully won me over.

# ANTÔNIA

Lord Bow's booming voice echoed in the opulent space.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Can I have your attention please?"

The energy around the room was high, everyone excited to see who the successful matches were from this May Ball.

Master Bow's silver suit jacket, white breeches, and white wig seemed almost purposeful as he prepared to ready us for the list of future matrimony.

"Thank you so much for attending the Monsters Ball. We know that some of you didn't come by choice."

I stifled a laugh. Was he spying on me? Or the Baron for that matter?

He went on and ended with the charming statement of, "We believe in happily ever after here, for all Ladies and fine beasts."

My father's old stories came to the forefront of my mind. Of maidens and their knights, of marriages and happily ever afters. Yet, we never exactly got to hear about everything that

came after that. How does one obtain this so-called happily ever after? Was it just the matrimony itself? But everyday wasn't matrimony. Every day had to be lived with a stranger if one didn't get a chance to get to know their partner beforehand.

The crowd cheered, and I made sure to clap along with them. The Baron stood stoically, not moving a muscle. If he had muscles. I still didn't know whether he was strictly skeletal beneath his suits.

“We have received notification from Her Majesty, Queen Charlotte herself.”

Phillipa's eyes widened as she clutched a wolven man's arm. Philippa, the one who was wary of the wolven man before, seemed to have had a turn of opinion on him. We didn't get a chance to interact much after our initial introductions on the first day.

I was confident at the start of Lord Bow's speech, but now that everything was heading toward the end, my heart began to pound nervously out of my chest. I never had the perfect example of what a happy marriage was. Would I be able to create one with the Baron?

Or would he tire of me, and one day...

I shook my head to dislodge my line of thinking. I had abandonment issues. It wasn't the Baron's fault. He had done nothing to lead me to think that way.

*Nia, get a hold of yourself. You should be enjoying this moment, not drown in self doubt.*

I looked upon the Countess who was standing at the front of the room. She was regal and confident in her white and gold dress, with magnificent finery that adorned her neck.

I touched my own, thinking back on how it made me feel to put it on. It was as if I was turning a page in my life's story, entering the next chapter.

Countess Standbridge opened an envelope and my heart leapt out of my chest. "We've had a very successful Ball." She looked at every one of us and gave me a small smile when she passed me. It helped to calm my nerves a bit.

The Baron slipped his hand into mine and the world stopped. All sound shut out of my mind as my entire being focused on his hand gripping me firmly as if to tell me that I was not alone. His strength encouraged me to swallow the rest of my fears. It would all be okay, surely.

I had adapted to change before; this would be no different. I could do this.

I gave the Countess my full attention again just as she read out, "The Queen would like to congratulate Baron and Baroness of Grimwood, Louis and Antônia as well as the Duke and Duchess of Chelmsford, Wesley and Phillipa!"

The crowd cheered and everyone was excited about the results of this Season's matches. The Baron leaned in and nuzzled my cheek affectionately before pulling me away from the celebration, hand in hand.



DOMINGOS AND THE MAIDS HAD DONE NOTHING BUT TALK about all the gossip that went through town about all that happened during the Ball.

“I never got to ask how old the Baron is. Do any of you happen to know?” I inquired as we sat around looking at the books in preparation for the wedding ceremony.

“Oh, I’ve heard different things from different people, Senhora,” Maria confessed. “Some say he looks the same as he did ten years ago, while others say the same, but twenty years ago.”

Twenty years ago? I would have been only nine then and he was already in full adulthood. Were the lifespans of the *bête monde* that much different from our own?

How did that translate into our time spent together after matrimony? Would I...

“Theresa, will I die before he does? What will happen if that is the case? Will he be married to an old prune while he remains the same age? Oh, this is terrible. I didn’t even think about it. What? I mean, how do the women of the ton handle that? I should go talk with someone about this, find out more. I need to—”

I was panicking, out of breath. My head felt tight, my heart hurt at the possibility of dying before he did only to have him mourn my death the same way my father did with my mother. Was it sentencing him to the same cycle of grief? What have I done?

“Antônia! Nia!”

I couldn’t be responsible for someone’s misery like that. I just couldn’t!

“Nia! Breathe. Someone get me a cold cloth. She’s burning up. Hurry!”

Maybe it was better for me to remain alone. Then I couldn’t hurt anyone. My heart ached at the thought of ruining

my future children's lives. What if they lived as long as he did. Would they too have to suffer and watch their mother die a slow death?

The organ in my chest beat as if I were not in my own body. It raced as pain radiated down my limbs, but I held on anyway, suffering through it the way I always did. I deserved it.

My eyes blurred with tears and I rocked my body to try and get some sort of control over my racing thoughts and the morbid scenarios that kept playing over and over in a loop.

Everyone around me with eyes full of pain, shattered hopes, and cries of agony from my children.

The vision morphed into an image of myself, alone, in my bed, waking up from a nightmare, calling out to my mother... my father who was too far away in another country to hear my cry.

Strong arms wrapped around me and I shook my head, pushing the body away, crying out for a man that no longer existed.

I was alone, always alone and now... now I would be the reason for my children's pain.

Arms came around me again, but this time they felt different. A dark energy wrapped around me, pulling my own darkness with it. It felt as if it weaved one into another, creating a harmony from the chaos that threatened to consume my mind.

Slowly but surely, my heart slowed enough for me to take in normal breaths instead of choking on them. My body quaked as my energy depleted. My soul settled into snuffles

instead of sobs, and I let out a shaky breath against a hard chest.

I was broken. No matter how much I try to perform in front of others in broad daylight, the truth was I was nothing but pieces that were glued back together again and again from sheer will and stubbornness.

A deep, masculine voice hummed into my ear, a tune that was both foreign and familiar.

My arms slid up and wrapped around his neck. I buried my face and my shame against him, hiding myself away from the world.

“*Mo Anam Cara*, you never have reason to hide around me,” he whispered in reassurance. His hand rubbed my back as my hiccups and sniffles refused to die down.

“I don’t want you to see me like this. How could you still want me when I’m nothing but something to be left behind?”

“I never left you behind, *Mo Anam Cara*. I knew you would come back to me.”

I let out a shaky breath, uncaring of who saw us at this moment. We were within the walls of my father’s estate, private enough from the prying eyes of the *ton*. Theresa and my father’s servants knew enough of my past to understand... I hoped.

“I don’t understand...”

“It is not yet time. We will be married and all will be well, I promise you.”

I let out a soft chuckle against the crook of his neck. This close, I realized he wasn’t all bone. No. I blinked back the tears, uncaring that I was probably ruining one of his favorite



shirts for all I knew. I lifted my hand and trailed my fingers along the exposed muscle and stretched skin along his neck connecting to his chest. I must have stretched out his shirt in my episode, but I wasn't sorry for it. Not currently. Not when my morbid curiosity had me trailing the skin to the light dusting of dark fur that peeked out beneath the fabric.

He took a sharp inhale and I jerked my hand away, ashamed of my behavior.

“How did you get here, Baron? I didn't hear the door...” I admitted, trailing off, wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me.

“You called for me.”

Did I?

“I don't remember calling for you. I remember screaming for my father. Or maybe it was all in my mind...”

He nuzzled me and I let out a calm breath, wrapping my arms around him again for comfort.

“I could do nothing but answer its cry. The sound of your voice, your pain—it tore at my soul.”

Nothing this man said ever made any sense.

“My irrational thoughts got the better of me, I apologize if I wasted your time.” What was wrong with me? Who said these things after someone came to one's rescue—because wasn't that what this was? I needed someone to save me... from myself.

“*Mo Anam Cara*, never be sorry for needing me. It is my duty to take care of you.”

I wasn't ready for this. My eyes teared up again, out of my control, and I felt weak. I didn't want him to think he was

marrying a weak woman so I forced myself to let him go, wipe my tears and stand up, running my hand down my dress as if getting rid of the dust would get rid of the problem.

“I thank you for your visit, Baron, but it wouldn’t do to have our marriage be spoken of in a bad light before it could even start.”

He stood up to his full height, staring at me without a word as if waiting for my command one way or another.

In a moment where I felt so utterly powerless, he gave me power over him. I soaked in that knowledge and filed it in the deep recesses of my mind, unsure how to proceed with conversation.

Like the coward I was, I left the room and made my way outside into my father’s modest garden that was finally beginning to come back to life.

“Antônia?” Theresa’s worried voice cracked my heart. I didn’t mean to worry everyone.

Clearing my throat, I answered her as calmly as I could with a smile. “Do you think the Baron would mind having a humble wedding in the backyard? Or do you think he would want to have it on his estate instead? Either way, we will have to be careful with how we spend my supposed dowry... or what’s left of it.”

“Antônia, are you alright?”

I turned to her and hid nothing on my face. My lips wobbled and she immediately ran to me, holding me in her arms as I fell once more to my knees, but this time over the fact that I still hadn’t told the Baron about the state of my father’s finances before he passed.

“He cares very much for you, you know?” she told me with assurance.

“Will he still want me when he finds out we’re barely keeping our head above water?”

Theresa rubbed my back. “Do not worry about that for now. You have a wedding to plan, and a very eager man waiting to marry you. Think about all the positives ahead of you. I’ve never seen a person get here so quickly. It was as if he knew...”

I laughed still unsure of how to interpret everything he had said to me during my breakdown.

“Theresa, can I ask you something?”

“Hmm?” she pulled back and looked at me questioningly.

“What does *Mo Anam Cara* mean?”

# ANTÔNIA

**B**oth Theresa and I were surprised when a letter arrived earlier this morning, addressed to me in a scrawl I had never seen before.

I was in the middle of packing a trunk with all my necessary items for the wedding.

The wax seal had an emblem of a grotesque fairy dancing in flames. I didn't want to break it, gruesomely fascinated with the detail.

With Theresa's insistence, I did, to find a letter from my groom-to-be.

My heart pounded loudly in response to tracing his perfectly eerie script on the parchment paper. It wasn't done with any calligraphy pen I had ever seen. I was beguiled to know more about the Baron. Every time a new piece of information about him came to me, I fell more and more for his mysterious air.

*Mo Anam Cara,*

*I wish the days would pass sooner. Every moment, my thoughts are ones of our matrimony, and my heart impatiently*

*grows fonder of a life spent with you.*

*Upon your arrival at Grimwood, my wife needn't concern herself with any tasks aside from tending to your own happiness.*

*To see you again will please me,*

*Baron Lockhart*

It was simple, to the point, and left my legs weak. Who was this man? And why was his awkward end to the letter so arrogant yet adorable?

“Tending to your own happiness? Or is he subliminally saying that he will leave you happy before the day is over?” Theresa blurted out.

I laughed and slapped her on the shoulder to stop her teasing.

It was just what we both needed after a stressful day in town. We had received the transfer of funds from my estate in Brazil. Domingos and the rest of the servants vehemently refused to take their pay, trying to convince me that I should funnel the money toward the wedding.

I felt a pang of guilt until this letter arrived and the servants in this home informed me that their money had been back paid before my father's passing.

I was left baffled. What in the world was the Baron trying to achieve? We were already to be married...

“Antônia. I know that look. Stop those irrational thoughts this instant.”

I turned to look at Theresa, sitting beside me in the carriage that was sent for us. An orc drove and another one was the footman.

“What do you mean? I was just—”

“Wondering what was wrong with the Baron?”

*What kind of witchcraft was this? How did she always know...*

“Because I’ve been with you long enough to be able to decipher the tell-tale signs of the lines creasing between your brow.”

My gloved finger automatically shot up to the location, trying to smooth it out. “You are insufferable. Now I won’t be able to get that out of my mind.”

“You look fine. What I need you to do is relax and let the events of the day pass. Before you know it, you will be Baroness and a small crease between your brow will be the least of your worries.”

My heart raced with anticipation and fear. I was trying my best not to think about the consummation of my marriage. Flashes of the Baron’s fur beneath his shirt tantalized me and my face flushed.

Theresa giggled like a foolish girl, and I couldn’t help but do the same. We were both being ridiculous from nerves.

I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “I’m so glad you are here with me Theresa, truly. I couldn’t imagine anyone else walking me down the aisle to give me away.”

Her laughter ceased and she looked at me intently. “Antônia, it’s all I ever wanted from you, your happiness. And from what I’ve been able to witness—”

My face flamed ever the more. She only knew half of the things that went on between the Baron and I since our meeting.

“—the Baron cares for you, deeply. I’ve never seen a man so desperate to bring security to a woman. The servants had nothing but good things to say about him on his last visit.”

The visit where I had an emotional breakdown. I grimaced, not wanting to remember it—but at the same time couldn’t help not to remember the way he held me as if I was always meant to be in the safety of his arms.

Suddenly, Theresa burst into tears, pulling out her handkerchief to dab at her eyes, then cover her nose.

“You will visit me, won’t you? You won’t forget about old Theresa?”

“Oh, you crazy old bat, you know good and well I could never forget about the woman who was basically my only mother growing up. Of course! If anything, you could come live with us. I’m sure if I mention it to the Baron he would—”

She blew her nose into the handkerchief loudly and my lip curled in disgust. Theresa laughed at my expression and playfully hit me on the shoulder. “Oh, I’m going to miss your craziness and your company.”

“Theresa, you act like I’m going to die, or go missing forever. I’m simply getting married.”

“Yes, well, from the way the Baron’s been attached to you I know for a fact he won’t let you up for air once you belong to him.”

“Theresa!” We are not talking about my marital activities right now!

“It’s true, and you know it! Plus, I can’t stay here without a purpose. I only came here for you!”

I snickered and leaned in, making her lean back. “Are you going back on that ship alone, Theresa? Are you ready for fish for breakfast, lunch, *and* supper?”

Her tearful laughter turned into gags, making me cackle.

“I thought so. Then it’s settled. You will be moving in with us.”

Theresa dry heaved out the carriage window and I sat back and crossed my legs in triumph. Ha! She wouldn’t be getting rid of me that easily.

“Oh, why do you need to bring that up when I need to be walking straight down the aisle with you.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have to come to this if you would just agree—”

The carriage stopped and jolted us forward.

“We’re here already?” I asked, now nervous once more.

“What do you mean, already? It’s been over two hours.”

“I’m nervous, Theresa,” I admitted shakily.

She placed her non-snotty hand over mine. “Don’t be. I’ll be right beside you.”

I nodded at her reassurance, and took a deep breath.

The footman came to open our door, and before he could offer me his hand to help me down, another hand—a skeletal one—came into view, stealing my breath.

“Baron, you shouldn’t see me before our wedding.”

“It pleases me to look upon you.”

I blushed. It was the same line that was in his awkwardly romantic letter.



“Baron, you must excuse us, but according to—” Theresa started matronly, but was cut off.

“Propriety has no place where we will be going, my Lady.”

I wasn’t informed of this change. “Going? Where are we going?”

He waited until we both stepped foot down onto the ground. The orc footman easily grabbed my trunk and brought it into the estate as if he was already given orders of exactly where it should be.

The Baron leaned down and gently touched the tip of his nose against my temple.

“The wedding will be held in the Unseelie Court. My realm.”

“The what?” I sputtered.

He chuckled, and I lost my train of thought. Theresa was nervously wringing her hands behind me.

“All will be well, *Mo Anam Cara*.” It was an endearment. It had to be. And it carried a meaning to him I had yet to decipher.

He hadn’t let go of my hand and I was taken with the fact. He turned us to go back through the large double doors of his estate with Theresa right behind us.

The moment we entered his home, I was taken aback by the sheer dark aesthetic of the interior. I felt like I was lost in the woods with how much greenery was inside. There were plants that grew through some of the crevices of the corners of the ceiling. The dark, damask wallpaper that greeted us looked floral at first sight, but upon further inspection was various images of fairies intertwined with vines and foliage.

“Your home is magnificent,” I confessed with awe.

“It is to be your home as well, Baroness.”

I flushed. “I am not Baroness yet.”

He turned and tugged me until I was against his chest. I could hear Theresa excuse herself and make pleasant conversation with one of the servants nearby as I stared into his dark eyes.

“Society here dictates that titles are necessary in order to determine a person’s breeding stock.”

“Are you calling me a dog, Baron?”

He let out a rich laugh. His demeanor in his home was one I hadn’t yet seen. He was so loose, so comfortable, so *free*.

It was as if the wallpaper danced with mirth as he laughed. I blinked a few times and looked again, the images reverting back to what they once were.

“What I will be calling you is my *Queen*.”

Oh, this is an endearment I didn’t see coming. I hid my face against his chest in embarrassment.

He grabbed my chin and firmly lifted my face back up toward his. “Never hide yourself from me. A Queen should be seen bold in all manners.”

“Baron, I am but a human woman—”

He leaned in and slowly licked my bottom lip, making my breath stutter and eyes flutter. “One that is about to be tied and unified to an Unseelie King.”

“What are you saying?” It was a stupid question. He just told me. But I still was unsure. He couldn’t be telling the truth could he? What are the odds of my betrothed being... a King?

“Trust me Lady Antônia, and I will show you a world you could never imagine. I want to share all that I have with you. I want to show you your kingdom.”

It was as if there were titters of wispy voices around us when he said that. It reminded me of something I had experienced before, but the feeling passed when he nuzzled me again.

Was I going to miss kissing lips after my union with the Baron? His skull didn't seem able to accommodate the human act.

His tongue slithered out once more and touched my lip again, but this time, I took the chance to dart my own tongue out and touch his.

He groaned and my nipples hardened beneath my dress. It was a sound I didn't anticipate. He freely expressed his reactions and I found myself drunk on it, wanting more of it.

I didn't know if I would be able to hold myself back for this wedding if he kept tempting me thusly.

He cradled my face with both of his hands and it was as if the world fell away...

...and then I was physically falling, screaming in fear.

“Look at me, *Mo Anam Cara. Only me.*”

I did as he said. His eyes glowed an eerie blue until it was almost too bright to gaze upon. Suddenly, we landed on a soft bed of soft linens with me on top of him. His hands moved down my naked shoulders to my lower back.

Wait. Naked shoulders?

I squeaked and covered myself as best as I could until I realized I was in a dark blue bodice and a very revealing skirt

that had slits on either side, showcasing my thighs up to my hips.

“Baron!”

He laughed as I crawled away to look at myself front to back.

“You are beautiful. The fashion of this realm is not like that of the *ton*.”

Tell me something I didn’t know. “I can see that, you rake. Why would you put me in this? This is inappropriate. I feel naked.”

His eyes glowed red and his humor died.

He began crawling toward me and my heart raced. “B-Baron?”

“I want to taste you, *Mo Anam Cara*. I want your essence all over me. I want everyone in this kingdom to know who brought the Unseelie King to his knees.”

And he was on his knees, crawling like a predator about to pounce on cornered prey—me.

I scissored my legs together and backed up until I hit the pillows, shaking my head. “We can’t. We’re not married yet.”

“Just a taste.”

What did that even mean? I was nervous, but also so very curious. Did he not already lick my lips? What other taste could he be speaking of?

“B-But, the wedding—”

“Will wait for its Queen,” he finished, cutting me off.

He pounced and I squeaked like a dying pig, but it didn’t put him off, surprisingly. He nuzzled my bosom and I cradled

his skull, shifting his spikes away from my face.

This was so inappropriate, so wrong. We shouldn't be doing this.

When his hand pulled at the top of my bodice, his tongue snaked out and wrapped around my very hard nipple expertly, making me gasp with delight. He let go and crawled down my body with purpose. It was at this moment when I realized his shirt was unbuttoned and showcasing a light dusting of fur around skin that looked as if it had been shredded, healed, and scarred over on his shoulders.

*What kind of life have you lived, Baron?*

I didn't have time to wonder when a cool breeze whipped between my legs as he pushed the fabric of my skirt aside.

I squeaked again, shooting my arm to stop him but vines burst forth through his shirt and pinned my wrists to either side of me. They crawled, wound themselves around my wrist a few more times, and caressed my palm as the Baron pushed my legs apart and licked me between the apex of my legs.

“Oh, heavens,” I gasped in incredulity and repudiation. *Do people really do this? Was it just something of his world?*

I lost my train of thought as he pulled my lady parts closer to his face, splaying my legs wider for his pre-wedding feast.

His dexterous tongue teased my folds, licked up to the tip of my hood, and back down again. I wanted to close my legs in abashment, but he wouldn't let me. It only made me all the more withdrawn with embarrassment. I had flirted and stolen kisses, yes, but nothing like this. Nothing I had ever seen or heard could prepare me for what the Baron was doing between my legs

*If this was a taste of what was to come...*

I mentally laughed at my own inside joke, then whimpered when his tongue threatened to penetrate me in my most private of places. More vines came forth, and I was beginning to understand why his body looked the way it did. How often must his skin have to tear for them to emerge time and time again?

They slithered across the soft sheets like a second lover and wrapped themselves gently around my bodice.

One crept along my bosom and I squirmed in anticipatory apprehension. What were they going to—

“You taste like victory under the moonlight wrapped in beautiful darkness.”

*Good grief, was this good or bad?*

His tongue dove further into me and I practically mewled like a wanton cat in heat under said moonlight.

“I’ve cursed myself with a taste. How could I ever let you leave this bed without drowning myself in you?”

I felt hot, unsettled, antsy. I didn’t know whether to scoot away or kick him for talking so much when I craved more of what he was doing to me.

When his fang nipped at my wet lips I cried out in shock... right before I moaned as his tongue penetrated me again and again, as if he knew I doubted his words of wanting to drown in everything I had to offer.

He growled as his tortures became more aggressive. My chest rose and fell rapidly as I tried to hold onto whatever was happening. My body tensed and coiled within itself the more his tongue lashed at my skin and between my folds. When he reached the tip of my hood, I whimpered and he latched on,

flicking the tip of his tongue against it then flattening it before penetrating me again.

Oh, the added girth did something to me I couldn't explain. I struggled against the vines around my wrist, but they tightened their hold on me as their master pushed his head against me even more. How close could he really get with his skull?

The answer came when he pushed his head forward and his tongue deeper within me and flicked that masterful tongue upward. The tension in my body released, and I threw my head back and cried out in pleasure as I pulsed around him. It seemed as if my body enjoyed being tortured. I was on the brink of pain as it mixed with the most pleasure I had ever experienced.

The Baron growled and lapped up everything, tracing his tongue to my inner thighs and up to my hips, nipping my skin lightly as he went. I felt flushed all over. My entire body was under a fever of delight.

The vines around us slowly withdrew, kissing my skin softly as it went. My eyes fluttered, my arms crossing over my face as I tried to come back to reality.

*“Mo Anam Cara.”*

I let out a satisfied sigh and lifted my arms above my head so that I may gaze upon the monster that had ruined me for all others.

*Who are you kidding, Antônia, there will never be any others. You can barely handle the Baron.*

His hands reverently caressed my arms and down my sides as he stared at me. His eyes pulsed in shades of red and maroon.

“Why do you call me that? What does it mean?”

He chuckled and I couldn't help but turn bashful from noticing the glistening of his face.

“I burn for you, *Mo Anam Cara*. I am tempted to skip this wedding and keep you here with me for all eternity.”

I playfully slapped his chest, then caressed his skin, feeling him beneath my fingertips.

“We are to be married. I demand it, Baron. You are to make an honest woman of me. Would you want to sully your future wife's reputation by bypassing cultural expectations? I don't know how it is done here, wherever we are, but remember that I still lead a life back there.”

He pushed my hair back and caressed the side of my face.

“You wouldn't have to. You could choose to stay and I wouldn't deny you.”

“Of course, you wouldn't. You dirty rake!” I scolded him playfully and shoved at his chest. “I should be furious with you for taking advantage of my innocence.”

He nipped the skin right above my bosom and I gasped with mirth.

“I would do it again, as I have no remorse for what I did.”

I struggled beneath his enormous body and weight until I was able to bend my knees up and place my feet against him to shove him off.

He fell to the side and grunted. The bastard probably let me because I wouldn't, in any way, be able to use my weight against his.



But I took the advantage he gave me and scrambled to get off the large four postered bed.

Right when I was about to reach the edge, he landed on top of me, his vines winding around both of us, locking us together as one. A few of them wound themselves around my arm and fingers.

“You dare to tempt one such as me?”

“If you’re looking for any sort of dare then, dear Baron, I dare you to give me a proper wedding.”

He laughed and sniffed my hair. What was with this man and sniffing me?

“I shall do as my Queen commands, but make no mistake, Antônia, in this bedroom, I am more than just your King. I will be everything you crave.”

# ANTÔNIA

**H**is words still echoed in my skull as we stood before the strangest looking creature in a dark forest.

No, not just a forest.

This place was beyond words and made my dark little heart happy. The eerie atmosphere was reminiscent of every villain's story in the tales of princesses my father used to read to me. Light struggled to peek through, but when it did, it cast shadows that moved and danced as if they came alive. The dark faeries wisped around us, leaving tails of different glowing colors that disappeared the instant you tried to take a closer look.

Titters of voices mocked and laughed, making one wonder what their inside joke was and if you were their next victim for one.

The moss and leaves gave color to the surroundings, though not much, complimenting the gray and brown branches of trees that look to be uprooted from the ground as if they, too, were desperate to attend the wedding of their King.

I heard my name and gave our strange clergyman my attention.

Gripping my blood red flowers between my hands, I stared at the antlers that protruded from his head. They looked more like millions of branches, but what did I know about the Unseelie? His face lacked a nose, but his empty eye sockets garnered more of one's attention. That, and the way it looked as if skin had grown over his mouth, then stretched and torn from him speaking, which he was doing right now.

“My Lady, I ask that you please repeat what I am saying.”

“Oh! Sorry. Yes, can you say it again please?”

He chuckled and I hid my shame behind my flowers, pretending to sniff them.

The Baron looked at me knowingly, but said nothing. I knew he was laughing at me on the inside and for that, he would be punished later.

The clergyman's furred cloak shook on his shoulders. *Great, he was laughing at me too.*

The feathers that stuck out from his neck vibrated as he spoke again.

“Lady Antônia Santos Pereira, say that you vow to take Baron Louis Lockhart with all his faults and strengths, promising to guide him well as you stand beside him as Queen.”

I looked at the Baron as he waited eagerly, his confident energy traveling between our combined hands. “I vow to take Baron Louis Lockhart with all his faults and strength, promising to guide him well as I stand beside him as Queen.”

“Baron, our King, say that you vow to take Lady Antônia Santos Pereira with all her faults and strength, promising to lead her well as her husband and King.”

“I vow to take Dear Miss Antônia Santos Pereira with all her faults and strengths, promising to lead her well as her husband and King.”

A faerie flew toward us and handed each of us a ring. It was my first time seeing it. I was beginning to believe that his kind didn't use the same symbolism as we humans did—and I was okay with that.

The Baron dropped my right hand and brought up my left for the ring. The piece was intricately designed and sparkled with purple jewels that held speckles of red. What looked like two hands held the biggest gem topped with a dark crown.

He slipped the ring onto my finger halfway and spoke.

“With this ring, I take you to be my bride, my Queen. I promise to be your safety, to provide you with a loving home, to provide you with what your heart desires as we rule this kingdom together as one.”

My breath stuttered at the sheer seriousness he had in what he was declaring. One thing I had come to learn about the Baron was that he didn't take his words lightly, unlike other bachelors I had come across who would say anything if it meant it helped them to convince a woman to give them favor.

No, Baron Lockhart had a veracity not many could ever obtain.

There was an awkward silence between us after he fully seated the ring on my finger.

His best man, who stood behind him, leaned over and whispered, “It's your turn to say your part.”

*Oh good grief, could none of them have warned me first? I'm not prepared!* I sent Aimon a panicked look.

When I first met the man I was taken aback. I had initially thought he was simply a tree. Come to find, he opened his eyes into two glowing white orbs and the branches cracked and split as he gave me a smile upon our introduction. Wispy branches that looked more akin to vines topped his head on either side. Beneath the shirt he wore, out peeked a face, and I laughed so hard I almost fell backward.

He explained to me that they were the souls of those who lost to his gambles and I sobered up, thinking of my father.

He assured me none of the faces were his, and I had sighed in relief.

I stared at him now, pleading for him to tell me what to say.

“Just make something up, quickly!” Theresa whispered behind me.

*Oh, bloody goodness!*

I cleared my throat and placed his ring halfway onto his finger. The Baron chuckled under his breath and I glared at him, which only made him stifle the rest of his laughter.

“With this ring, I take you to be my husband, my King. I promise to... forever keep you on your toes so that we may never bore of each other. To provide you with a loving home you can come back to after your kingly duties are done. And to try my best to rule beside you as we—er—rule this kingdom together as husband and wife.”

*Yes, that'll do.*

Titters of laughter could be heard from his Unseelie Court and I stifled my own as I fully seated his ring onto his finger.

“Yes, well, with that, I now pronounce you husband and wife. King and Queen.”

Before the clergyman could even finish his sentence, the Baron grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder, walking us both out.

“What about the wedding party?” I screeched. “Oh, this is so inappropriate.”

His hand slapped my bottom and I squealed.

Dear heavens, what have I gotten myself into?

“The Queen will be indisposed for the rest of the evening. Enjoy the entertainment on our behalf,” the Baron announced, and I hid my face with my hands for his shameful behavior.

All of a sudden, it was as if black shadows and smoke surrounded us, occluding my view of the crowd we left behind. A shiver of fear ran down my spine and the Baron slowly slid me down his front, holding me around my lower back.

“We’re wasting too much time,” he whispered as he placed his hand on the back of my head, holding me gently against him.

Everything turned into darkness and I screamed. The only thing that was real, that I could feel, were his arms and his chest. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face against it, shutting my eyes.

“Shhh. I’ve got you. Trust me, Antônia. I would never let anything hurt you.”

I landed in bed sheets as soft as clouds, with the Baron, my husband, on top of me.

“Would you warn me next time! My nerves cannot handle all the unknowns you keep throwing at me!”

He chuckled and rubbed his very naked chest against my very naked breasts. How did he keep doing this? How in the world was he able to dress me and undress me without his hands?

I became shy, unsure of what he thought of my body and I think he knew it.

“You are the most beautiful being I’ve ever beheld.”

I instinctually snapped a response laced with attitude, one of my coping mechanisms for insecurity I was sure. “Are you saying you have beheld many, Husband?”

He barked out a laugh and then licked my lips. The scoundrel knew he was avoiding my question. He was good at convincing me to leave the topic alone... for now.

I licked him back, unsure of how to maneuver us to simulate kissing.

He saved me the trouble by sticking his tongue in my mouth, letting us duel and discover one another.

I squirmed beneath him, and he lowered his weight further to pin me down. Something writhed between my legs and I squeaked in surprise.

“Husband...”

“My title on your lips suits you.”

“Oh, you bloody bastard!”

“Your bloody bastard, yes. It’s what you’ve turned me into.” His hands roamed my ribs and squeezed my breasts, teasing my nipples with his fingers.

I gasped, and he swallowed it *and* the moan that escaped me when one of his vines pinched my other nipple and slid between us.

“I’ve done nothing of the sort and do not appreciate your accusations,” I panted.

The sheets, soft as they were, felt rough against my back as he pushed his body against me, plunging his wicked tongue into my mouth again.

My legs automatically spread apart to accommodate his size, wrapping around him, wanting to be skin to skin in every possible way.

When he finally let me up for breath, I turned my face away in cowardice. All it did was allow him to lick down the column of my neck and crawl down my body.

The vines continued to play with my senses, caressing my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Unable to help myself, my hands touched his back right at the area where one of the vines wriggled out. It slithered across my fingers, winding and unwinding.

He was kissing me across my stomach and I bit my lip in embarrassment. Did he still think me beautiful? My body still harbored the stretch marks of my youth when I began to fill out in my hips and buttocks.

I wanted to cry when he licked each and every one of my scars, kissing them reverently as if to answer my self doubt—as if to pour his confidence into me like an offering.



Instead of feasting on me as I anticipated, my dear husband straightened up on his knees and looked down at me. His head spikes were erect, in a different position than they once were. Vines crawled between my legs and teased me where I wanted him to be.

The dark, mahogany posts of the bed moved until I blinked again. Everything about the Baron and his world was magical.

Bone and torn flesh peeked through his light dusting of fur. My eyes traveled lower, unable to help myself, and I bit my lip in terror and anticipation.

His cock. Dear heavens, his cock was covered in a rib cage down its shaft. Pink tentacle-like protrusions came out from the base, wriggling and wrapping themselves around the shaft. The head of his cock had a mouth that opened and another organ peeked from within.

The maids back home spoke and gossiped freely about their husband's genitals, but their partners were all human.

Was my body made to take this? Would I be able to if I tried?

“Do you want to touch me?”

I choked at his question. I needed to find courage. This was *my* marriage bed. *My* husband. Who but us both dictated what happened here?

I nodded with confidence and he pulled me up by the arm until I was on my knees in front of him. I tentatively traced his skin and fur, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. He was breathing hard, just as I was. Was he nervous?

My hand went down past his ribs and to his hips. He threaded his skeletal hands through my loose curls, massaging

my scalp with patience as I continued to explore him at my own leisure.

He groaned when my hand skated past his cock and to his thighs.

“Careful how you tease me, *Mo Anam Cara*. My control only goes so far.”

My breath stuttered at his threat. I wanted to push him. Wanted to see if he would follow through.

When the wet tip of his cock touched my stomach, I gasped and looked down. He growled and shoved me onto the bed, ending my discovery.

I yelped and turned to crawl away, tantalized by his predatory side, enjoying being hunted by my husband.

He grabbed my ankle and pulled me across the sheets until I was beneath him. His arms caged me in from behind, and I opened my mouth to exhale more deeply.

“You play with fire, *Mo Anam Cara*.”

I looked over my shoulder at him with hooded eyes, impatient for what he was going to do to me. “What if I wanted to get burned? I’ve been called stubborn most of my life. Might as well live up to my reputation.”

He chuckled and ground the underside of his cock against my buttocks. The rib cage along his shaft made me shiver.

Suddenly, he pulled my hips up, forcing me onto my knees. One hand pushed down my shoulders as vines wrapped around my wrists and across my back.

I gasped when he lowered himself and licked me from behind, stretching me with his tongue.

“Oh, god.”

“The only one you need to worship in this bed is me, Antônia.”

He was an arrogant brute with his words, but his actions were those of a man worshiping his Queen.

Vines tickled and spread my lips below as I panted and cursed him every time he brought me to the brink of pleasure only to pull back and tease me with soft licks.

When my pleasure retreated the fourth time, I tried to kick back only to be caught by his strong arms.

“A King takes his time with his conquests, *Mo Anam Cara*. To make sure his Queen never has any desire to leave his kingdom.”

“His kingdom is about to be burned to the ground if the King doesn't do as this Queen demands!”

He chuckles and violates me with his tongue again, whispering against my skin. “And what does my Queen demand?”

I keened when I come to the edge of the delicious cliff. “Pleasure!”

Vines wrapped around my breasts and nipples, another at the hood at the apex of my legs right as he spread my buttocks apart and plunged his tongue deeply within me.

I cried out and shook with so much pleasure, I thought I was going blind. Everything around me became a haze of lust.

I pulsed around his tongue until I suddenly was emptied, making me shriek with frustration.

The Baron turned me to my side, came up behind me, and lined himself against my entrance.

“Your King wants to come home, *Mo Anam Cara*,” he whispered as he slowly impaled me on his large, girthy member.

Inch by inch, I squirmed and whined. His arms came around me to wrap around my chest, holding me against him tightly. Inch by inch, when I didn’t think I could take any more, he kept pushing.

“Husband, it’s too much.”

He licked the shell of my ear. “You’ll take everything I have to give you.”

“I can’t,” I panted as he pulled back and pushed again.

His hand reached down and rubbed against the hood of my cunt. My face flamed with how vulgar my thoughts had become because of this man. I loved it and hated it all at once.

“Watch us as we become one. Watch how your delicious cunt takes every inch of me as if it was made to be there. You’re drenched in arousal, *Mo Anam Cara*. You want it just as much as I do,” he groans against my hair.

“Please.” I didn’t know what I was begging for. I couldn’t think of anything but his cock invading me, threatening to tear me in two.

In fact, maybe that was exactly what I was begging for.

“I’ve waited so long for you, *Mo Anam Cara*.”

“Oh, god.”

When he finally seated himself fully inside of me, I swore I could feel him poking through my stomach.

He pulled back and I whimpered, feeling as if a void was left behind.

He chuckled, nipped at my shoulder, and thrust back inside making me grunt with fullness.

My hands grabbed onto the sheets for refuge as he began a quicker rhythm in and out of me. The vines wrapped around my breasts again, slithering across my nipples that had hardened to rocks.

The hand that was around my chest moved to around my neck and under my jaw as the sound of wet flesh against flesh filled our ears.

The Baron grunted and growled, sounding more beast than man, and it threw me over the precipice. I cried out in pleasure when his ribbed cock hit a certain part within me I didn't know existed.

“You feel better than the blood of my enemies on my skin, *Mo Anam Cara*. Nothing can compare to what you do to me.”

“I can't take anymore, Husband.” My pleasures kept rolling over one another to the point of painful deliciousness.

“You can and you will. Beg for me, Antônia. Tell me how much you want my cock to fill you.”

He picked up his pace and I was annoyed that he would want any sort of conversation at all. I could barely breathe with how hard he was fucking me.

I mewled when his hips began slapping me harder and harder as if in punishment for not answering his demands. I bit my lip and kept my mouth shut, wanting it, craving it.

“I'm going to claim my wife every waking moment and even when she is not. How could you tempt your King like

this? How am I to rule my kingdom when all I can think about is burying myself inside of you?”

By heavens, the mouth on this man. How could I ever think he was awkward? This man was dominant and sure with every thrust, every word that escaped his lips weaving their way into all my fantasies and secret desires.

The cadence of his thrusts faltered and he growled, hitting the back of my head with his spikes right before his cock spilled inside of me, gushing between our combined flesh and wetting the sheets beneath us.

I screamed in pleasure again as his cock kept pulsing inside. His hands crawled between us, rubbing his release against my cunt as he forcefully shoved it back in right beside his cock.

I whimpered at his debauchery. It was so dirty of him. This whole union was nothing but filthy and... everything I never imagined. I panted as he kept playing with his release, rubbing it on the inside of my thighs and finally, bringing it up to my open mouth.

“Do you want to know what Heaven tastes like, *Mo Anam Cara?*”

I couldn't answer as he slowly slid his finger inside of my mouth. I closed around him and teased him with my tongue, tasting us both.

He groaned and began thrusting again, his cock never dying down within me.

“You've created a monster.”

“You were already a monster, Husband.”

He lifted my leg and turned me with his cock still buried between my legs until I was on my back.

“No, *Mo Anam Cara*, let me show you what a real monster your husband can be.”

# ANTÔNIA

“**Y**ou finally came up for air, I see.”

“Theresa!”

“I’m only stating what everyone is thinking, Antônia. Don’t you Theresa me!” She threw a towel at my face and I laughed.

While we were away in the other realm, my beloved husband had brought all of our belongings over to his estate, as well as our servants.

When I asked him what would happen to my father’s estate, he told me that it would be renovated and leased out to anyone who wished to have a short stay in the area.

It was smart of him. I should have thought of that myself. Of course, I didn’t need his arrogance any worse, so I didn’t voice any of my thoughts on the matter.

“Theresa, do you miss home?” I asked her, thinking of how Brazil would look at this time of the year.

“I do. But I know that I would miss you more. It wasn’t a hard decision.”



My heart felt full. What more could I ask for?

“What should I do about the estate and tenants back home? I do not think Isabella would want to keep up with all the books for that long. It’s mind numbing business.”

“Isn’t that something you should ask your husband?” She raised an eyebrow and my face flamed.

“I’ll remember to do that when he returns from his trip into town.”

“You’re a horrible liar. The only words I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth around that man since your wedding are profanities and cries of passion through the walls.”

“Theresa!”

“It’s a compliment, Antônia. Many go to their graves without sharing anything at all with their husbands but hatred and disdain. Some of these marriages are those solely of convenience.”

She was right. I honestly thought that was what was going to happen to me after attending the Monsters Ball. I was lucky to have found such a gentleman that would ignite my affection as such.

As if my thoughts manifested him, the front doors opened and in walked the very man who had taken over my thoughts.

“You’re home!” I said cheerfully. “Was the trip successful?”

He didn’t say anything. His eyes glowed red and then maroon, and I pressed my legs together in response.

“I’ll go... help Maria with lunch.” Theresa slipped away, leaving us both in privacy.

He swept me up in his arms and I giggled as he growled.

“I don’t understand what that means, Husband. Use your words.”

His eyes darkened as he stopped halfway up the stairs and placed me on the middle landing on my hands and knees.

He ripped the back of my dress, and I cried out in irritation. Right as I was about to give him a piece of my mind, his hand covered my mouth firmly. The only thing I could hear was the pounding of my heart behind my ears and the sound of him unfastening his pants.

*Oh, so he keeps his clothes intact but not mine?*

“I’ll buy you a million more dresses, Antônia. I cannot wait any longer.”

What did he mean? We just copulated an hour ago before he left home.

When one of his vines entered my dripping wet cunt, I squirmed.

“By the gods, you’re always so wet for me. Do you think of me, *Mo Anam Cara*? Do you think of my cock inside of you when I’m gone?”

I moaned against his hand as he teased me with his fingers, readying me for his invasion. I let out a muffled cry when the first climax came, and cried again when he brutishly thrust his cock inside of me.

The Baron had shown me many versions of himself in our bedroom, from soft love making to straight ravishing. I have to say I was more partial to his bestial side, and he knew it. He overpowered me there in the open, and the simple fact that any

one of our servants could walk by made the whole situation all the more alluring to my fantasies.

He was such a dirty, dirty bastard.

He removed his hand from my mouth, choosing to grip my hips as he thrust into me.

“What if someone sees us?!”

“They will see how well you take my cock inside of you. How you cry for more even when you pretend to escape my grasp.”

“You rake!”

He thrust into me so hard, I fell onto my elbows and lowered my head to the ground. All I could do was feel my husband claim me. I loved it. I loved how he lost control around me, needing me to get through his day.

I needed him, too. Desperately.

My thighs ached and my cunt leaked in anticipation of what was to follow. Oh, the servants would be upset with how much they would have to clean up. My husband had proved time and time again that his release could go on for more than a few minutes of time.

I bit my lip, thinking about how wet I will be once he filled me to the brim with his seed, splashing all over the insides of my thighs.

Did human men do this? Or was it only my husband?

He growled and his fingers dug into my flesh, burying himself to the hilt as he fell onto my back, rubbing his forehead against my shoulder and groaning.

“You’ve bewitched me.”

I could still feel his cock throbbing inside, a trickle of his seed spilling out between us.

“I’ve done nothing of the sort. I was minding my own business, helping Theresa, when some dirty scoundrel ravished me on the stairs.”

“You love it.”

I panted as he began to slowly thrust again. “Perhaps I do. Perhaps I don’t.”

He laughed against me as he withdrew his cock, splashing our arousal onto the carpet.

“Oh you dirty—”

My words caught in my throat when his hands pushed his seed back into me again and again, teasing me toward ecstasy.

“You smell like... mine.”

“Stop talking,” I panted and he quickened his fingers until I was crying against the carpet in pleasure.

“That’s a good girl. You always please me in the most beautiful ways.”

“I sound like I’m dying half the time. What are you talking about?”

He removed his hand and I whimpered again from the loss. “Dying around your husband’s cock isn’t the worst thing, is it?”

“Husband! Watch your tongue! Someone could be listening!”

He gathered me into his arms once more and walked us both to the second floor and into the bathing room. His realm crossed over here in this space, some of the Unseelie had

constructed a beautiful tub as a wedding gift for their new Queen.

He put me back on my feet and proceeded to undress me until everything was removed. I watched as he undressed himself with open interest, especially between his legs.

“Come, *Mo Anam Cara*, let me bathe and take care of you. I know I was rough out there.”

“I honestly do not think you truly care.”

He barked out a laugh, and I smiled. I did so love it when he was like this. Jovial. No longer that odd man that followed me around during the Ball.

Now he was just that weird man that married me and followed me around here, ravishing me in random places.

He carried me over the edge and placed us both inside as a faerie manifested from the wallpaper and came over to start the water.

Another one gave us a rag and the Baron began to wash me.

“Were you successful on your trip, Husband?”

“I was.”

“Well? Do not leave us all hanging. What happened?”

He chuckled and began washing my breasts very thoroughly.

“Work shall be done on your father’s estate in the coming months. There is nothing more you need to worry your pretty mind about. I will take care of everything.”

I turned, splashing some water onto the wooden floor.

“Will you? Would my father have approved of this decision, do you think?”

He caressed my face and I leaned into his palm.

“Your father would have wanted you to be happy. To fulfill your life’s purpose.”

“And what would that purpose be? I was left so young. I didn’t think I had any purpose but to survive my youth without parents.”

I was pitying myself, I knew I was. But so much of my past has shaped who I was now.

One good thing was that my nightmares had died down. I no longer woke up screaming for the dead. I always found myself being kissed right before he would make sweet love to me to make me forget what woke me up.

I stared at my husband with adoration, not yet brave enough to vocalize how much he meant to me.

“You’re coming into who you are, Antônia. I see the change in you. You are not who you once were.”

“How old are you?” I blurted out.

He shook his head and licked my lips. “You do not wish to know. There truly is no point in knowing. I’m with you now, as I am. Are you not pleased with me?”

I crawled up his body and wrapped my arms around his neck, rubbing my nose against the bridge of his. “I am very pleased with you.”

“Good. That’s all that matters.”

“You still haven’t told me what *Mo Anam Cara* means. I feel bereft and a little sad. Do you want your wife sad,

Husband?”

He chuckled and began washing my buttocks, very slowly.

“*My soulmate*. You are the one destined for me before time began.”

I frowned. “Before time began? How is that possible?”

“The universe gives no answers. It only is the way it is. My life before you was but utter darkness. I roamed the realms until the *monstrum plaga*—the Queen’s Curse—thinned the borders of my world and yours.”

This didn’t make any sense. “I thought the Queen’s Curse turned some of us humans into monsters.”

“It did. But do you truly believe that monsters never existed before that?”

His question was logical. They had to come from somewhere.

He moved the rag between my legs and washed gently. I bit my lip and looked at him from beneath my lashes.

“I’m still not happy over the fact that you both gambled with my hand in marriage.”

He tilted his head and was silent for a few moments.

“Your father never intended to until I convinced him,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“What?!” I shoved at his chest and pushed myself away, only to be stopped by his strong arms pulling me back against his chest.

“You were always mine, *Mo Anam Cara*. It is not easy to convince a man that his young daughter was already promised to a monster, one with a mysterious reputation in the *ton*. How,

then, was I to convince a human man that I would cherish his most prized possession as my own—that I already cherish her though she did not know it yet?”

“You would wait like a normal person until I was of age and then ask, you brute!”

“And if he were to die before that time came, what then? Do I force myself into your home in Brazil and take you? You would have never allowed that. You would have cut me down, slayed me as one of your dragons and buried me in your courtyard.”

I stared at him intently.

“How do you know about my dragons?” They were metaphorical. Every obstacle in my life became a dragon I had to overtake, refusing to let it drown me in my failures and self doubt.

It was Theresa’s idea, one that I was grateful for. It made me look at the world through a different lens, one that I could understand after all the changes I was forced to go through.

“I know everything about you, *Mo Anam Cara*. You are mine. It is my duty to understand every detail about how your mind works so that I may be worthy of being your husband. How else am I to serve you? How else am I to protect you when most of your demons are on the inside instead of the outside?”

I didn’t know what to say. He had rendered me completely speechless with his confession. Should I be afraid that he had essentially stalked me throughout my childhood? Should I be angry that he had invaded every part of me, even the ones I hid from myself?



His hand left the water and wiped away at the tear that escaped.

“You’re a rightful bastard.”

“You are the other half of me. The moment you came into existence, my soul cried out for you, though you didn’t know it. I wasn’t aware that I wasn’t living until the promise of my other half came to be. Do you know what it was like to force myself away from you knowing that human societal ideals would label me as the worst sort of person because of your age? I respected your human customs for as long as I could. But the moment you came here—”

“To London?”

He sighed with resignation. “The moment you disturbed the borders of my realm with your movement across the sea, I was tortured with longing. I couldn’t keep away from you despite my great efforts. And when you turned your face toward me as if you knew I was there—I was lost forever. Of course, you didn’t see me. You were looking at some stupid bird that landed on the docks.”

My sadness pivoted and a laugh burst out of me, causing me to snort from how much his statement tickled me.

“Yes, laugh all you want. The point here is that you are mine and always were. I couldn’t let you slip from my fingers. Those missives were the bane of my existence and if it wasn’t for the Unseelie helping me to be rid of them, I would have massacred the entire Ball the moment you stepped foot in the estate.”

I laughed again. “What?! Do you mean to tell me, the conspiracy of the missing invitations was all your doing from the start?”

He grumbled. “You were not ready. They did not deserve to see you. When the first letter never made it to you, I made sure to keep track of all missives sent to Brazil by the Queen. I needed to make sure we were able to be at the same place at the same time because, frankly, you’d grown to be an obstinate woman over the years.”

I got up and left the tub. This was all too much. I laughed the whole way, bending over to retrieve my towel—doing it purposefully slowly so that he may long for me from afar as he says.

“You tease me, Wife. It is not nice to tease the man who’s done nothing but pine over a human girl until she was finally strong willed enough to be his perfect Queen.”

“Oh goodness. You are too dramatic for your own good, you know that?”

He whined. Oh dear heavens above, the man whined like a kicked puppy and my heart ached. Patting myself dry, I dropped the towel and walked back toward him to cradle his face and give him a chaste kiss on the nose.

“There, all better. Now get out of that tub so we can start our day like normal people.”

He got up and splashed water everywhere, and all over me making me growl in frustration.

“What do you mean, I gave you the perfect start to your day.”

“I should shove your arrogance down your throat!” I was the one being overdramatic now. But I had just dried myself!

Fully out of the tub, he grabbed me and lifted me until I wrapped my legs around him.

“I would love to shove something down *your* throat, Wife, and I do believe you would love every moment of it.”

I gasped in horror and delight. My mind ran with a million scenarios of having him in my mouth since our first night together, I had just been too shy to bring it up.

“Get on your knees before your King,” he whispered with authority as he slid my body down to the ground.

His cock was jutting out right before my face, bobbing in excitement. My cunt was getting wet again while my throat became dry.

I tentatively wrapped my hand around his shaft. My fingers barely made it around the outer rib cage.

His fingers laced into the back of my hair and he guided my head toward him. I didn't fight it. I needed his confidence to pour through me, because I was anything but at the moment.

“Open your mouth for me, *Mo Anam Cara*.”

I did and he slid in slowly, stretching my jaw to the point of aching. I licked the inside of his head and pulled my mouth away only to bring it back again, making him moan.

I pulled him out of my mouth and moaned at his taste. “*Que gostoso*—how delicious,” I purred.

On the next pass, my other hand traveled between his legs and played with the pink tentacles that were writhing, letting them wrap around my finger. I tugged them gently, squeezing them and he groaned, losing footing as his knees buckled. If it wasn't for the tub behind him holding him up, he would have fallen.

The power I held over him at this moment gave me the courage I needed. My movements became more eager as I

swallowed him into my mouth until he pulled my mouth completely off him. I stuck my tongue out and teased his head anyway.

“I do not wish to drown you in my release, *Mo Anam Cara*. You must stop though it pains me to say so.”

I began to stroke him. “I do not wish to cause my husband any pain.”

He groaned and when I squeezed and tugged his tentacles again and he spilled all over my breasts like a waterfall. His thick warmth coated my stomach and dripped down between my legs.

I moaned and closed my eyes, but didn't stop stroking his pulsing cock.

“*Mo Anam Cara*,” he groaned as he covered his face with his hands. “I'm going to have to clean you again.”

I stood up, rubbing his release around my breasts, panting at how turned on I was.

He uncovered his face and stared at them. His tongue slid out and licked his fangs.

“After I punish you for making me lose control, that is.”

He grabbed me and lifted me onto the edge of the tub, standing between my legs.

“I should punish *you* for turning me into a wanton whore for you.”

He groaned and no more words were spoken between us as he plunged his wicked tongue into my mouth and kissed me.

# ANTÔNIA

“Nia, my love, what are you staring at?”

I smiled. He told me he was waiting for my approval before he could call me by my nickname. He said he had taken enough from me.

He was a lying bastard, of course. He just wanted to get back into my good graces after he tore into another one of my favorite dresses. He made good on his promise and bought me twenty more, but that wasn't the point.

“I'm looking at this painting. Were these your friends? I didn't know you served in the military.”

He walked up to me from behind, wrapping me in a sweet embrace.

“No, I was never in the military, but I did know of some who were. This gentleman here—” He pointed to the brown, furry man to the right with the most unpleasant face I had ever seen with furry, pointed ears and fangs that jutted out from his bottom lip. But then again, perhaps for his kind he was dashing. What did I know? “—was left in my realm as a changeling.”

“A what?”

He chuckled at my confusion. “I will explain that to you another time, Nia. But Michael Morea was brought to our realm by his family who lost their holding by nefarious means. He was given to me in exchange for saving their fortunes.”

Oh, the poor fellow.

“As his King, once he was of age, I gave him the option of coming to serve me or returning back to the human realm to serve their king. Either way, he was going to learn discipline somehow. Of course, he was curious about the world he was born in, thinking it would be easier to be in the realm of men as he considered them weaker. Little did he know he would be conquered by not men, but a woman.”

My interest was piqued. What a story! I looked over my shoulder with curiosity. “Did he fall in love? Was it a human woman?”

“My clever wife misses nothing. Yes, he found himself in love with a human woman. Of course, when he told me, I was furious. He hadn’t even joined the British military yet at this point, the entire purpose of him being there.”

“What need did he have to conscript if he found another purpose?”

My husband tilted his head to the side as if to question my sanity. It was rude, really. I was honestly curious and wanted an answer. The story was getting juicy.

“Do you truly believe her family would accept him, a monster with no noble bearing? No title? Nothing to his name? Her family deemed him unsuitable, as they should. They forbade him from coming back near their daughter ever again.”

The sun set and darkness settled outside our windows, almost as if setting the scene to this story.

I covered my mouth. This was the saddest love story I ever heard. “Why are you telling me such a sad story? I don’t like the way this is going whatsoever.”

“It is not my fault the story went this way. I did not control anyone’s actions. They were all their own.”

“Ugh, I cannot stand you sometimes. Alright, tell me. What happened next?”

“He had no other options but to join the military. It was said he fell in the Siege of Alexandria while helping to liberate the city from the French occupation. A letter came to my estate informing me, the only person he labeled as a close relation, that his body was never discovered.”

“This is a horrid tale.”

“You like all this morbidity. Do not tell me you don’t enjoy this tale.”

He was right, of course. But I didn’t tell him that. His head was too big for himself already.

“That’s not the point. The point is that you do not possess the talent of telling tales.”

“I wasn’t trying to. I was trying to answer your curiosity, Wife.”

I growled and fully turned in his arms, crossing my own for emphasis. “What happened to the lady he was in love with? Did she ever find out? What if she was his soulmate? She deserved to know!”

He placed his hands on my shoulders, trying to calm my nerves. The poor woman, what if she never found out? What if

she thought he just forgot about her and found some other woman to marry? I would have been heartbroken if it was me.

“I’m sure Miss Violet blames herself for his death, though she shouldn’t. Death is a part of living. It comes when one least expects it and anyone who thinks they can control that is not in their right mind. Unless, of course, one was doing the murdering.”

I threw my head back and laughed. My husband was ridiculous and quite humorous when he wanted to be.

“You’re insufferable, you know that?”

“If your moans are anything to go by, one would believe you enjoyed your suffering very much.”

I slapped his chest playfully, pretending to be offended. “Louis, how dare you!”

Now that I’ve come to think of it, why would my husband take on such a human name if he existed before the Queen’s Curse?

“Come, *Mo Anam Cara*, I do not wish to starve you. With all the recent increase in activity, I need to make sure you are always fed.”

I guffawed at his audacity, but didn’t get a chance to curse him when he lifted me into his arms and carried me down the stairs and into the dining hall of our estate.



“WHAT A HORRIBLE TALE,” THERESA SCREECHED.



“I know! That’s what I told him! The miserable bastard then went on to inform me that he wasn’t trying to tell a tale but to answer my question.”

Theresa laughed uncontrollably. “I never realized the Baron had such a personality. I barely hear the man talk when he’s not around you.”

“Oh, the rake talks aplenty. He never shuts up.”

“*Fala sério!* You’re joking.”

Theresa stared at me in bewilderment and I scrunched my nose.

“You are completely and utterly in love with that man.”

“Well, I am stuck with him. He’s my husband after all.”

“Stop your jesting. You know exactly what I’m talking about. The way your face lights up when you speak of him, even if it is in rage, there is a glow about you.”

“It might be the sweat from all the activities he’s accusing me of.”

She threw her head back and laughed like a loon. I couldn’t help but join in. When she settled down, her face became serious.

“Take care of yourself, Antônia. Make sure you’re eating enough.”

Why was everyone so concerned about my eating habits all of a sudden? Was this why married women tended to gain weight over time? I already carried enough extra flesh around my midsection and buttocks, though Louis always made sure to remind me that they were his favorite parts. The liar. With how much attention he gives my breasts, one would think those were his favorite parts.

Well... with how much attention he gave to feasting on me...

“Good heavens you can’t go a minute without thinking about that man. Your face is as red as a tomato! That is not the face of a woman who is angry at her husband.”

“Oh shush, you!”

“By the way, did the Baron ever name the young lady who fell in love in the story?”

I shook my head to rid myself of all the debauched thoughts of my husband and his cock in my mouth. I wonder if he would ever spill inside of me that way...

“Oh, um, yes. He mentioned a Miss Violet.”

Theresa’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What?” I turned and leaned into the table. “Who is Miss Violet? Do you know her?”

She slapped my arm, and I winced, pulling it back and hissing from the pain. “What was that for?!”

“You know her, too!”

“I do?”

She gave me a look and I still couldn’t connect the dots. She let out a frustrated breath, leaned in and whispered into my ear. “Countess Violet Stalbridge.”

I screeched and clasped my hands over my mouth before I could get any louder. There was no possible way! I must have forgotten. That was right, the second letter was signed at the bottom from a Violet Stalbridge.

“But...But, she ended up getting married, did she not?” I whispered back.

“Obviously. To a count.”

I stared off into the wall beside us covered by china cabinets full of opulent dishes on display.

“I wonder how she could have fallen in love again so quickly.” If anything were to happen to my husband, I do not think my heart would mend. No, my family seems to mate for life as they say, choosing instead to grieve until they find their own end.

“Who’s to say her family didn’t arrange one for her? If her reputation was sullied in any way by the gentleman that would be their solution.”

My mind was finally stringing things together correctly. “Was that why Lady Skevington was whispering her nefarious thoughts on Countess Stalbridge?”

I felt guilty finding out so much about her like this. It wasn’t as if I went seeking it, the information seemed to land on my lap when I least expected it.

“Who knows, Antônia. We’ve only been here for a short time. At this point, her reputation is spotless besides rumors.”

She was right. I hadn’t heard anything else about her besides her hosting the Monsters Ball at the estate and that she was a widow.

“Well, there’s no point in thinking about it any further—” Theresa started.

“That letter. It was in her study. Do you think she reads it at night thinking of him?”

Theresa put her head on her hand. “And if she did? It doesn’t bring him back from the dead.”

“That’s so morbid of you.”

“You know it as well as I do.” She patted my hand and got up from the breakfast table, heading back to do whatever it was she did in this home.

Letting out a sigh, I got up shortly after and wandered into the lower halls. Domingos was dusting some of the statues in the corner.

“*Bom dia*, Senhora Antônia!”

“Good morning, Domingos. Has the morning treated you well so far?”

“Yes, yes, Senhora. We have nothing but good days here at Grimwood. Though many of us still think about your father’s estate now and again.”

A pang of guilt hit me. I should really speak with the servants more, but my husband had taken all my time with his sinful ways.

“*Desculpa*, Domingos. I truly didn’t wish to uproot you all —”

“Senhora, there is nothing to be sorry about. We are happy here. The Baron pays us well and we have security of a home. What more could we ask for?”

My eyes burned. They were too good to me. Choosing to follow my whirlwind of a life with a smile. I could see why my father chose them to be in his employ. He was a good judge of character.

Did it also mean that he knew the Baron would be good for me? Was he truly convinced to offer up my hand in marriage or was it a calculated move?

It took a while to get over the hurt I felt when I found out about his gamble. But my husband had been doing a good job

in being transparent with me so that my self doubts melt away.

“We are happy for you, Senhora Antônia. I only wish your father was here to witness everything for himself.”

Tears stained my cheeks as I smiled back at him, unable to hold back my emotions. “I truly hope he is happy.”

“Senhora...do not be sad. The cycle of life is one that has never hidden its intention. With life comes death.”

He coughed into his gloved hand and my eyes snapped to his immediately. “Are you okay, Domingos?”

“Oh, it is just a cough. Probably from dusting. Do not worry about me, Senhora.”

I bit my lip and wiped my eyes, collecting myself. I nodded and curtsied before leaving the halls.

Passing the stairs, footsteps come up behind me.

“*Mo Anam Cara*, what is the matter?”

Just when I thought I had dried my eyes, they burned once more.

I turned and Louis was there, wrapping his arms around me. “Tell me who I need to kill.”

I laughed. “Oh, you are so dramatic. It is nothing, truly. I was just thinking about my father.”

“I see.” He rubbed my back until I felt better. “Perhaps a trip to town is in order to take your mind off things?”

I lifted my head and planted my chin against his chest. “A trip to town for what, exactly? You’ve provided me with everything I ever needed. Whatever will I purchase when I’m there?”

He sniffed my hair and blew at it, sending my curls into my face. I slapped it away, and he chuckled. “Perhaps for a stroll. You seemed to be fond of taking a turn around the nice scenery from what I remember.”

An idea came to mind and suddenly I was eager to go. “Can we bring Domingos to see the doctor? He’s come down with a cough.”

“Did he tell you he was sick?”

“Well, no, but I worry.”

“Your heart is soft, my love. However, did the universe think to choose you for one as cold as me?”

“They thought you needed a good laugh, and humor is not one of your talents, so they sent me to you.”

He laughed and shook his head as he grabbed my hand and led me to the front doors. “I was blessed with talents elsewhere, ones my wife is happy to praise behind closed doors.”

“You are so full of yourself.”

“No, my dear, I’d rather fill you.”

I sputtered and choked. “I do hope you don’t speak like this when we are in town. I would die.”

“No, you will not. The only people who will die are those who dare to look too long at you.”

“Baron, you jest!”

“Do I?” He left our bantering there as he turned to one of our servants, and instructed him to get Domingos.

He led me to the stables and his horse from the Underworld whinnied when his master got closer. The beast’s

nose reached forward and pushed against my shoulder, right between his master and I.

“Stop that!” I laughed. “Is he trying to separate us?”

“On the contrary, *Mo Anam Cara*, he wants you to ride him.”

“I cannot ride him! He’s much too big for me to even climb onto.”

“I didn’t hear you complain about climbing onto large things this morning.”

“You rake! Would you be serious?!”

The Baron laughed as he left my side and opened the stable door. His horse quickly stepped out and bumped me again with his nose. I chuckled and petted him. He was a sweet beast, even if he looked like he came from Hell.

“You will ride with me. I won’t let you fall, *Mo Anam Cara*.”

“Sir! I do not think it necessary—” Domingos called from across the yard.

“Your Baroness demands it. I will not be the one on the other side of her ire.”

I rolled my eyes. “Baron, you paint me out to be a cruel villain.”

“I’ve seen your fire, *Mo Anam Cara*. I am just lucky that it burns me with desire rather than fear.”

This man vexes me.

He grabbed me and lifted me onto his horse as Domingos shook his head and headed toward the stables for one of his own.

Once we were all ready, we rode away from the estate at a steady trot.

The countryside was nice and beautiful. The air was crisp and the skies clear. I watched the birds pass over us and the Baron grunts.

“What is your problem? Can I not enjoy our little stroll?”

“I only wish for all your attention to be on me rather than these random birds.”

Sitting in front of him sideways, I looked at him incredulously. “Do I not give you enough attention, dear husband?”

“No, you do not,” he pouts. *Who is this man?*

I laughed and ignored him the rest of the way to town, just to spite him for being so egotistical and cute at the same time.

When we arrived, the streets were bustling. Our trip to the Doctor’s was first with Domingos in tow despite his reluctance.

We came to find that he had pneumonia and my husband immediately sent for a carriage to take him back home, instructing him that he was not to work until fully healed.

I fell a little more in love with the man.

Hand in hand, we walked down the sidewalk. Many of the people around us gave my husband a wide berth. His vines began to wrap around him and I was beginning to suspect that it reacted to his emotional state. It was as if he wore it like a shield against the world. I didn’t understand why when everyone seemed to be intimidated by him and not the other way around.



“Oh!” I exclaimed as we came upon a store that sold ribbons. That was something I could be frivolous about and make him buy me. “I want to check out some new ribbons!”

“Why? You have plenty.”

I glared at him. “Husband. I demand more.”

He mumbled under his breath, but allowed me to lead him in through the front doors.

There were a few patrons lingering about.

“Welcome! Let me know how I can help you, Miss. If you have any questions about the quality at all, I can direct you away from the imported ones.”

“Thank you.” That didn’t make any sense. Why would the imported ones be of lesser quality? One could say I was imported. Does that make me of lesser quality?

Ignoring my depressing thoughts, I slipped my arms out of my husband’s and began touching all the different colored ribbons.

A very quiet girl stood beside me, seemingly at a crossroads at which ribbon to buy. There was a blue one in her right hand and a pink one in her left.

I decided to try and help the poor girl.

“What color is your dress?”

She startled at my question, staring at me with wide, frightened eyes. Did I look like that in my younger years?

“I’m so sorry, I should introduce myself. I am Baroness Pereira—well, I mean Baroness Lockhart.” This was the first time I had had to introduce myself as such. It would take some getting used to.

“I’m Isabella Carmicheal. Very lovely to meet you, Baroness.” She was a very quiet little thing, all her words were so softly spoken.

“So what is the color of your dress? I see you’re having a difficult time deciding.” I pointed to the ribbons in her hand.

“Oh—I—um, yes, my dress will be blue. It’s for the Monsters Ball next month, I’m a nervous wreck.”

“Ah, the one held at Broadstone Hall?”

She seemed to break away from her shyness with the mention of it. “Yes! The very one. Have you been there?”

I gave her a smile. “Yes, yes I have. I was at this Season’s Ball, actually.”

She gasped in delight, dropped her ribbons, and placed her hands on her cheek. “It is all so very nerve wracking. I still don’t know how I feel about it, though I am a bit excited to say the least. But the thought of so many monsters vying for my attention scares me. How does one know who to choose?”

I chuckled. “Sometimes the persistent ones choose you.” I patted her shoulder and picked up a white ribbon. “Try this one, it will contrast your dress nicely no matter what shade of blue it is.”

She blushed and nodded, gently taking it from me.

“You’ll be in good hands there. The Master of Ceremonies is a kind gentleman, you’ll love him, and The Countess Stalbridge is there as well to help you.”

Thoughts of the Countess brought me back to the letters and the story I came to learn from my dear husband. She deserved her own happily ever after after helping everyone at

the Ball find theirs. Was her past the reason why the Balls occurred in her home?

Louis said the body was never found. What if he was still alive? Surely, Countess Stalbridge deserved another chance at love. With the intention of furthering the goal of helping the Countess, I decided to pass on the knowledge to the one person I knew was going back to Broadstone Hall.

My eyes widened and I looked over my shoulder to see my husband picking up a ribbon between two fingers, turning it left and right as if to examine it. He was a strange one. But it was part of his charm.

I pulled her arm closer to me until there was no room between us. “You’re going to hear something, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

She covered her mouth and squeaked before pretending to look at ribbons, mimicking me.

*Good.* She was a fast learner.

“There seems to be a love note hidden in the Countess’ study from a mysterious admirer who goes by the initial M.”

She picked up a blue ribbon and I picked up a red one.

“And it just so happens that there was a gentleman who was conscripted into the military because he could not get her parent’s approval. Now, it said that his body was never to be discovered and the current Countess ended up marrying the Count.”

“Oh, what a sad story.”

“I thought so too.” I dropped the red ribbon and peeked at my husband. He was now facing the front doors, waiting patiently for me to choose my ribbons. “It does make one

wonder if the gentleman was actually still alive. Shouldn't the Countess have her turn at finding a lost love?"

"You're absolutely right," she agreed.

"You're going to Broadstone Hall next month. Perhaps you will be able to get to the bottom of this mystery and help our poor Countess."

Her eyes widened with a sense of purpose. "Good heavens, you're absolutely right. Where do I start?"

I shrugged my shoulders, unsure myself. "I would start in the study, I guess." I settled on a maroon ribbon that reminded me of Louis' passion and turned to smile at my new acquaintance.

"Well, I better get going before I bore my husband to death. Do not worry about the Ball, Isabella. I have full faith you will find your perfect match there. If you're nervous, be sure to hang around Lord Loren Bow, the Master of Ceremonies. Trust me, you'll recognize him when you see him."

She clutched her white ribbon to her chest and nodded fervently. I smiled at her, hoping her soft spirit would be matched to one that would treasure her the same way my Louis treasured me.

With that thought, I walked over to him and touched his back. He turned to look at me and gave me his arm. Looping my hand in his he escorted me to the front desk and bought my ribbon without saying a word, then escorted me back to our horse.

# ANTÔNIA

**S**omething wasn't right.

My monthly courses didn't arrive. The only reason I remembered to think about it was because during the middle of the night, as my wonderful husband was feasting between my legs, my fantasies veered to what his skull would look like smeared in my blood.

I blushed thinking about the fantasy again. *What was wrong with me?*

But he had never come back glistening with blood, which led me to wonder when my monthly courses were to arrive.

Sitting at breakfast, I stared off toward the window trying to mentally calculate when my last courses were.

Giselle poured my morning tea and stood there. "Are you alright, Senhora?"

I quickly responded. "Yes, yes of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" I laughed nervously.

What did this mean? Perhaps it was only late and I was overthinking it. A lot has happened recently.

But Louis has made my life a dream. Why would there be any stress at all?

The day passed by in a weird fog, my mind was still mulling over what was wrong with my body.

I didn't remember what we ate for supper, only that I couldn't finish my meal.

“What is on your mind, *Mo Anam Cara*?”

Pulled from my thoughts, I turned to look at my husband who was readying himself for bed. We decided to sleep in the Unseelie Kingdom tonight. We switched back and forth when the mood struck us.

“What?”

“What is on your mind? Your thoughts seemed to be preoccupied since supper. Was the food not to your liking? Do we need a new cook?”

“What? No. No, the food was fine.”

He tilted his head and I continued to undress for bed.

“Then why did you not finish your food? Have you taken to illness? Do you need a doctor?”

Did I? I wasn't even certain of that. Self-doubt plagued my mind as I contemplated whether I should see a doctor or not.

“It's nothing, truly. Come to bed. You must be tired from the day.” Louis had handled Unseelie business most of the morning and had to come back to the human realm to handle more financial business with my father's estate.

I informed him that I was more than capable of helping, to which he replied, “You can help me relieve my tension.”

Crawling into the fluffy sheets, I settled onto the pillow and tucked my hand under my head.

Louis crawled in behind me and pulled me against his very naked chest, nuzzling my hair, sniffing me the way he always did before bed.

“Why is your name so human, Husband? Everyone else I’ve met in this realm has more... foreign names, but yours is Louis.”

“It is who I am.”

His hands crawled to the front and cupped my breast, massaging them suggestively. He was insatiable.

“That didn’t answer the question at all. I asked why your name was so human when you, my dear, are anything but.”

I was annoyed. I didn’t know why my mood turned so quickly, only that I was now irritated with his evasion. Haven’t I brought this up before with no answer then as well?

I looked over my shoulder and stared at him. “How come you never answer this question?”

He reared back. “It’s the first time you’ve asked me.”

I fully turned to face him, with my elbow against the bed, holding my head. “And you still didn’t answer. Why is that?”

“*Mo Anam Cara*. What has gotten you so frustrated? Let me help release some of your tension so that you feel better.”

It sounded nice, but he was avoiding my question again.

I didn’t get a chance to tell him that when he climbed over me and crawled down my body, touching me in all the right places. His vines slithered toward me, tickling my fingers playfully.

“Louis, do you have another name? An Unseelie one?”

“Open your legs for me, *Mo Anam Cara*.”

“Louis, why are you avoiding this conversation? Oh, god.”

His tongue invaded my center so quickly, and I felt so full, squirming to get away from him. He grabbed onto my buttocks and pulled me back toward his mouth.

“Louis. Husband. I need to know...” I couldn’t finish the sentence as I moaned when he began to do wicked things down there.

My previous fantasies of him covered in my monthlies appeared behind my closed eyes and I closed my legs around his head. He pushed them apart and growled against my lower lips, vibrating deliciously. My hand went to the back of his head, encouraging him to continue his invasion.

I had become such a whore for his devilish ways that I had lost all my shame and embarrassment. Instead, all my fantasies with this man have become dirtier and dirtier.

“Do that again, your nasty tongue feels so good.”

“Not as good as the way you taste.”

“Oh, god.”

He groaned against me, whispering things in another language I couldn’t understand. I threw my head back against the pillow, lost in the sensation of what his tongue was doing down there.

Suddenly, as his tongue slipped into my wet cunt again, something else tried to penetrate the other hole. I cried out in panic, kicked him off my body, and scrambled up the bed, clutching the sheet against my chest.



“*Mo Anam Cara*, what is wrong?”

“I—I don’t—” I was so embarrassed by my reaction, I jumped out of the bed and left the room. I didn’t stop until I crossed back over to the human realm and locked myself in my vanity room, sitting myself on my favorite cushioned chair.

Yes, some women had vanity tables, but my beloved husband has provided an entire room for me and my nicknacks that I have accumulated.

Loud, angry knocks came at the door, rattling it. “*Mo Anam Cara*, open the door.”

I panicked again and blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. “I’m not feeling well!”

He pounded against the door again, harder. “All the more reason for you to open this door.”

“I can’t!” I pleaded. I needed some time to think. I had never explored back there. I didn’t know that was an option at all between a husband and a wife.

And now I was doubting my ability to please my husband. What if it was normal for them? What if I was taking away something my husband desired? That was wrong of me when I promised to be everything for him the same way he promised to do everything in his power to make me happy.

Would he be upset with me?

Would he begin to lose interest in me?

I gasped and covered my mouth as tears sprung forth from my eyes. *Would he look elsewhere for what I’m unable to provide him?*

Something slammed into the door and I screamed. He slammed into it again and the spikes on his head broke through

the wood. On the next slam, both doors broke open and hit the walls with a loud crash.

It was horrible timing, because the moment he lifted his head to look at me all he saw was a sobbing mess.

“Tell me what is going on. Right this instant,” he demanded furiously.

I couldn't speak, my mind spiraling down a dark path of what-ifs. Each scenario was worse than the next. Each scenario ended with me separated from my husband.

He tried to touch me, but I jerked back, unsure if he should provide comfort to a woman that may not be enough for him.

“You denied me,” he stated.

Of all the things to say. I shot up from my seat and wrapped my arms around myself.

“I wasn't denying you, I—” My coping mechanism chose the worst time to show itself. “All you had to do was answer the question, Louis. It's so simple, yet you refuse to do it.”

Yes, I was deflecting. Yes, I was turning it around on him because I was too embarrassed about everything that occurred. I wasn't ready to face my faults. I wasn't ready to see the judgment in his face.

He shook his head, the vines writhing around him, covering his chest and arms. I watched as he began pacing back and forth in front of me. My guilt multiplied. I was causing him undue distress all because I didn't want to explore something that might not even be that bad.

But my stubbornness wouldn't let me falter in this course. It kept me there like a prisoner.

“Just tell me your name, Husband. Don’t I deserve that much? I am your wife—”

“Do you not understand?! It cannot be done!” The walls rattled.

He had no reason to raise his voice at me like this. It was a simple question that required a simple answer. Why was he so upset? What reason would he have to keep a name from me?

My hardheadedness reared its ugly head, joining in with my stubbornness.

“If you do not do this, I will walk out of here and never look back.”

I regretted it the moment it left my lips. What was wrong with me? Why would I threaten that over a name?

*What if he was hiding something significant because of it? What if he harbored another wife and that was why he couldn’t tell me his name, because it was for his other life?*

I didn’t know where these ugly thoughts came from, but once they were there my train of thought kept getting darker and darker.

The air around us grew thick and oppressing. Thorned vines crawled from utter nothingness, wrapping around the rest of his body as a reflection of his roiling emotions.

What once would have scared me when I first met him, no longer held the same power. He could bluff all he wanted, but I knew the truth. He would never hurt me.

“You *will* not leave this kingdom, Antônia.”

*Back to my full name, I see.* He must really be angry with me. It was necessary. This was necessary. So much had been

left unsaid and brushed under the rug. I needed to know where I stood. Was I not worthy of a simple name?

“Who is going to stop me?” I threw down a challenge I knew I would not win. But I had to try. For the sake of this so-called marriage, I had to try. I will not become the one thing I detested. I refuse! I would not be anyone’s castoff anymore.

I stood there with my arms crossed and my head held high, though on the inside I was scared to death of his answer. Scared to death that he would reject me.

Vines shot out and broke through the walls as creatures from the darkness invaded our home. Their glowing red and blue eyes wisped around us as their forms took on varying shapes, morphing back and forth constantly, tricking the mind to believe it was insane.

But I knew better. He was angry, but he didn’t want to hurt me.

I didn’t take my eyes off him. I stared right into the depths of his soul, willing him to say the words I needed to hear—the words that would easily keep me by his side, if he would just put down his pride.

“The realm of men *will* fall,” he declared with finality. What did that threat mean? Over a simple name?

There was something I was missing, something I wasn’t understanding.

I snapped. It was not out of character for me around him. But this time, I even scared myself. “You threaten and you threaten, yet you refuse to just tell me what I need to hear. Just say it! What are you so scared of?!”

The only threats he’d ever shown were crawling around the room, breaking chairs and cracking through the walls.

The last time he was this angry, someone grabbed my hand and kissed the back of it. My husband had his back turned for one second, but the moment he caught sight of it the entire town ran screaming. I calmed him enough to take him back home before he landed himself in a human prison.

But this time, I was the one that needed calming.

I couldn't contain my emotion any longer. It poured out of my soul through the tears that tracked down my cheeks and the way my voice broke with my plea. My lip wavered and I turned my face away, unable to face him with such raw emotion, with such vulnerability.

I was Antônia Santos Pereira, the woman who lived life the way she chose not this sobbing pathetic thing standing here now. He had done this to me. He had made me into *this*.

Branches cracked and the building started to crumble under the weight of his destruction—his fury.

I wasn't backing down from this one. It was too important to me. It would change the course of everything.

I didn't hear him move. I couldn't hear anything but the racing of my heart pounding in my temples, drowning out the sounds of sobs. My hands clutched at my chest and slowly rose to cover my face from the world. This is not who I am.

Strong, inhuman arms wrapped around me from behind and I jerked away, angry at him, angry at everything that's happened in my life to create such a fear of abandonment within me that it would negatively affect my own relationship that had been nothing but beautiful.

I was drowning again, unable to come up for air. My knees buckled but he caught me against his chest tightly, the vines wrapping around us both as he nuzzled his face against the

crook of my neck, growling in frustration. The feeling was mutual.

“You torture me with your human frailties. You cannot comprehend—”

I dropped my hands from my face and screamed. “Then help me understand! Why can you not tell me your name!?”

He roared and it vibrated down my back. His arms wrapped me tightly as if to hold us both together, as if he knew this moment threatened to become unfixable.

*“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”*

Shakespear was wrong. There was a lot in a name, apparently, because my husband held it so close to his chest, death couldn’t pry it out of him.

“I cannot, *Mo Anam Cara.*”

I shoved him away from me, wiping my eyes with the back of my hands, refusing to look at him. “Can’t? Or won’t, Husband? You tell me you know everything about me, yet I cannot have this one thing about you. How does that make any sense?”

He roared and grabbed another chair, throwing it against the wall. I gasped and looked at him over my shoulder. His hands slapped the side of his head while he kept shaking it.

“Antônia. I cannot. Please, do not ask this of me!”

So this was it. Of all the things we had argued over and overcame, this was the one thing we couldn’t take on.

*A name.*

Was I so unworthy? If I was the other half of his soul, did he not see how I burned to know him just as much as he knew me? Did he not see how much I was hurting with this rejection?

“I ask that you leave this room, Husband.”

“No. I will not. Let me hold you. We will get through this.”

“How can we when the only solution is taken away from us, by you?”

*“Mo Anam Cara.”*

“No, don’t you Mo Anam Cara me. Go! I cannot bear to be around you right now! Please, GO!”

Truth be told, I was breaking my own heart. I didn’t want him to go. But I couldn’t let him think I was a pushover when it came to such important matters. I held value in this relationship too. It couldn’t always go his way.

He roared once more before leaving my vanity room, taking his vines with him.

I fell to my knees and silently rocked myself while I cried.



# BARON

MY SOUL CRIED FOR HER THE SAME WAY HERS CRIED FOR MINE, yet her words were still ringing in my ear.

*“I cannot bear to be around you right now.”*

What had I done? How could I fix this?

I paced in my throne room for what felt like hours, but was probably only minutes.

Leaving the palace, I stomped into the dark forest alone, needing to clear my thoughts. My steps led me to an enchanted hut along the river. Dead driftwood covered the outside, hiding it from view. Not many knew it was here, those that wandered this far were lost and tricked into taking the wrong turns on their return path.

“What brings you this deep into the dark woods, my King?”

I turned to find Aimon standing there with his arms crossed over the souls stuck in his chest. They moaned in agony as he grinned.

“I would think you and the Queen would be occupied at this time of the night, keeping the rest of us up as usual.”



“She hates me,” I admitted.

“She always hates you. That’s when she screams the loudest, as you very well know—as we all know.”

“No, this time, I do not think there is a point of return.”

“There’s always a point of return, you’ve probably just been tricked by one the faeries.”

“Blasted hell, Aimon, she kept asking for my name.”

He tilted his head and the branches that made his body creaked. “I’m not understanding the problem here.”

“She wanted to know my real name.”

Silence passed between us and the light wisps of faeries blinked in and out in our surroundings. Gossiping little rodents they were. Almost as bad as the gaggling women back at the Monsters Ball.

“You love her.”

“That’s not what’s in question, Aimon.”

“Then what is holding you back?”

I roared into the skies, causing the birds to scatter into the wind. “You know just as well as I what it means to give someone that much power over you!”

“Do I? I’ve never given my name, though I’ve also never been as smitten with anyone as you are with her. She’s already possessed you. She is a part of you. She is you. I’ve never seen other soulmates in my lifetime, but you two would be the definition of it. The universe ruled it to be so.”

“I cannot be apart from her.” My voice cracked and my rage grew at the vulnerability I was forced to admit.

Aimon has been the one friend I kept through the years of my existence. He never inserted himself into my life beyond what I would allow and he is one of the most loyal servants in my kingdom. It was why I chose him to be my best man. His mind was always clear, his decisions logical. We didn't have a military like the realm of men, but warriors who were ready if we ever needed them.

Aimon led our kingdom's warriors.

"There's something else underlying your decision, clouding your judgment."

"How can there be when I'm only trying to protect myself the way we all do with our given names?" I growled with conviction.

"What are you protecting yourself from with your wife?"

"Nothing!" I roared, realizing I sounded mad with my answers. Why was I being like this? Why did I feel so threatened?

"It doesn't sound like it's nothing. You're absolutely fuming. Your vines have, more than once, threatened me while I stand here."

I wasn't paying attention, my sole focus on the pain I had caused my wife. Pain I could have prevented if I wasn't so wrapped up in whatever it was going on inside of me.

"You best figure it out, my King, before the fate of your marriage turns the way you don't want it to. After all these years of your suffering to be with her, would you seriously let her go now? Over a simple name?"

I stared at the sky in frustration. Cursing everything that had brought us to this point. "It isn't simple."

“Then simplify it. If this is your decision, all I can tell you is that I will remain by your side, my King. But I cannot be the one to lead you in marital matters, for I do not have the talent for it. I can only help you make logical decisions for the betterment of everyone. And this kingdom has done nothing but celebrate your union with the human woman. I’m sure there are a few who take conflict with it, wondering why you haven’t taken one of our own, but they also cannot argue with what the universe has already decided for your course. And that decision fell solely on the shoulders of a dainty little human female with dark curls and a knowing smile.”

I growled at his explanation. He was right. But I still could not come to a simple solution.

My mind went to my loving wife, my sweet human female with a sharp tongue and the willingness to stand by my side as Queen. I thought of the way her dark curls splayed on the pillow, waiting to receive me when the day’s tasks became heavy. I thought of her sun kissed skin, the perfect complexion against my grotesque body, ravaged and torn time and time again from the vines of my power. She never once rejected me, not until tonight. And it tortured my aching heart to know that she had the power to bring me to my knees that way. The power to destroy me with a simple rejection in our marriage bed.

I knew I was never worthy of her, yet I had convinced her I was.

And tonight proved something I always knew but refused to think about since I had claimed her at the Monsters Ball. Antônia Santos Pereira had the power to leave me if she so chose because she was not Unseelie. She was human.

My life had been forever tied to hers from the moment of her existence. But our union had always hung on her decision to accept me.

And if she held power over my name, she would be able to cast me away from her forever.

“I believe our King has just come to a decision and my services are no longer needed.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Ashamed of everything that had come to pass.

“I am afraid,” I admitted quietly.

“You? Our Unseelie king? Afraid?” he scoffed. “I do not believe it. I’ve seen you take on enemies and bathe in their blood under the light of the moon without any hesitation.”

I turned to him and stared into the depths of his soul. “I’m afraid of losing her.”

He broke off one of the branches on his chest and threw it at me. “Then go and get her, you bloody fool. What are you doing here in the dark woods when she is over there? Go and get your Queen.”

# ANTÔNIA

I didn't tell Theresa anything before I made the decision to walk back into the Unseelie realm.

I called for a faerie and commanded her to find me the clergyman who was at my wedding.

He appeared before me in the middle of the dark woods behind the castle. I didn't want to cross paths with Louis, or whatever his name was.

"Yes, my Queen?" the clergyman appeared out from the shadows.

"I need you to help me travel to Brazil. I know for a fact that the Unseelie can go in and out of realms."

He looked at me quietly, his hands covered in blood. I wasn't going to ask. I had other pressing matters to tend to.

"Your King can easily do this for you, why summon me?"

I glared at the old man and confidently gave him my answer. "As your Queen, I owe you no reasons. I command you to take me where I need to go."

He bowed with respect. "Yes, my Queen."

I told him the exact location and a dark cloud emerged around us, engulfing us in the void.

The next thing I knew, I was standing in my room, back in my estate in Brazil.

One of the servants opened my door with a handful of towels. When she saw me, she screamed and threw all the linens into the air.

“*Desculpa!* It is only me, Juliana.”

“Senhora! When did you get here? No one informed us about your arrival? Where is Theresa?”

I sighed and helped her pick up the linens off the floor. “It is a long story. Just know we are all okay and I’m only here for a short visit.”

She gathered all the towels into her arms, peering over them at me. “Have you eaten? Would you like me to get you something?”

“No,” I shook my head. “It is okay. I just wanted to rest a bit. *Origada.*”

She nodded with a look of concern and exited the room, closing the doors behind her.

I sighed and walked over to my bed, falling face first into it, groaning over the fight I had with my husband.

What was wrong with me? How could I say those things to him? Now that I had had time to think, the weight of guilt oppressed me until I could do nothing else but to run in cowardice in case he came back home to face me.

I crawled into my bed and under my sheets. Juliana didn’t notice my lack of shoes, the towels blocking her view.

I cried myself to sleep despite there still being daylight outside my windows. My mind was in a jumble, my own inner voice berating me over my strange moody behavior.

My eyes fluttered and the next thing I knew it was dark outside and someone was softly knocking on my bedroom door.

“Senhora. Supper is waiting for you.”

I groaned and turned over, rubbing my eyes and then my hand down my face. I felt like a mess and my chest ached.

“I-I’m not hungry. *Desculpa.*”

A knock came again, but this time with a different voice. “Senhora, are you alright?”

Isabella opened the door and walked in. She covered her mouth when she saw me and swiftly came to my side.

“Senhora. What is wrong? Why do you look like this? Are you well?”

I bursted into tears. Isabella was another woman who helped fill the void my mother left behind.

“I don’t know why I feel this way. I don’t know why I keep crying over the silliest things. I’m angry, then I’m sad. I’m so confused and my husband probably hates me and—”

“Why would he hate you, Senhora? Is that why you are here?” Isabella straightened me up and pulled me into her chest, rubbing my back as we both rocked together.

“I’ve done something stupid, Isabella and I don’t know how to fix it. What if he never wants to see me again?”

“Oh, who could ever stay mad at you? Couples fight all the time. Perhaps you only needed some time apart.”

I shook my head, sobbing into her bosom. “No, Isabella. It was my fault. I’ve been moody and didn’t eat all my supper. So that probably made me upset and then he was being sweet as he always was but he wouldn’t tell me his name and it was the last straw—”

“Shh. Shh. Slow down. What is all this about? A name? Senhora, have any changes been happening to your body?”

I jerked upright and stared at her through teary eyes. “Yes! Isabella, my monthly courses are late, and I was worried something was wrong with me. I’ve been preoccupied with worry and my husband was just trying to make me feel better and—”

She grabbed my shoulders and I bit my lip and stopped rambling. My entire face was wet with tears and I was mad at myself for even crying because I didn’t know why I was.

“Senhora, take a deep breath with me.”

She inhaled and exhaled slowly. I mimicked her as more of my maids came to stand at the doorway, watching me unravel. Some of them had their hands clasped over their hearts and some of them had a smile on their face. I was baffled. There was nothing to smile about! My body was out of rhythm and my husband probably hates me.

“Senhora, there is nothing to worry about.”

I snapped. “There is plenty to worry about! I don’t know what’s wrong with me—”

“Senhora, you are with child.”

I stopped breathing and frantically looked at her and my maids.



The problem with our society was the simple fact that none of these things were ever explained to us, the topic too scandalous to grace our lips in public. I had been so preoccupied with my mother's death, growing up with all the changes happening around me, and then my father's death. And finally, the missive that landed here in this estate not so long ago.

I never had time to just slow down.

“W-What?” I asked in disbelief.

Isabella nodded and patted my back as if I was a silly girl. And I supposed I was.

“Yes, yes. Your monthly courses. The stop when a child begins to grow within you.”

My hands slowly crept to my stomach and I cried anew. So not only was I withholding something from my husband, I was also withholding this gift we created together in love.

How will I ever be able to face him and ask for forgiveness? All the feelings of brokenness I had felt growing up hit me full force as I fell to my side and covered my face with my hands. I was inconsolable. Over a period of time, Isabella and the others left me alone, gently shutting my bedroom door.



# BARON

MY FURY COULDN'T BE CONTAINED. I WAS READY TO RIP THE heart out of the messenger who told me what they witnessed behind the castle. After tearing through Grimwood Estate, questioning every servant, and then tearing through the Unseelie Kingdom, there was *one* faerie who was witness to it all.

She left me.

She left the kingdom.

She crossed oceans to get away from me.

All of my fears came to fruition the moment I realized she slipped through my fingers over the simple fact that I could not give my beloved wife my true name.

I stormed out of the castle and into the dark woods. Unable to contain my rage, my bloodlust was at an all time high. The light of the moon cast a mocking glow above me, highlighting all my faults and failures.

Titters of faeries came and went. I backhanded one of them away from me, my patience too thin for their games and trickery.

A voice broke through my destructive thoughts as I began to cross the cursed bridge.

“We’re better off, my King. A human had no place in ruling this kingdom.”

I snapped my head to the side to find a being I haven’t seen before. One of the random Unseelie of my kingdom. He didn’t know that he just signed his death with mentions of my wife.

Vines shot from my body before he could move from the tree he leaned against. They wrapped around his neck and all his limbs. My mouth craved blood and my eyes burned.

I will not have anyone or anything play a part in keeping her away from me.

The thorns emerged and cut through his flesh. He cried out in pain until the vines pulled all his limbs apart, showering the ground in his blood. He wasn’t crying anymore.

I grinned menacingly as I dropped the rest of him into the crimson pool.

My frustration was satiated for the moment by the kill. The darkness enveloped me as I traveled the realms to retrieve the other half of my soul.

I reappeared in the back of her estate in Brazil. How many years had I watched her from this vantage point when she was oblivious to my existence?

My vines pushed against the ground, lifting me to the height of her window. She was asleep, her face buried in curls. I missed the way they tried to devour me in my sleep when she tossed and turned in her slumber.

My heart pounded in my chest as I watched her sleep peacefully. Her nightmares had slowly decreased the longer we spent our time together. I never fully explained to her the repercussions of our soul ties. Despite her being human, she felt our loss as torturously as I did. It took her grief to open up that part of her into awareness.

She whimpered and I leaned in, placing my hand on the window, wondering how I should approach her to bring her home. It was a precarious situation that needed to be handled sensitively.

The moment she began crying, darkness enveloped me and brought me to her side on the bed. She tossed and turned, her arms flailing violently. My vines grabbed her wrist before she could strike me and I pulled her into an embrace, curling my body around her protectively.

She trembled as she continued to cry, shaking her head. My heart broke when she opened her mouth, under the influence of her nightmare, calling out for someone, anyone, to help save her.

She cried out asking what was wrong with her.

My own darkness reached out, pulling hers within me. I needed her to come back to me, but first I needed to protect her from her own inner demons, the darkness that threatened to pull essence away from me.

“*Mo Anam Cara,*” I whispered against her hair, taking in her scent and rubbing my own against her. Her smell calmed my violent soul.

She gasped as she came to a wakeful state, choking on the sobs that refused to let her go.

“Louis?”

I turned her toward me and cradled her face. My breath stuttered as I bore all my vulnerabilities to the one woman who could destroy me.

She looked at me with pain filled eyes and I stared at her, willing her to understand.

“Tromlui,” I whispered.

She blinked a few times in silence as I wiped her tears away with my thumb, caressing her skin. She was the most precious thing I had ever taken for myself. I had taken all the care in the world with her fragility, making sure to build her up and save her from her inner demons. I made sure to lift her as she continued to battle her invisible dragons.

“Tromlui...” she whispered back and I braced myself for her curse, for her to cast me back into the shadows never to return. Her lips trembled and I wanted bloodshed, but there were no offerings close enough to me at the moment.

Her breath stuttered and she closed her eyes, pain written all over her face. *I've done this to her. I deserve to suffer.*

Time stood still. I memorized her face so that it would haunt me forever. A fitting punishment for a King who could not keep his Queen.

“Tromlui, I've missed you terribly,” she cried as she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me into her embrace.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and buried my face into her hair, pulling her as close to me as possible. The darkness wrapped around us both, seeping into our skin and around her bedroom. It carried us back home to Grimwood where she belonged.

I rubbed her back and licked her tears, expressing to her all the words I couldn't vocalize, too lost in my own relief.

"You came for me," she said against my neck.

"I will always come for you as long as you'll have me."

She slapped my chest and picked up her head. "You rat bastard, you're stuck with me! You should have thought about that when you followed me through that maze and asked me to marry you."

I chuckled. My wife, her witty tongue and her tempestuous rage has always been part of her charms.

"And I would do it again and again. I would willingly take all your ire and fury if it meant I got to keep you, to hold you in my arms just like this."

"I-I'm sorry for being impossible lately. I didn't understand what was going on with me."

I nuzzled her neck and kissed her skin, my hands traveling down her body appreciatively. How could luck find me more than once with this female? She was perfect in every way.

"It wasn't you. I was stubborn in my own right. The blame falls solely on me," I confessed reluctantly.

She shook her head, grabbing my face and plunging her tongue into my mouth. I groaned and our kiss became heated quickly. Our passions ignited like an inferno ready to consume everything in its wake.

Her hands quickly divested me of my covers and I did the same, ripping through the fabric.

She gasped but didn't chastise me. It seems my little wife was desperate for our reunion just as much as I was.

“Louis, I need you.”

“*Mo Anam Cara*, you have me at your mercy. Guide me on how to please you. Command your King.”

Her breaths came out in pants, her body reacting to my touch beautifully. Watching her blossom into the radiant woman she was in this moment in my arms was one of my greatest victories as King.

“Please, I need your cock inside of me. I’m so empty without you.”

I groaned, loving the way she begged me so sweetly.

Turning to my back, I pulled her on top to straddle me. Her eyes burned with desire and hunger as she leaned forward with her hands on my chest, her little claws digging into my flesh.

I grabbed her hips and lifted her, positioning myself at her fiery entrance. She guided herself down inch by inch, and I growled in frustration at her torture until she fully seated on me.

I watched as she took control of our lovemaking, rocking her voluptuous hips against mine. With every squeeze of my tentacles, I struggled to hold back my release, wanting her to find her pleasure first.

Without notice, she picked up her pace, her breasts teasing my senses and fantasies as they rocked with her movement. It was mesmerizing. Her face was overtaken with ecstasy. I positioned my thumb against the top of her cunt, teasing her, coaxing her to give me what I wanted.

Her mouth gaped open and I was torn with wanting to fill her womb and wanting to fill her mouth.

When her moans increased, so did my thumb. I could feel her cunt fluttering against me and it pushed me to the edge. Grimacing, I forced my body to hold back in pain. She cried out in ecstasy and her womb milked me, clenching torturously around my shaft, forcing me over the ledge. I roared as I spilled into her, filling her to the brink, watching with debauched satisfaction as my release covered us both. The squelching sounds of our bodies moving against each other made me release again, tormenting me further in pleasure and pain.

This was where she was meant to be, this was my life's purpose. To make my Queen happy, to keep her at my side proudly.

“Baron...”

“Just enjoy the moment, *Mo Anam Cara*. Feel my cock inside of you filling your womb with everything it needs. Your cunt is hungry for me and I am more than happy to feed it, to breed you.”

Her breath stuttered before she fell forward, resting against my chest. My arm wrapped around her and my vines embraced us both as one.

“Tromlui...” she whispered against me.

I nervously waited with trepidation. “Yes, my Queen?”

Her little hands gripped my fur and I braced myself for what she was about to say.

“I am with child.”

She hid her face but I abruptly bolted upright, cradling her head toward me. “Surely, you jest.”

She shook her head, her eyes filled with unshed tears.



“Are you not happy, *Mo Anam Cara*? Why are you crying?”

“Because, you beast, I’m afraid *you’re* not happy!”

“*Mo Anam Cara*, this child is a gift created from love. I could ask for nothing more. You’ve made me the happiest man in two realms.”

“Truly?” she sniffed, trying hard to fight back tears. She was beautiful when she cried.

“Unquestionably.” I placed my forehead against hers, struggling to make her understand how besotted I was of her without sounding like a demented fool. “*Mo Anam Cara*, you do not understand the violence of my affection for you, the depths to which you have beguiled and captivated me. I love you beyond what this mortal realm could ever comprehend.”

She sniffed and wiped her face. I grabbed her hands in mine and held her with bated breath.

“You vex me and make me question my sanity,” she admitted.

Well, this was not how I saw this conversation going. I braced for her tongue lashing, unwilling to let her go. Perhaps I could tie her up in the bed and convince her she couldn’t live without me, that she would need no one else but me..

“But you’re the only person strong enough to hold my broken pieces together when I’ve lost myself too far in my darkness. In my fear, you’re there to protect and guide me back to sanity. Your arms are home to me, Tromlui. I love you with all my heart, it is all I have to offer from my brokenness.”

I sighed in relief and kissed her softly.

“Perhaps we are both broken, *Mo Anam Cara*. But even the damaged deserve love. We have our whole lives to unravel the complications of our pasts. Will you stand beside me and heal me when my truculence becomes too much?”

“Only if you’ll heal me when my own stubbornness gets in the way and gets me into trouble.”

I chuckle and lick down the column of her neck, making her giggle.

“I like punishing you when you get into trouble.”

“Louis!”

“You’ve had your fun, Wife.” I flipped her over onto her back and stared into her eyes with loving ardor. “Now, it’s time I had mine.”

# ANTÔNIA

## EPILOGUE

“It will be fun! Husband, I beg of you!”

He loved it when I begged. I didn't use it often, but I had to for this. He was being pig headed and refused to budge.

His eyes changed colors to red and maroon, then back to blue.

“Beloved wife, you know exactly what you're doing to me.” He stared at my bosom that has increased in size over the past months. I utilized it to my advantage and pushed my chest out a little bit more.

I was dying to go on my first trip on the railway. It was a large and gruesome beast that carried passengers on a track to different places. Seeing as I loved monstrous things, I had to be on it at least once in this lifetime.

I ran my hands along his shoulders, then wrapped them around him in an embrace.

“Beloved husband, it would make your Queen *very* happy.”

He growled and looked to the sky for assistance. None would come, as he knew. It was just me and him and this stomach—our little bean—between us.

“We will be riding to our deaths,” he pouted.

“You ride your horse all the time and you are fine.”

His face snapped to mine. “The things I do for you.”

I danced for joy, knowing I already won this argument. He chuckled and shook his head in disbelief.

The trip to the railway was a long one. Too long for my liking. And I was hungry. We had to make multiple stops for me to relieve myself, another annoying factor that got on my last nerve.

But when the carriage pulled up to the area, I almost fell out of the window trying to get a good look at the thing.

“Nia, get your delicious backside back in here,” he growled.

“Isn’t it grand, Husband? Just look at it! It’s absolutely horrifying.”

He groaned, knowing full well I love all things macabre. After all, I married *him*, didn’t I?

The sheer amount of times he has come home covered in blood since this pregnancy began...

I shook my head. I loved him completely anyway and held many of my questions at bay, unsure if I wanted to hear what had happened. I had convinced myself and chalked it up to ‘kingly duties’.

Louis helped me out and we walked arm in arm toward the station. He bought our ticket and we stood on the platform and

waited for its arrival.

I was dancing in my spot, anxious. Or perhaps I needed to relieve myself again, I wasn't sure. My emotions were all over the place.

Then a horrid, deep scream pierced the air. It was out of this world and a trail of smoke followed its wake. The front end looked like the nose of a beast from the Underworld as it chugged and rolled, stopping right in front of us, letting out a loud gush of pressurized air, smoke and steam billowing all around us.

Some of the ladies were scared. I was morbidly fascinated beyond belief.

With the excuse of my extended stomach and my brooding beastly husband, I was able to make our way toward the front of the crowd.

We stepped inside and it was as if I was taken to another world. Rows of seating greeted us as if we were swallowed by a dragon and the flesh of its intestines made fine chairs.

Louis led us and seated me beside the window, thanking the universe under his breath that it was closed. I was sure it could open somehow.

“Will you stop fidgeting? We're already seated inside this monstrosity,” he complained.

“Isn't it amazing?” I exclaimed to the brute beside me.

My husband ran a hand down his face, but all I could do was send a beaming smile his way.

“I'd rather be home breeding my wife—”

I elbowed him and glared. “Don't be scandalous, Husband, we are in public. Keep your naughty words where they

belong.”

“At home. Where *we* should both be,” he pouted. Goodness, what was wrong with this man?

Once the other patrons found their seats, the ticket collector came by each chair. After we gave him our papers, he informed us that the train would be leaving very soon.

I squealed like an excited mouse and squeezed the Baron’s arm, shaking him with me and trying to elicit the same excitement. I wasn’t surprised no one wanted to sit close to the crazy, pregnant woman.

“Good grief, would you calm yourself?”

“I’m just so excited? Don’t you understand, it’s surreal and —”

All my shaking must have affected my bladder because suddenly my entire seat was wet. My face flamed with the utmost embarrassment and I hid it against my husband’s chest with a gasp.

“I-I think we need to get off the train.”

“What? You just said you were—” He looked at me seriously then and realized what had happened. I had never soiled myself before in my adulthood, and I never wanted to do it again.

My husband stood up and brought me to my feet. I almost slipped on all the liquid that was beneath me, and if it wasn’t for his arm in mine, I would have.

A few steps into the aisle a pain shot down my back and I cried out.

“What is wrong? What’s happening? *Mo Anam Cara*, talk to me.” My husband’s voice was frantic, enraged, and worried.

Some of the other monsters and ladies on the trip gasped at my plight. I couldn't speak as I was trying to grit my teeth as another wave of pain hit me.

"Someone get a doctor!" a random voice cried out.

"Is she having the baby? *Here?*" a woman exclaimed with worry.

Was that what was happening? How did women go through this time and time again? Why would they choose to? This was horrible!

Vines snaked around us, creating a barrier between us and the others as dark smoke encompassed us. The Baron lifted me into his arms and we both disappeared into the void, reappearing back on our bed in the castle.

I cried out in pain again, and I could hear my husband calling out for someone. I couldn't concentrate on anything but holding my stomach as my body began squeezing and pushing.

I needed to push.

I had to push.

A strange hand touched my forehead and I opened my eyes to find an old woman with leaves in her hair. Or perhaps the leaves *were* her hair. Her nails were as sharp as claws and her eyes were a deep blue reminiscent of the dark woods with its dancing shadows.

"Now, now. It will be alright. Old Hollyhock's got you. Let your body guide you in what it needs to do."

"Help her!"

I couldn't do anything else. Another scream tore from my lips when my body pushed again. I felt myself stretching, but

the pain down there was nothing in comparison to the one going *through* my body.

After what felt like forever, my energy depleted and I cried out for my husband. The Baron immediately shifted me on the bed and held me from behind, rubbing his face against my hair, whispering sweet nothings to calm me.

It worked. I was so very tired. I didn't know whether I could do this at all. Perhaps my body wasn't suited for this, perhaps—

As if my body was waiting for me to stop fighting it, I felt the release of something large. My body sagged against Louis and I took a stuttering breath.

“You did it, my love,” Louis cooed, and I fluttered my eyes open to see.

The old faerie had the baby already bundled up in linens, though there were some stains of blood on the cloth.

“Old Hollyhock told you. Your body was designed for this, there was nothing to worry about. My King, I'm going to need you to hold this little bundle as I assist our Queen on this next part.”

*Next part? What next part?*

I quickly found out and was relieved when it was all said and done. That hurt more than the baby coming out.

Our Unseelie servants came and helped change our sheets with me still on the bed. One of the faeries washed me with a wet rag and praised me for a job well done.

I thanked them all as they exited our room one after another, closing the door behind them.



“*Mo Anam Cara*, you’ve...” His voice cracked and my eyes burned with tears.

I scooted closer to him and peered into the wrapped bundle. A small furred hand shot out, grabbing my finger firmly. I choked. It was a beautiful moment.

Louis turned our little bundle so that I could see our beautiful child—the product of our love.

He had his father’s forehead and the face of a human on the lower half. Two rows of little spikes jutted from his skeletal head that vibrated as he gave me the biggest yawn.

“It is hard work coming into this world, isn’t it, little one?” I giggled, still tired but was too excited to sleep.

“What shall you name him, *Mo Anam Cara*?”

I blinked a few times, thinking about it thoroughly. “I assume we’ll have to give the little bugger two names.”

My husband nodded, rubbing my shoulders and lulling me into relaxation against him.

“Enzo. It was my father’s middle name.” After all, without my father’s gamble, we wouldn’t be here now, funny enough.

The Baron gave me a kiss on the forehead and my little Enzo yawned again.

“Scáthanna,” he whispered against my head. “My little prince of the shadows.”

It was a beautiful name. I nodded in agreement.

A yawn escaped me as another question ran through my mind. “Husband, what does your name mean?”

He nuzzled me and chuckled. “Nightmare.”

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