



MONSTERS

Before Men

OPHELIA BELL • V.T. BONDS • LESLIE CHASE
GODIVA GLENN • JOCELYN MONTANA • LEANN RYANS
ELIZABETH AUSTIN • LAYLA FAE • CARA WYLDE
CASSIE ALEXANDER • HANNAH HAZE
CHLOE PARKER • CASS ALEX

Monsters Before Men

A beastly Paranormal Romance Anthology

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The Satyr's Sin

by

Ophelia Bell

Chapter 1

Nemea

“Do muses only come to writers or do artists have them too? If artists get them, mine needs to be fired.” My blank sketchbook taunts me with its utter *absence* of any inspiration, the white paper as blank as my head.

Audra chuckles from the next bench over. “Trouble coming up with ideas, Nem?”

“I have the exact opposite of any sort of spark. How do you do it?”

I look up from the evidence of my failure as an artist. As usual, for this week’s assignment in our precious metals class, Audra’s nearly complete and it’s only Tuesday. An elaborate jeweled collar, made of precious stones and platinum. An ornament befitting a deity, which was the theme of our assignment.

“Contrary to appearances, I have dry spells. This assignment just happened to speak to me on a deep level.”

I eye the sparkling creation on her bench, watching as she attaches a clasp, then lifts it to her neck to check the size. When she pushes her hair back, she reveals a deep purple bruise right over the pulse point at the side of her throat. I narrow my eyes.

“I see,” I say with a knowing nod. “So the trick to *inspiration* is getting laid on the regular, huh?”

She reddens, and I smirk. When I catch her surreptitious glance toward the front of the studio, I turn, eyes widening when none other than our *teacher* smiles back at her, then rises to come toward her bench.

I gape when Steven, our beefy, plaid-shirted ursa teacher, reaches Audra’s bench and leans into her personal space to inspect the ornamentation now circling her throat. His green

eyes reflect the emeralds she spent all morning painstakingly securing in each small, leaf-shaped setting. I don't need to know how to read auras to feel the raw sexual energy sparking between them.

"Beautiful work, Audra," he says in his growly voice. Her eyelashes flutter and her flush deepens.

I lift one eyebrow as I glance between the pair, locked in a stare that says *everything* about how she got that hickey.

"Get a room," I mutter, before turning back to my work.

I tap the tip of my pencil on the edge of the pad and force myself to sketch, trying to ignore the exchange going on behind me and kick-start my creative gears into motion. The conversation is all about Audra's technique, but the whole undertone of desire is frankly *distracting*. I haven't had sex in too long, and it's hard not to notice all the banging going on around me. Not literally in this room, thank fuck, but there are signs more obvious than Audra's love bite. There's also a common rumor that the real reason members of the Bloodline come to this art school, consciously or not, is to find mates. Me, I'm here to learn what flavor of elemental powers I possess. I don't need a mate. I need to understand why I've been an outcast most of my life.

The St. George School of Art is a haven for students like me. All of us are hybrid humans who carry higher race's blood, with a strong potential for magical abilities, if we can harness those latent talents. Since each higher race possesses power over a single element, those of us with strong bloodlines from any race can manifest that power to a degree.

Dragon blood carries power over fire, ursa blood over the earth and metals, turul over the air, and nymphaea over water. The founder of this school, April Vincent, discovered this in the process of her glassblowing and metal-sculpting work. She possesses a mix of ursa and dragon blood, which is why her glass and metal sculptures are so breathtaking—and loaded with magic.

For some of us, like Audra, our talent appears quickly, the second we touch the element we're most attuned to. She's got

ursa blood, and a lot, it seems, judging from the way Steven hovers. It hits me that Steven has a boyfriend... another ursa male who teaches one of the pottery classes. Does that mean Audra's banging *both* of them? Shit, I don't need to let my mind wander down *that* path.

Before I realize what I've done, I'm looking at a photorealistic sketch of an enormous erect *dick*.

"Argh! This isn't *working!*" I slam my pad down and bury my face in my hands.

"What seems to be the problem, Nemea?" Steven says in a gentle tone that somehow calms me. He rests a hand on my shoulder and nudges the corner of my sketchpad. I press down on it, but he wrests it from beneath my elbows.

It's my turn to blush when his eyebrows lift and his lips twitch.

"I see," he says. "Don't give up hope—believe it or not, this actually fits the brief. Did you know the phallus was a popular ornament in ancient times? Fertility-focused jewelry was quite common. Also, consider adding a dance class to your schedule if this was the first thing that came to you. You might have nymphaea blood, and their magic manifests most easily through performance art."

"Why can't there be a quick and easy test to find out what mix of Bloodlines I have?" I ask. "I'm happy to donate blood if it means finding out what I should focus on."

Steven gives a sympathetic look, but shakes his head. "Only a god could tell you for certain."

He says it as if I should know. I blink, drop my jaw to speak, then stop and clear my throat before trying again.

"So I need to find a *god* to get answers. Any tips on how I do that?"

He tilts his chin toward my penis sketch. "Fashion the right offering, and you might lure one to the mortal realm to tell you. Be careful because not all gods are benevolent."

My eyebrows shoot up because I realize he *isn't* joking. "Tell me more." I lean toward him, propping my chin on my palm. "About luring gods, I mean, not about whether or not they're benevolent. I just *really* need to know what element I'm supposed to be attuned to."

He chuckles. "If you're short on magic, you'll need material that's infused with power. Most precious stones possess their own power. Audra's emeralds, for example, can call to Gaia or another fertility god or goddess without additional magic. Materials found in nature have traces of elemental magic. A bird's feather, a seashell, even a chunk of granite, if presented pleasingly. And don't discount the power you have already imbued into this sketch. You wouldn't have been accepted to St. George if you didn't have the potential. It's inside you. Use it near the god's chosen element and they may hear your call."

I thank him absently then resume my sketch, as the image of the creature the phallus belongs to materializes. Not a man, but a god. I have no idea if he's an actual god or not, but this is just practice.

By the time class ends, I have the most unconventional idea for a piece of jewelry. Not something that depicts a dick, but something to be *worn* by one. The idea both elates and terrifies me. Creativity has been painfully lacking since I came to St. George and this is the first time I've felt excited about a project in the two weeks since I arrived. Does it mean I have ursa blood, since my idea requires working with metal and precious stones? I could just as easily craft the thing from glass, which is more of a dragon-blood medium.

I'm so excited, I carry the sketchbook to the dining hall and continue working through dinner. I flip to a fresh page, sketch the outline of the item, and picture the appendage it will adorn. Audra sits across from me, along with two of our classmates from another studio.

Rachel says under her breath, "So, Aud, are you going to spill? Were you with both of them or just Steven? What's sex with an ursa like?"

“God, Rachel, can we not do this while we eat?” Shawn says.

“You know if she were banging a turul *you’d* be asking the questions,” Rachel says.

I glance up to see Shawn shrug and grin as he takes a bite of his dinner roll. He winks at me, and I roll my eyes back to my sketch.

“I’m feeling some dragon love, too,” Shawn says. “I made a blown-glass flute today. We’ll see if it actually makes music.”

“Too bad there aren’t any single dragons at the school,” Rachel says, gaze drifting across the hall to the table where four of the resident dragon shifters sit, chatting. They’re all spoken for, but that doesn’t stop us from speculating.

“I heard dragons can heal wounds if they absorb sexual energy,” Shawn says. “And sometimes they use their own sexual energy to heal an injured partner. Handy if they like it rough.”

“They should totally have Higher Races Sex Ed, don’t you think?” Rachel suggests. “All of them are so... *special*... in that way.”

“How are the turul sexually special?” Audra asks. “I thought their thing was just singing... and having their *one true mate* who they know the moment they set eyes on them. There isn’t anything particularly sexual about that.”

“No, but they’re rumored to have epic skills in the bedroom. They control the weather. Lightning, thunder, wind, and rain...” Shawn gets a dreamy look, as if he’d happily chain himself to the pier in a storm just to find a mate.

“What about you, Nem?” Rachel asks. “Which one speaks to you the most? Kinky nymphaea? Sex battery dragons? Let me guess...”

She turns to face me and I shift uncomfortably as her stare intensifies. She’s positive she has dragon blood, so she’s been practicing her dragon sight, which allows them to see auras. After a minute, she frowns and tilts her head.

“What is it?” My stomach clenches at the odd look on her face.

“I must be doing it wrong. All I get is static and weird, broken light. You looked like a Picasso, like you were made of angular shards. Read nothing into it. My eyes aren’t used to looking at people that way yet.” She pats my arm, but seems disconcerted.

It leaves me even more off balance than I was before I came up with what I thought was the best idea ever. My idea feels ridiculous now because I’m still clueless about which medium I should use. I excuse myself, dump my leftovers in the trash and stack my plate for the dishwashers, then head outside, ready to put as much distance between myself and this school as I can.

Chapter 2

Nemea

There aren't that many places to go, being on an island in the middle of Puget Sound. But it's a summer evening and stays light past 9pm this time of year, so I wander for a while. Paths wind through the dense woods thick with scent. Cedar, pine, and moist, loamy earth. Ocean sounds are never far, but despite the solitude and idyllic scene, I can't chill out. What if I never find out what I am?

When I first arrived, I took the assessment they give all new students. It was inconclusive. I thought they'd kick me out that day, but April Vincent and her six mates all insisted that if anyone even makes it to this island, we're meant to be here. Something to do with a magical forcefield of Fate magic that keeps out anyone who doesn't belong.

I've soon wandered to the edge of the water on the western side of the island. The sun burns red, casting the sky in fiery hues. Vancouver Island's trees a few miles offshore are silhouetted beautifully and I'm tempted to stop and sketch, but can't bring myself to bother. I'm not feeling an awe for the scenery like my first night here. If it won't spark some deeper understanding about my nature, what's the point?

I turn away from the sun and aim for a creek that runs downhill over mossy rocks into the sound. Red-orange light glints from within the shadows of the forest and I squint. The sunset is behind me, so what the hell is that?

Heading for it, I find a neglected path that runs along the bank of the creek. The barely visible yet unmistakable path leads up a hill to a small clearing where a quaint, run-down cabin peeks out at the sunset, its windows reflecting sanguine light.

"Rad," I murmur, excitement overcoming my gloom. I study it, then pull out my phone to snap a photo.

The light is fading fast, but the day is at its most magical right now, with the sunset gilding the fine mist that permeates the air everywhere on this island. My camera can't quite do it justice, but I can fill in the details from memory later. My preferred style isn't exactly what you'd call *representational*, though. I'm more of an abstract expressionist. At least that's how I describe my art in the imaginary interviews I have in my head. Interviews that take place during art shows I've never had with art I've never finished.

In those fantasies, I never quite picture the art itself. Sometimes I see paintings, sometimes mixed-media sculptures. Sometimes I'm sweaty from performing interpretive dance. Most often, the only thing on the walls in my imaginary gallery are lights and shadows, ephemeral paintings created by my careful placement of objects hung from the ceiling. Their permanence is as fleeting as my grasp on my own desires.

But this little cabin looks like the perfect place for me to figure it out. I stow my phone and tread the flagstone steps to a wide porch, railed with knobby tree branches. I have to kick an abundance of leaves away from the door before trying the knob. It isn't locked, and when I push it open, I'm awash in sage with a tinge of must.

Not surprising. The cabin's interior is a snapshot of another era. The furniture all appears handmade, from carved wooden chairs to the nubby woolen blanket draped over an overstuffed sofa, one half of which has stuffing pouring out of it and clear signs of some rodent having nested in its guts. There are no electric lights—only several oil lamps in wall sconces, with more on the table near the window of the main room and on the mantel of the stone fireplace.

I wander through, shivering in the chill interior. The main room contains a small kitchen with a basin carved into the stone counter, a drainpipe heading out to the creek. There's no faucet, but the kitchen window has the perfect view of the sound through a gap in the trees. The sun has almost disappeared, but the remaining light still flickers on the waves. I glance at the nearest lamp beside the kitchen window and

fish into my pocket for a lighter. I have to hold the flame to the wick for several seconds before it finally catches, flaming up bright and hot, then diminishing to a warm flicker when I replace the globe and crank it down just enough to light the space.

It's even more magical in the warm glow of lantern light. I carefully take the lamp out of its holder and walk toward the doorway beside the fireplace. The bedroom contains a huge log bed beneath a window, covered in a quilt sewn from small, colorful scraps. Across from the bed hangs a large mirror surrounded by a hand-carved wooden frame. The craftsman who made all this was talented. Were they Bloodline like me? Did they imbue everything they made with their magic? Perhaps it was an *ursa*, considering all the beautiful woodwork.

I set the lamp on the bedside table, then sit on the bed, sliding my hands across the quilt and closing my eyes, begging my latent magic to show itself for once. I get glimmers once in a while—enough to know it's there, but not enough to do anything real with it.

Falling back onto the bed, I sigh and stare up at the beam in the center of the ceiling. This cabin is surprisingly clean and solid, aside from whatever small creature has been squatting in the sofa. I don't see a single cobweb or insect. And though it's a little musty, it isn't *dusty*. If it hadn't been for the pile of leaves in front of the door, I might have thought someone besides mice actually used the place.

Bathed in the muffled sounds of the creek outside and the ocean not far away, my mind blessedly stills enough for my project idea to emerge, free from any creative uncertainty. I unbuckle and remove my boots and crawl into the center of the bed, then reach for my bag and pull out my sketch pad.

Smirking at the giant dick on the page, I start sketching again, compelled to finish the image of the creature it belongs to. There isn't enough paper to add onto the initial body part, so I flip to a fresh page and sketch the full figure instead. He's a satyr, I realize when I finish and sit back to admire my work. He has two short nubs of horns sprouting from his forehead,

covered in fur from his hips down to his cloven hooves... all except for that huge, beautiful erection.

“Too bad you don’t exist,” I murmur, extending a finger to smudge a shadow on the underside of his impressive cock. He practically leers at me from the page, mischief glinting in his eyes. His hands brace behind him, with hips jutting forward, daring me to touch him again.

I groan when my core tightens and warms, toss the sketchpad aside and fall back on the downy pillows. I *don’t* need the frustration of being horny right now on top of everything else. But unlike the dormitory I share with half a dozen other students, this place is empty. I bite my lip and idly slip a hand under my shirt, sliding it up my belly to cup one breast. My pussy pulses.

Giving in, I decide if I’m going to jerk off, I may as well get it right—get it out of my system. I strip completely, then prop my sketchpad on the pillows against the headboard. I prop the sketch of the cock alongside.

He’s proportionally enormous... a size I don’t think I could accommodate, but the fantasy gets me hot. On my knees facing the drawing, I spread my thighs and dip my fingers between them, startling myself with a gasp when I find my clit slick and engorged.

“Why can’t you be real?” I whine, pushing two fingers inside my channel, wishing I could fill myself more. Maybe it isn’t a cock ring I should make, but an actual dildo just for me. Maybe that’s what I need to lure a god... a satyr god with wicked intentions. I don’t think I’d even care about who or what I am anymore if a creature like him wanted me as his plaything.

The visuals of such a scene play through my head and it takes moments for my rapidly stroking fingers to take me to the edge and over. My juices entirely coat my hand when I finish, and I collapse onto the bed face-first between the two sketches. I nudge them aside with a sigh and grab the corner of the quilt, tugging it over me moments before I drift off in a stupor.

Chapter 3

Nemea

I wake with a mission. Metal won't do for what I have in mind, at least not for half of the multimedia project I envision. I need stone, and the right kind. I dress quickly and blow out the lamp before leaving. It's dark, but not too late, according to my phone. Just past midnight. I use my phone's flashlight to scan the rocky shore.

The tide is just receding, and after walking up the shore past the creek, I find the motherlode. At first, I think it's just a pile of glass shards, but as I draw closer, my pulse increases. The sand is strewn with obsidian fragments, ranging in size from my pinky finger to pieces as large as my forearm. I shuffle through them, nudging with the toe of my boot until I find one that's just right. The shape has the perfect curvature, and I can even see the slightest suggestion of a mushroom crown at one end.

I bend to pick it up and nearly drop it when I find it warm to the touch, despite being half embedded in cold, wet sand.

"What the fuck?" I gingerly brush the sand off the shimmering black shard. My fingers tingle when they touch the surface, and when I wrap my palm around it, I could swear it lifts itself into my grasp. Something deep beneath my sternum resonates, as if I've struck a tuning fork and my body hums with the same vibration. It's so palpable, my nipples tingle.

It takes a moment for me to gather my wits, stow the obsidian in my satchel, and head back to campus. Hopefully, all it will take is a little grinding and polishing to be perfect, but I want to be prepared in case I need to melt it down and cast it fresh.

The first week at the school were intro classes for each of the elemental studios. I learned the basics of pottery, glassblowing, blacksmithing, woodworking, jewelry making,

and several other mediums taught here. Most of my classmates discovered their specific elemental talent during that orientation week, but I'm still rotating until I find mine. At least I know how to melt down glass and cast it if it comes to that. I'm eager to find out.

Distant voices carry through the darkness from nearby buildings when I walk to the courtyard in the center of campus. This place never really sleeps, so it's easy to find fellow artists agonizing over their ideas at all hours. The buildings are haphazardly arranged around a central garden with stone paths and benches. All around an enormous tree sculpture made of metal and glass.

Despite being crafted of inorganic materials, the tree grows. Glass globes dangle from the branches, transforming with the time of day, with the weather, and I hear they shift with the seasons too. Standing beneath the tree, I can feel the power of its roots beneath the earth.

Rumor has it that April and her mates crafted this tree and planted it here. It's as much their creation as the towheaded toddler that accompanies one of her six dads in the classes they teach. The kid is three years old but has no fear of the furnaces in either the glass or blacksmithing shops, and plays with those materials the way most kids her age use playdough.

April is proof that we can have powerful magic, too. Hopefully, the hum inside me means mine is finally about to show itself.

The glass studio is blessedly empty. I start with a fine-grit grinder wheel, but after a minute the obsidian doesn't show a scratch.

Next, I place the shard into a crucible, then into the furnace to melt. While I wait, I begin my wax mold. When I'm happy with the results, I return to the crucible, only to find the obsidian is still as rigid as it was when I found it, not even glowing from the heat.

I retrieve it with tongs and set it on an insulated pad, staring at it. What if it isn't obsidian, but something else? Against my better judgment I extend a finger, prepared to

snatch it back if the shard's as hot as it ought to be, but it feels no different from when I first picked it up. Body temperature.

But when I draw my finger away, a faint purple glow remains, dimming slowly. I touch the shard again and observe a faint illumination that gradually fades. Heart racing, I take it in my hand and stroke up the length. This time, not only does the stone glow, some of the angular ridges soften. The hum inside me vibrates stronger, that glimmer of what I always believed to be my magic speaking to me.

I still don't know what it means, but within an hour I've molded the rough shard into the perfect replica of my sketch, and only with my bare hands.

Fatigue hits hard when I step outside to a silver morning cloaked in mist. The kitchen is lit and the students whose skills relate to food are busy cooking. This place is magical at every turn. It'll be nice when I finally feel like I belong here.

Right now, the only place I belong is in my bed. I trudge up the steps to the third-floor dormitory and bump into Audra heading out the door, freshly showered and smelling of flowers. It isn't her soap, turns out, but her natural scent. A bonus of strong ursa magic, I guess.

"Nem! Holy shit, did you pull an all-nighter? You know we have four whole days to finish this project, right?"

"What can I say? Inspiration struck." I give her a wan smile and shrug, then glance past her toward my bed, where it beckons from beneath an arched dormer. "Hey, do you mind covering for me today? I can't make it to class. Tell Steven I'm working solo for a bit?"

She pats me on the arm. "You got it. I'm sure he'll understand. I can't wait to see what you're working on," she says brightly, then steps down the stairs.

I head to my bed in a haze and collapse face first onto the pillows without even drawing the curtains.

Chapter 4

Pan

“You fools should know better than to fuck with me!”

Plastering my back to the stygian doors of Tartarus, four Titans bear down on me with fire in their eyes.

Where the fuck is Alcides? Campe? Erebus? Why are the rest of the guards always off on some other task when shit goes down? It isn't like there are many places to blow off steam in this prison-realm.

I'm going to get blamed for this. Fuck, I'd probably get blamed even if I *wasn't* the one on guard duty right now.

“I'm warning you!” I bellow again, pushing every ounce of my power into my voice. A voice that would make most prisoners fall to their knees and beg to be hauled back to their cage. Even the Titans ran from it when we battled them before. I was instrumental in trapping them here to begin with. My later sentence to be a guard is still a sore point.

“We know you, little faun,” Hyperion says, sneering down at me. “Your bleating might have frightened us once, but no more. What's your price to step aside and let us through? We've been in that pit long enough.”

“About that. How did you get out? I sure as shit didn't open the hatch.” It's technically true, but I admit I wasn't exactly paying attention when I made rounds on my last shift the day before. Something was tickling my senses from the direction of the mortal realm, making my taint tingle. No one's escaped from this prison in millennia so the place would hold for one more day while I took some much needed *me* time.

“Next time don't spill your seed so close to the edges of a pit,” Coeus says, provoking chuckles from all three of his brothers.

“I wasn't *that* close.”

Hyperion lifts an eyebrow. “We could smell your musk all the way at the bottom, hear your braying when you came, your snoring while you napped. You’re a fertility god, in case it escaped your notice, Pan. Your spunk is full of life.”

“So what? Your pit is pitch black. Seeds need light and water and earth to grow...” The blood drains from my face when Hyperion’s eyes blaze with light. He smirks. What the fuck was I thinking? This is the same bastard who *made* the fucking sun. And every prisoner in here can take a piss and a shit.

It’s too late to go look, but in my mind’s eye, I can see the product of my interlude of self-reflection the day before. The droplet of semen falling far into their pit, Hyperion’s light coaxing vines to grow from it. Not to brag, but my god-jizz is damn powerful, so no doubt if I went back to look, there’d be a trunk big enough to hold all four Titans as they climbed up and busted out of their cage.

Fuck me.

“You get it,” Hyperion says. “Now, if you want your head to remain attached to your body, step aside.”

I grit my teeth and dig my hooves in, aiming my horns at his chest. “Not on my fucking watch. You’ll have to go through me.”

He heaves a weary sigh and glances at his brothers, then looks at me again.

“It’s your death.”

Chapter 5

Pan

Vesh is going to have my head.

That's not an uncommon thought for me, but this time it's a foregone conclusion. Though it hits me in the throbbing murk of half-consciousness that I at least still *have* a head. It's the part that hurts as if I just locked horns with a freight train and lost. The last thing I remember is the blast of blinding light as all four Titans came at me, then the deafening shatter of the gates of Tartarus as they rammed me through.

I groan at the stabbing pain that shoots through my forehead from two distinct points on my skull. My horns...

Without opening my eyes, I reach up to touch them, only to find empty air where both coiling protrusions should be. My fingers land on circular lumps of knobby bone, slick with blood and shredded skin. Another groan emerges unbidden, followed by a whimper. They're already regrowing, which accounts for as much of the pain as the ragged wounds left behind. But it took me a century to get them to the majesty they'd achieved before I rammed them into the gut of a titan.

"Hush. I've got you."

My eyes fly open and I turn my head, regretting the sudden movement as white-hot pain shoots down my spine. But in the split second I opened my eyes, I had a rather surprising view of a pretty mortal dressed in black. I also caught some of the room, which appeared to be a cottage.

"Where am I, exactly?" I say, covering my eyes to steady the sensation overwhelming me.

"Um... Earth? Or do you want more specifics?"

"WHERE," I snap.

"Oh! It's called B-bear Island."

I growl.

“Northwest of Seattle Washington. The St. George School of Art?”

That rings a bell. Wasn't this the place Vesh chased that thieving gambler to a few years back? He called on both me and Typhon to help with that fight, which we still lost, thanks to the intervention of a new goddess whose powers were nothing like I'd seen before.

“Why here?” I mutter.

“I think that might be my fault,” she says.

I uncover one eye and crack it open to peer at her. She is luminous, with pale ivory skin and jet black hair that falls around her face in wisps. She's lined her hazel eyes in black, and painted her lips the same. My taint tingles like when I made the poor choice to rub one out too near the Titans' prison cell.

“Do tell,” I say, uncovering my other eye despite the pain. It's worth it: the bountiful swell of her breasts in a clingy black shir. Ink teases over the swell of one breast, up the right side of her neck, directly over a pulsing vein—a black tentacle indelibly etched into her skin. I can't help but frown, the design too reminiscent of the power wielded by a certain prison warden who is going to tear me a new asshole if he finds me.

When *he finds you*. *You know it's inevitable*.

She tilts her head and laughs, and I drag my eyes up to meet hers. “You aren't what I expected.”

“So you *expected* me. That seems unlikely. Until recently, I was trapped guarding a prison. Which begs the question... did you happen to see four very large, very scary gods wherever it was you found me?”

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head. “Um, no. Just you. I only intended to summon you. I figure that's why you washed up on the beach where you did.”

“Show me.” I struggle to rise, and the pain of my newly forming horns hits hard. The world swims, then goes dark. I regain consciousness with my nursemaid hovering over me, deep concern marring her pretty face.

“Don’t move. I have pictures of the spot. I have this compulsion to snap shots of anything I might want to paint.”

“How long since you found me?” I ask, blinking down at the small rectangular object she holds, suppressing my astonishment at a perfectly realistic image of an unconscious satyr lying on wet sand surrounded by dark glass shards.

“Only a few hours. I did my, um, *ritual* at midnight. When I came out at dawn, there you were. Finding you must’ve jump-started my power because I’d never have been strong enough to carry you into the cabin otherwise.”

She casts an appraising look down my body. Her rosy flush makes me lift an eyebrow. “You did a midnight ritual, huh?” I can’t help but smile. “To summon *me*. Do you even know who I am?”

“A fertility god? Sorry, I don’t know your name.”

I snort. “It figures. I’ve been out of circulation for Gaia knows how long. In most mortal circles, I’m known as Pan. Aegipan to my closest enemies.” Her mouth drops open, revealing a silver stud in the center of her tongue. She has another piece of jewelry: an ornate silver bracelet set with black stones that absorb the light. This woman gets more intriguing by the second. But I have to prompt her to reciprocate. “And you are?”

“Nemea,” she blurts. “Pan, as in the Greek fertility god, who plays a reed flute and fucks wood nymphs?”

“So you *have* heard of me. That’s a relief. It’s nice to meet you Nemea. You wouldn’t be a wood nymph, would you?” I arch one eyebrow.

Her cheeks flush pink. “I don’t honestly know what I am. Maybe? I did all this so you could tell me. Everyone on this island has some mix of higher race magic. I have *something*,

but haven't figured out what. I'm hoping you can tell me." She pins me with a look of desperation.

"Do you have any closer pictures?" I ask, holding the little frame up.

"You can zoom in," she says, gripping the rectangle and stroking two fingers away from each other on its glass surface. I'm distracted by the brush of her fingers against mine and briefly debate saying to hell with finding answers and dragging her into bed. But the image enlarges and I'm transfixed by the gruesome view of my own bloody head, where it rests on a pile of black shards. Blood streams from my nose, eyes, and ears, as well as the raw stumps on either side of my skull—I stroke my upper lip; she must have cleaned me up before I came to. My horns are nowhere in sight in the image, but if I'm lucky, they're still embedded in Hyperion's gut and he's lying on the floor of Tartarus for one of my brothers to find. The clarity of the picture is startling, though.

"What sorcery is this?" I murmur.

She gives me a quizzical look. "It's a smartphone. Technology, not magic. Have you been living under a rock?"

"You could say that." I frown down at the image and point. "Did I arrive with all this void glass?"

"The obsidian? Well, no. There was a pile of it before. I used a piece to do the ritual. And smaller pieces for this." She holds up her wrist with the bracelet, which slides down to her elbow. It's too big for her, and not really styled for such delicate bones. "But there was a lot more of it when you showed up."

"It isn't obsidian, Nemea. Void glass is altogether different. It's material from the walls of Tartarus. From the body of the god Tartarus himself. If you used a piece of it to summon me, that explains why I landed there. Powerful stuff." It's all making sense, but isn't exactly comforting. "Can you show me the piece you used to summon me?"

If I can't stand up to visit the site of my appearance, I want to at least touch the glass that brought me here.

"Um... I'd rather not." She glances at my quilt-covered groin, then down at the bracelet, which she fingers lightly with her other hand, and won't meet my eyes again. My taint isn't the only thing that tingles.

"You want me to tell you who you are? I need answers too. Help me understand how I got here. Know that I'm going to be missed, and someone less forgiving is looking for me. If that much void glass is strewn along the shores of this island, it won't be hard to find it. If it was here before I came, he's been here before."

"No one's allowed here who doesn't belong," she says, shaking her head. "There's a magical barrier powered by Fate magic."

My heart beats double-time. Fate magic is the *last* thing I need to get tangled up with. But if there's Fate magic keeping out anyone who doesn't belong, her ritual would never have worked unless I was meant to be here. With *her*. It also means I'm safe, because not even Vesh can break through Fate magic. After our previous battle here, it was likely erected precisely to keep him out.

I swallow back the apprehension about what this signifies, and look at her with fresh eyes. Could this beautiful specimen of mortal femininity really be what I think she is?

It's a challenge to summon a gentler tone when my desire for her has just gone through the roof, but I muster.

"Nemea, show me the shard of void glass and I'll answer any question you wish. That is my solemn vow." To emphasize my promise, I lick my index finger and trace the symbol of eternity in the center of my chest. She looks dubious, but may not realize the act binds me to my promise. I couldn't lie to her now if I wanted to. I just hope she doesn't ask me for answers she'd be safer not knowing.

Chapter 6

Nemea

I want this, so why do I cringe to show Pan my creation? Both of them... because the void dildo is only a prop for my assignment. I'm proud of them both. Crafting them proved I have power, and I had no problem sharing with the class. I got heaps of praise before the lights went out and we ended class early because of an electrical outage on the island.

Yesterday was a weird day, with every studio complaining about equipment failures, broken projects, and general mayhem, only half of which related to our power outage, but I was immune to any mishap because I'd achieved something amazing. My first *successful* creation.

I'd retreated to the cabin to prepare for the ritual, and now here I was... with another success and too afraid to follow through.

I force myself to suck it up. I'm never going to get answers otherwise. Reaching back to my satchel, I fish inside.

Like when I found it, the glass snaps into my hand as if magnetized, fitting neatly into my palm, though I can't come close to wrapping my hand all the way around it. My heart pounds and my face heats when I hold it out to Pan.

His eyes widen in astonishment at first, and he opens his mouth but only grunts. After a moment of staring first at the giant dildo, then at the silver bangle around my forearm, I can practically *hear* the pieces clicking into place.

"Nemea," he purrs. "Sweet little Nemea. You've summoned me with my own penis. How in all the levels of Hades did you *make* this?"

He reaches out and reverently takes the object from my grip. It's my turn to be astonished when he flips the covers back and reveals his half-engorged cock. I'm too fascinated by the view to turn away.

Holding the dildo in one hand, he casually strokes himself to full hardness.

I can't breathe. His cock looks identical to my sculpture. An object I had buried deep inside me less than twelve hours ago.

When he lifts it to his nose and sniffs, my eyes widen.

"I washed it, I promise."

"Mmm, a pity," he says, eyes narrowing as he lowers it again. He lays it across his lap, supported easily by the real thing, and reaches out to grip my wrist. I'm too shaken from the whole scene to resist.

He gently slides the silver band off my forearm and over my wrist and hand, then holds it up.

"This is dangerous magic, you know. Using void glass for such a ritual. You might have summoned *him* instead of me. We're two parts of a whole. Lucky for you, there's Fate magic protecting you from him."

"But not from you?" I ask.

"It would appear Fate approves of our meeting." He lowers the jeweled silver cock ring to his groin and carefully pushes it over both large testicles, then he grips his cock in two fingers, pressing carefully at the base until it shrinks enough to fit through the ring as well. "It fits perfectly," he murmurs once he's settled the band snugly against his pelvis, making his cock and balls stand proud.

"Like Cinderella's glass slipper," I can't help but say, marveling at the glint of silver dotted with black stones nestled amid the luxurious curls of dark wool that surround his enormous cock. My fingers ache to reach out and touch it.

When I hauled him in a fireman's carry to the cabin this morning, I only had the briefest contact—well, *half* a fireman's carry since he's so huge his feet still dragged the ground. I covered him to avoid the temptation to touch him, making sure I kept my contact restricted to cleaning blood off his face. "I should have put it on you, shouldn't I?"

He gives me a wicked smile that stops my heart, because it's *just* like the smile from my sketch. The only missing element are his horns, but they're already growing back; two small protrusions jut up from either side of his forehead, with the same gentle curve of his cock.

"The bigger question isn't whether the shoe fits. It's whether *you* fit. Please don't tell me this—*copy*—is the only version of my dick that gets the pleasure of knowing what you feel like."

There's absolutely no mistaking what he's asking, and I have no words left, anyway. I bend down to unbuckle my boots. The buckles start just below the knee and go all the way down and I fumble, hands shaking.

"Take your time, sweet nymph. I'm not going anywhere," he says in a voice as smooth and thick as molten glass.

I glance up to meet his gaze. He slowly strokes himself. My mouth waters and my pussy clenches at the memory of how well the dildo filled me up the night before. I know he fits, and he knows it too, but that isn't the point, is it?

"Pretty sure I'm no nymph. Will sex help you understand what I am? Or do we do that after?"

"Depends. How deeply do you wish for me to know you? Because whatever you are doesn't matter a bit to me."

I pull off my boots and stand, unfastening my pants. He licks his lips when I push them down, leaving my black cotton panties in place for now. He groans when I peel my top off, his gaze tracing the elaborate tattoo along one side of my body, an octopus holding me with all its tentacles.

Leaving my bra and panties on, I climb onto the bed and straddle his thighs, then lean over and place one hand against his chest. His irises are blue-green, spinning like a hurricane around fathomless black pupils. I'm mesmerized, and it tugs me closer. I shiver when he brushes calloused fingertips down my tattoo.

"It matters to me," I say, lips brushing close enough to his to feel the slight tickle of his beard. "I hear only a god can tell

me what magic runs through my veins. I need to know.”

“Then I need this,” he says, cupping the back of my head and rising to meet my mouth with his.

His kiss is a wild invasion, devouring every shred of self control. I might be on top, but I’m a prisoner to this desire. His tongue sweeps past my lips with no hesitation, toying with my tongue as he holds me tight. He hums as if the kiss means something. Between us, he lifts his hips, his massive erection pressing against my panties. I groan at the contact, tilting against him and easing down until I trap his cock between us.

I’m aching to feel him inside me, but on the verge of getting the answers I need, I’m not about to interrupt his process.

He releases me, pupils dilated, their blue blown to Hades. “You are not any flavor of higher race’s magic, Nemea. You are a different element altogether... I must taste more, to be sure.”

He wraps both arms around me and sits up, burying his face against my neck as he yanks each bra strap down my arms. My breasts spill out but he falls against the pillows with a groan, a flash of pain clenching his eyes shut.

“What’s wrong?”

“It isn’t you. My blasted head... easier if you stay on top.” He cracks his eyes open again, dropping his hands to my hips. “Take these off.” He grabs the elastic waist of my panties and tugs. Before I can shift my hips, he grips them in the center and wrenches, splitting them down the middle. My soaked pussy bare, I press it tight against the hot underside of his shaft. I involuntarily rock my hips, gliding along the curve of him.

Pan growls. “If you want answers, you won’t get them by doing that.”

“I thought you wanted to fuck.”

“Oh, I absolutely do, but I made a vow.”

He gives one gentle thrust of his hips before grabbing mine in his firm hands and lifting me into the air. Before I can react, he brings me down onto his mouth. I'm too surprised by his strength to brace myself for the onslaught of his tongue against my engorged clit.

“Oh, my fucking *god!*” All I can do is claw the gnarled bed frame while he works me over with his tongue. A tongue longer and thicker than humanly possible. But this creature—this *god*—isn't human, is he?

He grips me ass-to-hip with both hands, tongues deep, then sucks and licks until my vision fills with fireworks. I climax in an unexpected rush, the release more intense than any orgasm I've ever had, a flood pouring down my thighs.

Pan moans against me but keeps licking. I look down, confused by the abundance of moisture.

“Wh-what just happened?” His entire handsome face is glistening, his eyes bright with excitement.

He withdraws his tongue and eases me back above his chest.

“You are a feast for the senses,” he says, his voice even more sonorous now than before, as if I'm hearing him with a deeper sense than what my ears perceive. His eyes are black voids, so deep I could fall into them.

“I don't know what happened... I've never come that hard before.”

He smirks. “It's a talent of mine in particular. Don't feel ashamed. I expect we'll be bathing in our shared juices by the time we're done.”

“Was it enough?” I ask, eager to hear the verdict.

“More than enough, but I need to be inside you before I share.”

Despite the epic climax, my pussy responds to the suggestion with an aching spasm. I oblige by sliding down his belly, reaching between my legs for his cock. It's every bit as hard as the replica, and I'm as apprehensive now as I was

before the ritual. It wasn't easy to take before, but with the added lubrication Pan coaxed out of me, all I feel is the fantastic stretch followed by the pleasure of being filled to the brim with cock.

"I'm going to fill you with my seed," he says, as if he'd just read my mind.

I lose myself to the lazy thrusts of his hips as he pulls me against him and I bury my face against his neck. He smells like the forest. His lips brush my ear and he says, "The forests were my home once. That's what you smell."

"You're inside my head?"

"You just drowned me in your essence, Nemea. You're inside me. I can sense the chaos that runs through your veins. No higher race's blood. Something even stronger, more ancient."

Chaos.

I sit up, take him even deeper, and stare down at his face. His expression is earnest, even reverent. He grunts with a deep thrust that urges me back into motion. I lose the thread of inquiry before I can ask him to explain, the pleasure too distracting to pin down the questions flitting through my mind. When he cups my breasts, I let my head fall back and rock my hips. His knees come up behind me, granting support and allowing him to fuck me harder.

"*You don't need to speak for me to hear you now.*" His voice is inside me and all around me at the same time. It filters through the pleasure, magnifying it, this understanding that he's not just inside my body now. He's inside my mind. How much deeper can he go?

"*With you, as deep as you'll take me. You mean freedom to me, Nemea. Freedom from the servitude I've endured for a thousand years, if you let me fill you with my essence.*"

"I want to set you free," I say, the words falling from my mouth without thought. "Tell me how."

"Make me yours. Take my seed and I will be your mate. I'll be free of that place. Free of him."

“Who is he?” I ask.

A shadow passes across his face. The shift in light is so sudden it’s disconcerting, especially since the view out the window hasn’t changed. Glowing deep purple, clouds swirl within our dildo on the bedside table. The settings in his cock ring glow between us.

Pan grimaces, eyes clenching shut. “Don’t ask that. Focus. I need this more than you know.”

But something has shifted. My spine tingles like someone walked over my grave, and when I look over my shoulder, I see mist thickening outside the window. Sparks like purple fireflies pepper the fog. The silver shifts to lavender, then deeper purple, the lights multiplying. When I look back down at Pan, he’s different. His face flickers between the handsome, bearded man and an unfamiliar visage with glowing purple eyes. I falter, my pleasure ebbing.

Pan shakes his head and growls. “Don’t fucking stop. I’m almost there.”

“She can’t save you, Pan.” The voice booms from the mist, rough and unexpected. Thick fog seeps into the room, accompanied by the tinkling sounds of cracking glass. Reality fractures as an altogether more powerful being wraps its presence around me.

Pan’s eyes flash. “Vesh, how the fuck are you even here? She’s mine!”

I freeze, still too filled with intense pleasure from Pan’s cock to be afraid, and the sensations blanketing my body are nothing short of electrifying.

An involuntary moan escapes me when *something* tweaks my nipples. It isn’t Pan; his hands dropped to my thighs to grip hard, holding me in place, though he stopped fucking the second the voice came.

Pan drops his knees wide and yells, “Get out!”

Something solid sinks into the bed behind me, then a pair of lips brush my ear. “When you summon him, you summon me, Nemea. He is bound to me, as are all guardians of

Tartarus. I'm sorry I couldn't answer your call sooner. But I'm here now, ready to take my share."

I shudder all the way to my soul. Pan shakes his head. "Why do I have to share *everything* with you?"

A large hand presses against the center of my back. I bend over, looking into Pan's agonized eyes.

"It's okay," I say. "I want you both."

"You don't know what you're saying," he says.

It shouldn't make sense. In some rational corner of my mind, I grasp the insanity of it. But every other molecule of my being is certain this is right.

The newcomer rips the remains of my panties off, and when a blunt cockhead nudges against me from behind, I spread my legs wider. I'm already stuffed full of Pan's cock, but I want more. I want them both no matter what it takes, no matter how much it might hurt.

"Will you share?" Vesh asks, teasing fingertips around my packed opening.

I crane my head, possessed by the need to see him, though my mind's eye already swims with his monstrous, handsome face. But he's more than in my head, a tangled halo of light-sucking blackness around his stark, sculpted beauty. Glowing purple veins web his muscular torso, and his eyes spark with violet lightning.

I nod and bend over again. I press a kiss to Pan's lips and surrender, sending him a mental plea to surrender with me.

"*He'll ruin us both if you let him. This can't end well,*" Pan sends back.

"*I don't want it to end.*"

Pan groans and slides his hands up my back, grabbing my hair as he deepens our kiss. He tilts his hips down, his cock nearly sliding free, and on the next stroke up, the fullness doubles.

“That’s perfect,” Vesh says, gripping my hips. His hands are so large he can spread my ass wide with his thumbs, both digits holding me open for him to push his cock in alongside Pan’s.

My brain disconnects from reality, pleasure doubling with the stretch of two enormous cocks. But Vesh isn’t just two hands and a hard shaft penetrating me. He bends over my back as he matches Pan’s rhythm, and everywhere our skin touches, I come alive.

With my first orgasmic cry, the window beside the bed shatters. More windows nearby explode, and the high-pitched crash of broken glass hitting the floor fills the air from the other room. The dissonant sounds are music to my ears. When Vesh yells in unison with my next cry, the sturdy beams holding the roof above us twist and groan, then pine needle covered shingles shake free, falling all around the bed in a raucous clatter.

“Here it comes,” Pan says. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Resignation bleeds through his abandon, and he stops fucking.

I couldn’t stop if I wanted to. Not even the destroyed building could deter me from reaching a second climax, thanks to my new lover’s touch that feels like being embraced by a turbulent riot of a million sensations.

Pan’s eyebrows draw together and he seizes my head in both hands, pulling me into a savage kiss. He leaves me breathless and presses his forehead to mine.

“I’m sorry I have to leave you this way. He won’t let me stay.”

He releases me and shoves deep once more, desperation flashing in his eyes, then only surrender. Vesh’s deep roar converges with my cry and the world tilts. Pan’s face contorts as a dark, shimmering cloud wraps around us. More of the structure gives way, the bed dropping suddenly, but I can’t see anything beyond Vesh’s power. He seems to slide over and around me like a blanket, the cloud enveloping Pan completely.

Then the world tilts and I'm on my back. Pan is gone, replaced by Vesh, who hovers above me. He's breathtaking in dark, angular beauty. His cock is still inside me, pulsing. Shimmering purple mist flows from where we're joined.

“What did you do with him?”

“I sent him back where he belongs before he could finish mating you. He has to answer for what he's done. His error could destroy the world and I'm the one who has to pick up the pieces. I'm sorry we can't stay.”

He withdraws and steps off the bed where his feet crunch into rubble. The dark cloud sucks back into him and he looks mostly human, except for his ultraviolet eyes.

I shake my head. It isn't enough. “I need answers! He said I had chaos in my veins. What does that even mean?”

He gives a sad smile. “To me, it means you're perfect. But it's better if you forget. You'll be safe here, inside the barrier of Fate magic. The rest of the world won't be so lucky if I can't fix Pan's fuck-up.”

He rounds the distorted mattress and bends over, pulling my chin gently with one finger to tilt my head back, then pressing a slow kiss to my mouth.

“Forget us, Nemea. We are nothing but a fever dream that your awakening power summoned. Learn to harness the chaos inside and you'll be more powerful than you can imagine.”

Chapter 7

Vesh

Nemea's eyelids flutter closed mid-protest, and she slumps back against the pillows. It pains me to leave her, naked and beautiful, my seed spilling from between her thighs to soak the bed beneath her. If I had time, I'd stay to acquaint myself properly with every inch of her, but I'll have to subsist on Pan's memories.

I pick up the void glass dildo and wrap her fingers around it, resting it on her sternum.

She won't remember. When she wakes, she'll think she fucked herself into a stupor with a magical toy that gave her revelatory dreams. Dreams that awakened a power strong enough to destroy the cabin I found them in, but a power equally capable of creation if she learns to use it.

Before I go, I spend one last moment taking her in, committing the sight of her to memory. I can't linger on this island. The guardians who patrol won't be thrilled to find me, and they've violently ejected me once before. The goddess who protects this place is one I know better than to tangle with a second time. I wish I could return, but knowing what horrors have escaped the prison I am the only lock to, I know it might never happen.

But she's given me one thing I can keep, that I hope will give Pan a reason to fight as well. We have found something we believed impossible: a mate. And if anything can compel us to win the coming war, it's the knowledge that Nemea exists, and that she can be ours.

About Ophelia Bell

Ophelia Bell writes sexy dragon shifters and other magical races in her menage and reverse harem stories, all of which feature epically endowed heroes and magical beasts in many flavors. Browse her other books here: <https://opheliabell.com/>

Myra's Monster

by

Leslie Chase

Chapter 1

Myra

The stale air had a hint of burned plastic, and the airmaker made a worrying whine. The artificial gravity kept glitching, too. *Myra's Joy* was falling apart around me and if I didn't get some repairs made soon, she'd be my tomb as well as my ship.

Worst of all was the worrying silence from the engine room. Ever since I bought her, the *Joy's* engine had made an awful racket you could hear through the entire ship. I doubted it had suddenly fixed itself, so I had to assume it was on the verge of death.

“Well? Found anything yet?” Hess asked, flicking a knife across the cabin. Despite the faltering gravity, it struck the center of the target he'd set up. I shivered, wondering how close he was to using me as target practice.

Volkov growled something at his partner. I didn't speak Russian, but from the way he looked at me with his cold, shark-like eyes, I didn't think he'd taken my side. The huge, genemodded hulk of a mobster dwarfed his slender counterpart, and he looked like he could crush my skull if I annoyed him enough.

Fortunately, I finally had something to report. Outside, in the darkness of space, hung my hope of salvation. The answer to all our prayers, wrapped in the dark between the stars.

“I've found a Tyradyn bioship,” I said, trying to sound happier than I felt. “That's worth your time, right, Mr. Hess?”

Both mobsters were behind me in the cockpit before I finished speaking. Hess only had eyes for the viewport, scanning the black for his prize. To my surprise, Volkov rested a massive hand on my shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

“Good. Good find.” Despite his harsh accent, he sounded almost friendly. I repressed a shudder—there was still no hint

of emotion in his dark eyes.

“Don’t congratulate her yet,” Hess said. “We don’t have a thing to show for this trip yet, right? Your debt’s not paid till we’ve got a prize worth selling.”

“The bounty alone—”

Hess cut me off with a sharp chopping gesture. “We never cooperate with the Reps. Never. Anyway, they’d just destroy it, right? A criminal waste when there could be anything aboard.”

Which was exactly why the United Republics would destroy it. Tyradyn ruins had a *history*, like all the Ancient civilizations that had died out before humanity reached the stars. Several seats in the Republic senate were empty because of idiots bringing back civilization destroying ‘prizes’ from Ancient ruins.

Now it was my turn to be that idiot.

Don’t think like that. Doing my best not to show fear, I focused on the controls, centering the sensors on the bioship. Most discoveries are fine, lifesaving even. Better medicines, food crops that will grow in near vacuum... we might be about to revolutionize the galaxy.

I tried not to think about Dr. Danforth, who’d come back merged with an ancient war machine. I’d made a deal with Hess: he got this chance to loot Ancient technology from uncharted space. In exchange, he forgave my debts and paid for the Joy’s repairs. It was too late to back out now.

The bioship hung in perpetual darkness. Out here among the comets, even the star it orbited was barely more than a distant point of light. I’d only found it because it was slightly warmer than its surroundings.

I hit the spotlights, bathing the bioship’s surface in light. Or part of it, at least. I’d thought I had a grip on its size, but seeing just how little of its hull I illuminated really drove home how much it dwarfed the *Joy*.

Cracked and rough, the bioship’s hull was in remarkably good condition for a ship abandoned ten thousand years ago.

Humans were still figuring out farming when the Tyradyn civilization ended in a war using technology we still didn't understand.

Hess whistled, low and long. Batting my hands from the controls, he swung the viewer across the mottled black and green hull, muttering to himself. I resisted the urge to wrest my ship back from him. It wouldn't be a healthy choice.

"Mr. Hess studied xenoarchaeology," Volkov said. "Excuse his impatience, he has always wanted to see more than sterilized Ancient ruins."

I nodded, unwilling to risk speaking. If I did, I'd probably ask something stupid like, 'Why didn't he just charter a ship, then?'

No good would come of that, especially since I knew the answer. This way, his ride was practically free—all it cost him was my debt and the cost of the repairs. Any pilot willing to raid an Ancient ship would do it for themselves, not get hired to do it for someone else.

"There! Look, an opening in the hull." Hess focused the viewer on a buckled stretch of the bioship and grinned like a maniac. "That's where we get in."

I clenched my teeth and didn't argue. No point insisting on a proper survey when the mob boss wants to get inside *now*. Maneuvering closer, I matched the gigantic ship's tumble and anchored the *Joy* above the hole Hess had spotted.

"There. I'll hold position until—"

Volkov laughed, and Hess cut me off with a savage, cutting gesture. "No chance, sweetheart. Your autopilot can handle that while you come with us. Don't want you to 'accidentally' fly off and strand us here. Think of it as an adventure—how many people have set foot in an Ancient ship?"

Better question: how many survived and came back without some horrible contamination? Again, I swallowed the question. It wouldn't make a difference, and he had a point. Now that I was here, I wanted to see the inside of a Tyradyn ship.

Getting into my spacesuit was a chore. Designed to be put on with a crewmate's help, I struggled to get into it on my own. The mobsters would have been happy to help, but I chose the risk of spacing myself over stripping in front of them.

While they dressed in their fancy, armored suits, I checked every inch of mine for scratches that might become tears. It was pointless—what was I going to do if I didn't like the look of it?—but the ritual made me feel safer. When I finally closed the helmet and turned on the suit's airmaker, I was ready to face the unknown.

The air in the suit was worse than the *Joy's*. It lacked the burned hydrocarbon smell, but it somehow tasted *sticky*. Doing my best to ignore that worrying sign, I joined the others in the airlock and looked out at the punctured hull of the ancient ship.

Hess made the jump across first, and his childlike shout of glee when his boots hit the alien surface almost endeared him to me. My first step onto the bioship's hull felt like sacrilege, like I was walking on someone's grave. To be fair, that was probably literally true, but the deaths had been too long ago to worry about. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself as Volkov joined us and we made our way to the hull breach.

Chapter 2

Monster

Out here on the frozen edge of interstellar space, nothing happens fast. Eons passed without change, and I slumbered in my cocoon, barely aware of time passing.

Over the long centuries, Home pulled herself back together. Scavenging material from drifting space dust was a slow process and gathering energy to do anything with it even slower. The race between the self-repair systems and entropy was a long one, and no winner had emerged yet.

Unexpectedly, something changed. Light! A feast of energy, pumped in at a rate Home had almost forgotten was possible. Thirsty, she drank in more than the distant starlight would provide in a century. Systems that hadn't seen activity in thousands of years sprang to life, spending carefully hoarded materials in a flurry of activity, and I drifted toward consciousness.

Waking up hurt. Of course it did—waking from longsleep always did. The ship's umbilicals pumped me full of life, my veins expanding as fluid filled through them for the first time in far too long. I shifted, testing my body and finding it ready for action. My limbs moved at my command, my claws slid out of their sheaths, and I breathed again.

Thin air, carrying a scent of rot, filled my lungs. Something else, too, a smell I did not recognize. The reason Home woke me.

Intruders.

Chapter 3

Myra

The first surprise greeted us as we pulled ourselves through the crack in the warship's hull. The moment I was inside, I had weight again. Artificial gravity turned *inward* into *down* and pulled me to the deck with a thud. If it had been any stronger, I'd have risked breaking something. As it was, I stumbled but kept my feet.

Hess landed harder, tumbling across the decking with a string of curses. Volkov surprised me by landing elegantly. His genemods hadn't just jacked up his strength, they'd given him superb reflexes too.

While Volkov lifted Hess to his feet, I looked up, cursing under my breath. We'd dropped twenty feet or more from the opening, and getting back up would be a challenge. Especially if we found something worth bringing back.

"How is the *gravity* still working?" Hess's voice crackled with static, but that didn't hide the awe in it.

Volkov shrugged. "More concerned about the air."

He tapped the wrist readout of his suit, and I checked my own. Blinked, and checked again. We were in an atmosphere? I'd have assumed my battered old suit's sensors were playing up, but his suit was brand new. We couldn't both have the same malfunction.

It was too thin to breathe, but as I watched, the pressure gauge crept up. So did the temperature, though it was still below freezing.

"The ship is waking up," Hess said, rubbing his hands together. "We should get a move on. If the power's working, there has to be some amazing treasure in here."

Great, the Ancient warship is still functioning, and that makes him happier to loot it? Not trusting myself to say

anything, I shone my flashlight around, examining the room we'd landed in for anything that might satisfy his greed.

Nothing. We'd fallen into what might have once been a cargo hold. Hard to tell, since it was empty, the dark green deck stretching away in every direction. The rough surface seemed to be made of twisted roots or branches, woven together in a pattern that looked as though it was moving under my flashlight.

Nothing to take here. We're going to have to go deeper. The idea made me shiver. This 'wreck' was too functional for my tastes, and every minute we spent in it just upped the chances of something going wrong. But Hess wasn't going back empty-handed, and standing around worrying about it wouldn't help anyone.

If I'm going to do something this stupid, I'd better commit to it. Unclipping the cutting laser from my belt, I tested it on the decking, watching it burn and part under the beam. The weave separated, edges bubbling as liquid boiled away.

I learned from my mistakes, and this time I anchored a line before stepping through the gap. A good thing too, because the next level down had stronger gravity, a good two-thirds of Earth Standard. The motor-winch on my belt whined under the strain, but it got me down safely. More importantly, the rope gave me a way back up.

Which was great news, because I felt like I'd stumbled into a treasure trove. This room seemed as vast as the hold above, though it was hard to be sure because of the jungle filling it.

Yes, a jungle. I know it sounds crazy, but there it was. Tree trunks stretched from floor to ceiling, branches forming the deck I'd just cut through. Other plants grew between those mighty columns. Bulbous fruit hung from vines, glowing a faint blue-white. Strange shadows flickered as they swung back and forth, adding a creepy, surreal air to the place.

I stared around in awe. This wasn't the fossilized remains of an ancient garden. These plants were living, growing, millennia after the fall of the civilization that planted them. And they were beautiful. Flowers bloomed, dark purples and

royal blues catching the light of the fruit. Vines wound around the trunks, glittering wetly and seeming to mark a path through the forest.

Turning slowly, I let my suit's camera get a good long look at everything. Biotech companies would fall over themselves to pay for this stuff, and rich collectors would want those flowers. If I filled my sample bags with plants from this garden, I'd make a fortune. And it would leave more than enough for the mobsters to get rich off, too.

My crazy gamble had paid off, and the mob wouldn't carve me up for my organs after all. For the first time in weeks, I let myself relax and breathe. Volkov and Hess followed me down the line as I took careful pictures of the first plant I wanted to harvest.

An awed silence filled our comms channel. The mobsters stared around the dark jungle, silence stretching until Volkov muttered something in Russian. I didn't need to speak the language to recognize a swear word when I heard one.

That broke the spell. Hess shook himself and spoke in the quiet, reverent tones more appropriate for a church.

"We're gonna be so fucking rich. Grab a sample of *everything*."

Chapter 4

Monster

My cocoon parted as soon as the pressure outside was enough to breathe. Built to defend Home, my body functioned for extended periods without air, but there was no point in using up my reserves. Not when an unknown intruder walked the halls.

My neck frills fanned out, listening for the comforting brush of the colony's mindsong, and found only silence. I'd entered my cocoon listening to the painful melodies of the dying, but I emerged alone. The absence of my siblings burned like a star in my primary heart, a terrible pain no warrior should ever know. All my life, I'd been part of the colony-chorus, and now I sang alone.

Almost alone. Home herself still sang, though her song was weak, fragmented, distracted. What little remained of her focused on using the gift of light the intruders brought to repair herself and storing the excess.

She sang to the flowers and branches of the garden, shaping the flow of air and precious water to take advantage of the energy the creatures brought. She sang to the walls, weaving fresh material to plug the gaps in the hull and heal the damage the intruders caused as they explored.

I followed that branch of Home's song to find the attackers, hoping to prevent further damage. A painful, discordant note entered Home's voice as one plucked a flower, disrupting the delicate ecosystem of the garden. Eons of inactivity left it balanced on a fine edge, and the slightest push might kill it.

I surged forward, unwilling to wait for my body to awaken fully. Using my four lower limbs to run, I held the remaining two high, ready to rend and tear. I would kill these intruders and feed their bodies to Home. Their nutrients would help repair the damage they had done.

Had the colony been healthier, I'd have rushed them as soon as I arrived. But now I had to be careful—if I died, I would leave Home defenseless, and that was unthinkable. Knowing nothing of my targets, I needed information before charging in.

So, instead of heading straight for the lights, I climbed into the branches above the garden and looked down to examine the intruders.

Three of them walked among the plants, and they weren't any species I recognized. Four-limbed bipeds, each wrapped in tight insulating suits, they looked clumsy and uncoordinated as they moved. Clear helmets let me see their faces, pale and soft under the glass. One bared his teeth in an expression I couldn't read, radiating cruel joy and jealousy as he plucked another flower to add to his already bulging bag. I tagged him the greatest threat to Home.

Another, by far the largest of the trio, kept a careful watch on the trees. I tagged him as the greatest threat to me.

But it was the third intruder who gave me pause. Her face, framed by curly red hair, was stunning for all its alien strangeness. There was something about her green eyes, the curves that her primitive spacesuit hugged so tightly, that made my hearts blaze with an emotion other than rage.

Unlike the others, she walked with care for the garden she moved through. When she stopped to pick a plant, she examined it carefully first, minimizing the harm she did to surrounding life. She acted with respect for the place she found herself.

I didn't know what to make of that, but there was no excuse for harming Home. Instinct told me to slay all three of them, yet I hesitated. Curious, I spread my frills to listen to the intruders' mindsongs.

Chapter 5

Myra

The forest stretched in all directions, dark and glorious. It was like being in a place of worship, some gigantic alien cathedral of plants. One more impressive than anything humans had built.

Ten thousand years of neglect, and still it functioned. The Tyradyn awed me, and I understood why the authorities didn't want people poking around in their ruins. If they could do this, what other miracles had they achieved?

I won't figure that out, I'm no xenoarcheologist. All I need is something worth selling, and I can go. The thought felt almost sacrilegious. Stealing from this place was too close to tomb robbery.

Not that Hess and Volkov cared. The pair of them took anything that looked interesting and did so without a care for the damage they did. I winced as Volkov snapped a branch off a tree, and Hess used a laser cutter to sever a length of vine.

Doing my best to do as little damage as possible, I pushed past the branches of a pitch-black miniature tree and stretched up for a glowing fruit. As I closed my fingers on it, a strange sensation washed over me. Like curiosity, but not *my* curiosity. Which made no sense.

I looked around, shining my light into the darkness, and saw nothing. But I didn't know what I was looking for, and the weird shadows of the jungle could have hidden anything.

There wasn't time to worry about it. I plucked the fruit and dropped it into a sample bag. Behind me, the mobsters talked in Russian as they cut their own samples.

If I had something to worry about, I told myself, it was them.

Chapter 6

Monster

The intruders spoke crudely, forming sounds to carry meaning rather than *thinking* to each other. The noises were meaningless to me, of course, but I was not so limited. Spreading my frills, I listened to the patterns of their minds rather than the words they spoke.

The two males radiated anger, suspicion, *hunger*. Not hunger for food, water, or oxygen. Those I would have understood and sympathized with. Their hungers were never-ending pits they would shovel resources into, no matter the cost to anyone else.

They didn't even trust each other. Whatever alliance bound them was nothing like the connection I had shared with Home and the rest of my kin. Suspicion went both ways, and eventually they'd end up hunting each other. Even in this den of plenty, I caught each of them wondering whether they'd profit more if the other died here.

The female was different. Her strongest feelings were wonder and fear and guilt. As I watched, she plucked a fruit with great care. Doing her best not to damage anything else, she tucked it into a pouch for safekeeping. Awe filled her mindsong, drowning out all other emotions and leaving her defenseless while the other two watched for danger with paranoid intensity.

There was something beautiful about the shape of her mind. Something quite unlike her companions, a warmth and openness which they lacked. These were not members of the same Hive, as difficult as that was for me to grasp, and the female didn't fit with the males even slightly.

I couldn't afford to wait until I understood. Home was suffering, and the damage got worse with every passing moment. The males carved pieces out of everything they passed, uncaring about the harm they did.

An attack without knowing more would be foolish, but I dared not wait. Learning about my foes would require me to take a risk.

I spread my frills fully, a dangerous move in the presence of strangers. It left me vulnerable to both psychic and physical attacks, the delicate frills thin and vulnerable.

But it let me peer deeper into the strange, closed-off minds of my prey. *Feelings* resolved into *thoughts* and I lost myself in the alien minds.

... rich, I'm going to be so fucking rich... do I need to share?

... this is so beautiful... what were the people who built it like?

... kill the bitch, take her ship, Volkov can fly it... keep all this for ourselves...

The female didn't think about the males at all, lost in wonder at the garden's beauty. But the males thought about her, and it wasn't pleasant. Unexpected anger blossomed in me as they considered killing her. It made no sense. They were all intruders. Why would I care if they murdered each other?

Home's quiet, fading mindsong gave me no answers, but neither did she condemn my feelings. I had to make my decision here, and the smaller male prompted me. He drew something from his belt, a tool I didn't recognize. I didn't need to. His thoughts betrayed him—it was a weapon, and he raised it toward the female with a smug rush of superiority, as though murdering one of his companions was a moment of pride for him.

Chapter 7

Myra

The creature came out of nowhere. One second, we were alone in the creepy garden of wonders. The next, a monster rushed down the trunk of the tree, four long limbs gripping the bark and two more reaching out with razor-sharp claws extended to tear and slice.

I squeaked in alarm and leaped backward, tripping over a tangled vine and falling on my ass. A bolt of light shot overhead, scorching into a black tree as Hess tracked his laser pistol towards the black carapace of the attacker.

That's a fast draw, I thought, a facade of calm over the raging torrent of panic that filled my mind. The creature tore past me, moving faster than anything that size had a right to, dodging to the side as Hess tried to bring the laser to bear.

With reflexes as impressive as its speed, the Tyradyn creature ducked under the blinding laser beam and crashed into Hess. The mobster screamed as he bounced off a tree and landed in an ungainly tumble, dropping his pistol. The creature followed close behind him, claws out, and I thought that was the end of Hess.

I hadn't taken Volkov into account, though. The giant smashed into the Tyradyn's side with enough force to drive it away from Hess, and the two of them slammed into a tree with bone-cracking force.

Volkov rebounded, just avoiding a slashing claw that would have opened his stomach. Ducking under a second claw, he drove a punch into the creature's belly. With his augmented strength and speed, I wondered if he had a chance.

Not the time to take bets, I told myself, scrambling to my feet and looking for a way out. Volkov and Hess were welcome to fight this monster, but I wanted to put a door between me and it. Preferably a door and several light years.

Hess's shot had carved a smoldering line through the plants ahead of me, and seeing it made me wince. If I hadn't fallen, the beam would have sliced through my head.

No wonder he'd been so quick on the draw. He'd already been aiming at me, which meant I needed a door between us, too. I scrambled through the undergrowth, trying to circle toward the rope while the mobsters and the monster fought it out.

A line of red light burned past me, slicing through the black flowers ahead and making me swear as I ducked behind a tree. Hess had recovered his pistol and yep, he was shooting at me rather than the Tyradyn monster.

It wasn't comforting news, but at least now I knew.

"Where d'you think you're going?" His shout carried a mix of panic and anger. "Going to abandon us to this *thing*? I'll kill you first."

"We've got to get out of here," I said. Reasoning with Hess wasn't much of a plan, but I didn't have a better idea. "Come on, we've got plenty of samples. Let's go."

No answer, but no laser fire either. I took that as a sign Hess might go for it. That would have to do, because we didn't have time to argue.

Cautiously, I popped my head up from behind my tree trunk cover. Hess was right there, laser pistol aimed between my eyes, a savage grin on his face. *Yeah, that's predictable. Disappointing, but predictable.*

His finger tightened on the trigger, and everything slowed down. It was like we were both moving through treacle, and I was going to watch myself die in slow motion. There wasn't time to throw myself back into cover, or to do anything at all.

Not for me, anyway. While everything else moved at a crawl, the Tyradyn beast moved as fast as ever, appearing from nowhere to grab Hess's shooting arm and pull. Hess screamed as his arm came off at the shoulder with a wet ripping sound.

The screams cut off when the beast's claw mercifully sliced open Hess's neck. He dropped like a sack of potatoes,

and time snapped back to normal.

Volkov's fist smashed into the back of the creature's head, taking advantage of its distraction. It staggered back and he followed, hammering brutal blows into its carapace.

I looked around for some way to help, though I wasn't sure which of them I'd rescue from the other. Volkov was human, at least, but his boss had tried to shoot me twice. And both times, the beast had saved my life.

Before I solved that dilemma, the Tyradyn did it for me. Rearing up on its hind legs, it lifted its middle limbs as another pair of arms, catching Volkov by surprise. The big man's genemodded reflexes were fast enough to dodge the monster's grapple, but that left him open to a punch that sent him flying.

He tried to recover, bouncing back to his feet as soon as he hit the ground. It wasn't enough—the Tyradyn's claws slashed across his torso and blood sprayed everywhere as he collapsed.

I'd watched the exchange frozen in terror, only snapping out of it when Volkov collapsed. That broke my paralysis and I ran for the rope. Not that I had a hope in hell of outdistancing the monster, but I had to try.

I made it perhaps five steps before it bounded into my path. Heart pounding, I skidded to a halt and looked up at it, shuddering.

Hess's laser hadn't saved him. Volkov's genemods hadn't done him any good. Now here I stood without either, face to face with a ten-thousand-year-old alien war machine.

It was beautiful, in the same alien way as the forest was. Shiny black carapace covered it in articulated plates, each piece perfectly fitting to the next, letting the creature move with the graceful elegance of a tiger. Purple markings down its flanks and long limbs might have been writing or body art. Its rear legs were thick and powerful, middle legs slender and dexterous, and its arms precise and deadly.

But it was the eyes that caught me. Three pairs of huge purple orbs, an orange circle like fire around each pitch-black

pupil, met my gaze with an intensity that made my breath catch. Those eyes were stunning, and I couldn't look away.

They were expressive too. Or perhaps I was fooling myself into thinking that the monster looked *lonely*? But I couldn't shake the impression. This creature was all alone, and the feeling was like an ache in my soul.

My heart beat loud in my ears, reminding me I was still alive. My breathing sounded deafening in my helmet, my pulse raced, and my skin tingled all over. Death loomed over me, and all I could do was wait for the end.

But the monster didn't attack. Cocking its head to one side quizzically, it lowered a hand to tap claws on my helmet's visor.

It (he? Somehow, I was sure he was male) leaned in, jaws opening wide. His teeth gleamed, a row of vicious fangs ending in needle points. This was a killing machine, built or grown for war, and I suddenly had a lot more sympathy for the politicians who'd banned salvage of Ancient technology.

It was a pity, because he was also sexier than I could have imagined. Perhaps it was the fight-or-flight reaction flooding my system, but the huge, powerful body of the monster called to me.

"...hello?" I knew he wouldn't hear me through my helmet. And even if he did, he wouldn't understand. I had to try. "Please don't kill me."

Those eyes, the piercing, impenetrable gaze, pinned me in place. I wouldn't have moved even if he'd let go of me. His sorrowful orbs held me, transfixed.

With a loud snap, frills opened up around his neck, framing his head with a glittering rainbow circle that wavered back and forth. The effect was mesmerizing, and somehow, I heard words as I watched the colors flow.

No, not heard. The words were thoughts, but not in my voice. *Calm/peace/safety.*

They weren't quite words, but to my surprise, I felt safer. My breathing slowed from panicked gasps and something else

formed in my mind. A question.

Why other humans attack you? Are you dangerous?

“No,” I answered quickly, shaking my head for emphasis and hoping I wasn’t imagining things. “Nope, they’re just assholes. Thank you for saving me from them! I’m not here to cause any trouble. I didn’t realize there was anyone alive here. I’ll just be going.”

Myra will stay. An unnecessary command. Against his strength and speed, escape was impossible, and if he wasn’t planning on killing me, I didn’t want to run off. But I wondered how he knew my name. He could project thoughts into my mind. Did that mean...

Are you reading my mind? I thought my question at him as best I could. It was an embarrassing question, but I drew comfort from the fact that, if I was wrong, he’d never know I’d asked it.

Yes/affirmative/listening. I shivered, trying not to show my surprise at being right. Pointless—I felt a strange, dry amusement at the edge of my mind, reminding me he heard my thoughts. That only made things worse, and a blush spread over my cheeks.

The amusement faded into concern. Was the telepathic killing machine worried about me?

Yes. Concern/confusion. Myra is clever, has a beautiful song. Why is it bad to listen?

God, now my cheeks burned red. I tried to keep my mind focused on staying alive. The last thing I wanted was the creature knowing how attractive I found him.

Shit. Fuck.

I’m giving myself away, aren’t I?

To my relief, he didn’t reply. But he didn’t need to. *Not* thinking about how hot he was would have been impossible, and he’d confirmed he was reading my thoughts. I did my best to find something else to focus on before I started thinking

about how his carapace would feel against my naked skin or what his cock would be like.

Shit!

“What’s your name?” I blurted the question out, the first thing that came to mind. The only answer was a confused mess of emotions with no words. “You don’t have one? Oh. You don’t have one that fits in sound, do you? Why would a telepath need a name, right?”

Yes/correct/am. The medley of emotions played out again, slowly, like he was enunciating his name. Fear and shock, anger and pride, joy of accomplishment and gratitude for rescue, all mixed. It fit, I realized, looking up at the towering killing machine. When his kin were afraid and angry, he would be there for them. His pride in saving his family, his joy at defending his home, their gratitude, it all mixed into a bundle that was quintessentially *him*.

A pity I can’t emote on command. Though I’ve got no trouble with the gratitude after he saved me from Hess and Volkov.

But the rest? Yeah, no, the closest I got was *grateful/scared/admiring/kinda-turned-on*, which wasn’t even close. As soon as I realized what I was broadcasting, I added *apologetic* to the mix, and he sent amused tolerance back at me.

“I think I need a name for you,” I said, trying to break the cycle. “If you’re okay with that? I can call you...”

I trailed off there, my embarrassment mixing with his projected anticipation. The huge and deadly alien waited patiently as I struggled for focus. Again, his amusement pressed at the edge of my thoughts, amusement tinged with something else.

Something hungry and eager. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

The fear was still there, but it was the breathless, exciting fear of an adventure, not the more immediate terror of my

death. I'd had quite enough of that from Hess and Volkov, so the difference was obvious.

“Fearjoyangergrateful is a bit of a mouthful,” I said aloud, trying my best to summarize the emotions that made up his psychic ‘name’ and rejecting the result as soon as I spoke it. “How about, uh, Tyradyn? No, Tyr is better. Right?”

I didn't know how much he understood, or how he'd react. It would be like someone calling me ‘Human’ or maybe ‘Hue’ because they couldn't pronounce my name. He stared at me, six eyes blinking in pairs, until he finally nodded.

Tyr it is.

Chapter 8

Monster

I'd never had a name. Not in the way Myra meant. All of my kin were extensions of Home, and we knew each other by our parts in the chorus of Home's mindsong. If a gardener needed a warrior, it did not matter whether they got me or another.

Deep sadness filled me at the realization that would never happen again. It was just me and Home now, and Home's song was fading. Soon, I would be alone.

No member of the Hive is alone. It's a contradiction, an impossibility. Alone and dead were almost identical concepts to us, and one would follow the other closely.

The possibility of moving to another colony had never occurred to me. Before meeting Myra, I wouldn't have wanted to—the death of the colony and my death held a natural link. My outliving Home was as meaningless an idea as my arm outliving me.

But now, things were different. Myra's mindsong, singular and self-contained, called to me. She offered me a name, a place that was my own. A place in the universe that included her.

Unlike the other humans, Myra's mind filled with wonder at Home's beauty. And her complex feelings toward me woke an eager desire in my hearts.

It wasn't just her mind that appealed to me. Her body, wrapped in skintight and vacuum-proof material, looked deliciously soft and invitingly curved. I wanted to see her without that covering, to bare her skin to mine. To hear her mind awaken to my touch and watch her body flourish.

Our minds resonated, her fear/desire/excitement echoing my need/hunger/lust, each of us inflaming the other as we stood, looking into each other's eyes. She had only two, bright

green and piercing, set in a round face framed by red hair. Her skin, pale aside from the flush spreading across her cheeks, gave a beautiful contrast to the full, red splendor of her lips.

I nodded, accepting the name 'Tyr' she gave me. Accepting that and more. Myra shivered, tongue darting out to wet her lips, mixed feelings clarifying into an invitation.

One I would not refuse.

Chapter 9

Myra

Tyr's claws tore through my spacesuit like a plasma torch through tinfoil. The first cut let in freezing air and made me gasp, the second tore away the whole front panel. Panic filled me as the air from my suit emptied into the garden, erupting from the rips in an icy fog. The suit's alarm screamed for a moment, then fell silent as the alien pulled off my helmet and cast it aside.

With effortless precision, Tyr carved the clothes from my body. Despite his speed, he didn't leave so much as a scratch on my skin. It took him less than five seconds to strip me naked.

I stared up into his eyes, my panic subsiding. This wasn't an attack. It was an answer to my secret longing.

Desire radiated from Tyr, an urgent need reflecting my own. How had I hoped to hide this from a telepath? Stupid of me to try, and doubly so when I found him sharing my feelings.

Some, at least. Lust and curiosity, yes, but there wasn't a hint of fear in his heart. Tyr's confidence was like a rock, anchoring us both as his clawed fingers caressed and explored me.

Am I going crazy? I asked myself, heart racing and pulse pounding in my ears. *He's a Tyradyne war machine, not a human. Does he even have a dick?*

Whatever the answer, I couldn't deny that he got me fired up in a way no human ever had. I needed this. I needed *him*.

As soon as I admitted that to myself, Tyr grabbed me and lifted me against him. His hard carapace surprised me with its heat and a strange, coarse texture that drove my body wild. He brought his mouth down to mine, tongue pushing between my

lips in a powerful kiss, probing and urgent. Long, flexible, rough, it felt nothing like a human tongue.

It was better in every way.

I moaned around him, body shaking as the weird texture invaded my mouth and *pulsed*.

Mine. The word formed in my mind as all other thoughts fled. ***My human.***

I wanted to object, to fight, to resist. Well, no. That's not really true. I should have wanted that, but my body was already a melting puddle of desire, and my mind overwhelmed by the waves of powerful sensation crashing through me.

Instead of arguing, I groaned and pulled him closer. *If I'm doing this, I'm doing it all the way*, I thought.

My alien monster's hard carapace was strange against my skin. It looked smooth, but it was rough to the touch and felt so, so good. My nipples hardened against him, and my pussy throbbed with need.

Strong hands gripped my hips, lifting me against my monster. It was only when more hands traced their way down my back, sharp talons scratching deliciously, that I looked down.

Tyr stood on his hind legs, his forelegs doubling as powerful arms to lift me up. That left him free to explore my body with his clawed hands, scratching across my breasts with just enough pressure for his talons to bite. The pain blended with pleasure, and I moaned as he withdrew his tongue from my mouth.

Amusement filtered through the mind link between us, and a blush spread down my body. With jaws capable of crunching through bone, he planted delicate nibbles on my shoulder, my neck. Lifting me higher, he left bite marks across my breasts, then down across my stomach. He kept lifting until his mouth reached my pussy and stopped.

I groaned and grabbed his head, trying to pull him to me. My fear of him vanished under the aching *need* he'd awakened, and I no longer cared if he knew it.

But he didn't shift. It would have been easier to move a statue. Three pairs of intense eyes stared at me as I panted with need, and the multicolored frill around his neck vibrated.

Submit. You are mine. Yes/No?

"Oh, fuck you," I shouted, frustrated need overwhelming me. "Yes, god dammit, yes."

I didn't get time to say more. He pulled me to him, his flexible tongue parting the folds of my sex and sending a shudder through my body. Its weird texture made me squirm and squeal as he devoured me hungrily.

Needle-sharp teeth scraped across my sensitive skin, making me arch my back and cry out. That long, flexible, amazing tongue lapped at my lower lips, circled my clit, pushed into me. He was exploring, discovering my human anatomy for the first time, and doing a fucking amazing job of it.

My breathing ragged, I panted for oxygen in the thin, frozen air. His clawed hands grabbed my breasts, tweaking and scratching, driving me closer and closer to the brink of a monumental orgasm. His lower, stronger hands held my hips motionless, no matter how hard I tried to struggle.

The alien menace wouldn't let me off that easily. As I reached the ragged edge of my endurance, he withdrew his magical tongue and lowered me to a bed of soft black leaves. I bit down on an urge to beg him for more, my body screaming with need.

Did it matter, when he was in my thoughts? Probably not, but it was the one shred of dignity I had left. Nope. I would stick to my guns.

My fierce determination was immediately undermined as my alien lover reared up over me. Chitinous armor plates parted on Tyr's abdomen, revealing an appendage that left me pale and gasping.

His cock, if that's what it was, looked like nothing on Earth. It was as long as my arm, and thick bulbs swelled along its length. A strange, swirling texture of red glowed under

midnight-black skin. Like lava flowing under an obsidian surface, I thought, mesmerized.

It ended in a bulge larger than the rest, flared and terrifying. I whimpered at the sight. What would that be like inside me? His size was terrifying, and I had no desire to be ripped apart.

The waves of his desire pounded through my mind, a hungry need that he wouldn't easily sate. My body wanted him as badly, but I didn't let it override my survival instincts. I scabbled backward, babbling as I retreated.

“You can't be serious. That thing will kill me. Please!”

No fear. No death. Only joy.

Was that supposed to be reassuring? I shuddered, but it wasn't entirely terror shaking me. My body, traitor that it was, wanted to experience him no matter the cost.

With powerful hands, Tyr pulled me back to him and parted my legs. The head of his cock pressed against my wet, eager pussy, and a wave of alien satisfaction washed over me.

I braced for what I half-expected to be my death by fucking. And damn me if I didn't think it would be worth it.

His upper hands closed on my wrists, pulling my arms over my head and pinning me down, helpless and exposed. My breathing quickened, chest heaving, as he lowered his face to me, long tongue extending to trace a pattern across my breasts. Wherever it touched, my skin tingled, sensations running through me.

When he licked my nipples, it was enough to make me cry out. Pleasure shot through my nervous system like lightning.

That was the moment he thrust, strong and slow. His giant cock stretched me, the pain mingling with pleasure, a whirlwind of sensations making me scream up at the watching jungle of alien plants.

Endorphins flooded my system as he pushed that first massive bulge into me. It was hot, burning hot, and my body welcomed it. But it was so wide, and his slow thrust stretched

me further than ever before. I whimpered and bit my lip at the pain, reflexively pulling myself away.

He didn't let me move, not an inch. And my helplessness sent another flood of wicked desire through me. I *wanted* this. My body ached for it, needed it.

God, I'm so fucked up. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting the feelings overwhelm me and trying to relax. To let him take me. He pressed harder, and my slick pussy stretched a little further, letting him in. The bulbous head pulsed as it pushed inside, and I fell over the edge into an orgasm like nothing I'd ever experienced.

It hurt, yes, but the pleasure was more than worth it. My body shook, my heart raced, and the world dissolved around me. Everything collapsed in on itself, leaving just me and the Tyradyn warrior, our minds and bodies pressed together until we might have been one flesh and one soul.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for this, and I don't know how long I lost myself in it before the feeling shattered, dropping me back into the real world.

My lover pushed forward, and the second bulge of his cock pressed into me. I threw my head back and screamed again, but this time with pure pleasure.

My alien lover's mind battered against mine as he thrust deeper, and unearthly emotions filled my soul. Some I could translate—savage joy, fierce desire, eager need. Others were a mystery to me, but all gave me a taste of Tyr's heart.

I thrashed in his grip, struggling as he pushed deeper, deeper, deeper. His tongue explored my body, rasping over my nipples as I shook under him, and I lost track of how many times he pushed me into an orgasm. Each one was powerful enough to leave me a whimpering mess, but never enough for him.

Pulses ran up and down his cock as he buried himself in me, deeper than I'd ever imagined I could take. Words lost, I thrashed under him, struggling to reach him, to touch him.

He lowered his head, and I lunged up, sinking my teeth into the softer tissue of his neck. The effect was incredible. He tensed, a vibration running through his black-carapaced body. Three pairs of eyes went wide, and the pulses along his cock sped up, his entire member swelling inside me.

The pressure from his mind changed too, losing all subtlety and becoming a tsunami of pleasure that swept us both away. As I tipped back over the edge into the wildest orgasm of my life, he bit down on my shoulder, sharp teeth digging into my skin and claiming me.

We came together in that moment, both our bodies shuddering as he emptied himself into me.

Chapter 10

Monster

I'd never heard a mindsong like Myra's after our mating. Her mind awash with pleasure, she held me close and accepted me in a way no alien should be able to. Was she some distant kin, a descendent of the Hive?

No. No connection. Home was certain, which meant I was too. Home wouldn't make a mistake about that.

But my frills twitched with the thrill of contact, of connection to a mate. If her species wasn't part of the Hive, how was that possible?

It didn't matter. She was mine, I was hers, and what more could the universe offer? Stroking her warm, soft skin, I marveled at how vulnerable she was without her suit. I both admired her bravery and despaired of her foolishness at venturing into space with so little protection.

I will keep her safe, I promised myself. Watching her chest rise and fall, I swore I would never let her come to harm. I just didn't know *how*.

The human could not share Home with me, because Home was dying. Her mindsong faded and stuttered, and in it I heard the truth I'd been avoiding. Home burned carefully gathered resources with reckless abandon to keep the Garden alive for me and Myra. Long-hoarded energy radiated out into nothingness, and ice crept up her veins.

Home's life faded faster than I'd imagined as she threw everything into keeping Myra alive. A deep urgency crept into her thoughts, pushing me to get her to her ship, but I hesitated. How could I abandon Home?

"What's wrong?" Myra's words vibrated in the air, and I plucked their meaning from her mind. Our mating had sealed us closer together, close enough that she felt my distress and I understood her speech without effort.

Home is dying. She is sacrificing herself for me. Myra tensed against me, holding me close, and the warm vibrations of her breathing soothed the pain. She cared. She didn't understand, but she still cared.

"That's awful," she said. Pausing, she looked around the garden. I wondered what she saw with her human eyes. "Is there anything we can do?"

The question hung in the air for a moment as I thought. The problem was too big, and Home was no help. She sank back into her fading song, content that she had saved me.

"There has to be something," Myra insisted as the silence stretched. "Home... you mean the ship's AI, right? We can save that, pull out the computer and bring it somewhere else?"

The strange concepts battered my brain, giving me a headache as I forced them into my frame of reference. *Home is the ship. Home is everything here. I am Home, this tree is Home. No one part is more Home than any other.*

Myra sat up, her mind churning through ideas that I could not grasp. I stroked her back and waited, hoping her alien mind would find some possibility I'd overlooked.

"There has to be something. If not Home, then a part of her. This ship is biotech, right? Is there, I don't know, a seed? A cutting we can plant somewhere?"

Fierce, angry at the injustice of the universe, unwilling to allow entropy to triumph. Given the choice, Myra would stay here until she solved the problem—or died trying.

No. I responded without thinking. We had little enough time, and wasting it on forlorn hopes would save no one. But I could not keep the truth from Myra. A moment later, I amended my answer. *I do not know. Home has always been. How she grew is a mystery.*

Myra's mind flickered, fast and beautiful, her breath frosting in the cooling air. "You said every part of Home is Home, right? And you're part of Home? So... you're a cutting. Sort of. In a way. We can try to regrow her from you, anyway."

The idea tasted bizarre and seemed unlikely. But it wasn't impossible, and that put it above any other options I had. Perhaps it was a foolish hope, but it was all I had—and to grasp it, we had to survive.

Home was failing. I felt it all around us—air leaking out into space, lights dimming, water reservoirs freezing over. The light from the human's spacecraft had never been enough to sustain Home, and soon she'd be back to drifting in the endless night. Only this time, she wouldn't wake up.

Ignoring my human mate's protests, I threw her over my shoulder and leaped into motion. As I carried her through the Garden, I saw frost forming on the leaves and flowers, and Myra shivered violently in my arms. The temperature dropped fast, already below the freezing point of water, heading for the freezing point of carbon dioxide. I didn't know what temperature would kill a human, but we were obviously plunging below it.

Ahead, the wall vines uncurled from each other, letting in bright light from Myra's ship. The path to the human vessel was open, but the crossing was airless and frozen. Home had concentrated on giving us time in our garden idyll and sacrificed everything else.

Locked in Myra's embrace, lost in claiming my mate, I hadn't noticed how far things had gone. Now we had an abyss of vacuum to cross, one that would kill my fragile mate if I made a single misstep.

Chapter 11

Myra

The lights faded around us as Tyr carried me through his dying ship. I clung to him for dear life, my eyes squeezed shut and curses falling from my lips. The speed a Tyradyn warrior could manage on four legs was terrifying.

Closing my eyes also spared me the sight of the ship dying around us. Part of me insisted that there had to be a way to save it, but that was stupid. It was far more advanced than anything I'd worked on, and thousands of years old. If a Tyradyn didn't know how to save it, and it didn't know how to save itself, then what use would I be?

Saving Tyr would have to do. Together, we could try to grow a new ship, and even if we failed, we'd have each other. Better that than dying here in a futile attempt at saving this ship.

I was still trying to convince myself of that when Tyr slammed to a stop. Opening my eyes, I was half-blinded by the shaft of light we stood in. Overhead, *Myra's Joy* hung in the darkness, her spotlight illuminating the surface of the Tyradyn ship and shining through the breach in the inner hull. All that separated us from the safety of my ship was about twenty yards of hard vacuum.

"Now don't you wish you'd given me a chance to undress rather than tearing my suit off?"

No. Take too long. Needed you naked. The voice in my head sounded smug, but I felt worry leaking around that. ***New problem, new solution. You are safe.***

I glanced around at the freezing darkness, goosebumps rising on my skin as heat escaped into space. "You could have fooled me, Tyr."

We are safe. Bound together. Tyr will not allow harm to come to Myra.

Worry clouded his words, but so did determination. He drew himself back, all four legs bracing, and I realized what he was doing just in time to scream as he leaped.

He wrapped around me like an armadillo, his segmented carapace forming an airtight ball with me at the center. Bruising pressure crushed the air from my lungs in the tiny space, but the vacuum didn't reach me. It felt as though we floated across the void for an eternity, though it couldn't have been longer than a few seconds before we hit something.

That had better be the Joy, I thought. If Tyr missed his mark, I'd be dead in minutes, if not sooner. My thoughts were already fuzzy, and my consciousness faded.

Airlock. His psychic voice sounded weaker too, though perhaps I imagined it. **How open?**

That question was easy, though the answer slipped from my mind as I tried to focus on it. As darkness gathered around my thoughts, I did my best to visualize the instructions as clearly as possible. All he needed to do was find the emergency release and pull it...

*

I woke, gasping and naked, cold hard decking painful under me and the harsh light demanding I cover my eyes. The air's burned plastic smell, the unsteady artificial gravity, the flickering of the lights, all let me know I was aboard *Myra's Joy*. That I'd been aboard a Tyradyn bioship seemed ludicrous. Like a dream, or a nightmare.

Wasn't it more plausible that the malfunctioning airmaker had pumped some toxin into the air and I'd lain here, hallucinating? I groaned and struggled to open my eyes, hugging myself against the chill and wondering about oxygen deprivation.

Whether from the airmaker's fuck up or an unprotected leap from ship to ship tucked into the hollow of a Tyradyn warrior's body, my brain felt like someone had stuffed it with cotton. My body ached and tingled, bruised and satisfied, and as my mind cleared, I recognized the feeling. I'd *definitely* had sex.

Foggy memories insisted it had been with a six-limbed alien warrior. But common sense reminded me I'd shared my ship with two men. The thought was enough to make me sit bolt upright—sex with Volkov or Hess was *not* part of the plan.

The cabin spun around me erratically as I looked for them. Instead, standing beside the airlock, I saw Tyr. My heart skipped a beat.

Somehow, it was real. *He* was real. Tyr stood there, unmoving, one pair of eyes open and watching me, the other two shut. Motionless, his carapace gleamed in the flickering light. He might have been a sculpture.

But as soon as I met his alien gaze, the multi-colored frills flicked open around his neck. His thoughts surrounded me, pressing gently against my own and filling me with warmth and love.

“What the hell am I going to do with you?” I asked, pulling myself to my feet. “Importing Tyradyn tech is illegal enough, now I'm coming back with a living Tyradyn warrior? Customs is going to pitch a fit, then throw the book at me.”

Despite my grumbling, I couldn't keep the smile from my face. It was real. *He* was real.

I kill Customs. Tyr's answer echoed in my skull, and I snorted a surprised laugh, though I wasn't sure he was joking. ***Protect from anyone who throws things at you.***

He came to me, limbs clicking on the metal deck as he moved with precision and lifted me in his arms. Tyr looked out of place in the *Joy*, his strange techno-organic carapace a wild contrast to the messy, worn-down old ship. But in another sense, he fit perfectly, as though he was the element I'd been missing to turn *Myra's Joy* into a true home.

“No killing law enforcement, Tyr,” I told him, throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him. In the bright electric light, his fanged mouth looked even more terrifying than before. But that sent a frisson of desire through me—I was safe, I knew I was safe, in his arms.

Maiming? Light mauling? I caught the amused tinge to his thoughts. Thank god, he *was* joking. Probably. I hoped so, anyway. *They will not harm my Myra.*

Okay, maybe not joking as much as I'd like. But we had weeks to sort out how to smuggle him past customs before the *Joy* reached settled space. Weeks to get to know each other and come up with a plan.

And we'd start planning as soon as I finished welcoming Tyr to his new home. I kissed him again, feeling his lust building as I cautiously stroked the frill around his neck. His tongue pressed against mine, his hands explored my naked body, and my brain shut up as he squeezed me to him. Desire sparked desire, the feedback loop leaving us both desperate for each other.

With the last of my willpower, I guided him toward my bed. It was no grove of black flowers, but we'd make do.

About Leslie Chase

I'm Leslie Chase, USA Today bestselling author of science fiction and paranormal romances. I love writing, especially writing sexy romance between sassy human women and their big, rough, alien warrior lovers!

Over the course of my life I've done a lot of things, from working with the elderly to studying sword fighting to teaching tai chi. And, always, reading reading reading!

When I'm not busy reading or writing, I'm busy thinking about what I'm going to write next or researching it – yes, damn it, looking at castles and swords and pictures of spaceships counts as research.

Sign up for my newsletter to keep up with my new releases and other news!

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Rutted by the Raptor

The Knottiverse: Jurassic Mates
Book 2

by

V.T. Bonds

Dedication

This is weird. I'm weird. You're weird.

*The world needs more weird, so middle finger to the
naysayers.*

Knotty reading!

Chapter 1

Kope

“You *asshole!*”

My wrists ache from fighting against my restraints. Ridiculous. This entire situation is so completely ridiculous it *must* be a dream.

“Good luck, Kope. You’re gonna need it.”

I glare into unrepentant eyes and wish I could slap him again. My palm still aches from when I hit him two days ago.

I glance at the guards stepping forward to grab my arms and growl my next words, too furious to stay silent.

“You’re sending me to a planet with a two percent survival rating because *you* fucked up some goddamn paperwork and won’t admit to your mistake.”

As the two guards, both beta males, pull me forward, I drag my feet but stop fighting my wrist cuffs, trying to find the calm façade that’s kept me alive all these years.

“You’re working for a fucking coward, boys. A goddamn snake. Watch your back, or you might get sent to an exile planet with fucking *dinosaurs*.”

Neither guard pays me any mind, and I can’t say I blame them. This shit show probably plays on repeat in this godforsaken place. They probably hear worse every miserable day of their lives.

Except they have employment, food, and a safe place to sleep, unlike seventy-five percent of my solar system’s inhabitants.

They push me onto a pair of yellow footprints and walk away. My sneakers refuse to lift, the soles held in place by the footprints, just like the other twenty-ish prisoners standing in a neat formation in the center of the loading bay. I flex my

fingers, itching to lunge back toward the idiot who put me in this mess, but suck in a breath, trying to steady my racing heart. My shoulders ache from having my wrists tied behind my back for so long, but adrenaline heightens my senses as dread curdles my stomach.

A shiny film coats the world, creating a box around us. It crackles and flickers for several seconds as the charge builds. As it zaps to full power, I drop into as much of a crouch as my planted feet will allow.

Taking stock of those around me, I square my shoulders deeper into the crouch and grit my teeth. There are only two other female prisoners, both near the middle of the group. With their height and stature, they must be betas, but without a proper sniff, I'll never know, and in this crowd, I have no desire to call attention to myself. Already, the three alphas nearest me stare at me with interest, despite the acrid stench of fear clouding around us as we prepare to face certain doom.

Oh, the joys of being an omega. Not only do I have to worry about surviving dinosaurs, but I also have to fight off any alpha too stupid to keep his cock in his pants.

The cargo bay disappears. Streaks of light turn the shiny film into a kaleidoscope of colors. Pitch black nothingness emanates from the walls as we stand in utter silence.

The footprints morph into dirt and the ties around my wrists fade into obscurity as the faux room around us dissipates.

Stars twinkle in a dark purple sky. Long grass tickles my shoulders and caresses my entire body as it sways in a gentle breeze. No one moves, waiting for the dizziness of teleportation to fade.

The hairs on my nape stand on end. Instinctual fear heightens my senses impossibly further. Each blade of grass brushing against my bare arms and every air molecule ghosting over my skin sends dread through me.

We're being watched.

A man in the far corner of the group screams and his head disappears into the thick grass. I erupt into motion just like everyone else, several alphas running off in whatever random direction they choose, leading the way into the darkness. I pick the largest group of panicked people and run in the complete opposite direction, gritting my teeth when I realize a handful of males run alongside me. With several meters between us, our breaths saw in and out as we sprint as fast as we can through the sharp grass. Blood wells from my arms as the blades slice through me without mercy, but I have nothing to cover them with, so I train my gaze on the path ahead, desperate for a change in scenery.

Between one stride and the next, the head bobbing to my left disappears. I glance to find the beta male gone, the trampled trail behind him ending abruptly. Cursing the height of the grass and my shortness, I push through the ache in my thighs and the burning in my lungs, pouring on more speed.

An alpha with much longer legs reaches the end of the field ahead of my tiny group. He trips over a log, screams, and gurgles the tune of death.

Crimson sprays up around where he fell, but the grass and the log block my view of whatever's happened. I change my trajectory, shifting to the right and breathing through my fear when a thin beta male almost tramples me. He snarls before his eyes go wide, his higher advantage point offering him a clear view of the gore ahead of us.

A gust of wind bends the grass, dipping the surface like waves on the ocean.

Reptilian eyes stare back at me from a terrifying, hungry face full of teeth and intelligence.

Terror gives my feet wings. I dart to the left and duck, gritting my teeth to hold in my scream as fiery pain streaks across my face, the blades slicing my cheeks, and a massive body catapults over mine.

The thin beta screeches and flails. I push forward, trying to put as much distance between myself and the horrifying creature, searching for somewhere safe.

A tree. I should climb a tree. Being off the ground should protect me from the velociraptors.

Why my brain supplies me with the name of the monsters stalking me through the field, I don't know. All I can focus on is the nearest climbable tree.

A feminine scream pierces my ears as a beta woman reaches the woods several hundred yards to my right. She jumps and starts scrambling up a trunk.

Instinctively pivoting to the right to avoid the log dripping crimson again, my heel slips in mud, so I tuck my shoulders and roll.

Claws snag on the back of my pant leg as another velociraptor lunges for me. Breathless from fear and exertion, but too stubborn to quit, I pop onto my feet and dart in a new direction. The woman screams and begs as she clings onto a low branch, her body stretched tight as rows of deadly teeth close over her calf.

I gasp for breath, my lungs an inferno as my head throbs with every beat of my heart, nausea roiling through my already tight stomach. A few paces away from the tree I mean to climb, I watch in horror as a gigantic beak closes around the woman's head. The pterodactyl twists its neck and leaves nothing but a torso behind as it disappears back into the foliage.

Nope. No trees for me.

Pain slices across my back as I dart around the trunk, the predator right behind me half a second away from killing its prey. Blindly diving over a bush with fat leaves, I tuck into a roll but keep falling and falling until finally my butt hits ground and I slide down an impossibly steep incline.

The haunting call of angry beasts follows me as I tumble through vines, rocks, and brush, my entire body throbbing in pain. My descent ends. I lay bruised and exhausted, fighting for breath and staring blindly up at a thick canopy of leaves.

A heavy mass slides down the slope above me.

I struggle to find my feet, rolling one last time before the hill evens out enough to propel me forward. Turning toward the sound of what I hope is a river, I thrash through the underbrush and prepare to vault over a fallen log only to slam my stomach into the bark, shock demanding I stop as my original tormentor blocks my path.

Tilting its head, the raptor watches me freeze in fear. My diaphragm seizes as I realize how close I came to jumping into its jaws.

If a dinosaur could smile, this one would offer me a triumphant grin. A sparkle enters her slitted eyes, and she hunkers down for the final swipe of her claws.

A shadow rises behind her, blocking out what little of the night sky passes through the canopy. It grows and grows, moving without sound, expanding until it stands twice as high as what I thought was my biggest threat. The velociraptor's yellow speckled eyes narrow as she senses her doom.

Claws as long as my forearm wrap around her throat and stomach, ripping her in two with one savage jerk.

A multi-toned screech bombards me from all directions a millisecond before more dark shapes vault out of the abyss. I drop behind the log and scurry along it as war rages between the pack of velociraptors and the unknown creature. The ground shakes and gut-wrenching snarls ring through my skull as I force my battered body to move, my ribs sending shards of agony through my chest with every breath.

Reaching the end of the log, I scream and roll, barely avoiding being smooshed by a bloody tail. Scrambling to my hands and knees, I crawl to the nearest cover, batting humongous leaves out of my way and pushing myself deeper into the thicket of vines and thorns.

Heat encompasses my ankle and drags me back into the fray. Mud cakes under my fingernails as I scratch at the ground in vain. Massive talons pull me inexorably out of my hiding place and roll me onto my back.

I stare up into slitted pupils surrounded by oblong green and yellow speckled irises, expecting each breath to be my last. With muscles locked in terror, I hold my filthy hands above me as though I might have a chance of warding off such a monstrous beast.

It leans closer, its broad shoulders blocking out the canopy above as the long face, an eerie cross between a raptor and a human, inches toward mine. My gut clenches as a familiar, lascivious gleam sparks within the creature's eyes, a sudden plea for death rising in my soul.

Delicious pheromones clog my nostrils as a lethal claw strokes my cheek, the outer curve smooth.

Clarity slams through me. With a broad neck and wide shoulders, more strength and cunning than a pack of velociraptors, and the masculine aura emanating from the monster, he proves to be an omega's worst nightmare.

He is alpha.

And he is *hungry*.

His curved talon trails down my throat and over my breasts, pushing between my outstretched arms and continuing down to my stomach. Stepping forward, he places his terrifyingly sharp hind claws on either side of my knees and drops to his haunches.

A rumble rolls from his chest. My bones soften and organs melt, the vibration wrecking my sanity. Heat bursts through my veins and sets me on fire with the lust of an omega entranced by an alpha's purr, my body no match for his call.

His claw dips lower while evil glee emanates from his otherworldly eyes.

White-hot agony spears into my thigh as he sinks his curved talon deep into the muscle. A scream rips from my throat as I arch against the pain, my fists filling with dead leaves and dirt as I writhe on the jungle floor.

"Mine."

Horrible, wonderful ice seeps into my thigh, spreading through my veins and extinguishing the inferno begun by his purr. For several confusing moments, nothing hurts. Nothing matters. Neither pain nor terror break through the odd numbness.

Hunger replaces the void, a raging beast gnawing at my insides and demanding satiation. Lust more intense than the mindless heat of estrous pours through me, pebbling my nipples and morphing my core to a pool of magma. Slick floods my pants as salty tears pour from my eyes, the sudden changes too much for my already overburdened mind.

Expecting the worst, lost to the wildfire eating away at my body, I fight and grapple with my tormentor as he lifts me from the ground and cradles me in his arms.

Such an intimate embrace shouldn't be possible from a creature so full of menace, but he gathers me closer to his chest and rips apart my will to fight by rumbling out a decadent note. My muscles go lax even as my brain scrambles for an escape, the situation so much worse than anything I imagined.

Heat emanates from his scales, scorching my arms and sinking deeper to fan the flames of desire ravaging my insides as he stalks through the underbrush. My ragged breaths, pounding heart, and broken whimpers ruin his otherwise silent passage, broadcasting our whereabouts to all creatures nearby.

He doesn't falter when my core cramps without warning, sending a gush of fluids through my pants and onto his bare stomach. I clap my disgusting hands over my mouth, stifling my cries of misery as best I can, not wanting to incite the beast so gently holding me.

His elongated muzzle tilts, pointing a green and yellow speckled eye down at me, the intensity of his glance worsening the flames consuming my nerve endings. As gore drips from his long, sharp teeth, his cheeks tighten in a terrifying grin.

My fear of the foreign planet coalesces and redirects toward the monster ferrying me to god knows where. Primal senses lodged deep within my marrow conclude him to be the

most terrifying beast on the planet, so my attempts to quiet my breathing have no purpose. I could scream until my voice died and nothing would dare approach him.

Which makes his silent stalking all the more terrifying.

The trees disappear, revealing the dark purple sky and twinkling stars. My mind grasps at the most inane topics between full body convulsions. The hunger spreads to my connective tissues and bones, infecting me on a molecular level until every cell within my body pulses for relief.

His spicy pheromones and deep rumble are the only reason I survive the all-consuming desire.

Cool stone replaces the solid warmth of him. My arms reach of their own accord, grabbing a wrist so thick my fingers barely touch despite me wrapping both hands around him. I snatch my palms away, horrified and confused.

“What did you do to me?”

My words emerge raw and uneven, my throat tight from abuse and my teeth gritted together as my hands immediately start roaming my curves, seeking to relieve my hungry flesh. I try to pull them away, but can only redirect them to less erogenous zones, embarrassment warring with need.

“I save.”

His rich, sharp voice hisses through a mouth with too many teeth, scrambling my senses and sending my torso through another convulsion. His use of the common human language sends my mind whirling.

“I mark.”

Tears soak my face as he caresses the oozing hole in my thigh with the back of the same talon he used to pierce me, fear and a dark joy thrumming through my veins. I blink and hold back a sob, noting how little blood seeps from my wound. Expecting it to spurt crimson, the slow leak makes no sense.

“Now mate.”

I freeze. Knowing what he intended and hearing the declaration prove to be two completely different experiences.

My diaphragm refuses to relax, panic creeping into my lust-riddled body. Darkness hovers on the edge of my vision.

“Nest, omega. Now.”

The syllables make no sense, and his decadent voice seems too far away from my fleeing mind. Slitted eyes narrow and talons clack against stone, the impatient rhythm menacing in its own right.

“I give. You use.”

Dried grass rustles as he scoops a mound of material closer to me, almost pushing it into my lap. I can't look away from his gigantic form, his graceful and thoughtful motions at odds with the lethal spikes trailing down his spine and the blood dripping from his midnight scales.

The void of unconsciousness slinks closer. I cannot mate this beast. He'll rip me to shreds.

His angry snarl follows him as he whips around so fast the wind from his long, tapered tail blows my hair back from my face.

Disbelief and relief score through me as he stalks quietly away into the night. The tension eases from my diaphragm. I suck in a breath and blink away the encroaching void, looking around for the first time.

Sitting in the center of what must be his den, I tremble as my mind replays his words and actions. A log makes up one wall, the fallen tree wider than I am tall, but the rest of the perimeter boasts the same sharp grass I encountered when I first landed on this planet. Mounds of different organic materials sit around me, each one higher than my shoulders.

“More.”

The growled word sends another wave of fire through me, a puddle forming on the bare stone under my butt.

Leaves tumble to the rock in front of my toes, the scent of freshly cut greenery a delicious addition to his potent pheromones. I cringe at the unexpected movement and clutch my abdomen, gasping through the pain of unrequited lust.

“W-what? Why?”

His talons click along the rocks as he steps back to the edge of the clearing.

“You want. I give. Nest. Now.”

I should run. I should have run the second he turned away. Anger flashes through his face as I glance at the horizon.

Pushing away the ludicrous thought as flames wrap around my core and heat pulses through my breasts, I swallow the moan building in my throat and reach forward, sinking my hand into the pile he just dropped in front of me, hoping to quell his anger.

My fingers slide through the leaves, the damp edges soft, and the urge to rumble in pleasure builds within my chest. I hold back, wrapping my fingers around a firm stalk and lifting it from the pile. Shrieking as something flies off the bottom of the leaf and slaps me in the face, I choke in fear as the world shifts.

Hard muscles covered in scorching scales scoop me up from my perch and fling me over a wide shoulder, the spikes running down his spine perilously close to my face.

He whips around, his tail knocking several mounds askew. Centrifuge lifts me from his scales. I grab the base of the nearest spike, desperate to avoid impaling myself on it, and hiss as pain slices through my arm. A squeak escapes me when I find myself held to his chest by ruthless arms, his hug too tight. Struggling to breathe as need pounds through my squished breasts and pain streaks up my forearm, I meet slitted eyes.

My stomach hollows out, dropping to the ground with an inaudible thud.

“Where threat?”

“It was j-just a bug. I’m s-sorry.”

He squints, narrowing his focus on my lips. A quiet moment passes while intelligence works behind his speckled eyes.

“No sorry. Mine.”

His mouth opens, revealing teeth sharper than any knife I’ve ever seen, and I flinch as he leans down. The movement loosens his hold on me, allowing me to inhale, filling my lungs with the raw power of his pheromones. A long, tapered tongue emerges from his mouth and strokes from my jaw to my hairline, leaving a trail of tingling wetness behind.

Cool relief seeps into my cuts, the tiny stings forgotten amongst my more severe pains. My chest stutters on my exhale before I suck in another delicious, dizzying breath.

Keeping me tucked to his chest with one arm, he lifts my forearm with his other palm, his terrifying talons bracketing my slim wrist.

The visual of his gnarled, gory claw cupping my delicate flesh sends tremors through my lust, the realization of our stark differences profound amidst my confusion.

His tongue grates over the gash created by his spike, licking from the tips of my fingers, down my palm, over my wrist, and all the way to the inside of my elbow. The same cooling effect sizzles into my nerves, and I gasp as the bleeding stops and the healing process begins before my very eyes. Not instantaneous, but exponentially faster than my natural capabilities, his saliva quickens my healing.

“No wait. Nest. Now.”

He settles me on my feet with an ominous growl, his warning in stark contrast to his unexpected gentleness. Gravity pulls on my breasts, the subtle bouncing too much in my frenzied state. A cramp almost sends me to my knees as wetness soaks my pants.

He keeps his stare pointed at me while he turns his thick body around, sweeping chunks of moss onto my sneakers with his tail before he stalks back to the edge of the clearing.

What choice do I have? With his venom scorching my insides and his sharp gaze trained on me, I wouldn’t make it five steps before he caught me again. Plus, I don’t know what other, worse creatures lurk out in the night, if there are any.

And the glimpses of care, however brief and *different* they may be, light a candle of hope within my soul.

Maybe he doesn't plan to hurt me, despite the pain he's wrought. Maybe he'll surprise me, like he already has with his gentle tongue.

He might be my only hope of becoming part of the planet's two percent survival rating.

Unable to hide my wariness, I slowly lower myself to my haunches, reaching for the closest bit of moss.

Instinct rises the moment my fingers grasp the silky bundle of fibers, the texture unlike anything I've ever felt before. My ears melt at the pleasure-filled purr weaving through the sounds of nature until I realize it originates from my chest.

Dropping into my basal needs like a rock plopping into a lake, I gather and knead the materials, sinking onto my knees and purring louder. No embarrassment rises, the joy of such decadent luxury in a wild, ruthless place too stunning for any other emotion. Spreading the tufts all around to create a soft layer between myself and the stone, I shuffle to the next pile, my hackles rising at the scattered materials. In disarray from his tail, the lack of order snaps me into a feral beast incapable of higher thought processes. I sweep the offending items toward the outskirts of his den and snarl, tearing a colorful bundle of vines in two before crawling to the next stack.

Less perturbed by the slightly misshapen mound, I sink my hands into the fronds but immediately yank them back out, hissing at the itchy, scratchy strands. Red spikes flash across my vision as my alpha swipes the pile away with his tail, sweeping the entire mound out of the circle with a single move. I jump and clutch my heart in fear, but the feel of my crusty, filthy shirt distracts me.

Grabbing the bottom hem to rid myself of the repulsive garment, I freeze as talons settle on my shoulder.

"No. Mine. Nest."

He nudges more material my way with his tail, pulling me out of my startled shock, the moment of clarity slipping away

as silky vines fill my lap.

Scooping them into my arms and nuzzling them in delight, a sound I've never made before slips free of my throat. Humming and pressing my cheek deeper into the squishy, elastic ropes, my logical mind drowns in instincts.

I shuffle to my partial nest and drop the vines in the center before scurrying across it to the other side of the clearing, primal needs demanding I inspect the bright splotch of colors. Approaching the mound of flowers with massive petals, I rumble my appreciation as every part of the plant proves soft and pliant, my ostentatious side preening over the colors so vibrant they shine in the moonlight.

My mate pampers me with his luscious offering. I approve.

Gathering every bit of the flowers, I hurry back to the center of the nest and glance at the other piles before sneering and turning to the mess in front of me. Nothing else seems even remotely enticing compared to what I already have.

I spread and organize, fluff and toss, rearrange and smooth until satisfaction outweighs the discord in my soul. Still, after picking up and setting down the same piece of moss exactly where I'd picked it up from three times, I snarl and hover my arm along the edge of my creation, prepared to wipe all my hard work away.

It's wrong. Despite the perfect balance of materials and fresh scents wafting up from the nest, all I want is to destroy it for mocking me with its incompleteness.

The ominous click of talon on stone stops me. I stay poised in my half-squat, half-kneeling position, the sound filling me with dread.

How could I sink so deeply into basal needs with him so close by? How could my omega self bask in his attention as he silently watched me during such an intimate moment?

My omega no longer agrees with my horror. She wants him to sate the heavy magma bubbling within my core. This alpha is the only one she wants, no matter his reptilian features and deadly aura.

Only he can fulfill the ache in my body.

I press my palms to the cool stone beside my nest, relaying the end of my ridiculous urge to send my creation of comfort across the clearing, and look over my shoulder at the beast brooding as far away as our den will allow.

Moonlight shimmers off his scales and makes the yellow speckles in his eyes shine. He taps his curved claw against the rock again, tilting his head and flexing his talons by his side. His inhale tightens my nipples and makes my core clench in want.

A moment passes where we study each other. Even with the mud and gore covered clothes encasing my body, I feel more exposed than ever before. More possessed and claimed.

He *sees* me. The real me. The terrified, hopeless omega who fought for scraps her entire life. The woman who always feared she'd either die alone and worthless or get claimed by an asshole alpha and spend her days in anguish.

In return, his eerily intelligent eyes reveal the complex, and yet refreshingly simple creature peering back at me.

He *wants* me to see him. He yearns for the connection of our souls. He expects to provide for and pamper me, to care for and protect me.

He intends to earn my loyalty and tie me to him so thoroughly that thoughts of separating from him never enter my mind again.

He wants *me*. Now.

His talons scrape along stone as he shifts into an intimidating stance, his forearms lifting and claws clacking in a lethal promise. Straightening his head, he sucks in another breath and unveils his creepy grin.

Slick bursts from between my folds as he releases his breath with a trill, his entire throat vibrating with dark promises.

He streamlines his body, lowering his shoulders as he stalks directly toward me. My senses heighten and my heart

pounds so hard in my chest my bruised ribs complain.

Fabric shreds with a scratching sound as he tucks his claw between my nape and my shirt and slices the material in two from my collar to the bottom hem in one swift tug. Callused, knobby knuckles sweep down my spine, the fire in my veins leaping at the soft caress.

His rumble drops an octave, hollowing both my stomach and my mind.

“Mine.”

He pushes the ruined material off my shoulders before slicing the waistband of my pants, catching my panties in the same motion and cupping his massive paw over my right ass cheek. With an insistent but painless push forward, he urges me to crawl into my nest, his other hand stripping me of my clothes as I shuffle along. When cool moss greets my bare hands and knees and fragrant air wafts across my naked body, I groan in delighted agony, incensed by his delicious pheromones and apprehensive despite the lust roaring through me.

His venom eats away at my nerves, demanding satiation from the beast hovering behind me.

Rough scales skim my exposed back, ass, and thighs, smearing my slick and coating his claws as he ghosts them up my body. His talons wrap around my nape and lower my shoulders to the nest, pressing the side of my face into the soft layers.

I fill my fists with dying greenery and knead through my angst, gasping and moaning when he uses his free hand to scratch the length of my body, his light touch zinging sparks straight to my core.

His bulk shifts behind me, forcing my knees apart.

Grainy despite the barrier of lubrication, his tongue sweeps along my folds, the tip flicking forward and hitting my clit so hard I jump. A god-awful noise wrenches from my throat, pitiful and wanton, as he buries the length of his tongue

between my labia and torments the sensitive bundle of nerves with tiny, stinging flicks.

For long, wonderfully horrible moments, he wiggles and grinds his tongue over my sex, teasing and tormenting every centimeter between my legs until my need drives me higher than ever before.

Writhing against my nest, helpless against his onslaught, I cry out again when he slips the tip of his tongue through my entrance. Electricity sizzles straight to my core, splashing his muzzle with my slick. His purr vibrates straight into me, ruining any chance of denying him what he wants.

I erupt. Colors become sounds. Sounds become taste. Nothing makes sense and yet everything is perfect.

Twinkling stars surround a terrifying face, reptilian eyes and dagger-sharp teeth holding my world together. Silk encompasses my back, more comfortable than a cloud.

His tongue glides over his teeth, ferrying my slick into his mouth as his slitted eyes narrow in delight. Pleasure streaks through my chest as talons scrape the mounds of my breast, lifting them from my ribs and pinching the hard tips between unrelenting, sharp claws. An animalistic moan fills my ears, reality warped by the flames burning me alive as I wade through the aftermath of my orgasm. Too sensitive, I swim in sensations more profound than life itself.

He lets my nipples slip free of his grip. Oceans gush from between my legs as I shatter yet again.

Gasping and shaking, I lift my heavy lids and blink in euphoria, the hazy cloud buffering me from reality and giving my omega instincts full rein of my senses.

My alpha's grin widens as evil glee shines from his diabolical eyes.

His claws scrape down his scales, the sound pulling my gaze to his chest. Too many muscles. His talons trail through the peaks and valleys, down his abs to the narrow waist above his thick thighs.

The scales covering his groin shift and part, his cock growing and growing until my omega heart weeps in awe. His black, thick, veiny shaft boasts yellow speckles reminiscent to the flecks of color in his inhuman eyes, and as it continues to balloon outward, even my basal needs shrink in terror.

Too big. No way he'll fit.

A whine seeps from my throat, the sound mingling with his delicious purr until he wraps a fist around his shaft and growls.

“Yours. All.”

His talon flicks something on the underside of his glans, and my lungs seize in horror as I notice the hook jutting from his shaft. Before I can react, his scorching body presses against my front. The thickness of his thighs wedge between my own and force my legs wide.

“Take.”

My tongue refuses to form words, nothing but a troubled moan leaving my lips as he fits the head of his massive cock to my entrance. Swollen and needy though I am, streaks of pain fill me as he stretches me, my tissues struggling to accept him, but he ruthlessly tilts his hips and invades my body.

A scream rips through the night, ending the chirping of insects and sounds of small animals, as an orgasm slams through me. His gigantic tool sits just inside my entrance, the hook a stinging pain amidst the white-hot wonder of *too much*. Liquid patters onto petals and soaks the moss, my slick spurting from between our partially joined bodies and landing on our nest.

My nails scratch at his arms and chest as he sinks deeper into me, taking me higher than the clouds with his ruthless invasion. His tongue laps at my tears with a languidness at odds with his dark purr, but perfectly in sync with his slow, determined reorganization of my internal organs.

His tip awakens erogenous zones I never knew existed, hitting sensitive places inside my body. The hook filets me alive, despite my subconscious telling me it isn't injuring me.

Something much thicker presses against my folds. I tear my gaze away from eerie yellow eyes and groan a garbled sound.

Near the base of his shaft, his knot already balloons, creating a wider portion of cock.

I can't. No way.

But I *need*.

He settles more of his weight onto my hips, incessant in his invasion.

Talons wrap around my nape.

“Take, omega. All.”

I attack his forearm, scratching and trying to bite him between screams as he forces the thicker part of himself into me.

Stretched beyond endurance, I barely track when he slices open his outer forearm with his own teeth, only shattering into a million tiny pieces when the sharp decadence of his flavor coats my tongue. I sink my teeth into his exposed flesh, my pieces scattering in the tornado of pleasure as he seats himself fully within me.

His knot expands. Agony rips through my torso as every muscle within my body clamps down, a horrendous wave of bliss crashing through me as he compresses my G-spot. Locked on his knot, grinding my teeth deeper into his arm, my eyes roll back into my skull as his tip mashes against the barrier of my womb. Unconsciousness creeps along the edges of my mind, preparing to send me into a dark void as the hook on the underside of his flange attaches to my cervix.

I die a million beautiful deaths. My heart splinters, portions settling within his gigantic chest and taking up the rhythm of his heartbeat.

White-hot agony pierces my shoulder as he bites me with his razor-sharp teeth. Foreign instincts and masculine strength settle into my chest, weaving within my own organs and solidifying our joining.

Beauty more profound than the expanse of purple sky and twinkling stars wraps around us, changing everything I thought I knew about myself.

I love every second of bliss as we bask in our joining, connected in body, mind, and soul. Barely breathing, stretched and hurting in glorious relief, I tremble within his arms and struggle to remain conscious.

When he extracts his teeth and runs his tongue over my mating mark, I fly into another orgasm, clamping around his massive cock and crying so hard my head spins.

His knuckle trails through my tears and caresses my jaw. I open my mouth and lick the puncture marks left by my teeth, instincts demanding I soothe him, despite my lack of healing abilities.

His purr presses me into the nest, making my limbs too heavy to move. After he licks his arm, he wraps his talons around my head, bracketing me in his muscular arms and encompassing me in a nest of alpha.

Piercing me with his slitted eyes, he strengthens his purr and trails the tip of his tongue through my tears.

Joy thumps through our combined hearts, the mating bond tying us together with a jubilant beat.

“Mine. Forever.”

His guttural words pull a moan from both of us as my insides tighten in response.

Pushing through the heavy satiation weighing down my body and the comfort of his purr buffering me from the night, I lift my arms and caress his jaw, enjoying the thrill of fear as I willingly touch his muzzle for the first time.

“Yes. Yours. Forever.”

All thoughts of escaping the planet fade. The universe beyond my lifemate and the care he longs to bring me disappears.

This is where I belong. This is where I want to be.

With my raptor. My alpha. My lifemate.

Even trapped on his knot and cocooned away from the world by his massive body, my omega instincts rise and harden my expression. Tightening my fingers on his face, I snarl the words, almost daring any future foes to show themselves so I can rip them apart.

“Mine. Only mine.”

My words pull a devilish smirk from his lips and a satisfied gleam from his eyes.

“Yes. Yours. Only yours. Forever.”

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Monster's Prey

Monsters in the Mountains Book

3

by

Leann Ryans

Chapter 1

Nala

I fussed with the pillow placement again. Something about it felt... wrong.

After twitching it another inch to the left, I yanked it from the bed, tossing it off the other side where I didn't have to look at it.

“Quit fretting.”

My brother's rough voice made me freeze before I could dive over and get the pillow again. The whole nest felt worse without it than it had before. Sucking in a deep breath through my nose, I blew out a slow exhale before responding.

“I can't help it.”

A grunt was all I received.

I'd hoped my heats would end with the loss of my mate. It had been a sad thought since I'd looked forward to children, but I was still surprised I'd survived a broken bond at all. My cycle had been muted while I was still struggling through the grief, but instead of dying away, I could feel it coming back full force.

Biology didn't care that I was no longer interested in breeding. That I'd lost my mate too soon.

My brother's mate spoke from where she sat beside the fire.

“I don't understand the big deal about nests, anyway. It's just a pile of bedding, and a messy one at that.”

I choked back the growl that the other female's words caused. She was a beta, and there wasn't a single day since my brother had taken over my care that she hadn't reminded me how put-out she was about sharing her home. She had no

sympathy, urging him to find me a new alpha as fast as possible, even against my protests.

My brother rumbled at her words but spoke to me.

“Edar has another two days of harvesting to do before he’ll have time to get you. You’ll have to handle it until then.”

As if I could control when my heat came.

“Yes, Brother.”

I climbed into my nest, careful not to disturb the pillows I’d taken so long to place. Reaching over the side, I collected the pillow I’d thrown in my fit of temper. As adept as I’d grown at burying emotions, the more hormones flooded my system, the harder it became.

Lying down, I fidgeted with the pillow until it no longer caused a crawling sensation down my spine. I’d never get to sleep otherwise, and with instinct already making me prickly, lack of sleep would lead to a fight I had no chance of winning.

As much as I missed my alpha, I couldn’t take the constant needling from my brother’s mate, but I didn’t wish to cause him more trouble. He’d come to find me when word of Nearden’s death reached him, then nursed me back to health instead of letting me slip away with my alpha.

At the time, I’d hated him for it, but I’d become grateful. The years I’d had with Nearden weren’t enough, and I had no wish to die yet.

Nor did I wish to take another mate, but I wasn’t given a choice. My only hope was to bond with another, and perhaps find fulfillment again.

*

“I don’t like leaving you on your own.”

“I’m not a child, Brother.”

His mate chimed in, “I’m sure she’d enjoy some time to herself.”

I couldn’t think of any other time she had bothered to stand up for me. She was clearly happy with my decision to stay at

the cabin instead of following them to the village.

“If anything happens, if you see anything strange, you are to bar yourself in the cellar.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. He was only a couple years older, but he'd taken on the position of protector from the day of my birth.

“Yes, Father.”

I couldn't help the jab. It wasn't the first time we got into an argument because he thought he could order me around like I was his child and not his sister. A sister who'd already mated and lived in her own house for more years than him.

He frowned down at me, heavy brows drawn together over dark eyes.

“Perhaps we should bring you with us after all. The forest isn't safe.”

My response was immediate, “No.”

A more emphatic, “No,” echoed me.

His mate and I both contradicted him, and his brows lowered further as his posture tensed.

“I still need time to prepare my things before Edar comes. If I lose a whole day going into the village, I won't be ready.”

It was a lie. Besides bedding and my clothing, I had little left. My brother sold everything from Nearden and my home.

My brother's mate curled into his side, pouting up at him. “You promised we would take this trip ourselves. She'll be fine for a few hours. You keep the area safe.”

I wanted to gag at her whining, but reminded myself she was coaxing him toward what I wanted.

“I have to launder my things and prepare them to be taken to Edar's home. I also need to make adjustments to my mating gown.”

It was ridiculous to go through a mating ceremony as if I was some young, untried omega, but my brother insisted. I still

had my mating gown from the ceremony with Nearden, but I wasn't as slim as I'd been then, and needed to let out the seams. With the signs of my heat growing by the day, I couldn't put it off any longer.

My brother still looked on the verge of ordering me to follow. He enjoyed his peace, and had built his cabin a half day from the village to maintain it. He only went into the village once a moon, and he hadn't left us behind the entire time I'd been in his home. Usually I looked forward to any chance to escape the pair. It was a joy to wander while they ran errands in the village, but with my heat already making me uncomfortable, I didn't want to make the long trip and be under the scrutiny of other alphas.

“Edar may be upset if I went into the village now, with my cycle so close.”

My brother growled low under his breath before cutting it off with a sigh. He knew I didn't want to take another mate, but it was unheard of for an omega to be on their own, and he didn't have the room or resources to continue to provide for me.

“The cellar—”

“If I see so much as a threatening bunny, I'll hide until you return.”

Eyes narrow, he stared at me a moment longer before grunting and turning away. It took all my control not to laugh as his mate practically danced at his side.

I stood in the doorway, waiting in case he turned to check, holding my breath until they disappeared around the bend in the trail. Even then, I hesitated, counting breaths until I was sure they were really gone.

I let out a sigh filled with a tangle of emotions, none of which I wanted to deal with yet. It was a relief to have some space, and I looked forward to taking advantage of it until they returned.

I dragged my bedding from the mattress in the corner of the main room, tossing them into the wash basin outside. The

water hadn't had time to warm in the sun, but I couldn't wait if I wanted my linens dry in time for bed. Nearden's scent had already faded, lessening with each wash until I could no longer detect it. Still, I had to be sure there was no trace of another alpha on the bedding for my mating nest.

I'd met Edar a couple times in the village, and all I remembered was the stench of ale that followed him and the paunch hanging over his belt. I knew my brother was getting a handsome reward in exchange, and I trusted him not to trade me to someone who'd hurt me, so while I held no particular attraction to Edar, I had no real argument against him according to my brother.

Resigned to my fate, I tried to remind myself that the bond should assure happiness in time. I hadn't known Nearden before being mated to him, Father having chosen him when I was approaching my first heat, but we'd grown to care for one another. Even after learning our lack of children was because of a hidden illness that eventually took him from me, I didn't regret our mating. Hopefully, I could grow to feel the same about Edar.

Shoving all thoughts aside, I flung my bedding over the lines strung in the sun, leaving them to dry. My mating gown flapped in the breeze, taunting, but I turned away. I had time before I could work on letting out the seams to accommodate my enhanced curves, and I had no reason to spend it cooped up inside.

Facing the trees, I let the lure of the shady, green space pull me forward. I'd wander for a while and enjoy the quiet freedom before facing my coming heat and new reality.

Chapter 2

Av'dag

I don't like to travel so close to the human settlement, but I couldn't let the bear get away again.

Checking the pile of dung, I judged I wasn't too far behind him. He would want to avoid the village as much as I did, so it should have been safe to continue hunting. He was a danger that had to be dealt with, especially after the injured old bear had gone after a youngling.

Claws flexing against my thighs, I tipped my head back and scented the air, the stench of dried blood and disease would lead me to him. Usually a situation like this would bring out a whole hunting party to find the animal, but with Mel'cam and Mel'ar both having new mates, a lot of the other alphas in the clan had gone in search of omegas of their own. I was one of the few who'd stayed behind to protect the clan, and now, that meant following the bear.

All I could hear were the rustle of leaves and small noises of birds and squirrels, so I moved on. I followed the paw prints and stench of decay. It was unfortunate to need to put the bear down, but since he'd lost a fight with a younger male and his wounds had festered, it was best for us all to end his misery.

I tracked him further down the mountain, the wandering trail a sign of his deteriorating state. He passed both food and shelter, moving ever closer to the human village. Despite the clan leader and his brother having human mates, we kept our distance from their settlements, not wanting to incite panic, and if the bear kept on his path, I'd have to watch from a distance to see if the humans would handle him.

Growling under my breath, I increased my pace. This was meant to be a quick trip to deal with a threat, and I didn't want to linger any longer than necessary. It would be better to catch him now than when he was closer to the humans.

I loped through the forest faster than a human could run, but it wasn't long before a scream ripped through the air and told me I was too late.

The feminine sound of fear had me sprinting, tree trunks blurring, claws digging into the earth beneath me to propel me as fast as I could move. None of my kind were in this area, and no human stood a chance against the beast.

The next scream corrected my path, and in moments I was taking in the scene without stopping my momentum. A lone female stood with her back pressed to a trunk, the old bear towering over her as he let loose a roar. I spared a second to be impressed that she didn't run and incite him further before he raised a mighty paw and I barreled between them.

He didn't register my arrival before I caught his arm, grunting with the weight of it. I'd have preferred to deliver his death at a distance, but it was too late. I was in it now, and I wasn't going to stop until I'd put an end to the threat.

The bear roared again, rearing higher as he fought for his limb away. I dug my claws in and held on, keeping him off-balance. Large as I was, he still had height and weight on me, and even with his injuries, he looked to be a ferocious opponent.

A tiny squeak behind me brought my attention to the human. I turned my head to find her still frozen against the trunk, her wide eyes locked on me as her scent reached my nostrils.

Lavender and lust.

Slick and sweet, feminine musk.

My distraction earned me a terrible blow and sent me crashing to the earth, shoulder and chest burning from the rake of claws. My fur protected me from the worst of it, but even so, I could feel a warm trickle of blood.

Shaking my head, I focused on the bear and pulled my legs beneath me, preparing for the next attack. I had his attention now, the human forgotten in the face of an actual threat.

He dropped to all fours and lumbered toward me with another ear-shattering roar. When he raised up on his hind legs again, I darted forward, slashing with my claws but unfortunately missing anything vital. The blow enraged him, and I barely escaped being mauled.

I rolled away and lunged toward his back leg. I hated putting the bear through more pain, but it left me no choice.

He turned just as I slashed, my claws catching in matted fur and sinking into muscle. If it had been later in the year and the old bear any healthier, his layer of fat would have saved him. With his body skinny after a long winter and then being forced from his territory, my claws did their job. His leg gave out beneath him.

Before he could get up, I launched myself onto his back. Wrapping one arm around his thick neck, I wrenched his head to the side as my other hand drew the knife strapped to my thigh. My claws weren't enough to dispatch the great beast with the speed he deserved, but my blade could end his suffering.

Plunging downward behind his collarbone, the tip pierced his heart, and he collapsed.

“Rest now, brother. Your journey has ended. You fought well.”

I murmured the words of the warrior's death as his body went limp. I pitied the old bear, but such was our way of life.

I withdrew my blade from his body, wiping it on his pelt before returning it to the sheath at my thigh. Sliding from his back, movement drew my gaze over his prone form to the omega still trying to become one with the tree. Blood pumping from the fight, instincts on edge, I could guess what her fidgeting meant, and tried to warn her.

“Don't run.”

Her golden skin blanched, eyes going wider as her lips parted. Chest heaving, the fabric of her dress strained to hold her curves. The sight made my mouth water.

I knew it was coming. She couldn't help it, and neither could I. I saw the moment the instinct kicked in, a feral grin pulling back my lips as the little omega sprang into motion.

Pushing off the tree, she ran, feet pounding the earth. I rolled my neck and straightened, loosening muscles that'd gone tight during my fight with the bear.

She had no chance.

I knew it.

She could feel it.

But she had to run anyway, and I had to chase.

And when I caught her...

Her scent promised things I'd never hoped for. I'd spent enough winters alone. Now, the gods had lead me to a ripe omega.

She would be mine.

Chapter 3

Nala

I gasped, rough bark biting into my shoulder as I careened off a trunk I couldn't avoid. Running through the forest was foolish, but what choice did I have, confronted with a monster?

My lungs strained, throat and sides burning. I couldn't tell if the growling I heard was real or imagined, but I kept my eyes focused ahead. I hoped to make it back to the cabin, even when it felt impossible.

What good would it do me? I'd just watched the monster kill a *bear*. The wooden door of the cellar could offer no protection.

A shiver wracked my body as slick slid down my leg. I stumbled, crashing shoulder-first into another tree with a yelp. The rumble behind me was definitely real, deepening as I righted myself and continued to run.

I'd stumbled on the bear by accident, looking up at the birds flitting over my head instead of where I was going. I'd all but walked into him before his huff of irritation drew my attention, and I screamed before I could stop myself.

The noise irritated him further, and he reared up as I backpedaled. I knew I couldn't outrun him and shouldn't try, but climbing a tree was for the young and limber, not a widow leaning toward the chubby side.

I'd braced for pain, convincing myself I was okay with my life ending there, when the monster appeared.

The monster. Almost as large as the bear, he towered over me. Horns sprouting from his head added extra inches. Where the bear's fur was a shaggy brown snarled with leaves and twigs, his was a rich charcoal with lighter grey on his muzzle, thinning to bare dark skin on his abdomen.

Despite the danger, it was impossible not to focus on his nakedness. Maybe it was my brain's response to preparing for death, or perhaps I could blame it on my heat, but I couldn't help staring between his legs.

A cramp brought forth a gush of slick just as the monster turned to look at me, chestnut gaze locking on mine. My gasp had flooded my lungs with the unmistakable scent of pine, campfires, and *alpha*.

Light shone between the trees ahead of me, hope surging even as a cramp drove the air from my chest. I hadn't run from the bear, but something drove me to run from the monster.

Maybe it was the hunger in his eyes.

Hands pressed to the ache in my side, I kept moving. I knew he was behind me. Chasing me. Toying with me.

"I told you not to run, *omega*."

His voice sent another shiver down my spine, ending with a cramp that made slick splatter the ground beneath me. The clearing around the cabin was so close, yet my steps slowed. Heart in my throat, I heaved for air full of his scent.

The monster approached me from behind until the heat of him burned my back, stopping my feet in their tracks.

"Never run from a predator, little one. It makes you *prey*."

He breathed the last word against my neck. Eyes clenching shut, I trembled, waiting.

Something soft brushed against my arm, but I stood frozen, incapable of even flinching away. His movements were silent, but I knew he circled me. His chestnut gaze had been alive with more intelligence than any story gave monsters credit for, and I could imagine them raking along my body.

A hard warmth touched my cheek and images of deadly claws flashed through my mind. The monster's were just as wicked as the bear's had been, but my traitorous body remained where it was, perfuming the air with pheromones he couldn't miss.

His claws stroked along my jaw before trailing down my neck, my pulse beating against them until they reached where it joined with my shoulder.

Where the scar from Nearden's bite still dimpled my flesh.

"You carry a mark, yet wander alone. Where is your mate?"

His words held none of the warmth they'd held before, turning hard enough to make my insides quiver. I swallowed, throat working before I could force myself to speak.

"Dead."

A pang stabbed my fluttering heart, but it was the truth. Nearden was dead and gone, and I had yet to mate with Edar.

The monster hummed, knuckles brushing up to tip my head back. Were my eyes open, I'd be staring straight into his, yet I kept them clenched shut.

"Were you looking for death then, to follow your mate?"

His voice lost its chilly edge, sounding almost... sad.

I parted my lips to answer but froze, the question replaying in my head. I knew wandering the forest alone was dangerous, and I'd never felt the urge to take a walk before. Yet today, on the cusp of my heat and a day away from mating with another alpha, I'd felt the undeniable need to walk the forest.

But I wasn't ready to die, so what had called me onto the dim, overgrown path?

"No," I breathed. "I was trying... to escape."

A weight lifted from my chest.

I'd fooled myself into thinking I would be okay with Edar. That despite the aversion I'd felt in his presence, I could grow to be content. That there was no way my brother would trade me to an abusive alpha, despite the whispers. I knew taking on my care had cost him, but not *that* much.

My eyelids lifted of their own accord, and the monster's visage filled my view. Greying muzzle, blunter than a bear's, but filled with teeth just as sharp. Horns brushing back from

his forehead to curl around pointed ears, their tips aimed toward me. Intelligent, chestnut eyes, filled with a hunger I'd never seen, even with my lost mate.

“You saved me.”

His cheek twitched at my whisper, hot breath gusting over my face.

“Only to take you for myself.”

His words brought another cramp that had slick running down my legs. Despite his appearance, my body responded to an alpha the way it had to, preparing for invasion.

And I found that I didn't care if he was a monster. My brother would have rushed forward to protect me out of duty, but with Nearden gone, there was no other who would have placed themselves between me and danger.

Especially not Edar. That drunk would've gotten himself killed.

“I understand. I'm Nala.”

His other hand came up to stroke through my hair as he stared down at me, his purr throbbing to life between us. My knees gave out and I melted, the tightness in my chest finally coming loose.

No one had ever purred for me. Not even Nearden.

The monster caught me as I fell, clutching me to his broad, vibrating chest. The silkiness of his fur surprised me, and I couldn't help but rub my cheek against him as he swept his arm behind my knees.

“I am Av'dag.”

My eyes drifted closed, and I felt him turn, striding away from my brother's cabin. My body flooded with relief. My brother had arranged the mating without me, so he could arrange the dissolution of it without me as well. I held no remorse over leaving.

Tangling my fingers in Av'dag's fur, I snuggled closer to his warmth, letting him take me wherever he wanted. There

was a pinch of regret at leaving behind my nesting materials, but they were the same I'd used with Nearden, and I was glad to make a clean break. They would always remind me of him and my life before, and while I didn't want to forget him, I wanted to start over.

Chapter 4

Av'dag

I marveled at the omega snuggled in my arms. Once she'd opened her eyes and looked at me, I'd expected her to scream and run. To get away. Escape.

And yet she'd accepted me keeping her without fuss. Offered her name, and allowed my arms around her.

The gods had blessed me.

Clutching her tighter, I broke into a lope, moving through the trees as fast as I could without risking injury to the omega. The scent of her heat grew, the sweetness of the slick coating her thighs making me salivate, and I needed to get her back to my caves before it was too late. I forgot the pain in my shoulder from the bear's claws in the rush of excitement.

Already, I wanted to throw her to the forest floor and rut. To sheath myself in her tightness until my knot locked us together and I could make her mine. Until I'd fucked a babe into her belly so I could watch it swell.

My erection bobbed as I ran, heavy and uncomfortable. I tried to ignore the soft curves of the omega in my arms, but it was impossible. The sooner I got us back, the sooner I could find relief.

I raced up the mountain, taking a direct path back to the clan. I'd been tracking the bear for almost a day, but he had wandered, and I'd traveled slower to stay on his trail.

It was still a long trek. Nala fell asleep in my arms, her soft snores rising to mingle with my purr. Even when my stride slowed with the difficulty of the climb, I maintained my soothing vibrations to combat the cramps I could feel tensing her middle. She would whimper and wriggle, but never fully woke.

The caves of the clan spread over a wide territory, each of the alphas claiming a set of their own when they reached maturity. Being an older alpha, mine were near the center of the sprawl, and I tensed each time we neared the homes of other unmated males. I held respect and position in the clan, but would be challenged for a ripe omega if another alpha caught her scent before we made it to safety. It was a relief when the dark opening of my cave appeared ahead, and I let my steps slow.

Purr fading, I gently jostled Nala.

“Awaken, my omega, and see your new home.”

She stirred, rubbing her cheek against my chest before turning to look. Her eyebrows rose as we crossed the entrance, fingers tightening in my fur as I carried her deeper into the warren where she would be safe. Her body stiffened as I placed her on her feet and I thought for a moment that she had changed her mind about me.

“I cannot see. It is too dark.”

I cursed, having forgotten human vision was weaker than mine. Taking her hand, I pulled her to the wall and placed her fingers against it.

“Remain here.”

Though I felt her tremble, she stayed put with her palm pressed to the rock as I stepped away. I had no idea what the inside of a human home looked like, but I knew they used fire for cooking and light, so I went to the nook where I made my cookfire and knelt. It didn't take long to get a flame, and I added an extra log to be sure it burned bright enough for her to see. I wanted her to feel comfortable enough to nest, as her instincts would drive her to do.

I watched Nala look around as the flames rose. They cast a warm glow on her golden skin, burnishing her dark hair with a red tint that sparkled off the grey we shared. Neither of us were new to life, and I thanked the gods for providing an omega already experienced in the world. I was too old to want an omega young enough to be my child.

She didn't give much attention to the cave, but her gaze locked on the far corner where I slept. There was a natural depression in the stone from a small stream that came through the back wall. It had changed directions in the centuries before I claimed the space, pooling in the opposite corner to leave a perfect nesting place. Furs I had collected over the years lined the rock, piled deep to provide cushion and warmth in the cave's chill when I didn't have a fire.

I rose, drawing her focus.

"You may move now."

She was perfect in her obedience.

Taking two steps toward me, her head turned back to the bed, and I could practically see her need to go to it. To follow her instincts.

To nest.

I grinned, letting a fresh purr rumble from my chest. The firelight sparkled off her wet thighs, and my groin tightened in response. Having her in my den had me fighting the urge to pounce, but she needed time to prepare. Her body wasn't ready yet.

"Go, Nala. Ready our nest."

Her wide eyes swung back to mine, hesitant before she dropped them and shuffled toward the corner. I followed, my purr increasing when she stopped at the edge of the bed. I knew it had to be hard for her, making a nest for another alpha after losing her mate, but her instincts would drive her to do what we needed. Once I claimed her, things would get easier.

Chapter 5

Nala

I was torn.

I wanted to obey. My body urged me to do what Av'dag ordered. But my brain caught on the phrase he'd used, flooding me with guilt.

“Go, Nala. Ready our nest.”

It was what Nearden told me each time he sensed my heat approaching.

“Perhaps this time we will be blessed.”

It had taken two years before he'd given up on the second part. I'd blamed myself until his illness became apparent, stealing his vitality as it spread through his body.

This time, you might have a chance, my mind whispered.

The prospect both excited and terrified me. I had no idea if it was possible for me to carry the monster's young, or what would happen to me if I did. He was so much larger, and while I knew most horned beasts were born with nothing more than nubs, the thought was still intimidating.

“Nala.”

I shook my head. Standing at the edge of his pile of furs, I sucked in a deep breath and steeled myself to take that final step, but a large hand landed on my shoulder.

Heat seared my back as Av'dag pressed against me, my core responding with a deep clench of need. I had no idea how he'd react to my hesitance, and for a moment, fear stole my breath.

“Take your time.”

I could feel his hardness against me, yet he wasn't rushing me. Trembling, I sucked in an unsteady lungful of his scent,

shaking the old memories.

A fresh start.

I pressed back into his strength and patted the hand on my shoulder before kneeling.

Start with a clean slate.

I tugged the furs from the corner, noticing the depression in the stone. It was almost a perfect oval, the narrow ends touching the back and side wall of the cave, with a small, raised area between the long edge and the corner.

Disturbing the bedding stirred up Av'dag's scent and it filled my senses. A part of my brain screamed this was crazy, that I should have tried harder to get away, but a larger part wanted him. Wanted something new. Someone I couldn't compare to my first mate.

What was life if you didn't take risks? I'd almost lost mine twice, yet I had nothing to show I'd ever lived.

I ran my hands over the furs, deciding which to use. The cave had a considerable chill, but with a layer below to protect us from the leaching effect of the stone, and with Av'dag to keep me warm, there would be no need for a cover. There were no pillows, but there were enough pelts to provide cushion if placed properly.

Building a nest was done by feel, but I'd never had to create one large enough for a monster. Once I filled the depression with the thicker furs, I hesitated, looking over my shoulder at Av'dag.

He stood a few paces away, arms crossed over his chest, cock jutting from his groin. It jerked as my gaze landed on it, the dark, glistening tip making my mouth water, and I forgot why I'd turned to him.

“Yes, omega?”

I startled, yanking my attention up to his face. His smugness was clear even on inhuman features.

“I need you to lie down.”

My hands fluttered toward the nest as I struggled not to stare at his shaft. My core clenched and cramped, legs dripping with my arousal. A puddle formed beneath me as I squirmed on the stone.

“As you wish.”

He stepped around me, careful not to rumple the furs as he settled on top. His eyes locked on mine as he lay back, lacing his fingers over his belly.

“Like this?”

I bit my lip, forcing myself to focus and not let my gaze roam. The cave had grown too warm, and a trickle of sweat traced my spine, making me wish I wasn't still wearing my dress.

“Yes.”

Looking down at the pelts I had left, I brought my mind back to building the nest. Smoothing the creases from when he lay down, I tested the thickness of padding beneath him and added layers where necessary until there was only one fur left.

Stroking the soft, short fur, I let my eyes wander over the nest and the male within it. He remained perfectly still, his gaze trained on me. He was so large, he almost fell outside the confines of the depression, but I'd adjusted the furs until he lay cradled and cushioned.

Then I realized his horns kept his head from resting the way mine would.

Rolling the last pelt, I fluffed and flattened it, moving until I knelt behind his head. The fire had died down some, and his eyes looked like black pools as they stared up at me. Nostrils flaring, he held still. Watching.

“Raise your head.”

My voice was a bare whisper, but he obeyed, lifting his head the short distance I needed to tuck the pelt beneath his neck and skull. He relaxed again, the makeshift pillow fitting perfectly between his horns.

Licking my lips, I stared down at him. My mind had grown fuzzy while I worked, focused on the task at hand, but now that I'd finished, the fog lifted and I was unsure what to do next. Part of me felt silly for making such a fuss of it when I knew he was bound to move, but instinct insisted it be perfect.

“Are you happy now?”

The rumbled question had my eyes darting over the nest again, warmth blooming in my chest when I realized I was.

Until I spotted his neglected erection bobbing in the air. The glisten on his tip had flowed into a trail, glossing the length of it.

My brows drew together as I frowned.

“No.”

Chapter 6

Av'dag

Her response brought an end to my purr, the unexpected negative shocking me out of the lulled state I'd been in. Her hands gripped the sides of her dress, pulling it up and over her head in one smooth motion before she tossed it to the side.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of her, a low growl leaving my chest before I could stop it. Her breasts lay heavy against her ribs, her belly and hips gently rounded. I raised my head to follow her but froze when she stepped within the bounds of her creation, dropping to straddle my knees.

Her lips were on my cock before I knew what she was doing. Breath stuttering at the feel, I couldn't stop myself from cradling her head, mindful of my claws.

Lips stretched wide, she engulfed the tip. Little swirls from her tongue made my toes curl, and when she hummed, she brought a spurt of fluid from me that she gulped down without releasing my flesh.

Small hands wrapping around my shaft, she pumped up and down the length, milking me for more as she continued suckling. I couldn't stop my grunts and snarls, the sensation almost too much.

Curling my hand in her hair, I tugged until she popped free. My little omega struggled to take me back into her mouth, but I was too close to shaming myself. Her eagerness alone would be enough to push me over the edge.

Using her hair, I dragged her body up along mine until the wet valley between her thighs added to the saliva coating my shaft as it rubbed between her folds. I wrapped my other arm around her hips, grinding her on my length as I forced her to arch her back, bringing her breasts in perfect reach of my mouth.

Tongue darting out, I licked over one stiff bud before turning to the other and pulling it into my mouth. I let her feel the rake of my teeth on her breast as I sucked the nipple deep, not breaking the flesh, but making her gasp as she writhed atop me.

“Please.”

I switched back and forth between her breasts, licking and nipping and sucking, until her whole chest glistened, puffy and red. Her breaths came in short puffs, hips rocking over my shaft as it slushed through her arousal. The sweet scent of her slick surrounded us, her heat deepening with the completion of her nest.

“Please, what, omega?”

She panted, little whimpers leaving her throat as she chased her release.

“I need more.”

Her breathy confession had my cock twitching in eagerness, but I wasn't sure she was ready. I didn't want to hurt her, so I'd leave her to determine how much she could handle.

“Then take it.”

I couldn't help the growl behind the words, and I felt her entire body shudder at the sound. She continued rocking for a few more moments before pressing against the hold of my arm.

Giving her space to move as she needed, I turned my attention back to her breasts. She rose on her knees, reaching between us to take my cock in hand and align it with her entrance.

I offered a purr to help her body relax as she slowly let her weight drop. She was hot and tight, the sensation of her channel accepting my length making me want to snap my hips upward and bury myself inside her.

Lifting, she wriggled before pushing back down, working to take more of me. Her legs trembled, core fluttering as she

moaned and whined.

“I—I can’t. Please. It won’t fit.”

I growled, my claws flexing on her bottom. My knot was already swelling, but she still hadn’t seated herself, and I needed to lock inside her to plant my seed.

“You can, Nala.”

I sat up and her hands moved from my stomach to my shoulders as she shook her head. Her muscles quivered with strain.

“No.”

She stood before I could stop her, leaving my cock standing rigid and glossed with her slick. I let out another growl, but she stepped over me to the edge of the nest and pushed on my shoulder.

Confused, I scooted aside, and as soon as she had the space, she dropped to her knees again. Leaning forward, she pressed her chest to the furs, leaving her bottom in the air.

“Please, alpha.”

Her words were muffled, but she looked over her shoulder, meeting my gaze. Her eyes begged me to understand, and a fresh surge of blood rushed to my shaft as I rolled to my knees behind her.

She presented beautifully. The puffy lips of her sex framed her slick coated folds, glistening in the firelight. Calling me.

I gripped the outside of her thighs, leaning down to taste her. Running my tongue up her slit, I collected her honey, groaning my delight as I swallowed and searched for more.

Nala moaned into the furs, rocking back on my tongue as I thrust it into her, twisting it to scoop out more slick. She trembled on the edge of release, and I needed to push her over.

Removing my tongue long enough to drag my teeth along the lower curve of her bottom, I went back to fucking it into her as I sought the little pearl at the apex of her folds with a knuckle. I circled the nub until her hips followed the motion.

She cried out when I gave into her urging and brushed over the pearl, her body growing tense, but it took two more strokes for her to shatter.

Lurching forward, I took hold of myself with my other hand as I continued to stroke her little bud. When her body sagged with the ebb of her release, I pushed forward, sliding half my length into her before she clamped down. Dragging it back out, I rubbed over her little pearl again as I purred, causing her to shudder and relax.

Surging forward, I buried myself deeper and she cried out again. I didn't relent, pulling back only a fraction before moving my grip to both hips and yanking her back as I pushed forward.

The edge of my growing knot kissed her stretched lower lips, and I fought to keep my purr from dropping into a growl.

“Good girl. Just a little more.”

Nala sobbed into the bedding, shaking her head, but she pushed into my grip. With a last retreat, I moved forward and forced my knot through her entrance, both of us gasping as it popped through.

I could only make short thrusts as my knot swelled, finally locking into place behind her pubic bone. Nala reared back, hands reaching around to take hold in my fur at my sides, as I raised my arms to circle her chest.

Dropping my nose to the scar she bore on her shoulder, I let my tongue drag over it. I wasn't jealous she'd already had a mate, only happy she'd ended up mine.

With another lick, I traced my hand between her legs to rub her little nub again. She tensed around me as I shifted to the other side of her neck, her channel fluttering as it tried to milk me, but I needed to hear her cry out once more.

Chapter 7

Nala

Av'dag raked his teeth along my shoulder, making me shudder as his finger worked between my legs. His thickness lodged inside me, the pressure excruciating and exquisite.

He released a growl with every breath. My body teetered on the edge of another mind-numbing orgasm, but I needed more.

He worried the flesh of my neck and shoulder, teasing me without breaking the skin. He added a second finger to circle my clit, but I still hung at the edge, unable to fall over.

I wanted him to fill me. To flood my womb, and gods willing, breed me.

But most of all, I wanted to feel the connection I'd lost. A new memory to replace the one of my soul ripping in two when Nearden died.

“Bite me.”

I didn't realize I'd spoken the words aloud until Av'dag's growl deepened, his teeth pressing harder into my flesh. I stiffened, breath held and braced against the pain I knew would come, praying I wasn't too broken to bond again.

“Come for me.”

His words were muffled against my skin, but it didn't matter. He pinched my clit between the sides of two fingers, setting a spark to the tension coiled in my abdomen.

I cried out, the first wave of my release pulling an answering pulse from him. The second time my core clenched, so did his jaw, his teeth piercing my shoulder. Breath caught in my throat, I choked on a scream as everything froze until a fresh bloom of warmth grew behind my sternum.

I could feel him.

His pleasure filled me, each jet of his seed scorching my womb and echoing through the bond. My climax grew stronger as he shared his, bright light building behind my eyelids, burning the moment into my brain.

Peace.

Acceptance.

Joy.

It all flowed into me, more than I could have hoped, and I returned it. He may look different from me, but he was no monster. Any lingering regret burned away with the onslaught of feelings cycling between us, a new hope daring to take root in my heart.

Too impatient to wait, I turned my head and sank my teeth into the inside of his upper arm, where his fur was short and thin. A bond didn't require a bite from each, but I wanted to show him what I felt was real. Wanted it plain for all to see.

He may be my second mate, my second chance, but he wasn't a second choice. There was still a place for Nearden in my heart, but there was enough room for Av'dag as well. He wasn't taking what remained, but doubling the love I held.

He was my future, and the seed still pumping deep within my womb would be ours.

Together.

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About Leann Ryans

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Demon by Night

by

Godiva Glenn

Chapter 1

Alyssa peered around the corner. She rarely hid among the reference stacks in the library, and the most recent occurrence was right before she'd thrown caution to the wind and asked Drastos Blake—the mysterious, charming, incredibly sexy research librarian at her university—out to dinner. It seemed fitting that he was once again the reason for her anxiousness and hiding.

They'd had a wonderful date. They'd connected easily with never a dull moment. He'd kissed her goodnight and melted her kneecaps. Then, he'd never called. A week passed and each time she visited him at his desk, it was as if nothing ever happened between them.

She'd known him for four years and been in love with him—or as “in love” as a one-sided situation could go—for three. Asking him to dinner had taken every ounce of her courage, and she was ready to muster up said courage again to now ask, “What the hell?”

Pushing back her shoulders, she inhaled and pictured herself breathing in pure confidence. It was the absolute longest six foot walk of her existence, and the feel of her loose curls bouncing off her shoulders made her feel more comical than serious.

Drastos looked up at her and smiled as he always did, with a mirth that reached his dark eyes and made them seem lighter and full of life. His eyes weren't brown, exactly. More like mahogany. A definite red undertone lurked in their depths and—she ground her teeth. She had a purpose today, and it wasn't to fawn over his eyes.

“You never called,” she blurted out. She'd planned to be cool and casual, but her mouth had spoken, so she stood behind it and held his gaze.

His smile slipped for a moment. “I don't think it best to discuss personal matters while I'm working.”

“Then when? Could we meet for lunch today?” she asked, not backing down.

His brow furrowed briefly, and he shook his head. “I’ve already had lunch. Perhaps—” he pursed his lips before continuing. “I think we should just move forward, Ms. Harris.”

The use of her last name struck a hard blow. She hadn’t been Ms. Harris to him for at least two years. What happened to their first-name basis? She backed away, but before she turned to leave, saw what looked like regret in his eyes.

You’re imagining things.

*

There was a line between persistence and stalking Alyssa knew this, and she pondered it while waiting beside the steps of the library’s main entrance. She hadn’t imagined how well their date had gone, nor had she imagined their years’ of low-key flirting. How many after-hours university events had they met up at and chatted away into the late night? How many times had he called her over to his desk with extra materials he’d found in his personal time to help with her research?

They had something. Chemistry. Yearning. She wasn’t imagining the connection; she was sure of it. All she wanted was the truth from him. She could handle if he told her he didn’t feel a spark, but she needed to hear it in plain terms.

When he exited the library, she took a moment to appreciate him in the afternoon light. He was tall, dark, and classically handsome, but the crowning glory of his appearance was in the gentle swoop of silver above his left temple. He wasn’t all that much older than Alyssa, and once mentioned he’d had that patch of gray his entire adult life. It was chef’s-kiss perfect on him.

His clothing also stood out, being a man who always dressed impeccably, who wore a suit jacket year-round, and never jeans or sneakers. Suits, ties, the occasional waistcoat, and fancy leather shoes—which she bet cost more than one would expect on a librarian’s salary—comprised his wardrobe. He had an old-world appearance, which fit him because he was the type to make women swoon.

She called his name as he hit the last step, and after a resigned glance toward the parking lot, he came to her.

“Can I at least know why?” she asked, not wanting to beat around the bush. “I thought we had an amazing time.”

The briefcase at his side twisted as he fidgeted—a very un-Drastos-like reaction. He slid his free hand into his pants pocket and stared at her with palpable frustration. She almost took a step back, unaccustomed to the non-congenial side of him.

“Whether the time was well-spent or not is of no importance. It is a matter of the future. We—you and I—cannot have one together. I take responsibility for leading you on, but there can be nothing between us,” he said matter-of-factly.

It was an answer that sparked a million questions. “Why?”

His jaw tightened, and his shoulders lifted in an almost imperceptible shrug. “It’s not something to discuss. It simply *is*, Ms. Harris.” His voice lowered, and something akin to remorse entered his voice. “You can’t know...”

“What? Like if you told me you’d have to kill me?” The ridiculous joke was out before she could think better of her tone.

Drastos tilted his head. “Yes.”

She wanted to laugh, but one look at his face killed the urge. Everything about his demeanor chilled, and now he stared at her with ice in his eyes as if daring her to break the uncomfortable silence that had settled between them. Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

Chapter 2

Alyssa shivered as she stepped out of the tub into an impossibly cold bathroom. The small room should have been a fogged-up mess from her scalding-hot shower, but cool air drifted through the partially open door.

A door she had definitely closed before her shower.

Staring at the door, she wrapped a towel around her torso and pulled her shower cap off to free her curls. She lived alone, but anytime she used the room she still closed the door. Now she approached it silently and listened. Her pulse sped, jolted by the idea that somehow, she wasn't alone.

Closing her eyes, she flattened her body against the door and waited for any sound. Her apartment was absolutely silent.

She took a deep breath. Obviously, she hadn't pulled the door hard enough to latch. That had to be it. Now she was scaring herself over nothing. She opened the door wide and looked into her bedroom. It was empty—of course. No sign of anything out of place, although there was a mysterious chill in the air.

Air conditioner on the fritz? Had to be. She'd call her landlord in the morning. Convinced her imagination was playing tricks, she dried off and slid into her satin robe for a lazy night of ice cream and binge-watching in bed. It still disappointed her that her great love affair with Drastos was over before it ever officially began. Drastos. His name still made her heart flutter. Damn him.

Was there a support group for women pining after unavailable, mysterious, foreign men? At least, she thought he was foreign, with a name like Drastos. Plus, after a few drinks, a strange accent would loosen from his tongue. She'd asked him about his unique name, accent, and where he was from, but he was impressively evasive. No matter. Curiosity be damned. She planned to purge him from her thoughts with endless rom-coms.

That plan died when she left her bedroom and found her living room window wide open. Night air blew through the screenless frame, causing her long gauzy curtains to dance like pale blue ghosts in the dark room. She took a quick step back and braced herself in the doorway, part of her trying to remember where she'd left her phone, part of her reasoning that she was on the fourth level of her apartment complex, which sat on a steep hill, no less. Intruders wouldn't—no, they *couldn't*—use the window.

She backed up and bumped into something solid. Her blood ran cold. With a shriek, she leapt to run away, but a hand closed around her wrist and yanked her back into the bedroom. She stumbled and landed on the floor. Wasting no time, she scuttled away from the tall figure and went for her nightstand. She was ninety percent certain her phone was on it, and if not, the massive metal flashlight in the top drawer could make an impressive weapon.

Before she could reach the nightstand, powerful hands lifted her from the carpet and flung her onto the bed. She bounced in the center of the mattress, a tangle of shaking limbs and long robe as she turned over to face her intruder. It wasn't human.

The sound of her distress echoed off the walls as she stared, horrified, at what her brain identified as a demon—and yet demons weren't real. She wanted to deny what she saw.

Slender horns coiled up and away from the demon's ridged brow line, which currently held an unreadable expression over glossy black eyes. His skin was a deep brick red that darkened to black at his temples, pointed ears, clawed fingers, and cloven feet. A black tail curled and swayed behind him, drawing her attention to it and the other hanging appendage in that general vicinity. He was naked, but she was too frightened to spend more than a split-second of her attention on it.

As far as she knew, there was only one reason for a naked demon to appear in a woman's room at night.

Words jammed in her throat, and only strangled sounds escaped her. She wanted to crab-walk backward on the bed,

but her legs refused to cooperate. All she could do was sit and tremble and stare.

“I couldn’t resist,” the demon said, his voice startlingly familiar.

He approached the side of her bed and dragged one black claw along the comforter. Light from her bedside lamp caught a streak of silver hiding behind one of his horns; a glowing beacon against the rest of his sleek black hair.

It couldn’t be.

“Here I am, and I can’t take it back,” the demon said in a thoughtful tone. “After two centuries of good behavior, I suppose I’m due an act of purely foolish, selfish indulgence.”

Drastos?

Her fear still muted her and hot tears streamed down her cheeks as she stared at the demon. Her mind warred. If it was Drastos, should she be afraid? She wanted to believe he wouldn’t hurt her. Yet he’d broken into her apartment. And he was naked.

Demons with good intentions would wear clothing, right?

You’ve officially lost it.

He snarled at the bright lamp as if just noticing it, then slammed the cheap thing to the ground in a crash of metal and glass. She flinched at the sound and violence, her mind reeling.

The demon bent forward and hooked his hands behind her knees to drag her toward him. As he drew her closer, she sucked in heavy breaths. She wanted desperately to believe she was imagining things, or that he was a man in a costume, but up close, she couldn’t deny how real he was. Dark spots appeared along the edges of her vision as she gasped again and again. She was going to hyperventilate and pass out—maybe that would be for the best.

Leaning over her, the demon inhaled slowly and released a low growl. The darkness increased her fear, and she closed her eyes as her thoughts swarmed; a cacophony of potential last-

ditch efforts. All of them required her to move, however, and she'd frozen stiff with terror.

He forced her chin up with his sharp fingertip, and she sensed his intent before his mouth landed on her. She resisted the kiss, her lips tight and unresponsive, but his hand circled her throat, the gentle pressure a threat she understood. She forced herself to relax and parted her lips in surrender.

Whatever she expected, this wasn't it. The demon's kiss was so strange and hungry that her fear dissolved into confusion. Curiosity guided her into motion, and her tongue slid over the sharp points of his teeth. However frightening the circumstance, the kiss itself was... magical. Familiar.

The voice. The silver streak of hair. Now, this kiss.

Her memory wouldn't fail her here—this kiss was comforting and passionate—the culmination of years of longing. The same kiss she'd had with Drastos the night of their date. But how?

His grip tightened around her throat, and he shoved her back on the bed. Her eyes sprang open to meet the demon's black stare. His dark lips curled into a sneer.

“I can taste your indecision. Do you fight because I'm a monster? Or do you surrender like the sweet little slut your body wants to be?”

More out of reflex than any conscious decision, she pushed against his chest. He released her neck to catch her hands. With his fist around her wrists, he stretched her arms above her head and pinned her to the mattress. His free hand stroked her cheek. The dull tips of his black, clawed fingertips dragged across her skin, raising gooseflesh over her body as they skimmed down her collarbone to slip into the robe's front.

She licked her lips, wanting to speak, but unsure of what to say. If this demon was Drastos, he'd been keeping a secret identity for years—or as he'd just said, centuries. If she let on that she knew who he was, she wouldn't survive the night. He'd told her earlier. He told her he'd have to kill her.

Oh fuck.

It made sense. He couldn't know that she recognized him. Although...

"Wh-what are you going to do to me?" she asked. Her voice was so meek and shaky, she barely recognized it herself. Fear compounded as her eyes adjusted to the moonlight spilling through the glass balcony door.

His brow arched. "Why, I'm going to fuck you, of course." His fingers hooked the belt at her waist and tugged the knot. "Isn't that obvious?"

She swallowed, flinching as he pulled the end of the belt loose with a hard yank.

"And after? Will you—will you..." she trailed off, unable to continue. She didn't want to die tonight.

He flicked each side of the robe away from her body, exposing her completely. "After? Maybe there will be no after." He nodded as if the plan pleased him. "Maybe I will keep you forever, my own little pet."

Would that be the end of the world? As opposed to dying, maybe not. Then again, what about her life? Her dreams? Her goals? Her fucking dissertation and all the time she'd already poured into it?

Death, or become a demon's sex pet.

This was never supposed to be a choice she had to make.

He caressed her breasts, sweeping his claws from one to the other in lazy, deliberate circles.

Squirming, she locked her knees together. If she could buy some time, then maybe... maybe... maybe what?

The demon leaned down and licked her jaw, the sensual action giving her a close-up view of the black horns that swept away from his face and another glimpse of the silver streak. This was Drastos. She no longer had a doubt.

How she felt about it was still a tumble of confusion and anxiety, but she clung to the tiny comfort. *The demon you know, and all that.*

“And I have no say in the matter?” she asked.

He chuckled, his lips touching her neck and bathing it in the heat of his breath. “Say all you want. Scream if you’d like. No one will hear you except me, and I happen to find your voice to be absolutely delicious.”

His head lowered to capture a nipple with his lips. He sucked and nibbled, her pleasure undeniable as he teased the hardened bud with sharp teeth that were somehow careful. For all her fear in this moment, her attraction to Drastos overpowered it. Even in this demon form with dark red skin and claws, she wanted him. Perhaps she was even more aroused. Could fear heighten the pleasure? She didn’t know what to expect; had no control, and that held its own enticement.

She writhed beneath him, and as he switched his attention to her other breast, a moan escaped. Fuck. Her right nipple was always more sensitive than the left, nothing to be embarrassed of, and yet even with her life hanging in the balance, heat flooded her cheeks. As his tongue swirled and teased, her lower belly fluttered and she felt the hot rush of her arousal pooling, broadcasting exactly how he affected her.

Drastos bit down hard, infusing the pleasure with pain in a divine moment that made her gasp. The sound must have pleased him; he lifted his head to reveal a wicked smile. Gazing down her body, he cupped between her legs and sank one of his fingers into her wet folds.

Her body’s response rippled upward, and her mouth shot open. Her nipples ached for more attention, and every part of her felt alive.

He groaned as he slid his finger in and out of her tight channel. “The things I want to do to you.”

She whimpered, not at his words but at the way her hips wanted to buck against him. She wanted to ride him. He’d barely touched her, and already she was primed to go.

The bed creaked as he knelt beside her. He grabbed the discarded belt. After tying it around her wrists—an action she

watched rather languidly—he looped it around a bedpost and wrapped the loose end around his hand. He jerked on the improvised lead. The satin belt was surprisingly strong and tugged her up the bed. She scooted back until he appeared satisfied with her position against the bedpost and a mound of pillows.

He joined her on the bed, crowding her on the full-size mattress. Her bed was far too small for demon intruders. His hand shook as if throwing dice, and dashed her thoughts away. He'd grabbed something. What from where? Perhaps from under the pillows, but Alyssa knew her bedroom, and she kept nothing there.

“What did you—Ah!”

Gaping down, she saw a small clamp on her left nipple. It hurt, and she thrashed and squeaked in protest while he looked on with clear, despicable delight. When he reached toward her again, she twisted away.

“No,” she whined.

He didn't listen, and pinched a matching clamp to her very sensitive, already aching right nipple. The bright silver stood out against her brown skin, taunting her.

She howled at the sharp pain jolting through her body. She kicked and cursed, and it dawned on her that maybe she didn't want this—him—after all.

The mattress bounced as Drastos moved, but she couldn't open her eyes against the agony. He caught her kicking legs and opened them wide. He pressed her knees open against the mattress, and then he licked her wet slit with his hot, thick tongue.

Some of the pain subsided. Her breath caught in her throat as his powerful tongue wriggled against her opening. *Oh, sweet kittens...* His tongue was not human. It was wider, longer, and... *oh*. Forked.

He plunged his tongue inside and covered her mound with his hot mouth. His teeth scraped against her clit, making her buck, but he held her still while he tasted her.

Her eyes rolled back, and she exhaled in desperate moans. As she panted, her shaking breasts snapped her awareness back to the clamps that kept her hard and aching. The soreness became delicious when combined with the intense sensation of Drastos licking between her legs.

She was so close. He nipped at her folds, the brief grazing of his teeth tormenting her closer and closer to the edge.

“No,” he hissed.

She opened her eyes and strained to look down. He shook his head and sat up, abandoning her at the precipice of bliss.

“Not yet.”

“What? Why?” she demanded.

He dug his claws into her thigh, enough to make her wince. “You exist for my pleasure, not the other way around.”

She bit her lip to stifle her bubbling argument.

Rising from the bed, he looked her over. For a split second, as he shifted, his erection loomed at the edge of her vision.

It made sense for a seven-foot demon to have a proportional dick. However, the shadowy blur seemed far larger than warranted.

His hand churned a slow circle in the air, and from the shadows, he retrieved something. He brought it into a sliver of moonlight. At first glance, it looked to be a weapon. A curved sword.

Darkness bled through the edges of her vision.

Chapter 3

Drastos tapped Alyssa's cheek. "Scared?"

Her vision focused. Moonlight wrapped around the edges of the object he held, and he turned it slowly in the light to show her.

Not a weapon. A... well, she wasn't entirely sure. It had a handle like a sword, but the part that would be a blade appeared to be more like—her eyes widened—a dildo?

"What is that?" she shrieked.

"I came prepared."

"But—"

"It's a courtesy," he said in a warning tone. "Your body wasn't made to accommodate me, pet. Though it would all feel the same to me, I thought you might not want me to rip you apart during our fun."

"W-with that you—"

He chuckled softly. "It's an *usveis*." The sound rolled from his tongue, sounding infinitely more poetic than the object appeared. "It's a training wand, of sorts."

"Training?"

"Sometimes humans are kept. Whether for pleasure, entertainment, or breeding, an *usveis* is the best way to acclimate a human to the variety of demon genitalia." His brows lowered, and he stared at the wand in his grip. "This will prepare your sweet cunt for me."

A chill ran through her, and she stared at the *usveis*. It was hard to see any details in the dark, as the wand was equally dark. She could make out the frightening length and girth thicker than both her wrists together, and that it wasn't smooth at all, but covered in ridges and bumps that she'd never have imagined on a male appendage. And he implied he was larger? That this was just to make her *ready*? Her eyes strayed down,

but his back was to the window, hiding the front of his body in shadows.

He yanked her legs to him so one hung over the side of the bed, then pressed the wand to her entrance.

Grabbing her face, he forced her to look at him as he teased the head of the unexpectedly warm *usveis* up and down her slit, coating it with her arousal. Her brows furrowed as its tip slid inside, her teeth gritted in uncertainty and anticipation. Drastos grinned at her reaction.

“It’s difficult, this restraint,” he whispered, “when every instinct of mine is to bury myself into you, regardless of your pain or anger. You’re the only woman to see my gentle side.”

Her mouth opened to remark on his “gentleness” but as if to prove her point, he pushed the wand deeper, giving her a feel of the first hard ridge at the top of the shaft. She released a soft sound. The sensation wasn’t terrible, but unexpected.

She stared into his dark gaze and imagined a human Drastos looking back at her. She loved his mahogany eyes and thick, ever-serious brows. While at work, he always had a look of severe concentration. Over the years, she’d prided herself on breaking him down and making him smile and laugh.

The shaft slipped out before plunging farther in, another ridge notching against the top of her opening and reminding her of how long it had been since she’d been with a man. She was wet and aroused, but still too tight.

He pulled the wand back and pushed it in with more force. Her body opened to it, and this time the ridges were a textured glide that felt divine. Her lips parted, and she moaned softly.

Pleasure and the full sensation of the *usveis* sinking deeper and deeper worked her into a heady trance. Drastos worked the *usveis* slow and then fast and then slow again, his expression tight as he kept his eyes on her face the entire time. The pressure of the girthy wand against her walls wasn’t unpleasant, and even the keen stretch became bliss as her body adjusted. The *usveis* worked like magic.

“Now we begin,” he said.

She blinked at him. Begin? Her body was taking the full length of the wand and it felt like a perfect fit. Unless he meant to begin with the actual sex? She couldn't ask, as her climax loomed just out of reach and she grasped desperately for it.

The *usveis* undulated within her, and she froze.

“What’s happening?” she squeaked.

He thrust the wand deeper inside, burying it until the round handle pressed against her opening. The *usveis* pulsed and trembled against her walls. The sensation transformed; starting pleasant, becoming strange and mildly uncomfortable, then reaching the brink of pain.

“No-no-no,” she moaned. “No more!”

Her arms shook, and she yanked at the satin tethering her against her bedpost. She groaned and squirmed, which only made it worse. Her stomach cramped, and she kicked in panic, nearly causing herself to slide from the bed.

Drastos pressed the hilt of the *usveis* upward, and it molded against the top of her mound like warm wax. He kissed her, and though she was trembling with fear and pain, the taste of him still dazed her. The kiss regulated her breathing, and she tried to calm her limbs, which still wanted to thrash and seek a means of escape.

He spoke against her lips, “This is for your own good. Let it happen. Allow the pain to become pleasure.”

The doubt must have been clear on her face, because he cupped her chin and kissed her again, his tongue gently sweeping against hers. Between her legs, the hilt of the *usveis* tingled against her clit. Drastos groaned and twisted the handle, causing the shaft to cease its wild movements and slow into a firm undulation that was easier to bear. Her body still cramped, but as his reassurance sank in, a wave of relief swept over her.

Gradually, the pressure against her inner walls lost its harsh edge and became not only bearable but gratifying.

“Oh my... f-fuck,” she cried out as she convulsed around the squirming wand.

Spasms struck her inner walls, tugging loose her ability to think straight. Pleasure unlike anything she’d known churned through her, and she begged through lips dry from panting.

“Please, please, yes...”

“Not yet.”

Chapter 4

She grunted in frustration. He was controlling her climax. She didn't know or care how, but she *knew* it was his doing that kept her wound tight and unable to find release.

The hilt of the *usveis* loosened from her body, no longer molded to fit perfectly against her mound. Drastos eased the wand out slowly, moving in the tiniest, most tormenting increments as her walls clutched to hold it in. Alyssa could make out a teasing expression on his faintly moonlit face, as if he felt exactly how her body reacted.

The tip of the wand left her, immediately flooding her with an empty ache. Drastos gestured, and the *usveis* disappeared. If she weren't on the edge of madness from craving her orgasm, she may have questioned him.

Her chest rose and fell with her heavy breathing. He swept a heated touch up her thigh and let out a primal rumble.

A sense of urgency hung in the air, a buzzing awareness that prickled at her skin; yet somehow, time had slowed, prolonging the moment as he moved closer. Between the passing seconds, she pictured how the next part of the night would go. She was ready for him physically, but his earlier threat still lingered in the back of her mind. He hadn't promised she'd be safe.

He loomed over her, his form encased in shadow. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"I can taste your fear. One moment, you were deliciously eager." As he spoke, he moved between her legs. "You shouldn't fear this, not now."

He was ready to plunge into her even though she reeked of fear, and she wanted to stall. She could ask him what he planned to do with her at the end of the night and perhaps get a more straightforward answer than, "maybe you'll be my pet."

He was a demon. He was exactly what nightmares were made of—or maybe he was supposed to be. Her perception of him was biased between the pleasure he'd given her and her belief that he was—somewhere deep down, beneath his fire and brimstone exterior—still the guy she'd had gushy romantic daydreams about for the past few years.

“Why do you care now?” she asked, the words rushing from her. “Earlier you said I could scream all I wanted. Why does my fear matter now?”

He growled, and she sensed frustration in him she couldn't comprehend. She had her own tangled emotions to deal with, and she couldn't begin to imagine his.

The broad head of his cock pushed into her silencing her wandering mind and questions. He wasn't open to discussion after all.

She hissed as he entered her, his hard flesh rubbing her tender walls and blending pain with pleasure. She struggled against her bindings. Her body yearned to move and adjust to more easily take him, but her arms were bound fast to the bedpost.

He slid a hand behind her and pulled her to the edge of the bed. He worked his length in and out of her wet heat in slow, torturous strokes. She wanted him. She wanted more. And if it hurt, she wanted it harder.

Rather than fight her strange thoughts, she closed her eyes and lifted her hips farther, leveraging her weight by digging one heel into the bed.

“Yes,” he moaned. “Let me in. More.”

The bed creaked, and the mattress shifted with his forceful thrusts. He snarled in frustration, and in the next moment, she found herself lifted from the bed. The belt around her wrists fell loose for a second as he readjusted and with a yank, he tightened it once more, securing her arms higher above her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he held her weight with one spread hand beneath her.

Gravity took hold, and she sank fully onto his cock. She cried out at the shocking sensation of him filling her and bottoming out. Leave it to a demon to make cervix slamming a turn-on.

He thrust in and out of her, finding a steady rhythm as she bounced against him and enjoyed the ride. It was the most vigorous, satisfying sex she'd ever had while doing nothing. She was being used, but it was damned enjoyable. From a dark corner of her mind came the thought that maybe, *just maybe*, being his sex toy forever wouldn't be the worst fate.

The feel of him changed from one moment to the next, his shaft smooth one pulse and rough the next. It wasn't the right time to ask, and she was certain she couldn't form words. Her brain was absolute jelly, and all she wanted was to chase down the pleasure of his body ramming into hers.

He must have needed this. Though she couldn't know his motivation, she understood this maddening desire to let lust rein and give in to their carnal needs. Regardless what this meant to him, for her, it was the culmination of dirty thoughts, teasing dreams, and a never-ending fantasy of taking Drastos to her bed. She'd earned every moment of this fantasy and its included pleasure.

Her climax loomed with a tension stronger than ever before. Drastos was close too, judging by his grunts and the increasingly aggressive way he squeezed her bottom and yanked her to him with each thrust. The outward drag of his cock from her body became tighter. Rougher. As if it didn't want to leave her. Prominent ridges swelled along his shaft and pressed against her walls, filling her with concern and overwhelming exhilaration.

"Please," she whispered. "Let me..."

"Yes," he snarled. "Come for me. I want to feel your cunt squeezing me as I pump you full of my seed."

At his words, a shudder tore through her. In her wildest dreams, she couldn't imagine proper, suited Drastos saying such things to her, and yet they were perfect in this moment, propelling her into the spiraling chaos of orgasm.

He plunged harder, and deeper, and she shattered into a million pieces of herself. Denied climax so many times, the built-up pleasure exploded again and again until she was dizzy and screaming with rapture.

Through her euphoria, she felt his cock throb deep within her. It seemed to expand until it filled her completely, then rumbling groans shook through his chest and vibrated against her, heralding his release. Heat flooded her, and he cradled her through it all, through every tremble of his body in hers.

Before the waves of pleasure died down, he released her from the bedpost, untied her arms, and threw her on the bed again. Now she had the freedom, she reveled in the feel of his hot skin beneath her palms. She stroked his chest and arms, then dragged her nails down his back as he pistoned into her with wild abandon. Demons weren't hindered by release, she noted. Would this go all night?

The bed groaned in protest beneath them, and she grinned, considering how much a demon must weigh. She kicked at the blankets, trying to find purchase to lift her hips to him again, by now knowing exactly what she needed. When his thrusts hit too deep, she squirmed instinctively away, and he held her down, pinning her against the mattress.

She couldn't budge him and was effectively trapped, yet she felt safe. His muscles bunched beneath her hands, his effort shaking them both. He was in a frenzy, and she held on for the ride. He pumped into her again and again, and once more she felt him pulsate and release within her.

Chapter 5

Alyssa's breathing gradually evened, but she clung to the lingering sensations swirling through her body. Never could she have imagined a passion that would test and challenge her like this. Fear and pain, hope and ecstasy had blended in strange juxtaposition.

He withdrew from her slowly, and bent to trail kisses from her neck downward. He stopped at her breasts and licked her sore nipple. She'd forgotten the small clamps he'd placed there, the sensation lost in the sea of blissful ecstasy he'd given her throughout the night. He freed her nipples now; removed the clamp, and drew the aching bud into his mouth. His tongue swirled and teased, igniting her blood. He bit down, and she whimpered at the pain, but it didn't deter him. She bled beneath his sharp teeth; small pricks of white hot pain chased by the sweet relief of pleasure.

He repeated the action on her left breast, then moved up. Hovering over her on strong arms, he gazed down at her, his expression unreadable, yet comforting.

Unbidden, the memory of her first meeting with Drastos unfolded in her mind. She'd been flustered and overwhelmed, and the librarian at the checkout station had pointed her to Drastos' desk at the center of the East wing in the vast university library. She'd begun rambling to him immediately about her research, ideas, and what she needed help with, and he'd made short, scratchy notes on a pad while he listened patiently.

When she ran out of breath, he offered suggestions. That was the moment she opened her eyes and truly saw him. Freed from the madness of her upcoming paper—due three months from then, but she was easily stressed—she blinked and absorbed the handsome face staring at her. His soothing, strangely accented voice drifted across her ears like a refreshing mist.

She'd made it through all of her school years without developing a serious crush on anyone, but Drastos hit her like an arrow straight to the chest. He took up residence in her heart, and from that day forward, she'd become ever more enamored. After a while, it seemed mutual.

And he'd come to her tonight. It had to mean something. Even if that something was no more than a night of meaningless, mind-blowing fucking, she'd take it.

"Drastos," she said with a heavy, languid sigh.

The demon, who remained hovering over her in the afterglow, went still. She flinched, realizing her mistake.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He gripped her chin and forced her to look straight at him. "You knew."

Dim moonlight slid along one side of his face, scarcely illuminating his dark skin. She couldn't read his expression, hidden as he was, and no amount of staring solved that.

"I won't tell anyone. I won't say anything."

His grip on her face tightened briefly but soon released. His clawed thumb stroked her cheek. "Did you know the entire time?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Or, I just guessed. I..."

"How?"

She imagined where the telltale patch of silver hair hid and reached up to touch it. Her fingers brushed the ridged horn curling up from his left temple. She traced past it and twirled the hidden hair forward.

He let out a low rumble. Though she sensed it wasn't in anger, she flinched.

"Just that?" he asked. "A lock of hair?"

She almost nodded, but that wasn't the truth. The truth was embarrassing, but his secret was out in the open. Keeping her

own felt petty. “And the kiss. I remember the way you kiss.”

“You recall that?”

“Of course. That kiss was amazing,” she said somewhat defensively. “When you’ve been waiting forever for something, you savor it. Cherish it. I don’t think I could ever forget that kiss.”

“It meant that much?”

She hesitated, and then her voice came out shaky and small. “It did. So much.”

The room gradually brightened. Turning her head, she found the source was the remaining lamp on her other nightstand humming to life, twin to the one he’d smashed earlier. The warm glow flickered and grew, casting enough light to reveal to the top of his body, down to where her legs wrapped around his waist. She looked into his eyes and wanted to ask how he turned on the light without his hands, but then again, he was a demon. A demon who had slipped into a fourth-level apartment through the window. A demon who could summon a sex toy from thin air and make it vanish just as easily.

“I can keep a secret,” she said, breaking the silence.

“This doesn’t bother you?” he arched a brow and gestured to his face.

Her initial fear had long since faded. Red or not, demon or not, he was still attractive, however different.

“Would it be going out on a limb to assume that to other demons, you’re considered hot?” she asked.

He shrugged. “To other Maelificars, yes. I’ve turned a few succubi’s heads as well. Incubi, too.”

She let that slide, not wanting to get distracted. She considered him; her gaze drifting down his muscular torso. “You’re handsome in this form. As handsome as when you appear human.”

“Truly?” he asked, amused.

Biting her lip, she gave a quick nod. “The horns. The mystery. The danger. But then again, you’re looking at a girl who always had a soft spot for the bad guy in scary movies. Watching Labyrinth always made me feel funny.”

Drastos chuckled and shifted beside her. He stared at her for a moment, then fell onto his back. The bed shook under his large body as he settled onto a pillow and looked up to the ceiling. It was strange to see him this way, laying in her bed and taking up most of it. The sight of the intimidating demon laying against her lavender sheets was almost comical.

“Humans are fascinating,” he mused.

“We are,” she agreed. She pulled the rumpled blanket from the foot of the bed and brought it over her body. The apartment had a chill. “What now?”

He didn’t respond, and continued to look up.

She tried to be patient, reasoning he was just as unprepared for this outcome as she was.

“We aren’t meant to form attachments to humans,” he said finally. “For a multitude of reasons.”

“Why did you ever agree to a date, then?” she asked.

“I thought it would go poorly. I thought that the reality would pale compared to the imagined ‘what if’ world we’d created around ourselves. Years of flirting. Of getting to know each other. It meant nothing because we’d never dug deeper.”

“Is that the truth, then? Did it go poorly?” She braced for his answer.

He exhaled audibly. “It was a disaster. Everything that drew me to you in the first place compounded. I realized I’d miscalculated before we’d even made it to the restaurant. The connection between us was genuine, and by the time we had that kiss—the one you feel so strongly about—I knew I had to have you.”

Her heart raced. The emotions she tried to stifle returned tenfold. She could make sense of things now. He had to reject her, or thought he had to.

“I thought if I came tonight and had you, that would be enough.”

“And now?”

“We walk among humans daily. Have done so for years. You aren’t the first to discover the truth.”

“And I assume that usually means... silencing them.”

He gave her a look that confirmed her guess. “Or they were brought into servitude in our home realm, in one fashion or another. Human servants in Pandemonium aren’t uncommon.” He growled and left the bed. “But that won’t be your fate.”

She sat up, holding the blanket against her chest for comfort more than modesty. “Earlier you said—”

“I recall. I meant to scare you, for my sake. You were supposed to be afraid of me. Hate me. Make it easier for this to happen once and be no more than a nightmare that would fade in your memory.” He paced back and forth, his tail flicking with annoyance.

“I guess there’s no demonic memory wiping ability?” she asked. Not that she wanted her memory erased.

He shook his head. “Madness. We can inflict madness and then your memories would be a muddle. That’s as close as it gets. Plucking out individual moments is an impossible task for Maelificars such as myself.”

Maelificars? Her face scrunched, but he continued past her confusion, “Other demons can do it, but it isn’t the sort of favor one asks for.”

“Then...” She couldn’t imagine what that left.

“There are rules. Pandemonium is chaos incarnate, but all demons bend to order in some fashion. An unclaimed human with knowledge of the truth can’t simply run free. I must claim responsibility for my actions. For you, there is only one fate.”

The solemn finality of his words swept over her. So far, the presented options were death, madness, or servitude. He wouldn’t kill her. She was certain of that. It didn’t seem he

wanted to drive her mad, and he'd implied he wouldn't bring her to Pandemonium.

Approaching the bed, he held out his hand. She took it without hesitation, and when he gently tugged, she stood before him, allowing the blanket to fall away. His pitch-black eyes roamed her naked body a moment before meeting hers.

“Join me in eternity?” he asked.

“Wha—what?”

His hand squeezed hers, and he pulled her toward him until her sore breasts collided against his muscled stomach.

He loomed over her, reminding her exactly how large and intimidating he could be.

He wound a lock of her hair around his dark claws. “Marry me.”

Epilogue

Alyssa wrinkled her brow and pondered the glowing numbers on her microwave. It was three-seventeen in the morning, but she was craving hot cocoa. The microwave would make considerably less noise than a whistling kettle. Or maybe if she babysat the kettle, she could catch it right before it whistled—

“You should be in bed,” a deep voice growled behind her.

She jolted back, landing against a hard, familiar chest. She looked up to Drastos’ human face—a face she couldn’t see because she was lurking around the kitchen in the dark—but a face she knew had a sour, disapproving expression.

“I’m still working.”

“No,” he disagreed. “I know you. When you’re up this late ‘working,’ it means you’re staring at the same information and rewording it again and again until you’re exhausted and feeling ‘snacky’, as you call it.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed away from him to flick on the light, since they were both up anyhow. “I do some of my best work at night.”

“You believe that, but trust me, it isn’t true. You’re just confused because the work that keeps you awake would put everyone else to sleep,” he grumbled. “Data organization optimization.”

Shaking her head, she leaned against the doorjamb. “But I’m awake. I may as well attempt to be productive.” She arched a brow at him. “You should find my work interesting. It’s directly related to how easily you do your work. The university library’s search engine is atrocious.”

“I have advantages that nullify the barriers of an average human researcher,” he countered.

She grabbed the kettle, her desire for a hot drink rekindled. His hand gripped her wrist and tugged, making her release the

kettle.

“You and your night *cravings*,” he chided.

“Don’t say it that way. They aren’t *that* sort of cravings.”

He smirked, and his eyes flickered to her stomach. She wasn’t expecting, but it was always on their minds, as it wasn’t for lack of enthusiastic trying.

“If they were ‘that sort,’ they wouldn’t be as mundane as your usual nighttime foraging.”

“In any case—” She freed her hand from his and gestured to the stove. “I was just going to boil some water for cocoa.”

“I suppose that’s better than the time I found you frying bacon at two in the morning and eating it right out of the pan.”

She bit her lip, fighting the blush that accompanied her embarrassment at being caught. Most people grabbed a handful of chips or microwaved pizza rolls when they got the munchies at night. She’d once cooked a New York strip and called it a snack. In her defense, she was usually so busy during the day that she skipped lunch and rushed through dinner. Her mundane was another’s unthinkable, and yet she guessed that demon baby cravings would be on an entirely different level.

“If you can’t sleep, I can remedy that,” he said. His eyes met hers, and as she watched, his mahogany irises darkened into the pitch-black that signaled his demon form coming forth.

She was over his shoulder within a blink, and back in their bedroom the next. Since their whirlwind marriage last year, they’d moved into his home—a luxurious, multilevel brownstone that put her tiny apartment to shame.

With the new home came front row seats to the double life Drastos lived. His friends were mostly Maelificars, but she’d also met a pair of incubi and a few vampyrs. He enjoyed hosting them, turning from mild-mannered research librarian by day, to debauched demon millionaire by night. Or as she liked to put it, librarian in the stacks, demon in the sack. She loved both sides endlessly.

He tossed her onto the bed and flexed, shredding his onyx silk pajamas in a violent transformation to his demon form, sans the wings she'd discovered after their first night together.

The wings were a surprise he'd shown her later, and were functional, giving him the ability to teleport short distances in the human world, and between this realm and his home—Pandemonium, the demon realm. They were cumbersome, and he often left them off when he transformed, just as he nixed the tail if he pulled his demon form out and wanted to don demon-appropriate attire. The latter had occurred a few times thanks to some very interesting dinner parties at their home.

It turned out that demons were fine with human companions as long as there was true commitment. Marriage made her acceptable, because demons could not break contracts, and there was no divorce for the supernatural. Actually, she had a suspicion that not even death would do them part, but she had yet to find the right moment to delve into what would likely be a deep and dark philosophical discussion.

He joined her on the bed, which didn't creak like her old one. His was a monstrously large and sturdy bed with a black-lacquered frame she suspected was made from center cuts of a tree. She'd seen no bed as massive, but it was necessary to accommodate his demon form. However expensive, it was a practical choice. The night before their wedding he'd visited her apartment for nostalgia's sake and her frame had splintered and cracked beneath his vigorous movements. It wasn't a moment she wanted to repeat.

From beneath the cage of his body, she eased out of her robe and tossed it aside, relishing the way his gaze wandered over her nude body. She slept naked these days, a demand of his that she had grown comfortable with.

He lowered himself until his chest pressed against hers, the warmth of his body quickly seeping into her. Their lips met, followed by the heady rush that always accompanied his kisses—she hoped it never faded. The taste of his lips and tongue imparted giddy magic on her. She moaned into him, and he

swallowed the sound and followed it with a possessive growl that rumbled through them both.

Pulling back, he sucked her lower lip between his teeth and gently bit down until she squeaked from the tiny, sharp pain.

“I love that sound. I could devour you.”

His words vibrated along her skin, filling her with anticipation. His arms straightened, lifting his heavy body from hers. She resisted the temptation to lie back and welcome his wicked, talented tongue. Instead, she licked her lips and gazed meaningfully down his body. “I want to do the devouring.”

He grinned. “Are you certain?”

“I’m feeling snacky,” she teased, and pushed against his chest.

He rolled over rather dramatically and fell to his back as if she had overpowered him. He was no longer semi-aroused but full-blown erect. She crawled to his side and wrapped her hand around the impressive length, eager to try her hand at pleasing him this way.

Frequent, vigorous sex and some sort of subtle demon mysticism helped her lower body accommodate him, but throats didn’t work the same way.

As her doctorate proved, Alyssa was not a quitter.

Determination filled her in tandem with the surge of lust that hummed through her from the sight of Drastos, naked and waiting for her mouth.

She pressed a kiss to the broad head of his eager, twitching cock. Drastos tapped the leg closest to him, signaling her to change places. His preferred position involved placing herself in what she’d previously seen as an undignified position. Marriage to a demon had cured her of most of her inhibitions, however, so she straddled his muscular chest and settled over him.

He was roughly two feet taller than her, making mutual oral impossible, but he liked to see and play with her when she

went down on him. True to habit, he gently sunk a clawed fingertip into her before she'd reclaimed her hold. She closed her eyes and enjoyed his teasing. His claws weren't razor sharp but dulled. Still, they could rip and tear. It was like being fucked with a weapon. She'd embraced the madness of her choice in wedding a demon, though, and didn't fear his touch. He'd never hurt her without bringing pleasure in excess.

Opening her eyes, she wrapped both hands around him and felt the texture of his shaft change. In the early stages of arousal, it was smooth, but he was already past that, anxious as he was for her mouth.

She licked the mushroomed crown and trailed her tongue up and down his length, feeling the ridges hidden beneath his dark skin become prominent. She squeezed her hand around his base and pumped up, causing the ridges to retreat. Once he neared climax, they'd remain raised and hard, making withdrawal rough. Drastos had explained that demon mating was feistier than humans', and their anatomy reflected that. On the same vein, male demons enjoyed oral sex so much that their cocks didn't engorge to full size if stimulated by a mouth. Drastos was still huge, but by comparison he was currently, *theoretically*, manageable.

Spit trickled from her tongue as she laved him, coating him to ease her efforts. Once satisfied, she wrapped her lips around his crown and sucked gently. A guttural groan rumbled behind her, filling her with bubbly delight. She sank further down, taking him inch by thick inch.

She'd never managed to deepthroat him before, but felt lucky tonight. Bobbing slowly up and down, her hands mimicking her motion lower down his shaft, she enjoyed the feel of him and his salty pre-spend. He worked two fingers into her, and the distraction helped her sink into the hypnotic headspace she needed.

His cock flexed at the back of her throat. She didn't gag, but the sensation was uncomfortable. Of all the lessons she'd learned in her sexual adventures with Drastos, the key was that rough, passionate sex rarely looked pretty. She had to accept the tears and sweat—and in this case, the tears and drooling

and choking—to reach nirvana. She half-whimpered as she sank down on him. Each determined bob sent him deeper than he'd ever been before, and closer to her dark fantasy.

Before her lips met her hands, she pulled back with a gasp. Lips parted, she breathed heavily against him, catching her breath. Her head spun and her ears rang.

“Fuck,” Drastos groaned.

His voice was muffled as if he spoke through water. She was in her own world. Her skin tingled, charged with chaotic, lust-driven energy. She took him into her mouth again, deeper. His length slid against the walls of her throat and sent a ripple of awareness through her. Going down on him wasn't his pleasure alone. She was dripping wet for him.

She moaned, and the vibration made his cock jerk. Drastos shook beneath her.

“Mine,” he snarled.

*

Drastos

There was nothing quite like a sultry woman's throat clamping and moaning around one's cock to snap the tether of self-control.

Drastos' neck arched back as a shudder ran through him. Alyssa wanted this. She wanted to suck him dry. It was her fantasy, her terms. However, he was a *demon*. He would take control. It was inevitable.

She'd pushed him over the edge, and he was no longer satisfied to lie back and toy with her sweet cunt while she worked her magic and worshipped his cock. He wanted to fuck her pretty mouth and force her to swallow every drop of his seed—take what he wanted.

Reaching down, he buried his hand in her thick black curls. Mesmerized by the sight of her glistening wet cunt, he guided her head up and down in the perfect rhythm, feeding his desire for control. Her throat was a vise, and he gritted his teeth at the tight sensation on the sensitive ridges along his

length. She was too perfect. He didn't deserve this, and yet he'd make the most of it because he was a greedy demon.

Her hand pressed into his thigh, and she rose slightly. The movement distracted him, and he gripped her arm to hold her where he wanted. He pushed her head back down through the resistance. Deeper, faster. His eyes clenched shut, and he focused only on the feel of gliding in and out of her throat. Spit trickled down his sac. She was nearing her limit. So was he.

He held her hair and pushed her all the way down. His hips flexed and arched up—he couldn't help it. He held her shaking body as he used her mouth, fucking her throat in rough desperation.

Their marital union formed a mental bond between them, and though he rarely pried into her thoughts or emotions, she was mentally screaming at the moment. She would black out, and her body was panicking, but she didn't want him to stop. He would, however, hurry.

With a last shove, her soft lips hit the base of his shaft, and he threw his head back and roared. A wildfire of pleasure tunneled through his spine and exploded, sending hot jets of his seed down her welcoming throat. With the ecstasy came overwhelming dizziness, and though his cock still twitched and spilled, he yanked Alyssa free.

She gasped for breath, but the magnitude of his climax—she could rival a succubus for the way she drained and satisfied him—left him slow to recover.

At least, his brain was slow—his cock, not so much.

Gazing at his limp little wife sent another wave of urgent desire through him, and soon he was cradling her to him and easing himself into her wet and ready cunt. Her walls fluttered against him, and she gave a feeble protest that melted into sultry moans when he cupped between her legs and teased her swollen clit. He would make her come, feel her convulse on his shaft again and again... then tuck her into bed and hold her through the night. In the morning, he'd make her tea for her sore throat. Once she'd recovered, he'd be her soundboard as

she talked through the plans and complications of her database project. He'd take her again the next night, of course. His need for her was insatiable, and he was only ever able to withdraw from her because he knew she wasn't going anywhere. He'd have her every day and night forever, never tiring.

They rushed into marriage. No talk of feelings or weight on the decision made to keep her safe, in case their unsanctioned relationship was discovered. Day by day, it became clear that there was more between them than sex and practicality. Their relationship wasn't one of convenience or compromise, but of love.

Love.

Like most demons, Drastos was skeptical of it at first. Yet it turned out to be the ultimate aphrodisiac.

About Godiva Glen

Godiva Glenn is a nocturnal being, much like vampires and cats. She holds a B.A. in Literature, which more or less means she has spent more hours reading and writing than she would ever care to admit to. Luckily, all that knowledge comes in handy for her creative pursuits.

Most of her recent writing endeavors circle around the paranormal/supernatural. Wolves are her preferred sexy shifters, but who knows what the future holds.

She resides in the U.S. with dreams of traveling abroad to research locations.

Browse her other books here:

<https://godivaglenn.com/allbooks/>

Abducted

Monster Mouthfuls Book 2

by

Cass Alex

Chapter 1

Luna

Our craft finally landed at the UGP outpost 7*KUr! I did a celebratory dance the moment I unfastened my seatbelt and stood up.

I'm fresh out of graduation and this is officially my first job as a Species Specialist trainee. With all the new outposts the UGP are settling on, they ran short on people in my field. Can you imagine? All these new species, and no one to come learn about them. It's a travesty!

The UGP reps were literally standing outside the Species Specialist classrooms trying to recruit. For real — I tripped over one guy coming out of Galactic Ethics and Responsibilities class and smacked into a wall.

Of course, all this 'settling bases' talk is just a fancy term for 'invading.' I'm going to call it as I see it, and hope the other species don't hate me on sight.

In the meantime, I'm so ready for this mission! According to my paperwork, I'm to report to Dayzee Martin and check-in with CDR Firken. I really hope these people are nice; I don't know a single soul here and it could get lonely if I don't make some friends.

I was in line to retrieve my bags when I realized... it was a little hotter than I expected. I mean, they didn't specify how hot it would be, but this felt excessive. Even as I used my official paperwork to fan myself, I was already half-sunburnt. I was gonna need more hats.

What planet did they say this was, and how close to hell was it exactly??

Could you get heatstroke in under three minutes? I'd been standing in line for ten minutes and was ready to fry where I stood. My water bottle was bone dry and yes, I tried to lick the inside for droplets.

Hypothetically speaking, if someone dies while waiting in line, will the UGP send their dried-up husk home to their foster-sister or just leave their carcass to serve as a warning to others?

Asking for a friend.

Chapter 2

Gr'ruuf

Another shiny container of noise came from the sky today. I yelled at it, but it still landed.

Why did they put their container-landing so close to our rock-open? The sounds the containers make upsets my tribe. They echo inside our tall ears, making our heads ache. Our tails flail in agitation, but they do not stop. Do they not care at all about *others*?

It is even worse when the containers return to the skies, though—the ground rumbles and moves, greens and ground shove out forcefully towards our home in the rocks, making it so we cannot breathe without pain, choking us. Each time scaring the youngest and oldest of us, causing them to howl in fear and distress.

With each rise of the round-in-dark, I watch the creatures arriving from the shiny containers. I see them interact and live their lives. They are social with each other, but not to any other tribes.

I watch as they emerge from their round-in-light lives and return to where they rest. They choose to rest in the darkness. This confuses us as we are born of the dark and feel the dark-round's call. The round-in-light brings much heat and makes our fur feel thick and dirty. If we have to be awake with the light round, we end up sitting in the wet a lot, drinking more, and hiding beneath the tall greens. We tolerate it if we must, but we dislike it. Our homes are deeper in the rocks to shield us from it.

Sometimes, we rest in the lesser round-in-light, where our rock opens. The warmth can feel nice on our hairs and we can move away if it becomes too hot. Inside, we have many places to rest apart or together.

Many of the *others* enjoy the round-in-light. There must be a reason — something my tribe does not yet know. I will discover this and inform them.

By far, I am the most curious. I watch the other tribes and learn about them. I have not greeted any yet, but I will. Most do not seem to like each other, but they also do not interact much either.

I know that a *wet-other* and a *noisy-other* from the wet-rocks mated with one of the *container-others*. This mating brought three groups closer to peace.

If I mate a *container-other*, will my tribe join theirs? Or join all three *other* groups? In the end, will four of our tribes join in peace? We have much to share with the *others*, and they have much they can share with us. I want this union. As a future leader of my tribe, this could be important for us.

I am the third born of my birther's second litter. Very much like my birther's mate, but bigger. I do not have their gift of overseeing our tribe yet, but I will. My gift is in learning about *others*. One day, I will use both talents to make us the greatest of all the groups.

I am especially curious about these *container-others*. They have less hair than we do, and they wear coverings on their bodies. They are always busy, sometimes loud, and very social amongst themselves. Similar to my tribe. We have kept to ourselves for too long. All of our tribes grew... and now our youngest rarely see or speak with any *others*. They never stray far from their places of rest. None of us do.

I do not think this way is good. I believe we should know all the *others*. Some will be good, some bad, but all will have things to share.

*

There is a new shiny-container creature that arrived today that I am curious about. Usually, these creatures have hair only on their top, between their small blunt ears, and usually their hairs are short or contained. Not this newest one. I believe it is a birther. It appears to have feeders, though only two instead of our many, but they are larger and well-formed. I have not

gotten close enough to smell her to confirm her matehood... yet.

She came to sit and stare up at the round-in-dark. But it was her fur that stole my eye. Furs so long they brushed the ground where she sat, draping her completely. With color I rarely see — like the skies sometimes when the light and dark trade places. Her paw coverings match her fur. She looks like she has fur all over her, like we do. This must be a sign that she is meant for us. For *me*.

If I quietly call to her, will the round-in-dark pull her towards me as a mate, as it does those in my tribe?

A strong and prime male, I am completely unmated. I hunt successfully, and will care well for my mate. I am the largest of my tribe. Even my oodt is fat and long, and my der are very large. I will make large and powerful young. A good, strong mate choice for a birther. We would make a good pairing.

I will greet her and hope she chooses me.

Chapter 3

Luna

So, apparently, this is ‘summer.’ HAHAHAHA.

This humidity? It’s going to kill me. It’s not only actively trying, but it may succeed.

My hair looks like I was electrocuted. I tried to make a ponytail and busted my favorite hairband. I broke two teeth on my sturdiest comb and bent one. My brush caught in my hair so badly, I almost had to cut it out to free it. It took me twenty minutes, a crying fit, and Maria from next door helping me to detangle.

By some miracle, the sun and/or atmosphere here actually brightened my hair instead of fading my colors. My hair went from faded periwinkle to light amethyst. It’s gorgeous! Whatever mysticism this is, they can make a killing with this science. It should be on the ads for 7*KU recruitment.

It’s day three on 7*KU. It’s 8:00 p.m. and I’m sitting outside praying for a cross-breeze. I have my thinnest robe and my unicorn slippers on, and a huge cup of water I’m tempted to douse myself with.

I was told not to go for a swim until Dayzee returns to camp in another few days. They said she needs to go with me. I have no clue why.

The past few days have been... interesting. CDR Firken was nice when we met. Even a little flirty, which was great for my self-esteem. Then he heard I was the new Species Specialist, and all but banished me to my bungalow, or whatever the hell they call this large walk-in closet pretending to be a room. I was amazed they managed to fit a toilet and kitchenette in here, let alone a bed. However... I’m not sharing a room with others **and** have my own potty? Sold! You won’t hear me griping.

Technically, I don't even have to leave and brave the heat unless I want to.

Newsflash: I do not want to.

Plus, there might be some wild animal in the bushes nearby. I keep hearing weird noises outside. Rustling, grunts, and low woofing noises. In fairness, it could be a hallucination brought on by heatstroke.

Maybe someone brought their dog to the outpost. At least it sounds like a dog. It also sounds... frustrated.

Day One, I heard quiet barks and woofs.

Day Two, the sounds seemed closer. Mostly at night, but I swear I heard a series of howls and woofs in the daytime too, just farther away. It's odd.

Today, the noises are close again and have a whine to them. Clearly, it wants attention. Who's not petting it?

I'm a sucker for animals, especially if they have fur. I mean, who can resist something floofy? Though a week from now, I might consider snuggling a snake if it seemed friendly towards me. The people here sure aren't.

Only two more days until Dayzee returns, and I can officially start my new job. I'm grateful for the downtime, but I need a purpose. No one will give me any info about the species I'm assigned to.

I just want a sneak peek.

Chapter 4

Gr'ruuf

I believe a small pack of eligible mates came to meet my *other*. Their scent was strong, and they had flat feeders, unlike the birthers. I watched them even though the round-in-light was there. She was not there, and they made loud harsh mouth noises and left a gift for her at the opening to her resting space.

This had to be courtship! They were leaving gifts for my mate, to capture her attention. I howled in upset and they left as quickly as they came.

They all wear coverings, and I do not see them scenting each other. How do they know who is a birther or a potential mate? How do they tell each other apart? Will more suitors be coming?

I quietly crept close to where she lives and made wet around the outside her home. Twice. To ward the others away. Now her home is marked by my scent. Now they will know she is reserved for me. *Only* me. They will not try to take her for themselves — I will not allow this.

I do not know how the container beings find mates, but the ones with oodt will now recognize her space is marked by another.

In case my scent is not strong enough, I will return later and mark it again. I will continue to spray her home until all with an oodt and der know to stay away from her.

MINE!

Chapter 5

Luna

This place is filled with assholes.

Maybe it's the mentality, since most of these people are military, but it feels like I'm back in high school again. I am not a fan.

I was in line to get food and asked the people around me if anyone knew who owned the dog I kept hearing near my bungalow. It took a good several seconds for the laughing and clapping to die down before the response of, "You do." That set off a new round of hysterics and a hell of a lot of stares and grins.

Today was *not* the day, and I was *not* the one.

I was hungry, dehydrated, cranky, and was having none of this quasi-bullying bullshit.

I stomped onto the nearest bench seat and yelled out, "Excuse me? Hi! Is there anyone around here mature enough to answer my question without acting like an asshole?" I waited several long seconds, hands-on-hips, glaring around the room. "No? Okay, good to know then." I nodded and climbed down, marching back to my spot in line. The dude behind me sensed not to halt my return. I was hangry and could easily become violent.

I grew up in foster care. The state paid for my schooling alongside my scholarships. I fought damn hard to get to this point in my life. It was going to take a lot more than a bunch of camo-wearing fledglings to knock me down.

For fuck's sake, I'm not asking for loyalty from these people, but was civility really too much to ask?

A hand on my arm brought my attention to a woman about my age. She was on my arriving flight. She's human, as the

majority of us here were, and I recalled thinking she seemed polite and quiet on the craft.

“Do you really not know?” I met her eyes and shook my head. “Grab some food and come over to our table, and we’ll tell you what we’ve heard.” I agreed and watched the spot she returned to.

There was still snickering and looks, but mostly from the guys in line. When I got my tray and headed over, I found her sitting with some other women. They all appeared human, and all stopped talking when they saw me coming. Gee, I wonder what the topic was.

“Hi, I’m Luna.” I introduced myself and took a seat across from the woman who spoke to me.

“I’m Doreen. I was on the ship with you. Oh my gosh, your hair is so pretty. I’ve always wanted to color my hair, but never had the courage.” Her words rushed forward nervously, but her face was earnest. She smiled and suddenly, the weight of the past few days left my shoulders.

Doreen’s own medium brown hair was pulled back into a bun, and her round face had the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. She genuinely looked like a nice person, and every thought and feeling seemed to echo across her features. I liked her. Maybe we could become friends.

Friendship was hard. Making friends when you moved from care home to care home? Impossible. You’re too busy surviving to learn things like social skills. Those came after you aged out of the system.

“I’m Katarina. You can call me Kat.” Kat was gorgeous with thick, wavy dark hair and tanned skin, and had an accent I couldn’t place.

“Hi. Samantha.” Her soft voice came with a small, shy wave. Samantha was petite with green eyes and a cloud of blonde fluff for hair. She reminded me of a porcelain doll I saw as a kid. She was as pale as me but less sunburned. I needed to learn her trick.

“Regina.” She nodded once and offered a small smile. Her skin was as dark as mine was light, but hers was flawless. What a complexion! She would never need to worry about foundation or makeup and probably never had a zit before. She seemed reserved — either she was the type who held things close to the vest or she wasn’t sure what to make of me yet. Either was fair, and I nodded politely in return.

“We had no idea you weren’t told.” Doreen jumped directly into the topic. “The noise is one of the creatures they brought you here to study. I only know because I work in the main building. They’ve been hoping the howling would stop because you’re going to meet with the um... well, the species making all the ruckus. Sorry, I don’t know what to call them.”

I did not expect this. Well, shit.

“I think I’ve seen them,” Samantha said. “They live in the larger rock caves, on the other side of where the Aviarids nest.”

Regina nodded in agreement.

“Aviarids?” Is that one of the species they discovered already?

“Yep, Aviarids. Dayzee is mated to one. Think ‘bird-man’.” Katarina said between bites of food. “Yours isn’t a bird-man or an octopus guy, though.”

“Wait, there’s an octopus guy *and* a bird-man?” A slight thrill went through me that I might meet them. I love this field!

“What am I assigned to?” I felt both dread and excitement stir while asking.

They exchanged looks, clearly caught between trying to describe the creature, and being unsure if they should tell me. This problem was solved by a jerk at the next table.

“If bigfoot fucked a werewolf and a demon, that’s your love-child right there!” More laughter from the camo-wearing crowd one table over. This time it came with claps on the back and high-fives.

If these creatures like the taste of humans, I was gonna send them after these assholes.

“So, how much of that is true?” I asked them.

The women glanced between each other before shrugging uncertainly and nodding.

Oy.

I took a breath to calm down. “Can you guys describe them to me?” I breathed and prepared for the worst.

“I heard they look like werewolves,” Doreen started. “Except that they have hair like ours, instead of coarse fur. Well, if werewolves actually existed.”

“Don’t forget the pointy horns and the tail.” The women began talking amongst themselves while I ate and listened.

“And the claws. Someone said they saw claws.”

“But did they really see them, or is it another rumor?” Regina asked before taking a sip of her drink.

“I wondered the same about the horns. But I haven’t seen any of these guys yet, just heard them. Still less noisy than the Aviarids. Those guys squawk and stomp over just about anything,” Samantha remarked as she rolled her eyes.

“So do these guys. They get especially loud when transports come in. Protesting I guess.” Katarina shrugged.

“I hear they walk upright like we do, which is why someone said they are like bigfoot. He was a big humanoid covered in hair.” Doreen considered.

“True, but he didn’t have a tail or howl, which is why they say werewolf,” countered Regina. “And no horns.”

“Werewolves transform, though. I don’t think this species shifts. They’re just hairy all over,” Katarina commented.

Do the other species shift?! Would I be able to watch? I needed to take notes on all this information.

“Do their faces look like wolves or like us?” It was my turn to jump in and say something. “Are we talking werewolf

style face... or bigfoot humanesque face?"

We all exchanged glances.

"Everything is hearsay. No one has gotten close enough to tell for sure." Samantha took a bite of her sandwich, clearly still thinking.

An *ARROOOOOO* sounded somewhere outside, and our heads whipped toward the window facing the sound. It was clearly one of the aforementioned creatures, and it seemed closer than ever. Uproarious laughter sounded throughout the mess hall as heads swiveled toward our table, all eyes on me.

"Hey dog toy, go fetch!" someone yelled out.

Being laughed at? *That's* always tons of fun.

I sighed and stared off in the direction of the noise. I braced myself and stood, straightening my clothes and picking up my tray.

"Well, lunch was passably edible, and it was very nice meeting you all. It seems I may have an appointment I was previously unaware of." We all glanced towards the window facing the section of housing I lived in.

"You should wait for Dayzee. We don't know enough about these beings," Samantha voiced her concern.

"Do you want us to go with? We can walk you back to your bungalow. Safety in numbers." Regina stood and reached for her tray, looking determined.

I shook my head. "I don't think this can wait any more. It sounds like they are nearby. I don't want anything to happen to you guys either. Do me a favor and check on me later? If anything happens to me, please let Dayzee know A.S.A.P." They all nodded.

Another shorter series of yipping howls sounded from the area of my bungalow.

"Sounds like the werewolf Avon lady has a delivery for you!" Some guy stood and pretended to hump his friend while howling at the ceiling. All his buddies laughed. Yes, because that was just *so* funny. Ha. Ha ha.

“I’ll make sure and save a lipstick sample for you.” I made kissy lips at him.

Sarcasm was my superpower, but I tried not to use it too often. Big mouths can cause big problems and I was mouthy by nature.

A sampling of throaty barks in varying tones sounded outside as I dropped off my tray and moved toward the door. Were they calling out to someone? Were they communicating to each other? What the hell was really going on outside and how was everyone so oblivious?

I stood up straight, flung the door open, and headed towards the sounds.

No matter what, this was about to get interesting.

Chapter 6

Gr'ruuf

She did not return yet. Her scent leads to the large closed place with many smells. I think this is where they have foods. It smells like it could be food, but I am unsure.

I did not see any other container beings nearby, so I examined the gift that was left for her. I sniffed it. It was not dead or alive. But it was contained in a half-shell and left for her. Was this food? I think this is their food. This must be what the container people eat.

Why were they trying to feed my mate? Did they think I could not provide for her?!

I was outraged.

I called out for her, using different tones, hoping she would hear me and come quickly. I was very upset!

I was sure she heard me and will come to me soon.

I sniffed the container again. Their food does not seem appealing the way ours is. I can show her I can do better than them. I still have time!

Chapter 7

Luna

One of these pricks left dog food at my door. I came home to a goddamn bowl of Kibbles and Bits.

I'm glad they find my job so amusing. But you know what? Even my most boring days will still be more interesting than standing around guarding a base all day. The truth hurts. Sorry, not sorry, military gym-bros!

When I went to pick up the dog dish, I also realized that something reeked. What the hell is that smell? I looked around, not seeing anything. It smelled like strong pee. Animal urine, maybe? Were there wild animals around here as well as aliens? I wanted to see!

I brought the dish in and placed it on the counter. Someone around here may have a pet that will eat this. Out of the corner of my eye, through a window, I caught a bush moving. Son of a — were they out there again?!

This was it. Prepare to meet my wrath!

I grabbed the broom and mentally prepped to rip the door open and clobber some dude for messing with me. I weighed the broom in my hand, ready to swing, ripped the door open and...

Screamed.

Chapter 8

Gr'ruuf

She yelled. Loudly.

This was not the response I expected.

I did not have time to put the gheeghee down. I had just caught it and hurried to leave it for her as a gift. The small furred corpse was still warm, and the blood was minimal. Really, it was a very good kill.

She opened her home to find me standing there holding it. She stared at me. She stared at the gheeghee. She stared at me again. I smiled at her. She screamed.

My head and tail drooped with sadness. Did she not find me presentable?

I quietly held out the gheeghee to her, and her demeanor immediately changed.

“Iss dat fer mee?” She pointed at the gheeghee.

I had no idea what she was saying, but her voice was so light and soft. It was our first time speaking, and it made me want to sing to the round-in-dark from happiness.

“I do not yet speak the shiny-container language. I will learn.”

Her eyes became big. “Yuu barkt. Iss dat yer tawking?”

I still had no idea what she was saying, but she smelled wonderful. Unmated and scenting of pink blossoms and wet greens. If only she would accept my mating offer.

I presented the gheeghee to her again.

Her face seemed sad as she stared at the food. Does she not like gheeghee? Should I have brought a brrip instead? They have spikes, though, and she looked soft.

She visibly swallowed as she held out her hand to accept the gheeghee.

It was happening! She was accepting my offer to mate!

I placed the gheeghee into her palm and waited expectantly. She smelled lightly of fear. This was to be expected; we just met. We were both new to this mating. She was anxious, same as me.

“Tank yu.” She stared at the creature before looking up at me and offering a small smile. My tail swayed happily in response.

Then they returned. The same males from earlier.

My head swiveled in their direction, a low growl forming in my throat. She remained unaware until they were practically upon us, but I could hear and smell them.

“Uppity bitch thinks she can act all high and mighty? She’s just a pet for the local dogs. We’ll show her.”

I do not know what they said, but it was not friendly and they scented like anger. Danger. Her face fell as she heard them, confirming my thoughts. A moment later, three container males rounded the corner to the front of her home.

PROTECT MATE!

Immediately, I leapt in front of her and stood to my full height, snarling viciously. I extended my nails to full length and bared all of my mouth bones. I roared in anger, growling, swiping and snapping in their direction.

Two of the container beings stopped and screamed. One immediately dropped to the ground and covered his head. One made wet as they stumbled backwards away from us, and one turned and fled. There was much yelling. I heard more coming, so I did what any good mate would do.

I grabbed my mate and her gheeghee, and I ran home with them both.

Chapter 9

Luna

What the hell was happening with my life?!

I walked outside, ready to swing a broom, and got handed a half-dead pet by a werewolf. I was confused. Did he think I was a veterinarian?

Then he bared his teeth at me, and I nearly peed myself. Was this a smile or a threat?

Then some assholes came, shit happened, and now I'm draped over a furry shoulder and he is hightailing it out of camp. Literally. Pun 100% intended. I have no idea where we're going. My hair is in my face, I'm hanging on for dear life... and I'm still holding onto the dead animal.

I must've dropped my broom when he tossed me over his shoulder. We can all agree, I'm clearly not made for combat.

After a few minutes of darting through trees and bushes, it feels like we are climbing. I'm bobbing up and down as he hoofs it. I hear animals and it smells a little musty. Where is he taking me?

The world goes from bright to dim and I am placed on a soft pile of... something. I carefully put down the animal I was handed and brushed the hair from my face.

Oh... crap.

I'm in some sort of rock alcove, in a pile of leaves and brush. A nest? Through the opening into the main area, I see a hell of a lot of whatever he is, all staring wide-eyed at me.

I brought my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. My hair draped down over me.

My kidnapper left, returning with a large shell filled with water. He squatted and handed it to me.

“Thank you.” I accepted the gift and took a moment to look at them all.

At a glance, they looked a lot like dogs, but more humanoid and stood upright. Their hair was longer and softer than a dog, which I noticed when he carried me. Their face features were distinctly canine, yet expressive like a human. The sharp teeth and claws he had when he defended me are gone, so maybe he can control those? The rumored horns must have been imagined. The normal, dog-like tail swayed slightly as he remained crouched in front of me, I studied him.

Um... wow. He is huge. Buff too. I could see the curve of muscle in his upper arms and legs, even with the hair. He stared back at me, examining me as well. He gently stroked a lock of my hair, pulling it closer and sniffing it.

His hands and feet ended in short, blunt dark claws. His feet were a cross between humanoid and canine, leaning towards canine. He had toes, and, for some reason, that enamored me. It was cute. I smiled to myself and examined his tall ears. He turned his head so I could see them better.

Glancing at the others, I realized the women had several sets of breasts, noticeable enough to see but not much bigger than the males'. The exception was one female holding a couple of babies, eyeing me fearfully from across the main room.

Something pink caught my eye, and I glanced down before realizing what it was. Was that a red rocket?? Oh, hell.

It disappeared back into the large furry pouch I had failed to notice before. In my defense, his front had a lot of hair. And it was black. And the room was not well lit. Plus, it's really rude to check out your captors' genitals, regardless of their species, right? Right?! But I can say from up close, he is 100% male, has testicles like friggan' apples, and his doggy pouch would look big on a bull moose.

Luna, stop looking at his package! I mentally shook myself.

The crowd parted slightly and a creature nearly the size of mine stood there, flanked by two others. He woofed. No, really, he woofed at my creature.

Mine stood and woofed back. The two of them began grrr'ing and woof'ing and chuffing and then I realized: the barking, yipping, howling, and different tones I heard earlier were all conversation. Talking.

I flunked both Spanish and French. How do I learn to speak Werewolf?

Suddenly, they were all looking at me.

“Hi, sorry. I don't mean to intrude. He just kidnapped me.” I pointed at my captor.

“Grrr...” he growled at me. “Ruff.” He barked slightly, then rested a hand on his chest.

I stared blankly in response.

He patted his chest and repeated himself. That's when I noticed the inflections he used. A drawn out R and a sharply accented U.

“Grrr... Ruff.”

I did my best to copy him exactly. “Grrr... Ruff.” It was his name?

Everyone exchanged looks, surprised, talking excitedly amongst themselves.

He patted his chest once more, “Grrr... Ruff.” Then pointed at me.

Oh.

I tapped a finger to my chest. “Luna.”

I'd never seen a dog squint before. I tried really hard not to laugh.

“Luuu... naaa. Luna.” I drew out the sounds, hoping it would help.

“Rooo-raaa.” My name but with a dog accent. That was cute. It reminded me of a cartoon dog from my childhood

years.

“Llll. La la la.” I showed where my tongue was while pronouncing the L sound. He opened his mouth and tried to copy it. Damned if he didn’t come close! So I showed him moving his tongue back further for the N sound. “Nnnnn. Na na na.”

“Lll. Uuu. Nnn. Ahh. Loooonnaa,” he attempted.

I lost it and clapped my hands, scaring them all a little.

“Looonaa.” I nodded at Grrr Ruff, beaming. He smiled, baring a hell of a lot of sharp-looking teeth. Yah, so that part? Not so humanoid.

But a smile meant he didn’t want to eat me, right?

Chapter 10

Gr'ruuf

I could not wait to taste her. Her long fur scented of freshly crushed berries, her flesh smelled like blossoms and greens, and her heat was blossoms and spice and musk. I scented it when I brought her liquid to lap up and my oodt instantly responded.

I wanted nothing more than to lap up her spicy heat and wetness, lick her from top fur to bottom paw over and over.

“The *container-others* will come for her. They will be angry and attack. We have many young and older to protect. Why is she here?” My birther and her mate were concerned for our tribe.

“Loo'na is... *mine*.” My admission stilled our entire cave of all sound. They knew what this meant. The round-in-dark pulled her to me as my very own. Few were as treasured as those fated by the round.

“Wy iss evrywon lukng atme?” My mate's voice was quiet, and I smelled her fear.

“We will ready ourselves. Unless she chooses to leave, she belongs to our tribe now.” My birther's voice was both soft and stone as our tribe prepared for attack and intruders.

My birther came to rest beside my mate, examining her paws and her pretty colored fur, curious of her coverings. My mate smiled with her blunted mouth bones showing, patient with my birther. I swelled from joy at seeing them together.

There was movement and I saw Aa' wuuf, from our birther's first litter, watching as well. We did not like each other. Even as young, we clashed. If he thought to take what was mine, we would fight.

A low, deep rumble stirred from within me. A warning sound.

He looked at me, his eyes not readable. I snapped my mouth bones at him. He ignored me, returning his eager gaze to my mate. I heard his low keen, meant to pull her attention to him.

Never!

So I did what any sane tribe member of my status would do.

I began to make wet around my mate's nest so that everyone knew she was MINE!

Chapter 11

Luna

My jaw dropped as my creature started to pee around me. “Dude, what the fuck?!” He stopped immediately when I scolded him, ears and tail drooping. “You are lucky that didn’t splatter on me, mister! What the hell are you doing?”

His eyes were on the creature that whined at me. He looked upset. Wait — was this a territory thing?

My brain immediately searched for everything I knew about dogs. Was he worried the other one would take me, or hurt me? Was this a claim? Maybe a protective measure?

I glanced at the creature holding my hand, her slightly graying muzzle and tummy marking her as older. Maybe his mother? She was intently watching the three of us.

My creature seemed upset, his face a bit chagrined. Maybe because I yelled at him. A low whine from the other creature had me frowning at him. He caused this reaction somehow, I was sure of it. Hey, was he inching closer to me as he whined?

“Stop right there!” My voice was firm as I pointed at him. I know I looked mad. Good — he was causing issues, and I had no time for that. “You need to leave. You’re upsetting him.” I glanced at my creature before making shooing motions at the other guy.

I’m sure you’re a very nice dog-man, but I already have enough on my plate right now, thankyouverymuch.

Mine stood taller and prowled towards him, head high. The female next to me petted my hand and hair. Somehow, I gained her approval.

The troublemaker slunk away and the creatures in the next room seemed to grumble at him as he went. Even they weren’t pleased with his behavior.

A quiet series of huffs and low woofs from the female next to me had my creature stopping and glaring fiercely where his friend (enemy?) went, before returning to us. I was listening as they communicated. She remained calm, her paws continuing to pet my hands and hair. She sat with bent knees, her tail tucked along her ankle, while I was cross-legged. He stooped in front of me again, glancing between us as they chatted. Clearly talking about me. Something she said made him appear... proud. A full array of his teeth went on display and he appeared to puff up as he listened. I examined them closer. Their ears were tall, slender, furry, and they both had full lips, longer noses that ended in blunt tips, and rounded eyes with long eyelashes.

And then it happened.

“Luna? Are you in there?” A voice called from where we first entered the cave.

My eyes went wide as everyone jumped into immediate action.

I was shoved back against the wall with the female in front of me, crouched, and growling low. Grrr Ruff stood in front of us, claws out, fangs out, snarling with menace.

Shit shit shit!

“Hello?” I called out, doing my best to seem calm. I remained seated to show that I did not deem whoever this was a threat.

“Are you okay in there?” The question was hesitant.

“Well, I think my new friends are a little on edge right now.” That was an understatement. “May I ask who wants to know?”

Was my yelling across the cave rude? Maybe.

Was it necessary? Yes, since they were ‘protecting’ me.

“The entire base is wondering, but especially me. I’m Dayzee, I’m in charge of you.”

My brain scrambled.

Yay, it was Dayzee! She will understand, right?!

Oh no, it's Dayzee. What an awful first impression. I'm going to be fired.

Flip a coin to see which thought raced faster through my brain.

“So... I may have been kidnapped. But I think he's protecting me?”

Silence.

“Are you able to come out and talk to me?”

Was I? I rested a hand on the female creature's shoulder and met her eyes with a nod. I tried to remain calm and like all of this was no big deal as I stood up. The female stood along with me, concern in her eyes. My creature turned and whined at me, panic and fear on his face.

I went with instinct, taking the female's hand and moving slowly, so she came with me. I took my creature's hand as I cautiously neared the alcove opening. Both came willingly.

The main cavern was packed with their strongest ready to fight, and their weakest behind them. I made a show of smiles and calm as I walked slowly towards the entrance, taking my creature and the female with me.

Low whines and whimpers followed us. So did a large male, who stepped alongside the female. The same one that spoke to my creature earlier. His father, maybe?

I stepped into the light at the front of the cave, allowing us to be seen. On an outcropping at the front of the cave was... Oh hell if I know. A human, a giant squid, and a giant humanoid bird?

Fear flooded me as I took in Dayzee's mates. This caused Grrr Ruff to move in front of me and growl a little.

Oh boy.

“It's okay.” I soothed him softly. “They are okay.” I nudged him aside and stepped forward.

Dayzee smiled and waved, and for the first time since I arrived on this planet, I relaxed.

“It’s a good thing we came back early. Are you sure you are okay?” She was sweet, with darker, sun-kissed skin and an open face.

“I like my new friends *much* better than the guys at the base.” I nodded, and she laughed.

“Sounds like you met good ole CDR Firken.” *Sounds like there’s a story there.*

“The entire place is full of assholes. They basically called me a dog toy and left kibble at my doorstep.”

All merriment left her face.

“We’ll take care of that once we get back. Our department is important to the right people and they won’t be happy our team is being harassed by the grunts.” Her eyes went to the beings standing beside me. “Are congratulations in order?”

I stared at her, confused. “What do you mean?”

“He kidnapped you, right? Brought you to his cave, lair, home. Introduced you to his clan and/or family. This is clearly a ‘Sociology of Species class, Year Two’ situation.”

I... what? Wait. No...

“Did he feed you? Pet you? Offer gifts?” She waited patiently, her face knowing.

Oh fuck. Could I be any dumber? How did I pass class with high marks, then fail so miserably in the field?

She laughed the minute she saw it dawn on me.

“They are super nervous right now. Start by introducing me the same as you did yourself. I can take it from there, then we see how they react.”

Okay, I can do this.

“Grrr Ruff?” I looked up at him, careful to say his name the way he did. “This is Dayzee.” I pointed at her. “Daaaayyy

Zeee. Ddd. Aaaayyy zzz eeee.” I showed my tongue placement for the D and Z.

That was clearly the right thing to do. He calmed immediately, seeing that she was not a threat, even with the other two aliens behind her. This allowed everyone else to relax. His possible parents remained at my other side, observing the interactions intently.

I watched him quietly practice to himself before looking at her and saying, “Daasee.” I was so proud of him!

Her face lit up. “Grrr Ruff.” She nodded and smiled, her pronunciation of his name perfect. She turned to the beings behind her and they stepped closer. I examined them openly while she introduced them.

“This is Gluub. G g gg ll uh b. Gluub.” She spoke both to me and to Grrr Ruff. She also pronounced Gluub’s name as he might, and it was so friggan’ cool! It sounded like she was underwater. He had a full mouth with pretty lips and six blue eyes that studied everything and everyone, assessing.”

And this is Khaw. K k kk aaawwww Kk aaaaw Khaw.” She legit made a bird noise. She called out an actual cawing noise. This partner was clearly more protective, hovering warily and watching us with gem-like golden eyes.

Grrr Ruff repeated the names, making eye contact with the other aliens. They each met his eyes and replied with his name. I can’t explain why, but this meeting felt significant.

Both of her partners were tall and wide, while she was shorter and more slender. Not so different from my creature and myself. Her bird-guy, Khaw, had down and feathers, but his back looked like colored razor blades. But it was her squid-guy that felt more dangerous. It was his alertness; absolutely nothing got past this being.

“Do you want us to walk you back to your bungalow?” I looked at Grrr Ruff and then his parents, uncertain.

“It would give you a break to gather your thoughts about today as well as document everything you have discovered.”

She was right about my needs, on both counts. “Plus, we have an idea for tomorrow.”

A rumbling began, loud screeching noises echoing through the cavernous cave. Huge gusts of dirt and debris flooded the space. The creatures yowled, clutching their ears, coughing and running deeper into the cave. His mother tugged my arm, fearful, as his father tried to protect us both.

“What the fuck is that?!” I stared outside in horror, covering my nose and mouth with my shirt. Was... was that a craft taking off?? Was it like this each time? This had to be torture for these beings!

I motioned to his father to take his mother and go, nodding my assurance I would be okay. However, my creature refused to go.

I shook my head at him. “Go with them.” I pointed, but knew it would not work. I took his arm and walked him back into the cave to where the others were.

“You... stay.” I pointed at him then used both hands to motion he needed to stay put. I then motioned to myself and pointed towards the exit. He whined, and I rested a hand to his mouth. “I will go. I will return. I promise.” I pointed and made my fingers look like they were walking. Walking out... then pointing at the sky and drawing a circle... then pointed at myself... then walking fingers returning. I finished by pointing to where he stood.

Did he understand? I hoped so... but right now, I needed to confirm what that was and find out how to stop it. I put on my meanest face, growled towards the outside, clenched my fists, and stomped out. All for show, but I hoped they understood intent, otherwise my theatrics were all for nothing.

Dayzee was talking to her mates when I returned, all of them upset.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said to her. “If that is what I think it is, we need to do something about that A.S.A.P.” She nodded in agreement, fury on her face.

The four of us trudged back towards base on a mission.

Behind us, one low, sorrowful howl pierced the night.

Chapter 12

Luna

Boy, did I need that rest!

I'd needed to gather my thoughts and jot a million notes.

But you know what I needed most? The sight of Dayzee and her mates putting the fear of God into every grunt that made the mistake of arriving at the mess hall for breakfast.

It. Was. GLORIOUS!

“Dog food. Are my notes right? I want to make sure it's all accurate. And...” Dayzee checked an official-looking pile of paperwork. “Humping, howling, denigrating names, ridicule... Then, of course, the attempted attack on a Species Specialist. Did I leave anything out?”

She and her mates were holding court in the cafeteria. Two silent, imposing guardians, and a confrontational Species Specialist Lead.

“Luckily, I also have a wonderful list of names to go with that. Would anyone else like to be court-martialed over an interstellar incident? Anyone at all?” She looked around expectantly. You could hear a pin drop.

“I have a list of over a dozen names. Those of you involved will want to pack your bags and tell Mommy and Daddy to fetch you at return drop-off. If you cannot behave civilly to a Species Specialist, on a base meant to meet other species, *you do not belong here.*” She barked the next part, “Are we clear?!”

“Sir, yes Sir!” arose the chorus of response.

“Okay, that was totally worth getting up at the ass-crack of dawn for runny eggs.” I walked up to them, smiling.

“I wasn't like this before I mated.” She grinned. “You take things seriously pretty fast when you realize how important

your job is, and how much you need to protect your mates.” She studied my face. “You know what I mean?”

“I get it.” I nodded. “But no mate for me yet. I am boringly single.”

“Yah, I wouldn’t bet on that, Sweetie. Give it a day or so, then see what you think.”

That was odd to say. What can happen in a day?

Well, you can get kidnapped and taken to dog-land. Apparently, that was a thing.

“Your mates don’t talk much,” I noted. “Do they understand us?” I eyed them curiously.

“Yes,” Gluub replied, his tentacles whirled slightly as he shifted towards me. “Khaw also.”

“They tend to observe when we are around others, but they aren’t big talkers. It’s more a human trait.”

“It’s a whatever-my-new-friend-is trait too. They love to talk. Woofs, yips, grunts, barks, huffs. They have their own language. It’s incredible. And their faces are more expressive than ours!” It felt wonderful having someone to talk with that understood.

“Did you choose their name yet, for classification?”

I tilted my head, puzzled.

“I chose Aviarid for Khaw’s species because of their bird traits,” she explained, “And Octoceph for Gluub’s because they are cephalopod but I see more octopus traits than squid in them. These are just so that we can understand them by Earth terms, for our records.”

“Maybe... Canid Noctum? They have doglike physical traits and seem to prefer the night.”

“Perfect!” Dayzee turned to Khaw. “And it looks like your idea might work even better than we thought.”

“What idea?” I looked between them.

“Something to help welcome your new friends to the tribe.”

Chapter 13

Gr'ruuf

My tribe was upset for the entire round-in-dark.

Loo'na left to battle the loud, and we feared she would not return. My birther and her mate remained with me throughout the night. The entire tribe took turns resting, so we could stay awake in the round-in-light. We all agreed that with the rise of the round-in-light we would leave and try to locate my mate. Already my mate's fearsome nature has earned her place in our tribe.

“Grrr... Ruff? Ar yuu in daar?” Loo'na's sweet voice carried to me.

“Loo'na? Loo'na!”

Heads snapped, and we all ran for our rock-open.

In my lifetime, I could never imagine what waited for us outside. It was all I hoped for.

Chapter 14

Luna

“We call this a ‘Welcome Wagon’.” I beamed up at Grrr Ruff and his people.

Dayzee and I stood there. Beside me were my new friends, who were curious and excited to meet the newcomers. Gluub brought an elder, two adults, and two very young Octoceph. They were so adorable. I couldn’t stop staring. Khaw brought a large Aviarid, two slightly smaller than himself, and three young of varying ages.

We brought fish from Gluub’s people, fresh fruit from the grove, and various foods from the base. They also brought looped circles of branches that I hadn’t figured out yet.

“Come down?” I motioned for them all to come to us. Grrr Ruff and his parents exchanged looks and were the first to come down. He immediately ran to smell and examine me. His mother was next, and they stayed glued to my side.

It was nice, feeling cared about. I didn’t have that growing up.

His tribe slowly filtered down as they realized it was safe and welcoming. My new friends brought out blankets so we could sit and eat.

Everyone was curious about each others’ food, and the Canid Noctums brought out some of their own. Like the Octoceph’s, they apparently ate things raw. We made a small fire, which shocked them, and they watched us cook a fish that we shared after, so they could taste the difference.

The upside was the Canids liked cafeteria casseroles from the base. At least someone did.

The downside was none of us were brave enough to chew on raw fish or dead animals like them.

Luckily, the fruits and vegetables were neutrally shared territory.

But the most fantastic part came with those branch circles. I didn't realize what they were until Khaw rolled one towards the smaller Aviarids and suddenly everything came alive. They were makeshift balls! They ran, kicking them back and forth, flapping and squawking happily. Khaw rolled one towards the Canid pups, who sniffed it, then batted at it. When it rolled towards another, he batted it back. Before we knew it, three more balls hit the ground and then all three species of kids were playing with them. Within minutes, everyone was playing together. The humans were running, the Octocephs were swirling after the balls, the Aviarids were flapping after them, and the Canids were running and batting as balls rolled by.

I studied Grrr Ruff; his expressions were everything to me. Proud, wistful, joyous, curious. I also saw how much he cared for the other Canids, how much the younger ones looked up to him, crowded for his attention, and how loving he was with them.

Good parents raised him, and it shows, I thought to myself. His entire tribe trusts and respects him. He will be a good father one day.

The adults loved playing with the kids, carrying them while running, lifting and twirling them. Some things were universal. There was so much happiness.

But for me, the defining moment was a tiny Octoceph coming to rest on my blanket. He sat and stared at me, nestled in his tentacles. Tentatively, he reached out to touch my hand, curious. I smiled and let him examine me. He was beautiful, with five eyes in shades of green, and a sweet tiny mouth. I don't know what I did, but before I knew it, he swirled himself into my lap and curled against me. I wrapped an arm around him and held back tears. This was amazing! A tiny Canid crawled onto my blanket to stare at me next. He examined my hands as well, but was fascinated by my hair and petting it. Suddenly, I had a Canid baby curled up with an Octoceph in my lap. Another Canid young, and one of the Aviarid young

made their way to me next. Kaleidoscope eyes stared at me and he ruffled his feathers as the tiny Aviarid made himself comfortable on my lap. The Canid simply leapt after finding me worthy.

Is it rude to pet alien species that resemble animals on your home planet? Because there was no way I wasn't going to love on these tiny babies wanting my attention. I cuddled and hugged them as a group and they settled in for a nap.

Best. Day. EVER!

Chapter 15

Gr'ruuf

My mate, resting with a nest of young, all from different *others*, was my life's greatest moment. She did not judge. She simply loved those who came to her. So gentle and kind, but with a fierce heart.

Even though we were in the round-in-light, this was the best day. When we became too hot, the *wet-others* brought us to the water, and we rested in it with them. They played there as well, chasing each other, but were also careful to watch the young.

One of the human birthers was teaching young how to rest in the water safely. We, and the loud ones, learned much from those teachings. And all three *others* liked our very tall greens to rest beneath. We forgot how nice it was to rest under them.

As round-in-light turned to round-in-dark, Luna went to her sleeping place. I followed.

She showed me the inside. She had a wet source! She filled a container and offered it to me. It was cool and fresh. I sat on her nest, which was the softest nest. A wonderful nest.

Luna took a new covering and showed her back. She removed her current covering and was going to put the new cover on. I could not help my whine. I wanted to see her. Explore her. She was my *mate*, and I had not seen her flesh yet.

She stopped and remained still for a moment. Then she turned her front to me.

Chapter 16

Luna

I'm so gonna get fired.

I knew he was as curious about me as I was about him, so I turned around, topless. It's a sociological experiment, right?

His eyes stroked over my neck, arms, stomach, raising up to my breasts. I stared down, wondering what he saw. Two fair, medium-sized breasts with pink nipples. Not quite the six flat ones he was used to seeing.

I stepped closer so he could examine me.

A low whimper sounded, his paws fisting at his sides as he stared at my exposed skin. He was visibly trying not to touch me. What gave his thoughts away was the flash of dark pink poking from his pouch.

That really shouldn't turn me on the way it does, I chided myself.

His eyes met mine and the longing I saw stole my breath. I used a band to tie my hair into a ponytail, and stepped in front of him, the view unobstructed.

I stared down, watching more pinkness push out, but much thicker. *How big was he down there?*

He followed my gaze downwards, then eyed my pants. Okay, fair enough. I toed off my shoes, tugged my pants and underwear down, and stepped out of them.

I expected him to look, but he closed his eyes and inhaled close to my skin instead. Suddenly, there was a lengthening pink rod protruding from his pouch. From the heavily tapered dark pink tip, he widened at the middle, changing to a pink the color of my own nipples. At his base was some sort of swelling of flesh, like a deflated ball. He was as thick as my wrist and still growing as he smelled me.

His eyes met mine, and he whined softly as he leaned in. His tongue slowly licked over me, parting my lower lips as he watched me intently.

I gasped, not expecting it. He slowly licked me again, starting from a lower point. He was... tasting me. I stared down at his pink cock, my mind flooding with thoughts and my arousal flaring.

He reached a hand down, gripping his base firmly. I watched him stiffen, his thick hardness now beading with his own desire. But he didn't stroke himself, he just gripped. His tongue once again lapped at me, starting between my legs where my honey flowed and lapping upward. I panted slightly when he brushed my clit, but that was nothing compared to my reaction when he tilted his head down and ran his tongue over his own cock.

Brain. Scrambled.

He licked along a side as if cleaning, but lapped circles at his tip while his grip stayed firm.

Curious, I leaned down and swiped my tongue over his heavily swollen appendage, same as he did. He snarled in shock, eyes wide, and nearly fell off the bed.

In a flash, he had me flat on my back and was examining me. Fingers parted me and a wide tongue stroked up my center, over both holes, making my pleasure spot twitch. I bit my lower lip to hold back my moan.

I pulled his head up towards mine, and I taught him his first lesson about humans... I pressed my lips to his in a kiss. It took a moment before he tried to copy my motions, moving his lips over mine. A groan from him enthused me, my tongue swiping over his teasingly.

He pulled back, burying his face between my legs. I felt his tongue press into me, tasting my sweetness from its source.

Damn, that feels good.

He discovered that licking my clitoris made me squirm, and made me wetter, and soon he was licking me like I was his last meal, stopping occasionally to lick the slick dew from his

own cock. He also quickly realized doing that also made me drip with honey.

I watched his tongue drape over his length as his hand shook his stiffness firmly. He throbbed, pre-cum dribbling out his tip, which he licked his hole to clean up after. A low moan was my only warning before I squirted wetness onto the bed.

He stared at me in shock.

My fingertips moved to my nipples to tease, because I was not a one-and-done type of woman. His fingertips reached to touch a breast. I lightly tweaked a nipple, showing him what I liked. He was a little rougher than I was, but it felt really good. And in return, I reached down and tweaked his cock tip.

He reared back, staring at his stiffness for a moment before trying it himself.

Yah, someone definitely liked that.

I ran fingers up and down his length as he shuddered, eyes at half mast. It was apparent he'd never been touched before. I moved my hand to his pouch and gripped lightly, using it to stroke him, my other hand using his own wetness to circle his tip.

Grrr Ruff watched in awe, his face filtering through all the new sensations and experiences. And then he leaned in and kissed me, and something in me melted. It may have been the wall I kept up to protect myself. He allowed himself to be vulnerable with me. I actually felt secure enough to reciprocate.

His arms wrapped around me, and he held me to him like I was a treasure.

Chapter 17

Gr'ruuf

My mate. My Loo'na. *MINE*.

I clutched her to me, begging the round-in-dark to never take her from me.

Again, I leaned down, my mouth brushing hers. This closeness... it is even more than my tribe experienced, and my tribe is very loving.

My Loo'na, she made hot wet just from watching me tend to us both. It was an honor to see!

She leaned back, pulling my body onto hers. My oodt was out and desperately wanted to mate with her.

I felt her reach down and take hold of me again. She brushed my oodt tip over her hot wet, using the slick on us both. This caused us both to make more hot wet and noises of pleasure.

She rubbed me more on her and pressed me to her deep heat. I think she wishes to mate now.

I pulled back and flipped her onto her front. I pulled her knees up so her bottom was open to me. This is what I have seen others do.

She reached to continue rubbing. I took my hardness in hand as she had and rubbed against her. Soon, I felt her deep heat press against me. My birther reminded me before I left that if I mated Loo'na, to be slow and careful. The *container-others* were smaller than our tribe.

I knew my oodt was to aim for the deep heat, so I pressed the top into her musky wet and slowly pushed.

Soon, she would be all mine.

Finally.

Chapter 18

Luna

I've heard stories about how big dicks make you feel full. They did not lie.

Slow as he was going, Grrr Ruff was spreading me pretty wide. His hands stroked down my sides, trying to comfort me as my insides choked the life out of his dick. I'd be shocked if he didn't get stuck inside me.

I pulled forward, then back, using him to ease myself and spread our slick. The back and forth worked and soon he was in me to his root, with his arms wrapped around me. I could feel his occasional pulse and throb inside of me, though he stayed still.

I turned to face him. "More? Move?" I moved slightly, to explain.

His hands moved to my hips, and he pulled back before thrusting into me. He repeated it, us falling into a slow pattern that rapidly increased. His grip at my hips tightened as he moved from thrusts to slams, stopping once to nuzzle me sweetly.

I reached down to circle my clit with our wetness, causing me to throb a release. I tightened on him, causing him to howl and pour himself into me. Instead of his size decreasing, his bulbous base suddenly inflated, locking us together. Is this knotting? I read about that somewhere. It was either in my Species Physiology book, or my last roommate's romance novels.

He carefully laid us on our side, holding me and kissing my face and shoulders. Knot or not, he wasn't about to let me go, and feeling wanted and cared for was the best feeling in the world.

I totally get why Dayzee took her mates, even with all the bad reactions. Nothing tops having people that truly care about

you. Especially when you so rarely had that before.

What can change in a day? EVERYTHING, if you are lucky.

Maybe even a lifetime.

Anthologies consist of short stories, so this is a shortened, 'anthology version' of the original. The full version will be released on completion of the anthology's term.

Thank you for reading :)

*

Enjoyed this story? Be sure to leave a review!

Your opinion will help others and will help the author.

About the Cass Alex

Cass Alex (a.k.a. Casper Alexandria) is a multifaceted author who specializes in Sci-Fi Romance, Monster Romance, Paranormal Romance, Urban Fantasy, Rom-Coms, and the occasional anthology.

She currently resides in central Florida and spends her days thinking rocket launches feel a lot like earthquakes.

She is always jotting notes, tends to read way too much, and likes to wander off and explore new places. Sometimes she even makes it home unscathed!

You can find her on Facebook at:

<https://www.facebook.com/cassalexwrites/> or on her author page at <http://www.cassalex.com/>

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The Orc In My Closet

by

Cara Wylde

Intro

When I buy a castle on impulse, eager to spend the money from my divorce settlement, I don't expect it to come with... a portal. In my closet. And the portal to come with... a sharp-tusked, green-skinned monster. A monster that looks like an orc.

At night, he climbs through the portal and into my bed, and I don't stop him. Because with him, I feel things I've never felt before.

Chapter 1

Heather

I took a deep breath, stepped out of my car, and looked up at the mighty structure. I still couldn't believe I'd just bought a castle in the middle of nowhere. It was mighty because it was tall, with two towers dominating the landscape, wide arches, and a garden that spread behind it, not because it was in particularly good condition. But that was okay. I had plenty of money left to renovate, especially since I was determined to get my hands dirty for a change.

I needed this. Something to call my own. Why not a castle away from civilization, a dream of mine since I was a little girl? I had to use the money on something. Had I inherited it, I would've thought twice. Had I worked for it, maybe thrice. But it was my ex-husband's money, so when I saw the advertisement that this beautiful castle was for sale, I didn't hesitate. It was an impulse buy.

My stupidly rich ex-husband cheated on me from day one. Now, I'd gotten a huge settlement and treated myself to a gift I knew I deserved. Why not?

The moving truck pulled in and snapped me out of my trance. No point in thinking about the past anymore. Mrs. Adler was gone. I was back to being Heather Dale, middle-class roots, with romantic, cozy dreams for the future, ready to work toward the life I wanted. This castle was home now, and as I admired its rough, beaten-up stone from a distance, I didn't regret my impulse purchase. I could be happy here.

The movers greeted me, and I walked to the front door to let them in. I instructed them where to leave the boxes and where to carry the little furniture that I had. The castle had come fully furnished, but I was attached to a few pieces from my other life. Luckily, my ex hadn't argued about my taking them. He probably wanted to bring his new mistress home as soon as I was out of there, so he let me take whatever I

wanted. My settlement hardly scratched him. If anything, the money he'd lost in the divorce was an inconvenience of paperwork. He must be happy we didn't have children. Then, the divorce could've affected him.

"If you could sign here and here, Mrs. Dale."

"It's Miss. Of course, thank you."

I signed the papers, and the men left. I waited to hear the truck pull away, then took a deep breath and relaxed. This was good. This was nice. It didn't bother me to be alone in this huge place. After the mess and the drama of the divorce, with his family and mine begging me not to do it, a little peace in an isolated castle was exactly what I needed. I knew how to take care of myself. Before marrying rich, I was middle class, working for a living and finishing my studies at the same time.

I took the groceries out of my car and stocked the fridge. Then I fired up the stove and brewed a strong cup of tea. I could take things slowly. I'd seen every nook and cranny of the place when the realtor showed it to me, so I hardly thought there would be surprises. I took my cup of tea and went for a stroll in the garden.

"Ugh, I'm going to have to hire a gardener, for sure," I whispered to myself as I looked at the overgrown trees and bushes. There were flowers here and there, but weeds suffocated them. "I can clean and cook, but I can't keep indoor plants alive, let alone a whole garden." That was one skill I hadn't acquired before marriage.

It was okay. Doable. Even if I spent all the money from the settlement on renovating the castle, I still had plenty in stocks and bonds. I hadn't gotten my diploma for nothing. I knew how to invest and live on the interest. If I could detach myself from the toxicity of my marriage, I could even say it had been a good deal in the long term. I was set for life.

I found the vegetable garden and felt excited to grow my own veggies and eat fresh every day. But the weeds were so overgrown that it would need a lot of work, and then, maybe next year, my wish could come true. There was a rose garden, too, and it looked better than the rest. Who would've thought

roses were so resilient in their beauty and could grow wild and free without needing much attention? There were stone statues here and there, maidens with their breasts uncovered, carrying baskets or reading. I found an old, half-rotten bench, sat on it, and finished my tea in peace.

I lost track of time admiring my wild surroundings, and thought about everything and nothing in particular. My cup was empty, and the sun started to set. I got up and winced when I felt my leg had fallen asleep. I rubbed it and hobbled a bit until it recovered.

I returned to the castle, entered through the back door that led directly into the kitchen, and made myself a sandwich. With my plate, I walked around the ground floor, staring at the boxes in the hall. I wasn't going to start on them today. All I needed was to pick a bedroom upstairs, throw fresh sheets onto the bed, take a bath, and then sleep.

And I did exactly that.

I carried two suitcases to the first floor and checked out the bedrooms. I chose the biggest, with tall windows that faced the rose garden, and settled in. It had its own bathroom with a vast mirror, an old sink, and a generous claw-foot tub. All the faucets were golden and only needed a good polish. Turning the water on, I felt rather fancy.

The tub filling, I went back into the bedroom to make the bed. It was a massive four-poster, and after checking the mattress, I decided it would do for now. It would need changing the first chance I got, but I wasn't going to die tonight if I slept on it. I made the bed, then rummaged for my pajamas.

There was a tall, wide closet on the wall opposite the bed, and I stared at it for a minute, then sighed, feeling too exhausted to take out my clothes and put them in it. From what I could tell without opening it, it was big enough that I wouldn't need a walk-in closet, as I used to have when I lived with my ex. I liked that it was all vintage, built of solid cherry wood, and like most aspects of the castle, only needed polishing.

Tomorrow.

I took a long bath, and once my body was so relaxed I could barely sit upright, I slipped into my soft pajamas, then under the sheets. I turned off the lamp but didn't close the drapes. The moon was full, and its soft light was all I needed to soothe myself in this unfamiliar place. The silence was all-encompassing, and I soon drifted to sleep.

A noise startled me, and I groaned and turned to my other side. Must've been the wind howling. Another noise, louder this time, and thumping, made me snap my eyes open. I stared at the ceiling of the four-poster. Moonlight brightened the room, and I held my breath to listen closely.

Then the impossible happened, the doors to the closet in front of the bed burst open, and through them, a tall, wide figure stumbled out. I screamed and sat up in bed, pressing my back to the headboard and pulling the duvet up to my nose.

The figure rose, and I saw it had two strong legs, arms as thick as tree trunks, wide shoulders, and long, dark hair. I started shaking like a leaf. It looked like... a man. A huge, deformed man who'd just leapt out of my closet. And then he took a step toward me. And another. Moonlight hit him across the face, and I froze when I saw that his skin was green all over. He wore little in terms of clothes – only a tunic that hooked over one shoulder, and heavy boots made of leather and covered in animal fur. But his face... His face was that of a monster. He had sharp double tusks poking out of his mouth, curling over his upper lip. A scar crossed his features from his jaw to his left eye. His hair was black as night, long and coarse, and his eyes were just as black, filled with something I couldn't decipher.

He looked around the room, then his gaze fell on me.

I screamed louder, until my throat burned. He grinned, jumped on the bed, and I screamed again and again.

No one could hear me.

Chapter 2

Heather

The green-skinned beast pulled the duvet off me, and I found myself in my silk pajamas, shaking, trying to cover my full curves with my hands. He grimaced when I kept screaming, which could only mean he hated it. Maybe if I screamed harder, he'd go away.

No such luck. He climbed on top of me, pulled a dagger out, and pressed it to my throat. I went silent, swallowing heavily.

“Please, please... What do you want? Please...”

He furrowed his brows, then grunted.

“I don't understand. Just tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you... If I can, if I have it...” I was rambling, and the more I did, the more it seemed to confuse him. “You can take anything you like. I have money in my purse...” Though, what would a creature that looked like a legit orc from fantasy movies do with money? “I have jewelry, too... Gold, platinum... My ring...” I raised my hand to show it to him, and his grip on me tightened. “Topaz, see? Take it.” When I tried to use my other hand to remove it, he pressed the blade to the pale skin of my throat, and I whimpered.

He grunted and growled some more, and I soon realized he was trying to communicate in an unfamiliar language. He didn't even look at my ring. His eyes focused on me and me alone, and his free hand came up to touch my hair. He seemed to be fascinated by it, and I couldn't know if it was the color – ash blond, except I wanted to stop dyeing it, – or that it was so soft compared to his.

His hand wandered lower, and he brushed a finger down the side of my face, to my jaw. I drew a sharp breath in and held it. He removed the dagger from my throat, and to my utter surprise, dropped it on the nightstand.

“What do you want?” I whispered.

He didn't speak this time. He put some distance between us, presumably for a better view of me, and I found that I couldn't move. I was paralyzed, waiting for him to decide my fate. No more screaming. Speaking softly got him to drop the weapon, and I wasn't about to risk enraging him again.

But what the hell was this monster doing in my room? In my bed? He'd literally emerged from my closet!

How was I supposed to wrap my head around what was happening and survive at the same time?

Luckily, he didn't seem interested in hurting me anymore. As long as I was quiet and calm, maybe he would behave too. It was worth a shot. I couldn't fight him – that I knew for sure. He was massive and as solid as a rock. Even if I managed to take hold of something and throw it at him – like a chair, or a whole bloody table – I doubted it would impress him much. No way I could outrun him.

His hand reached my throat, right where the blade of his dagger had been. His skin was rough, but warm to the touch. My heart pounded in my chest.

And then he reached lower. And lower.

“What are you doing?”

He growled as his hand slid down my chest and took hold of my breast. I yelped and grabbed his wrist. But instead of pulling him off me, I surprised myself by... doing nothing. For a long moment, we stared into each other's eyes. Warmth flooded my body, going straight to my core, and I was almost ashamed to feel how wet I became between my legs. He squeezed my breast, and a pathetic whimper escaped my lips. He grinned and grabbed my other breast, and his eyes dropped to my generous cleavage as he pushed them together.

“Oh, God...”

I allowed myself to look at him now. To really look at him and try to understand why I felt like this when he touched me. My nipples hardened, and my panties were on their way to ruin.

He knelt before me, and I could see his muscles move under his green, scarred skin, in an almost mesmerizing way. He was strong, and he looked like pure sin. Both his nipples were pierced, and I wanted to pull at the golden rings. His abs were rock hard, just like his... my eyes widened when I saw what hid under his tunic. Judging by the tent pointing at me, his cock was massive.

He pulled at my silk top, and I let him. I had nothing on underneath, as I liked to feel the silk directly on my skin. He didn't stop there. In a swift motion, he tore my pajama pants off me, and I yelped and slapped at his hands.

“What are you doing? You could just ask, you know... Not rip my clothes to pieces.”

He let out a few grunts, and at the very least, I was relieved he didn't appear mad at my outburst. I had to remember that even if he awakened scorching passion inside me, I wasn't safe. He was a monster, and I was a fragile human. Who knew what he used those tusks for?

My panties were next, and once he had me fully naked, he pushed me onto my back and started exploring my body shamelessly. I moaned and whimpered as he pulled and tugged, squeezed and rubbed. He didn't seem bothered by my large hips and round stomach, and revered my large breasts, his big hands sliding up to them over and over. He ran his fingers down, down, down, until he reached the spot between my legs that was aching for him. And when his finger slipped between my wet folds, he was actually gentle.

“Oh!”

His eyes filled with curiosity, and he watched my reactions as he rubbed me there, grazing my clit even without understanding what he was doing. Before I could stop myself, I grabbed his wrist and held his hand there, while I moved my hips to create friction right where I needed it. I fixed him with my gaze, and his lips curved into something that could be called a smile. I smiled too.

“I don't know what I'm doing... Oh... But it feels so good. Forbidden. Maybe you're not even here. Maybe you're

not real, and this is just a dream. Because I haven't been fucked well in so long, I just made you up, and here you are."

He grunted a few words in his strange language, but I couldn't care less what his opinion about my theory was. In truth, I was quite convinced this wasn't a dream. It felt too real. Which was fine, because I wanted to have some real sex right about now. Even with a monster.

I rubbed myself harder and harder, chasing an orgasm that I knew would only take the edge off. He allowed me to find my rhythm and reached for the belt that held his tunic in place. He had more respect for his clothes than he had for mine, apparently, because he removed it and dropped it to the floor, then removed his tunic, too, not damaging it one bit. And I could finally see him in all his monstrous glory!

He wrapped his hand around his massive cock, and my eyes followed his movement. The second my gaze fixed on the round, dark-green mushroom head spilling a stream of translucent pre-cum, a quick, intense orgasm washed over me, and I let out a cry as I held his hand still on my clit. And then I let go and collapsed onto the bed. He didn't permit me a minute of rest, though. His hand kept exploring my folds, spreading them so he could stare at me, at the small nub that had just given me so much pleasure, then one of his fingers pressed against my entrance. I moaned and opened my legs for him as I pushed myself up on my elbows.

"Yes," I whispered, encouraging him to push his finger inside me. When he did, I let out a moan. His finger was thick, which was great, because I needed at least a bit of preparation if I was going to take his huge cock tonight. "Yes, just like that."

He growled, and I hated that I couldn't understand him, and he couldn't understand me. From the way our bodies reacted, at least it was clear we both wanted the same thing.

His finger moved in and out, curling and exploring places inside me that had me whimpering and begging for more. He pumped his cock harder, and when it released more of the translucent liquid, he pulled out his finger, dipped it into his

pre-cum, and then smeared it all over my folds before pushing it inside my pussy. My eyes rolled in my head. The gesture was beyond sexy, but that wasn't it. It was as if the second his fluids got in contact with mine, a fire started between my legs and spread through my whole body, up to my heart and through my head. Now, I wanted him more than ever.

“Please...” I sat up and reached for him, trying to pull him over me. “Just do it. Fuck me... Fuck me now, or I'll go insane...” I meant it. I felt in every fiber of my being that I would go insane if he didn't put his cock in me and fill me with his seed. He'd just given me a taste, and I was already addicted.

He grunted softly, word after word that I couldn't understand, then grabbed me by the thighs and flipped me onto my stomach before I could catch on to what was happening. I yelped and kicked, but he had me pinned under him. I felt the head of his cock press against my entrance, and I relaxed instantly. The position was uncomfortable for me with his incredible mass and weight. Compared to him, I was small and fragile – two adjectives I would've never used to describe myself until now. He seemed to realize that, and he sat up, allowing me space to breathe and move. I pushed myself to my hands and knees, and from this position, his cock slipped inside me, the fat round head, then the shaft, inch by inch.

“Oh, my God... Oh, God...” I was delirious. “This is so... fucking... good...”

It hurt. He was huge, and nothing had ever stretched me like that in my life. But the pain mixed with pleasure, and the adrenaline pumping through my veins made it easier to bear the burn. Once he was fully inside, up to his heavy balls, I felt like I was going to burst.

“Move...”

I didn't think he understood me. Because instead of moving, he took his time to explore my body once more, his hands kneading my breasts, his fingers pulling at my nipples until I cried out. I felt impatient and being teased like that was too much. I thrust my hips back, and that knocked the head of

his cock painfully against my cervix. He growled deep in his chest.

“Please... just... I need this. Come on...” I pulled my hips forward, then pushed back against him, and finally, I could get some friction.

I heard him growl louder behind me, and he started moving, at last, pulling out until only the tip was in, then sliding back in. It was slow and gentle at first, and that surprised me. It showed that he was aware I wasn't built like him. He knew he could hurt me if he didn't pay attention, so I was grateful to him for allowing me to adapt to his girth and length. I wanted this more than anything, but I also wanted to walk in the morning. And maybe... just maybe... be able to do it again soon.

I stopped that train of thought before it went any further. Because there had to be something seriously wrong with me if I was getting fucked by a monster who'd come out of my closet, we were far from being done, and I was already dreaming of getting fucked by him again.

He grunted in his usual manner and increased the rhythm. I fell on my face, hugging the pillow, unable to hold myself up any longer when he started thrusting with abandon. The sound of skin hitting skin filled the room, and it felt like his cock was seconds from tearing me in two. I moaned and screamed, and clawed at the sheets, but I never told him to stop. Because I didn't want him to stop. My pussy opened more and more, accommodating him even as I could swear his cock grew larger and harder with every plunge inside my body.

The orgasm hit me when I least expected it. I was so consumed by lust that I couldn't think straight, and I felt so many things in my body, all so overwhelming, that when it hit me, I tensed and arched, and felt myself come for the first time in ages. Like, really come. I gushed onto his cock, coating it with my juices, and when I thought I was done, another orgasm shook me screaming.

Above me, he grunted and growled, then let out a sound that was akin to a pained howl, and the next thing I knew, he

was filling me with his thick, hot seed. He filled me to the brim, and he still had more to give.

I was putty in his hands as he flipped me onto my back and held me there as stream after stream of seed spilled out of his cock and onto my flushed, sweaty skin. It was hot and gooey, and it kept coming. He covered my breasts in it, there was plenty on my face and in my hair, and he'd flooded my pussy with it too. It seeped into the mattress, and I was suddenly glad I hadn't changed it yet.

Then it was over, and the orc lay down next to me and traced patterns all over my body as I drifted to sleep. What was done was done. I'd been fucked like never before, and I felt content. Was he going to eat me? Who cared? I was too high in the afterglow.

Chapter 3

Heather

I woke at noon. The sun was high in the sky and poured through my window, lighting up the room and allowing me to see every speck of dust. The first thought in my mind was, “*What a crazy dream!*” But then I rolled onto my back and realized I was sore all over. My muscles ached as if I’d run a marathon, and when I inspected myself with the tips of my fingers, running them from my clavicle down to my bare pelvis, I discovered that the stickiness from the night before had solidified into a crust that required washing.

“Not a dream,” I whispered as a smile pulled at my lips. But I shouldn’t have been smiling. A green-skinned monster – an orc – had just completely defiled me, and I shouldn’t have felt as amazing as I was feeling.

With a whine, I sat up and threw my legs over the edge of the bed. I eyed the closet doors suspiciously. They were closed and looked innocent enough. I swallowed hard, pushed myself to stand, and held a hand to my lower back, which ached like crazy. I hobbled to the cherry wood wardrobe. Yesterday, I hadn’t opened it and inspected it because I’d been too tired. Then an orc had walked out of it and into my bed. It was time to investigate.

I threw the doors open and took a step back, half expecting the orc to jump out at me. But he wasn’t there. Which made sense, since... how would a big, growling orc live in a closet? There was a tall, oval mirror in the back of the closet. Except its smooth surface reflected nothing. It looked like a mirror, but if it was a mirror, then I might be a vampire, because I had no reflection. I gathered my courage and stepped inside the closet. It was spacious, and there were hangers above my head, while to my left and to my right, there were shelves and drawers. It was completely empty, except for the strange mirror that I had a feeling was no mirror at all.

Another step, and I sensed a whoosh and vibration. The mysterious object became active. Its surface shimmered in shades of blue and silver, then with all the colors of the rainbow. It made a soft and eerie sound, and I felt it as a deep, rumbling vibration in my bones.

“A portal,” I whispered. And the word felt right. “Not a mirror. A portal.”

To another world? To another dimension? I reached out, curious to see if the shimmering surface felt like anything, if it was hot or cold. But I thought better of it and pulled back. I stepped out of the closet, and the portal deactivated, returning to the dull state it had started in. So, proximity activated it.

“This is wrong. I shouldn’t do this.” I quickly closed the wardrobe and went to open the tall windows. “Good, God... I thought I bought a castle, but this...” How did the realtor not mention that it came with a portal to another universe? The fresh air of the valley invigorated me. I felt better, and I could think more clearly.

Of course, there was a way to find out what was on the other side of the portal. But if I went through it, I could land in a world of orcs and find myself surrounded. Not a great idea! No, I wasn’t going to risk it. It was better to not touch the portal.

I went into the bathroom and ran myself a hot bath. I needed to wash away all the sinful things the monster had done to me. I was hungry too, but cleaning my hair and skin of his fluids rose to a priority. No time to indulge in a long bath. I dried off quickly, grabbed the first clothes I could find, then headed downstairs. A cup of coffee and a plate of eggs and bacon later, I was starting to feel like myself again. Most of the pain was gone, too, though the muscles in my thighs still felt like I’d just spent too many hours at the gym. Which was a silly idea... I’d never been a fan of going to the gym. The most I’d done in terms of exercise was Pilates.

“What if he shows up again?” I walked to the foot of the stairs and looked up at the landing of the first floor. “Tonight... What if he shows up again?” And I bit my lower

lip as I realized that I, in fact, wanted him to walk through that portal and pin me under him like he'd done the night before. The thought alone got me wet, and I rubbed my thighs together.

"I could get rid of it..." Of the portal. "I could... take it out of the closet, bring it out into the yard, and try to smash it to pieces." I didn't know exactly how, or whether it would work, but I owned a hammer, and could give it a try. "Or I could drop it to the bottom of the lake." The castle wasn't on the shore of a lake, but there was a lake nearby, and the area was deserted.

I didn't want to get rid of it, though. Not right now. Not today. I had to see what happened tonight. If he came again...

With that decision made, I spent the rest of the day cleaning and unpacking. I wanted to hire a maid and a gardener, but all I could think about was him. My monster. I couldn't have anyone in the house while the portal was in my closet, and he could come through it. So, I distracted myself as best as I could, and when the sun set, I retreated to my bedroom.

I waited for him in bed, in a fresh set of pajamas, with the lamp turned on. I wanted to see him clearly this time. Hours went by until it was well past midnight. I thought he wouldn't come. It was hard to stay awake when the past few days had been so intense, but I fought to keep my eyes open. And when I thought I was being silly, and I should've just gone to sleep, I heard whooshing and felt vibrations, then heard thumping in my closet, and the doors burst open.

I sat up, alert, and watched as he stepped into the light. It was him. The same monster from the night before. And I realized I'd been worried some other monster would visit me tonight. But I recognized him, and he recognized me. Of course. It was me he'd come for.

He rushed to climb into bed with me, but when he pinned me down, I placed both my hands on his strong, wide chest, and firmly looked him in the eyes.

"No."

He growled and furrowed his brows.

“No. Not yet. Wait.” Then I pointed at my chest. “Heather. My name is Heather. What is yours?”

He didn’t understand. He pushed me down again, and I resisted. Fortunately, he must have known I wasn’t scared of him and didn’t want to run, so he didn’t use his dagger this time. But he was clearly annoyed that I wasn’t giving in.

“Heather.” I pointed at my chest again, then pointed at his chest. “You?”

“Hulgan,” he growled.

“Hulgan?” The name sounded strange, and I couldn’t imitate the way he’d said it. When I pronounced it, it sounded different. “Hulgan?”

He nodded. And I smiled, triumphant, feeling we’d made progress.

The monster pressed his hand to my chest and said, “Heather,” then to his chest, and said, “Hulgan.”

It was clear. I’d managed to go through to him. That I knew his name and he knew mine proved there could be something between us. He was real; I was real, and this... was also real. As crazy as it seemed!

“Heather,” he whispered in a gentle tone. “Heather.”

I beamed at him. “Yes!”

He leaned in, and I didn’t resist. I thought he would rip off my clothes like before, or go straight to my boobs, which he seemed fascinated by, but he pressed his lips to mine. I felt his tusks press into my cheeks. It made me shudder. My pussy throbbed in anticipation. He kissed me sloppily, and I responded, my tongue trying to tame his as we devoured each other. His hands were on my hips, my arms were around his neck, and soon, he pressed his hard cock right between my legs, where I needed him the most.

“Heather,” he whispered again as he pulled my pants down.

“Hulgan.” And I did something that maybe I shouldn’t have.

I licked one of his tusks.

Chapter 4

Heather

He gripped me so tightly that I thought my ribs would break. A deep, lustful growl started in his chest and reverberated through his entire body. I was so close to him, my curves pressed against his taut muscles, that the growl reverberated through me, too. He looked into my eyes, and there was a fire I hadn't seen before. He squeezed me again, and I mewled in pain.

"N-no... Don't. That hurts," I whispered. "Hulgan." And only when I said his name did he let go and move back to give me space. I rubbed my sides, wincing, then looked up at him, a question in my eyes and on my lips. "What happened? Why did you do that?"

He furrowed his brows and frowned. Then he licked his tusks, and it hit me. They were sensitive! An erogenous zone. That licking them and kissing them turned him on so hard made my heart skip a beat. I wanted to turn him on. To be the only woman he wanted, the only woman who could get that reaction from him. Unfortunately, that squeeze to my ribs showed me I couldn't take that level of lust. My body wasn't strong enough to withstand him.

"Come here..."

He complied. He covered me with his body, and I removed the cloth around his hips. While I wanted to lick his tusks again, I fought the urge. But maybe I could lick something else.

I pushed to roll him over, but my efforts were in vain. He grinned and settled on his back, and it felt like a good sign, like he wanted to please me. He wasn't as dominant as the previous night. Maybe he would have been, had we not exchanged names. I crawled to him and settled between his thighs. His long, thick, gorgeous cock was staring at me, and my mouth watered. I knew it would be impossible to fit even

half of it into my mouth, but I wanted to try. I wanted to taste him.

I took his cock in my hands – both my hands – and gave the head a tentative lick. The translucent liquid seeping out of the large slit tasted rich, and I moaned as I swallowed it, feeling its warmth travel down my throat and seep into my very bones. There was something about his juices. There had to be. I tasted his pre-cum, or my pussy got a sample of it, and my body lit up inside. My core throbbed and my brain obsessed about fucking him. Fucking Hulgan. Or being fucked by him. The same thing.

I wrapped my lips around the head of his cock and sucked greedily, drinking his nectar. He grunted and growled, and his hand came to rest on my head. He pushed me down, and I panicked at first. But he didn't apply more pressure than I was comfortable with, so I relaxed. If everything went well, I would not choke to death today.

I took more of his cock into my mouth, but once I'd gotten a quarter of it in, the head hit the back of my throat and I gagged. That was as much as I could take. I used my hands to rub the rest of his length as I bobbed my head up and down and breathed through my nose. He tensed up and breathed harder. He must have enjoyed what I did to him, even if it was so little. There was no way I could give this massive orc a proper blowjob. But I wanted to try, and I soon realized the more pre-cum I ingested, the more relaxed I became. I could push another inch of his cock down my throat, and then another. My gag reflex was gone. My jaw ached, but I ignored it and sucked his big, green cock as best as I could.

“Heather,” he growled.

I looked up at him. He watched me with hooded eyes, so I made a show of letting his cock pop out of my mouth so I could lick the head and drink from it. His eyes widened, and I didn't understand why at first. But then I felt his balls swell and harden. He was close. I stopped what I was doing, and he growled in frustration. But I didn't want his seed down my throat. I wanted it in my pussy first, and then, if enough of it was left, I would drink it, too. I quickly climbed on top of him,

before he grew too impatient. He gripped my hips, and I lowered myself onto his cock, mercilessly impaling my pussy. I was still stretched from the night before, so the pain wasn't as sharp. I screamed, closed my eyes, and threw my head back.

Hulgan grunted in his strange language, then lifted me like I weighed nothing, and slammed me back down onto him. I screamed again and pressed my hands to his wide chest for leverage. As eager as him to reach climax, I moved in the rhythm he imposed. I vibrated all over, shaking from sheer passion. His cock plunged into my pussy like it belonged. With every deep thrust, I felt the head push against my cervix, causing wave after wave of pleasure spiked with pain to rush through my body. The tension built and built, until I thought I was going to burst and disappear forever.

The first orgasm shook me so hard that Hulgan had to hold me in place. I screamed and wiggled on top of him, the sensation too much. He didn't let me go. He fucked me harder and faster, until tears streamed down my cheeks. Even though I was still on top, I wasn't in control. He lifted me and slammed me back down as if I was as light as a feather. Which I wasn't... Not for a human guy, at least. It was nice to finally have sex with someone who could handle my full, curvy body. So what if he was a monster? He was a monster who could fuck me into oblivion.

I orgasmed again, and this time, Hulgan held me still, impaled on his cock, as his whole body tensed to release his cum inside me. I felt his cock throb; I felt it grow bigger as he pumped me full of his seed, and when it seeped out, he pushed me off him and onto my back, then climbed on top of me. He grabbed the base of his cock and aimed the stream at my face. Happily, I closed my eyes and opened my mouth. The taste was so sweet and intoxicating that I couldn't have enough.

It lasted for minutes. When it ended, I felt truly full. His cum had drenched my breasts and stomach, and my pussy was dripping through the sheets. I opened my eyes, looked at him, and licked my lips. He grinned at me and slapped my thigh playfully. It jiggled, and he slapped it again. I laughed.

“You like that, don’t you?” I knew he couldn’t understand me, but I still felt the need to talk to him, to make a connection that was more than carnal. “I’m glad, because my ex didn’t particularly enjoy my thick thighs. He didn’t enjoy sex with the lights on, either. I lost weight for him at some point, and he liked me then... But I found out he was cheating on me, and I began stress eating. Then it was back to lights off.”

Hulgan cocked his head and listened to me carefully. I liked that. So what if he didn’t know what I was saying? At least he liked the sound of my voice. My ex hadn’t liked that, either.

“Come here, big guy. Let me clean you up.”

I nestled between his legs and licked his cock clean. He was still hard, and I was pretty sure he would soon want to fuck me again. I felt sore but looked forward to it. The taste of his cum made me horny.

When I was done, we lay in bed, on top of the covers, and stayed like that for a long while. I kept talking, and sometimes he interrupted me with his usual grunts that felt like words.

“Maybe we can make this work,” I said. “I don’t know where you come from. I know that thing in my closet is a portal, but I don’t dare to go through it. If there are more like you in your world, and if they all want me as much as you do... Well, let’s just say it wouldn’t be ideal. And besides, I want you, Hulgan. You’re my orc, and you always will be. The orc in my closet.” I giggled, and he laughed, even though he couldn’t have a clue what I was talking about.

“Heather,” he said, and kissed the top of my head.

I sighed and curled in his arms, feeling safe and protected. But as I dozed off, I felt his big hands start exploring me again. I smiled to myself, rolled onto my back, and let him do as he pleased. I was too exhausted to move, but not too exhausted to scream when he pushed his cock inside me again and fucked me hard and fast, just like before, giving me two more orgasms and leaving me covered in buckets of his delicious cum.

It was a long night, and I didn't mind one bit.

Chapter 5

Hulgan

I left the female named Heather sleeping in her bed and returned home. Stepping through the portal hidden in her furniture, I found myself back in the cave. I stopped for a moment and listened carefully. Once I felt certain there was no one around, I could breathe easily. I looked at the mighty portal. It shimmered with energy, and when I stepped away, it finally shut down.

What a marvel! I didn't know whether it was magic or alien technology. I had no idea who had made it, and why it was hidden in this cave, deep in the wilderness. I had stumbled upon it by chance, and I was grateful now, for it had taken me to my soulmate.

Heather.

It was her. She was the one for me. The female with pale, translucent skin, and hair the color of the sun. She looked nothing like the females in my village, but she was perfect. Her body was soft, warm, and inviting. She wasn't a fighter, she wasn't a warrior, and I adored that. Her wide hips and full breasts showed she could carry life in her body. One day, she would be the mother of my babies. I was going to rut her over and over, until her belly swelled with my heirs.

Now, the question was... Could I keep visiting her where she lived, in that strange house? Her world was a mystery to me. She had things in her room that I'd never seen in my life. Or could I bring her here? Would she like to live in the village with me? My hut lacked the comfort of her home. It was early, still. We'd just met, and our relationship was mostly carnal. I had to be patient.

I grabbed the pelts and strips of leather I'd tucked behind a rock before I went to see Heather and proceeded to wrap the portal in them. It was heavy, but I was strong. I was determined to keep the female to myself, and that meant I had

to move the portal, take it back to my hut before someone else found it.

When I first stumbled upon it, I was hunting. I had followed a beast into the cave, slain it, and then saw the big, heavy object that looked like a looking glass. It was buried underneath some rocks, and it took me a while to dig it out. Once I did, I lifted it, placed it upright, and it immediately activated, as if sensing my presence. It shimmered and glowed, and its liquid surface looked so inviting that I couldn't contain my curiosity, and I stepped through it.

And there I was, on the other side, in a dark, cramped space. Inside a box. I burst out of it and saw her. On a wide, strange bed, with four pillars and a ceiling that made no sense to me – there she was, a female with pale skin and eyes as blue as the sky. She was terrified, paralyzed, and when I moved closer to her, she started screaming. I couldn't bear the sound of it. I had to silence her and show her I meant no harm. All I wanted to do was... show her pleasures she'd never experienced before. Her body was like nothing I'd ever seen or touched. She was so enticing that I couldn't help myself. I was hard. I wanted to fill her with my seed, then cover her in it. I wanted to hear her scream in pleasure, not fear. Even though we didn't speak the same language, she understood what I wanted, and she let me do it to her.

Heather.

She was mine, and mine alone.

When it was night in her world, it was day in mine. Now, it was day in her world, and night in mine, so under the cover of darkness, I carried the portal out of the cave, then slowly and carefully, down the mountain and through the deep woods. I reached the village just before dawn and hurried to my hut. There, I placed the portal against a wall, then stepped back to admire it. It was in one piece, and I felt such relief I'd brought it here without damage.

Now, I had to make sure no one entered my hut and saw it. The others knew I liked to be left alone, and while the elders sometimes asked me when I intended to take a mate and build

a family, the rest of the villagers were too busy to pay me any mind. I liked to hunt and shared what I hunted. That was enough for them. I was an only child, and my parents had perished in battle. Knowing my sad history, the others expected me to be different, so isolated that I was almost a recluse. That was fine by me. And now that I had a portal that could take me to another world – more specifically, to Heather’s room – I was happy I didn’t have friends and relatives to always inquire about what I was up to.

No one had to know about her, at least not until I could convince her to join me. I likely couldn’t live in her world, since surely her people would not accept me, but my people... They would accept her. She didn’t look scary at all, while to her people, I probably looked like a monster.

But I had to bide my time and learn her language first. Or teach her my language. I was going to visit her every day – or night – and show her what I could do, how I could make her feel. I was going to rut her until she became addicted to me. I’d noticed what my seed did to her when she got a taste of it. It wasn’t something that happened with females on my world. Heather was special, and the way she responded to me made me love her even more.

Yes. I loved her. I loved my Heather.

Chapter 6

Hulgan

Months passed, and my castle was starting to look good. I hired people to clean and got my hands dirty too, but not too much, seeing how I was distracted with other things... ahem... every night. I couldn't afford to be sore from sweeping and mopping and working in the garden when I knew Hulgan would come and make me sore from... other activities. I forbid the maids from entering my room, of course. I couldn't risk anyone looking into my closet and finding the portal. Hanging my dresses in front of it had covered it quite effectively, though Hulgan had managed to ruin my favorite dress, desperate to reach the bed, and me in it.

He visited almost every night. When he didn't visit me, I visited him. It was strange at first, and scary, for sure. Going through the portal felt incredible, like being immersed in a sea of sensation. I could hear in colors and taste sounds. It was impossible to describe. And when I landed on the dirt floor of his hut, I was so dizzy I almost collapsed. I couldn't understand how he could deal with traveling through the portal so frequently. Probably because he was so big and strong, and I was fragile and easy to break. Maybe it wasn't even healthy for me to go through the portal too often. I told him that, and to my surprise, he understood.

I spoke his language now, and he spoke mine. Just a few words, simple sentences... It wasn't easy, but we were both making progress.

On his world, he kept me away from the other orcs. I still called him and his people orcs, even though he told me he didn't know what I was talking about, and they didn't identify as that. We kept our relationship secret, just like the portals. I wasn't ready to move into his hut, and he wasn't ready to move into my castle. How was he supposed to explain my pale

skin and blond hair to his species, and how was I supposed to explain his green skin and sharp tusks to other humans?

It was soon clear to me that Hulgan came from another planet. And that the portals we'd found – because there were, technically, two, and they were connected – were star portals.

He only let me step outside of his hut at night, when everyone was asleep, and I saw that he lived in a village, in a valley surrounded by mountains. It was quite idyllic, and I would've loved to explore, but when he said it wasn't safe for me, I believed him.

He was quite jealous and possessive, too. He wanted to keep me all to myself. When my ex came to see me out of the blue, curious to see what I'd bought with his money, I had been silly enough to tell Hulgan. Just the thought that another man had stepped foot in my home had enraged him. Learning that man was once my husband had only made things worse. He fumed for days.

I still didn't know how we could make this work. He wanted me to move in with him, but was afraid if other orcs saw me, they would want me or the star portal. And I wasn't sure I could get used to living in a hut. The castle had all the amenities I needed, and once I introduced Hulgan to hot baths in my claw-foot tub, he had to admit that I had it better than him. And I liked to be comfortable. As the weeks passed and we grew closer, I saw him acclimate to the comfort in my home. The food was a problem, though. He kept insisting that what he hunted on his planet was more delicious than what I bought from the supermarket in town. I didn't necessarily disagree with him, except I preferred veggies to meat, and wasn't sure he was ready to learn that about me.

Tonight, I waited for him. It was his turn to visit me, and I took a long bath first, chose a sexy nightgown, and read a few pages as I popped strawberries into my mouth. I heard the portal activating and smiled to myself. I placed my book on the nightstand and ate the last strawberry. Hulgan walked through the doors of my closet, careful not to ruin my dresses. He held a bouquet of wildflowers, and I jumped out of bed to kiss him.

“These are beautiful!”

“Beaut-iful.”

“Yes!”

“Like you.”

I giggled. He knew what beautiful meant. I filled a vase with water, put the flowers in, and placed it on the table next to my laptop. Oh, another thing I didn't believe I could live without if I were to move into his hut – the Internet.

“I missed you,” I whispered as I threw my arms around his neck.

He lifted me easily, and I wrapped my legs around his hips. He carried me to the bed, and I could feel his hard cock press between my legs. I wanted him so badly. I could never get enough of him. Could never get enough of fucking him until I couldn't move.

“I want to teach you something new tonight,” I said. He gently laid me down, and I pulled him over me. He was always careful not to crush me, but I loved feeling his weight on me. “I'll teach you how to say the three words that any woman wants to hear from her man.”

“Teach me.” He kissed my neck, and I had to close my eyes and bite my lip. “Teach me, Heather.”

“Mmm... Oh... Oh, God... It's hard to think when you do that.” He moved down and nibbled at my collarbone. “Okay, stop for one second, and look at me.”

He complied. I could lose myself in his dark eyes. He looked so scary and brutal, but he was a teddy bear.

“The three words I want to hear from you... are...” I took a deep breath. “I love you.”

He grunted in his language, and I was pretty sure he said the same thing. I tried to repeat after him, and he nodded, smiling.

“Now you... in English.”

“I love you,” he murmured.

I beamed at him. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Because I love you too, Hulgan.”

He repeated the words, again and again, marking each of them with a kiss to my neck, until I blushed and squirmed under him, eager for more.

He removed my nightgown gently, since I’d scolded him so many times about destroying my clothes, and I pulled at his tunic. When he came to see me, he left his dagger at home. I felt safer this way. As he grunted and pushed his cock inside me, I closed my eyes and enjoyed every second.

Buying this castle on impulse has been the best decision of my life. Of course, I hadn’t known then that it came with a star portal. It was a bonus that was worth every penny, and also all the suffering I’d gone through. I was exactly where I was supposed to be, with the man that was destined for me.

Well, he wasn’t quite a man. He was a monster. A beast. And he was mine.

If you want to read more orc romance, check out this FREE novella:

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Cara Wylde loves to write about strong, feisty women and their hot Alphas who will do anything to make them happy. Her books are filled with romance and just a dash of mystery, suspense, and that eerie atmosphere she fell in love with reading too many gothic novels. With a master's degree in Comparative Literature, she can't help but play with tropes and themes from various genres, trying to come up with fresh perspectives on the paranormal characters her readers love so much. Vampires, shapeshifters, demons, witches... Cara will always make sure they get their own twists.

When she's not writing, Cara is reading, planning her next story, or daydreaming.

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The Tiger and the Swan

by

Cassie Alexander

Chapter 1

Namir was following me out to my car after my shift at Rax's casino for the fifth night in a row—he wasn't even *trying* to be subtle—so once I'd beeped my Honda Civic open, I whirled on him. "I know you're there!"

How could I not? Namir was a massive man, with medium brown skin, black hair, and a tightly trimmed beard. He had green eyes that I could still almost see in the dark, and he was wearing the same suit he wore as second-in-command on the casino's floor. As Rax's casino catered exclusively to shifter clientele and some few brave or insane humans, that was saying something.

He stopped a good thirty feet away from me and shrugged, making his suit's crisp shoulders roll up and down. "I'm not hiding, Lily. I'm making sure you get home safe."

"Uh-huh."

A smile lit up his face, and he lifted up both hands, protesting his innocence, as he started walking closer. "Fine. You can talk to HR tomorrow."

I crossed my arms. "I wasn't aware we had an HR."

"We don't, really," he said, still smiling. "It's just me. But if you want, your next shift, I'll send Charles out here instead." He stopped again, just five feet in front of me, and looked around warily. "You're a popular dealer, Lily. You walk out with a wad of cash big enough to choke a horse each night. I'm just keeping Rax's assets safe for him."

"Of course," I said, with a hint of sarcasm. From this close, I could scent the musk of what Namir was on him—a *tiger-shifter*—and it should have terrified me. As a swan maiden, I'd been attuned to predators my whole life. But there was something about being around Namir that felt less like danger and more like electricity.

"Of course," he repeated, much more kindly than I had.

I paused, torn between ripping him a new one for thinking me incapable of managing myself versus finding something about his presence there wholesomely proprietary. In the great mass of people I didn't know and would never meet in this city, it was almost—*but not quite*—charming that someone cared.

“Get in your car and I'll watch you leave,” he said, jerking his chin at my ride.

I turned to my car and opened up the door. “I bet that's not the only thing you'd like to watch,” I quietly muttered, then slammed my door shut solidly, watching him give me a low wave as I drove off.

Chapter 2

I took route-four-hundred-and-twelve home after that, checking in my mirrors to make sure I wasn't being followed the whole time, because this was the longest I'd stayed anywhere and I didn't want anyone to follow me.

My parents had both been swans. They'd taught me how to survive in the world, and right now, I was doing pretty much the opposite.

Unlike the other shifters I was surrounded by at work—my shifting ability wasn't innate, something I could control, or something pulled by the moon.

I could only shift if I was wearing my feathers—like a feather-skin cloak—and if I wasn't, and someone else got hold of them, they could control me.

It was why my parents had kept me as sheltered as possible. They'd given each other their feathers when they'd mated, then burned them, choosing to never become swans again rather than take the risk of being parted.

But they'd known I was like them the second I was born with a downy white caul—and they would've protected *my* feathers with their lives, up until the point I was old enough to be in control of them, which I now was.

I'd been on my own for years, doing what I was supposed to be doing: using magic to hide who I was and change my scent, and moving every few months to a new place before anyone could get attached to me, or get too curious.

But when I'd heard about the vault at Rax's casino—because the casino was a front for the dragon-shifter's magical object racket—I couldn't resist. The price the dragon-shifter had quoted me to store my feathers was usurious—*fifty thousand dollars a year!*—but at the thought of them finally being safe, it seemed worth trying for.

So here I was, six months into a job for the first time in my life, with thirty-thousand dollars saved up due to high-tippers

and me living off of ramen, and maybe, just maybe, in another four or five months, my feathers would be safe. Then I'd get the dragon-shifter to put me on a monthly payment plan and I could have a real life, without looking over my shoulder all the time.

And *then* maybe it wouldn't matter so much, if I found myself being followed by a cat.

Maybe I could even slow my roll finally.

Maybe I could turn around, and give the cat a pet.

I parked in front of my house, sure that my secret was safe for another night, and thinking about Namir, when I realized my front door was open.

Chapter 3

I ran through the devastation of my house—the couch that'd been slashed, the TV that'd been ripped off the mount—for my bathroom, where I found my mirror shattered, and the wall caved in behind it, leaving chunks of drywall in the glass.

My feathers were gone.

I grabbed hold of the sink, got a fistful of glass, and wouldn't have even noticed it, except for the red streaks my own blood left behind.

Static rushed in my ears, my pulse thumped at my throat.

Someone else had my feathers.

I could already imagine their leash around my neck.

It was only a matter of time.

I stumbled back into my living room before I collapsed, and managed to get my phone out. I called the only person who I thought could help me—the only other person nearby who might care.

“Human resources,” Namir teased, after picking up.

I couldn't form words. I could barely breathe.

“Lily?” he quickly asked, realizing something was wrong. “Are you all right?”

“No,” I whispered.

“Lily,” he said, making my name into a growl of concern. “Where are you?” And when I didn't answer fast enough . . . “Home?” he guessed. “Stay there. I'm coming to get you.” I heard him shout a muffled order to someone else, before I regained his full attention. “No—wait—if it's not safe—go a few blocks away. Text me an address.”

It didn't matter. Nothing did. Everything was crashing down.

“Lily!” He shouted my name one last time, before I managed to hang up.

Chapter 4

I had only the vaguest connection to my body when Namir had arrived. He'd patted me roughly, making sure I wasn't hurt, and then had searched the house, seeing all the same things I had. Then he picked me up and put me into his sportscar—I didn't know where he was taking me.

It probably didn't matter.

Soon I wouldn't care about anything, ever again.

Was this what it would feel like when I was controlled? When some man slid on my feathers and demanded things of me? Would I feel this great distance between myself—the true me—and the rest of the world, forever?

And when I could next pay attention to anything, I was swaddled in warm blankets, sitting on a broad leather couch, in front of a crackling fire, my hurt hand cleaned and wrapped.

There was a steaming mug of coffee in front of me, as well as a glass of whiskey with a ball of ice in it, and Namir was in another leather chair, off to the side, his elbows on his knees, watching me with eyes that gleamed like a cat's in the firelight.

"I wasn't sure what you'd want when you got better," he said. He was in the same suit he'd had on earlier, only now his tie was undone.

I pushed the blankets around me down—they all smelled like his tiger. Masculine, musky, like danger personified. "Better," I repeated, and gave a soft laugh.

He pulled his whole chair closer. "What happened, Lily? I saw your place."

I opened my mouth up and nothing came out. I *never* talked about my feathers. You could only tell people you absolutely trusted about them, and past the mythology of being swans, my parents had told me all the horror stories. All the swan men and women who'd shown their feathers to the

wrong person, who'd then lost their sense of self. Been forced to get married to strangers, and have their children, trapped until they could escape—*if* they could escape.

All the swans who'd thought that they'd had true love, only to find out that they'd been wrong.

“Lily.” Namir said my name again, and put a comforting hand on my knee. I was still wearing my dealer's uniform from the casino, a crisp white linen shirt, and a short black mini. When I dragged my eyes up to meet his, his whole expression was full of tense concern.

Was Namir safe?

At the casino, yes. He was actually great there. For all that Namir *was* a predator, when I was on shift, I knew he always had my back. He always knew the difference between players having a good time, chatting me up and giving me tips, versus the ones who got handsy after winning a few, who felt like the chip they'd tossed in my direction meant that I owed them. He had no problem throwing out drunks or obnoxious flirts, most times even before I had to say a thing.

But here?

And with *this*?

I closed my eyes and swallowed, hoping that whatever instinct I had right now in my belly was right.

“What kind of supernatural creature do you think I am?” I asked him.

He frowned and took a deep inhale. “You've always got protective magic on you—so while I figure you're a shifter . . . you're not anything strong.”

My lips twisted to the side. I was, when I was a swan; swans could fuck your shit up . . . it was just that I didn't want to *stay* a swan, for the rest of my life.

“And if you don't want other people to know what you are,” he added, “it's why you need protection.”

Well, he wasn't wrong there.

He was just too late.

“Lily?” he asked again, quietly, when I’d taken too long.

“I’m a swan maiden,” I blurted out, ripping off the scab. “My powers to shift are tied to my feathers—it’s like a feather-skin coat. When I swear it, I’m a swan, and when I take it off, I’m human. But if someone else gets ahold of it . . . they can control me.”

Namir made a low growling sound on my behalf, and his hand tensed on my knee. “And that’s what was hidden in your wall, behind your bathroom mirror?”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“Do you know who took them?”

I swallowed and stared into space over his head for a moment, thinking, before lowering my head into my hands to hold. “No. Though I can guess why.” If whomever had stolen my feathers hadn’t put them on yet—and I knew they hadn’t, because I still felt free—then. . . . “They probably stole them to sell to the highest bidder. And soon I’ll be trapped, as some rich man’s plaything.”

“The fuck that’s happening,” Namir said, with enough intensity to snap my head back up. He stood and started pacing. “Are you sure they’ll auction it?”

“Not a hundred percent positive—but it seems likely.”

“Let me make some calls,” he said, stalking off. He went around the corner to where I couldn’t see him, although time passed and I heard the comforting murmur of his voice. While I was waiting, I chugged coffee and liquor in turns, and when he returned, his expression was still dark.

“Anything?” I asked, embarrassed by the quaver in my voice.

“I know people who know people,” he said, giving me a tight half-smile. “Don’t worry, Lily. I’ll find them for you and bring them back.” He glanced between the beverages I’d polished off. “You should rest now. You’ve had a night.”

Namir's place was only lit by firelight. There were windows along the far wall, but all the curtains were drawn. It was dawn by now though, it had to be—and this might be my last free day on earth.

“I don't think I can sleep. I mean . . . what if it happens when I do? And when I wake up, I don't belong to myself anymore? And I'm at some stranger's beck and call?”

Namir moved to sit on his heels in front of me. “I don't make idle promises. I *will* bring them back for you.”

I wanted to believe him, but I didn't dare. “How can you be so sure?”

He paused for a long moment before answering. “Because,” he said simply. “I want you to belong to me.”

Everything in his bearing said that that was the case. The way he was looking at me now, the intensity he radiated. I lost the ability to think—to *breathe!*—again, filled by an entirely new type of panic: a thin thread of hope, tangled with fear, knotted with longing. I took a ragged breath and frowned, quickly looking at my lap. “You don't really know me.”

“And there's a very good reason for that—you work for me, essentially, and I'm not an asshole. But that doesn't mean it's not true. I feel pulled when I'm around you—and now I wish like fuck I'd told you sooner.”

I made myself look up at him. “It's just because I'm a bird, and you're a cat.” I shook my head, trying to deny it. “And—you're just saying that because you always get your way.”

“Not always,” he said softly, but giving me a dark smile. “Just most of the time.”

Was he really flirting with me? At a time like this? “Must be nice to be a predator, then!” I crawled back on his couch, curling up into a ball. “You don't know what it's like, to always be afraid!”

Namir rose up on his knees on the ground in front of me, casting me in shadow, and I could hear him breathing hard. “That's where you're wrong, Lily. Because right now, at this very moment, I am deeply afraid of losing you.”

His revelation made me gasp again. I'd spent years thinking that some fraction of the people in my parents' stories deserved what they got, for not playing it safe, for being stupid enough to fall in love.

Up until now, I'd had no idea what they'd been through.

Namir's suit rose and fell as his chest heaved. "Do you feel it too?" he asked, in his low voice, as he leaned forward to clutch the edge of his couch with both hands. "I swear to you, no matter what, I will get your feathers or die trying, but if you don't—put me out of my misery."

I put my hands to my face while looking at him. "I don't know what I feel, Namir. I'm terrified. And if it's anything else—I've never felt this way before." But at the thought of him dying for my feathers, a piece of my heart kicked and screamed. "I need you to be safe, though." I bit my lips, until I couldn't stop it, and the truth came out. "Because I want to know."

His expression relaxed a little, and he nodded deeply—then looked distracted, pulling out his cell phone. He grunted and stood after reading the screen. "Rax sent me the address of two local magical object auction houses—one of which is having a rush auction tonight."

I caught my breath and finally started to feel sane. "Okay, then—let's make a plan—"

Namir shook his head. "I'm not involving you. Not unless your plan is letting me throw you into Rax's vault for safekeeping."

The vault that'd gotten me into this mess in the first place. I snorted. "No, Namir—they're my feathers; I have to go—"

"No," he said, more firmly.

"But—" I stood up to follow him, whether he liked it or not.

"Lily," he said, catching my shoulders. "To keep your secret, I'm going to have to kill everyone who knows your feathers exist. It's going to be dangerous—and exceedingly messy." I watched his jaw clench as he willed me to believe

him. “I don’t want you there to distract me—and I don’t want you to see me like that.”

I swayed, stunned, and felt his fingers tighten to keep me upright. “You’re not kidding, are you,” I whispered.

“No. I’m not.”

“And . . . you’d do that? For me?” I blinked and felt my throat closing up. How much more could I even take today—tonight—whenever this was?

“It’s all right. I’m used to this. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Namir said, then his brow rose some, as did the corners of his mouth. “Can I put you in Rax’s vault, though? Because now that I’ve mentioned it, that seems like a really good idea.”

“No! Because this is all his fault—”

“Yeah,” Namir cut me off, nodding slightly, with a frown. “He told me to tell you he’s sorry. If he’d known the stakes, he never would’ve asked for money.”

I shook his hands off of me. “Fuck his apology! Wait—you told him?” My voice rose in horror. I’d only *just* told Namir about my feathers, and here he’d gone and told someone else?

“Had to,” he said, in a sympathetic tone. “I’m sorry. But your secret’s safe with him. He’s mated, and richer than God—and he’s letting me raid his armory for tonight.”

My hands clenched into helpless fists at my side. I’d thought I might have had feelings for Namir for a handful of seconds, and he’d already gone and betrayed me?

He stepped back and started reknitting his tie, like a man long used to the habit. “I need to go. Stay here. I’ll come back when things are finished.”

“Namir—” I started to protest being left behind and having someone else even vaguely in charge of my life—then I realized that this might be the last time I saw him alive. I could almost feel him pulling back from me as he finished his tie’s knot—it was like he was putting armor on.

“Don’t go,” I said, instinctively.

His green eyes gave me a soulful, worried look. “Lily—” he began, and I ran up to kiss him.

It wouldn’t have even been possible if I hadn’t had heels on—and I caught him completely by surprise. I’d only meant to give him a quick kiss on the lips, but then he grabbed me before I could rock back very far. His eyes searched mine, my lips parted, and his came for them.

Namir wrapped his arms around me and a second later, his tongue was in my mouth, stroking mine, asking me for more. I tried to give as good as I got, and found myself melting without meaning to, pressing up against him. He made a satisfied sound, and started to dance me backwards, so I threw my arms around his neck for balance.

We’d moved every few months when I was growing up, for my safety, and when I was an adult I’d been obsessed by my endless quest for survival . . . which meant I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I’d never felt safe enough around anyone to be kissed by them, much less fucked, but now—*this was happening*.

He pulled his mouth away from mine, and I tried to follow it—I wasn’t done kissing him yet, and I definitely was not done with him kissing me—and he chuckled. He put his forehead to mine and his eyes searched mine. “Yeah?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I breathed, and started kicking off my heels. He reached down and easily picked me up, making me squeal. My skirt hitched up as I wound my legs around him. I could feel the hard promise of him underneath his suit slacks and tried to grind against it.

“Eager little bird,” he whispered, kissing me against my neck, before laying me down on his couch. “I won’t make it into my bedroom with you.”

“That’s okay,” I whispered back. I just wanted this—wanted *everything*—now.

Before anyone else could take it from me.

Namir groaned again, and pulled his suit jacket off, before quickly undoing his tie and letting it slide off like a snake. He had one hand above my shoulder, the other at his belt, and then he paused.

“Wait,” he said. “Swan . . . maiden?” he asked. “Is that literal, Lily? Like, you’re a virgin?”

I felt myself flush beneath his gaze. “Does it matter?”

He rocked back and considered this. “It does to me.”

I hit my head against the leather couch behind me and rolled my eyes. “Oh, come *on*, Namir—”

He took the hand from his belt to take my chin, leaning over me to make me look at him. His scent was intoxicating from this close, and everything about him set off everything about me. His pupils were wide, his nostrils flared, hips were pressed to mine, and things I hadn’t ever felt safe wanting before rushed to the surface—to taste his skin, to feel his touch, to have him in me. My imagination had sometimes been torturous, but now that *he* was here, it was all so much worse. I bit my lips and made a sound I wasn’t proud of, begging for him—and I watched his green eyes flash into a dangerous cats’ slitted pupils.

“Do you have any idea how hard I’ll fight to come back and be the first in you, little bird?” he asked me, and the tone he asked it in made me shiver. I shook my head against his hand, and he gave me a wicked grin. “If I had to, I’d kill everyone in this state.”

As thrilling as that was to hear, I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “But what if you don’t?” My voice was tiny and high. “What if this is the last chance *I* get, to make up my mind?”

Namir moved back to survey me. I wished I could twist away to hide from him; I knew I was a mess. My long, light blonde hair had fallen out of my dealer’s bun and was in tangles, I knew my nipples were hard enough to show through my thin bra and shirt, and I was dripping so much I’d probably ruined his couch.

“I promise you it won’t be,” he said. His hands reached for mine and used them to slowly pull me up, being gentle with my wounded hand. “I will be so careful with you, Lily, but, because I care for you, now is not the time.”

I swung my legs down, pressing my knees together, both furious at him and still somewhat frightened. “I don’t even know if careful’s what I want.”

“Then we’ll figure it out, together.” He brought my unbandaged hand up to his lips, brushed a kiss across it, then grabbed his tie and stood to walk out his door.

Chapter 5

Ten minutes later I was done cleaning myself up in his bathroom.

That smug motherfucker.

How-the-fuck dare he cut me out of getting my own feathers back.

They were mine, and no one else's—and it was all too easy to imagine him out there, putting something on a billboard about them when he was through. He'd already gone and told Rax. I could feel myself winding up; the patterns of my fear and anger were familiar trails inside my head.

But ... maybe Namir didn't deserve that.

Yet.

He was a fool though if he thought I was just going to stay behind and wait for him. And he wasn't the only one who knew how to find shit.

Swans had been on their own, protecting each other, for centuries. I had a duty to warn the rest of my kind, and also, humiliatingly, tell my parents what'd happened, before someone else controlled my whole life and I couldn't anymore.

I picked up my phone and logged into a website one of the oldest of our kind had made, as a clearing house for information that had twelve-factor identification practically, and told my story, in case it helped anyone else escape my fate, and in case anyone else was in a position to help.

Then I called my mom and dad and had the worst phone conversation I'd ever had to have in my life.

Chapter 6

My parents tag-teamed on the phone with me, my mother buying plane tickets out to rescue me somehow—*did airlines give breaks for pre-bereavements, for when someone was going to metaphorically die?*—while my father did his best to sound rational and keep her sane.

He swore they'd find me, and that they'd find my feathers for me, but in reality they were three thousand miles away on the other coast, and if someone bought my feathers and told me to never talk to them again, I wouldn't. I didn't tell them anything about Namir—I didn't want to offer them any false hope—and in the end, we cried with each other on the phone for a good thirty minutes before I started worrying about my phone's battery and we all made ourselves hang up.

After that, I wandered into Namir's bedroom, wondering if he'd have one of those phone-charging pads I could use on his nightstand. Also, I was curious if there were any other signs of women around, since whatever level of experienced I was sexually, Namir was the opposite of—but his bedroom was just more unadulterated manliness, like the tiger himself. Done in bronzes and blacks, with a few pictures on the wall, nice pieces of art, and a bed that wasn't made but that smelled like him.

It turned out after talking to my family, for possibly the last time while I was still myself, I wasn't done crying yet. So I started, crawling into his bed, salting his pillows with my tears, and somewhere along the way, sleep got me.

When I woke up much, much later, my phone battery was at fifteen percent—but several other swans had gotten back to me. Some to tell me stories of their own survival, how they'd gotten their own feathers back after long periods of servitude and for me to not give up, others to say goodbye, that they'd be praying for me. But in the middle of all of these was one swan who'd briefly lived locally and felt liked they'd been stalked last year, who'd caught a picture of the guy, before

she'd left in the night and now she was ever so sorry she didn't post his photo at the time.

He did look a little familiar, and as I scrolled back in my mind through every punk who'd tried something with me at the casino—yeah—if that guy had a shaved head—because he had the exact same scar near his hairline as I remembered. Namir had thrown him out on my behalf last month, muttering something about *fucking hyenas* all the while, before telling him to never come back.

I was good at making superficial friends and fitting in, so it was nothing to send out a frantic message to the dealers girls' chat, pretending to have the hots for a hyena-shifter I'd met, and where did they all hang out? And sure enough, one of their boyfriends was friends with one and told her to tell me the bar where they liked to frequent.

I used almost the last of my phone's battery to summon a ride.

Chapter 7

The hyena bar was divetastic, with bad lighting and dubious hygiene. I still had my purse on me. I'd found it in Namir's place, and in it, the wad of tips I'd been on my way home with the prior night.

So I tried my luck with the bartender, the person sitting in the darkest corner of the place, regulars at the bar, and people coming in, flashing cash and showing them my screenshot of the picture the other swan had taken, telling them he was either the father of my child, a long-lost boyfriend, someone who killed my non-existent dog—anything crazy enough that would get the man himself a texted warning that there was a strange woman with ice-blond hair passing out cash for his attention.

Because the only thing that would make the feathers they were auctioning off even more valuable was actually auctioning them off with their swan.

I spent an hour there, acting essentially unhinged, until my phone was dead and I was out of cash, and then I knowingly stepped out the back alley, where I was jumped.

Chapter 8

The shifters who grabbed me were too busy congratulating themselves on the easiest kidnapping of all time to realize that I didn't scream, not even before they put tape on my mouth. They were all blustery and overconfident, and they didn't stop talking excitedly in the car after they'd put a bag on my head and driven off.

I wondered if Namir was all right . . . and also if I should've told him about this scheme. The only thing that'd stopped me was the knowledge he'd definitely have come back to his condo and tied me to a chair. But what he didn't understand was that my feathers were *mine*. And if I got them back on my own, it'd prove I didn't *need* him.

Because I didn't *want* to need *anyone*.

I wanted to be wanted, yes . . . but not predicated on some servile version of love, purchased by rescuing my feathers for me. How would that be any better than my feathers being sold? My love wasn't something you could barter for, and I wanted to be his equal, not his underling . . . which was why I hoped like hell the rest of my rather foolish plan would work.

The car we were in stopped, and the shifters in it pulled me out into the night. I was still wearing my heels from work, off balance with my wrists behind my back. One of the shifters shoved me to go faster, and I fell, scraping both my knees, groaning in pain behind the tape they'd covered my mouth with. They laughed at me, yanked me up, and kept propelling me forward until I was indoors; I knew because my heels were suddenly clattering on tile. The air changed from the humid outdoors to air conditioned, and they suddenly took an interest in my health, two of them practically picking me up, one on each elbow, to make sure I didn't take a header down a flight of stairs.

I was rudely shuffled into a room, a door slammed, and the bag over my head was finally taken off. It was the man from the casino; he had the same scar from his forehead, up into his

hairline—the other swan’s intel had been right—and I knew my feathers were here. I could practically feel them. I swiveled my head around the room, trying to figure out where they were at.

“Did you really think this was a good idea, ballerina?” he asked, stepping up to me.

I couldn’t answer him, ’til he ripped the tape off my mouth. “Ha, ha, *Swan Lake*, I get it,” I said—and then spat at him.

He wasn’t expecting that—he swiped it off his face and made a vicious snarl. I braced for a blow that I was sure was coming, and then he squinted at me, reaching forward to grab my jaw roughly and swipe my cheek with his thumb.

The tape had torn my skin, and there was blood on it. He looked between it and me like I’d been lying to him, somehow, and this was it, my only “amazing” ploy: how obscenely normal I was, without my feathers on.

“I don’t shift like you. I don’t heal without my feathers.” I twisted my injured hand up for him to see, and took a swing at his groin with one of my bleeding knees. “So you’d better let me put them on, or you’ll be selling damaged goods.”

“Some guys’d pay more for this,” he said, giving me a gesture. He had a weird wheeze on his inhale that made it sound like he was laughing.

“Sure. But the true pervs would want to beat me up themselves, don’t you think?” I looked around the shabby office we were in. “I doubt they’d want to outsource it to shady-ass shifter-parts dealers like you.” He snarled, and I made a face at him. “Yeah? A hyena’s afraid of a swan? You think you can’t handle me?” I said it in my most mocking tone and then I rushed him.

He batted me back, sending me bouncing to the floor, rattling my spine, definitely bruising my ass.

“There goes another hundred grand,” I warned—and then I pulled the oldest trick in the bird book.

The broken wing maneuver.

I appeared to crumple.

I never cried—I'd already cried more in this one day than I had in my entire life combined—but I dredged up the power to produce more tears now, suddenly bowing in front of him, sobbing big, fat, wet tears, my eyes going red and my nose going snotty. "I just want to wear them one last time. Please. And then I'll be pretty and I'll do what you want. I'll be good, just please, mister, please—" It had to be coming up on auction time soon, so either this would work, or Namir would save me, maybe—God-please-may-something-just-break-my-way—and some of my fake tears became real ones.

The hyena snarled and cursed, and then grabbed me by my hair, yanking me back in the room.

I just needed to touch one feather—*one feather would be enough*—the hyena-shifter opened up a box and yanked out my feather-skin.

I hadn't even seen them myself since I'd boarded them up behind my mirror months ago.

That was the worst thing about being a swan—being forced into hiding from your own soul.

I threw myself at them, touched them, and changed instantaneously.

I was no longer the ungraceful creature I spent most of my time as on two spindly legs, incapable of flight, and weak, and pathetic. I was a beautiful swan, covered in iridescent feathers. I felt agile, precise, and glorious, winding my long neck around, feeling my feathers cover me.

I finally was as I was meant to be—no wonder some swans left their feathers on all the time, and gave up on being human.

"All right, bird, you had your chance. Now take 'em off," the hyena said, snapping at me with his fingers. I hissed at him, trying to flutter my wings forward. My clothes were lost in my transition, like always, but the stupid tape I was bound with was still around my wrists for some reason.

"Magic," he said with a snort, as I realized my predicament. "Couldn't risk you getting free. So come out of

your skin now,” he said, before reaching for a knife from a sheath in his pocket. “Or I’ll cut you out of it, and we’ll sell your feathers as a novelty.”

I stepped away from him and shifted back, keeping my feathers out of reach, becoming a whole and naked human beneath them.

“I’m sorry—thank you—I’m sorry,” I started apologizing as he crept forward.

But he made the mistake of letting his knife down, and I launched myself at him, changing halfway through, knocking him back with my swan’s weight and shoving my hard beak, with all the strength of my elegant neck, directly into his unprotected eye socket.

He screamed, and started shuddering, trying to stab me with his knife, and one blow landed, but I didn’t give a shit; I kept going until he was dead.

I fell off of him, and started shredding the tape around my wings with my blood-covered beak, thinking only of how I was going to escape, when the room rattled, and I heard gunshots up above. I got my wings free—I changed back to human, clutching my feathers to my chest, and then the door to the room opened and someone threw something in.

Namir.

And whatever he’d thrown in exploded. I screamed, falling backwards, and if I hadn’t had my feathers in front of me like a shield, I would’ve died, I was sure. As it was now, I was scrabbling in the rubble of the room—I’d let them go mid-flight; I needed them—I couldn’t let anyone else—

A cloud of plaster and smoke drifted by and a man came out of it.

“Namir!” I said, shouting his name, but he didn’t hear me—and I didn’t hear myself shout it, my ears were ringing so badly. “Namir!” I tried again, as I watched him bend down. He was in the same suit he’d left this morning in, picking something up off of the ground—

My feathers.

My heart fell through my chest and stomach and hips and down into the earth's molten core.

I wasn't safe, and I'd been a fool to ever think I could be. I waited for my life to end, but all he did was pick them up. He brought them to his face to scent, breathing them in. Was he tempted? I couldn't tell, there was too much dust, and I was breathing so fast that I was dizzy.

"Namir, don't," I whispered, willing him to be the man I needed.

And, as if he heard me, he carefully folded them up, holding them over one arm—and then reached for his ears to pull protective earplugs out.

"Namir?" I squeaked after that, and his head whipped my direction.

"Lily?" he asked, taking me in in sudden horror. "What the fuck!"

I was reading his lips and his attitude more than I could hear him. I paddled my hands near my ears, to show him I couldn't hear, while he took me in again, handing me my feathers while he pulled off his sportscoat, to also hand over. I took it from him and put it on. It hit me the top of my thigh, like the world's shortest mini-dress. "I can't hear you."

Namir nodded, taking my face into his hands so I was looking at him. "Concussive grenades," he mouthed slowly. "Because you weren't supposed to be here," he went on, and I could tell he was pissed off at me.

"Be mad later?" I asked him.

He nodded, briefly setting his forehead to mine, before picking me up, to carry me out.

Chapter 9

I would've fought, only my shoes were lost, and the room was full of rubble . . . and then the staircase we were in next was full of bodies. I gasped, and tensed, and Namir pulled me close, using one hand to shield my face from what he'd done for me.

The lobby at the top of the stairs wasn't much better—some people's faces had been clawed off—and I knew that the stains on Namir's suit jacket, the one that I was wearing, were from other people's blood. I twisted into him protectively, deciding to just not look at anything else, until we were out of the building entirely, where a man I recognized was waiting: Rax, our dragon-shifter boss from the casino. He was tall as Namir, slightly more built, but with wavier hair, and he looked entirely nonplussed. He began talking at the sight of me, but I couldn't hear him—and I felt the rumble of Namir's chest, probably telling him that. Then he came up to us both, gave me an apologetic gesture, and reached for the feathers I was cradling to my chest.

Too little, too late. I hissed at him, just like I would've were I still a swan, and he stepped back.

"I am sorry," he mouthed, clear enough for me to read it, but I shook him off, and let Namir carry me to his sports car.

Chapter 10

We didn't talk once we were in it. There was no point. And I didn't even ask where we were going. I just kept petting my feathers in my lap—it felt so good to see them again, and to have been a swan, no matter how briefly.

We reached the parking garage of Namir's nice building, and he took me up to his condo. Once we were inside, he gestured for me to give him a moment, so I did, standing in his entry way, until he returned, sans tie, with two shots of some amber liquid, a pad of paper, and a pencil between his teeth. He handed the shot over, and showed me what he'd written down.

If you become your swan, will you be able to hear again?

I shrugged. It fixed most everything else.

Then he gave me a strange look, downed his shot, set the glass down on his entryway table and wrote: *If you show me yours, I'll show you mine.*

I made a face at him, and watched him laugh.

"Fine," I said, also drinking whatever he'd brought me—it was whiskey, and it made me cough. If this whatever-it-was was going to work out, we were going to need to discuss my alcoholic beverage preferences. But after that I steeled myself, shucked off his suit coat, and pressed my feathers to my skin, wishing to be a swan again.

The change was immediate, and there I was, being stared down by a tiger-shifter. His presence made my feathers prickle, and I both wanted to fly away and also stay very, very, still.

He reached the back of a hand out, asking for permission to touch me, and I granted it, bowing my head so that he could touch the soft feathers along my neck. His hand was big enough that he could've wrapped his hand around it and strangled me in an instant, but somehow I still felt safe.

Then he stepped back, and gestured at himself, kicking off his shoes, unbuttoning his shirt, reaching for his fly.

I changed back into a girl, holding my feathers to my chest like a bath towel, putting a cautious hand out.

“Lily?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

I looked between myself, naked, and him halfway there, with his shirt open, making the visible slice of his warm brown skin and abs point down to the top of his boxer briefs like an arrow. “Not sure yet.”

He laughed. “We don’t have to do anything else. I just figured I’d show you my tiger—but I also didn’t want to ruin another suit. More, I mean, considering.” He shook his head and let go of an exhale, refastening his suit slacks, which were also stained with blood. “What the fuck were you doing there?”

“Getting these,” I said, holding my feathers up to show him, as they hid me from him.

“You didn’t trust me?” he asked, looking pained.

I shook my head. “You don’t understand what it’s like. It’s not just you. I don’t trust anyone. You get why now, don’t you?”

He looked me up and down, and nodded solemnly. “Yeah. And I guess that I can’t blame you. But—Rax says he’ll keep them safe for you in his vault. And you can visit them any time you want. Once I found out that he could’ve been keeping them safe for you all this time, Lily . . .” he said, a growl catching in his throat.

“It’s okay. I never told him what they were, or what they meant to me. I couldn’t risk it, so he didn’t understand. Because nobody does, really, except for other swans. And now you, maybe.” I carefully petted my feathers with one hand, and realized I’d watched him do the same beneath the auction house.

He hadn’t been tempted to put them on. Not even for a moment. I kept staring at their soft, delicate, fragile, white curves and thinking hard.

Was I ever going to let another man get this close to me, and really know my secret? Not very damn likely.

Did it feel right?

Yes.

But that didn't mean it wasn't *frightening*.

So I crossed the distance between us and offered them out before I could lose my nerve. "You can touch them if you want. And maybe put them on." I started talking as fast as my heart was racing. "As long as you promise to return them. I don't want somebody else being the boss of me, for forever."

Namir demurred, waving his hands. "I don't want to take your feathers, Lily."

"But," I protested, confused, and hurt. "I want you to have them."

The expression on his face softened then, and he took them from me—not to put them on though, but to turn and take them further into his place, to lay them on the ground in front of his fireplace. "Come here," he said, waving me to follow.

Without them, I was naked, metaphorically and literally. I did as he asked, though, until he could take my hand, and he pulled me to stand in the middle of them.

After that, he stepped back. "I still want to show you my tiger," he said, finishing taking his shirt off. He was beautiful and muscular, and I couldn't stop myself from staring. "May I?" he asked, undoing the top of his suit slacks again.

I nodded, while watching his him strip—and then he was a jerk and changed into a tiger before taking off his boxer briefs, in a blur of sudden motion.

"That's cheating!" I protested lightly. "You've seen all of me!"

The creature he was now—massive, furred, and sleek—chuffed in amusement, padding toward me on the feathers, and then stopped when he was close enough for me to touch.

He still had Namir's green eyes, and they watched me reach out and stroke a finger up the fur on his nose the wrong direction, then sweep my hand up to catch and rub an ear. I felt emboldened then, and started running my hands down the solid length of his neck, shoulders, and back. Petting him felt miraculous, and he was endlessly patient with me doing so, as my fingers traced the outlines of his thick, blunt fangs, and his legs down to his claw-tips. He closed his eyes and wound his way around me, offering all of himself to be touched, bit by bit, until all of him was on the feathers with me, and he lay down, stretching out to lick a paw, just like a housecat.

"You're ridiculous," I told him, lying down beside him. I couldn't stop petting him, though, as I wriggled up against him, so I could feel his fur against my skin.

Namir stopped licking his paw and looked over at me, to run his raspy tongue up my cheek. I laughed, wiping his spit away—and when I next opened my eyes, he was a man again, stretched beside me same as his cat had been.

"You lured me in," I complained lightly, from my position, laying on my feathers.

"Absolutely," he confessed, coming in for a kiss.

I felt him rock over me and I reached up, tracing my fingers over him again, on skin instead of fur. His free hand roamed as he pushed himself up, pinning me against my feathers below, his hips asking mine to open.

I did so readily, all of me already achy and hot, anticipation overwhelming any fear—but instead of taking it like the invitation that it was, he started kissing lower, at my jaw, my neck, while my fingers curled in his hair, until he found a nipple and lapped at it, using the rough part of his human tongue that still mirrored his cat's, to pull it into a soft peak for him to suck on.

"Namir," I breathed, watching him, my jaw dropped a little, my gaze feeling heavy.

He purred a response, and then went to suck on the other, holding the first breast with his hand, teasing the same nipple

between thumb and forefinger. “Am I the first person to kiss your breasts, little bird?” he asked, lifting up, his pupils as wide as my own surely were.

“Yes,” I whispered, squirming beneath him lightly, encouraging him to hurry up.

He chuckled at that, and then started kissing lower, pausing sometimes to gently rasp me with his tongue, until his face was almost between my thighs. “And will I be the first person to taste you?”

I nodded, because I knew where his mouth was going, and the thought of it stole my words. His hands held me open and he breathed me in for a moment before his lips descended on me, pulling at my clit, exposing it for his tongue’s soft-rough attention.

I had a hand in his hair before I knew what I was doing—I just needed to keep him there. “Namir,” I whispered again, but this time with a greedy whine, while he made a satisfied sound between my thighs.

I’d come before, with my fingers and with toys, but none of those sensations had been like this, like how it felt to be able to watch him as he ate me out, feeling his bearded chin rubbing against my folds as he made hungry sounds, licking and sucking and pulling at my clit.

I’d imagined what this moment might be like on a thousand different nights, wondering if I’d ever find someone who I could trust to let it happen—and now that I thought that I had, I was completely without shame. “That feels so good,” I whispered, tensing up. “Don’t stop.”

He made an acquiescing sound against me, as I began to squirm.

“Oh God,” I said, rising up, my ass clenching, my calves tight, as he growled and held me open for his tongue. I was so close I was panting—but I didn’t want to come from this—not when the rest of him was so near. “Namir—stop,” I whispered. I wanted him in me so badly, *now*. “Do it—don’t make me wait again.”

His tongue stilled and he looked up, his mouth close enough to my clit that I could feel it as he breathed his words. “Are you sure?”

I nodded again, frantically, letting go of his hair. I licked my lips, held one breast with one hand, and reached for him with the other.

He rose up, his lips and chin glistening with my juices, as he crawled over me. “You don’t have to rush. There will be other nights.”

I shook my head, that wasn’t good enough. “I want it to be this one.”

His expression became one of restrained concern. “Do you feel for me, as I do for you?”

“I—I don’t know, Namir. I still hardly know you—and like this, I’m more human than swan, so maybe I don’t get the magic feels like other shifters do. But I know I want to know you, which is more than I can say for anyone else I’ve ever met. And I desperately want you to fuck me. Doesn’t that count?”

“For now, yes,” he said, eyeing me studiously. “But I want it all, Lily. I want what’s in between your legs, *and* your mind, *and* your heart. I want to be the first thing you think of when you wake, and the last before you go to sleep, and every moment in between.”

My heart began pounding in my chest. “You could’ve had that already, if you’d just taken my feathers,” I quietly confessed.

He gave me a wicked grin. “I had some time to hit up Google today—so I know. But my pride requires that you choose me freely.”

I put my hand against his cheek. “Predator-prey relationships never work out, Namir.”

He twisted his mouth to kiss my palm. “Or, they’re so gloriously happy, no one ever hears from them again.”

I laughed beneath him. “All this time working with you, and I never realized you were a sentimental fool.”

Namir stared down at me, his green eyes glinting by his firelight, then rose up. The firelight cast half his body in light, and the other half in shadow, and I finally got to see what I’d be dealing with. His long, thick erection was folded up against his stomach: it curved up at the tip, and the length of it was covered in fleshy ridges, like the crenulations of a bottle cap—the kind of dick you never see in porn. I watched him stroke himself with his hand, from his head down, following their flow, and then halfway down he pulled up against himself to show me how they would flare out in a tight space.

“They’re meant to keep me to you, and you to me,” he warned. “And I am not a fool, little bird—I’m a tiger who killed innumerable men for the chance to be your mate.”

And something about the way he said it reached down, made my core squeeze, and made everything that was swan me in rise up, all my stubborn, spiteful, willfulness, the parts of me that’d kept me alive so far. “So do it,” I challenged him. “Mate me.”

“Don’t say that if you don’t mean it, Lily,” he warned, his voice a low rumble.

“Or what?” I asked him, rising up on both my elbows. “You won’t fuck me?”

“I am strong enough to walk away from you, if need be,” he growled.

I was breathing hard now and feeling reckless, full of something bigger than myself, an insane pressure that needed to be relieved. “From *me*, maybe,” I taunted him, getting on my hands and knees, and wiggling my ass at him same as if I still had my feathered tail. Then I looked over my shoulder at him and braced. “But we both know, tiger, there’s no way you’re walking away from this swan tonight.”

He snarled something incomprehensible, and then reached for me, grabbing both my knees and pulling my legs out from under me. I yelped in surprise, falling down on top my

feathers, as he pounced on top of me, spreading my legs wide with his hips. I felt the ridges of his wide shaft stroke down the cleft of my ass, just before he tilted his hips forward so that he could catch the end of his cock where he'd just been licking, playing its blunt tip against my folds and making it rub my clit.

I groaned his name and tried to lift my hips up, to get him to go inside me, and he rumbled a laugh.

“You want to get mated so badly now, little bird?” he asked, sweeping up my hair to wind around his hand. “You want to know what it’s like when the tiger catches up?”

“Yes,” I hissed.

He leaned forward to harshly whisper in my ear, “Me too,” and then notched himself up like an arrow and buried himself inside me.

I cried out at once. I hadn’t been expecting the sudden fullness, or the tearing, or the rush of heat as he slid in. It wasn’t anything like I could’ve imagined before—because I’d never tried to imagine *him*.

I gave a surprised whimper, and then Namir growled in my ear, before regaining himself. “Lily,” he gasped, releasing my hair at once, to bend over me, his hips still matched to mine.

“Don’t apologize. You’re a tiger. Tigers don’t apologize,” I panted, catching my breath.

“This one does,” he said, and kissed my shoulder where it met my neck, before bowing his head against my back. “I am sorry, little bird,” he said, even as I shook my head. “I won’t move in you again until you tell me to—if you tell me to,” he promised.

I forced myself to breathe and relax. This *was* what I’d wanted—and who I’d wanted it with—and how I’d wanted it, besides. “You can move . . . a little.”

Namir made a comforting sound, but didn’t thrust, he just slid an arm under me to start to rub my clit in tiny circles.

I closed my eyes, remembering the first time I'd ever tried to fly. I'd stolen my own feathers, and gone out to a secluded pond to try. I was awful at it for hours, but I never gave up, because I knew I'd manage to—and I remembered the feeling of precisely when I did—catching the air with my wings and lifting off, finally conquering gravity.

It felt ... like being free.

And what if being with someone else felt like that?

What if love didn't have to be confining?

What if it made you limitless, instead?

“Lily?” Namir asked. He nuzzled my cheek with his, his hand slowing down.

I twisted to look at him more clearly, breathing hard. “If I come, Namir, will we be mated?”

He gave a thoughtful rumble. “No. It's more than that, I'm told.”

“Told?”

He kissed my temple, before answering. “There can be many firsts tonight.”

He pulled his hand out from beneath me to balance on, and I could see my virgin blood on his fingers—and where its red now stained my feathers' pure white.

“You're truly that sure of me?” I asked him. “Swans aren't nice, Namir. We're obstinate and cranky and headstrong—”

“And tigers aren't?” he said, holding himself above me while frowning. “I don't know how to make it clearer, Lily. I need you in my soul,” he said, and then I watched him brace for my rejection.

A predator, afraid that his prey would reject his love.

I had never been so humbled in my life. I squirmed for my freedom beneath him, and felt each of the ridges along his shaft rub and pull my walls as he granted it, leaning back, the expression on his face looking more stricken by the moment, until I turned onto my back beneath him.

“I want to see you.” I could tell he didn’t dare to hope, so I went on. “Swans are bossy. And it takes us awhile to make up our minds—but once *we* do, we mate for life.” I reached up to take his face between my palms. “This feels right.”

A slow smile spread across his face as he lowered himself over me again, matching his body with mine. “Then open wide, little bird,” he said, going down on one elbow to cradle the back of my head with a hand. “Open wide, and let me in.”

I nodded, winding my legs around his hips as his lips met mine, and he started pushing forward. “Lily,” he whispered, as the first ridge on his cock passed through and then he paused there, tugging it against my entrance.

“More,” I told him, continuing to nod. “Namir—I want everything.”

He gave me a look of delight, and then took me at my word.

My head rolled back as he plunged himself deep and then his mouth was on my neck and I could feel him inside of me, the curve of his cock and the ridges on it rubbing hard against my walls as he shifted himself minutely, not thrusting, just moving enough to make me ache for more. “You’re so wet, Lily,” he murmured appreciatively.

“Well, I am a water bird,” I said. Namir sagged his head and groaned while I snickered, and I tapped him so he’d look at me. “Look, you’re the one who wanted this. It’s not my fault you didn’t know I have a corny sense of humor.”

He laughed, and I could feel it rumbling inside and out, and I’d never known anything as good. “I guess I’ll get used to it,” he said, sounding like a complaint, even as his entire face was beaming.

I ran a hand through his hair as he looked up, and smiled at him. “I think you’ll have to.”

He took me in then, like he was seeing me for the first time, before leaning in to kiss me, softly at first, before deepening, and I made a surrendering sound, wrapping my arms around him as he started to thrust. His ridges spread me

open, one by one, as he pulled out, and then stretched me again as he filled me back up again. I moaned beneath him, into his mouth, rocking my hips in his time. “Namir,” I whispered, when he pulled up.

“Do you like that, little bird?”

“Very much,” I confessed.

“Good,” he agreed. He came in and bit my lower lip, pulling it up between his teeth and all of me squeezed until he let it go. “I want to fuck you faster, Lily. Harder, too,” he warned.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Please.”

And he held himself above me, holding my face in his hands, watching me as he took me, and I had never felt so known—or owned.

Because for all that I was a bird and he was a cat, what we were together was meant to be. I could feel it where we met, each time he filled me, in the way my body reacted to his, and the friction building between us, as he kept stretching me wide and thudding in deep.

“It’s so good, Lily,” he groaned, before kissing me ferociously and chasing the last of any fears I might have had away.

“I know,” I said, clawing my hands up his scalp through his hair. I couldn’t even have explained how I knew, since he was my first time, but I did, *fuck*, I *did*. “Namir,” I whispered, feeling tight, and full, so fucking full of him, like he was always meant to be inside me. Usually I needed to touch my clit, but the way he was taking me, how turned on I was, and how much I *needed* this to happen—“Namir,” I whined, squeezing my thighs around him.

“Fuck—this is what it’s supposed to be like—*fuck*—” he harshly whispered, bowing his forehead to mine. “Little bird—*please—fuck—come—*” he grunted in time with his thrusts.

And for maybe the first time in my life, I did as I was told. I threw my arms around his neck and screamed. My orgasm rippled out of me from my core, slamming through me hard

and then rebounding, making me clamp down tight in pulsing waves. Namir growled above me, a completely wild sound, and covered me as I thrashed, shoving me as full of him as I could take, again and again, until he was coming too, I knew it by his snarling, and the way his hips erratically rammed into mine, before he collapsed above me, both of us covered in sweat and with only barely with room to breathe.

Namir nuzzled his face against mine—*just like a cat*, I thought, with a stuporous grin—before he pulled back, still breathing hard. “I knew you were my mate, Lily.”

“I’m glad one of us was sure,” I said, stroking a hand gently against him, before I realized from his expression he had more to say.

“And . . . you’re going to be trapped on me for a bit here,” he said, rocking both of us with his hips. I could still feel how hard and full he was inside me. “Don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic?” I repeated, blinking back to attention. “You do realize telling people not to panic literally does the opposite of that?”

He gave me an apologetic wince. “It’s a cat shifter thing. When we mate—with the right person—there’s fleshy barbs. It shouldn’t hurt—”

“Excuse me?” I said, pushing up on my elbows beneath him. “I’m not sure the word ‘fleshy’ makes the word ‘barb’ better—*wait*—why didn’t you warn me?”

I watched him grit his teeth. “Because it’s never happened before, and I didn’t want to scare you.”

I squinted up at him, reading between the lines. “Because you weren’t sure it was going to!” I said, hitting him on his shoulder.

He stared me down with his amazingly deep green eyes that I already knew I would never get tired of looking into. “No,” he finally confessed. “But everything in me wanted it to happen.”

And that part?

I believed.

I grinned up at him, my lips curving mischievously. “Well . . . now that *you’re* trapped on *me*,” I said, pretending to take the power back in the situation, “maybe we should talk about normal getting-to-know-you things. Like my favorite cheese is Swiss. And I really enjoy karaoke.” I fell back onto my feathers, giggling, elated.

I’d shown my feathers to a man, he hadn’t stolen them, they would always be safe soon, and somehow, even though I was pinned on Namir’s cock, I had gained my actual freedom by his side.

“Don’t laugh,” Namir warned, even though he was laughing too. “If you make me hard again, little bird, I’ll—”

“You’ll?” I taunted him, sweeping my arms up behind his head. “What? Have to fuck me again? Or be stuck with me forever?”

“Both,” he growled possessively, coming in to kiss my throat.

“Just as long as you know I’m ninety-percent sure you’re going to have to meet my parents tomorrow,” I warned him, and I could feel his smile against my skin before he answered.

“I’ll do anything, Lily, as long as I get to keep you.”

About Cassie Alexander

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Full Moon Heat
A Riftwolves Novella
by
Chloe Parker

Intro

All Charlotte wants is for her alpha, Elijah, to claim her as his omega, but Elijah won't bite her no matter how many times she asks. When a friend suggests activating his instincts with a bit of primal play, Charlotte finds herself intrigued by the idea...and ends up leading him on a chase through the moonlit woods as she goes into heat.

Triggers/Kinks: *Primal Play, Discussion of Breeding, Discussion of Biting*

Prologue

It's my first full moon with the pack.

My steps are light on the forest floor, the full moon shining overhead. My breaths come in short gasps, my whole body feeling like it's on fire. My heat rolls across my skin, tugs at my breasts, pools at my core...and I feel alive, alive, *alive*.

My white dress drifts around my thighs, the grass soft under my feet. Here in the deepest part of the woods, I feel like I could be completely alone.

But I know he's out there, waiting.

Looking.

Hunting.

Elijah.

Even the thought of his hands on me, the taste of his name on my lips, makes me hunger with need. I inhale summer flowers and the barest taste of autumn, a chill wind blowing in with a distant storm. Thunder rumbles, making me shiver, and I pause beside a tree to grip the trunk and breathe.

I'm so turned on, so *desperately* turned on. Elijah is playing games with me. I know he can scent me on the wind, that he's been lurking in the trees for hours, watching me run without a care in the world. But I want him right now.

He's not the only one who can engage in the chase.

I glance over my shoulder, sweeping my gaze back into the trees behind me. Is that the flash of opalescent eyes in the shadows, or am I imagining things? Is he lurking at my back, or is he waiting to pounce right in front of me?

"Elijah?" I ask the empty woods, and I wish I sounded less afraid.

No answer.

A twig snaps in the darkness, and my instincts go into overdrive.

I leap into action, running forward into the trees, branches whipping at my arms and legs. They cut me, yes—and I’m undoubtedly afraid—but something about this game makes heat build between my legs, already so wet I can barely stand it. This must be the slick the other omegas told me about, the unbearable desire mounting with the friction of my thighs brushing together as I sprint.

I break through the tree line, moonlight shining down on a field of scarlet and gold sunflowers. Even in the moonlight, they shine like distant stars in the field of tall grasses, tickling my knees. I feel free, desirable, *wanted*...

And like I could sense him, I hear him there behind me—clawed paws treading the grass, panting breaths as he gets closer. I can’t fully shift yet, so I know he’ll catch me. And I *revel* in that feeling, my mate drawing closer, my heat pulling him in like a fish on a hook.

His weight hits me all at once from behind and I tumble into the grass, talons biting into my shoulder as I roll onto my back. I gasp, staring up at him and spreading my legs as he partially shifts, his teeth sharp and his eyes flashing with animalistic, carnal intention.

“My,” I breathe. “What big *teeth* you have.”

Elijah chuckles, ducking his head against my neck. His tongue drags rough and hot over my skin. I whimper in delight and desire as he gives me a feral grin, his voice coming out in a raspy southern drawl.

“The better to eat you with, my dear.”

Chapter 1

Twelve Hours Earlier

What does it even mean to be human?

I've pondered that question a lot since I came to live with the Austin pack—since I discovered that I'm not fully human myself. We play by different rules now that we're part Lycan. I belong to a new species, one that intermingles with humanity in strange ways...and I can't wait to see what happens tonight.

I can feel my heat coming over me as I wake up on the first morning of the full moon, crawling from my core over my thighs and stomach, my nipples pebbling under the thin blanket. Our little cottage in the woods doesn't have AC, and Elijah's body is so warm beside me that I'm already sweating. His fingers glide across my hip, letting me know that he's awake and probably has my scent.

"You keep lying here smelling like that, I won't be able to wait until tonight to mate you," Elijah groans in my ear, his breath hot against my neck. I arch under his touch. Even though he's only grazing the underside of my sweat-slick breasts, it feels like he's already inside me. I know it'll feel even better once he is.

"Sounds like you're the one with the problem," I laugh. "Don't make me kick you out of bed."

I open my eyes to find him staring at me from the other side of the bed, no part of him touching me but his fingertips. His sun-kissed skin shines bronze in the early morning sun, his eyes glinting with icy blue longing. I chance a glimpse and see his cock jutting out underneath the white sheet.

He licks his lips, and I barely resist the urge to press myself forward and catch his tongue between my teeth.

"What time is it?" I ask, trying to keep my mind on anything *but* his tongue.

"Close to noon," he says. "I didn't want to wake you."

“Mm...I asked you to wake me up,” I groan, stretching out my limbs. I don’t touch him; I *can’t*, if I ever want to get out of this bed. The moon isn’t even out yet, and I already feel like I won’t be able to stop fucking my mate until this long week is over. “I told Peaches I’d head over to the den to help her cook dinner tonight and get set for this week. It’s the least I can do, given how kind everyone has been to us here.”

“Put it off another day,” Elijah groans. His hand flattens against my stomach as he props himself up in bed beside me, and I can’t help the needy whine that slips past my lips. He laughs. “See? Your wolf is begging for her mate.”

“*My wolf* is me, and my body doesn’t control me,” I scoff. “And neither do you.”

“You say that now, but just wait until moonrise tonight,” he says. “Once I get you into bed...”

His hand trails lower, and I catch his fingers in mine to bring them to my lips. I graze a kiss over his knuckles, and Elijah groans, knowing exactly what I’m going to say.

“That’s why I have to go and help out today,” I murmur. “Because I’m anticipating staying in bed with you for the next four days...and because I’m gonna make you wait.”

“You’re a sadist,” Elijah says, feigning a pout.

“And you’re stuck with me,” I smile. “Now, let me up; I’ve got some things to take care of today, and no time to waste.”

*

The kitchen in the old visitor’s center smells like fresh tortillas and chili powder, platters full of enchiladas and chile rellenos coming out of the oven as we prepare for the week. The pack likes to get food ready ahead of time during the full moon—even those of us who are unmated can be pretty useless once our heat starts, uninterested in anything but, as Peaches told me, ‘screwing and eating.’” I’m immediately put to work slicing up peppers, a crate full of stolen vegetables in the corner.

“You excited for tonight?” Peaches says from beside me. She’s tied up her red hair in a messy bun, wearing a blue floral dress that hugs her curves. “It always seems like a hell of a lot of fun for folks that are mated.”

“Well, I’m not *technically* mated,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Not yet. He won’t bite me until we ‘get to know each other.’”

“Hey, that’s sweet,” she says, nudging me with her elbow. “I wouldn’t expect it from a guy like Elijah.”

“Peaches...” I sigh. “I want him *so badly*; it’s him and only him. I’ve never been so certain of anything in my life.”

“So you want to convince him you mean it—that you’re committed for good,” Peaches says.

“Of course I do,” I tell her. “I just don’t know how.”

“Well...” Peaches lowers her voice, glancing around to make sure no one’s listening. “The Prime doesn’t like it, but back with my old pack, we used to do this thing during the full moon.”

I narrow my eyes, leaning closer to her with a conspiratorial smile. “I’m listening.”

“There would be a hunt,” she says.

I frown. “A hunt...? I’m not sure I understand.”

“The night of the full moon, the omegas would go out and hide in the woods, and their alphas would come to find them,” Peaches continues. “I guess it wakes up your Lycan instincts—makes it more fun to mark and...it wasn’t always used for good with the Atlanta pack, but for you and Elijah it might just do the trick.”

“I don’t want to trick him into doing it,” I cut in.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it,” Peaches deadpans. “Just... give it a shot. And at the very least, it could be a good time, right?”

I nod, but it doesn’t exactly seem like a great idea. “Sure,” I say. “Maybe it will.”

Chapter 2

The idea grows on me for the rest of the day. I remember how Elijah chased me through the woods the first time we met—a shadow lurking in the darkness, growling about how good I smelled. I remember him pinning me to the ground with sharp claws, his snout at my ear, his tongue flicking out to lap at my flesh...

It might not be so bad.

Plus, there are other benefits to being marked. I'm painfully reminded of that when I leave the den to go home for the night, the scent of my oncoming heat enough to drive unmated alphas in the den wild. My family in the den protected me the last time—my uncle *is* the Prime after all, and an omega's scent doesn't have the same effect on family, thank goodness—but now I have to go back to my isolated cottage in the woods.

I take my time and weave through the trees, taking my shoes off to step barefoot through the summer wildflowers. I'm still getting used to the sensation of soft grass under my feet, the open air invigorating in a way I never expected it to be. The sun has just started to set as our little cottage comes into view, nestled in the grass, and I hold back as I approach just to take a few more deep breaths.

He's not there when I arrive—hunting or running off excess energy. I put down the carefully packed food Peaches gave me and look around our one bedroom space with my hands on my hips.

And then I realize, this is an opportunity.

I sit down at the little wooden desk in the corner and scribble a note in hasty cursive, not knowing when Elijah will get back. If I want this to work, I have to hurry. He'll be able to track my scent with ease, and follow me through the forest. There's a spot down by the creek where I can hide, to make a game out of the chase.

Even if he doesn't bite me... it'll be worth it for the pleasure.

For the hunt.

*

I leave when I can feel him drawing closer, the magnetism of my fated mate resonating in my bones.

Even without the bite, we sense each other—and he'll know *exactly* where I am when he gets my scent—but I'm fast enough to beat him to the creek. My wolf sings to be set free as the moon rises, making me quicker, bolder, stronger. I don't even bring shoes as I put on a white sundress and close the door behind me, leaving the note tacked to our front door.

Come find me.

I know it's going to piss him off. He's especially protective with his instincts in overdrive during my heat, and there could be other alphas in the woods. Even the brush of my thighs together as I take off through the grass arouses me, heat pooling in the pit of my stomach and wetness slipping between my legs. My scent will drift all over the prairie, drawing Elijah to me like moth to flame.

I feel powerful to have that leverage over him. The big bad wolf like putty in my hands.

Mine.

The creek is about three miles from our place, and I take it at a sprint, my heart pounding and lungs working overtime. I cross a field of bluebonnets and prairie fire, their sweet scent hitting my nostrils with an incredible intensity thanks to my heightened senses. The moon glows above, already full and gorgeous as the last rays of sun vanish on the horizon.

Rushing water sounds ahead of me, recent rainfall gathered to a clear cascade over the grey stones of our creek bed. The dusky sky tints the water violet, and I leap into the cool water up to my knees to cross the rocks, round pebbles massaging the soles of my feet. I can't help the laugh that bubbles out of my chest as I lift my dress up my thighs. A riot of sensation overtakes me, nipples pebbling under my dress, my pussy so

wet I'm certain not even the water could stop Elijah tracking me.

His howl breaks through the night, skittering across my skin like the touch of a lover.

I move faster, even as a needy whine cracks through my composure.

I've never needed anyone like this—not since my first heat during the last full moon. Meeting Elijah woke something in me, a wolf that had been lurking in the shadows of my heart my whole life. And she's hungry for her mate, frustrated with the games we like to play.

It's going to make this all *so* much better.

Another howl sounds, closer this time, just as I reach the other side of the creek. The woods are thicker here, and I stumble into the darkness just as I feel his presence... a shiver rolls down my spine. I take harsh, uneven breaths, wanting him to find me just as my prey instinct kicks in.

There's a creature in this forest intent on eating me.

I catch something out of the corner of my eye: a shadow, huge and menacing. A flash of white fur, violet spines down his back, silver eyes in the dark. I'm confident it's Elijah. I can scent him, that combination of whiskey and pine and *male*, essential and primordial.

Mine.

Mine.

The game is on. My feet fly through the grass, my dress catching on the thistles. This creature runs across the plains, wild and untamed. I'll dance on the prairie until sunrise if I have to, until I get my mate's bite.

I break out of the tree line and race for the other side, letting out a laugh of pure, unfiltered joy. I can feel him behind me, ready to nip at my heels. A claw catches in my skirt, but I slip out of his grasp and run the opposite direction. Fear mingles with pleasure and excitement, filling my chest with pure *need*.

And then he catches me.

Now, the fun begins.

Chapter 3

Elijah stays partially shifted over me, his claws out, teeth sharp as daggers. His eyes flash with an otherworldly, alien glow as he lowers his nose to my hair and inhales deeply, dragging his tongue out over the shell of my ear.

My every nerve attunes to him. I'm helpless in his grasp.

All I want is for him to rut me.

"Just my luck to find a pretty little omega running wild on the full moon," he growls, his claws biting into my shoulders. I let out a whimper and press my hips up to him, feeling him hard between my legs. "If she doesn't listen to her alpha, she might get lost in the woods."

I move to dig my nails into his back, but he snatches my wrists in his powerful hands and presses them into the grass above my head, pulling back to look at me.

"Remember, I don't have an alpha," I whisper. "I'm unclaimed."

"Is that so?" he says. "Can you say that when my scent is all over you?"

His rough tongue drags across my clavicle, dipping into its fossa. He's fully naked from the shift, and my dress is riding higher and higher up my legs. *Fuck*, I can already feel his knot swelling where it rests on my thigh, his cock an agonizing few inches from my pussy. My walls clench in anticipation of what's coming, my thighs falling farther open to remove that last bit of flimsy fabric between us.

"*Fuck*, Charlotte... your slick," Elijah mutters, rolling his hips against me. It's drenching his swollen knot, my thighs sticky with it. "You scared me."

"Can we not talk about this now?" I say. "I'll beg if you want me to."

"You ran away," he mutters. His hand lands on my thigh, squeezing hard, his claws biting into me. He's showing me I'm

his, even if he hasn't marked me.

It makes me want him so much more.

The moon peeks out from behind a cloud, bathing us both in silver light. Elijah snickers against my neck, his hot breath scorching my flesh. In one swift movement, he pulls my dress down at the neck, tearing it down the middle to reveal my breasts. He sinks his head down to nip at the peaks, his teeth sharp, always *teasing*.

The moon above reminds me how empty I am. How I need to be filled.

"Please," I breathe. "I need you inside *now*."

"Oh no, little omega," he says. "You played games with me... now it's my turn to play."

He rises to kneel between my legs, craning his neck up toward the moon until the light pours over him. He's so beautiful like this, like he was cast in pure silver, every shining angle of him *gorgeous*. I look up at him with hooded eyes, propping myself on my elbows.

I don't know how he's able to resist his rut.

He has more willpower than I do.

Elijah takes his girth in his hand and pumps himself up and down, from knot to tip. His cock already wet with my slick, he groans as he coats himself with it. If we'd fully mated—if we'd exchanged bites—I could feel *exactly* what he feels right now, and I'm jealous with the need to claim him, and for him to claim me.

"You're going to make it up to me," he says.

I know exactly what he wants.

"Suck, Charlotte."

My jaw goes slack as I sit up and crawl to my hands and knees. The dress rides up over my ass, and Elijah lets out a harsh breath as he looks at it in the moonlight. He doesn't move—just leans toward me, his huge cock dripping with a bead of pre-cum at the tip, its tip scarlet in an all-silver world.

I don't have the will to resist him. I have to taste him.

I take Elijah fully into my mouth, sliding my head forward until he hits the back of my throat. I keep my eyes on him and bring my hand up to squeeze his knot. He answers me with a rumbling growl, primal and proprietary.

My pussy clenches painfully, slick sliding my thighs together as Elijah's hand rests on the crown of my head.

"I'm gonna knot you all night, little omega," he growls. "Keep you locked on my cock until you're satisfied. You can't fucking wait for it, can you?"

I can't respond; my tongue is sliding desperately over him, to apologize for running away, even when I know he *loved* it. I'll play this game with him, and I'm going to play it again. Next full moon.

Because he's not the only creature of wind and moonlight.

Lycan blood pumps through my veins as well.

I massage his knot and take him past my lips, into my throat, out again. Elijah falls into the rhythm of it, his narrow hips moving rhythmically into my mouth. I look at him to find his eyes locked on my ass, flashing with monstrous intent. He's going to lose his composure soon, and then he's going to rut me on the prairie.

Knot me until I'm sore.

Lock into me, claim me...

Then he loses it—right down my throat.

He slams his hips forward and I swallow everything he gives me as he shudders with a breathy sigh. His knot expands, pulses, and I taste caramel sweet whiskey on my tongue. My pussy aches, *angry* that he's already come, even as I greedily devour all he offers.

I'm delirious with the taste of him as he grips me roughly by the shoulders, then turns me around.

"Buckle up, Sunshine," he mutters. "I'm about to fuck you until you can't see straight."

I let out a shuddering gasp... this is what I've been waiting for.

Chapter 4

Elijah's claws trail down my spine, halting on every vertebra. My whole body shudders as I thrust my ass back toward him, his cock sliding through the wetness between my thighs.

"Please," I groan. "Please... please knot me, my alpha."

Wolf dirty talk. It never gets old.

His claws dig into my ribs, then trail down my stomach. I'm certain he'll leave red marks tomorrow, but I'm happy for him to claim me however he wants—since he won't bite me.

"Charlotte..." he murmurs. "Fuck, you're so wet."

"I need you."

"If you needed me that badly, you wouldn't make me chase you," he chuckles. "Gorgeous girl... playing your little games."

The head of his cock dips inside me, and my elbows buckle as I thrust my ass up toward him. My fingers curl in the dirt, pulling up chunks of grass as my hands shift subtly into claws. "Elijah, *please*."

"You want me to knot you, Sunshine? Out here in the moonlight, when we could have done this in our bed?"

I can't help but laugh at that. Elijah's claws dig into my hips as I do, making me more aroused. "Are you going to stop complaining and fuck me?"

He takes the provocation, as I knew he would.

His cock plunges into me until his knot grinds against my folds, not pushing in yet. He must wait until he's ready to come—until he's ready to spill into me, bind us together, rut until the sun comes up. My clit throbs as he reaches around to flick at it, his other hand holding my hips against him. "*Jesus*, Sunshine," he curses. "You're so fucking tight."

He pulls out and rams into me again. I taste whiskey, like he's filling me up. My whole body resonates with his heartbeat. Growls rumbling in his chest pulse through me where we're joined.

"In the full moon," he says. "You look like..."

Breathless, I glance back at him, words stolen from my lips as he thrusts into me again. "Like what?" I finally say.

He leans forward until he's pressed his chest to my back. Elijah rubs my clit relentlessly, his finger moving in slow circles to drive me mad.

My first orgasm builds...

"Like starshine," he whispers in my ear.

My inner walls flutter and I come in a rush around him, his knot at the edge of my entrance, not *nearly* enough. He pulls out to ram into me again, fucking me harder, faster, enhancing my orgasm until I'm all but spent. And I listen to him breathe, focus on the slap of our bodies together, the way I pull him into myself until he's nestled as deep as he's willing to go.

I need more. *More*. I need his knot buried inside me, filling me completely, that last barrier between us makes me ache.

"Give it to me," I beg. "Knot me... breed me..."

I don't know where the words come from: somewhere primordial and feral, the wolf inside me screaming for her mate. It's what the heat is for... to be rutted, claimed, bred. It goes against every aspect of my conservative upbringing, but I'm wild with desire for this man, and I won't let anything get in my way.

Even if I'm on birth control for this heat, it's fun to play.

To dream.

Elijah's tongue laps at my pulse, and I bare my neck to him as he continues to fuck me from behind. "I'm not gonna bite you, darlin'," he murmurs, his Texas accent husky. "No matter how much I want to."

"Please," I say. "I want to feel you everywhere..."

“Soon,” he whispers. “Soon.”

“Why not *now*?”

Elijah doesn't respond; he takes me in his arms and pulls out, leaving me empty. I whine in protest... but he turns me to face him, laying me back in the grass.

And there's so much tenderness in his silver eyes that I forget about everything else.

He rubs his cock over my swollen folds, covering his shaft in slick. I'm so wet, so open for him, that he slides right in up to the hilt... and then further, he buries his knot in my pussy. We lock into place like puzzle pieces, and Elijah stares down at me as he rolls his hips.

This... *this* is what I've been waiting for.

The deep, hard thrusts from my mate, my everything. His gaze on mine, unblinking. His sharp teeth lower to my neck, and I bare my throat to him in submission.

“Bite me,” I plead. “Mark me.”

“Not yet,” he growls.

His pace becomes punishing, fast and hard. It finally eases that aching need in my belly, the liquid heat at the pit of my stomach. I mutter nonsense words into his blond hair, tangle my fingers in the strands, and I ask him to *please* make me his.

He doesn't bite me.

But I come anyway.

Over and over and *over* again.

I pulse around his cock, around his knot. Elijah nips at my throat, but doesn't latch on, his sharp teeth stinging and providing a beautiful pain with the pleasure. His hips rock and roll as he comes, his whole body shuddering, spilling into me as I take every glorious drop.

And I ride out the pleasure as I stare up at the full moon, letting out a howl that's more wolf than woman.

He melts against me. We fold together and he stays locked inside me, his breath puffing warmth against my neck.

And that's how we spend the night, there in that field, his knot so swollen we can't break apart.

Chapter 5

We fuck and fuck and *fuck*.

Our bodies intertwine, unable to break apart. His cock nestles inside me, soft grass at my back, his tongue and his lips and his hands finding the pieces of me that feel best.

We stay like that until morning.

I wake to the touch of soft pink light on my cheeks, the warm heat of the sun. Birds sing overhead, the sweet song of starlings in my ears. My eyes blink open to find Elijah still sleeping, and I stretch against him then press a kiss to his cheek.

We should head home. We're in for another night of heat.

I'd rather *this* night be in bed.

His eyelashes flutter, and Elijah rolls onto his side to face me. His silver gaze meets mine. We must have unlocked in the night, but I'm still a mess. My dress is in tatters, beyond mending. Guess I should have considered that before I ran off in it.

Next time, I'll make the sprint naked.

"Mornin', Sunshine," he murmurs.

I crack a smile, heart pounding in my chest.

He does this to me.

"Mornin'," I respond.

He yawns and stretches, his lithe body muscular and shining bronze in the sun. I trail my hand down his chest, already feeling the spark of my heat coming over me. It's stronger during the moon, but sometimes I can't even resist him during the day.

"We should get back," I whisper. "Eager to get to our nest."

His brow furrows, hand resting on my hip. “You’re not... are you?”

“Pregnant?” I huff out a laugh. “Still on birth control, but... I’ve been thinking about it. Now that we’re safe with the pack, and secure, and we’ve got our little house? That choice seems more and more appealing.”

“One day,” he says. “But is it selfish of me to want a few years with you first?”

His lips find my pulse, and I hiss out a breath when his teeth graze my neck. I wonder if he’s finally going to mark me.

He doesn’t. He trails kisses down my neck.

I pull away from him.

“Why won’t you mark me?” I ask, trailing my hand over his stubble. “Is it because you don’t want me?”

Elijah frowns. “Charlotte—no. Of course not.”

I search his gaze for the truth, biting my lip. “Then why?”

“Because I... shit, you’re really gonna make me rush this, huh?” He rakes his hand through his hair, then chuckles under his breath. “It’s because your family would kill me if I bit you without marrying you, so... I’m gonna marry you first.”

I can’t control the laugh that bubbles out of my chest, even though it definitely puts Elijah off. He frowns, shoving my shoulder gently. “Seriously?” he says. “That was supposed to be romantic.”

I smile. “I’m your mate. And you know what we have is deeper than marriage...”

“I know,” he says. “But I want to do this right. There are a lot of things I’ve done wrong in my life, and I... I want to do this right, at the very least.”

“Elijah.” I hold his hand to my chest. “You don’t have to.”

“The fact is, I want to,” he says. “I love you, and I want to do right by you—so, will you marry me?”

I look at our entangled limbs, at my tattered white dress, at the sunrise-painted sky. Wildflowers bloom all around us, rising tall enough to keep us secret and safe from the world.

“I will,” I say. “But you have to promise you’ll chase me through the woods again next month.”

He grins. “Anytime, Sunshine.”

And as the sun makes its way up the horizon, I know my mate will always satisfy my heat.

About Chloe Parker

Chloe Parker is a full-time smut peddler and part-time academic working on a PhD in alien eggplant. When she's not dreaming up angsty, otherworldly love stories, you can find her hanging out with her three little dogs and her extremely silly husband. You can learn more about her work—including the Fated Mates of the Riftwolves series—at www.chloeparkerromance.com.

The Governess and the Wolf

by

Hannah Haze

Chapter 1

I hurried down the stairs as quietly as I could, fingers trailing against the white-washed wall, my tight bun bouncing loose. My feet clipped on the back stairs despite my best efforts, but I hoped the merry noises from the dining room would disguise them.

My instructions were simple: once the guests arrived, keep myself and the children upstairs and out of sight. Which, if it weren't for little Anne's doll sitting neatly on the chaise in the morning room, I'd happily intended to do. But the child could not sleep without her precious toy, so here I was, risking my mistress' wrath to retrieve it.

At the bottom of the staircase, I paused, gripping the door ajar and peering into the dark hallway. Finding it empty, I held my breath and scampered across the space, sliding quickly into the morning room.

From the far wall, the doll gazed innocently back at me. I scowled at her before snatching her up and hurrying back into the hallway.

"And who are you?" a voice boomed into the passageway.

I froze, the blood in my veins running cold. The voice had bellowed from behind me, a similar timbre to the master of the house, only deeper and lower.

"Miss Samuels," I said clearly, lifting my chin. I did not intend to be cowed by whoever stood behind me.

"Yes," the man said with irritation, stepping around me. His face fell into a sliver of moonlight that shone in the window, casting his strong features into sharp relief. "But *who* are you?"

With his familiar features, I immediately understood him to be the master's younger brother, one of the party expected for the festivities. His face was very like his brother's, although where his brother's hair had an autumn tint to it, his was dark, as were his eyes. His jaw was squarer, too, and his

build taller and broader. Nor did he sport a paunch like his brother. In fact, even through his coat, I could see his muscular build. He smelled of the countryside, of mud and earth and wind, and I wondered if he had only just arrived.

“Miss Samuels?” he prompted, frowning at me in a manner that dragged his heavy brows down over his eyes.

A sharp retort hovered on my tongue. I knew what he meant. He was enquiring after my position in the household. As a gentleman’s daughter, it still smarted to admit I was now in service. But my father had died a year ago, leaving me an inheritance of bills and debts. I could not afford to lose this position. Penniless women like me were ten to the dozen.

“I am the governess,” I said, following his dark eyes as they roamed across my face.

His examination of me drew on and I shifted from one foot to the other, desperate to be away.

“Little Anne forgot her doll, and I was retrieving it.” I lifted the doll into the space between us and his gaze dropped to the well-loved toy. “I beg your pardon, Sir.” I curtsied. “I will return it to her now.”

He nodded curtly, and for a fleeting moment, he seemed to lean a little closer and inhale the air around me. I stiffened. But it seemed such a silly notion that I dismissed it as he stepped to one side. With relief, I darted towards the back stairs.

“Mr. Edwards,” he said, and I paused momentarily, my hand on the frigid door handle. “My name is Mr. Edwards.”

Chapter 2

The children settled quickly, their faces turning peaceful and their tiny chests rising and falling with steady breaths. I tucked the blankets around them and blew out the candles before retiring to my little room next door. Sleep did not come to me so easily, though. Despite our location high in the attic of the great house, noises from the party below seeped through the floorboards and echoed in the chimneys. I could hear every muffled word, every peel of laughter.

I sat in bed, my book spread across my knees, but I hardly turned a page. It seemed I must suffer a cruel punishment for my father's sins, shut out from society and banished to the nursery where I would most likely remain forever.

As a child, I'd dreamt of something better than life as a governess. Of sailing across oceans, of exploring new lands, of setting forth on adventures. Of course, such dreams had been ridiculous. A gentle woman like me could never visit the Americas or the African continent. But at the very least, I'd expected trips to London. Even the Ton was now out of my reach, for while the lord and lady of the house had spent the season enjoying the delights of the capital, the children and I had remained in the country.

I sighed and closed my book, staring out of the window at the moon, almost full and ghostly white. I didn't have a clock in my sparsely furnished room, but I guessed it was long past midnight.

The revellers could sleep long into the morning. I, however, would be up at the crack of dawn with the children.

I sighed, flopping down on the bed and lifting the solid pillow over my head. I had hoped the visiting party would provide a little entertainment to break the endless drudgery of my days. If I was honest, I'd even hoped upon hope that the mistress would invite me to dine one evening, or perhaps let me join the ladies in the drawing room after dinner. But no, I remained doomed to my monotony up here in the rafters.

Below, doors slammed, and feet stumbled along floorboards. Finally, the party had come to an end. I listened as hushed voices faded, footsteps died away, and at last, the house lay in silence.

With a sigh of relief, I removed the pillow from my head and stared up at the ceiling.

Suddenly, a loud crack sounded from outside, followed by a thump and muffled cries.

I scurried from the bed to the window, hoping to catch sight of whatever scandal was surely occurring down in the gardens below. Perhaps it was not becoming of a young lady, but I was bitterly starved for entertainment and curiosity had always been my weakness.

But peering out of the window rewarded me with nothing but a view of the silver-lit garden, dark shadows criss-crossing the lawn and the trees bristling in the night air.

Had I imagined that sound?

I leaned my forehead upon the glass pane and stared out at the night, at the black hills of the countryside rolling endlessly towards the horizon, at the dense forest that lay to the west and the parkland beyond the gardens.

A movement below the window made me jump, a flash of fur at the very edge of my vision. My gaze snapped down, but there was nothing there.

Yet, there had been. I was sure of it. A fox? A deer? But so close to the house?

My heart racing in my chest, I swallowed, scanning the shrubs below my window. All was still. All was quiet.

I reached for the curtain, about to draw it and close out the night, when a glint in the darkness caught my attention. Two glints, I realised with a jolt. Twin pinpoints of reflected moonlight. Eyes.

A pair of eyes

A pair of eyes that met mine.

Chapter 3

A cold wind rattled through the nursery as the children leaned over the table, sketching from their imaginations. William bit his tongue between his teeth and I smiled. We had spent the morning reading, and a break had been in order after all that exertion. This activity had held William's complete attention for the past half an hour, and I leaned in now to inspect his drawing. Usually, he produced endless sketches of soldiers; soldiers marching, soldiers riding, soldiers fighting. Today, his sketch caught my breath in my throat. My hand rose to cover my mouth.

A wolf. The boy had drawn a wolf, large against a circular moon, its teeth pointed, its mouth snarling, its eyes murderous.

I'd told myself that what I'd seen last night had been a dream, or nothing more than a tired mind imagining things.

But there was something about that drawing that had my heart faltering as it had last night.

"A wolf? Where have you seen this, William?" I asked, my voice quaking.

"I dreamed it," he said casually. I snatched up the papers and opened an arithmetic book.

"Time for your sums," I told them, sliding the child's picture into the sleeve of my dress. They groaned, but I tapped my finger on the page and soon their heads bowed over their work.

The icy breeze sent a shiver down my spine, and I turned away to wrestle with the window. As I cursed under my breath at my failure to secure it shut, the door opened.

I swung around, surprised at the intrusion. Lady Edwards never visited the nursery, and neither did her husband. Four o'clock sharp was the time I delivered the children, spick and span, to the morning room to visit their parents and only on the occasions they were not otherwise engaged.

But the intruder was not the children's mother or their father, but their uncle. I gaped at him for a full minute, my mouth surely hanging open. Remembering my manners, I bobbed a curtsy.

“Are you lost, sir? The library is—”

“No.” He frowned at me in that way he had yesterday, a frown that would surely have made a weaker woman shake in her boots. “I am where I intend to be.”

“The nursery, sir?”

“The nursery. I wish to see my niece and nephew.”

William and Anne peered up at him, as surprised as I was.

“Certainly.” I strolled towards my prodigies, signalling with my hands for them to rise. “Children—”

He lifted his own palm to stop me, and I halted. “Please, do not disturb them. They are busy with their lessons.”

The children looked at me with wide eyes of terror, clearly unsure of what they should do. Their uncle was certainly a large and domineering man, with a voice that boomed in the confines of the nursery.

I placed my palm on William's shoulder in reassurance.

“They are practising their multiplications.”

The man bent his head to look at their work. “You are teaching them both arithmetic?”

“Of course.”

His gaze snapped up to meet mine. In the daylight, his irises were lighter, the colour of walnuts. “Anne has no need for multiplication. You should teach her French and music.”

“I am teaching her those, too. But I would strongly disagree with you, sir—”

“You would, would you?” he said gruffly. My cheeks warmed. I had spoken out of turn and at once I feared what the man would have to say to his sister-in-law about it. “Please, do enlighten me.”

I should have stopped there, apologised for my rudeness and deferred to his better judgement. But a challenge hung in his eyes and I could not resist it.

“Miss Edwards,” I motioned to his little niece, “will one day run a household of her own. If she stands any hope of not being cheated and hoodwinked by every tradesman and servant she encounters, she had better have a good grasp of her mathematics.”

“Hmmm,” he chewed that over, “I grant you, perhaps that is true.” A little smile twitched on my lips. “But I would argue, Miss Samuels, that if Miss Edwards hopes to find herself a husband one day, she would be better off steering clear of mathematics and the natural sciences. A man hardly finds such knowledge attractive in a woman.” He stared at me, and I understood the unspoken insult in those words.

Chapter 4

I was too restless to return to my room after I left the children with their parents that afternoon, so, grabbing my cloak, I headed for the door. Autumn blustered through the gardens, sweeping brittle leaves over the earth and swaying branches overhead. I hoped it would blow away the strange feelings that had settled over me. Bring some colour to my cheeks and some sense to my thoughts.

Tugging the spencer around my neck and tying my bonnet firmly on my head, I braced my face against the weather. The wind was too strong to choose the open paths, so I ducked through the pleasure garden instead, past the bare stems of rose bushes that had long since dropped their petals, and further into the dense part of the garden where the rhododendron bushes grew tall, blocking the view of the house. I quickly realised it wasn't what I wanted. I needed open views, space, and freedom. Instead, the groaning branches packed tightly around the path left me feeling dizzy and trapped. But at least here, the weather could not batter me.

Picking up my heels, I weaved between the russet leaves, the ground slippery in places where thick moss carpeted the stone path. Twice I slipped, the soles on my old boots long since worn, but I kept walking. I had but an hour and I intended to tire myself out, fearful my unease would keep me awake that night if I were not bone-tired.

As I walked, the peculiar sensation of being followed shivered through my body. I whipped my head around, searching the path behind me, listening for the telltale boots on the ground. But the path lay empty, howling wind the only sound.

I batted away my paranoia and continued on. The light faded, and it was as if a heavy shadow fell over me. I peered over my shoulder again and again.

By now, my hands trembled, and my breath came in frightened little pants.

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the ridiculous sensation. It would not budge. It had wedged itself deep in my bones. My body was convinced that someone pursued me.

The path weaved this way and that and suddenly I understood I had stumbled into the abandoned part of the garden. Overgrown and untended. I had not trodden this path before and fear settled in my stomach. Was I lost? Would I find my way out?

I stopped still, then spun around once again, although I knew there was no one there, that it was all in my mind. I threw back my head and looked up at the wild heavens.

“You are not a silly girl,” I said to no one else but the wind. “Nor a foolish one. Get a grip of yourself.”

With renewed determination, I marched onwards.

Darkness rapidly chased away the daylight. I hurried on. If I did not find my way back to the house within minutes, I would be late to collect the children and my scolding would be severe. The hedgerow curved to the right, and I followed its length, turning a corner and colliding straight into the foreboding figure of Mr. Edwards.

To my shame, I screamed, jumping backwards in alarm. Mr. Edwards, however, seemed unperturbed. Almost as if he had been expecting me.

He blocked the entire path, solid and substantial, heat radiating from his presence.

“Miss Samuels,” he said.

“I... I... I...” I spun around, stumbling back the way I’d come. My manners seemed to abandon me whenever I faced this man and yet, in that moment, I could not bring myself to care.

“Miss Samuels,” he called after me, his voice roaring over the wind. “If you hope to find your way back to the house, you are walking in the wrong direction.”

I halted. My hand rested over my thumping heart. I blew out a long puff of air. “You know the way?” I asked, not

turning around to look at him.

“I do. I can show you.”

What could I do? Fumble onwards in the hope I’d stumble across the right path? Or trust this gentleman to lead me? I was not completely naïve to the dangers young men presented to a friendless woman like me. Yet, I had no desire to linger out here in the dark alone. I would take my chances.

Slowly, I nodded and came to stand next to him. How funny. I stood saved, rescued, no longer lost, yet that fear still slid through my veins, that chill of a sensation not lifting.

Mr. Edwards spoke not a word to me as he led the way through the garden, pausing several times to ensure I followed him. His boots fell heavy on the path—he was a solid man—and I knew he could not have followed me without my knowledge. And yet... and yet...

When we broke out of the bushes and onto the lawn, I picked up the skirt of my dress and scampered across the wind-flattened grass. I was late, and my reputation could not withstand tales of a tryst with a gentleman. The house had been abuzz with the Davenport scandal all weekend long—a whole family stained by one daughter’s foolish actions. I did not want to fall prey to the gossips’ tongues. I would have to pray no one had seen us.

“Thank you,” I murmured over my shoulder, racing for the house.

Chapter 5

I went about my evening duties as usual that night, bathing the children and putting them to bed, all the while stealing glances at the other servants, wondering if rumours about me already circulated. Nothing appeared untoward. Nothing but the strange sensation that all was not as it should be. Those glinting eyes, William's picture, that walk in the garden. All this left me uncomfortable and I could not shift the sensation, no matter how many times I told myself it was all imaginary.

As I feared, I could not sleep. Night brought with it a tumult that rattled the tiles, swooped down the chimney, and lashed the windows with rain. I tossed and turned in my cold little bed, wishing I could be downstairs in the bright firelight, surrounded by company and warmth as I rode out the storm with the family and their guests. Instead, I was alone. Completely alone. Since my father had died, I had no one. Not one friend or relative that would look beyond my penniless state and take me in. I had been ostracised, cast out from the loving arms of society and friendship.

The storm only grew louder as the night drew on, and my thoughts grew darker. But I would not succumb to them.

Throwing off the bedsheets, I grabbed a shawl and tiptoed out into the hallway. Thunder boomed overhead, shaking the floorboards, and rain battered the roof so fiercely I thought any moment it would flood the house. Swallowing down my fear, I made my way down the staircase, feeling my way in the dark. I would head for the library, light a candle and lose myself in a good book. Distraction was key. It was no use lying awake, staring at the ceiling all night.

The house groaned and creaked as the storm continued its assault and I made my way along the row of closed doors to the one I knew to be the library. I was allowed in here rarely, on occasions when the mistress was feeling generous, or when I needed to locate a particular volume for the children. Yet of anywhere in the house, it was the place I most longed to be.

Lined on all sides by row upon row of books, with long glass doors that looked out onto the gardens and deep leather chairs in the centre, it reminded me of home. My father had taught me to read, to write, and, yes, to multiply with speed and ease. He had had a love of learning and saw no reason why a daughter should not be as well educated as a son.

I rubbed my head. He had been a good man. Just not altogether sensible. I expect he thought he would live for much longer than he had. Have time to sort his finances and find me a good husband.

The door squeaked as I opened it, then snapped shut with a bang as I slipped inside.

Bright lightning flashed beyond the glass doors, water streaming down the panes and blurring the night. I took a step forward, mesmerised by the fearsome beauty of it. The trees in the gardens bent near double by the force of the wind. Another bolt lit up the library and thunder rumbled through the house.

Books rested invitingly on the shelves around me, and yet it was the window that drew me closer. Closer. Closer.

A third flash of light pierced the jet black night.

I screamed, thunder muffling my cry as my whole body snapped, rigid with terror.

Beyond the windowpane, staring straight back at me, stood a creature. A monster. It possessed the form of a wolf, but it stood on its hind legs like a man and its shoulders and arms were packed solid with muscle and strength. Thick grey fur covered its body and pointed canines protruded from its jaw. A tail dragged behind it on the floor and sharp claws flashed at the extremes of its hands. It was a creature formed of pure nightmare. And yet there was something human about it, too. In the way it stood, in the angle of its face, in the intelligence of its eyes. Eyes that glinted in the flash of light from above. Eyes I had seen before.

I stumbled backward, the monster disappearing as the light vanished.

When it flashed again, there it was. Pressed up against the window, leering at me, its tongue lolling from its mouth as it assessed me hungrily.

My whole body shook, but I could not move, frozen by its stare in that flash of light.

The lightning ceased. The window fell dark. But I heard the crash of powerful fists upon the glass and I spun and fled, streaking out into the hallway and up the stairs as fast as my legs could carry me. In my room, I dove straight for the bed, flinging myself under the blankets and shivering there uncontrollably.

I lay there all night, waiting, waiting for the creature to find me, straining to hear paws padding on the floorboards.

But all I heard was the raging storm until finally dawn crept in my window.

Chapter 6

The next morning, the children were restless, refusing to settle into their studies and bickering with one another. After several days of adhering to the best of their behaviour on account of the guests, the strain had gotten to them. Or perhaps my own flitting mood was affecting them. I could not sit still, moving from the chair to the window, from the window to the bookshelf, and back to the chair. My body ached with tiredness and when I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror, my face was pale.

By the afternoon, the children's unruly chatter drew the housekeeper to the nursery with instructions from their mother. Another walk was in order. Activity that would blow away the cobwebs and let the children expend their energy.

I tried not to shake at the prospect. Stepping outside, placing myself in the path of that monster, was the last thing I desired in all the world. Yet, I had no choice. Orders were orders. Her ladyship could not be disobeyed.

Wrapping the children in sufficient layers, we set off across the parkland, meaning to climb the nearest hill and, once out of sight of the house, a tree or two.

The fresh air did all three of us good. Soon, the children laughed and chased each other, and out here in the wide expanse, I could convince myself last night's encounter had been some strange hallucination.

I was tired and bored, and in such circumstances perhaps it was not peculiar that my mind had conjured such a creation.

There were no such things as lycanthropes. I had simply read too many novels. These creatures did not exist except in folklore and books.

I smiled and chased after the children.

On our way back to the house, we heard the thud of horses' hooves and turned to find the children's father and uncle riding towards us. They drew up alongside us and

immediately little William whined about tired legs, though he had been running only moments ago. With a tut of his tongue, his father scooped him up to perch in front of him on his horse.

“Make him gallop, Papa,” the little boy insisted, bouncing on the saddle, and soon they were cantering towards the house.

The little girl peered up at her uncle, towering above us on his great horse.

“Would you like to ride too, Anne?” he asked. She shook her head, but looked longingly at the animal.

“Perhaps she could have a ride by herself,” I ventured, suspecting the child found her uncle intimidating. His demeanour was always so fierce. I had not seen the man smile or utter a light word once.

The man nodded and, swinging his leg over the horse’s back, jumped down from the stirrup, landing deftly on the ground beside me. In the next moment, he swung the child up onto the horse. She shrieked in alarm, but once in the saddle, grinned widely and stroked the coarse mane.

I smiled at the man beside me, an expression he did not return. Instead, he examined my face, his gaze lingering on my mouth, as he took hold of the reins and commanded the horse forward.

“You look rather pale today, Miss Samuels. Are you unwell?”

I wondered why he cared enough to ask.

“Perfectly well. Just a little tired.”

“The children keep you busy.”

I laughed. “Yes, but I did not sleep soundly last night.”

His body seemed to stiffen beside me, and I looked up at his face. His gaze, however, was now fixed ahead.

“The storm?” he asked.

“Hmmm,” I said, rubbing at my forehead, that strange unease, the vision of the monster returning. I shivered. “And

the strangest of dreams.” I don’t know why I told him. Perhaps it was because I had no one else to confide in and I feared these wild thoughts would drive me mad. Perhaps I was already falling into insanity. Was I not long for the asylum?

“Ahhhh, dreams,” he mumbled. “They have unsettled you.” His arm brushed ever so briefly against mine as we walked and, despite the layers of my clothes, the friction drew an awareness across my skin.

“Yes, this one, it seemed... it seemed so real.”

“And what do you believe of dreams, Miss Samuels?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You have studied the sciences—”

“A little, but—”

“Then what do you think these dreams mean?”

That I am losing my mind, I thought. But I was too frightened to utter those words. The man would not want a mad woman caring for his young nephew and niece.

When I didn’t answer, I sensed him turn his head to look at me. His presence beside me was cowering, his scent that same smell of wilderness I had noticed the first time we met. I peered at his hand, tightly coiled around the rein. His arms bulged against the constraints of his coat. He was a strong man. Powerful. It radiated from every inch of his body.

“I think dreams reveal our inner desires,” he said, “our inner passions. Things we try to keep hidden from others, from ourselves even.”

His words heated my blood, making my cheeks burn.

I shook my head. “No, this was... this was... frightening.” My voice faltered slightly as fear rattled through my body.

He growled, and the noise had me snapping my gaze to his face. His eyes were still locked resolutely on the horse.

At that moment, the little girl called down to me.

“Sarah, I’m cold.” The wind whipped across the lawn and the horse shook its head.

Mr. Edwards drew his hand down the animal’s long nose, shushing it slightly with a murmur of his lips. “I will return her to the house. Do not tarry, Miss Samuels. You should not be out in the grounds once darkness falls.”

Thick grey clouds blanketed the sky, the sun well hidden, its light filtered away.

The man tightened his grip on the reins and set off at pace across the lawn, faster than I could follow. I watched him go, noting the way the horse seemed small next to him, observing the way the muscles worked in his thick thighs and broad shoulders.

Halfway across the lawn, he turned and caught me gaping.

“Miss Samuels,” he called to me again, his voice carrying on the wind. “Stay inside after dark.”

Chapter 7

By the time I reached my bed that night, the wind had died away, and the night was eerily quiet. Earlier in the evening, the Lord and Lady had trundled away with their guests in carriages to some distant ball. It was not until the early hours of the morning that they returned. The sounds of hooves and chatter woke me from a fitful sleep and I tossed and turned, listening to creaks of tired feet heading to bed. Soon, silence crept through the house again. I had the feeling that only I lay awake, unhappy thoughts marching through my mind.

Why had Mr. Edwards demanded I return before dark? Had he himself not travelled in the dark with the other guests to the ball tonight?

I had never feared the dark, even as a child. Although now I feared something lurked in the shadows. That creature. That creature which seemed more and more real the longer I lay alone in my bed. I had not imagined it. It had been there, beyond the window, watching me. I remembered the scraping of its claws on the glass, and as if my very thoughts had conjured it forth, I heard a menacing howl from the garden.

My body froze in terror, and for a full minute, I could not move a muscle.

Then it came again. Louder this time, piercing through the night.

The monster. It was there. Again. I was sure of it.

But then I heard another sound. A muffled cry of alarm, a plea for help.

Despite my fear, I dashed to the window, throwing back the curtain to peer outside. The moon shone full now, a perfect disc in the heavens, and the whole garden lay bathed in its silvery light. Immediately, my eyes landed on a figure lying prone on the lawn below my window.

Mr. Edwards!

With an effort, the man lifted himself up onto his hands and knees, his head lolling forwards, only to collapse back down.

Was he hurt? Injured?

Had the monster attacked him? Would it return to finish the job?

I gasped, dashing into the hallway to snatch at an old sword that hung on the wall. Then, before I knew what I was about, my feet hurried me out of my room, down the back stairs, and out into the frigid night, the cold air assaulting my face and bare arms.

“Mr. Edwards!” I called, stumbling across the uneven ground, the sword heavy in my hand. He lay unmoving, and I stifled a sob, half convinced the man had died in the time it had taken me to descend the stairs. “Mr. Edwards!”

But no, he was breathing, his shoulders falling and rising.

With another heave, he lifted himself once again onto his knees and twisted his head, peering through the night to where I stood but a pace away.

“Miss Samuels,” he growled, his mouth twisting into a sinister smile.

Stay in after dark.

I hugged my free arm around me in terror as his body jerked and jolted, his limbs bending in awkward directions, his very bones snapping. His frame swelled in size, the clothes he wore ripping and falling in tatters to the grass. Hair sprouted from his skin and his face elongated, his teeth enlarging, claws springing from his hands.

Fear gripped my throat with icy fingers and no scream would come, no plea for help. I stood frozen to the spot; the sword falling from my fingers, unable to drag my widened eyes away, as the monster that had once been Mr. Edwards clambered to its feet before me.

“I warned you to stay in after dark,” he said, his voice, like those dark eyes, unaltered. He lurched towards me and that

familiar scent of the wilderness filled my nostrils, stronger and more violent than before. “You did not heed my warning.” A long tongue dragged from the creature’s mouth and wrapped along his lips as his gaze weaved down my shivering form.

“I did not mean to...” I began, stumbling away from the monster that towered before me.

But he snatched my wrist, his sharp claws grazing my skin.

“Oh, but I think you did.” I shook my head, attempting to tug my arm from his hold. He held me firm and yanked me towards him. “I think you are as intrigued by me, Miss Samuels, as I am by you.”

“Intrigued?” My voice quivered, my gaze swallowed by those dark eyes.

He leaned closer, inhaling my scent, a little moan escaping his throat as he did.

“Hmmm, as soon as my wolf laid eyes on you, as soon as he smelled you, he recognised you for what you are, Miss Samuels, our mate, and now that you’ve come willingly into our arms, we intend to make you ours.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I mumbled.

“I think you do,” he purred, and a wickedness that had my stomach fluttering radiated from those eyes.

“You intend to devour me?” My voice croaked. He would feast on my flesh, slurp up my blood, gnaw on my bones.

Why had I not heeded his warning? Why had I come out alone into the night? I had seen this monster the night before. I knew what lurked in the darkness.

“I do. But not in the way I suspect you imagine.” With a growl, he scooped me up into his brawny arms. He pressed me against his muscular chest so firmly I could feel the beat of his heart beneath his ribs, violent and possessing. And then he sped with me through the night, racing at unnatural speed through the gardens and over the windswept parkland to the darkness of the woods where the trees stood like spindly spectres.

Once under the canopy, his pace slowed as he weaved in and out of the tree trunks, carrying me deeper and deeper into the wood. The darkness grew more and more impenetrable, the moon lost behind the branches that tangled above our heads.

I struggled in his arms, twisting and yanking against his grip. He only held me tighter, growling as I struggled.

“Lay still, little one,” he told me.

I turned my face away from his monstrous countenance. I did not want to look at those sharp teeth and think about the pain I’d endure when he sunk them into my flesh.

But there was another reason I kept my gaze locked away. I did not want to see the resemblance to the man in the monster’s face. I did not want to be entranced by those eyes, eyes that seemed to possess a power I could not fully comprehend.

Finally, we reached what looked like the mouth of a cave and he dropped me to my feet, panting as he stood before me.

I flinched away, but he followed, crooking a claw beneath my chin, the tip pinching my skin. He lifted my face, forcing me to meet his eyes.

“What are you?” I whispered, my curiosity untamable even before what was surely my inevitable death.

“I think you know.”

“A... a... werewolf?” I could hardly bring myself to say the word. It seemed like madness. Would I wake any moment to find myself in my bed, drenched in sweat, the bedclothes tangled?

But, no, this was no dream. The cold of the night stung my skin, the wind tickled my face and his scent drowned my senses.

“I am.” He held my chin in place, stroking the soft skin beneath my jaw with the pad of his thumb.

“How?”

“I have travelled to the strangest of places, Miss Samuels,” he said. “Prerogative of a younger son who must make his own fortune in this world.” My eyes were now locked with his and I noticed that richness in the colour of his irises again, the specks of gold. “I was bitten.”

He drew back the ripped remains of his shirt to reveal a deep scar on the side of his ribbed abdomen, the gnash of teeth marks clear in its curving shape. A strange desire to reach out and touch it overtook me. I could not resist.

He flinched as my cold fingertips brushed the fine fur of his stomach and, as I traced the damaged tissue, I felt the muscles beneath his skin ripple. He purred softly and his arm curled around my waist, dragging me against his body.

I braced myself. I closed my eyes.

“Do not be afraid, Miss Samuels,” he whispered, his mouth close to my ear, his warm breath tickling my skin in a way that had an unexpected sigh issue from my lips.

“I am not. I will meet my maker with my head held high.”

“Your maker?” He chuckled, leaning away from me, and at once, something sinful in me wished for that pressure of his hard body to return. “I intend to take you to heaven tonight, Miss Samuels, but not in that manner.”

“What can you mean?” He was toying with me. I had never liked to feel stupid, to be the one who did not understand the joke. And he was joking with me, I was sure.

“I am going to ruin you, Miss Samuels, utterly and thoroughly. I am going to make you mine.”

And then his hungry lips met my neck, sucking on my pulse as his hand slid up my body, over the curve of my hip and my waist and up to my breast. He squeezed, the thin material of my nightdress providing little obstruction. To my shame, my nipple stiffened and the pad of his thumb discovered the tight nub with obvious delight.

“Please, sir,” I begged, my body betraying me as shivers of desire danced up and down my spine. I had never been touched like this, never held, never kissed. In my dreams, the

faceless men that stole away my innocence had always been the quiet, scholarly sort. Nothing like the creature that now took what he wanted with little care. And yet he did so with dizzying and irresistible passion.

I was not a silly girl, I reminded myself as those sharp fangs of his scraped down my neck to the cleavage of my nightgown. If he took me here in the woods, if anyone was to learn of this, it would ruin me, and snatch the few choices I had in life cruelly away. I would be cast out onto the street with no hope of any honourable family hiring me, not even to empty their chamber pots.

“Sir!” I pleaded again, as he tugged at the ribbon securing the neckline of my gown. “They will throw me out.”

He halted and lifted his head from my chest, his face hovering in front of mine. “Who?”

“Lord and Lady Edwards, and I need this employment.”

He snorted in annoyance. “Miss Samuels, you fail to understand me. You are mine now. My mate. I intend to make you my wife as well, but while a wife can be snatched away, a mate cannot.”

I gasped. “Your wife? Sir!”

“My wife, Miss Samuels.” His fingers untied and loosened the ribbon, and his hand slipped under the material. My eyes fluttered shut as he cupped my breast and tweaked my nipple. But I bit my lip, determined not to lose the thread of this conversation. The monster was mad. It was clear.

“Your family would never approve of such a match.”

“It matters little what anyone thinks, least of all my family. I have made my own fortune, as you know. I am free to make my own choices in life. And my wolf has chosen you.”

“But I...” I pushed firmly against his broad chest, forcing some distance between us. The cold air knocked some sense back into my mind. “I have not chosen you. You have not even asked me, sir.” He growled at me, his eyes fading a shade darker, and the glare made me shiver with fear. Still, I held my ground.

“You want choice?” he asked.

I nodded resolutely.

“You want freedom?”

I hesitated.

“Your current arrangement allows you very little. I think you long to be free.”

Seduced by his words, I swayed towards him. How did he know? It was as if he'd peered inside my soul to see all my longing laid bare.

“I do,” I conceded. My skin itched for his touch again.

“I am free, Sarah.” My name sounded soft in his monstrous mouth. “Be mine and you will be just as free. I will take you any and every place you long to go. I will show you every corner of this mortal world. I will reveal the secrets that lurk in the shadows. Secrets like me.” He growled and held out his hand to me.

I stared down at the large paw with its deadly claws.

This was insanity, pure insanity. The promises on this creature's lips could prove false. He could bed me and leave me. He could rip me to shreds. Yet something in those deep eyes told me he was true. He had revealed himself to me in all his monstrous glory, had trusted me with this secret. And now I would trust him.

I took his hand and pulled the wolf towards me. He snatched me up greedily and his mouth was on mine in a heartbeat, kissing me in a way that only confirmed all he promised. At first, my inexperience left me faltering, but soon I was kissing the monster back, my fingers tangling in the fur of his chest, tugging on it, wanting more.

His hands gripped the neck of my gown and, in one fierce rip, he tore it from my body, leaving me naked before him.

He tipped back his head, and I whined at the loss of his mouth.

“Let me see you, little one,” he commanded, his gaze trailing from my face down to my chest, where it grew hungrier still as he soaked in my breasts, then further down over my ribs and my belly to the tuft of hair at the apex of my legs. “Beautiful,” he murmured with such reverence I knew this was no false flattery. “Let me taste my mate,” he said, still eyeing my groin.

“Taste me?” I muttered in alarm.

“Yes, little one.” He fell to all fours, his nose hovering at the top of my thighs. He nudged them open with his paws and I gasped as he dove his muzzle between my legs, his wet tongue slurping through my folds. The contact was electric, every nerve there singing in pleasure, and I could do nothing but grip the two large, furry ears on the top of his head.

“So sweet,” he moaned, his lips vibrating against my sensitive nub, making me buck with bliss. “Ahhh, you like that?”

I had no opportunity to respond because his attention was now focused on that point. He licked at it, circled it with his long tongue with slow and languid movements one moment, quick delicious flicks the next. My legs shook, and I collapsed over him, but he held me upright with his strong body, unrelenting in his ministrations. An intense feeling buzzed deep in my core, building and building until it swept straight through my body, to the very tips of my fingers and toes, causing me to moan and buck and jolt with every fresh wave.

He only gripped my thighs harder and thrust his long tongue right up inside my entrance, brushing against a point that had me crying out. My response seemed to urge him onward, and he prodded at that same spot until I wept and begged him, for what I did not know.

He withdrew his tongue and rocked back on his haunches. The fur around his muzzle was slick with my juices, and I blushed at the thought of what he’d just done.

“Ahh, little one, you taste divine.”

He had just sparked my body into life, caused ecstasy to blast right through every part of me. And yet, now, I had a thirst for more. I wanted more of him, more of his touch, and his taste. And I wanted him to show me more too. I knew there was more.

As if reading my mind, he clambered to his feet, licking my juices from his lips and untying the laces on his breeches.

I stifled a cry, a mixture of lust and alarm, but I could not draw my eyes away as he yanked his trousers down and the rod that lay between his legs sprung free.

I had never seen the most intimate part of a man before, and certainly not stiff and erect like this. But even so, I was certain this was the cock of a monster and not a man. It stood the length and thickness of my forearm. The head was bulbous in shape and silvery liquid trailed from the tip toward the forest floor. Thick veins ran down its length and at the base rested an engorged mass of pulsing tissue...

“My knot.”

I gulped. I knew the mechanics of the coupling between a man and a woman, in theory anyway, but I could not possibly see how that thing would ever fit inside me. He would surely split me in two.

“Sir,” I trembled, backing away.

He growled, a low, rumbling warning, and the noise had me halting. “Do not step away from me, little one, not when my hard cock is aching and drooling to be inside the sweetness of your cunt.”

His coarse words should have shocked me. Instead, they sent another shiver of desire down my spine. This beast understood me better than myself.

He pitched towards me, grasping my buttocks in his hands and lifting me against him. The hot outline of his cock dug into my stomach as he stumbled with me, pressing me against the trunk of a tree, his mouth on my neck. I wrapped my arms around him.

An ache throbbed between my legs and, despite my concerns, I longed to have him inside me.

“I will not be gentle, little one. I cannot be. It is not in my nature. But you will take it. You will take everything I give you.”

I bit my lip and nodded my head, grinding my hips against him.

“Yes,” he purred, “Yes. I knew you would be a greedy little thing. Knew my mate would need my cock.”

He shifted me upward, and the head of his desire nudged my entrance.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Little one,” he whispered, nuzzling at one of my breasts. “Relax for me.”

I sighed as his tongue laved my creased nipple, then gasped as he thrust his hard rod up inside me.

My head fell backwards against the rough bark of the tree and I winced in pain, biting back a whimper.

He was inside me now, but although he stretched me wide, I realised he had barely breached me. Grunting, he pushed further, my walls parting to take more and more of him, deeper and deeper inside me, until I was sure he was bucking up against my very womb.

“Hmmm, you feel so good, little mate, so good. Better than I ever imagined. I am going to enjoy fucking you, rutting you, filling your belly with my pups.”

I moaned as, finally, the knot at the base of his cock knocked against my entrance and he could proceed no further. His body rested flush against mine, the pelt on his chest tickling my sensitive breasts.

He paused inside me, breathing in my scent, and I smoothed my hands through the fur on his shoulders, loving how soft it felt on my fingers.

“Such a good little mate,” he moaned. “Going to take good care of me and my pups.” As the last word faded on his lips, he pulled his hips away from me sharply, his cock dragging through my channel, massaging that spot he’d found earlier and making me moan. Then he thrust back inside me, so violently he shook the tree and crushed the breath from my lungs. He repeated the action again and again, aided by the wetness his earlier attention had wrung from my quim. The friction drove me wild.

I clung to his fur, yanking at it, my body writhing and squirming in his grasp as I felt that surge of ecstasy building in me.

It wasn’t meant to be this way, was it? Not for a woman, anyway. We all knew men were driven by their carnal desires, but women? Coupling was something our sex had to endure, an unpleasantness to satisfy our husbands and bless us with children.

It wasn’t meant to feel this earth-shatteringly good. Especially to a woman like me who, until tonight, had never been touched. But, then again, I wondered how many husbands had pressed their mouths to their wives’ most intimate parts, and had driven pleasure from them with their tongues, before having them against a tree.

He had well and truly primed me for this rutting and I crashed over the precipice again, crying out with ecstasy as my body went limp and boneless.

It didn’t deter the beast. He kept right on bucking into me, his hands tight vices on my backside, his teeth nipping at my shoulder.

“Look how well you take me, little mate. You like it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I panted, unable to deny it. He was a monster, perhaps born of Hell itself, rutting me against a tree, and I did not care, could not care, for anything but the divine sensations dancing around my body. He had promised to take me to heaven, and it was a promise he had kept.

He growled, his thrusts faltering, the movement of his hips stuttering, his face relaxing. “Going to fill you up now, little one, going to pump you full of my seed.” With a low groan, he sunk deep inside me, far deeper than before. Warmth flooded inside me and my entrance stretched to accommodate the bulb at the base of his cock.

“Too much!” I yelped, tears stinging my eyes as he drove his knot inside me, barging his way in until I felt the bulge lodge behind the bone of my pelvis.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, little one. I have mated you, good and proper. I have filled your belly with my pups.” His hand fell to my stomach and pressed down against the still hard rod of his cock inside me. Stars popped into my vision, pleasure stealing away all knowledge of pain. More warm liquid pulsed inside me and he sighed with satisfaction.

The mad noise of our coupling died away and only our rasped breaths and the rustling of dead leaves filled my ears. Warm sweat coated my body. The wolf dragged his tongue up my neck, tasting the salt on my skin. Then, with his cock still locked inside me, he carried me into the darkness of the cave.

Chapter 8

The first fingers of dawn woke me much later, and I found myself on a hard earth floor, the damp ceiling of the cave above my head and the sleeping body of Mr. Edwards beside me.

There was no sign of the werewolf who had ravished me in the night and once again, I wondered if I possessed a maligned brain that had imagined the whole thing. But the sting and stickiness between my legs told me I had not. And then there was that scar on the man's side, the jagged lines of it white in the morning light.

I realised that, like me, he was completely naked, and, despite all we had done last night, I blushed, rolling from under his arm that lay over my waist.

He stirred, murmuring, and dragged me to him. Burying his face in my hair, he nuzzled against my neck. "Little mate."

"Mr. Edwards?" I asked, wondering whether the man could possibly live up to the words uttered by the creature last night.

"Sarah, my little love," he murmured, and his stiff cock nudged against my backside. It was perhaps not as large as the monster's had been, but I could still determine that it was impressive in both length and girth.

I twisted around to face him and met those entrancing eyes. Eyes, I realised, I was beginning to love. "What happens now?" I said, with a hint of apprehension in my heart. I had been let down by the only other man I had loved and trusted in my life, my father. Had I fallen into that same trap for a second time?

Mr. Edwards nipped at the lobe of my ear, his hand resting on my stomach, his fingers stroking the tender skin there. "After I have made love to you again, my little mate, I will take you home, where I intend to keep you in my bed day and

night until I am satisfied our mating has been successful and my child grows in your belly.”

“And marriage?” I asked. He had promised. I wanted to know if he was a man of his word.

“I will marry you today, Miss Samuels, if the rector will allow it.”

I laughed. “I doubt he will.” Then my face fell, and I sighed.

“What?” he asked me.

“There will be gossip. Gossip, perhaps even to rival that surrounding the Davenport affair.”

“I have never cared what people thought of me.”

“No,” I said, running my fingers through his dark locks. “I suppose I have not either. But to be shut out of society...”

He took my hand in his and kissed my pulse point. “We will have adventures enough. We will not miss society.”

A shiver of excitement skated down my spine. “The wolf?” I asked.

“Do not fear, little one, he is always near. He will have you again. But right now it is my turn.” He kissed my mouth and my body turned pliant in his grip. I parted my thighs, expecting him to thrust his way inside, but he dove down my body, burrowing his mouth between my folds.

“Sir!” I squealed in delight as his tongue caused electricity to spiral through my core.

“Randolf,” he said. “My name is Randolf.”

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Wild Berry Wine

by

Layla Fae

Intro

In the flickering fire of the torches, he looked impossible: his legs covered with fur, his hooves. And between his legs...

The fire surged, intensified by a gust of wind or magic, and I could see him clearly in its golden light. He was so much more than I had bargained for.

He was real.

Afraid to speak, afraid to even breathe, I tore my eyes away from his cock and looked up, not even flinching at the sight of long, sharp horns, gracefully curving up and away from his head. Pan grinned at me with wild, savage joy.

“I will fill you with music.”

Chapter 1

The Summer Solstice

“I will NOT fuck a stranger,” I said for the umpteenth time that day.

Dora didn't even look at me. She climbed our upward path with the sure-footed grace of a goat, and I clambered after her, mind preoccupied.

“I will not,” I said, sounding surly even to my own ears.

Dora stopped and turned to me. Her hands went to her slender, jean-clad hips, and I took a step back, sending a flurry of small stones down the path.

“You will shut up and enjoy the view, Jane,” she said in her best governess voice, the one she used on her perpetually misbehaving nephews. “And after you've looked around, you will thank me for bringing you here.” When I kept looking up at her, Dora pointed her finger at me. “Now!”

“All right, all right!”

As I looked around, I had to admit the view was splendid. Long grasses swayed in the wind, tired bees buzzed among the wild flowers, and the tree line further up the slope looked dark in the blazing sunset.

And up ahead, on each side of the path, glistening like colorful jewels...

“No way! Lanterns? So it's here! We made it!”

Dora cleared her throat meaningfully, and I gave her a jostling hug.

“Thank you for bringing me to your witchy pagan thing so I can finally get Edward the Wanker out of my system,” I said.

She patted me on the arm, her eyes glinting.

“Please reconsider your stance on fucking strangers. After the sun sets, this place will brim with magic—real magic. It makes sex so much better. I am going to spend the Revel lying naked on the grass with my legs over my head and one beast or another plowing between them.”

“Wait, Dora. Magic? Beast? Is that some code for party drugs or...”

But she kept walking up the path, beckoning me to follow. I frowned at the sun glimmering over the horizon. It had almost entirely set.

A shiver ran through me and I walked faster to catch up with Dora, who was already by the trees, entering the forest between two purple lanterns. I hadn’t counted on this secret party in the woods being so eerie—so frightening.

The tree canopies over the path were so thick, they stole most of the remaining light. In the gloom, lanterns hung from the branches glowed even brighter: purple, pink, red, yellow, green... They looked like real fire, and I almost stopped to admire the effect. But Dora walked on, so I hurried after her.

We walked deeper into the wood, and the air cooled. No one walked the path apart from us, and I felt decidedly strange. She had promised me a big, exclusive party with an international crowd.

Yet, here we were. Alone.

“Dora? Are we too early?”

“Hm? Ah, no. It’s just that the Revel is not technically here. It’s far away, in a pocket reality. It appears every Summer Solstice, then disappears for the rest of the year. There are many entrances, each in a different part of the world. We are the only ones to come in through this path, so we’re alone.”

“Aha.”

We walked on in silence, and I mulled over Dora’s answer. Ahead, distant music sounded, uneven and distorted as if slipping in and out of range.

“Dora?”

“Yes?”

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?”

She gave me an amused look and stopped under a red lantern, which bathed her pixie blond hair in a brilliant, unearthly glow.

“Jane, you always say, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ So, you’ll see. And believe. And besides, I had to get you to come somehow. You and Eddy broke up almost a year ago, and I’m done watching you pine after him. It’s time to move on, and there’s nothing like the Revel to get you out of a funk.”

She turned away and walked on.

“Huh?”

I looked back to discover the lanterns behind us were no longer lit. The path faded into murky shadow. I shivered and followed Dora. Paying closer attention, I noticed that each lantern I passed under snuffed out as soon as I reached the next.

It felt so creepy, I sped up to keep Dora in sight. She skipped ahead singing, happily gamboling into the eerie unknown. I had no choice but to follow, which was probably her goal. Or maybe she was just so excited to be back to this exclusive party in the woods that apparently included... magic.

The path curved downward, heading into a deep pool of shadow, the lanterns ahead our only points of light.

And as we walked, the sounds of the Revel grew louder. Drumming so deep and piercing it penetrated through my ribs into my chest and stayed there, urging my heart to pound. Violins played shrill, eerie notes, fast and soul-rending.

Flutes, harps, tinkling bells... Sounding closer and then further, closer and further, like a radio searching for the right signal.

Soon, we were close enough for the cacophony of distorted sounds to become music. It raced wild through my veins,

filling them with liquid heat.

We turned a corner and the path widened, opening into an enormous clearing. Fires burned, too many to count. Some looked ordinary, but others burned blue, green, and pink.

Between the fires, a multitude of revelers, their shadows big and small, danced, jumped, sang or... writhed right there on the grass, their bodies entangled, bare skin glistening in the colorful firelight.

I had entered the Revel.

Chapter 2

Seduction

Dora turned to me, cheeks flushed, face brilliant with joy. I blinked, thinking she must have done something in the seconds we had been apart, maybe applied more makeup... But no. She was radiant with excitement.

“This place runs on magic,” she said over the music, cupping my ear with her hands. Her breath tingled over my earlobe, sensuous and intimate. I jerked back, startled. Dora laughed. “Look around!”

I did, bearing in mind what she’d said: magic.

The fires burned, sending jets of colorful sparks high into the sky. The music reverberated in my ribcage, my body thrumming to its rhythm. I could feel the balmy air of high summer night, the warmth radiating from the nearest fire... and a tingling in my hands.

I raised up my palms. They sparkled with a silvery powder. Somewhere by my ear, I heard a giggle, but when I whipped my head toward it, there was nothing.

The same silver glitter rained down on top of Dora’s head. She was laughing and twirling in a circle.

“Fairies!” she gasped, laughing brighter.

My eyes were adjusting to the light, and I could now see more than just writhing, dancing, skulking shadows. Right in front of me, three women gestured and laughed, their bodies glittering silver and pink, shoulders and stomachs bare, long hair braided, and large backpacks on their backs.

I looked closer. Not backpacks. Rather... capes?

One unfolded her wings and beat them up and down, up and down, laboriously rising in the air. The surrounding fires lowered and then rose higher, fanned by her wings.

I turned to Dora to ask her if she saw what I was seeing, but Dora was gone. I was alone among the strange creatures.

Which were very much real. I was here, looking at them with my own eyes. And my eyes had never deceived me.

Hugging my arms, I peered into the moaning crowd. I felt lost and desperately wished for Dora to explain this to me.

I peered into the crowds in search of her lithe shape, but no luck.

There were, however, plenty of other shapes to watch.

The bulky figure of a beast caught my eye. At least twice my height, he towered over others, his huge, curved horns jutting black and sharp into the night sky. Two women and a man danced around him, their bodies rubbing against his massive thighs, their hands reaching for his hands, up his stomach, down to his groin.

The creature threw back his head, revealing an unhuman, bull-like face, and bellowed so loud I could feel it from the tips of my ears down to my toes.

“That’s a minotaur,” a warm, delicious voice said right by my ear.

I jumped and turned so fast I lost my balance. Two big, warm hands landed on my waist and arm, steadying me.

“Uh... thanks...” I said.

And stared.

I looked up into a man’s face. His sharp jaw covered by a brown beard, short with a curling tip. His full lips curved in an amused, self-confident smile. Above his aquiline nose, his eyes glittered, dark with mischief.

His hair fell past his ears, wavy, insouciant, attractive.

He was shirtless. I blushed when I caught myself staring at his nipple. The dark areola was perfectly round and surrounded by soft, curly hair. Panicking speechless, I looked up to his face. His smile had morphed into a full-on grin. White teeth, too sharp, flashed in the flickering light.

His hands were on me. The one lingering at my waist rubbed circles against my bare skin right under the edge of my top.

“Uh... Hi?” I said.

Great going, Jane, a spiteful voice resounded in my mind. Ask the gorgeous man hi. And while you're at it, drool a bit more, it's such a sex magnet.

“Hi,” he said, eyes holding me in an hypnotic trap that made it impossible to look away. As if he had put a spell on me. And he might have, I reminded myself. This place was magical.

That thought sobered me.

I stepped back from our intimate, entirely too delicious embrace. He didn't make to follow, but didn't leave, either. One eyebrow cocked, his eyes slid languidly up and down my body. He gave me a dark, twinkling look, and I knew he liked what he saw.

“You're a virgin,” he pronounced.

At his totally inappropriate comment, I choked on my saliva. During my subsequent coughing fit, the stranger came close again and gave a few blows between my shoulder blades. I raised my hand for him to stop, and he did, but his hand remained on my back, its weight warm and comforting.

Once I could finally breathe again, I straightened and turned to him, which put my face inches from his throat. I took a moment to appreciate his prominent Adam's apple and stepped back.

“That is terribly untrue,” I said, pointing my finger. My voice sounded weak from all the coughing. “And also rude.”

He grinned wider, completely unabashed, and I did not melt, not even just a tiny bit.

“I meant a Revel virgin,” he clarified. “It's your first time here, isn't it? And you need a guide.”

“I came with a friend,” I said and looked around, but Dora was nowhere in sight. “But I can't see her, so... um. Guess

you're right. And to be honest, I'm struggling to process it all. I mean, I just saw a woman FLY. With her WINGS. And that... that guy practically having sex with three people over there... No, not three, there are five now. Damn. You said that was a minotaur?"

His grin widened, and he took my elbow in a firm grip. The pads of his fingers pressed into my flesh with just enough authority to make me feel every sizzling point of contact.

"They are astoundingly virile and always seek new thrills. Come, now. If it's your first time, we must do it properly," he said with a wink. "I'll give you the tour."

"Fine," I agreed, breathless. "But, um. Shouldn't we... like, know each other's names? If I fall into a fire, I have to know whom to call."

He gave me a hard look, so startling on his face, which looked made for mischief.

"I will never let you fall into a fire. At least," he said, the smile again playing at the corners of his mouth, "not a literal one. A fire of passion is an entirely different matter. I'm Pan."

"Jane. And thank you."

"Follow me, Jane."

With one last twinkling look, Pan pulled me into the smoky multitude of bodies. We passed by the fires, some of them hot, some freezing cold, some shimmering like piles of precious gems.

The Revel.

There were creatures with horns, wings, tails—or branches growing from their torsos where arms would be. I spotted a shirtless guy wearing a jack-o'-lantern on his head. Except, when he turned, I realized it *was* his head. The hole of his mouth was moving, and fire burned within.

"That's Jack," Pan explained, tugging me closer to himself. "If he crosses paths with Satan, there's going to be blood. Or pumpkin juice. I'm not sure what's running through his veins. It might be interesting, but now that you are by my side, I'd

rather skip their fight. I find you much worthier of my attention.”

He let go of my elbow and caught my hand. Before I could reply, we were off again, weaving our way between the other revelers.

Further down, the clearing opened wide and formed a maze. Tall hedges divided the paths, lit with torches burning ordinary fire.

We entered the maze and sound from the crowd dimmed, although the music remained eerie with the plaintive call of the fiddle, the wild drumbeat urging my blood to flow faster.

“This portion of the Revel looks different every year,” Pan explained, walking so close to my side that our arms brushed. Goosebumps trailed me from being so close to this strong, male, clean-smelling, stranger. “Last year, it was a lake with waterfalls. Oh, you should have seen the mermaids! I spent the entire night watching them.”

He looked down at my face and stopped, leaning closer. His lips brushed my earlobe, and I couldn’t help but sigh.

His voice lowered. “But then again, if you had been here with me, I wouldn’t have noticed the mermaids.”

The hedge muffled sounds of conversation and giggling from a parallel path. We passed a couple deep in conversation—who looked entirely normal until I noticed his silver tail curled around the woman’s bum.

We walked and walked. Music came from everywhere at once, beating to our every step. Laughter and moans grew louder and softer in turn, making me think about the entirely too few parties I’d attended.

I’m a wallflower.

I felt my palms sweat with the heat, the walking, and the impossibility of everything around us. But Pan’s hold on my hand never wavered. He kept my hand in his large, warm grip and led me with absolute certainty.

His manner alone—the way he telegraphed his interest in me without a smidge of self-consciousness or uncertainty—frankly melted my panties.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. We’d reached a quieter spot by a headily scented rosebush that glittered with gold and pink lights. “Because I am.”

From the way he said it—looking right at my lips, his eyes hooded, mouth spread in a luxurious grin—I knew he wasn’t talking about food.

My heart beat faster, and my thoughts scattered. I had no suave response to that. All I wanted to say was: Yes, take me right now.

Even my shock at this place being real, at magic being real, was wearing off—replaced by a much more potent fluttering of my heart and other bits of my anatomy.

It was the first party where a man took interest in me right from the start—or at all—and I was going to say yes.

But something nagged at me. Almost everyone we had passed on our way looked unhuman. And Pan—apart from his obvious beauty and too-sharp teeth—looked very ordinary. Despite his mythical name.

“I might be,” I finally said. “I mean, I am. Yes, I am hungry. But... I wonder what dish is being offered.”

I looked at him, panicked that my nervous rambling would scare him off, but Pan chuckled quietly, his seductive smolder still in place.

“I was not talking about food,” I clarified and buried my face in my hands.

Pan caught my wrists in a gentle grip and pulled my hands away, baring my blush.

“Look, Jane.”

It was still him, and yet, it wasn’t.

In the flickering torch fire, he looked impossible: his legs covered with fur, his feet, hooves. And between his legs...

The fire surged, intensified by a gust of wind or magic, and I could see him clearly in its light. He was so much more than what I had bargained for.

He was real.

Afraid to speak, afraid to even breathe, I tore my eyes away from his cock and looked up, not even flinching at the sight of long, sharp horns gracefully curving up and away from his head. Pan grinned at me with wild, savage joy.

“I will fill you with music.”

Chapter 3

Pan's Flute

“Music...? Oh. Oh, damn.”

He gave me no time to react. One blink and he was on me, his large hands gentle on my skin, the touch of his fingers teased, fluttering like moth wings.

He ran his hands up my inner arms, caressing the insides of my elbows. My flesh broke out in goosebumps. A shiver that was at once cold and searing swam through me.

And then he was leaning over me, pushing my head back and to the side, baring my neck.

A frisson of alarm flew through me but it dissipated as soon as I felt his hot, wet mouth right over my pulse. He kissed my neck, hummed deeply in appreciation, and the world quieted but for my gasps, the deep rumble of his chest, and the blood rushing in my ears.

“Sing for me,” he said, lips moving against my skin, his voice vibrating through my ribcage.

And it felt as if someone unshackled my throat and poured molten honey down it. I gulped for breath and moaned.

The sound was unlike anything I had ever produced. It sounded unearthly, vulnerable... Fucking sexy.

Pan answered, a deep guttural groan coming from him. The sound entered me, not just through my ears, but through the pores of my skin, filling me with dark, sticky warmth.

I shivered, on the cusp of orgasm and he hadn't so much as seen my clit.

“What... How...” I gasped as his mouth traveled up, and he nibbled on my earlobe, humming again a deep, masculine note that weakened my legs. I leaned against the hedge, barely noticing the prickly branches.

“I’m Pan,” he whispered into my ear, and I moaned in answer as his rough, insistent voice twisted its way into my lower belly and filled it with thrumming heat. “The god of music and fertility, at your service.”

His lips curved against my ear, and I could only half understand what he was saying.

I focused on relieving the pressure that was becoming unbearable. I raised my leg to hook it around his hip, and Pan grabbed it under my knee and pulled me closer.

I pressed myself to him fully now, my breasts squished against his bare chest, my calf rubbing against his coarse fur, my hands gripping his muscular, hard shoulders for dear life. The closeness made me giddy.

He was a stranger.

I rubbed myself against his bare cock, shameless, but it wasn’t enough. My panties were in the way, and I needed him against my bare skin. I needed to be filled with those magical vibrations and sounds.

Pan’s lips pressed to my ear again, and he sang a low song in a language I could not understand. The sounds bloomed within me like flowers painted in fire, and I was close, so close...

His hand dove between our bodies and found my clit. One small touch of his clever fingers, and I was exploding, my head lolling back, my heaving body gripped in his powerful arms, pressed so close he had to feel my every twitch and spasm, hear my every sound.

When I floated down from the heights of pleasure, I shivered in his embrace, my throat hoarse. I had screamed, I realized. In a public space, where everyone could hear me, where anyone could have seen me, I had allowed a man to give me the best fucking orgasm of my life.

And he barely even touched me.

“Jane?”

“Mhm?”

“Look at me.”

I did, stepping away to look up, my entire face aflame. His eyes were dark, his face drawn in an intense, focused look. Feral. The horns curving around his skull sent sparks into the night sky.

“I will fuck you.”

I would have fallen down, boneless as I was after the climax, and now completely overwhelmed by a new onslaught of arousal. But he held me fast, his hands on my hips, and when my knees buckled, he swept me into a bridal carry.

As he carried me, his dark, focused eyes never left my face. I raised my trembling hand to his beard and stroked the bristly hair.

I didn't know where he was taking me, nor did I care. I was falling, and he was holding me, and it was enough.

But... I cared about one thing.

“Pan...” I started, combing my fingers through his beard. His lids grew heavy, and he looked like a cat ready to purr. I combed some more.

“Hm?”

It came out almost like a purr.

“I was wondering... About your... your...”

Pan's eyes flashed open, filled with mischief.

“Yes, Jane? Tell me.”

“Oh, damn. You know what I'm talking about. Your COCK, Pan. It looks... um. I'm not sure. I'd like to study it, if you don't mind.”

He laughed, and his laughter seeped into my skin, a warm gust of amusement and joy and arousal, and it felt like I was purring myself, light and vibrating.

I brimmed with life, even my nails and hair awakening, capable of sensation.

I felt my hair sway with Pan's every step. It tingled pleasantly, but once he stopped laughing, the sensation faded.

"You can study my cock all you want, nymph. But first things first."

He put me down but kept his body close, his hands on my hips and sliding toward my ass. We were under the canopy of an enormous tree, faint silver lights strung between the branches high above us.

Pan pushed me until my back hit the tree trunk. Me, trapped between a tree and a hot-blooded satyr.

He caught my chin and turned my face right then left, as if appraising me. His thumb brushed my lower lip, and I lost myself in his dark, glittering eyes...

He leaned lower, my eyes captive to his mischievous look, and his hands gripped my buttocks, squeezing them possessively.

Pan kissed me.

His tongue, hot and insistent, nudged my lips apart. I held on to his shoulders, gripping his warm skin as our tongues danced. He tasted me, plunging deeper. He drank in my moans and gasps. And when he made a low growl in the back of his throat, I felt it down to the soles of my feet.

He tore my panties off and soon his fingers were swirling in my wet heat, spreading wetness over my entrance, flicking my clit. I hooked my leg over his furry hip again and reached between our tightly pressed bodies for his cock.

As I gripped it, it twitched in my hand, sending a flurry of sound into the air and into me. The air vibrated, like a sound just outside hearing range. While I couldn't hear it, it felt like music.

I ran my fingers along his shaft, exploring the hard, round protrusions and indentations, and sounds that were not sounds escaped, strumming my nerve endings.

Pan kissed my neck and I broke out in goosebumps, trying to imagine his cock by touch alone—and that brief glance

before—but it escaped comprehension.

Pan's dick sat heavy in my palm. I tried to wrap my fingers fully around it but couldn't. It had girth and its uneven texture, the bumps and hollows, made it seem even wider.

But as Pan rubbed mercilessly tight, precise circles over my clit, I lost all interest in analyzing his cock.

I wanted it inside me.

He lifted my leg higher, opening me wider, and pulled back. As he looked at my face, then down at my hand on his cock, his expression morphed into something wild and primal. His hair became an unruly mane, his beard grew scraggly, his eyes filled with mad passion.

He bared his teeth in a feral grin.

I let go of his cock and he pushed it inside me, watching with primal intensity as it slid deeper, inch by inch by inch.

I gasped and panted, because his girth stretched me so wide, filling my pussy to the brim with his hard, throbbing presence. It was a tight fit, much too tight, and I would have stopped him but for the mind-blowing pleasure.

The protrusions marking his length dragged and pushed against sensitive nerve endings I didn't even know I had.

When Pan bottomed out inside me, our hips pressed together, his cock touched all the right points, and my pussy clenched and undulated around him with the unbearable pressure building inside me.

Pan pulled back and thrust hard, packing me too full, and I cried out, my head lolling back. My pussy gripped him harder, and pleasure bloomed so intense I could mistake it for pain. The only difference being... I never wanted this to end.

He thrust again with a snarl, and my body filled with music. The impossible sounds burst within me like a glowing crescendo, a fire burned in my lower belly and radiated to my chest, legs, and hands.

With every thrust, the song built, a symphony of reverberating sensations, and I flew among the stars. The

sweet music burned, each note driving me higher. My body lightened, its function reduced to receiving pleasure.

When the first orgasm rolled through me, my screams complemented the song as it built, rising stronger and more powerful. Pan's hands gripped my ass, his skin sliding against my skin, his voice pure lust.

"Not yet. You will take it all," he said, or sang, or roared. Sound had turned into touch, touch had turned into melody. "You will take all my music and sing for me. Your voice is so beautiful."

And I tumbled down into a well of sound, my body an instrument. Pan filled me with the drumbeat of his thrusts. The slick, even rhythm of his cock slid in and out of me, and fire crackled inside.

Pan spread my ass cheeks wide, thrusting harder. The music swelled, and I pulsed around him. My cries and moans were overshadowed by the melody, wave after wave of ecstasy. I soared again, my body gold glitter carried by the winds into the night sky.

I was nothing, and yet, I was everything.

Pan thrust into me with one last musical groan and stilled. I felt each spasm of his thick cock as he emptied himself inside me, spurt after spurt. I collapsed in his arms, and he held me close, my cheek pressed to his neck, his pulse in sync with the drumbeat of my heart.

When my breath slowed, he stepped away. As his dick slid out of my pussy, leaving it relaxed and thrumming with the aftershocks, his cum slid down my thighs. A few drops landed on the grass and glistened there, dark as ink.

I couldn't stare at it, though, because Pan gripped my hair and pulled my head back to look at his face. It was wild, his sharp teeth bared in a mad grin, fiery sparkles playing in his smoky eyes.

"Run, little nymph. And when I catch you, you will serve me as I wish."

In one heartbeat, the lovely, warm afterglow zinged into excitement. Pan leaned closer and licked my skin in one long stroke of his tongue, tasting the sweat running down my neck. He let go of my hair and stepped away, his eyes glowing like embers.

“Now.”

The urge to flee overrode everything else. My excitement tasted like fear, cold and metallic on my tongue, electrifying my limbs with strength.

I ran.

Pan’s laughter behind me rang wild and unhinged, and I couldn’t help it—I screamed. As true panic gripped me, I sped through the forest, instinctively choosing my path between the lantern-lit trees.

There was no one else in sight. I was alone, fleeing through magical woods, my mythical lover on my heels, his laughter haunting my every step.

I stumbled and regained my balance with a gasp, heart hammering in my chest. Running faster, my skin poured with cold sweat. The trees grew denser until I reentered the maze. I ran down a narrow path, impossibly tall hedges crowding me from both sides.

The maze was well lit by glowing orbs hovering high overhead, spilling gold light onto the grass beneath my feet.

Pan’s laughter followed me, now further away, and I slowed with relief. Stepping quietly now, I reached a fork and chose the right path, moving further from Pan’s voice.

I turned the corner, and a set of warm arms closed around me, lifting me up in the air, his hot breath on my neck.

“Got you, little nymph,” he whispered, and I shuddered, an uncanny mixture of fear and arousal heightening all sensation, turning each touch and sound into tingling pleasure.

Steps sounded behind me. I turned my head to see the newcomer. It was Pan, grinning with triumph.

Who was holding me?

Chapter 4

Flute Duet

“Nice catch,” Pan said, coming closer and putting his hands in my hair. He leaned in and kissed me, plunging his tongue deep into my confused mouth. I returned his kiss, letting go of my spinning thoughts.

When Pan broke away, I looked up at the stranger who still held me, his hands under my ass, kneading my flesh. He was... Pan. Pan, down to the closest detail: the wild tangle of his beard, the fiery flash in his mischievous eyes.

“My name’s Nomios,” he said, leaning in to lick my neck. “I am Pan, too.”

He kissed my neck, both hands under my ass, fingers splayed wide. He massaged my cheeks ever nearer my asshole. Pan stepped closer and lowered the strap of my dress, exposing my breast. He started playing with my nipple, pinching and kneading it thoroughly.

“Wha... How?” I managed between gasps.

“I can multiply,” Pan explained, nuzzling into my neck from behind. “And I’ll be fucking you with two cocks. Objections?”

Nomios chose this moment to grind his erection against my core while Pan flicked my nipple, sending a jolt of pleasure through my clit.

“Oh! Fuck no. No objections.”

“Excellent,” Pan said with laughter in his voice. He swept the dress off me in one impatient motion, tugging it free when it snagged on my elbow. “Did you get it?”

Nomios handed him a large glass bottle. Something glittered inside.

“A special Revel lube,” Pan explained, giving me a slap on the ass. I squeaked. “You will sit on Nomios’ face, little nymph, and you will suck his cock.”

Nomios let me go and lay down in the grass, his body sprawled luxuriously, everything on display. Muscular arms, broad chest, powerful legs covered with thick fur.

A drop of dark pre-cum glistening on his hard, engorged dick.

I looked back at Pan, and it gave me vertigo. Both satyrs looked exactly the same. Both cocks were standing rigid and ready, their heads pointing at me.

Pan frowned, seeing my wide-eyed wonder, and swung his arm so fast it blurred. My ass stung with the slap, the sound of flesh hitting flesh loud in the muffled quiet of the maze.

“Now, Jane,” he said, his voice cold with warning.

Electrified with a primal need to obey, I scrambled to Nomios and plonked down on his face, leaning closer to his shaft. A pair of strong hands gripped my hips and repositioned me, and soon, a warm tongue was licking slowly between my folds.

And as I watched the satyr’s cock, my burning curiosity could finally be satisfied.

It was deep purple, almost black, with prominent dark veins running under its smooth skin. They pulsed, as did the protruding, perfectly round bumps, which felt so heavenly earlier, inside me.

The head wept inky pre-cum, glistening in the magical orb light. A strong, sweet smell wafted to my nose, tart too, and I took an experimental lick.

The satyr pre-cum tasted like berries with a stronger bite. I frowned, lapping at it with small licks of my tongue, and Nomios’ cock twitched, more pre-cum glistening on its head.

He licked me thoroughly, slowly, and I grew impatient now I’d studied the mystery of the cock up close. I wiggled

my hips, pushing myself at his mouth, but another firm pair of hands clamped down.

Both satyrs held me in place, and I could not move.

With a moan of disappointment, I focused on Nomios' cock and took the head in my mouth, hoping that if I sped up, he would, too.

My reward was a deep, vibrating groan which penetrated through my flesh and thrummed against my nerve endings with mind-blowing intensity. I almost came from that sound alone. Then something slick and hot touched my asshole, gently massaging. I clenched, trying to move my hips, but there was no give to the hands holding me.

I sucked the satyr's cock, running my tongue under the edges of his head and pushing gently into the seam, gathering more delicious pre-cum into my mouth. The cock vibrated with a single, deep note which resounded inside me like a glowing light.

A hot, wet tongue thrust slowly into my pussy, and Nomios made another noise of pleasure which traveled straight to my G-spot, teasing it with golden tingles.

Pan lubed up my asshole, and I lost myself in the sensations. The taste of his cock, I still could not identify... until more pre-cum landed on my tongue. The dark, tart flavor was as familiar as a quiet summer evening filled with the sounds of cicadas, and I knew.

Wild berry wine.

Nomios licked my clit with tight, circular motions of his skillful tongue, and I shivered, gripping onto his furry thighs with shaking hands while taking his delicious cock as deep as I could, sucking every drop out of it.

Pan pushed a slick finger into my ass, and I clenched tight around it while Nomios sucked my clit more insistently. His cock gifted me another spurt of pre-cum, and music reverberated inside me as the satyr groaned his pleasure right against my clit.

I came with his cock deep in my mouth, my moans going straight into it, and Nomios tensed under me, his hips jerking. As I rode my orgasm, Pan buried his finger deep in my ass, my hips held still, and Nomios came in my mouth, flooding it with the impossible, wild taste.

I tried to swallow it all, but it overflowed my mouth and some of the decadent wine fell into his thick fur.

“Lick him clean,” Pan growled.

I released the satyr’s cock from my mouth and licked thoroughly along his shaft, running my tongue across every inch of him. Pan removed his finger and resumed massaging my asshole, now tight with the latest orgasm. I kept licking, and Nomios’ cock remained hard, despite his heavily productive orgasm.

“That’s the original Pan’s flute,” Pan said, his voice dark and delicious as Nomios hummed against my pussy entrance, licking me gently. “The musical instrument was named after my cock and looks nothing like it, though it produces a similar sound. Soon, we’ll play a flute duet.”

With that final word, he pushed his fingers into me again, now two. He stretched my asshole and I tried to shy away from the intrusion, but both satyrs held my hips in place. Nomios thrust his tongue into my pussy again, licking against my G-spot, and Pan fucked my ass with two fingers, plunging them deep.

Every time he pushed back in, it felt easier, and soon, I rocked my hips against his fingers to urge him faster. My ass lit with sensation, gaping to be filled and stretched. It felt like a second clit.

“How are you doing that?” I gasped, because I was definitely going to try this again someday.

Someday soon.

“It’s the lube,” Pan said, adding a third finger to the mix, and I shuddered at feeling too full again, relishing the stretch. “A Revel special. Makes everything more sensitive.”

He pulled out his fingers and pushed them in again, excruciatingly slow, and I felt every inch of his penetration, sliding against my walls with glorious bliss. He took them out slowly, and my asshole quivered to feel so empty.

“She’s ready.”

Nomios rolled me off, and I landed in the grass with a soft gasp. He turned to face me, and he grinned Pan’s grin, wild and promising dark, forbidden pleasures.

In a flash, Pan was behind me, sandwiching me between two satyrs, my legs intertwined with theirs, coarse fur scratching my bare skin. Nomios gripped my top leg and raised it, hooking my knee behind his hip.

I shivered as the cool night air touched my hot, sensitized flesh.

Pan reached over my shoulder to play with my nipple. His cock rested between my ass cheeks, hard and ready. He rubbed it against my asshole in a slow, sensuous rhythm.

Nomios rubbed his cock against me too, one of his bumps pressing against my clit, overloading me with sensation. My body was hot, stuck between two naked, furry males, but I wasn’t overheating. Most of the heat pooled between my legs, my pelvis a furnace, burning hotter by the minute.

“Please,” I begged, tangling my hand in Nomios’ wild mane. “Please,” I repeated, reaching behind me to stroke Pan’s cock.

“She begs,” Pan said, his voice hot on my neck.

“She wants to be fucked,” Nomios answered, white teeth flashing.

“She’s a wanton girl, asking for two fat cocks at once,” Pan laughed, slapping my ass. The heat inside me increased, everything tightening in painful knots. I moaned and pressed my ass further back to rub myself against Pan’s shaft, but Nomios held my thigh in his powerful grip.

I was stuck.

“Please, I will do anything,” I whined, looking into Nomios’ amused eyes.

“Yes, you will,” Pan whispered in my ear, and I shivered when his lips moved against my earlobe.

Nomios raised my leg higher, tilting my core towards himself, and pushed his cock inside my pussy. I moaned at the intrusion, wide and briefly uncomfortable against my swollen tissue. He pushed further in, as much as he could in this position. It wasn’t the deepest angle, but the sheer girth overwhelmed me.

Pan spread my ass cheeks and positioned himself at my entrance. Before I could prepare or get used to Nomios’s dick inside me, Pan pushed in. Despite the special lube, his fat head was too much for me—too big, too wide, too everything.

I cried out from the stretch, feeling suddenly breakable. Pan relentlessly penetrated my asshole inch by inch, and I could feel the flimsiness of the wall separating these two cocks inside me.

“You’re such a good girl,” Pan breathed in my ear, while Nomios caressed my hip with his large, warm hand. “Taking us both so well. I’m proud of you.”

All my worry disappeared and glowing warmth filled me. His praise unlocked something, or maybe I was adjusting to the double penetration, because a tight, focused pleasure pooled between my thighs.

“Very good girl,” Nomios said.

And he moved. With slow, unhurried thrusts, he fucked my pussy, and I could feel every inch of his cock sliding against that thin wall separating his cock from Pan’s. I moaned and pleaded, moving fast to the peak.

And then Pan moved, too. In the easy slickness of the magical lube, he thrust into my asshole, deeper and more powerful. Both satyrs found a rhythm, and trapped me between them, my body overflowing.

The music began soft, only gentle vibrations ringing through my core and ass, flutters of pleasure strumming my

nerves. But soon, it swelled, and where Pan's flute rang deep and powerful, stretching my asshole with the sound, filling it with full, round notes, Nomios' melody played faster, more playful.

I crashed into my first orgasm like a wave crashing against the shore, my body light as foam. The music grew louder, each slick thrust a powerful force conquering me from within, each groan of pleasure a vibration going straight to my nipples.

"You're so pretty when we're fucking you," Pan growled into my ear. "Such a pretty, dirty nymph."

He thrust hard and deep, twisting my nipple to pain and delight, and I screamed from the second orgasm, a harsh, tense explosion of bliss. I clenched, pulling both cocks deeper inside me, tightening around them.

Both satyrs panted and groaned now, moving faster. Their melody became a wild, disjointed crescendo, notes upon notes of primal passion, a barbaric tune tearing me from within.

I came once more, my entire body rising in flames that burned and burned and burned, hotter than the sun, filling me with the light and heat of pure, infinite energy.

Pan ground out my name and stilled deep inside my ass, while Nomios thrust three more times, fast and focused, and he, too, came deep inside my cunt. We stilled, a tangle of sweaty bodies, weightless and fully satiated.

I didn't fall asleep—more like blacked out from pure sensory overload.

When I woke up naked, sticky and sore, I was back on the mountain trail we had climbed earlier. Dora lay in the grass by my side, covered head to toe in what looked to be dried, magical cum.

It sparkled in the sun.

I woke her. We found our clothes lying in a pile under a bush and dressed in silence, both dazed at what had just happened and sorrowful it ended so soon.

Chapter 5

Wild Berry Wine

Two months later, I wandered through the downtown. Edward the Wanker, my ex from before the Revel, wanted to get back together.

I told him no with no hesitation. I didn't even have to think about it.

After the Revel, the thought of having sex with an ordinary man was utterly dreary. Pan had spoiled me and given me expectations so high, no one but him could meet them.

Ever.

I walked down a cute little alley off a busy street and pondered my situation. It looked like until the next Revel, my sex life would be a desert.

I could only have satisfying sex once a year.

A pub caught my eye. It was called Satyr's Den, and on the glass door leading inside, someone painted a lewd scene. In it, a woman panted in ecstasy, her legs wrapped around a satyr's waist. Vines covered their naughty bits.

The pub was perfect because, frankly, I needed a drink.

I entered, and the smell hit me with a wave of sappy recollection. Wild berries. I sniffed, my pussy clenching at the memories that refused to fade. Then I saw Pan's face, grinning with that unhinged, passionate smile, leaning over me possessively.

I blinked. The memory bled into reality, the image of Pan from my recollection fading while the real thing loomed before me.

He was here, hornless but unmistakable. Standing behind the bar.

“I hoped you’d find me, Jane,” he said, watching with that glint of amusement in his eye. “If you didn’t, I planned to appear on your doorstep and hoped not to startle you to death.”

“Well, why didn’t you?” I asked, my stomach full of butterflies.

“Most humans talk themselves into believing the Revel was just a dream. If you had, and I appeared in person, you might have gotten a shock.”

“Ah.”

I looked around, trying to think up a clever line, but my mind was blank, the butterflies spread around everywhere, their wings fluttering to the rhythm of my pulse.

“Would you like a drink?” Pan asked, his smile flashing. When I nodded, he asked with an innocent smile: “Wild berry wine?”

I made it to the bar with weak knees and sat down. It was still early, and there were no other patrons in the little pub.

“Yes, please. I want nothing more than... wild berry wine.”

Pan chuckled, his mischievous eyes now focused on my lips.

“Mhm. Let me tell you a secret. What we sell here is but a poor substitute. Wouldn’t you rather get the real stuff? Straight from the source?”

I gave a transfixed, breathless nod, and Pan grinned, his beard growing longer and more tangled, horns peeking out from his hair. He transformed into the Revel god.

“Follow me upstairs, little nymph. We’ll make some music.”

About Layla Fae

Layla Fae writes paranormal and fantasy romance with flavorful monsters. Check out her Monster Ever After series for short, steamy monster reads featuring all kinds of flavors, from pumpkin spice (JACK) to pistachio cream (ORC). Hungry for something more substantial? Read Layla Fae's DRACO: A Dragon Chef Romance, a novel full of banter, Slavic folklore, and a double-flavored dragon hero.

<https://laylafae.com/>

The Naga's Faerie Mate
A Step Between Realms Novella
by
Elizabeth Austin

Intro

The Naga's Faerie Mate is set in the A Step Between Realms universe but is a short story from the Northern Faerie Territories where the monstrous Nagas live. Nagas are deadly, cruel creatures hunted by the Orcs and Ogres. They are known for their appetites and desire to cross into the Human Realm to feast. This story contains brand new characters.

Content Advisory & Kinks: Mature language and sexual content. Violence & Murder. Sex with a Naga (Snake-like) monster-I hate snakes, but this is fun. Special Monster Equipment. Size Difference. Primal Play. Spanking as Playful Punishment. Double Penetration. Breeding.

Chapter 1

Niksha

When the King's messenger interrupted my fevered dream this morning of sinking my cocks between the legs of a nameless body, I was furious. I was about to see her face before I awoke to the pounding at my door. This creature appeared in my dreams many times without ever revealing her face. Her skin was smooth, scaleless, and her body differed from the Naga females. I longed to explore what my dreams created. I kept these mysterious dreams to myself; perhaps it was a gift from the goddess. Why, I would never know, but I'd happily accept.

I didn't bother rushing as I prepared for my summons. It would have infuriated my father to know that I ate my fill of fresh meat I had stored, before my leisurely walk to his cavern. Steam rose from the icy water as it crashed against the black sand. Despite the chunks of ice bobbing, the ground was hot against my feet and golden scales. I preferred traveling across the beach instead of through the tunnels in the mountains. Unlike most of my kind, warmth and sunshine made me feel alive. As the youngest son of the Naga King, I received odd looks, but no one questioned my habits. Apart from lowly hunters of the sea, our kind used the caves for all travel.

Only my father snarled and hissed at me for everything I did. He fucked my mother, a pretty black and gold snake, during the Great Mating Ball over thirty years ago. She was not allowed to speak a word against him. The Ball had a terrible misnomer. I'd heard in Fae society that they all dressed in their finest, danced, and courted females for the honor of mating during balls. A Naga ball included no such niceties instead ours celebrated beastly base nature and desires. The king kept my mother in a secluded chamber with his other breeders. They were his property, and he didn't share. His actions were wrong and went against all the teachings about our creator, the Great Mother Echidna. She was worshipped

and revered. Why wouldn't we treat her daughters with the same respect? Without mothers, we would not exist. *Maybe because of our cruelty toward mothers, our numbers were dwindling. The numbers didn't lie. We were dying out.*

We were a small kingdom, hated and hunted by others in the realm. When I was younger, I couldn't believe that we were monstrous enough for other monsters to hunt. I hated the Orcs, Ogres, and Fae. While the Fae never engaged in combat with us, they provided magic and knowledge to help the other beasts. They all thought they knew us, but they knew nothing. The Nagas they hunted and killed were our exiles and stripped of all their magic. From the other monster's brief encounters, our kind looked like crazed, slithering killers. That is what we wanted them all to believe.

Exiled meant you'd angered the king so much that he used the only magical object we possessed, the Serpent's Staff, to strip you of your legs, voice, and mind. The Staff was passed down from one king to the next. I had a feeling my brother, Ganna, would be the next recipient. The thought angered me, but I pushed it down as I made my way to the grand cavern, per my father's summons.

My thoughts continued to wander to the world outside of my own. The Fae believed they and the elves were the only magic-wielding creatures, but they weren't the only ones who possessed it. We didn't have a noble existence like the Fae, who supposedly coaxed nature's new seasons and protected the humans. Instead, we were told our purpose was to appease the mountain god and goddess, to keep our territory safe from the rest of the realm. Our mountain gods were the eldest creators. When they roamed the realm, they guarded the mountains and held court deep within. During those early times, nymphs and Fae ran free and mated with the goddesses' children, giving us our magic and appearance. Our ability to shift was a secret no one outside of the mountain knew.

I was in a genuinely foul mood, thinking about my father and what was to come of his legacy and our kingdom. Perhaps he wanted to remind me of the ball in a few days and how it was my duty to bring future generations into being. I hated the

idea of cold, faceless fucking. The invited males filled every female Naga in the Mating Ball with cum to breed. Only the most beautiful or highest-ranked females entered the dark, slippery pit. The females could only detect the male's body heat before the fucking began. This disgusting orgy was made to ensure our population's best bloodlines survived and thrived. However, fewer and fewer younglings were born. I was the only birth from that year's ball. To keep courtiers happy, they were invited to the ball, though it didn't prevent anyone from knowing which youngling belonged to anyone except the royal bloodline. Only those of royal blood have a rattle tail. The Ball occurred in the darkest, coldest den in the inner cave. Oils were thrown on the ground to add slickness and entice arousal since none taking part were fated mates.

Those who were truly goddess-blessed and mated, of which there were currently none, nor the lower class, were involved in The Ball. Commoners who were not invited could live their lives as they saw fit. I longed to be unimportant. I had just reached maturity. My second cock showed. It became strong and full of seed, and therefore I was ready to have younglings. My first ball was days away, and I dreaded it. Like any other creature in our realm, I wanted a mate. I didn't want to fuck strangers coldly in the dark; I wanted the warm sun to shine as I made love with my one true mate in the forest, or on a secluded shore of our beach. One day, I would pleasure her until she begged me to breed. As hard as I tried, I wasn't pure. I couldn't hide my darkest desires. Along with pleasure, I wanted to deliver a bite of pain to my mate. I've learned happiness is magnified after hardship. I believe pleasure would be heightened with a little pain. But that would be between us, in the dark, and only if she desired it after our sexual needs were sated during the mating frenzy. I wanted to build a cottage and a family. Not reside in the bitter cold of the caves. *But I also wanted to live, so I didn't tell a Naga soul about my dreams.*

I was already a disappointment to my father, finding his hunting parties senseless. Why go down into the Fae, Orc, or Ogre territories to terrorize their young? We had plenty to hunt and eat like the beastly grozhis that lived in herds, or flying

fowl, and fish from the sea. But he enjoyed going to the realm's borders in hopes of catching a human to feast upon, or a lost youngling. Last time they went after an Orc youngling, it ended in a massacre. The Orcs' fury led them out of their southern territory, marching up into our mountains with the aid and blessing of the Fae.

My father used this as an opportunity to rid himself of enemies. He sent the oldest of our kind and those with females he wanted to fuck out to greet the Orcs. After they'd killed my father's enemies, the Orcs were satisfied, not knowing that most of us were still hidden, watching behind the stones. Father threw a grand party that evening and celebrated with another mating ritual. It was his excuse to fuck the recently widowed. He was despicable.

His rule and the behavior of my kind disgusted me. I hated what my kind did, and I didn't want to imagine what I'd become without my thoughts or moral code. Because banishment by his Serpent Staff meant death, I stayed. Not because I wouldn't be able to survive on my own, but because it meant insanity. Becoming a crazed killer was the last thing I wanted, so I went along as much as I could with what my family and king asked of me.

I arrived at the king's den to be greeted by my brother's hissing tongue. It surprised me that there weren't any guards or soldiers waiting. Father's den was completely empty except for the two of us.

"You dumb fuck, you're late. The king hassss been sssspitting venom, waiting. Not that I care, but watch your back sssso he doesssn't ssstrike you down once he sssees you." Ganna laughed with a sinister undertone. He was a brute who relished pain. While we all had forked tongues, he split his deeper to ensure each *S* would draw out when he spoke—*dramatic asssshole*. The females enjoyed it. This giant red hooded Naga bragged about mating with two females at a time in his chambers. Two rode his cocks, and then he would use his tail to choke the one who displeased him. Their cunts fully gripped him, but he didn't bother to engage with their *hedyos*, the second opening that ensured a female's pleasure. Once he

tired of her gasps, he would send his rattling tail deep inside her throat like a third cock. Having his tail sucked brought greater heights to his orgasm, he said. And he knew better than to make any of their bellies grow with his young since they were lower class. He continuously scented them and tasted their blood to ensure they weren't fertile.

Once a poor, though pretty, red coral Naga made her way into his bed, hoping to breed his young to move up in our world. He nearly killed her. For her trickery, he had Father banish her into the wild. I didn't know what became of her, but I hoped the gods were kind. It was foolish, but she didn't deserve death and insanity.

“What is he seething about this time?” I groaned.

“The fact you dragged your feet and ssscales across the sssand to make him wait.” His black eyes slid to mine.

“I'm here now. Let's go.”

“Niksha,” my father appeared out of the darkness. “Because you kept them waiting, I've sent my other soldiers home since you obviously believed you didn't need them. You and Ganna check the trail. Rumors of a sweet berry scent are running through the caverns. Go and check. If it's a Fae male, they will be gone by now. If it's a female, bring her back for our meal. Put that great temper of yours to good use for your king.” He licked his two fangs with his forked, slender, black tongue.

“Delicioussss,” Ganna hissed.

I gave a tight nod before quickly turning to leave. I didn't want either of them seeing the disgust on my face or the plan that was forming in my mind. The idea of killing and feasting a hurt Fae was deplorable. But how far would I go to protect a stranger while endangering myself? I felt the gods were testing me, I only prayed I passed.

Tallulah

Damn it, I thought as I ran through the forest.

We'd always been told not to go through to the human realm. If you ever came across a tear in the realm's wall, you never knew when it would close. But, I had been having a good time with my friends. We were playing, drunk on Faerie wine. Stupidly, we took turns running in and out of the human realm. I think it was my third time through. *I don't even remember, to be honest.* We kept drinking, laughing, dancing, and running. Then it happened. The fire and jars of light that surrounded our little party were gone, and all I saw was more of the forest I'd been standing in. I'd trapped myself in the human realm.

I ran up and down the space around the tear, but nothing. I reached deep within to find my pitiful bit of magic and glamoured myself into human form in case I got caught. The pale teal skin, dark blue hair, and pointed ears would give me away on any day but Halloween. Unlike the older Fae, my generation knew more about the human world because of our foolish games and occasional interactions with humans nearby. In human years, I was around twenty-two. A decent age, but as a Faerie, I was not allowed to sit with the *grown-ups*, not considered old enough to be presented into Fae Society. That's how I ended up in this mess. My friends and I were too young to be at the mating ceremony for one of the Centaur princes. Centaurs were strange in how they shifted, so many more rules than us. I packed, and used the portal as my parents demanded, and then enjoyed the accidental freedom they gave by ignoring me once we arrived.

What I did was foolish, I further realized as I sobered up and saw the muted glow of the human sunrise. It seemed monotone compared to our realm. Thanks to my magic, I could use public trains and search out magical sites across the part of the world I landed in. After weeks of traveling and feeling for magic, I finally had good luck. I was near what the humans called a "Fairy Tree" in a beautiful field on the Emerald Isle. I'd heard tales from locals and felt the pull of home.

I ran as fast as I could until I saw a change in the landscape. The field turned into the woods. Then, as if I blinked, it was gone. There was a tiny hole of ocean on black

sand in the middle of the lush green forest. That was my way back home. Once back in the Faerie realm, I could find a portal and return to the palace. I wasn't a royal, but my parents were courtiers for King Zephyr. I'd be in trouble for sure, but I feared staying in this world more than my punishment from my parents. As I got closer, I felt a change in the weather. It was cold, but as soon as my feet hit the warm sand, I knew I was where I was supposed to be. It even smelled right. Different, but right. The scents of summer citrus and sunshine overwhelmed me in this strangely cold land. *Did I enter the King Kai's ocean kingdom?* I didn't recognize it, but at least I was in the magical realm.

I felt as if everything was going to be alright until I tripped over a large jagged rock in the sand and cut my leg. It hurt like a bitch, but my Fae blood would heal in a matter of minutes. Except as I tried to walk, nothing happened. I continued to bleed; the black sand wouldn't allow me to heal. It burned. The warmth that felt so nice a few moments ago was now like fire in my wound. There was no need to be brave. I let out a whine and made my way to the icy water. It seemed like a promising idea until I heard movement in the sand. When I looked around, there was nothing. It was just me.

But the sound grew faster and louder. Whatever it was, it was close and well-camouflaged. It wasn't until it was a few feet from me that I saw a massive red cobra racing across the sand. But it wasn't just a snake. It coiled in front of me, its body larger than mine. He had the face, arms, and chest of a Fae, but his waist continued into a thick-scaled belly that narrowed into a rattling tail. Skin and scales hooded his face like a cobra. Two fangs dropped from the top row of his teeth and dripped paralyzing venom. I knew that because as younglings we were warned against the vicious creatures and their delight in killing us.

Somehow, I had landed in Naga territory. No wonder I didn't recognize it; no one came up here. I was in the far north of the realm, weeks away from my Fae kingdom, and no idea where to find a fae-made portal. Now, all because of a drunken mistake, I was going to die. One foolish night was about to end my life. I didn't have magic strong enough to protect

myself. I threw up every sigil I knew for healing, speed, and protection. Yet with every step I took back, for some reason I didn't want to take my eyes off of him, he slithered closer. Then I gave up. Despite my wound, I ran. I don't know how many feet I made it away from him when I heard a loud crash, followed by a high scream and rip.

My curiosity got the better of me. I stopped, turned around, and came nose to nose with the most tantalizing-smelling creature. His golden eyes matched his scales. They blinked. I stood, mesmerized, as a black forked tongue lightly licked up my neck to my ear. I moaned with desire. Then I felt a small pinprick on my shoulder, and though I was awake, I couldn't move. The beautiful bastard bit me, wrapped his tail around my waist, and took off, leaving the carcass of the red Naga that tried to kill me. *Would my fate be the same in this Naga's grip?*

Chapter 2

Niksha

I slithered through the caves with Ganna, hating every moment. His incessant excitement about the Great Mating Ball infuriated me. He and some others from his brood were in a race to fuck and breed with as many females as possible. Ganna's red rings and hood around his face would show in his offspring. Others had distinct colors and patterns as well.

“We might not let the courtier males take part this year.” He seemed proud. “What have they done to help us?” He really believed those in the royal line were the most important. He failed to see how those he looked down on kept our kingdom alive.

“Do shut up and let's get this ridiculous task over with.” It wasn't until we exited into the sun and sand that I smelled it. The sweet berry scent of a Fae was clear, but this one was different. I flicked my tongue in the air, hoping to taste the tart berry scent further. Was that vanilla? I could imagine the juicy red fruit with floral hints coating my tongue. Hiding my arousal was difficult now as my cocks emerged from their slit and leaked thick, white fluid. My balls grew heavy, now visible under my scales. *Fuck*. I couldn't let Ganna know. He would hold whatever was on the beach against me, and was already in the mood to kill.

His head leaned up with his tongue out. His fangs dropped as he took a deep breath through his slitted nose. “Cool your anger, Niksha. I smell an injured Fae here. If I catch it first, I bet the king will let me enter the ball first and give me the chance to create the largest brood of the year.” Without looking back at me, he dropped his whole body to the ground and slithered onto the black beach at top speed. When fighting non-Nagas, we hid our legs. Then he glamoured himself to blend in with the sand for a surprise attack.

No sense wasting my energy on disguise. I had to protect whoever was on the beach. I couldn't think about the implications with my family, my conscious said I had to save them. Their scent told me they were important. I moved as quickly as I could, legs pumping as my tail slid behind. I launched my body forward with the might of my tail, catching up with Ganna. When I was close to the water's edge, I saw him, but most importantly, I saw her. I knew her from my dreams. She was beautiful. Her lithe bluish-green Faerie body covered in odd clothing was no match for a Naga's strength or Ganna's determination to kill. I wanted to scream at her to run, but didn't want Ganna to realize I'd gained on him. Thank the gods, she ran from him. Her little bit of magic pushed him back enough to buy her time.

His anger and injured pride stunned him long enough for me to pounce. Instinctually, I wound my body around his, beating his skull with my tail and using my fangs to rip and shred his flesh. Anger flooded me as it never had before. That little Faerie was worth protecting, worth dying to save. I had to ensure nothing in this realm hurt her. *I wanted to comfort, protect, and... breed.* She was surely goddess-sent; I needed to fill her with my cum and young.

As soon as I detached Ganna's neck from his body, I slid through the water to clean myself. I should have regretted his death, but I didn't. I'd loathed every rotten word and deed of my brother. I could say that I killed strictly out of protecting the weak, but the truth was I was happy one less wicked creature walked the realm. What sealed his fate was the moment he tried to hurt my mate. Her scent would have been evident the moment I laid eyes on her. He knew she belonged to me and didn't care. He wished for bloodshed more than the happiness of two souls.

After I was clean, I made my way to my sweet, wonderful, gods-sent mate. I would show her what it meant to be loved and adored. I would worship every inch of her perfect body, but I needed to get her quickly and quietly out and closer to her homelands. She would never know the harshness and hatred of my world. *How the hell did she even get here?* My lust was blending with my protective nature, wondering who I

would need to thrash for letting her make it into our part of the world. Somebody would be punished for being so careless.

“Beautiful creature, forgive me. I needed you to go with me without a sound. Please, I swear on the mating bond I would never hurt you. I’ve only used a small amount of venom. It will wear off soon, and we will talk about and plan our lives. I needed to make sure you are safe. My people will come looking for me when they find Ganna’s body.” As I carried my mate to safety, I tried to sound brave and heroic. Her eyes widened as she stared at me.

I doubt she had ever seen one of my kind, and to be honest, I’d never seen her kind either, but I knew the signs. With all of our differences, what were the gods thinking, matching us together? I don’t think there has ever been this kind of pairing in thousands of years. Nagas have been separated from the rest of civilized creatures, hunted down, and killed for our horrific nature, but maybe there was hope? Maybe. Could we go back to the days of free-spirited gods and nymphs, the days of Nagas having fated mates?

I ran swiftly. Soon, the sand gave way to forest. My mate’s little face began twitching along with her fingers and toes. It was then I noticed the cut that hadn’t healed on her leg. Further into the trees, I came to a clearing with warm sun and soft grass. I didn’t want to let her go or stop touching her. Holding her tight, I lifted her body to clean the wound. I sniffed, smelling the beach’s sulfuric sand, then licked her clean. She shivered. “Does this hurt?” Her eyes went wide as she tried to speak, but couldn’t yet. Instead, she was able to shake her head. I continued licking the flesh until there wasn’t a grain left.

I wasn’t sure if I should have been happy, or cursed her little wisp of a dress. Her strange clothing from earlier turned into Fae attire. Strong leathers could have prevented the injury, but I loved the access her skirt allowed. After tending to her, I would try talking to her again, hoping my venom wore off quickly. I longed to hear her sweet voice. I needed to clear the sounds of her screams from my mind. It hurt to remember the terror on her face and in her voice. However, along with the

panic, there was a fierce determination that she wouldn't die. I was so proud of her for fighting to survive. I wanted a strong mate who could resist, even against impossible odds.

I checked her for any further injuries. I inspected her head, smelling for any more blood. She seemed to be well. Her scent was ripe. Fertile, ready to receive me. My body tightened, and my balls ached. I couldn't give in yet. Not until I made her comfortable. I felt her shoulders, arms, hips, and thighs. Then worked my way down her legs for any broken bones. I loved touching her. When I moved back up her thighs and hips, she gave a small groan. "Do you like that?" Her eyes dilated as she nodded. I *turned her on, thank the gods*. I wasn't alone with my cocks out of their slit and leaking. Her sweet honey scented the air between us, and I moved my hands slightly under her dress to feel her damp thighs. First, I had to get her talking and hear her say she wanted me, not just a body asking me to claim her.

I'd never felt a hunger like this for anything in my life. I'd never felt a female before. I couldn't help but wonder what she was used to. Had she been with other males? The thought made me hiss and hold her tighter.

"Oh! That hurt, big guy!" she spoke. She spoke for the first time, and it was to let me know I was causing her pain. I truly was a monster, hurting my mate. She must have seen the agony on my face. "It's okay, just a little too tight." I massaged her again, and she moaned.

I introduced myself, and she explained how she came to be here. All seemed to be going well until she did the most unexpected and dangerous thing. She kicked me and ran. *Fuck*. She had no idea she just evoked my inner beast, who was now going to hunt her down and make her his. She went from beloved mate to naughty mate, who needed a lesson, and I couldn't control myself. She was mine, and now I would make sure she understood what that meant.

Tallulah

I was frozen and being carried to safety by a rambling Naga. I had no idea they were intelligent, let alone kind. *They had legs?* I would bet nobody knew they could shift between forms. The one Naga I met on the beach matched all the stories of the murderous brute. But this creature, he was nothing like I expected, and I couldn't deny the feelings that were increasingly growing. I loved the heat from his skin seeping into my pores. I'd heard stories of fated mates. It's all the Faeries at court discussed, esp

pecially the royals. Mates strengthened your magic, but I didn't know how this walking serpent-creature could do that for me. *Gods, how would we even... oh fuck.* As the numbness dissipated, I became more aware of his skin, scales, and the stiff wet bulges leaking on my back. *Bulges. Where did they come from?* All I saw on the red Naga were skin and scales over his stomach. He slithered and coiled as I expected of his kind.

But my questions dissolved as I gave in to the sensation of his long black forked tongue that fluttered across my body. He removed every bit of pain, and my wound healed. His tenderness didn't match his appearance. He was a killer. He killed for me. Every time I doubted if this was real or possible, his tongue and fingers would pull me back into a lust-filled haze. Images bombarded me. I'd never truly been with a male. I'd kissed, been touched, and even brought to a pitiful climax with an unexperienced hand under my skirt, but never any further. Yet, I wanted to be cradled in his arms while he licked my pussy until I screamed. *This would never work. My brain was all wrong. I surely wasn't scenting my mate.*

Yet I continued to wonder what all he could do and make me feel. *Gods, two cocks?* I needed to see them. I needed to know what the two rigid hard-ons digging into my back looked like. If only my body would process the venom, I could reach down and feel. My body shivered with desire. I was so lost in thought, I barely registered that we'd stopped. I could tell we were getting closer to the Fae Kingdom from the trees and soft blue-green grass. We were still weeks away by foot, but if we kept moving, I had no doubt we would find a protected portal that could whisk us outside the palace.

I didn't want to go home. Gods, not only would I have to explain my disappearance, but they would kill my mate on the spot unless they scented him first. Which I doubt they would be searching for mating marks and scents as they readied to kill. They'd assume he took me. This was going to be a disaster.

One thing at a time, Tallulah. First, consider having a mate with two cocks. Gods, this was going to be interesting. Damn it, Faerie, get your shit together and run! My mind kept flipping about what it wanted.

Despite my fears and restless mind, I wanted uninterrupted time with my astonishing new mate. *Get yourself together. There is no way he is your mate, it must be a trick.* There was so much to explore and discuss. And I needed to know everything about him. I could already imagine us, living in a beautiful cottage on the outskirts, away from prying eyes. I wondered how I could become pregnant with his younglings, but the urge to fuck and breed coursed through my veins. His touch felt so good, it was hard to concentrate on any one fear. My body was ready as arousal took over. The way he moved and flicked his tongue in the air let me know. *He knew.* Then there was a distinct change in his features as he squeezed me tighter. That's when my voice started working. Thank the gods.

"I'm Niksha," he said smoothly. "I've never seen one of your kind, nor expected to find my mate. It's all I've wanted, but with my kind, it rarely ever happens. I don't know the last time it did. Most Nagas just fuck and die fighting. It's a cold and brief existence. How did you end up on my beach so far from home, little one?"

"Ah, I was being reckless one night with my friends and ended up in the human realm." I felt ashamed.

He looked astounded. "You survived there?"

"Yes, I glamoured into human form. Mostly, I blended into the background. Some humans are nice, but most want to be left to their own lives. My goal was to get back home."

“I’m sure your family must miss you greatly. A daughter, well, any child is a blessing.” He seemed wistful. I could only imagine what kind of existence he’d had.

“Who attacked me on the beach?”

“Ah, that was my brother, Ganna.” He didn’t seem at all hurt or regretful of his actions.

“Wait, you killed your brother?” I was shocked.

“Yes. He was a vicious, vile creature, ready to torture you and bring you back to the mountains for our father, the king to feast upon. He hoped this would gain him first entrance in the Mating Ball.”

“Wow, there is a lot there.” I couldn’t stop the nervous laughter that bubbled out of me. “You’re a prince. Your father is the king, and I was going to be dinner. That is supremely fucked up.”

“I agree. I’ve never eaten anything besides wild animals. Never anything with a conscience.”

“Same.” At least, I think we were on the same page. I went to what I thought was a safer subject, to distract from my arousal. “Tell me about this ball. It sounds exciting.” Shit. That was the wrong question. His explanation was horrifying, and shame heated his golden cheeks.

“I dread the Ball. I want more than what was expected and offered. Anytime I brought up the subject of a true fated mate, I was silenced and reminded that our kind wasn’t blessed anymore. The gods had turned their back on us. Therefore, we should take what we want and do as we please. But I wanted my first mating to be out of love.”

I felt my body relax and melt into him. “You’ve never been”—*I wanted to use the right word and not sound like an inexperienced teenager*—“intimate with anyone?”

Please say no.

“No, this Ball would have been my first.” I didn’t think he was much older than me, and by the way he blushed, I could tell this was embarrassing for him. It didn’t matter because, at

any moment, we would fuck. I'd imagined it would be in a cozy, faerie-lit room with a feather bed and warm oils. That's how my friend Farrah described her first time. I also remembered how she freaked out when something felt off and she thought she was pregnant, which turned out to be sour wine. *At the moment* pregnancy didn't scare me. I didn't fear that. I was the opposite in craving my mate to fill me with cum and young. "How about you?" I could feel his body tense.

I don't know why I panicked; we were doing great. My mate was kind, strong, and just as lust filled as me. Except for a god no one could trick the mating bond. I really belonged to him, and him to me, but it was too much. *It was just the bond making me want babies, and to settle down.* No, I was young, I had friends, and parties. I still had my coming out to court ball to attend. Those are silly things, but it's all I'd known. Then the thought of giving birth to snake babies started to freak me out. Would they slither out? Bite me? Kill me?

I know this male was promising to always protect me and love me, but as he admitted a union of our kind was unheard of. I was so torn, I wanted to tell him I was just as inexperienced as him, but I also wanted to run. So, before I said anything or he could get another word out, I kicked him as hard as possible and ran.

I didn't look back as I pushed myself hard into the forest away from him. I ducked under low-lying limbs, jumped over gnome mounds, and avoided little beasties that hid in the dark. He and I, we're too different. I tried to reason with myself. The gods would never put us together. *Which god did I displease and cause to trick me?*

"Stop this right now, my little mate. It's only going to make it worse the longer I chase you." I could hear the pounding of his feet as he yelled. He didn't sound angry, but as if he were restraining himself.

"No! I'm not hatching serpent eggs. This pairing is insane and will never work." I didn't slow down.

His rich dark laughter nearly made me stop. "No eggs involved, my love. You will take my cocks like a good girl and

breed our younglings. You will carry them in your belly and birth them as any other creature.” He paused, probably checking to see if that would stop me. Then he sighed, “If I have to hold you down with my tail to prove who you belong to, then I will. I can smell your desire and ripe cunt, ready to take my seed. Quit running.”

“No,” I hissed back, pissed that he knew. My face scrunched in defiance as I ran. But he was correct. Arousal pumped through my veins, and slick trickled down my legs. My body wanted him, wanted to carry his young. Knowing that Naga youngling were made the same as Fae took most of my fears away.

“With each step I take to catch you, little mate, I am transforming into the serpent that I hate. Please; I don’t want to punish you for defying me. We belong to each other, and you need to accept it. I’m a predator. By running, you’ve become prey. Stop.”

“I’m not accepting anything,” I huffed out. I realized how severely out of shape I was. “I don’t care that you smell divine and that my pussy is clenching around the air wishing she had you. She’s lost her damn mind.” Yep, I just gave my pussy a place in this conversation. I’d lost it.

“No. Your body has accepted what your mind almost did. You were so close. I saw it in your eyes, then you got scared. Last chance to come to me. Last chance to give yourself to me. To allow me to be gentle while I love you. I’ll still make you writhe and scream in pleasure, but with my blood hot, it won’t be as I planned.”

His voice was louder, which meant he was closer. I could stop. Sure, I wanted to stop, but something deep and dark inside me enjoyed the chase. I think he needed it. No wild creature should be so controlled. I wondered if he had been holding himself back his entire life. More than anything, I desperately wanted to please him. When he asked me to be his *good girl*, it took all my strength not to throw myself onto the ground, ruck up my dress, and spread my legs for him. My Naga mate was doing strange things to my body, and I loved it.

“If you want me, come and get me,” I yelled out with a smirk. My arrogance got the better of me.

Two strong arms grabbed me by the stomach and flattened me against a hard, muscular chest. One hand splayed and ran down my belly to cup my pussy. “Thiss belongsss to me.” I felt his tongue flick against my ear as he hissed the command.

Chapter 3

Niksha

I captured her. Her body fell lax against mine. When I cupped her sweet cunt over her dress, I felt the fabric dissolve in my hand. She was soaked. She wanted me. Why wouldn't she give herself permission to accept the bond? So beautiful, sweet, and innocent. I knew what kind of monster I was, but she didn't. Of course, she was scared, but she still shouldn't have run.

I turned my mate around to look into her bright eyes. She was trying not to smile. The chase had been a game. She liked the threat. I wondered if anyone had ever disciplined her. Her parents failed to protect her, lost in the human world for weeks. Anger consumed me. How dare they let anything happen to her? Tallulah needed a monster devoted to her, and from now on, that would be me.

"Why, little mate, why did you do that? We were getting along so wonderfully. Now I must ensure you never do that again." I ripped the wisp of a dress straight off her body, exposing her entire beautiful body to me. Her smile vanished as her eyes widened in shock.

"Wait. No, I won't do it again." She thrashed a bit in my hold. It didn't matter. Of course, I was stronger. Spotting a fallen tree trunk in the clearing where our game ended, I walked over and deposited her on it.

"We will get to know each other when I'm finished teaching you who you belong to and how you will not put yourself in danger. My gods, running off into the human lands and then running away from your mate." I playfully tsked at her as I whispered my threats into her ear. I sat us down on the trunk with her facing me on my lap. Her legs instinctively wrapped around my thick middle, right on top of my cocks escaping from their slit. Her sexy pout and warm body ebbed my predatory instinct.

“I’m being good now.” She gave me a devious smile as she rubbed her cloth-covered cunt against me. As if I could read her mind, I purposefully loosened my grip. She nuzzled into my neck, nipped it, and chuckled before she tried to run.

“No, you’re not, and bad little Fae get punished before they get their mate’s cocks.” It wasn’t hard to untangle my little Fae’s legs from around me and toss her over my knee.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” Her outrage was cute as she kicked and thrashed in my tight grip.

“Reminding you not to run away again.” My thighs stabilized me against the tree. My tail came around to wrap her tightly against me at her waist. I moved one thigh to immobilize her further and trap her legs under mine. My cocks proudly jutted into her stomach and wept. Every move she made felt incredible. I used my free hands to touch her. My fingers loved running through her silky blue hair. I massaged her shoulders and down her back. Her sighs and further relaxation of her body were just what I wanted. It would make the sting from my hand more memorable. I moved my hands up her thighs and over her backside, exposing her smooth, plump skin. Nagas didn’t look like this. We didn’t have twin globes. I palmed each one, massaging the tight muscles I felt underneath.

“Leave my ass alone,” she purred. Her hands were free as she tried to swat at me.

“Your body is mine to touch. Mine to do with as I see fit.” I continued to explore her ass, then ran my fingers down the center until I hit a tight opening. I massaged it with my thumb to see if it would allow me entrance.

“Good gods, Niksha, leave my asshole alone. If you want to explore something, move down.” She didn’t tell me to stop, which was a good sign. I didn’t want to give in to her demands too quickly, so I leaned down to better look at her *asshole*. Spreading the globes apart, I saw the tight little knot I’d felt. Maybe it needed coaxing to relax and bring her pleasure. I knew her cunt would be warm and seeping wetness, but I thought her *hedyos* would be as well. I wasn’t sure what to

make of this. Ignoring her comments—*this is so embarrassing*—I continued to touch. I wanted to lick and know every inch. Bringing my face closer rewarded me with her rich scent of arousal. My forked tongue lapped at the entrance. The second my tongue caressed her, she went rigid and moaned.

“This is so wrong. So dirty. You aren’t supposed to lick me there. Eat my pussy, gods, yes. Eating my ass is on a different level.” She wiggled all over my cocks, trying to escape the pleasure that befell upon her.

“We are mates, Tallulah. Nothing is off-limits. Nothing is wrong or dirty. You like it. I will do it. You are enjoying it; I can smell your rich juices. But you are right. I am dying to eat your cunt. Down further, you said.”

I moved my tongue down until she rewarded me with loud keening moans and her sweet nectar pot. Her slickness dripped down my chin as I lapped at her cunt. This was where I would slide in and plant my seed. I would fill this beautiful little hole up with my cum.

“More, please, more. Give me your fingers. I need more to come. You don’t know how badly I need this.” She sounded desperate, and in truth, I knew exactly how she felt. I watched as she moved one hand to her breast and squeezed. She tried to move another in between her legs. There was something she was trying to get at, but I knocked her away. Still licking, I moved my fingers further down until I found a little smooth pebble. It was hot and pulsing. “Yes,” she whined as I used my thumb to massage it. More of her slick gushed into my mouth. I was greedy and wanted to coat my tongue in her essence. I slid my tongue further inside, licking her tight channel’s delicate walls.

When my tongue felt a rigid area different from the smooth slick walls, Tallulah nearly bucked right off my lap. She panted, and pleaded for me to keep working her body. I pressed the ridged area with my tongue while moving my fingers over her wet pebble outside. Remembering my free hand and how she’d squirmed, I massaged her asshole with my thumb in time with my other hand. I felt her walls flutter on my tongue, squeezing and filling my mouth with her juices. I

pushed my tongue in further, and her muscles relaxed as my finger sank into the tight hole to my first knuckle. It didn't take but a few strokes for her to scream out my name and flood my face with her orgasm. Her body went happily limp.

“That is what I wanted to do from the beginning.” I felt pride knowing that I could please my mate without even touching myself. I smiled and removed my face from her heavenly cunt.

“I should have let you. That was the best feeling I've ever experienced. My fingers could never accomplish that.” She giggled as she looked up at me. “When do I get to touch you?”

“As soon as you've learned not to run.” Her eyes widened before she felt the first slap of my hand on her ass.

Tallulah

Sweet heavens, that was the best orgasm of my life. Given what that Naga did to me, either he's lying about never having been with a female, or he really is my mate. I was ready to do whatever he asked. I would freely give. But then that sneaky bastard did something I wasn't expecting. He spanked me. I thought we were over that, but, oh no, my mate apparently holds a grudge. But that's not why I was mad. I was angry that my pussy got wetter with every whack, and I wanted him more. It's not supposed to be like this. I was supposed to enjoy sweet and tender, but instead, I got off running away from my mate in the woods and being spanked. I was learning more about myself every minute.

“No more. I'm not running away, and if you want to fuck me, surely you want me to be able to lie down without lighting my ass on fire.”

“I know you're not going anywhere. And”—he dragged his hand down my core, coating it in my slick—“there is no doubt you love it. One more, then we will join.” The smug sexy bastard smiled and rubbed my clit before removing his wet hand.

I readied myself. His hand moved through the air; I could hear it coming, but this incredible sting this last swat held was nothing like the others. Curses came flying out of my mouth. “Did you seriously use my slick against me? Fuck me, that hurt, you son of a bitch.”

“My mate’s beautiful mouth says such wicked things. I thought you were brought up at court?” He licked his fingers as he smiled.

“Bastard,” I said, laughing. Clearly, he wasn’t trying to beat me or change me, and his punishment made me want him more. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing his tricks worked. I never wanted to leave him.

He released me as I crawled back onto his lap and faced him. I took joy in making him wrestle as I pressed against his rigid cocks. “Not that it matters, but I am a curious male. As I asked before, we were so rudely interrupted,” his eyes took on a primal glint, “have you been with another?”

“What if I have?” I challenged with a smile.

“It changes nothing between us, but I might have to hunt down any male who has tasted your divine ambrosia. Because mated or not, he’d want more, and that can’t happen,” he answered with a satisfied smirk.

Damn, that was hot. He’d already killed for me today. Better not add to the body count. “Nobody. This will be my first as well. Though you might need to take the hand of a fae or two.” Nerves fluttered along with excitement. His golden irises nearly disappeared into blackness as he flicked his tongue up and down my neck. “Oh, I like that,” I hummed in appreciation.

“Nobody needs to lose a limb. Your secrets belong to me.”

“And yours belong to me.” I reached up to kiss his lips softly.

“I hope you like everything, my precious mate. I was only taught about Naga females, but I feel like my instincts know what you need. May I?”

“Yes, my body is yours.” I hardly recognized my soft, breathy voice.

“Mine is yours. We can explore together.” His low tone made each word slide together like a bass-driven melody. It made me want him more. My body loosened. His deep inhale told me he knew exactly how I felt about him, and what I needed.

Chapter 4

Niksha

We were far from Naga territory, safe in the small forest clearing, resting under the shade of a giant pink flowering tree, but I had to be sure that no predator could catch us off guard. *My kind would hunt me down, but was my betrayal worth a battle beyond their land?* My hands rubbed her lower back, searching for any tension she was holding. Her beautiful bluish skin had an iridescent quality I'd never seen among my kind, only on rare beautiful pearls. I gently moved her thick ocean-colored hair to one side and caressed her. I was fighting to hold onto my control. The beast in me wanted nothing more than to wrap her hair around my hand until it pulled on her scalp and demanded she open her mouth. I'd yet to kiss her pouty lips properly, but I craved her mouth around one of my cocks.

"Should I ask what you are thinking?" She grinned as she drew lazy circles on my chest.

"Something I shouldn't." I moved my mouth to her jawline to distract her.

"Mmmm," she groaned as I peppered kisses around her cute, freckled face.

Her hands pushed my light golden hair off my forehead and rounded my face. If she was like me, she was trying to memorize every inch of her mate's face. I was nowhere near beautiful, but I thanked the gods for her desire, lust, and eventual love. I could tell our temperaments were alike. We craved a place to belong, and were young enough to figure out where. The only truth that mattered at this moment was that we belonged together.

"Wrap your legs around my waist." She did. I wrapped my tail around her hips. I used my hands to hold her waist as I walked back into the sunlit grass not shaded by the canopy of the tree we were currently under. She looked at me with wide

eyes as she realized what I was doing. I leaned forward for a soft kiss on her lips. Her mouth opened for me when I slid my forked tongue inside her smooth, pink mouth. It reminded me of her warm, wet core. Gods, I was ready for her sweet body to accept my cocks. Even though most Naga males didn't give a shit about females' pleasure, we have a better chance of our seed taking if we bring the female to climax. We'd already gotten there once with my tongue and fingers. Despite Tallulah's protests, she thoroughly got off when I played with her tight little asshole. Maybe it was her *hedyos*, and she didn't know it.

She ran her hand down my chest, not unlike her own flesh, and flicked my nipple. "This part is as sensitive as yours." She smiled as I devilishly rolled her nipple, remembering how she played with it while I ate her delicious cunt.

"Gods, that feels good," she groaned. Running my hand up to my top cock, I squeezed it to let more cum run down to the other, ready to continue my lesson. Instead, her hand drifted over mine until I pulled and guided it away. She worked my upper shaft with her small, beautiful hand. "From the look on your face, I imagine that feels good." She bit her lip and smiled. "It's huge, and there are two. Even with mating magic, I don't see them both fitting." She swirled her thumb over my cockhead. "But I can already imagine how good it will feel to take those first few inches." Her mind kept changing as her hands moved down, stroking, then squeezing. Her hand barely covered the first third of my cock. Shifting it down, she massaged the length above my swelling knot. "This section feels different with these raised bumps already so slick."

I interrupted her, "Some of my kind have spikes instead."

"Good gods, I'm glad you don't. Yes, I know we can fit between our mating and faerie magic, but then, there's that." Her eyes widened at every detail. My sweet little mate looked frightened. I already knew what she was staring at—my knots. I know some other creatures have them, but it's quite a size difference. "Yours are so large. Then those extra ridges of scales go down to your base. They were undoubtedly made for pleasure, but they are a lot to take in."

“I would never really hurt you.” I nuzzled into her neck and lovingly caressed her.

“I believe that, and we both know I enjoyed every minute of my lesson,” her soft chuckle eased my mind. For a brief moment, I feared I gave her too much.

“We will go slow and only ever do what makes you feel good. But I trust your body will welcome both easily. The gods never give us more than we can take.” I kissed her hair before leaning down to wrap my long, black tongue around her nipple, sucking the little bud to make it tighten. Her sigh gave me the mental image of her eyes rolling back in pleasure.

“I want you, Niksha.” It was what I needed to hear.

“I want you. Do you trust me?” I asked with such hope.

“Yes, you crazy, giant serpent, I do,” she said with a smile.

Tallulah

I’d always believed that I’d meet my mate at a special Fae gathering, or maybe one of my longtime friends would be the one, and like magic, I’d have feelings for him. Yet I never imagined I’d find myself here, naked in a peaceful Faerie field with the special pink flowers in bloom, used to make magic sigils. I couldn’t help but wonder if we were near Ogre territory. I knew of a Faerie, Lark, who had a special garden in the woods used to make magical goods. She was an odd Faerie, raised as a human and abandoned long ago by her Faerie mother, then by her human father. I’d overheard rumors... But now wasn’t the time to think about anything other than my mate.

I knew that Orcs often prepared their mates with copious amounts of cum. They’d rub it into their mate’s skin, have them swallow, and fill every hole with as much cum as possible to make a womb ready and body pliable. I think Ogres did the same if they mated with a smaller creature or human. But as a Fae, I had magic. My shocking, two-legged, long, thick rattle-tailed, two-cocked mate had complete faith that the mating magic would allow my body to accommodate

him. No preparation was needed, but I was questioning magic itself at this moment as I looked at Niksha's massive members.

I felt Niksha's gaze roaming my body. It was kind of funny how he didn't wear clothes. He was all muscles and scales. I'm sure that when he normally walked around, his cocks stayed in their pouch, or whatever it was inside his body. I imagine that's where his balls still hid. As I looked at his body more, I found the golden scales sexy. I liked how he rubbed his body against mine. Our hands explored each other as our mouths moved with wild, wet kisses. I was hot and slick from my last orgasm. It didn't take much to push my doubts aside. My body needed more from him. I needed him inside me. He'd licked and fingered to stretch me, and I trusted in our bond.

"I want you as close to me as possible," he hissed as he shifted into his full glorious Naga form and sat down on the ground next to me. With ease, he lifted my naked blue body atop his golden scales. He set me right above his top cock. "Take as much or as little as you want. From this angle, you control everything, Tallulah." Sitting up and resting on his hands, he made his body into a comfortable L-shape for me to straddle, pressing our chests together. It was already intimate. My arousal bubbled as he traced his tongue up my neck to my ear, and sucked. His fingers glided between my folds and worked my clit. Everything felt exquisite as I arched my back, pushed my breasts up, and slid back. His cocks were running with precum that made it easy for me to slip back and forth on them between my pussy lips. This motion teased our senses, driving us both mad. "Tallulah," he groaned. "I'm not a man. I'm a beast and can only take so much." He nipped at my neck, then sucked.

Between his fingers, our arousal, and his mouth, I came, hard. I couldn't believe what my body produced and how empty my pussy felt. I needed to feel him deep inside of me. With a rush of excitement, I lifted my body and notched his top cock at my entrance. My body easily slid down his thick, spiny girth. Each of the three sections was a new sensation, lighting my body up. Removing his fingers from my clit, Niksha wrapped his hands around my waist, helping me move

further down his shaft and bounce on his knot. He thrust from under me and held me close until we worked into a rhythm that had us both moaning in ecstasy. He felt so good inside of me, but I wanted more. I needed to feel fuller. My delicate inner walls grabbed at him, pulling him deeper, yet I could tell something was missing.

I couldn't believe the next words out of my mouth, but it felt so right as I popped off his shaft. "I want them both. Fill me up so I can't tell where I end, and you begin."

I loved how he didn't question my desire, but raised his eyebrows as he grabbed his second cock and rubbed it against my asshole, slick and hard. That's not where I needed him this time. I wanted both cocks, both knots ripping me to the limit and breeding me. I moved back, and he understood. Burrowing my chest into his, I raised my chin to meet his lips kiss for kiss. His hands worked underneath us as he held his cocks together at my entrance, waiting for me to accept them. At first, I thought he had slipped his other hand around to my clit when I felt a warm vibrating sensation. I looked down and saw his tail. I gasped from the unexpected pleasure as I worked my way down onto his twin cockheads. Unlike the first time, this felt almost uncomfortably tight. I could feel every thick ridge, bump, and scale. It created exquisite pressure that was building to orgasm just from taking him into my core.

"Do you like that, my precious little mate?" he cooed.

"Yes," I panted as I shimmied down further. "I need your help."

"Of course, my perfect mate." He nuzzled his face into my neck. I was still wedged on his cocks, with his tail vibrating against my clit, he held me close as he rolled us gently over, leaving my body briefly as he moved me onto all fours with him kneeling behind me. This new angle gave him a full view of my swollen pussy and more control to thrust deeper. "Gods, you are beautiful. I can't wait until I can unlock every ounce of pleasure your body can release." He thrust both ribbed, textured cocks deep into my channel, until my ass slapped against his muscular abs. He stilled while I breathed, relaxing

my inner muscles. "I'm going to fill you with my cum until it pours out of you." I moaned at the thought.

His tail rattled quicker as he pounded both big cocks inside me. My pussy spasmed, building to a great wave that would soon take over. Clenching both knotted cocks so hard I feared it would hurt him, his hisses and moans told me otherwise. I felt his hands tighter around my waist. His body went rigid as he pulled me back over his pulsing knots, which grew now that I was locked in place. The new fullness sent me over the edge. As soon as my orgasm hit, that was it for him. He released warm jets of seed into me.

My body greedily took in every drop. Though sealed together, there was nowhere else for it to go. Panting and sweating, I felt him pull me closer, still knotted, and roll us so my back was resting on his chest. Turning my head and looking over my shoulder, I stared into the big gold eyes of my Naga. This felt like the most natural thing in all the realms. I couldn't help but smile and think about all the fabulously filthy things we could do.

"I understand that look." He grinned. "Feels like you were thinking what I was just now." He licked the sweat off my neck. "When my knots release, we are doing this all over again. I can't wait to devour your precious little pussy. I'm going to make you come over and over again until my seed is so far inside you that your body has no choice but to conceive."

"Fuck, that is hot. It's also insane but turning me on." I rolled my hips against him, causing his softening cocks to harden again. We weren't going anywhere, so I might as well enjoy it. "How long do you think I'll be able to keep you away from my ass?"

He laughed. "Little mate, I think it's just where you need my bottom cock. Imagine both of your holes full of your mate, bathing your insides with seed." This beast was filthy compared to the tales of lovemaking my friends had told. They had their experience; now I had mine, and I loved every dirty minute of it.

“Gods, I want to swallow you down.” I was a little shocked at what came out of my mouth, *but fuck it*. We were mated and I was riding a sexual high.

“I couldn’t let you pleasure me alone. How about I wrap my tail around your pretty little waist, so I have full access to your hot-honey cunt, and keep my hands free to twist and flick those tight nipples? I bet I could make you come from that alone.” I shivered in anticipation. These were promises I knew he’d fulfill. “Or how about we see how much of my cock you can take down your throat? Would you like it if I forced them both down?”

Arousal rushed through me at the idea of him *making* me do anything. “How about I run away and make you hunt me down to prove I’m yours again?” I was getting giddy.

“Is your ass in need of another lesson? Clearly, you lack discipline, my lovely little mate. Do you really need a reminder that you belong to me?”

“I don’t need it,” I looked at him with a smirk, “I want it.”

“The gods have blessed me with a naughty little mate.” He gave me a long, lingering kiss. “If you need proof of my love and devotion every day, I will give it to you however you wish.”

“Every day.” I looked at him wistfully. “This is going to be difficult. You and I, out in the woods is bliss, but the moment we step onto the court’s land, it will be different. I don’t know how the other faeries are going to react. Though they will be forced to accept our bond.”

“And I don’t know if my people will come looking for me.” He shook his head. “But we can’t worry about that. We will take our life together one bite at a time.” He playfully nipped my shoulder.

“We have a long, hard road, but we can do it. I know we can.”

“Yes, my love. We can do anything, as long as we believe and hold tight to each other.”

Thanks for reading The Naga's Faeire Mate. Want to read more? Check out The Orc's Fated Mate and all the other spicy monster romances from A Step Between Realms series!

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About Elizabeth Austin

Elizabeth Austin is a former teacher, mama, and wife to the most supportive husband in the world. She resides in a small college town in the South. Her former students and family would curl up and die if they knew she wrote steamy paranormal and fantasy romance novels!

Reading has always been a passion for Elizabeth. After years of teaching and some freelance editing, she decided to let the wild characters in her mind out to run and play. She loves writing about romance, magic, and mayhem. She is a firm believer in quirky characters and Happily Ever Afters!

I love interacting with readers! Let's keep in touch:

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The Boon

by

Jocelyn Montana

Chapter 1

Devon picked at a chip on the wood kitchen table. Calling it a table was a stretch. It was a leftover plank, too twisted and knotted to build with, balanced on two matching boulders, but they were lucky to have even this scrap of wood. Timber was scarce in this region of Peklo—the underworld.

Her mother plunked a steaming mug of tea in front of her, then settled in the only other chair. Why was her mother still home this morning? Once her mother woke up, she left to spend her day with the demon overlord up in his mountain cave. She never lingered at home to share a cup of tea and chat with Devon.

Devon pushed her mug aside. “You wanted to discuss something?” Was her mother finally going to agree to leave this horrible place? They’d have to find a junction point to get up into the upperworld of Ulterra, placing them both at the mercy of the beasts and immortals roaming the Deceptive Lands, but it had to be possible.

Ulterra.

She’d see for herself the two suns shining actual sunlight, the flowing rivers, and lush, green grass. Her fellow villagers spoke of Ulterra like it was a dream. Like it wasn’t real. But it was, and she *would* get up there.

“Drink your tea,” her mother pointed, “I made it just for you.”

Devon sighed and picked up her steaming mug. She didn’t even like tea, and it used at least two cups of water, maybe two and a half. That left six cups for the rest of the day. What a waste. Then again, her mother wasn’t the one who trudged to the cistern to collect the daily rations and figure out what they’d drink and what they needed for washing. Devon had performed that chore ever since she’d turned eight years old—twenty years ago—when her mother told her to start taking care of the house.

She took a sip and blanched. It tasted like she'd licked the ground outside.

One corner of her mother's mouth curled upwards slightly. Her mother's version of a smile. "It's not great tasting, but it's a special blend and it's good for you. Drink up, don't waste it."

Devon narrowed her eyes. Since when did her mother care about what was good for her? "Did Bune give you this tea?"

The corner of her mother's lips twitched. "Of course. He takes care of us. We'd all die down here if it wasn't for him. You owe him."

"I owe him his monthly rations, and I deliver it." Their demon overlord, Bune, enjoyed the hallucinogenic effects of smoking the scrubby plant called smokeweed. Devon was the villager tasked with cultivating it. Mostly because no one else wanted their flesh gouged out by its vicious thorns.

Devon walked to his cave once a week to give him his crop delivery, but beyond that, she avoided him. He looked like a mix of a cyclops and a boulder, with lumpy skin and a slash for a mouth. She was pretty sure the last time she'd brought him his plants, lichen was growing on him because he hadn't moved in so long. Then again, what did he need to move for? An army of harpies did his bidding, and her community—a straggle of humans called the betrayers—grew his food and waited on him.

"He's decided it's time for you to do more."

As Devon took another sip, a bead of sweat dripped down the back of her neck. It wasn't any hotter in here than normal. Why was she sweating? Her vision blurred for a moment, then cleared. "What's in this?" She pushed the mug away.

"Bune selected a few elite members of our group to join his flock. I'm one of them, but only if I bring you as well. He says you're strong. Special." The slight smile on her mother's face faded as it returned to her normal glower. Devon favored her in looks as they both had triangular shaped faces and green eyes, but as her mother aged, the bones of her face sharpened, like if someone touched her, they'd cut themselves. And her

mother had dark hair, compared to Devon's blond. She didn't know who her father was, but perhaps her hair color came from him.

“No, mother, let's leave for good. Forget about Bune.”

Her mother shot to her feet. “While you prattle on about returning to Ulterra, I've scratched out a living for us down here. With Bune, you and I will become powerful. Immortal.” She pointed at the mug. “There's harpy venom in there. Within a day, maybe two, we'll both transform into deadly harpies and join Bune's army.”

Devon's stomach roiled, and bile scorched her throat. “How could you?” She lurched to her feet. “You've doomed me to remain down here forever.”

Any feigned warmth faded from her mother's gaze as she shrugged. “You were never leaving this place. You're a betrayer too, and we're banished down here for eternity. Might as well become powerful and take what we can.”

Devon grabbed her mug and threw it across the kitchen as hard as she could. With a crash, it shattered against the stone wall above the sink. Her face felt too tight, her skin itchy. Tears threatened, but didn't fall. Her mother didn't deserve them.

Without another word, she wheeled on her heel and raced out the front door, gulping in air.

She didn't notice where she'd fled until she'd already climbed high up the path along the shoulder of the mountain. Whenever she had a free moment, she hiked this trail. Up here, if she was lucky, she might breathe in a few wisps of air not clogged by brimstone and sulfur or peppered with flecks of ash.

The silence drew her attention.

She scanned above. Grey sky spread to the horizon, casting a weak, murky light over the blighted land with its cracked, burnt sienna soil and few scraggy trees. But no shrill shrieks filled the air. There wasn't a harpy, with their hideous beaked faces and lethal talons, in sight.

That was odd. Even when they were battling for Bune elsewhere, a few still lingered up here. She'd always thought it strange they patrolled this side of the mountain when Bune's cave was on the northern slope, but every time she hiked up here they perched nearby, watching her. And they never let her climb up to the summit.

She laughed a dry, bitter laugh. At least when she turned into a harpy, she could fly to the peak. Although she doubted she'd care much about fresh air then. As a harpy, she'd only want to comb the underworld for battles and raw meat.

What a future to look forward to.

Her hands clenched into fists, and she strode on. As the path steepened, her calves screamed. A short distance below the summit, the path flattened and widened into a small shelf. Centered in the middle, with talon marks scuffed into the surrounding ground, stood a massive black obelisk.

Devon wiped the sweat from her brow and stepped closer. The obelisk stood twenty feet high with a deadly point at its tip, its base spanning the width of her outstretched arms. She scanned the sky for harpies again, although she'd hear their shrieking if they returned. Was this monument the reason the harpies forced her back down the mountain?

The sides of the obelisk were smooth except for two words etched on the front, "The Harvester." The words flashed as if light flickered across them, but Peklo was perpetually grey. No sun.

The air hummed like it did after lightning struck the ground. The unceasing winds cut off as if someone sliced through the air with a knife and killed them. A slight whiff of fresh cedar broke through the sulfurous stench of the underworld, and Devon's shoulders relaxed a fraction. Any thoughts about harpies and her future ... faded. She sidled forward. Where was that smell coming from?

She needed to touch the obelisk. There was nothing more important in the entire world than feeling this sculpture and stroking her hands over its surface. A niggling alert sounded at

the back of her mind, but she frowned and ignored it. She reached forward and placed her palm flat against its surface.

Before she had a moment to register how warm the stone felt under her hand, it cracked in half and a blast of hot air slammed into her chest. She flew backwards and crashed into the ground, inches from the cliff's edge. Sitting up, she rubbed her hip. "What the hell?"

A small piece of obsidian stone shot into the air and thinned until it resembled a short piece of rope. With another spurt, it came for her. Devon screamed and flinched, throwing her arms out to block it, but it didn't hit her. Instead, a pulsing warmth spread through her left thumb. She lowered her arms and stared at her hand. The rock had turned into a ring and circled her thumb. In a brilliant flash, a word appeared in red along its surface, "*Apophis*." It glittered once, then faded.

The obelisk groaned, and the ground shook as the crack deepened. It split in two, each half crumbling to the ground, revealing a large figure standing in its center. With one lithe motion, he cleared the rubble to step onto the path a few paces in front of her.

The figure was definitely masculine, with a broad chest and shoulders partially bare under his intricate gold breastplate, but he wasn't a man. Instead of a man's head, there was a canine one with glittering, amethyst eyes. He had to be at least eight feet tall, although he appeared taller with an elaborate gold headdress topped with a golden statue of a snake poised to strike between his long ears. His smooth skin matched the obsidian of the obelisk, and, despite his canine features, he wasn't hairy. Corded muscle flexed underneath his golden armor.

The same prickle of awareness that always whispered over her skin in the presence of an immortal rippled over her. All the hairs on her arms stood up. It was never a good thing when an immortal showed up.

"Who are you?" Her voice came out like a squeak.

He cocked his head like a predator about to pounce. "You broke the seal. Don't you know who I am?" His voice was a

low rumble, dark and smoky, with an accented lilt to his vowels.

Good thing she was already sitting, because her legs turned to jelly. A seal? She hadn't seen a seal, because if she had, she'd have known what the obelisk was, and she'd have run fast in the opposite direction. When the most dangerous of the immortals were cursed to remain in Peklo forever, there were a handful so powerful, and so evil, they weren't deemed safe to roam free even in the wilds of the underworld, so they were sealed away.

And she'd just released one.

She swallowed. "Your obelisk said you're the Harvester."

His gaze narrowed in on her thumb with the ring, and he bared his teeth. She winced. They were exceedingly white and lethally sharp. "That's my occupation, pet." His lips spread into a grin, and she wobbled to her feet. A nearby boulder sat near the cliff's edge, and she scrambled behind it. At least she'd put something between them. That smile was terrifying, and more deadly than one of the two-headed serpents lurking in the deep desert.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"You don't recognize Rerek, the god of chaos? Who are you?"

He was a god? "Devon."

His smile faded, and his eyes widened. "You give me your true name without a thought."

What? What did he mean, her true name?

He waved his hand, and his form wavered. The gold armor didn't change, but his skin turned bronze, and the canine head shifted into a man's. His eyes remained the same glittering purple, and black tattoos stood out along his bare arms, the marks shining like the black stone of the obelisk. The hue matched his dark hair, a few inches long, and brushed back.

He frowned, and the high angles of his cheekbones sharpened. Devon stared at his mouth. He had nice lips for a

being who was probably about to kill her. “What is a true—”

“Good. I expected a willing thrall to release me centuries ago. And now I have one who relinquishes their true name easily. Exactly as it should be.” He stepped forward and raised his hands.

Chapter 2

Rerek inhaled deeply and let his power flow through him. Fire flickered over his skin, and he blasted a lick of flame high into the air. His power needed fuel after not feeding it for millennia, and a willing source stood right here in front of him. One foolish enough to tell him her *true name*. Except why did she seem confused about who he was? Hadn't she come to offer herself as his thrall? "What kind of illusion would you like?" He snapped his fingers, and an image appeared before them of this mortal—*Devon*—sitting on a throne with a few incubi petting her.

The mortal stepped around the boulder. "What is this?" She waved her hand through his illusion, and it dissolved.

He growled. If she'd banished his illusion so easily, he was weaker than he thought because she shouldn't be able to do that. The ring around her thumb caught his attention again. As he stared at it, a thread of power—one ancient and not part of his own—thrummed through his chest and tugged towards her to wrap around the two of them. What was this? He batted at it with a flicker of flame, but it strengthened and pulled him towards Devon again. Either he was truly weak, or threads of magic bound him to this mortal.

Why? He glanced over his shoulder at the obelisk and a golden symbol rose from the rubble and floated in the air. Three thick lines intersected, making the overall symbol look like a Z with an extra arm. *A rune*.

He cursed mentally. Runes were rare and their magic mysterious, but he knew a little something about them and he recognized this symbol. It was the rune of exchange. Since Devon had done him a service and freed him, he now owed her a boon in return.

Anger slashed through him, hot and thick. He'd finally gotten free, and here he was, tethered once again. Unless—he smiled a wicked smile—she became his thrall first. Then she'd be under *his* power. He stepped to the left to block her view of

the rune shimmering in the air. She was a mortal. She didn't know about runes, and she wouldn't know he owed her anything.

He called forth an illusion of a glistening palace, servants holding food and drink. "Wouldn't you like to live like a queen with adoring men and women ready to worship you?"

"What are you talking about? No. Stop what you're doing."

He stilled. A mortal ordering him around? "One flick of my finger and you burst into flames. You understand?"

Her chin rose. Defiance. Not fear. "I rescued you," Devon said. "Turning me into cinder wouldn't be very nice."

Instead of anger, he cocked his head. Who was this mortal that didn't quake before him? "I'm not nice. Although I'm being rather generous to you right now. I'm offering to give you whatever you want. All you have to do is give me your shuwt and all of this," he waved his arm to gesture at the surrounding landscape, "this bleak underworld is gone. You'll live in a world with no pain, no hunger." He didn't mention that while she'd see and hear the illusion he put her in, actually, she'd be doing his bidding and feeding his power.

"What's a shuwt? Would this new world be real?" She shook her head. "No. I want to go to Ulterra. Since you're being generous, could you take me there before I turn into a harpy?" Her request caused a surge in the rune magic, tugging the threads between them together, but she hadn't quite asked for her boon, and the magic faded.

A snap of wind tousled her hair, and he caught a faint scent of citrus. Like walking through an orange grove back when he lived in Ulterra. A flash of warmth stirred in his chest, and he studied her fully.

She had shiny blond hair to her shoulders like a succubus, but her form was toned and her fingernails blunt with a bit of dirt underneath one of them. No succubus would ever perform physical labor. Or wear plain, burlap pants and a baggy, ill-fitting linen shirt. But she was far lovelier than any succubus.

As he studied her, she stared at him right back, meeting his gaze without flinching. Most mortals averted their eyes and groveled. Groveling got old fast.

A frisson of lust snapped like the crack of a whip. He never desired mortals. Never. “What do you mean, you’ll turn into a harpy?” Harpies were vile creatures. This mortal was far too beautiful to become one of them.

Devon’s mouth tightened, and her lush lips straightened into a tense line. He wanted those lips greedy and wet. Perhaps wrapped around parts of his anatomy. “Answer my questions first,” she demanded. “What do you mean, give you my shuwt?”

Another order? He should turn her into a heap of ash. However, he could use her curiosity to his advantage as he worked to make her his thrall. “I’m the Harvester. When some mortals die, their shuwt comes to me.”

She frowned and her lower lip curled in a way he’d enjoy biting. “I don’t understand. Like their soul?”

“It’s a bit more.” He pointed to the ground at her feet. “It’s like your shadow, always there, always a part of you. Your essence. Those who become a bit, well, twisted during their lifetimes, come to me when their body no longer exists. I harvest their shuwt.” He smiled. “But the wise mortals come to me before their body turns to dust. They know I can give them exactly what they desire.”

With a flick of his hand, piles of gold appeared along the path. “I can provide riches. Or the pleasures of the flesh.” A wiggle of his finger and two nude succubi appeared, undulating their hips. After millennia locked away without sinking into a soft body, he could use a couple of succubi bouncing on his lap, but when he tried to picture it, only the image of Devon and her lips appeared.

Devon waved her hand, and again his illusion wavered and faded away. A flare of anger spurted through him. How was she doing that? His illusions were the most powerful among all the immortals. It was one element that made him a god.

She shook her head. “It’s all fake. Why would anyone want to live a fake life?”

“You can live out whatever you want. Your deepest desires.”

Devon’s lips thinned again. “When they become your thrall, do they die?”

“They die eventually, like any mortal, but not because they gave away their shuwt.” He waved his hand and the gold in the illusion glittered. “And just imagine living your life in perpetual happiness. Your every wish granted.” The illusion of happiness, anyway.

Her eyes narrowed. “And what do you get?”

“Barely anything for the great gifts I give them.” He shrugged one shoulder. “It’s a rather uneven trade. For only a paltry link between us, they get everything they’ve always wanted.”

“A link?”

“Something a thrall can’t feel and won’t care about. A small exchange of their shuwt every day. Just a touch.” Thrall crawled to him, begging to escape their lives. Willing to give him anything. At the snap of his fingers, they’d do whatever he wanted. Obey his every command while also feeding his power daily. When Devon joined him, her will would become his. His gaze dropped to the ring on her thumb again. *And he’d control the boon.*

Devon stepped backwards, so the boulder was in front of her again. “No. I don’t want the illusion of Ulterra. I want the real thing.”

“Come now, little mortal, you know you won’t be able to return to the sunny land above. You were sent down here for a reason.” He cocked an eyebrow. “What was it? Slaughter a few people? Dabble with black magic? I only remember immortals getting cursed to live down here. You must have done something quite naughty.”

Her hands fisted. “No. My mother and a group of her fellow villagers in Ulterra did something bad enough to earn

the name betrayers, but I've never learned what they did. When my mother was banished to Peklo she was pregnant. I was born down here."

He frowned. An expression he rarely indulged in because he usually got what he wanted and had nothing to frown about. What was this stirring in his chest? Pity? Ridiculous. "Give yourself to me, and every moment, you'll believe you're in Ulterra." He snapped his fingers and a verdant forest spread around them, a light rain splattering against their skin.

She gasped.

"You could live in this every day."

As she stared at the forest he'd created, her face smoothed and her gaze turned sleepy, the same drugged expression all his thrall got. All he had to do was whisper her true name in her ear, and he'd have her.

"I'll turn into a harpy by tomorrow. I don't want to become one of them." Her words came out sluggishly.

"What?" His illusion fell. "Why do you keep saying that?"

Devon's expression cleared, and she clutched at the boulder again. "My mother laced my tea with harpy venom a couple hours ago." As Devon explained about some lesser demon and his harpy army and her mother tricking her so they'd both become hideous shrews, his anger surged and he returned to his jackal form, fire blazing from his fingertips.

Devon yelped and leaped backwards. She was already at the mountain's edge, and she lost her balance and tumbled down the side, screaming.

He rolled his eyes and dove after her.

The wind whistled past him as he sliced through the air. Devon was inches from the jagged rocks when he snagged her wrist, and in a flash, he transported them to a spit of sand under a copse of gnarled trees. They landed in a tangle; Devon sprawled on his chest.

A tingle spread like the warmth of the sun from everywhere she lay against him. A sun's warmth he hadn't

remembered until this moment. He expected Devon to scramble away, but she didn't. "You saved me." Her face tilted towards his and he met her gaze.

"Yes." He glanced at her hand, where the ring remained in place. He frowned. "Saving your life should have taken away the boon I owe you."

Her brows shot up, and she raised her hand and studied the ring. "Is that what this is? You grant me a wish?"

He cursed his slip, but didn't toss her off. He rather liked the way her breasts pressed against his chest. "Not a wish. I'm not a djinn. I can provide a service for you, if it's within my power."

Her gaze flickered over his face, but she didn't scramble away in fear, even though he hadn't shifted back to his human form. Slowly, her fingers brushed across his chest. "You're hot to the touch. Even your armor is warm."

"I run hot. Whenever possible, I wear nothing. Nude is best." His voice had deepened into a huskiness he didn't recognize. He flipped Devon onto her back and pinned her under him.

Her breath hitched, but she didn't struggle to get away. "Is it within your power to remove harpy venom?"

"Let's see how much venom is in your system." He lowered to her neck and teased the tip of his tongue up her throat.

She whimpered, but it wasn't fear scenting the surrounding air. It was the deepening plume of honeyed vanilla. *Lust*. "You can taste their venom by licking me? Or are you going to bite me?"

"I'll nibble if you want me to." Rerek couldn't taste harpy venom either way. He'd simply wanted to run his tongue across her skin. "I can destroy the venom in your system, but the only way to burn their venom out is to replace it with mine."

"What?" This time fear spiked through the air, and she scrambled to free herself. He sat up and allowed her to push

him away. “Will I become one of you?”

He laughed. “No. Harpies have no males, and they need venom to create more of their kind. I’m a god. My venom is for a different purpose and much more pleasurable.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Rerek reached up to his headdress and pointed to the snake at his crown. “In my native language, the word for venom and semen is the same—*mtwt*. Both course through you, hot and potent, drugging you with pleasure. The nectar of the gods.”

Devon’s gaze fell to his waist, and his cock twitched in response. “Do I have to chug your ...” Her cheeks pinked.

“I can inject venom into my saliva, too, so no chugging is required. Although, if you’re interested, I won’t stop you.”

Her entire face flamed red as she continued to stare at his groin. “What do you mean, drugging me with pleasure?”

“My venom is for breeding. I haven’t used it before, but I know what it does. Once I give it to you, nothing else will exist except your desire for me to mount you. Over and over.” A shimmer, like what stirred when he called an illusion forward, floated around her for a moment.

The air crackled, as if he’d ignited his fire, but there were no flames anywhere. Desire kicked through his veins. There was something different about this mortal. *Devon*. When he’d roamed Ulterra, many mortals stood before him to grant him their life essence. Some shuwt punched into the air, as if they’d been vicious in life. Others coiled, like they were devious and waiting for the moment to strike. But Devon... she flamed. Far more powerful than any mortal he’d met, and with an intensity that thrummed the longer he remained close to her. He leaned forward and let the primal rush wash over him. It teased the edges of his power. What was strange, though, was his desire was only for Devon, not for taking her power for his own.

The shimmer flickered again.

“How long will your venom stick around? Or am I going to desire you forever?”

“I’ll give you one dose by bite, and the first time I’m inside you, filling you with mtwt, you’ll get another. It’ll last about a day, long enough to burn off the harpy venom.” Rerek raised a brow. “But your desire for me? Once I touch you, you’ll always want more.”

“Is that because of you, or because you’ll cast more of your illusions?”

He growled and grabbed her ankle, pulling her back to him. “I don’t need illusions during sex. I’m fantasy enough.” His grip gentled, and his fingers traced under the cuff of her pant leg. When his fingertips trailed over her skin, she shuddered.

“What have you chosen?” he demanded. “Speak your boon aloud.”

Chapter 3

His touch seared her skin. Even the small whispers of his fingers on her calf. And the way he looked at her right now? She'd never seen anything like it. His gaze flickered with need, desire, and something ... otherworldly. Something far beyond a mortal's ken. As if his entire world turned on her choosing to go to bed with him.

When he'd used his illusions to trick her, his magic had plucked at her to release her life force and give it to him. Right now, that pull of power was absent. He wasn't using any tricks.

The cedar scent she'd only gotten a whiff of before intensified, and she shifted forward. Funny, she'd expected him to smell like the rest of Peklo, of ash and sulfur, but he didn't. She watched his arm as he stroked her calf. Watched the muscles flex and bunch. Damn, he was strong.

She reached up and stroked his jaw. "Will you remain in this form if I accept your venom?"

His breath hitched. "Yes. My jackal form is dominant, and I'm stronger in it. You'll want me to stay in control."

"Why?"

"I'll want to breed. My kind, we knot. If I maintain control, I can prevent that."

Her jaw dropped. "You ... do that?"

His brows rose. "You know about knotting?"

She nodded. "The hellhounds pass through our village sometimes." Her face grew warm. "Many of the women enjoy their company and aren't shy talking about it." No, they'd detailed what it meant when a hellhound knotted them during sex. How he swelled at the base of his shaft and bound them together. And every one of them fought to entertain a hellhound again, so they must have enjoyed it.

Her heart pounded in her chest. He'd bed her like this. In his jackal form. Dangerous. Primal. A lick of heat flamed through her veins, pooling in her abdomen.

He bared his teeth and turned feral again, a crackle of contained rage snapping around him. "Have you bedded a hellhound?" His hand circled her ankle. A possessive hold.

"That's none of your concern."

He tugged her closer. "I've decided you're mine."

"Well, I haven't decided anything yet."

He growled. "You're too lovely to turn into one of the monstrous feathered folk. You should have decided within seconds to let me pleasure you. It's a once in a lifetime experience."

As his words threaded through her, her cheeks warmed. Since he was a god, he must have seen thousands of women, and he'd called *her* lovely. Their gazes locked. "For my boon, I want you to save me from becoming a harpy, then immediately take me to the junction to Ulterra." She sucked in a quick gasp of air, suddenly breathless. "Please."

He growled and rubbed his chest as a slash of heat seared her thumb. Devon yelped and raised her hand. The ebony ring glowed a bright red and the same word from before flashed across its surface, "*Apophis*."

Still rubbing his chest, Rerek snarled and stood. In a flash, he scooped her into his arms. "Your boon has been set." Wind swirled around them, making her hair fly, and the landscape blurred into one mass of grey. Rerek's arms grew hotter. The world around her whirled faster and her stomach roiled. Devon closed her eyes and clung to his neck. A small rumble vibrated through Rerek's chest, a pleasant hum, and she snuggled closer.

The wind died, and she opened her eyes. As Rerek lowered her to her feet, she gasped. They stood in a room with red-hued walls of sandstone. Torches sat in sconces, blazing a bright light over a massive bed, the frame also of sandstone

but the sheets of vivid lapis lazuli. Etched on the headboard was the symbol of the coiled cobra.

Devon circled. Tapestries hung on each wall, all depicting a jackal-headed god with mortals bowing or offering him gifts. Ebony furniture dotted the wide room. A sofa, large enough for an eight-foot male to lounge on, sat along one side, and a dresser, large enough she could lie inside one drawer, stretched across the other. When she shifted her weight, sand from her dusty clothes scattered across a plush yellow and blue rug.

“Are we in an illusion?” she asked.

He scoffed, and she jumped at the harsh sound. “I don’t deceive myself with illusions.”

So, his illusions *were* a deception. Exactly as she’d suspected. “Where are we?”

“Back when I lived in Ulterra, the people of the southern sands built me a massive pyramid for my home. I recreated it. We’re standing in my bedroom.”

The rush of the perpetual winds of Peklo didn’t whistle through cracks in the walls like at her home. It was so quiet she heard her breath coming in quick gasps as she stared at him. His power was so great he’d just *created this from nothing?*

He turned and walked across the room to a sweeping archway. Beyond was a small, tiled room, the floor slightly concave. Rerek reached under one arm, and his breastplate unclasped. He slid it off and hung it on a hook on the wall she hadn’t noticed. His headdress soon joined it. He bent to untie the sandals laced up his calves. “Normally, I have people who undress me.”

She stared at the only clothing he still wore—his armored knee-length short trousers with elaborate fabric draped like a codpiece over it. “You mean your thrall?”

He shrugged. “No. Not always. Many simply wish to admire my form and touch me.” A few more snaps as he unclasped the last of his armor and his golden trousers

loosened. He turned toward the tiled area, giving her his back, and stepped out of them.

Devon sucked in a breath. Naked, he was like a sculpture come to life.

He entered the small room and pulled a chain hanging from the ceiling. Water rained down, trailing over the smooth skin of his back as if wanting to cling to him as long as possible.

Devon's jaw dropped open. "How do you have water like this?"

Rerek shrugged and shifted to face her. She forgot all about the water. He was only partially hard, but his cock was flushed red and as thick as her forearm. He crooked one finger to beckon her forward. "Bathe. I don't want to taste sand on your skin."

She gulped. Was she going to roll around in bed with this dangerous god? One who wanted to bind her to him in servitude? An image of their bodies entwined flashed before her.

The sparks of desire that simmered through her veins fanned into full-blown fire. She'd known lust before, but this? This felt like if she didn't touch him, if she didn't wrap herself around him, nothing would ever be right again. "Did you give me some of your venom when you had your mouth on me earlier?"

He cocked his head. "No. You'll know when I do."

She swallowed hard. Okay, apparently demanding, massive gods turned her on. Or maybe it was just him.

She ducked her head. She had to undress right here? Right now? Devon pivoted to face the wall and drew her shirt over her head. Her fingers didn't seem to work right as she unlaced the ties along her side to remove the bodice binding her breasts. A quick flick, and she unfastened the toggle on her loose pants, and with one shimmy, they dropped to the ground. She was bare.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to the water, but her first step hitched. Rerek stood there, one hand gripping the sill of the archway as if he'd lost his balance. His cock was fully awake now. Tapered at the tip, it swelled into a shaft thicker than her fist. Its base flared even wider.

Rerek growled and strode out of the small room to close the distance between them, dripping water on the floor. He picked her up like it was nothing, and her legs wrapped around his waist. As he re-entered the small bathing area, warm water flowed over her face and hair.

He walked forward until her back bumped into the smooth sandstone wall. "We'll start now." Without waiting for her to respond, his head jerked forward, and his teeth sank into her shoulder. White hot pain streaked through her like she'd been stabbed, but as he licked over the torn flesh, the pain faded. A warm tingle spread from his bite, humming through her veins as it flowed through her.

He grazed his lower teeth up her throat, and she moaned. Every touch, from the light patter of water flowing down her skin to his fingers digging into her waist, felt more intense. More alive. Like before this moment, she'd moved through the world, barely existing. But now ... now she truly *lived*.

Rerek drew back and his fingers brushed over her cheek as he wiped her hair out of her eyes. Something fluttered in her chest. His gesture was tender. Gentle. Not what she'd expected.

"I've been in the obelisk too long. I have no patience to seduce you slowly."

She dug her fingernails into his shoulders. "Who wants to go slow?"

He pressed her more firmly into the wall as his head dipped and he nibbled up her throat. Each lap of his tongue seared. Her heart pounded, and she felt giddy and lightheaded, like she wasn't breathing enough. She clawed him closer. A murmur rumbled through his chest, and she rubbed against him. *More*.

Water rained over her face and dripped down her breasts. So much water. They shouldn't waste it, but as he licked drops from her throat, she couldn't bring herself to tell him to shut it off.

Chest heaving, he paused, his lips caressing the shell of her ear. "I'll take you here up against the wall later. But right now, I want to see you." He reached overhead and pulled the chain to cut off the water, then placed her on her feet. Waving his hand, a gush of warm air puffed over them, drying her skin and hair. "Go lie down on the bed, and spread your legs."

Her left brow rose. Rather a bossy god, wasn't he? But when she opened her mouth with a retort, the words died on her tongue. His shoulders were tense, his back stiff. His amethyst eyes had turned pure black. As she watched, his hands curled into fists. He shuddered once, and purple bled back into his black irises.

He'd said he'd keep his control, but he seemed to be struggling.

Without uttering a word, she turned for the bed. Built for a tall jackal-god, the bed had to be almost four feet off the ground, and she had to crawl up onto it. Smooth, luxurious silk flowed under her palms, and she slid on her hands and knees farther onto the bed. She crooned a pleased, short hum.

A guttural, primal growl ripped through the room, and Devon turned her head to peer over her shoulder. Rerek's eyes had returned to pure black, even the sclera.

He growled again.

Even though she was human, she recognized the sound. It was the feral note of a male about to claim his female. The breath froze in her lungs.

His lips curled up his eyeteeth, and he pounced forward, power whipping around him as he lost control.

Devon scrambled to flip over, but he'd already reached her. One hand landed on her back, keeping her face down. His other hand grabbed her waist, and he slid her across the bed towards him, lifting her backend higher in the air. She'd barely

registered the position he'd pinned her in before his tongue landed on her sex.

She jolted and cried out. His tongue danced between her legs, and each lap was ecstasy. Shots of pure lust hammered through her. He laved over the greedy spot begging for his attention, dragged against it in a few hard strokes, then his tongue plunged deep. Devon keened and her hips snapped upward, giving him better access. There was no slow teasing, only demand.

Over her moans, his breathing ran ragged. Harsh. He licked harder. With the venom coursing through her veins, each touch was magnified. He skated his tongue over her in short, rough licks. The intensity was too much. She whimpered and wriggled.

He snarled, and his fingers tightened along her waist. He worked her faster. His tongue curled. Pure bliss. She catapulted close to the edge, crying his name. The silky sheets twisted in her fingers as she clawed helplessly. Everywhere he touched was fire. Words escaped her. All she could do was moan and whimper, begging wordlessly for release.

"You will come now," he said. More of a growl than words.

A few hard sucks and she shattered under him, her hips bucking. The room blurred and her heart galloped so fast it might give out.

He didn't stop. "Again."

She sobbed and tried to jerk forward. "It's too much—"

"I said again." The hand still on her back pressed her more firmly into the bed, but he switched to feather soft glides over her sensitive flesh. Whereas before he'd chased her to find her release, now he teased, pulling her along. Each time she shuddered, he focused in on what caused it, and repeated the motion. She writhed so long and so hard, sweat beaded at her brow.

When she finally gave up and settled, letting him have his way, he hummed a short chord of approval and quickened his

pace. One long wave of pleasure crashed over her as climaxed again.

His tonguing stopped and Rerek mounted her, his hand leaving her back to slap down near her head. The other remained at her waist, pulling her hips beneath his. His hard chest brushed along her back and his thighs spread hers wide as his cock notched into place.

She squirmed in pleasure, but a thread of awareness trickled in. How was he going to fit? Her eyes widened, and she garbled a note of alarm. She tensed, bracing herself.

One sharp pump of his hips and the tip of his cock wedged inside. She cried out. It burned. Both from the heat of him and the stretch.

He thrust, sinking a few inches deeper. There was no easing, only powerful strokes demanding she accept all of him. He rolled his hips again, spearing farther inside. "You're mine. Every sigh, every whimper." His breath feathered against her neck. "You belong to me. Let me in." His voice had deepened into something savage.

Rerek reared back and slammed forward, all the way to the hilt.

Devon thrashed and keened. He was too thick, the burning too intense. He gripped her waist and held her still as he rooted deeper in small, urgent nudges. Groaning, he stilled, leaving his cock buried deep. The hand at her waist slid around and between her legs. With the pad of one finger, he stroked her.

He rubbed her exactly right, and whether it was the venom or *him*, his teasing touches chased away the lingering pain. While he stroked, her inner muscles clenched and milked his cock. Damn. The way he filled her ... she'd never thought anything could feel this good. Or make her feel this complete. He let out a low, sultry growl, and she twitched and arched under him. As he did it again, he quickened the pace of his finger. A few more flicks, and she screamed as another climax surged through her.

Whispers of his power floated across her skin as it sucked at her. He hadn't moved, but his power coaxed her, a silky caress tugging at her chest. One that wanted her to lose herself and become his thrall.

Devon gritted her teeth and growled. No. Today wasn't about trickery and deception. Rerek would stop using his power and focus on her. Only her. The hell with him holding onto his control.

She reached back, dragged his head down, and bit the side of his neck.

He roared, his cock kicked inside her, and he withdrew, only to lunge forward and fill her again. Each pump stoked the fire inside her. She tilted her hips for more. He hammered with powerful surges, as if he couldn't get deep enough. His power stopped grabbing for her, and she hummed her satisfaction.

Rerek sat back on his heels and pulled her upright, tight against his chest, so she sat in his lap, her back to his front. He held her hips and pulled her up and down on his cock as he thrust.

The angle made it feel like he'd thickened and pushed even deeper. She moaned and her head fell back against his chest. One hand left her hips and palmed her breast. He rubbed a thumb across her nipple and when she jerked; he pinched it. Devon squealed, and her hips bucked. Behind her, Rerek groaned, and his hips pumped faster.

His strokes turned short and insistent, and his arm slid across her chest, his fingers curling over her shoulder to hold her in place against him. Devon felt the base of his cock flare, becoming so thick he had to shorten his strokes as his knot bumped for entry.

His lips brushed her ear. "I want my cock locked inside you."

It took a moment for her to understand what he'd said. "Wait... what?" He'd said he wanted to avoid that.

"You're mine."

He hummed his rich, seductive thrum, and jerked his hips. His knot pressed ... pushed ... then sank inside her. A stab of pain and incredible pressure. With a few more frantic pumps, he locked his knot behind her pubic bone, and it swelled farther, sealing them together. Devon clamped down and shuddered, panting and writhing. It burned, but licks of pleasure also coiled through her.

His cock throbbed with his release. As his warm seed filled her, the venom acted as a balm to her stretched flesh, and the burning faded. Flares of pleasure stoked into molten heat.

“What are you doing to me?” he whispered, brushing the back of his knuckles down her cheek. He leaned forward and brought them both back to the bed to lie on their sides. He rocked against her and nudged deeper. A brief tremor rippled through him, and he groaned as another warm release bathed her insides. He held her pinned in place and pulsed rhythmically as Devon closed her eyes in bliss. Every small motion pressed his knot in exactly the right spot. He curled his hips to drive deeper, and she shattered again.

They remained linked a long time. So long, she lost track of how many times they both rode to a peak.

When they finally parted, he rolled her to face him, and wrapped his fingers in her hair. “Right now, your breathing is deep and smooth. The way it slows when you’re sated. Unlike the stuttering gasps you make when you’re in the throes of pleasure, or the sharp inhale you take when you’re greedy for more.”

A hum threaded through her blood. Desire uncoiling again. “I know your breathing too,” she whispered. “How it turns ragged when your desire builds.” He was already stiff against her hip, ready to go again. She reached down and gripped him. He was so thick her fingers couldn’t touch as they circled around him. When she pumped, his chest heaved.

His mouth landed on her neck, and he nibbled up her throat. “I own the power of fire. I’ve scorched entire forests to the ground. Yet the hottest I’ve ever burned is for you.”

Her breath hitched. Was this the venom talking? Or him?
“Burn for me again.”

Rerek growled and rolled her onto her back. “All day and
all night.”

Chapter 4

Prickling, like tiny claws across his skin, needled Rerek awake. He lay on his back in human form, his arms wrapped around Devon as she used his chest for her pillow. He'd spent the last day inside her, and still his cock stirred to take her again. Her hand splayed across his ribs and a flash of red winked from her thumb as the ring glowed.

As dawn approached, he'd sensed the absence of his venom and her previously blown out pupils returned to normal. Yet she'd still reached for him and greedily run her hands over his body.

The last time they'd coupled, he'd taken her slowly, knowing her desire was truly for him.

His power lay banked and quiet. It didn't curl around her to tempt her to become his thrall. Right now, it would be easy to bind her shuwt to him and place her under his will, but something ... stopped him. Once he bound her to him, she'd be only blind obedience and vacant eyes. He wanted her writhing in pleasure. Wanted her using her teeth and fingernails on his skin. No thrall would dare to do that.

When he'd first sunk inside her, his power—thirsty for the boost of a shuwt—reached for her. But then he'd lost all control, gone into a rut, and nothing else existed except feeling her clench around his cock as he knotted her. To hold her until his heart slowed and beat in tandem with hers.

He never knotted. Yet with Devon? She belonged locked to him. Completely his.

The ring pulsed again, and the clawing sensation across his skin increased. How long had they slept? It couldn't have been more than an hour. Maybe two. *'For my boon, I want you to save me from becoming a harpy, then immediately take me to the junction to Ulterra.'* He groaned. Why had she said immediately? Had she worried he'd keep her with him? His arms tightened, and Devon let out a small sigh as she nestled closer.

She was right to be worried about that.

In her boon request, all she'd asked was for him to *bring* her to the junction, not help her cross. Once he transported her there, the boon would be fulfilled, and he could carry her straight back to his bed. He wasn't finished with her. He'd barely even started.

The ring flashed again, and the needling increased to stabbing. He shifted and gently peeled Devon off him. "We need to finish your boon. Get dressed and let's go."

While he fastened his armor back on, out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Devon slipped back into her clothes. She remained quiet. Was it because he'd worn her out, or because she thought of Ulterra?

It was a mere flick of his power to sense where the nearest crossing place was and transport the two of them there. They landed at the base of a high mountain, the dark shale of its jagged face towering over them. Ash clogged the air and rivulets of flame singed past as lava burbled in cracks at their feet.

His kind of place.

A yawning cave marked the entrance to the junction, and from within, a willowy form with cerulean skin and pure white hair walked forward. The soot didn't land on her and turn her pale hair grey. It bounced off her in sharp pings. His brows rose. An ala? Really? He'd thought those immortals long extinct, yet here one stood, guarding the junction.

At least she was in her mortal form and not in her raven one. Alas were notoriously bad-tempered, but they were much worse in raven form.

Devon coughed. He frowned and let a small bit of his power sneak out and form a barrier around her to burn the impurities from the air before they reached her lips.

"One of the cursed and one of the betrayers," the ala said. "Why are you here?" Even in mortal form, her voice still resembled a caw.

Devon squared her shoulders and took a step forward, disentangling her fingers from his, and his hand fell, forlorn, against his side. "I'd like to go to Ulterra. Please." The ala studied her, and while she did, the ebony ring on Devon's thumb crumbled into dust.

He'd fulfilled the boon.

As the dust scattered into the wind, Rerek summoned each speck and caught them in his palm. Now was the time for him to whisk her away.

The ala's eyes narrowed. "You don't have the stain the other betrayers have. You aren't one I must keep from the suns above. But to cross, I require a toll."

Devon's face crumpled, and she raised her arms. "I have nothing."

The ala surveyed her coolly. "Not exactly true. You have an escort." Her gaze flicked to Rerek. "I haven't had one of his kind warm my bed. He joins me, and consider the toll paid."

Devon growled and stepped in front of him, placing herself between him and the ala. "Not a chance."

Something wrenched in his chest, as if a hand squeezed his heart. Everything around him seemed to pause. Even the plumes of ash in the sky hung in the air. In that moment, *he knew*.

The ala laughed. "You're a possessive creature, aren't you? But no one tells me no." Her smile widened. "I take him, or your memories of him. They float in your mind like little jewels of happiness."

Devon gasped and took a step back, brushing against him. "No."

Rage coursed through him, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. *He* decided if Devon stayed in Peklo or not. Not this immortal bound to her lava mountain. What was her power compared to his?

He glanced at Devon as she stood between him and the ala. She stared at the ground, her arms wrapped around herself and

her shoulders slumped. Another sharp pain lanced through his chest.

While Peklo was his playground, it was her prison. If he took her back to his bed, she'd enjoy being with him, but her heart would always seek ... something else.

He wasn't sharing her heart with Ulterra. He'd own all of it.

Was he really considering letting her go? He sighed. If he spoke to the other immortal mentally, would she receive it? Some communicated through the mind, and some didn't. **You'll take another toll and let her pass.**

The ala tilted her head. **Hmmm**, she responded. **What are you offering? You have the power of fire, but I have no need for that.** She waved her hand. **Plenty of fire around here. Your illusion magic is powerful ... but that doesn't tempt me, either.** She raked her gaze down his body. **Turn your attention to a more worthy partner, yes?**

The ala had a unique beauty all her own, but his lust, always a flame ready to turn into a fire, didn't flare for her at all. He glanced at Devon again. **I've found the one I want.**

That ala's gaze burned into his, her milky eyes glowing. **One night with me, and I'll change your mind. And I'll let her leave with her memories.**

Fire flamed from his fingertips. **You don't barter with a god. I've offered to pay the toll. Take it. I'll only offer once.** Whatever this ala said, whatever measly thing she'd want, it was nothing. A mere trifle.

He sensed the ala's lust increasing, and it made his tongue want to curl backwards in his mouth. If he hadn't been certain before, now he knew for sure. His lust would only burn for Devon for the rest of eternity.

When his kind found their mate, there was no other. He was willing to tie himself to yet another boon, only for her.

I can't leave my mountain and there is something I'd like. Agree to get it for me and she can go, but I'm still taking her memories of you. No one tells me no. If she's

truly yours, then she'll return to you, won't she? The ala glanced at Devon. Or maybe not. Mortals seem more inconstant than immortals, don't they?

He jerked his head in a curt nod. **Fine. We have an agreement.**

He pushed the barrier he'd created around Devon out farther to surround them both, forming a barrier so they could speak in private. He turned her to face him. A quick flash of his magic, and the dust in his palm turned into a ring again. He slipped it back on her thumb and the word etched on its surface winked in the murky light. He stroked his fingertip over it. "Did you read it?"

She nodded. "Apo—"

He placed his finger on her lips, even though the ala couldn't hear them. "My true name."

Her eyes widened. "What—"

"Go to Ulterra." He held her hand between his and ran his thumb over the ring. "See what it offers, and you'll realize nothing compares to me. Speak my name and we will reunite."

A sheen appeared in her eyes. "But I'll have forgotten you."

"No one forgets me." His gaze fell to the pink of her lips. How would they feel against his? They'd done many things together over the past day, but he hadn't kissed her. What would it feel like to kiss someone?

He slid his hand into her hair, holding her in place, and bent his head so his mouth was only a fraction away from hers. Her lips parted and their breath entangled.

He closed the distance and brushed his lips over hers.

A wrench twisted in his chest, and sparks exploded behind his eyelids. Had the volcano erupted around them? He grabbed her hip and hauled her against him. She belonged here, pressed against his body.

All he wanted was more of her taste on his tongue, so he feasted. He sucked, nipped, then ran the tip of his tongue along

the seam of her mouth until she opened for him. She whimpered, and the blood pounded in his ears.

Maybe they were in the underworld, but this was heaven.

He explored her mouth, every nuance of her addictive taste. Delving deeper, he gripped her harder, and she moaned. More. He needed more. There'd never be enough.

As he plundered, he let his magic out in a single small thread and let it seep into her ring. He poured his memories of the past day they'd spent together, from her freeing him from the obelisk, to waking up this morning tangled together. If she forgot, when he kissed her again, it would all return.

With a jerk, he pulled back.

She panted, her lips swollen. "How will I know to say your name if I don't remember this?"

"You'll know."

The ala stood with her arms crossed, staring at them, her face more pointed and feathers cropping up on her shoulders. Hail showered around them.

"It's time for you to go. Soon the ala will anger me so much I'll toss her out of her mountain and take it for myself."

Devon turned and looked over her shoulder at the entrance to the cave. She caressed his ring. "Thank you."

And Devon walked away.

The ala put her hand on Devon's shoulder, and a milky vapor drifted from Devon's head. He watched as they entered the cave and disappeared.

Rerek crossed his arms. He'd get whatever the ala wanted and in the meantime, take over the underworld. Afterward, if he had to burn this place to the ground to get to Devon, he would.

Devon was his and he wouldn't remain parted from her for long.

Want to read more about the world of Ulterra? While the junctions are guarded by immortals, the werewolf pack are the

ultimate protectors of Ulterra and they decide who can and cannot enter. Rerek will have to work with them if he wants to find Devon. Come and read the first story in the Werewolves of Ulterra series, [Fate Awakened](#).

Rerek and Devon's book arrives in the Immortals of Ulterra series, coming soon.

Want to stay in the loop? [Join my newsletter](#) and receive a free story in Ulterra that features a Dark King.

About Jocelyn Montana

Jocelyn Montana is a fantasy and paranormal romance author focusing on her two series featuring the world of Ulterra. She lives outside of Boston, Massachusetts with her boyfriend of ten years and her chiweenie Marcus, also known as The Dog Who Will Do Anything for Ham. She loves werewolves, and demons, and all sorts of fun supernatural beings. She'd like to thank Disney and their movies: Beauty and the Beast, and Robinhood (animated version) for showing her that handsome heroes don't always look like men.

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www.jocelynmontana.com

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*This anthology celebrates the 2nd anniversary of [Monsters, Demons, Knotting, Oh My!](#) a Facebook group for discussing/admiring/drooling over Romance heroes who are **uniquely equipped**. We aren't simply talking about size. We're talking shape and function. Monsters, demons, aliens, shifters, omegaverse alphas, etc. If you love M/F books with weird and wonderful "packages" this is the place for you. Geared toward PNR and Sci-Fi but all genres and readers are welcome.*