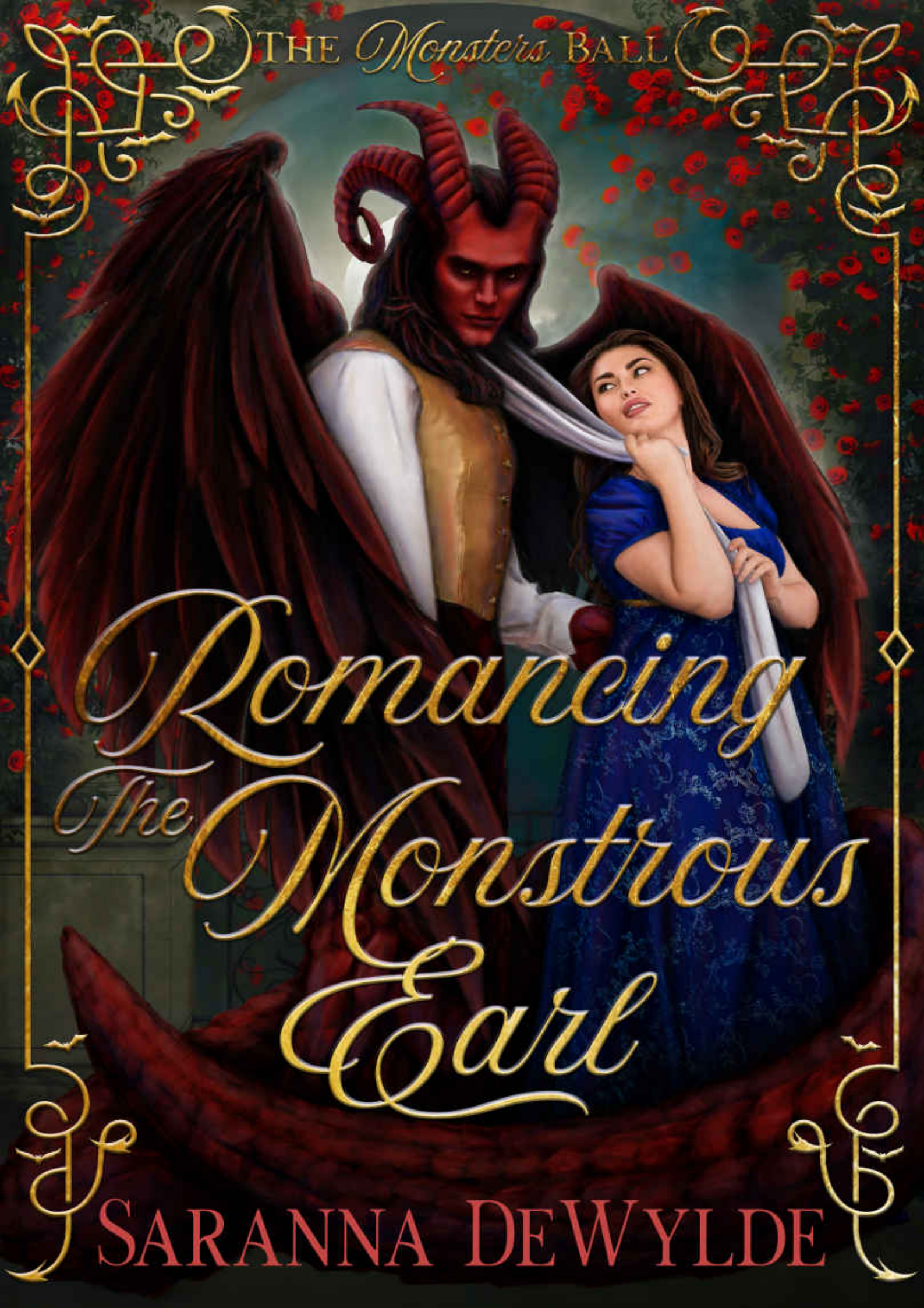


THE Monsters BALL



Romancing
The Monstrous
Earl

SARANNA DEWYLDE

Romancing the Menstruous Earl

SARANNA DEWYLDE



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The High Tea

Oh, Dearest Reader! It has come to my attention, and so it must come to yours, that one of our favorite scandalous heiresses has been invited, nay—*ordered*, to attend the Monsters Ball. This author has obtained a copy of her invitation and it's just as outrageous as any one of us could have hoped.

“Dear Lady Yvaine of Moray,

It is with no great regret that Her Majesty informs you that after the unfortunate fencing incident with Lord Tyler, the stabbing of the younger Lord of Malay with a hat pin, and finally, the brawl with the Ladies Banning (including the Dowager), it is Her decree that you shall attend The Monsters Ball, and there you will find among them a husband to match your harridan, monstrous nature.”

Fencing? Stabbing? Brawling? Society knows that things are a bit less conventional in the wilds of Moray, but Lady Yvaine might be too much harridan even for our eligible monsters. (Lord Tyler is a renowned swordsman and we can only assume an undefined, unfortunate incident means the lady trounced the lord at his own game, and he incurred some truly embarrassing injury beyond his pride.)

I cannot speak to the younger Lord of Malay, but I haven't seen him invited about Town after word of his stabbing made the rounds. We must infer he was inappropriate in some way. While the youthful Ladies Banning are a delight, I'll confess, a singular, unladylike desire to let fly with the Dowager Lady Banning myself. For that alone, I shall be cheering for Lady Y to make a grand match.

Until next time my friends, sip slowly.

Lady Grey

One



Maidenbury

Maelstrom, Lord Pandemonium and the Earl of Evernight was more like a Prince of Hell than English peerage. He skulked about, not in a sprawling country house, but a veritable castle filled with shadows and mystery. At least, he had until he'd become a regular at the Monsters Ball.

At first, he'd found the entire affair to be ridiculous. Monsters prancing about with human ladies. Not just prancing but *dancing*. He snorted aloud. Minding their manners as if they themselves were sweet young misses being presented at Almack's while pinned, tucked, and stuffed into silks and velvet.

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

Of course, to his great chagrin, he now found himself purchasing said country house, complete with a proper English garden and staff so he could be nearer the ball, monster tailors, and the monster social scene. He did also quite enjoy English roses. (The plants, as well as the women.)

He could fly, so it was no great feat to travel, but Her Majesty frowned on the ruckus and display he made when he chose to go overland, his giant snake-like tail and horns frightening the common folk. He would've thought that they'd be used to monsters by now, since it had been years since the plague. Yet, many still gasped or outright screamed when they saw him. Although, he supposed that was fair. They didn't understand upper crust fashion.

That was one thing he enjoyed about his lands, Evernight, no such human sensibilities. Once upon a time, before the darkness, Evernight had been known as Orkney, but when he and the darkness came, the last of the hardy lot of humans that called that harsh landscape home had fled.

However, as much as he enjoyed the ball, he had no intention of actually marrying any of the misses he met there. He couldn't fathom shackling himself to a wife. Or, her to him, really.

His goals in attending the ball were comprised of three Ds: Dance, Dally, and Dandy. Mael had no use for a wife. He did not need to continue his line. Darkness and the things in it managed his home just fine. This was the extent he cared to join society.

Checking the fit of his light green jacket, crisp white linen shirt, and his perfectly tied cravat in the long mirrors that ringed the ballroom, Mael was satisfied that even Brummel would approve of his look. Not that he cared.

Well, *perhaps* he cared a bit. He could admit that. There was no reason not to be a stylish monster. After all, who had more panache than the beasts among them? The elegant lines of a satyr's legs? The perfection of constantly burning blue fire? The Fibonacci curve to a set of horns? The sheer majesty

of the wings on those who could fly? All sheer gorgeousness and gorgeosity.

Was gorgeosity a word? Bah, he didn't care. It was if he said it was. He was an earl, after all.

With a wave of his hand he instructed the shadow at the pianoforte to continue playing the lively number that had him slithering rather elegantly across the ballroom floor, cutting quite a dashing figure, if he did say so himself.

And he did.

Say so.

“Belial, aren't I fine figure?” His deep baritone echoed over the music.

“Yes, Lord Pandemonium. Your horns are sharp, your visage fearsome—”

“No, no. I know that.” He waved him off. “My dancing, my good man. My dancing.”

“Ah, yes. Quite.” The shadow at the pianoforte continued playing until suddenly the tendrils of darkness quivered and a mighty wail echoed through the room as he began to dissipate.

“Don't be so dramatic,” Mael replied. “I simply—”

Just then, the ball doors were flung open by a (delightfully) uniformed regiment and he knew it could only be the Queen herself had come to call.

“Must you do that when you enter? Flinging about your ‘divine right’ to rule gives my minions migraines,” Mael drawled. They were also forced to do her bidding. It was their price to be in this realm.

Queen Charlotte emerged from behind her soldiers and glided toward him, a vision of white lace-cobwebbed perfection. Of course, she always looked gorgeous, even though she tended to wear styles from her youth that on anyone else would be extremely out of fashion. Though, her beauty wasn't simply because she was queen. Those vintage cuts and fabrics actually complemented her better than any current fashion.

She splayed her arms. "Fitting for a visit to a monstrous earl, wouldn't you say?"

Mael took the gloved hand she presented him, bowed over it and kissed the air above, not quite touching. "You look glorious as always, my Queen."

"Hmm. Indeed." She lifted her chin.

The heat of her pointed, dark-eyed gaze bored into him and he felt she was waiting for something else from him. "Not that a visit from you isn't the highest honor, but notification would have been nice. So I could've prepared quarters. Tea. We're not yet outfitted for human visitors."

"That's part of the problem, Pandy."

The growing shadows in the corners of the ballroom tittered with laughter and the Queen's guards took up sentry posts around the room, seeming to be inured to the presence of the sentient shadows.

Mael rolled his eyes. "Please don't call me that," he muttered.

"My dandy Pandy," Queen Charlotte cooed, obviously just to irritate him. "I grow tired of waiting for you to take a bride."

He tried not to cough, but the sudden urge to clear his throat was a most pressing matter. As was the fact that the Queen had lost her mind. Whatever had afflicted George had now impressed itself upon his wife.

“Your Majesty, I don’t believe I heard you correctly.”

“Are your horns blocking your ears? Or is your cravat too tight? I do believe I was quite clear.” Charlotte tilted her head to the side, her lips pressed together tightly.

This time, he coughed.

“Speechless, are you? How long did you think I’d allow you to slither about with no obvious heir to your lands? If you want to keep Evernight, you’ll marry and produce an heir on which I should like to dote.”

Sounds of approval rumbled from the shadows.

He cut a sharp sideways glance toward them. *Traitors.*

When he didn’t speak, she said, “It’s a bounty of riches, I know.”

“Ma’am, the *monstrum plaga*—”

“None of that nonsense, Mael. Truly. I know you think you’re different than the other monsters, and you are. But only so far as your origins. In this matter, I require only your obedience. I can command it with my ‘divine right’ to rule these lands as you say. If you disobey me, your stay in this world will be short. But I’d much rather have your willing capitulation because you respect and honor me as your queen.”

She really knew how to drive the sword straight through his heart.

He loved Charlotte. Honestly. Truly. She was a good queen who cared about her people. All of her people. But the fact

remained that she was human.

He was not.

He never had been.

“Plus, as I said, it has occurred to me that I desire a baby Pandy. With large eyes and sharp little teeth to bounce on my knee.”

The very idea.

He decided to try another angle. “Madam, have you considered what you’d be inflicting on your subject to demand I produce an heir with a human woman?”

“Of course. I’ve had fifteen children myself.” She turned her head and looked around the room. “Belial. Sincerest apologies for the migraine. Do return and play for us.” Charlotte turned her face up to Mael. “If you’re going to tower over me, you might as well dance with me.”

When Belial returned to the ivories, Mael dutifully led Queen Charlotte in a lively romp across the floor.

“In any event,” she began, a bit breathless. “I have decreed it shall be so and your wife, whoever she may be, will be the better for it.”

“What poor curse have you laid on your subjects that bearing a half-demon child will leave the chit better for it?”

She smacked at his arm. “Pish. One, don’t call your future bride names. Two, there are demons all over the place. Frost demons and the like. Landed, with titles. And—” She leaned in to whisper as if conspiring. “—happily wed and bred, as your lot likes to say.”

“My lot? I’d never.” He gasped like a spinster aunt.

“If you insist on being pedantic, you’ll be a viscount by dinner.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. “There’s no need for violence.”

The Queen flashed him a beaming smile. “I’m so glad we understand each other.”

“Indeed, we do.”

An heir? Was she insane? How could she just look up at him with her sweet face after uttering something so awful?

He tried to imagine his spawn. He couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t.

“Stop making that face at me, Pandy. It’ll all work out to your *and my* utmost delight. Which of course, is the most important part.”

“Your delight?” he questioned.

“Obviously.” She held up her hand and snapped her fingers.

Two of her regiment stepped forward, rolling a giant silver cart outfitted with all things necessary for a proper tea toward them and two more stepped inside carrying a small table and a high-backed chair covered in red velvet. The Queen sat down and without being asked Belial wormed his way over and wrapped himself around the teapot.

“Just so,” the Queen inclined her head at his servant. “Really, Pandy. You must fix this immediately if you hope to host a bride here.”

He didn’t hope to host a bride. He wrinkled his nose. “I shall see to it.”

Then he noticed a delightful, non-tea scent was wafting from the teapot. To his joy, he realized it was drinking chocolate.

He tried not to drool. That would be ungentlemanly.

And unlordly.

Belial unwrapped himself from around the teapot and took human form. He was dressed impeccably, in black velvet with silver piping, as was a requirement for service to Mael. He poured the drinking chocolate and served up various bits of pastry from the cart.

Again, the Queen's regiment didn't seem at all affected by what was happening around them. Which pleased him. Drinking chocolate was not the beverage or treat of choice when fear overrode humans' control of their bodily functions.

As was polite, he waited for Charlotte to sip her drinking chocolate before taking a sip of his own.

She held the cup to her lips without taking a sip for what seemed like forever.

He realized all of this time here was making him soft. He knew what forever felt like, and it wasn't an extended moment between himself and gratification.

Finally, she sipped her chocolate and replaced it on the tray and then produced a folded paper from her reticule.

It was a gossip sheet. *The High Tea*.

"I'm sure you've seen this."

A grin curved his mouth. "Of course."

"Have you been introduced to the Lady Yvaine of Moray?"

Oh no. She couldn't mean... Well, that would be ridiculous. The Lady Yvaine was a child. In fact, as he peered over the gossip sheet again, he realized he had a duty. Perhaps to utterly destroy and eviscerate the Lords Tyler and Malay, seeing as how the lady was all alone without a guardian and they must've done something ungentlemanly to earn that kind of response from her.

"Your lands could be joined," Queen Charlotte said lightly. "It would be quite the coup of the Season."

He cleared his throat again. "The last time I saw the Lady Yvaine she was three. She climbed my back like a cat from hell, grabbed my horns and screamed "giddyup" at the top of her lungs.

"She hasn't changed much, has she?" Charlotte asked.

"Ma'am. She is but a child."

"She's practically on the shelf, Pandy. She's twenty-three. Lord Tyler says she's quite mad."

He took another sip of his drinking chocolate. "Lord Tyler should be flogged within an inch of his life for whatever he did to earn the 'unfortunate fencing incident'."

"So you don't believe it was an accident? Neither do I." Charlotte wore a smug expression. "I'm delighted to see that you already feel protective."

"As I would of any young woman as is my duty as a lord of the realm," he corrected.

She scowled at him. "You're not getting out of this. It doesn't have to be her, but it better be someone. I expect an announcement after this ball or I shall choose someone for you."

“It seems as if you already have.”

“Maelstrom,” she used his full name. “We’ve known each other a long time. In the business of marriage, parents often arrange these things for their children. As you have no family to do this for you, I must act in your best interests.”

He almost laughed aloud, but then realized she was deadly serious.

Mael accepted the fact he had to take a wife. He didn’t like it. But he accepted it. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad. He enjoyed a life of leisure, after all. If this was the price to pay, then so be it.

But definitely not the harridan from Moray. He’d lend her his protection, and really, he’d been remiss in not offering his assistance when her parents had passed in that truly tragic gondola incident. Further, he had nothing against harridans, but there was no reason to make his life any harder than it already was.

Yes, that’s what he’d do. He’d introduce himself to her at the ball, offer her assistance in screening (intimidating) her suitors, he was quite good at that and did have the wherewithal to follow through, but then he’d pursue some pleasant, dutiful, miss who had a thing for wings and horns and call it a... what was the human lifespan again? Regardless, it was only a wink of time in his long existence.

“I see your brain working, Mael. What sort of devilry are you hatching?”

He bared all of his sharp teeth in a smile. “Only how to best serve you, Majesty.”

Queen Charlotte raised a brow and harrumphed. “We shall see, won’t we?”

Two



The Lady Yvaine Stuart of Moray was currently living up to her wild harridan nature riding hell-bent for leather on an amber-colored Courser hunting for the night's dinner.

Like Queen Boudica from the days of yore, she galloped behind the buck, her bow drawn and aim sure. Her dark hair whipped behind her, a wild banner. After she let the arrow fly and it struck true, only then did she slow her horse and rub the side of the animal's flank.

"Fantastic shot, my lady." Her bugbear gamekeeper rumbled as he emerged from the forest.

"We'll be having venison tonight, Michael." Yvaine was proud of herself.

"Aye, lass. We will." He flashed her a grin. "Far be it from me, my lady, but—"

"If it is far from you, then leave it where it lies." Yvaine gave him a gentle smile, but the last thing she needed was scolding on how to be a lady from him, too. Thus far, he'd been her only ally.

"It's just this Monsters Ball." He let the rest of what was unsaid lie still and quiet.

“Perhaps in the monsters, I’ll find a male who is strong is enough to be my husband. I doubt it, but perhaps.”

It wasn’t simply that Yvaine was wild. Though, she was. She was every inch a child of Moray. A wild spirit made flesh, connected to the land of her birth, and the people here. She took the care of the lands very seriously. She had a warrior’s heart and she’d never be ashamed of that. Even if that meant she’d never be the right fit for the *ton’s* drawing rooms and inanities she couldn’t have given a fig less about.

These pale English lords with their soft hands, even softer brains who thought they were a match for her.

She shook her head to herself.

No, it wasn’t only her wildness.

It was the fact that she was being harrowed by an imp from hell.

Literally.

While the fencing incident and stabbing were hers to claim, the fight with the Dowager was entirely the imp’s fault. He’d slapped her silly and left Yvaine to take the blame.

When she’d been a child, Alasdair had been a delight. He’d been her best friend. They’d gotten into “small troubles” together. Putting frogs in her governess’s bed, sailing imaginary ships across mud puddles, and sneaking away from her dancing master.

So she could not, in fact, dance.

However, as she’d grown, so had her small troubles. Until the day her imaginary friend had proven he wasn’t so imaginary.

One of her ancestors had made a deal with a devil to keep his lands. The next girl child to be born to the Moray line was the price. Somehow, it had been only sons until Yvaine. Now, unless she could find a way out of this mess, she was doomed.

She needed a monster more monstrous than Alasdair and her last hope was to find him among the lords at the Monsters Ball. Or spend the rest of her days on holy ground, but he'd sworn that if she did that, he'd make her people pay.

Yvaine couldn't have that.

"Perhaps you will," Michael agreed softly. It was clear from his tone and body language that didn't like any of her options either. "So the monks were no help?"

"None at all." She dismounted as Michael walked over to the deer and hoisted it up onto his massive shoulders. "I didn't expect they would be, but Alasdair almost had me burned for a witch."

"What do you mean?"

They began walking back toward the estate, she leading her horse and Michael hauling the deer as if it were nothing more than a mink stole around his neck.

As soon as I stepped foot on holy ground, the storm came. Clouds black as night, rain sharp as arrowheads. Thunder, well, like it was rattling the gates of Hell.

"The imp throwing a fit?"

"A massive fit. I told him I wasn't staying. But that didn't matter. He's displeased I'm not looking forward to being claimed." She shook her head. "As soon as I left, the skies cleared. They said I was a witch from a long line of witches and a bunch of other rot."

“Rot indeed, Lady Yvain.” As they moved along, he continued. “I wonder how long he has the sauce to hold out on a display such as that?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“There are some villages to the south that could use some rain,” he said solemnly.

She laughed. Michael’s practical, no nonsense way of looking at the world was always just what she needed. Whether it was his presence, or his wisdom, she always felt safe around him. Since he’d come to the estate with no memory except for his name, and a seeming sixth sense for working with the animals, they’d become like family.

Another reason she was no fit for proper society. He’d never be just a gamekeeper. He was her friend. Her family. They took care of one another. Those bonds mattered more to her than anything anyone else thought of her.

That was probably why Lord Tyler had thought that she was his for the taking. He assumed that the mad heiress who spent so much time alone with a strapping bugbear was already “soiled.” Hence she’d challenged him to a duel to fight for her own honor.

And not only had he lost, he’d gone to the nearest tavern and bemoaned his fate while drinking himself to oblivion.

If she’d been him, there would’ve been no way that anyone could’ve dragged that out of her.

“I still don’t like you alone on the road. Traveling all of the way to Maidenbury?” He shook his head.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll be under the Queen’s protection. If nothing else, you-know-who won’t let anyone else interfere in

his nefarious plans for me. Should I be accosted by brigands, bandits, or highwaymen, I'd fear more for them than myself."

"At least he's good for something."

She didn't want to speak about Alasdair any longer. Too much thinking about him or speaking his name brought his presence and since the monastery incident, he'd been blessedly absent. Yvaine knew he wasn't gone forever, but she'd take what she could get.

"Shall we have a stew this evening?"

The gamekeeper nodded.

The imp had run off all of the other staff. It was simply Yvaine and Michael.

"Perhaps a biscuit or two," he added.

"Or a dozen."

Her horse nickered.

"Some oats for you, too." She rubbed his forelock and he pushed his head into her hand as they walked.

Suddenly, a sound unlike any she'd ever heard erupted from the horse. It was deep, guttural and he began to froth at the mouth, his eyes wild.

"That was quite the adventure, Yvaine."

She tightened her hands into fists as the horse morphed into a tall, thin, gaunt man with long white hair dressed in black. Alasdair. A literal growl erupted from her lips.

"That's Lady of Moray to the likes of you," the bugbear grumbled.

Instead of being angry at being corrected, Alasdair simply tsked. "When she is my bride, she'll have no need of the titles

of men.”

“I hate you,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Hmm. Quite. But here’s what’s going to happen. Eventually, you’ll forget that you hate me. All you will know is me. All you’ll be able to see, smell, hear, touch or taste will be me. I’ll become your whole world, just as you’ve been mine these long years.” He smiled, baring a mouthful of fangs that reminded her of an animal trap. “Yes, mine. I know your plan and it will fail. There’s no one on this earth who can take you from me. Our contract is one signed in blood. So have your last hurrah. Enjoy your ball. Indulge in cup after cup of ratafia and dance the night away with your monsters.” He pretended to consider. “Or perhaps not, since you cannot dance. But indeed, give it your all.” Alasdair leered in her face. “None of it, in the end, will signify.”

Michael, still walking with the deer over his shoulders as if he were on promenade in Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens instead of in the wild forest didn’t miss a step as he said, “I hear tell of a lord who was never human.”

Yvaine knew exactly to whom he was referring. Her neighbor to the north. The place where the sunlight never shone and was shrouded in mist and mystery.

“They say he was part of the Queen’s Curse.”

Alasdair spit on the ground. “What do you know of it, simpleton? If you can’t remember aught but your name, perhaps you aren’t the best one to be whispering gossip, eh?”

“Perhaps I shall set my cap for the Earl of Evernight.” She straightened her shoulders.

“Do you know what they call him in Hell? He is Lord Pandemonium. He may pretend to ponce about, put on a

human veneer, but he is all monster.”

“Then maybe that’s exactly what I need.”

“Then maybe I shall come to you in the night and whisper of his dark deeds, a lullaby, if you will, and if that doesn’t change your mind, then let me remind you. There is no power on earth that can break the contract that gave you to me. None.”

Fear surged through her, but Yvaine shoved it down deep. “That same song is becoming tiresome, Alasdair. If you were smart, or even worthy of me, you’d be wooing me to your cause instead of trying to force me.”

He wrinkled his nose, obviously insulted. “What do you call the last twenty-three years? And you say ‘trying’ as if the end isn’t a foregone conclusion.”

“Perhaps the dark lord in the north will have something to say about that. Yvaine is very beautiful. Their combined holdings would be a coup.”

“I’m already bored of this.” Alasdair disappeared in a puff of sulfurous smoke.

“Do you really think I should set my cap for the Earl of Evernight?” She asked him as they approached the outbuilding where he would dress the deer.

“In the taverns, they say that Queen Charlotte herself has instructed him to take a bride. Even he is not above her will. You’ll do as well as any other and perhaps, he’ll allow you to stay in Moray. You could do worse.”

She knew some of the gossip that circulated about her. About how she’d been mad long since before her parents had died. She had to be to have simply climbed up the demon earl and demanded he entertain her.

Yvaine had no memory of the incident, but perhaps he did. She wondered what he'd think of her pursuit.

"Michael?" she asked slowly.

"Yes, my lady?" His voice was carefully metered with the infinite patience he seemed to have for all of her escapades.

"You are a gamekeeper."

"Is that in question?"

"No, but it means you're an expert in all things hunting related."

"I wouldn't say all things, but I know a fair lot." He nodded as he laid the deer down on the table.

"Would you know then how to hunt a husband?"

Michael strung the deer up and set to work on it, talking as he went through fluid and practiced motions. "I rather imagine it's like hunting any other game. You must first choose your prey. Only with men, and monsters, you must not let them know they're prey. You must let them think it's their idea. At least, that's what I gather."

"I think I can do that. Unless he takes too long."

He nodded. "I don't think it will take anyone too long to know what a treasure they have in you, Lady Yvaine."

In all the years that she'd known Michael, she'd never known him to have any kind of companionship. Of course, if he kept time with fancy ladies, he wouldn't be telling her about it. But she'd asked him once if he didn't want to fall in love and he'd said that not being able to remember his past wasn't fair to him, to anyone he should fall in love with, or any of the people he might've left behind.

He also figured no one would want a bugbear. Though, for all his ferocity, was one of the most gentle creatures she'd ever known. At least with her.

She supposed gentle, by her definition, might have been relative.

“What am I going to do if this doesn't work?” she whispered.

“I won't lie to you and tell you it'll be okay. It'll be the worst thing that's ever happened to you.” Michael continued stripping the meat off the carcass. “But what you'll do is bide your time and make him wish he'd never thought your name.”

She nodded slowly. If nothing else, revenge was always on the table.

“I know you're scared, but fear isn't going to help you. Just moxie.”

Moxie had never been something she'd been lacking. Just then, an idea came to her. Perhaps she'd just have to seduce herself a monster.

“I would say I don't like the look on your face,” he began without even looking over at her. “But times and needs are dire. Whatever you're hatching, best make sure it works.”

First, she had to pick a monster, but so far, the only one in the running was the Earl of Evernight. He seemed to be the best option.

But how did one go about seducing a lord? Or a demon for that matter?

She considered questioning Michael further, but decided against it. This didn't seem like the type of topic he'd be

comfortable speaking about. Although, being Alasdair's property didn't sound very comfortable either.

Yvaine quietly took her leave and walked toward the manor house. As she did, another idea occurred to her.

She could simply tell Evernight what she was about. Throw herself on his mercy, if he had any.

While she was inexperienced, she did know that this idea didn't sound like nearly as much fun as seducing him.

Yvaine understood how it worked in theory. She knew the workings of the land and animal husbandry.

Demon husbandry had to be similar.

Yet, considering what she thought she knew about the Earl of Evernight, it didn't seem he had the same equipment or at least not placed for human relations. Her curiosity had silenced her fear.

She realized that she'd seduce him for the sheer pleasure of the knowledge she'd gain.

Even as the thought occurred to her, Yvaine knew that sans curse, she'd still be no fit bride for any lord, no decorative drawing room piece. She tried to be okay with that, but there was a part of her deep down that wondered if maybe she should try harder to fit in. To be part of society.

To do her parents proud.

Although, that would be mean silencing a part of herself. It would be easier for everyone. Yvaine used to think it would be easier for everyone except her, but now, she wasn't so sure. In her private daydreams, sometimes she imagined she was more like the way she remembered her mother.

Proper.

Graceful.

Kind.

A credit to the family name.

A pearl of the first water, as they said.

Sometimes, women like Yvaine herself were called “Uniques.” That’s if they were very beautiful, very powerful, and very rich. They could mostly do as they pleased.

Yet, that wasn’t Yvaine either. She didn’t have a slim willowy figure, she was made for the cold Moray nights, the long sieges, and even longer winters. She had no patience for pointless conversation, and no idea about which fripperies looked best, and she definitely wasn’t interested in downplaying any of the scandalous things she did better than many men to soothe their fragile flower egos.

Oh, however was she going to seduce Evernight? Who had she been kidding?

Her very best option would be to throw herself on his mercy. Being forthright and direct was how she preferred to do things in any event. Much simpler and much more likely to get the outcome she desired.

Yes, that’s what she was going to do.

She’d march right up... no, no marching. Approach with confidence and caution? Yes, that was much better. She’d simply approach him and ask for what she wanted.

Yvaine sure hoped the Countess of Stalbridge meant what she said when she’d offered to outfit her for the event. Her wardrobe was full of breeches and several dresses that hadn’t been the fashion in years.

They all had their work cut out for them.

Three



Mael was not ashamed to admit that he was in his element.

The chandeliers, the orchestra, the ballroom... it was all a delight. So many well-dressed monsters, perfectly coiffed humans.

He'd had Belial paint gold cosmetics on his wings. Mael felt very handsome, indeed. Which almost made up for the fact he had to choose a bride.

"I say, old chap," a voice rumbled in his ear. "Are we playing after dancing?"

Mael looked over to see Randall Honeycutt, Viscount Lisle, a chupacabra who had great skill at whist.

"Low on funds, Lisle?"

"Of course. I'm a degenerate gambler. What else would I be doing here?"

Mael laughed. "Fortune hunting of a different sort."

"Bah." Lisle waved his paw. "I have no use for humans. I come to part lords from their lucre." He then paused to look Mael up and down. "Is that... face paint on your wings?"

Mael turned to the side and flared his wing. "Indeed, it is."

“We were of the same mind. Look at my ears.” He wiggled them for Mael’s benefit.

The chupacabra had painted the inside of his ears with gold flake. Mael approved. “That’s rather dashing.”

“Mm,” he purred. “I’m quite proud of it. Have you seen Whidbey yet?”

“No, but I didn’t bother with dinner. You know I only came for the dancing,” he answered.

“I’ve heard tell that you must choose a bride at this ball or the Queen will choose for you. What say you, Evernight? Is it true?”

“You’re such a gossip, Lisle.”

“No, I’m a gambler and I’ve made bets. I must know, will it be silks and gold or broken legs for me?” His tone was light, but there was an underpinning of truth to his words.

“There might be some truth to the rumor.”

“Ah, it appears that tomorrow shall bring me a bit of trouble. I didn’t think it could be possibly be true. You’re a favorite.”

“A favorite who the Queen has decided must reproduce, if you can feature that.”

Lisle tittered like a honking goose, a strange sound indeed to be coming from a chupacabra. “Damn. I actually cannot.”

“If we’re being honest, I can’t either. Yet, here we are.”

“Which of the ladies are you considering?”

Mael shrugged. “I haven’t given it a thought, to be honest.”

“I’ve heard there’s a Unique here tonight.”

“A Unique? Who?” Why was he even asking? He didn’t want a Unique. He wanted, if forced to choose, and he was, a miss who was practical, who would do her duty and part of that duty was to leave him alone.

“The Harridan from the north. The Lady Yvaine of Moray. She is unconventional. They say she fights as a man. She’s a swordmaster who lives alone with a bugbear gamekeeper and so far, has refused all offers for her hand. Violently.”

Mael shrugged. He didn’t see how this was a problem. “If they were unworthy...” He shrugged again.

“Even some of the monsters fear her.”

He didn’t like the way Lisle spoke of her.

“I thought you said you weren’t interested in the marriage mart?” Mael got straight to the point.

“I didn’t say I wanted to marry her. But have you seen her? She’s plush in all the right places. Rounded and soft and—” Lisle choked as Mael wrapped his hands around his throat.

“You will not speak of her in such a way.”

As Lisle’s tongue began to lag out of his mouth he nodded and Mael released him.

“If you wanted the girl, you should’ve said so.”

“I don’t want her.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” Lisle tossed back, rubbing his throat.

Rounded and soft, he said. That description rolled about in his brain and for some reason, he couldn’t stop thinking of it.

“Lisle, get caught cheating at cards again?” Another gentleman degenerate, Lord Twombly, said as he joined their

group.

Twombly, had a rare blood disease that the *monstrum plaga* had cured, in a way. He now required the blood of others to survive. One might call him a vampire.

“He’s never actually upset when he catches me cheating. He just laughs.” Lisle straightened his cravat. “No, methinks he’s found himself a wife.”

Twombly’s lips pulled back over his fangs. “Who?” He sounded quite scandalized.

Mael was not impressed and didn’t care to discuss it further. He simply rolled his eyes. “The fact of the matter was that I did not care for your ungentlemanly reference to one of the ladies attending the ball. Just because we look like monsters doesn’t meant we must behave like them.”

“That didn’t answer the question, Evernight.” Twombly said in a cheerful tone.

“Bah. My neighbor to the south—”

“—the Harridan!” Lisle finished.

“Haven’t you gotten yourself in enough trouble with her name on your tongue?” Mael warned.

“Not nearly!” Lisle grinned. “This is much too juicy of a morsel.” He held up his hand. “The subject, not the lady herself. Although...”

“I shall throttle you again,” Mael said in an equally cheerful tone. “I am only being a gentleman and upholding my duty as a peer of the realm.”

But was he?

He'd never had this reaction to a woman before. Sure, he enjoyed them. They were an essential part of the three Ds. Specifically, "Dallying." He couldn't dally without them. Well, he could. He had. But he wasn't quite into that this century.

"I think it's a smashing development, if I do say so myself." Twombly sipped from his cup of punch.

Lisle was obviously intrigued by this. "Smashing, you say? It's not your windpipe in his crosshairs."

"There's a simply solution for that, Lisle." Twombly sipped again.

"Oh?"

Mael was curious to see what his friend would say.

"Don't be a cad and Mael won't be forced to choke you. Didn't your governess teach you mathematics? One plus one, my friend."

Lisle sniffed. "As a matter of fact, she didn't. My life-giver was too busy swiving her senseless for her to teach me much of anything. It's why I gamble. It's my only skill."

"I hate to break it to you," Twombly began with no small amount of glee. "But you're entirely bad at that as well."

"It's a disguise." Lisle paused, cocked his head to the side. "Not the word I wanted. I may be a bit inebriated."

"A ruse?" Mael supplied.

"Mhmm, that's the one." Lisle nodded.

Mael turned to Twombly. "He was just telling me that he's going to have to learn to walk backwards as he's made some more betting choices."

Twombly seemed to consider for a long moment. “Ah, truly unfortunate, that. But he’s a chupacabra. Can’t he already twist his knees around? You know, for effect?”

“Shh.” Lisle grinned. “That’s a secret.”

“Don’t look now, but here comes our hostess,” Mael said as he saw the Countess of Stalbridge from across the room.

“Are you going to choke me if I take that lovely lady to the gardens tonight?” Lisle asked.

“Perhaps,” Mael answered.

“Have you thought about what this means for you?” Twombly brought the conversation back to his unusual response.

“Another reason why she’s not the one for me. I don’t need all that headache. Queen Charlotte herself suggested her, so I obviously don’t...”

Oh no. Part of his covenant to staying in this realm was that there was no power on earth that held sway over him, except the English monarchy. Had the powers that be taken Charlotte’s suggestion as a decree?

He refused.

Mael didn’t want to feel this way. He didn’t want anyone else to have that much control over him. Especially someone with a human lifespan.

“I see that the implications of that are just now hitting you. Have you seen her yet?” Twombly asked gently.

“Seen who?” The Countess of Stalbridge demanded.

Mael bowed low over her hand. “You, of course.”

She slapped his shoulder with her fan. “You’re such a rogue, Maelstrom.”

“Madame, I would never.” Although, he flashed her a genuine smile.

“But do tell, sirs. If you’d like an introduction to a specific young lady, I’d be pleased to facilitate that introduction.” When no one responded, she laughed. “Mael, our beloved Queen wrote to tell me that you might enjoy a re-introduction to Lady Yvaine of Moray.”

“If I require such an introduction, I’ll be sure to impose on you.”

“Definitely don’t ask if anyone else would like an introduction to the lady. Mael is already feeling territorial,” Lisle offered.

“Shut it, Lisle.” Mael growled low in his chest.

Rather than offending the Countess, his growl seemed to delight her. “Oh, indeed?” She smiled widely. “However, if you don’t plan on following through, you mustn’t stop her from making a good match.”

He hadn’t even seen her, but the idea of her making a match with anyone else had his horns prickling, his teeth grinding, and his claws opening and closing as priming to throttle someone.

That seemed to be a theme for him where the lady was concerned.

“I want your word, Mael.” The Countess once again tapped her fan on his shoulder.

“Of course I wouldn’t stand in her way.”

“Is it true she’s mad?” Twombly asked.

“Don’t be such a gossip.” The Countess flashed him a grin. “You’ll just have to see for yourself, won’t you?” After eyeing him, she added, “We all have our demons, don’t we?”

“You will *not* be seeing for yourself,” he muttered before he could stop himself.

“What did I just say?” The Countess reiterated.

“You said a good match.” Mael shrugged.

“You’re absolutely incorrigible.” She sighed.

“All apologies for my companion’s boorish behavior. Perhaps I could find a way to make it up to you? A stroll in the gardens?” He offered the Countess his arm.

“Just so you know, this doesn’t excuse any of you from missing dinner. I do despise having empty seats at the table. Especially when I planned certain dishes just for you.”

The Countess was a master at spreading the guilt like paint on a canvas. Mael could feel that his reprobate companions actually did feel slightly bad for disappointing their hostess.

He found himself wondering about the Lady Yvaine. If she’d eaten. Who she’d been seated next to, and...

“You really do have it bad, don’t you?” Twombly asked as the Lisle led their hostess out of the ballroom.

“No,” he denied. “Maybe.” Mael didn’t like this at all. He didn’t like being managed, either. If he surrendered to this thing... No. It simply wouldn’t do. Not at all. “I haven’t seen her in twenty years. This is ridiculous.”

“One more thing, and I’ll leave you in peace. Not because I don’t like needling you. I do. It’s a delight. But I see that Miss Astley has entered the room and I should like to get my name on her dance card for the evening.”

“Miss Astley you say?” Mael flexed his snake-like body and lifted himself a head above the crowd to look for the lovely Regina Astley who had captured his friend’s attention. “If I remember correctly, you offered for her at the last ball and she turned you down?”

He phrased it as a question, but really, it was a gentle barb to remind him to keep his fangs out of Mael’s relationship matters. Mael spotted the miss. She was radiant, a ray of sunshine. In fact, she was wearing green, which complemented her coloring and her golden blond hair. He contracted and sank back down to his friend’s eye level.

Twombly scowled. “Indeed she did. Some rot about not wanting to marry me only because,” he lowered his voice, “we had a tryst.”

“That’s not unreasonable,” Mael agreed. “There’s more to marriage than trysting.”

“I compromised her reputation. I thought you’d be the first to say that as a gentleman, I should offer for her hand.”

“Of course you should.” Mael snorted. “Lucky for you both, she said no.”

“Maelstrom, not all of us are averse to the institution of marriage. I wanted her to say yes.”

Mael shrugged. “Well, try, try, and try again.”

“I do have my pride.”

“Why? I mean, if she is who you desire, what is pride?”

“I believe those words will come back to haunt you.”

“Everything does.” Mael scented something different in the air. Something delectable. He began scanning the crowd

again, looking for the source of that scent. “But what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Right.” Twombly cleared his throat.

“Oh, this must be heavy indeed.”

“Not heavy, just important. As your friend, it’s my duty to tell you that you’re being a bit of a twat.”

Mael snorted. “Oh? What’s brought you to this glorious conclusion?”

“You can’t get out of your own way. That’s the height of twattery. You’re putting human conventions, human limitations on your own happiness.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just what I said. You can’t claim a lady because you haven’t seen her in twenty years? Who cares? Your reaction to Lisle means she’s yours. That’s human nonsense about denying your core nature.”

“My core nature?” Once again, he was distracted by the scent on the air. It was a wild scent, something dark, seductive, and it made his mouth water. “Everyone here is thankful that I don’t indulge my core nature.”

“Oh, here we go with the demon lord offal again. I know. We *all* know. But you’re here. You’ve been commanded to marry and it’s to a woman you already know belongs to you. So what’s the problem? Again, don’t twat yourself out of happiness.”

“I’m not twatting myself out of anything. I’m protecting myself,” he said quietly.

“From what?” Twombly sounded incredibly frustrated.

“I’ll live forever. She’s human. All of the women here. Even the monsters will not live as long as me.”

Twombly clapped a hand on his shoulder. “That’s the price we all pay, my friend. Every last one of us. Humans. Monsters. There’s no protecting yourself from loss. Unless you spend eternity alone and that sounds like the greater loss.”

In that moment, it didn’t matter what was going on in his logical mind. The monster in him was focused solely on the source of that scent that had wrapped itself around his sanity and squeezed.

A woman had entered the ballroom and that deliciousness wafted from her in wave after wave. She was taller than many of the other ladies, more buxom as well. Her curves were plush and decadent, especially wrapped in purple silk, and her face... it could have launched a thousand ships. Pale skin, with a smattering of sun-kissed freckles across her nose. Ink black hair in a waterfall down her back. Lips like the first rosebuds of spring.

Regina Astley kissed the newcomer’s cheek, and offered her a bright smile. The woman returned the affection, and the smile. She looked up, and from across the room, their eyes locked.

Mael’s whole world exploded and imploded at the same time. It was as if he were simultaneously at the beginning and the end of time all at once.

He was nothing short of fucked.

Four



She'd missed dinner.

It had taken Master Bow that long to wrangle her wild tresses and to tailor a dress to make her presentable. He'd been quite gracious about it, but that didn't stop Yvaine from feeling slightly bad about how hard he'd had to work.

Alasdair had yet to make his presence known and that didn't comfort her. He was bound to show up at the most embarrassing and inconvenient place. Anything to foil her plans.

Although, she didn't have much time to think of it because Master Bow was rushing her to the ballroom so she didn't miss any more of the festivities.

As soon as those double doors opened to reveal the crush inside, all of the beautiful ladies, the opulent dresses, the distinguished monsters... it had her rethinking her little plan. This wasn't her world. She didn't belong.

Yvaine wanted to flee back to her quiet, useful life in Moray. She understood that world. She didn't understand this one.

Yet, she knew that even if she returned to Moray, it wouldn't be the same. She didn't have much time left before Alasdair claimed her and either way, the life she'd known, the world she'd known, they were both gone.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward.

Lady Regina Astley reached for her and pulled her into a welcoming embrace. "Just breathe," she whispered.

Yvaine took a deep breath.

"Remember who you are. The stabber of lords and smiter of leches."

Yvaine laughed. "Thank you."

And just like that, she did remember who she was. She was a force to be reckoned with. Her eyes sought out her target.

Maelstrom, the Earl of Evernight.

It could only be him standing there with gold on his wings and horns. A painted dandy who commanded legions of hell.

Her mouth went dry and she felt as if she'd been yanked somewhere outside of her body and then stuffed back inside like game fowl. He was so tall. Broad shoulders. And those horns. She desperately wanted to touch them. Yvaine wondered what the texture of them would feel like under her fingers.

What it would feel like to him for her to twist her finger along their curves.

She could easily imagine his wings wrapping around her, hiding her from Alasdair.

Speaking of Alasdair, she rather imagined that just to be in Mael's presence would make him snivel in ways that brought

her such petty pleasure.

She knew she should break eye contact, look away, demure. But that wasn't who she was. Nor who she wanted to be.

Yvaine didn't bother with convention or making polite conversation as moved through the ballroom toward her target.

All of Michael's advice about pretending to be prey fell out of her head, too. It didn't matter. He'd either do what she wished, or he wouldn't. It was better to find out now so she could make other plans, if she needed to.

Although, as the distance closed between them, she realized she had no idea what to say to him. Not that she could've formed words anyway, not when held in thrall by his golden eyes.

Her whole body heated and she felt things in places she knew were unholy. She thought again about the marriage bed and how it would work with such a creature. Yvaine desperately wanted to find out.

If simply setting eyes upon him had her body betraying her, what would it be like to be touched by him?

"With our lands neighboring as they do, it's quite silly we have to come to Maidenbury to meet," she blurted.

"Ah, the Lady Yvaine," his deep baritone rumbled through her. "It's a pleasure to remake your acquaintance."

He offered his palm. She vaguely remembered her niceties and offered her hand. His claws barely touched her skin but jolts of lightning shot through her. He bent low over her knuckles and brushed a barely-there kiss over top of her hand.

"Remake my acquaintance?"

“We met when you were a child. You seemed to have a fascination with my horns.”

She still did. Only it was a much different affair. “Indeed? Well, they are quite impressive.”

More heat rushed through her and she realized that was probably a most improper comment.

“That’s kind of you to say, my lady.”

Silence reigned and their gazes remained locked. She knew she had to say something. Anything. “How are your lands faring?”

“Quite well.” His eyes narrowed. “Madam, may I be so bold as to ask you a question of a personal nature?”

“Not knowing the question, I cannot say if I should allow you to be bold or nay.”

“I suppose that’s fair. I do not mean this as flattery, I should actually like to know why you have an unearthly air about you.”

“Oh, no that’s a perfectly reasonable question. I’m being harrowed by a demon who I was promised to years ago.” She realized she sounded rather insane.

“I see. So you’ve sought me out to seek my help in ridding yourself of this demon?”

Could it be that easy? “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“I doubt it would be.” He smiled at her. “I’ll ask a boon in return.”

She’d give him anything. Yvaine half hoped he’d be very ungentlemanly and ask for something scandalous. Mostly

because she'd feel rather stupid for not asking for his help before. If it would be that easy to rid herself of Alasdair...

“What is it?”

“A dance.”

Of course it would be the one thing she couldn't offer him.

“I would happily grant that boon, if I knew how to dance.”

He gave her what seemed to be an indulgent smile. “There were more important things to concern you than dancing managing an estate on your own.”

“Truthfully? I snuck away from the dancing master so often he gave up.”

“If you'd like me to teach you, I'd be pleased. Although, here would not be the place for that.”

“The gardens?” she blurted, then felt her face heat. Yvaine knew she had to be blushing furiously.

A small quirk curled at the corner of his lips. “Lady Yvaine, I'm shocked.”

His tone conveyed that he was no such thing. She was, however. “I... I did not mean it as it sounded. Truly, I'm mortified.”

“As a friend of mine was telling me earlier, human conventions no longer apply to us. We're monsters. We're led by instinct. If it was your instinct to request I teach you to dance in the gardens, there must be something to it. I did not take that as an invitation to do anything but dance.”

Well, damn it. Why not? “Thank you for being so gracious.”

“If you would like to dance in the ballroom, I have a solution. Because I dearly love to dance and I believe you would enjoy it as well.”

Yvaine wanted more time with him. She wanted his hands, his claws, on her. Even if it was dancing. “What do you suggest?”

His tail curved up and into what looked like a perch.

“Please, have a seat and allow me to turn you about the floor.”

She carefully arranged the outer layer of her dress so it draped over and hid his tail as she rested herself in the cradle he’d made for her. He was so warm, so strong, and she felt safer than she ever had.

He lifted her up so that she could place her hands on his shoulders. Which were oh-so broad.

“There. No one will know. Unless of course they’ve been watching us this whole time, but I think they surely must have better things to do with their time.”

As the orchestra played, he moved them out onto the floor and twirled her throughout the dance. He was quite the dancer, especially since he was able to move her body like a marionette to imitate the proper steps.

She felt like a princess.

And a hedonist. Because how was it that she was permitted to touch him so? Her hands on his shoulders, close enough to smell the wild heat of him.

She couldn’t hide her desire any longer. Yvaine hadn’t thought of the intimacy of their position. How it would feel to use his body as a perch. Where he’d be touching her.

Where she wanted him to touch her more.

This was indecent. Scandalous.

Then she thought about what he'd said about how they were led by instinct. Not human convention.

Yet, here they were, dressed up like proper humans. Going through proper human motions. Yes, they were bound by convention.

Weren't they?

She'd been taught that she should only want the things she'd been imagining with her husband.

But why? Moray was hers. The only line of succession that mattered. Not her husband. If the Earl of Evernight could easily free her from her harrowing, then what need had she of marriage?

Why not indulge herself?

"I have another question," he said after a while.

"Are you asking to stop? It's okay. You don't need to keep carrying me."

"Oh, but I do. That's definitely not what I was going to ask. I could carry you for days and not notice the effort," he scoffed. "No, I must know your perfume. It's driving me mad."

"No perfume. It's simply me. There were some rose petals in the bath when I arrived. But nothing else."

A low rumble sounded in his chest and she found that it rumbled other places as well and she squirmed a bit on her perch, pressing her thighs together.

"None of that, if you please."

Once again mortified, she whispered, “Am I too heavy?”

“As I said, I have the strength. I’d not want to offend your sensibilities.”

“Tell me,” she said, looking up into his eyes. “I doubt you’ll offend me.”

“It should offend you, for anyone to say the things to you I want to say to you.”

She bit her lip. “I thought you said we weren’t bound by human sensibilities.”

“I suppose you have me there.”

Their surroundings had faded for Yvaine. There was nothing but him. He was all she could see, all she could touch, all she could hear...

“Then perhaps it is you who now owes me a boon,” she challenged.

“I don’t think that’s how it’s supposed to work,” he teased. “But what would you have of me, Lady Yvaine?”

Christ, but the way he said her name did things to her that she didn’t understand, but wanted to.

“I want to touch your horns.”

“Ah, the fascination continues. Why?”

“I don’t know. All I know is if I don’t get to touch them, I might die,” she confessed.

“Ah, well, we can’t have that. But you should know, my horns are... I might ravish you here on the dance floor if you touch them.”

His tone was light, but she didn’t doubt he meant what he said. Part of her wanted to say she didn’t care, but she did care

very much.

She wanted him.

Yvaine was lost in a haze of desire and need. There had been rumors of these kinds of connections happening at the Monsters Ball, where it was what they were referring to as “fated mates.” It was an instant, vital need for one another that superseded everything else.

She reached up and pushed a lock of his hair behind his ear, an intimate move in itself, but her thumb grazed the base of one of his horns.

“You play a dangerous game,” he warned gently.

“Do I?”

The tip of his tail curled up under her underthings and around her leg to press against her inner thigh. She had to bite her lip to keep from squealing.

“Are you ready to rest and have some punch,” he offered.

She shook her head and repeated the motion. The tip of his tail crept higher, stroking along the soft, vulnerable skin causing her to gasp.

Through it all, they continued dancing. The heat of his hand against her back burned through her dress. The way his eyes locked with hers.

This was more insane than anyone had ever thought her. She wasn’t supposed—fie on what she was supposed to do. She didn’t care.

He was right. The human world had never held a place for her. The monstrous one did, and here, he wanted her. She wanted him.

Yvaine was done not getting what she wanted.

His wings suddenly wrapped around her and it was as if they were in a world all their own.

“Tell me to stop,” he whispered harshly.

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t want you to stop.”

His tail pressed higher, stroking back and forth oh so close to that ache. She wanted to squirm closer but couldn’t.

“You are perfection,” he praised.

“Please,” she begged. “More.”

The ridges on this tail fluttered closer and closer to her pleasure center. She couldn’t believe she was doing this, but there was a wild part of her that said this... this was what she’d been missing.

This was why she couldn’t stomach the thought of men.

It was because she’d been meant for a monster.

He hadn’t even kissed her and she was about to find culmination on the dance floor with his tail.

Finally, he slithered beneath her small clothes and continued that delightful fluttering motion of his ridged rattle against her nubbin and she gasped.

His hand slid up to gently cover her mouth and he increased the pressure and speed. It felt as if she were going to burst into stars and leave nothing behind of her existence.

“Bite if you like,” he whispered.

She took him up on it and bit him hard, but it didn’t hurt him, or if it did, he enjoyed it greatly, because he let loose another of those little rumbles in his chest.

Still they twirled and moved to the music.

If this was dancing, she wished she'd done it sooner.

Her nails dug into the velvet of his jacket and her eyes fluttered closed.

“No, don't hide. Look at me,” he commanded.

She had no choice, her body wanted to obey him in all things. Yvaine opened her eyes and it was then that the tension that had been building snapped and pleasure surged within her, sending bliss radiating through her limbs.

His wings retracted, as did his tail and he spun them just once more around the floor before guiding her to the fringes and releasing her, leaving her flushed and pink.

“Thank you so much for the dance, Lady Yvaine. I shall call upon you about that business matter soon.”

He kissed her hand again, but this time, his lips lingered. He pressed his mouth too hard, he stayed too long.

Yvaine's body thrummed with ecstasy and it was compounded by the additional delight that no one had paid any attention to them. No one gave them shuttered looks, or whispers. They were all too involved with their own dancing partners.

“Thank you, Lord Evernight.”

“The pleasure was entirely mine,” he said in a pointed tone.

His words caused her thighs to clench and she wet her lips with her tongue. She tasted blood. His blood from where she'd bitten him.

It was dark and sweet, and felt entirely wrong that she should enjoy that she'd marked him so.

No matter what it meant to him, she was irrevocably changed.

Five



He definitely should not have done that.

One conversation with her and he was ravishing her on the dance floor.

To be fair, she'd not asked him to stop. Her consent had been enthusiastic. He couldn't stop thinking about the way she'd felt while he'd been thrashing her sweet little bean with his tail.

It would've given Mael great pleasure to continue to do that all night. And all of the next day. Then... well, yes. Pleasuring the Lady Yvaine had become his new favorite pastime.

After one encounter.

They were dangerous to each other, fated mates or not. This couldn't go on.

Yet, he couldn't stop it. He knew better than to think he could. After all, as she'd so helpfully reminded him, he'd been the one talking about animal nature, hadn't he?

He had no more interest in dancing, so he took his leave and flew to his new estate to pace. He hoped that would keep him from going to her rooms after the festivities had died down for the night.

If he were the gentleman he pretended to be, he'd offer for her now. And it was all pretend, wasn't it? Because what could he actually give her besides his name? He was a demon.

What could she give him because... well, this? To be honest, it wasn't about what she could give him. She'd already given him so much.

It was about what she'd take when she was gone. When the shadow death pulled her from the world, as it must all living things, she'd take everything with her. All of the joy, all of the sunshine. Everything that made living a life here worth it.

He'd admit he was selfish enough that he didn't want to make that trade.

Even as Twombly's words came back to haunt him.

Mael didn't need to experience these feelings. He didn't want them. He wanted to continue dancing, wearing pretty clothes and not having a care in the world.

It hit him then that it wasn't only her he would lose.

The Queen had commanded him to produce an heir.

It was likely that any heir he produced would have an extended lifespan, but would not be an immortal such as himself.

No, he absolutely couldn't and wouldn't face that. He didn't buy into any of that a little bit of something wonderful was better than nothing. Or that something was made more special, more magical by having an end date. That was all trash and rot as far as he was concerned.

The part of him that railed against his fate said he'd simply put a stop to all of this immediately. He'd let the Queen choose

his bride and then he'd refuse to consummate the union. Thereby saving himself the pain and loss he knew lay in store for him.

She didn't have the right to demand that of him.

Yes, she knew what it was to lose a child, but she didn't have to live with it for eternity. Her life was the blink of an eye.

He was eternal. Forever.

A voice spoke to him from the shadows. "You have returned early, my lord. Was the dancing not to your liking?"

"It was quite to my liking, actually."

"Ah, I see. Was that the problem?"

His long-time servant had keen powers of perception, but then again, most demons did. "Yes."

"Was it the Lady Yvaine or another who caught your discerning eye?"

"Yvaine, of course. As the Queen commanded."

"Unfortunate. I tapped my network and I've discovered she belongs to another demon. Alasdair. He's low level, but it is unbreakable."

"What do you mean?" A roar escaped him.

"Don't kill the messenger, sir. But it's a blood pact. Sworn by an ancient Lord of Moray during the English occupation. He traded his descendant for success in battle. The Lady Yvaine is his."

Mael flexed his wings and then rolled his neck. "Then I'll just have to kill him."

"Master, I'm not sure if that's the wisest course of action."

“Why is that?”

“It’s written into the contract that if he’s killed before he takes his prize, that everything will be undone. Which means it could possibly rewrite the course of human history.”

“I give a shite about that. Fuck everyone but Yvaine.” Who did they think he was, the hero? No, he was a demon lord. A villain. He didn’t give a damn about human history. Their existence. Only that Yvaine would be safe.

“You’re missing the point entirely,” Belial said with exasperation.

“Well, make it, man.”

“If you kill him, you’ll kill Yvaine.”

What was he to do? But before his frustration got the better of him, he reminded himself that there wasn’t a contract he couldn’t figure out how to break. Especially one crafted by a lower level demon such as Alasdair.

Or he had to find something that he wanted more than Yvaine, but Mael understood on a primal level that was probably not going to happen.

“I have a plan, though.”

“You do?”

“Of course, I do. Alasdair has annoyed me since the Fall. If I can confound him, it will please me intensely.”

“Let’s have it.”

“We let him take her.”

“Absolutely not.”

“No, hear me out. We let him take her. Then the parameters of the contract have been fulfilled. Then you kill

him.”

“I see. I do like catching a fiend with a technicality.”

“Now, you must return to Broadstone to tell your lady of your plan.”

“No, that’s the last thing I should do.”

Villainous laughter echoed. “It would be the last thing you did for the day. It’s almost midnight.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Oh, I’m very funny.” Belial made himself corporeal. “Funny, too. I’m quite the catch.”

“Mayhap you should throw your hat in the ring at the Monsters Ball?”

“I’m no titled lord.”

“You could be.”

Belial disappeared in a puff of sulfur. “Never speak of that again. I will not leave your service.”

Mael laughed. “No one said I’d release you from service. I just said you could have a title.”

“Oh, well. I accept. I should like to be Baron of Graemsay.”

It was a small outer island in Evernight. Mael was pleased to offer it and a title to Belial. “Done. Now, my lord, if you please, a bit of sherry.”

“Only if you go back to Broadstone.”

“A measly title, and now you think to tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“My lord,” Belial said, scandalized. “I’ve always done that.”

It was true. One didn’t spend centuries with someone and not get a little familiar. “I’m not going back until breakfast.”

“Of course you are. You’re not going to be able to help yourself.” Belial offered up a glass of sherry. “That is, if she is who and what you suspect.”

He hated it when Belial was right. That was something he could say for the demon, he never told Mael what he wanted to hear if it wasn’t the truth. He was annoyingly honest.

That was something that humans didn’t understand about the truth. At least, not most of them. It was a more potent weapon than a lie ever could be.

He had a solution to her problem.

He’d told her he’d come to call.

So she’d be expecting him. It would be rude of him to make her wait.

He paced a little more.

“The long you wait, the more indecent it shall be for you to show up at her door.”

“Well, who said I was going to be decent?”

“Suit yourself, sir.” Then he disappeared, leaving Mael with his own thoughts.

And zero self-control.

He flew back to Broadstone and he instinctively knew which window belonged to Yvaine.

There was that strange glow that seemed to follow her, but it was one that so far, only he could see.

He debated the wisdom of knocking on said window only for as long as it took for that thought to form and then it was gone.

Mael rapped lightly on the glass.

“Sod off, Alasdair.”

He was both amused and enraged at the same time. Amused that his little firebrand would speak so, but enraged that Alasdair would infringe on her in such a way. Yes, he definitely had to get rid of that demon.

“I’m sorry for the late hour, but we did agree I’d call,” he said.

The window opened and she stood wrapped in a blue velvet robe looking just as beautiful as she had earlier in the evening.

“Do come in. I suppose I’d thought you’d use the door.”

“At this late hour?”

“The conventions you seem to keep don’t make sense to me. Some of them, you’re like a governess. Others, well, you’re every bit a rake.”

“Madam, I have visited no chambers but yours.”

“I’m afraid if you did, I’d have to challenge you to a duel to defend my own honor.” She stepped away from the window so he could enter. “And I’d win.”

“We’d have to see about that, but I have heard it’s not out of the realm of possibility.”

“Don’t indulge me or I’ll skewer you where you stand.”

He laughed quietly. “Ah, I do enjoy your fire.”

“Well, that’s all you’ll get from me because that’s just who I am. Tomorrow, at the games, I’ll be competing in archery. I shan’t hold back or diminish myself, either.”

“Nor should you.”

Her hands had moved to her hips and her robe gaped open slightly and he found his gaze drawn to the swells of creamy flesh and his brain emptied as desire consumed him. It was at times like this that he wished pants were practical.

He’d have to sit much lower to the ground to cover his two-pronged erect cock as it thrust up from his cloaca.

“So, you have an answer for my problem?”

“I do. But let me make sure he’s not here, spying.” He scanned the room and while evidence of him was present, the demon himself was not. “No, we’re alone.”

“That would be a handy tool to have. Just before I left for the ball he’d shapeshifted into my horse and...”

He didn’t hear the rest of what she said. All he could do was imagine what it was like to be between her thighs, to be ridden by her. It further spurred his desire to pop Alasdair’s head off like a dandelion and mount it on the wall.

“Are you paying attention?”

“I’m afraid not. The sight of your cleavage has distracted me.”

She huffed and wrapped her robe tight around herself. “We can get to that in a moment.”

“Oh, can we?”

Suddenly, she blushed. “I mean, if you’d like to. But Alasdair. How shall we rid ourselves of him?”

“This is going to take a supreme amount of trust on your part, but you’re going to have to let him take you.”

She laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“It’s your only way out. I don’t mean take as in... what’s mine. But—”

“What’s yours? Listen, even if we’re fated, I’m not yours. I belong to no man.”

He puffed up with supreme male pride. “I am no man.”

“You know what I mean. I belong to myself. I am not chattel.”

He blinked. “So if a pretty miss were to attempt to vie for my attention, you wouldn’t absolutely obliterate her? Aren’t I yours?”

“You’re what you choose to be. If you choose to indulge someone else, I have no control over that. I only have control over me.”

“Interesting.” So perhaps she wasn’t as affected as he. Mael had to say he didn’t care for that development in the slightest.

“I wouldn’t like it, though.” She bit her lip and looked down. “Are you sure this is my only option?”

“I am. I was simply going to kill him, but if I do, his contract would be null and void, but everything done would be undone. Including you.”

“So what’s the plan? Let him take me, and then you kill him?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled heavily. “Okay. Is it very foolish of me that I don’t want him to die?”

“I wouldn’t say foolish, but I’d ask why you feel that way.”

“He used to be my best friend. We did everything together.”

“Like sneaking away from the dancing master?”

“Exactly.”

“He used your innocence to get close to you. To get you to trust him. To care for him. So you wouldn’t fight him when it was time to go with him.”

“Even knowing that, part of me still doesn’t want him to come to any harm.” She fiddled with the sleeves of the robe.

“As long as it’s not a problem when the time comes. If it is, you let me know.” He held out his hand to her and she stepped into his embrace. “You can change your mind, you know. If you decide you want him...”

It would tear out his heart to see her choose Alasdair, but she was right. She didn’t belong to anyone but herself. The choice was hers.

And, if it didn’t tear his heart out, literally, he’d have to remove the damn thing himself. Stupid, wasn’t it, to give a demon a heart. What was he supposed to do with it anyway, except for unnecessary things like this?

“No. I don’t want him. It’s crazy that we’ve only just met, but I don’t want anyone but you.”

“I have to tell you.” He’d been about to make some remark about how even though they were fated, that... well, he

couldn't remember what. Because she'd dropped her robe and stood naked before him.

"Tell me," she said.

"I..."

She gave him the smile of a woman who knew her worth. The powerful smile of a woman who knew exactly what effect she had on him. "Instead, tell me what it will be like between us. Tell me how it works."

"I am like a snake in every way."

"Show me."

He raised himself to show her where his hemipenis protruded from his cloaca. It was thick and straining for her. Both prongs.

She flushed, but didn't shy away. "How do I please you the way you pleased me?"

"Existing, really." He teased. "Touch me."

Six



She started with his velvet jacket, sliding it from his massive shoulders. Then, untied his cravat with shaking fingers.

Yvaine couldn't believe she'd been so bold to simply bare herself. But there was something about the energy between them when they were together. He brought out a wildness in her. Truthfully, she'd already thought herself to be a wild harridan, as the papers called her. Yet, when she was with him, she felt powerful. Like it was okay to surrender to every desire. That the world was hers for the taking.

He was hers for the taking.

His skin intrigued her. She loved his powerful arms, the expanse of his chest and the way his body shape changed from man to beast.

She pressed her lips in an innocent kiss against his chest and his hand threaded through her hair. She allowed her tongue to dart out and she tasted him. His deep rumbles of approval spurred her on. Upward, toward his jaw, and his lips where she finally claimed the kiss she wanted.

As his lips slanted over hers, she wrapped her hand around his horn and stroked it from base to tip, earning a shudder of

pleasure from him and he sighed against her mouth before kissing her again.

His mouth and hands seemed to be everywhere. She couldn't get close enough to him. Yvaine realized the dynamic between them had changed. He was once again focused on her pleasure instead of his.

She wanted this. She wanted to be the one who made him cry out her name against his will.

Instinctively, she pulled back and sank to her knees in front of his cock and leaned forward to inspect it, her warm breath seeming to make it surge toward her of its own volition.

“Not all men are made so?” she asked, curious.

“No.”

She tentatively wrapped her hand around one prong, and then her other hand around the other.

He muttered something in Latin that she didn't understand, and Latin had been one of her best subjects.

“I'll need you to teach me that one later.” She began to move her hand slowly and another litany of what could only be curses left his lips. Yvaine took that to mean she was doing this correctly.

She wasn't quite sure how this would work, but she knew she wanted him inside of her. She wanted to be joined with him in every way. While she trusted him, she also knew there was still the possibility that Alasdair would win.

It wasn't that she doubted Mael, she didn't. It was just that sometimes, no matter what you did, or how powerful you were, the worst could still happen.

If it did, she wanted this memory of Mael. She wanted to experience him. These pleasures.

“Stop, stop,” he pleaded as his two-pronged member surged in her hands.

“What’s wrong?”

He pulled away and sank down so that he was eye level with her. “We shouldn’t do this.”

“Why? I’m already ‘ruined’ because I live alone with a bugbear.”

He gave a wry laugh. “I’m not protecting you. Selfishly, I’m protecting me.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, she felt very naked and vulnerable in ways that went beyond the flesh. “Tell me.”

“I can’t risk it.” He didn’t elaborate further.

“Risk what? We’re already fated, aren’t we?”

“What if I get you with child?” He looked so haunted. “What if that child is mortal?”

Understanding hit her. “I don’t know how to answer that. I know I want to be with you no matter what the future holds. But if you don’t feel the same, I...”

“It’s not that I don’t feel for you. I feel for you in the way that a human man never could. I can’t even say I love you because it’s a shallow quantification of the breadth and width of my feelings. I would burn the world for you, Yvaine, and everyone in it. Already, if I were to lose you, there would never be another for me. You are my eternity. Your poets like to wax on about forever, but when I say it, I mean until stars extinguish and there is only nothingness. In that nothingness, I will remain, and so will my pain at losing you.”

“If you were trying to cool my ardor, that wasn’t the thing to say, Mael.” She reached out and touched his face and then curled his hair around her finger. “You asked if I trusted you. I do. Implicitly. So I trust that we will find a way together. Not only to free me from Alasdair, but to be together and stay together.”

“Yvaine,” he muttered her name like it was either a prayer or a curse.

Mael wrapped her in his arms and lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him. She felt the press of his cock against her throbbing cleft.

“Please, Mael.”

“Tell me no.”

“No,” she whispered. “Don’t stop.”

Inch by delectable and slow inch he slid inside of her. She’d been told to expect pain, but this was nothing short of ecstasy. It was as if she’d been made for him, she didn’t know how or why, but it felt as if once he was inside of her, her body changed and stretched to accommodate him.

“We fit so perfectly. You were made for me,” he said. “Literally made for me.”

She clenched around him and he groaned against her ear. “More.”

He began to move against her, his hands guiding the motion of her hips so she met his undulations.

“You’re mine,” he said. “Mine.”

Yvaine was so close to the edge of culmination, she couldn’t argue. Didn’t want to. If this was what it meant to be

his, she'd belong to him any day of the week and twice on Sunday. Or twice on any other day he chose as well.

She tightened around him again and he hissed. "I'm going to spill too soon if you keep that up."

Yvaine didn't know exactly what that meant, but she had an idea. It made her feel powerful that she could push him to culmination. So she said, "Do it. Give me everything. All of you."

Her surged inside of her and a hot rush filled her. But to her surprise, he stayed within and felt as if he'd grown even larger instead of flagging.

"What's... oh." She gasped as her own pleasure intensified.

He whispered against her ear, "That's my body keeping us locked together to make sure my seed takes root. The pleasure you feel now is your own mechanism to pull my seed deep into your womb."

The concentric waves of ecstasy that reverberated out from her core caused her to spasm and shake against him, the sensation a thousand times more powerful than the culmination he'd brought to her on the ballroom floor.

"Ride it, my firebrand. Let it take you," he encouraged.

Soon, she was a boneless heap in his arms, sweat-slicked, and well-satisfied, yet they were still locked together, and that's how she slept.

When she could sleep. Every few hours, she'd wake to another round of intense pleasure only to fall back into a sated sleep. He'd stayed inside her the whole time, their bodies linked.

When morning finally came, she found herself sore and alone, but with a single rose and a chocolate pastry on the bedside table.

“Did you take a lover?” a familiar voice said from the sitting area.

“Not that it’s any of your business.” She pulled the blankets up to cover her nakedness. “Go away.”

“No. I just wanted to remind you that there’s nothing you can do to escape me.”

“If there’s nothing I can do, why do you keep bothering to remind me? It’s a waste of your time. You must be incredibly bored.”

“I am.”

“Hmm. Only boring people get bored.”

“I’m not a people. I’m a demon.”

“Mm. Make yourself useful and ring for a bath, if you please.”

He seemed confused by the request.

“A bath, you know, hot water? Rose oil? Bath?”

“I understand the mechanism, but why would you think I’d do that? As if I’m some kind of servant?”

“I see that you’re not going to care for me then, once you do claim me. Good to know.”

“Of course I will.” He snapped his fingers and a tub, along with steaming, rose-scented water appeared.

“Thank you,” she said. “Turn your back.”

Rather than argue with her, he did as she asked and turned his back so she could get into the tub.

Her body ached in places that she didn't know existed. Muscles that she didn't know she had hurt. But it was a blissful kind of pain, purposeful.

Beautiful.

"It was Pandemonium, wasn't it?" Alasdair grumbled.

She didn't want to ruin this new rapport they were developing, so she answered him. "It was."

"Why him?"

"As opposed to who?" He couldn't be suggesting what she thought he was suggesting.

"Me."

"Well, to start with, he hasn't harried me to the point of madness."

"He would, if you told him no." Alasdair turned back around. "We were friends, weren't we?"

"We were. If you'd treated me like a friend, it might've been you. I don't want to hurt you, Alasdair. But I don't want you like that."

"You're mine," he said softly. "You were promised to me."

"Promises can be broken. Your contract can't."

"You would really break it?"

She had to grit her teeth to keep from shrieking at him that of course she'd break it. She didn't want to be dragged off to hell to be his... well, whatever he was going to do with her. "Yes, I would. I went to Mael to break it, but instead,

discovered we're fated. There was never a chance for anyone else. Not ever."

"Not ever," he repeated and his shoulders slumped. "But we made a good team hunting that deer. I did everything you said."

"I thought you were my horse. That was a violation."

His shoulders slumped further. "I'm sorry."

"Are you? Are you really?"

"I am. I've missed you, Yvaine. I've missed us."

"I missed the Alasdair of my youth. My friend."

"I must think."

Hope surged inside of her, but she didn't dare clasp onto it too tightly. "If you don't mean that, it's very unkind to say."

"I never wanted to hurt you." He looked sheepish. "Well, maybe a little. You hurt my feelings."

"You hurt mine too."

He handed her an envelope. "This came for you. It doesn't look like it's from him." Then he was gone.

She examined the envelope. The penmanship seemed familiar. She opened the letter.

My dear friend Yvaine,

I know that it has been some time since we have seen each other, and I was so looking forward to reconnecting with you at the upcoming Monsters Ball. Unfortunately, Father will not permit me to attend. He has me under lock and key and I fear that I might never see the outside world again. I am biding my time, creating new dresses from Mother's belongings, even

though I may never get the opportunity to wear them for anyone aside from my lovely maid.

It is her that I am entrusting with this letter, for she is the only person true to me in the household.

I met the Baroness Pereira recently, and she imparted on me some information that I deemed necessary to give to you. While I know there are many rumors about the Countess Stalbridge, it seems that the truth is more complicated than rumor. If you find yourself in the Countess' study, there is a love note hidden within that space from a monstrous admirer who goes by the initial M. I dearly wish that I could view that missive with my own eyes, but I rely on you to take this task upon yourself.

Apparently, when M's offer of marriage was rebuffed by the Countess' parents, he conscripted into the army. While he was presumed dead, his body was never discovered, and some believe that this means he is still out there somewhere. Perhaps pining for the Countess - do you think she might pine for him, now that her husband has departed this life?

For all those who yearn for love, could you please take it upon yourself to delve deeper into this mystery? I would if I could, but alas, my future feels dire. If you do perchance manage to uncover something, please think of me, and consider sending a return letter.

Yours, always,

Despite our years apart.

Isabella Carmichael.

She worried for Isabella and would write her at the earliest opportunity. But for now, she had to make her way to the Countess's study post haste!

Yvaine loved nothing more than a mystery and perhaps to matchmake for the Countess. Now that, in her opinion, would be the coup of the season. To find the Countess's lost love.

With Alasdair at least on hold, she was definitely going to do some digging. Archery could wait. After all, she could do that at home.

She dressed quickly, with not much mind for how she looked. It didn't matter. She realized now would be the exact time to use Alasdair's talents.

"Alasdair?" she called. Of course, he'd be gone when she needed or wanted him most.

"What?" he grumbled. "I'm still thinking."

"I believe they call that self-reflection."

"I don't care about 'they'."

"May I ask a favor?"

"No. I already told you, I'm not here to serve you."

"What if I told you it could be a great adventure? The Countess had an ill-fated romance and they suspect—"

"Again, who is they?"

She huffed and handed the letter over to him. When he didn't take it, she waved it in his face. "Come on."

He took it and scanned the pages. "Damn you, you know I love a mystery."

"Currently, I'm supposed to be having breakfast and getting ready for breakfast and archery, not skulking about the manor. But skulking must happen, my dear Alasdair. This is your specialty."

"You want to skulk with me?" He perked.

“I do.”

“I don’t want you to think that we can just do this whenever you like. We can’t,” he admonished.

“Understood.”

“Eat your pastry, first, my pudding.”

She wasn’t going to argue with him. She shoved the thing in her mouth and he wrinkled his nose. “I know you’ve been taught manners.”

“Didn’t bother you when I was little,” she said around a mouth full of food.

He sighed and looked down at the floor. “Come along.”

Alasdair held out his hand and he pulled her forward through the shadows, through the dark, empty places between time and light. Before she knew it, they were in the study.

The room smelled of parchment, violets, and well-loved leather. It was a pleasant space and she could imagine the Countess of Stalbridge spending many long hours here.

There were many stories about the Countess. Some whispered that she was benevolence personified, a monster-ally. A monster lover. A killer. She didn’t tolerate fools and it was rumored her husband and been a fool indeed.

A widow and a countess gave her the kind of power many women in society never achieved. A freedom to do as she liked.

It broke Yvaine’s heart to think of her spending all of these years parted from her true love.

She didn’t have much time and wasn’t quite sure where to look for this letter.

“I suppose you’ll be asking me to find the letter.”

“If you’d be so kind,” she answered.

After a moment of scanning the room, the letter appeared in Alasdair’s hand. She reached for it, but he held it up and away from her.

“Tsk tsk. Be patient.”

“If we get caught in here...”

“We won’t.” He raised a brow. “At least, I won’t.”

“Alasdair!” She stopped her foot.

“Oh, fine.” He brought the letter close to his chest. “But I get to open it. I found it after all.”

“Fairsies.”

He slowly, and with great care, unfolded the letter.

My dearest love,

Long I have struggled, but I can bear it no more. My heart must be made known to you. For it beats only for you, lives only for you. You are the only reason I stay at this ball. Three short days at Broadstone and you have transformed me. You are light and laughter, and I dwelled in darkness before I saw your smile.

While I do not have the riches or title of a peer, I swear upon my very soul that I shall always cherish you. I shall make my fortune, and I shall ensure you are cared for. I beg you, accept my humble offer and make me the happiest of men.

I shall wait all night.

Yours faithfully,

M

She gasped aloud. “How tragic.” Yvaine could feel the earnest longing from the page. It seemed so special. Magical. So familiar somehow.

“How stupid,” Alasdair groaned dramatically.

“What do you mean?” She cut him a sharp glance.

“He should’ve just taken her.”

“How well is that going for you?”

“There was no need for that.”

“Don’t call romance and true love stupid and then I won’t have to get violent.”

He capitulated. “I suppose that’s fair.”

The handle on the door rattled as a key was inserted into a lock.

“Shite,” Alasdair blurted and grabbed her, letter in hand, and disappeared into the darkness.

The High Tea

Dearest Reader,

It seems for certain that the dandy demon is going to make an offer for the mad harridan of the north. Or at least, they were rather conspicuous at the opening night of the ball. Our dark lord wrapped our intrepid heroine within his wings seemingly for more privacy.

Reader, what do you suppose happened under those wings?

I'm dying to know.

Degenerate gambler and reprobate Lord Lisle was spotted taking the Countess for a walk about the gardens. Could it be the Countess has taken another lover?

Until the next spot of tea, sip slowly.

Lady Grey

Seven



He shouldn't have left her.

Although he planned to offer for her, he didn't want to cause her any embarrassment by being seen leaving her rooms early in the morning.

Now, she hadn't shown up for breakfast and the games were starting.

Where was she?

Lisle and Twombly had yet to show, but he didn't expect to see them until after sunset. Of course, that was when he usually made his appearances.

If Alasdair had made off with her...

He'd what, exactly, he asked himself. What would he do?

Well, if he'd already fulfilled the contract, he'd rip his head off and use it for a punch bowl, and keep him alive while he did so. Yes, that was entirely an option he was prepared to pursue.

No, not a punch bowl. A latrine.

He grinned. Yes, this gave him great and wondrous joy.

"She's getting ready. She'll be here soon," a man he didn't know said as he walked closer to him. A man that looked like

an illustration of death himself, gaunt, haggard, and pale.

No, not a man. He was a demon. He glowed with that unholy light that stained everything around Yvaine.

This had to be Alasdair. Mael clenched his fists so tightly, his claws sank into the flesh of his palms and dripped blood.

“Settle yourself. I’ve been doing some thinking.”

“About how you’d like to not be a latrine for the rest of eternity? That’s a good choice.”

Alasdair rolled his eyes. “If you could do it, you already would’ve.”

“Oh, that remains to be seen.”

“Listen, what’ll you give me for her. I’ll trade.”

“He doesn’t have to trade,” Belial said from behind him, stepping forward, looking every inch a proper valet.

The look on Alasdair’s face said it all. “Not you again.”

“Yes, me.” Belial was full of malicious glee. “Have you missed me the way I missed you?”

Alasdair turned to Mael. “I’ll take the latrine.” He shrugged. “It has to be better than this. Do it. End my existence.”

Mael realized quickly that there was some unexplored history here. He’d thought he knew everything about Belial, but apparently, he didn’t.

Belial cackled. “By the way, I’m a Baron now. So that’s Lord Belial to you, you absolute nit of a demon.”

“Hmm.” An even darker light lit Alasdair’s black eyes. “I wonder how she’ll feel when I tell her you wouldn’t trade for her.”

He hadn't thought of that. Surely, she'd be sensible about it.

Just then, he saw her striding across the green bold as you please, bow and arrows already in hand.

"Come on, make me an offer. Or forever hold your peace."

Fuck. "What do you want?"

"What I want, I can't have. So the next best thing might be a favor from Lord Pandemonium, and a blood oath not to kill me."

"Don't trust it," Belial blurted.

"How about we reverse to the part where I asked you, Belial? Right, didn't happen. Moving along." Alasdair glared at him.

"I find that I wouldn't be doing my due diligence if I didn't find out why the sudden change of heart. The willingness to let go of a prize you've waited centuries to claim." Mael's eyes were drawn to that very prize they spoke of as she joined the ranks of waiting archers who stood lined up like soldier dolls ready to unleash a fury of arrows at the enemy haystacks.

"I'm bored. I want a new game to play." Alasdair's eyes were also drawn to Yvaine.

He realized then that demon cared for Yvaine, in his own, twisted way. In that, they were the same.

"I think I found one. It's a mystery." Alasdair smiled wickedly. "Of course, Yvaine is already playing."

"I knew there was a catch," Belial said.

"Not at all. You can play too. The Countess had a great love."

“I remember,” Mael said.

“Do shut up so I can tell the story,” Alasdair admonished.

“Do go on,” Belial encouraged with faux politeness.

“Thank you.” Alasdair made a great show of clearing his throat and adjusting his sleeves.

“At the risk of being rude, Yvaine is about to show her mettle. I’d like to give that my full attention,” Mael prompted.

“Oh, yes. Of course.”

Alasdair babbled a condensed version of the road so far, and the mystery was quite intriguing. He could see why Yvaine wanted to help and why Alasdair was so intrigued.

He watched Yvaine as she stepped up to the firing line and the rest of the world had gone silent. It was only the two of them, or at least that’s all that mattered to him.

She proceeded to fire arrow after arrow, all of them bullseyes, each splitting the one before it in a display of skill and showmanship.

“She can do that on the back of a horse, too,” Alasdair’s chest puffed with obvious pride.

“I believe it,” Belial said.

For a brief moment, Mael considered a grand gesture. He thought about flying up above the party and directing one of her arrows to fly straight to his heart. Then he’d tell her that’s what she’d done to him.

But that was too overwrought.

He wanted to ask her for her hand. It was true they were fated to be together, but he knew she’d want to be asked.

“Lord Pandemonium?” Alasdair’s voice shook him from his reverie.

“Fuck all, what?”

“Pardon me for intruding, but you never said whether you agree to my terms or not. I’m going to need a contract.”

He waved his hand. “Yes, yes. Belial will draw it up.”

Yvaine headed toward them.

“I suppose you’d like to tell her?” Mael asked.

“I would not.” With a poof, Alasdair was gone.

“I still don’t trust it,” Belial said.

“Fair enough. But draw up the contract anyway. I think, perhaps, in his own way, he does love her.”

“Bah,” Belial murmured.

“Was that Alasdair I saw here?” Yvaine asked as she approached.

“It was. We have come to an accord,” Mael said.

He watched the emotions play out over her face. Disbelief. Shock. Fear. Acceptance. Delight.

“I... truly?”

“Truly,” he promised. “Now, it is you and I who must come to an accord.”

She smiled. “Oh, must we?”

“We must.”

“Am I drawing up this contract too?” Belial asked.

“If I’m lucky,” Mael said softly.

He'd wanted to make a Grand Gesture. A big, showy production that showed Yvaine exactly what she meant to him. But he knew she'd appreciate something that was from the heart. Not to say the showy production wouldn't be from the heart, but she was standing before him, radiant and flushed with joy and he didn't want to wait.

"You see," he began. "I've just purchased this country house and I have need of your particular skills."

Belial coughed. "Master, this isn't the way."

"No, this is exactly the way," Yvaine said quietly.

"You'll help me?" He took her hand. "Forever?"

"Forever." She nodded.

"This is not the story I want to be telling your hellspawn." Belial shook his head.

"I think it's perfect." She looked up into his eyes. "And I had an idea. Marriages are contracts," she began.

"More contracts!" Belial sighed.

"You're pulling an Alasdair," Mael said out of the side of his mouth.

Belial gave a maidenly gasp. "How dare you."

"You were saying?" He directed this to Yvaine.

"We can put whatever we like in the contract. Such as I live as long as you do. Our children will take after you in longevity. Or," she paused and looked at Belial. "Our hellspawn. After all, it is only fitting that the harridan in the north breed hellions just like herself."

"See? This is why I need you."

"I know."

He supposed the Queen had been right after all. Yvaine was perfect for him.

Yvaine smiled and tilted her face up to his for a kiss that could only be the first step to their happily ever after.

Eight



It was the last night of the Monsters Ball and Yvaine had never been happier.

How quickly her life had changed. Over the span of three days, she'd gone from terrified, unsure, and lost to feeling like she was finally where she was supposed to be.

And contrary to popular belief, marriage wasn't shackles. With Mael, it meant freedom.

Freedom from Alasdair, freedom from convention, freedom to be her true, authentic self and to live and love with wild abandon. She couldn't wait to marry him.

When she'd gotten the letter from the Queen, she'd thought it was the second worst thing that could've happened to her.

But it was so much better.

Dancing with her soon-to-be husband was now her very favorite thing, and not just because his tail was once again up her skirts.

Although, she liked that part very much.

It was being held by him. It was the joy on his face to be in his element. His happiness made her happy. Yet, she never wanted to dance another way again.

The tip of his tail continued its way up her leg, but this time she hadn't bothered to wear knickers.

"You're quite scandalous," he murmured as his tail slithered between her thighs.

"You were warned," she teased.

As they danced and celebrated their union along with the other ball attendees, it suddenly hit her why the handwriting on the Countess's love letter looked so familiar.

Because she'd seen it in the house accounts.

It was Michael's handwriting.

Could her bugbear gamekeeper be the Countess's lost love?

"What?" Mael asked her. "What's happened?" He leaned in closer. "Aside from my being incredibly filthy while tailing you in public."

Heat suffused her cheeks. "You're incorrigible, but I love it." She pressed her lips together. "I think I may need your help."

"Anything."

"You know my gamekeeper, Michael, he has no memory from before he came to work on the estate. I'm wondering if you may be able to help him remember."

"I might know someone who could help. He's an elder god. If I could get word to him, he could meet us in Evernight."

"Oh no! It needs to happen here. Can we bring Michael to your country house? He needs to be close to Broadstone."

“Of course!” Mael leaned close to her ear once again. “Do you think that Michael is the lost love from the letters?”

She bit her lip. “The writing from the note. It matches his. I know I could be wrong, but I think it’s worth it.”

Mael wrinkled his nose as if he’d scented something foul. “I suppose we must include Alasdair.”

“We must.” She nodded. “We’ll task him with collecting Michael.”

“How is Michael going to feel about that?” Mael asked.

“Oh, he’ll absolutely hate it, but it’ll give us some time to enjoy each other alone, and speaking of, you should send Belial with him.”

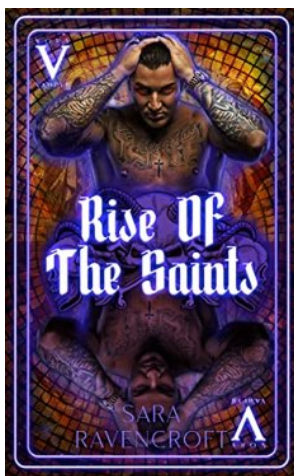
“He, too, will absolutely hate it.” Mael laughed.

“They’ve both started to act like a couple of maiden aunts. I want some time with you in the country house. You know, so I can help you as you asked.”

Mael laughed and dipped his head to kiss her.

Yvaine kissed the demon lord of her dreams and was excited to see just what forever was all about.

*Saranna DeWylde Writing As Sara
Ravencroft*



Dragomir Saint is amassing an empire controlling black market trade routes through the Midwest, claiming his power with a singular brutality that makes him and his brothers a rising force to be reckoned with. When a hit sends him to the morgue, he finds he has a weakness after all, and it's not the GSW to the back of the head. It's the morgue attendant, one Cordelia Bloom.

When he discovers she's being stalked by a killer the papers have dubbed "The American Ripper" he's determined to bring her the monster's head. But when the autumn moon is full, a fiend who is dark of heart may become something more—something Dragomir never anticipated. He'll risk his kingdom, his brothers, and his very life to save the one woman who reminds him of what it is to be human.