

TJ NICHOLS



MYTHO: FIVE

SLOTH  
& OTHER DELIGHTS

# SLOTH AND OTHER DELIGHTS



TJ NICHOLS

Copyright © 2023 by TJ Nichols

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

✿ Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[Sloth and other Delights](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Other books by TJ Nichols](#)

[About the Author](#)

## SLOTH AND OTHER DELIGHTS

Negotiations with the LA vampires have failed.

Having survived the attempted razing of their enclave by the dragons, the vampires are now holding Jordan's sister hostage and are demanding a unicorn for her safe return. There's only one problem.

Unicorns aren't animals. They are wild magic best left alone.

Jordan holds the media responsible for Katie's capture. If they had stayed out of his private life, she would've been safe. With Edra banned from LA and Jordan unable to even look at the case, there is nothing they can do to facilitate her release unless they want to risk catching a unicorn.

The vote that will decide the status of mythological people draws near, protests are increasing, and wild magic is creating havoc in the city. Jordan and Edra are pushed to their breaking point. When Jordan encounters the unicorn, it gives him what he craves most: escape.

As tensions rise, lines are drawn. Edra is on his own to save Jordan and the city.

## CHAPTER 1



“*I*s this human?” Carlin Howard held up a photo of a werewolf. “This is what your government wants to give human rights. They think this monster should be able to serve in the military, become a cop, and collect welfare. They want this to be able to marry humans.”

“That’s not what is being debated. Mythological people will have the same rights, but they will not be human. Even on Tariko, humans were humans, and elves were elves,” Sandra, the female host of the popular news-style TV show, said.

“Classifying mythos as people is the first step to letting humans and monsters marry. Already we have an SFPD inspector *mated*, as they say, to a lesser dragon, a part-time animal. He’s sleeping with a part-time animal. Shouldn’t that be illegal?”

Edra leaned forward. Even though he’d read all of Carlin Howard’s articles, hearing the man talk was making him sick. *If I was an animal, I wouldn’t be able to understand you. I wouldn’t have learnt a new language and new technology when I was brought here.*

Sandra pressed her lips together before forcing a narrow smile. “There is nothing in the bill being debated about mytho-human marriages. It’s about equal protection under the law.”

“So, are these relationships illegal or not?” Carlin held up a fistful of photos. “These are only the ones that are public. Vampires, elves, ogres... Would you want your child dating one of these?”

Sandra blinked a couple of times. “I think we are discussing two different things. You seem more worried about mytho-human relationships than their treatment and recognition.” She smiled and faced the camera. “In Europe, mythological people have been granted resident status and full protection for the past four years. They are treated as humans, though it is recognized that they are not.”

“And have there been mixed marriages?”

“I believe so,” Sandra said carefully.

Carlin slapped down the photos as if he’d won. “It’s bestiality. That’s what it is. That’s what the governments are encouraging.”

“They are people.”

“They are monsters, and they are taking over, forcing us to accept them and their ways.”

“We destroyed their world.”

“And now they are destroying ours. A few days ago, dragons burned an entire block in LA, killing a dozen people. And we’re supposed to sit back and be okay with that because it’s their culture?”

Edra winced. While neither he nor Jordan had asked the dragons to do that, they were both kind of responsible. Next to him, Jordan was silent and motionless, as if made of stone.

“My understanding is that it was a vampire enclave, and there are underlying issues.”

“Are you a mytho supporter?” Carlin sneered.

“I think we have an opportunity to create and learn and grow.”

Carlin ripped off his mic and tossed it on the table between them.

Sandra didn’t flinch, and her thin, fake smile remained in place. “That was Carlin Howard, a very vocal opponent of the Mythological Persons Bill of Rights. Next, we have Layla

Miller, a lawyer and supporter of the bill. We'll be back after these words from our sponsor.”

Jordan turned off the TV and tossed the remote across the room. It bounced off the armchair, startling Sinner, who hissed at both of them. Edra almost hissed back out of habit.

“This is his fault. I am going to find where he lives and—”

“Do nothing,” Edra said. Carlin was loud, and Edra would have loved to feed him to the dragons, but they wouldn't touch him—he'd be bitter and chewy from all that rancid hate. And if something happened to him, the mythos would get the blame. “Besides, I already know where he lives. And that his ex got a promotion because of her involvement with the LA vampires.” He should have bitten his tongue on the last two words because Jordan flinched as though Edra had ripped out his heart and offered it to him for dinner.

“I can't do nothing.” Jordan paced and raked his fingers through his hair. “Katie—”

“We have been ordered to do nothing.” The king, Ardel, and the Strega had been very clear about that. And Edra wasn't about to step out of line, given that none of the leaders were happy about the razing of the enclave. Even though that wasn't his fault, he hadn't done anything to prevent it either.

That and there wasn't anything they could do. Neither of them could turn up in LA and fight their way to Katie. They'd be arrested or killed the moment they crossed into the city, making them worse than useless.

“We should be finding the damn unicorn, delivering it, and getting Katie back.” Jordan snarled.

Ever since he'd seen the video demand from LA, he'd flicked between anger and torment, often managing both at the same time. He was going to burn out if he didn't stop to breathe. Sometimes there was nothing that could be done except wait for the lines of fate, as the Strega was fond of saying. As annoying as that was, Edra was old enough to understand what she meant and to pause. He couldn't catch Jordan up on a century of lived experience.



Edra grabbed Jordan and put his arms around him, hoping to soothe him. He didn't like that Jordan was hurting and that he was unable to help him. "And what did your boss say?"

Jordan was rigid, as though he didn't want any comfort. "To leave it to the FBI and LAPD—though they are probably working with the vampires." Jordan pulled free and stalked away. "If Carlin and his buddies hadn't been trawling my life, our lives, for information, then none of this would have happened. She'd have been safe." There was more snarl to his words than a dragon who'd had a baby stolen.

"You need to take a breath and—"

"If you say calm down—"

"You'll what?" Edra stood in front of him, crossed his arms, and used the couple of extra inches in height that he had to as much effect as he could as he glared at Jordan.

"She's not your sister—"

"No, but I can feel that it is wounding you. I spent time with her. I like her. She is so much like you. She buries her wounds and pretends that she's fine. She colors her hair and calls it armor. She snaps and snarls to fool others into believing she is strong. Neither of you are."

Jordan stepped back. "You need to get out of my face."

Edra didn't move. He held Jordan's gaze without offering the concession of blinking and pretending to be human. "You're hurting and lashing out. I've been there—"

"You don't even know your siblings."

Edra growled. "I lost a mate. I lost my entire world. Don't lecture me on loss."

Jordan swallowed and looked away.

"I have lost friends in battle. I have watched them age and die because my lifespan is longer. I know what it is like to be told to stand down and step aside to let someone do what you can't. I am only a Knight. *You* are only an Inspector." He deliberately used Jordan's human title. "We can't do anything

without fucking things up worse. How many kidnappings have you passed on to someone else?”

Jordan’s jaw remained clamped closed. The muscle worked as his eyes brimmed with tears. Watching, feeling, his mate suffer was tearing him apart. The gouges hurt more than when the werewolf had ripped his back open to the bone. These were wounds that a shift and a feed wouldn’t heal.

He wished they were.

“I would love nothing more than to ask Vlash to gather the army and to lead them to LA to tear apart every enclave and locate your sister and everyone else they are holding captive. They have eaten the entire mytho population.” He didn’t say it, but one kidnapped human was nothing. One scale on a dragon’s tail. “I don’t want to lose you to a wild magic chase.”

“Wild goose chase,” Jordan snapped.

Edra frowned. The words sounded similar in Tarikian, but he knew a goose was an animal. “What does a goose have to do with it?”

“That’s the phrase. A wild goose chase.”

“No, it’s not. I can assure you that is a human misinterpretation of the Tarikian word for magic.” Edra repeated the phrase in Tarikian. “And a wild magic chase is infinitely worse than a wild goose chase—that sounds kind of fun if I was a dragon at the time, that is.” And not dangerous at all. “Unicorns...” He shook his head. The Strega had tried to describe them to Jordan and why catching one wasn’t possible and that even if it was, handing over magic to the LA vampires wasn’t going to end well. “They aren’t real.”

“Except they are real, and there is one running around.”

Edra’s hands become cold out of frustration. “It’s not running anywhere. It’s intangible and... It’s like a fart. You can’t see it, or touch it, or catch it, only smell it.”

Jordan’s gaze narrowed.

From the look on Jordan’s face, that description hadn’t helped, so he tried again because while Jordan was grappling

with unicorns, he wasn't worrying about Katie. "Think of wild magic as a storm. You know it's there and that it's going to do some damage, but there's nothing you can do but let it roll through."

"It makes no sense that you have wild magic, and what? Tame magic?"

"Well, it's all kind of the same, but wild magic has its own form and can't be used until it settles. That wild magic even exists here is amazing. It means that magic survived the collapse, but it took time to recover and coalesce."

"Unicorns exist in human lore, so they must be real, like dragons and werewolves."

Edra scrubbed his hands over his face. "Yeah, wild magic probably flowed between the worlds, and some humans might have seen it and written about it. That doesn't mean it was a physical thing. We can't set a trap and put a rope on it."

"Then why did they ask for it?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I would have said something, wouldn't I?" The Strega had offered to knock Jordan out for the rest of the day, and right now, that wasn't looking like a bad option. "They want magic. That's all we know."

"It's got to be about more than looking pretty."

"Power. If they look pretty, then they don't get shunned, and it's easier to bribe people." But the only magic vampires had was blood magic. And Edra didn't know how to turn wild magic into anything usable until it was ready to settle down and make a magical wellspring. No one, not even the gods, could force wild magic to sit still and become part of the fabric of the world until it was ready.

Wherever it settled would become a place of great power. Nymphs would gather there, and the Strega would be able to draw from it. The magic would radiate out and touch every mytho. All vampires within the radius would benefit. The werewolves might be able to shift again. The city that was chosen...

“You just thought of something,” Jordan said. His heartbeat was calmer, even though there was still an edge in his voice.

“Yeah, maybe they think they can harness it and make it settle. No other city that I know of has even had a unicorn sighting.” But then why report it? It would be better to keep quiet and let the magic take root. Those places where mythos were thriving might have already had wild magic settle. “They would become more powerful if their city had more magic.”

“How?”

Edra held out his hands, the ring on his index finger catching in the light. “How important is air to a city? To life?”

“Essential. But mythos breathe air too.”

“Yeah, but we also *breathed* magic. It was fundamental to life. We used it without thinking. It was our air and water and the blood in our veins. Not having it left us gasping and...” he struggled for the right words. “With a hollowness that can’t be filled.”

“If other mythos know we have a unicorn, they’ll come here. They’ll go to LA if they have it. Then the vampires will eat them.”

Edra shook his head. “They wouldn’t need to eat mythos for the magic in their blood if the wild magic settled there. They want a mytho city-state with no humans. They want to annex areas for mythos only.” For how long had they known that there was a unicorn near San Francisco?

Jordan frowned. “So who smelled the magical fart and reported it to LA?”

“That is a good question and something we should definitely find out.”

## CHAPTER 2



As well as his relationship being tabloid fodder, Jordan was pretty damn sure that it had taken less than an hour for every cop in the damn city to learn his sister had been kidnapped. He didn't even make it to his desk before his captain summoned him to his office with a crook of his finger.

Jordan stepped into the office and shut the door. He might not be able to hear the whispers, but he was sure they were happening.

"I've seen the video. I've been told a team has been assembled, and they are working on it. They may want to ask you about Katie's involvement with vampires."

Jordan sat. "She wasn't involved with vampires." Or at least she hadn't told him if she was. Would she know who was a vampire and who wasn't if they all looked human?

The captain continued as though Jordan hadn't spoken. "And talk to your partner since he was just in LA."

"Edra was there because the LA vampires have been making demands of the mythos." He was going to bite his tongue but couldn't be bothered. Holding all the secrets was suffocating him. "They have been searching for ways to take over this city too." He stared at the desk so he didn't have to see the shock, horror, or disgust on his captain's face. "There are no mythos other than vampires in LA. They ate them all. They funded Lew's campaign. They tried to marry Ardel's heir..." he shook his head.

Silence.

Jordan risked a glance up.

“I wondered how much you knew. The chief and I weren’t sure how much Knight Tendric told you.” The captain carefully used Edra’s title as though to remind Jordan that there were conflicts of interest that they were ignoring because it suited them.

What if the bill didn’t pass?

And Edra wasn’t deemed a person?

At least at the moment, they were in a gray area. If laws were passed... He swallowed, knowing that he was on the wrong side of them. It felt as if he was on the wrong side of everything and everyone at the moment, and he couldn’t find the line to cross back over.

Edra was being prickly, and Jordan was being prickly right back.

“Ardel told me.” He wasn’t about to drop Edra in the shit. “There is a lot Edra and I don’t talk about and don’t ask about.” It would be easier not to know half the things he’d learned.

The captain considered him for several seconds that stretched on to feel like hours. Jordan suspected he was not going to like what came next.

“After this morning’s meeting, you need to speak to your friends in the media department as you need to make a statement about your sister before the press gets hold of the story. You can push back at the constant prying. Say it’s impacting operations, or however the media department wants to phrase it.”

“It’s the media’s fault,” he said through gritted teeth. By media, he meant one person. If Carlin hadn’t kept shouting and pointing, they might have slipped by unnoticed. “Without them, the LA vampires wouldn’t have known about Katie.”

“You don’t know that.”

Jordan drew in a breath but didn’t say anything. The captain was right, but it still burned because all he wanted was

someone to yell at. Someone to blame.

He shouldn't have had a go at Edra.

But he hadn't been able to apologize yet, in part because he didn't know what to say. He didn't want to agree that there was nothing they could do and happily sit on his hands.

The captain checked his watch. "We are meeting in fifteen minutes. I'm introducing three new inspectors. I want one of them in Mytho SiD, and I'm going to request someone else also volunteer."

*Great.* As much as he wanted someone else. That meant he was going to have to explain everything all the time, and there'd be someone watching over his shoulder. The things that he sometimes ignored, or did the mytho way, would be questioned. The only cops who worried about their methods were the ones who were doing it the wrong way.

He'd never had doubts before. Now it was all he had.

"Also, there is a delegation coming from LA. Politicians and their entourage, which I have been told includes vampires. I don't think they are coming to chat about your sister and mytho integration issues, and neither does the chief. They say they want to meet with the mayor, Ardel, and the elvish king to hold talks. Refusing means revealing that we are aware, and it would create some major waves."

"They're coming for the unicorn." And there was nothing that could be done to stop them. If they took it by force, would Katie be freed? Or should he be thinking of ways to protect the unicorn?

"Let's hope that is all they are planning on doing. Either way, they'll be expecting a city-provided protection detail. I'm considering pulling you and three others to be part of it."

"They will know who I am."

"Good."

Jordan stared at him, not quite sure if he was being set up to be killed while on duty or if there was another reason.

“You’ve time to make coffee. I suggest you do it. You look like hell.”

That was a dismissal if ever there was one. Jordan stood and walked to the door; his hand reached for the handle before he turned. “Does the team know where Katie is?”

“I don’t know that. I do know that they have a mytho liaison on the case. Tendric isn’t the only one.”

No, but there weren’t that many, and it wouldn’t be hard to find out who it was and to beg Edra to make some inquiries.

“Do not stick your fingers, or mytho fingers, in that pie, Kells. That is a direct your-ass-will-be-fired-from-the-very-top order. You do not touch, and you do not ask. You do not get your boyfriend to ask. You will be informed like any family member. Am I clear?”

Jordan nodded, even though it killed him. “I need to do something.”

“You are going to be bringing a new inspector up to speed. That should give you plenty to do. And I have no doubt that these damn protests are going to spill over again. The amount of resources...” The captain sighed. “Get your coffee, and keep your hands clean. Please. I don’t want to lose you as an inspector.”

“I don’t want to lose my sister.”

“It’s not pleasant being on the other side, is it.”

“No, sir.”

“You aren’t the only one to have ever stood there. I can tell you that since I’ve been in this chair, two have lost their jobs because of bad choices.”

“I understand.” But he didn’t like it.

“I don’t care if you understand. I would much rather you sit in your chair and spin in a circle for forty hours a week than get involved.” The captain waved him off.

Jordan left and made himself the coffee, still trying to think of ways that he could help Katie. He should never have



let her go to LA. He should have stayed in LA and helped Edra. Every option he thought of dragged him down a little further.

Keep his hands clean?

He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to scrub the dirt off.

“Do mythos do Halloween?” David said as a greeting as he grabbed a cup to make himself coffee.

Jordan stirred in one sugar, not really listening. “I don't know.”

It had never come up in conversation, and even though he'd seen the pumpkins and decorations appear in the shops, he hadn't thought about it. Mason would throw his usual party—on Halloween night, regardless of the day. Jordan had missed last year's because he'd been ass-deep in the stolen property case.

According to Edra, a vast collection of the mytho stolen goods were in LA courtesy of Hayes, who was now dead. That case was going nowhere.

“Hard to dress up as a monster when...” David pressed his lips together as though realizing what he'd been about to say may not go over well.

Jordan's fingertips whitened against his cup. He kept his gaze on David as he took a sip, refusing to bite. David may not have finished the sentence, but it was clear where it was going.

“I didn't mean—”

“Yeah, you did.” Jordan walked out before he said something he couldn't take back.

He made his way to the back of the meeting room. It was already filling up. Three neat and tidy people sat on one side. They were the new inspectors, and they were trying hard to make a good impression. Everyone else was somewhere close to neat. Some were talking, others nodded a greeting or stared out the window like they'd rather be anywhere else. Maybe they were thinking of the cases they already had or the ones they hadn't been able to close. That was usually him.

Anything that involved a mytho would be tossed his way. His name was the only one under mytho on the whiteboard at the front. He had no idea what had happened over the weekend, only that it hadn't been bad enough for him to be called out. Neither had Edra.

This wasn't the lull before the storm. No, it was the eye. The eerie quiet as the world was ripped apart around him. The debris was in the air, but he had no idea where it would land or who would be injured.

He closed his eyes and drew in a breath.

He'd survived, leaving home with nothing but a bag slung over one shoulder and a plan to start over in San Francisco. He'd lived through the collapse, gotten addicted, and gotten clean. This was another thing to endure until it passed.

Not everyone always made it, though. He'd lost colleagues who had gone to work expecting to go home. He'd lost friends the night of the collapse. But nothing had hurt this bad because this time, he couldn't do shit.

He cursed his parents for giving the interview and telling anyone who'd listen that he'd had corrupted her too. They had told everyone that Katie had run away to LA as soon as she'd turned eighteen. They blamed him.

Did Katie?

He opened his eyes as the captain started welcoming the new inspectors, Browning, Lopez, and Williams. "We have one section, which is on a volunteer basis."

Jordan almost snorted. He had been handed one case and had never left. Instead, he sipped his coffee and tried to guess which shiny young inspector would join his team of one. Lopez glanced his way as if she'd already figured out what was about to go down. Williams stared straight ahead as though he wasn't allowed to look elsewhere but at the captain when he was speaking. Browning was relaxed back in her seat. Her. She already knew what she wanted, and she wasn't here to kiss ass.

“So, which one of you would like to start out in Mytho SiD?” The captain finished his spiel, having pumped up the opportunity to work everything from homicide to vandalism.

His days were never the same, and they always came with a level of frustration and a sense of achievement that he’d never gotten anywhere else.

Browning put her hand up.

The captain’s eyebrows shot up as though he hadn’t expected any of them to volunteer. “Excellent. Kells is in charge.” He pointed at Jordan as if no one knew who he was. Four weeks ago, no one would’ve. “I would like another inspector to move across to mytho—”

The other inspectors groaned.

None of them wanted it, and Jordan had been much the same at first. It was a difficult mix of cases.

“Look, I’m hoping that in the future, we won’t need a special division, but at the moment, a dedicated team is what’s working for their community. You’re expected to have an understanding of their culture...cultures...as well as their internal politics. You do not need to speak Tarikian or Dragon.”

Jordan smiled. He hadn’t tried to learn Tarikian, and his Dragon was terrible, though not bad enough to get him eaten. “But it helps.”

That made a few heads turn.

“You sell it. Tell them your average week,” the captain said.

“I might lose Browning.” But he walked up the front, knowing that one inspector in this room, unless they were on leave, had left the SFPD zookeeper T-shirt on his desk, along with the eyeliner and toy dragon. “You will all be aware of the high-profile cases. The ones the media loves to use to remind us they are other. They don’t talk about the vandalism of mytho shops and houses. The stabbings by humans. The mytho-on-mytho crime such as werewolf disputes.”

“Isn’t that something that your *mate* deals with?” Miller smirked and chewed the end of his pencil.

Jordan ignored the acid in the word mate. “They solve some disputes themselves. The same way you would try to solve a dispute with your neighbor before calling the cops. It’s taken time for them to trust me and for me to understand the reason some things are the way they are. It’s part major crimes, part community policing, and you never know until you turn up which one it’s going to be. There is a stack of cold cases, missing persons, and all kinds of things to go through.” He stared out at the blank faces of his colleagues. There were not going to be any bites. He’d rather have no one than someone who didn’t want to be there.

Nate Isaac lifted his hand to shoulder height. “I want out of sexual assault. I’ll do it.”

That wasn’t exactly the enthusiastic volunteer he’d been hoping for, but Jordan would take it. At least Isaac had experience and understood that some things needed to be handled delicately.

A few swiveled their heads to look at Isaac.

“What? I’ve had my resignation typed up for the last three months.” He glanced at Jordan, then the captain. “I’ll give this that long and then reevaluate.”

Next to him, the captain sighed. “Let me hand out some jobs.”

## CHAPTER 3



“*T*here’s been an increase in vandalism with the Mytho Bill being debated. This is the pile of new ones. That is the pile of old ones.” Jordan pointed to both piles that were spread on what had been the empty desk next to his. “What I’ve been doing is making sure everything is well documented, photographed, and I grab copies of footage from any cameras in the area. Mytho areas don’t tend to have cameras. So far, I haven’t been able to ID anyone. However, there are three very distinct patterns and a stack of randoms.”

Browning pressed her lips together as she eyed the pile. “Vandals have their own style like taggers?”

“Exactly. I’ve put a rubber band around the files that are similar.” Jordan would’ve liked to say he was close to catching the culprits.

Browning flicked a rubber band. “Aside from the property damage, why do we care?”

“Mild hate crimes lead to violent hate crimes,” Isaac said. “Or retaliation. Either way, stopping it now is better than leaving it. Database?”

Jordan laughed. “You think IT is going to spare me the man hours for that?”

“So you cover every crime as long as a mytho is involved,” Browning said.

“Are you regretting volunteering already?” Vandalism wasn’t exciting, but Isaac was right. A rock through a shop

window or pouring acid over someone's garden led to bigger problems.

"No. I want to work the mytho cases. I want to learn more about them. It's why I applied to be an inspector. I saw what was happening on the street. There's a lot of shit that doesn't get reported."

"That's true of any department." Isaac thumbed through the files. "What do you want us to do?"

"For the moment, get familiar with what I have called acid, paint, and destruction." Jordon spread the bundled files out. "Destruction of satyr property I bucketed separately because that usually has a religious bent."

Isaac pulled a rubber band off a stack of files. "So religion is the fourth horseman of vandalism."

Jordan smiled. Isaac might sound worn out and done, but he was a good inspector, and he was sharp. "Yeah. Anyway. We have three new ones from over the weekend. I haven't looked at them. See if they fit into one of the categories, and when I come back, I'll take you to Mytho Servo, and then we'll start talking to people to see if anyone will tell us what they saw."

"Where are you going?" Browning asked.

"I have to prepare a media statement." At this point, he'd rather talk to mermaids than the media.

"Is this because your...your partner is..."

Jordan let her hang for several seconds before answering. "Edra is mytho. He's a lesser dragon. If you can't say what they are, you're going to have problems. Calling a vampire a vampire isn't offensive. Edra is a dragon shifter. The werewolves were shifters once too."

"It's just because, with all the talk. I didn't want to sound like I was gossiping or prying." Her cheeks darkened.

Isaac gave a low laugh. "Everyone wants the inside edge. It's what we get paid to do every day."

“It’s a bit more serious this time.” Jordan forced out a breath. “The attention has…” he paused and glanced around. No one was working. No one was talking. They were all waiting. Fuck the lot of them. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

He grabbed his coffee and left Isaac and Browning to their reading.



Edra walked up the hill. It was quicker to fly to Jordan’s, but it was a lot harder to go shopping as a dragon as he had nowhere to put his wallet, and it would freak the humans out—if he’d turned up at Vlash’s shop, the elf wouldn’t have even blinked. In this suburb, though, Edra did his best to appear human.

While Jordan was at work, Edra had this week off, in part because of his recent trip to LA and the need to finish healing and in part because Ardel wanted to keep him away from all things political and Katie-related.

The moment Jordan’s house came into view, his gut tightened. He didn’t know what was wrong, only that something was. There were scents that didn’t belong, something chemical. Instead of walking the rest of the way, he ran.

As he got closer, beneath the stink of chemicals was the scent of blood and fear, but it wasn’t human. “Sinner?”

From three houses away, he saw the graffiti and the signs stuck to the door. The red paint splashed on the walls and down the stairs.

They had been found. Someone knew where they lived and had made sure that others would know. He spun, expecting someone to be lurking, but he was alone.

“Sinner!” He called in English and then Dragon. His heart was beating so fast he almost didn’t hear her heartbeat or the tiny cry.

He called again, and this time he located her. He lifted the metal lid of the trash can where she lay broken and bleeding inside. His eyes burned. “No.”

He cooed to her in Dragon, too scared to pick her up in case he hurt her. “What happened?”

Jordan had always wondered how much they talked. It wasn't enough for a full conversation, but like Dragon, a lot was communicated in body language.

“Help,” she cried again.

“I will.” But for several seconds, he couldn't think of anything to do. Her big green eyes stared up at him, and she whimpered. She couldn't shift to heal, and he couldn't take her to the hospital as that was for humans—they didn't even like treating mythos. There was only one thing he could do. “I'm going to carry you as a dragon. It might be scary, but please don't wriggle.” He stripped off his long-sleeved T-shirt, it was really one of Jordan's that he'd been borrowing for a while, and he laid it out and gently picked Sinner up and placed her on it before tying it up so she wouldn't fall out. It was only then he noticed the bloody prints he was leaving on the shirt.

She didn't have much blood to lose.

He stripped off the rest of his clothes and shifted a little faster than he generally liked. He was still catching his breath, and his skin was burning from the formation of scales, but he only gave himself three seconds to stretch, so everything clicked into place before picking up his precious cargo and launching into the air.

He streaked over the city, not caring that he was visible, and landed in a run on the road next to the grove. He didn't stop moving until he was on the grass. It was only then he set the bundle on the ground and shifted so he could undo the knots, but his fingers wouldn't work because they were shaking, and everything kept blurring.

What if he'd been too slow?

She had to be alive. There had to be a chance to save her.



The two ogres tending the garden had stopped working. The older one stood and walked over. “What’s wrong?”

He unfolded the shirt, and Sinner blinked up at him. He thanked whatever god who was listening and prayed the nymphs would be kind and that the ogres could heal Sinner.

“Jordan’s cat was attacked. Please.” He was on his knees, naked, in the grove like any petitioner, begging for a miracle.

## CHAPTER 4



Jordan splashed water on his face, even though it wasn't going to help to reduce the redness of his eyes. Every other statement he'd been able to get through without breaking, but this one had been painful. And he'd needed to redo the recording what felt like a hundred times. His eyes were scratchy, and his throat was thick.

He hung his head, his hands resting on the edge of the sink. Water dripped off the end of his nose. At least it was only water, and he didn't need to ask for five minutes to pull himself together for another take.

Would the statement make any difference?

Probably not.

Would it get Katie back?

No.

But it was a box that he had to tick, and he wasn't in a position to push back. His phone rang. The work tone, not Edra's. They hadn't spoken this morning. Jordan had gotten up, gone for a run, and then gone to work. He needed to put things right, but it felt as though everything was unravelling, and he couldn't stop it.

He yanked some paper towel out, dried his hands and face, and pulled out his phone, answering as he left the bathroom. "Kells."

"I have a call for you. He's claiming to be Tendric."

“Okay, put him on.” Why didn’t Edra call him directly? The hair on his arms prickled up, and his chest squeezed tight. Something wasn’t right. He knew before he heard Edra’s voice.

“Jordan?” Edra’s voice was tight and pained.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt? Where are you?” If Edra had been captured again, he was going to pull apart the city, brick by brick, and no one was stopping him.

“I went to the shops, and I let Sinner out as usual. I shouldn’t have. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know what else to do,” Edra’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“Was she hit by a car?” Sinner never went on the road. She sat on the front steps or slept in the postage stamp he called a backyard.

“No. Not a car. You need to come to the grove.”

“The grove...why?” But the answers were already forming. Something had happened to Sinner, and Edra had thought mytho cure, not vet.

“She may not make it.”

Jordan stood in the corridor. For so long, Sinner had been all he had. She was the constant in his life. Another piece of his world was being ripped away. “What happened?”

“Just don’t go home until I...I sort it.” Edra sniffed.

He raked his fingers through his hair. “Tell me what the fuck happened.”

“The anti-mytho protestors found where you live. There’s paint everywhere, and they attacked Sinner and put her in the trash.” Edra’s last word was little more than a gulp. “Hurry.”

Edra hung up, and Jordan stood there for several seconds, too raw to move. With each breath, the pain didn’t lessen. He forced himself to take a step.

As he did, he made a plan. He walked to his car and, once there, called his captain. “Sir...I...I’m done for the day. My

house has been targeted by protesters, so you're going to need to send someone around."

"Targeted?"

"Vandalized. My cat was beaten and put in the trash. I need to go." He hung up because he didn't know what else to say. He drove to the grove but wasn't sure if the lights had been green or red when he got there and parked opposite the trees that had been decorated with corpses not that long ago.

Edra was sitting in the grass, bare-chested.

It took a moment for him to process what must have happened. Edra had flown there and left everything at home. He reached into the back seat and grabbed the bag of clothes that now lived there. They could be worn by either of them in a pinch.

This was pinching in all the wrong places.

His fear of the grove pushed to the surface as he crossed the road. Standing in the shadows of the trees was a nymph. Two ogres were bent over something he couldn't see.

Sinner, he realized. They were trying to save her.

Everyone was getting hurt because of him. He glanced at Edra. Because of them.

"Here." He tossed the bag at Edra but didn't watch as he dressed. His gaze was on the ogres. "How bad is it?" He could take her to the vet. That would be better, wouldn't it? "Can you help her?"

"They have been," Edra said.

"She needs to remain here while she heals," the nymph added.

The last thing he wanted was to be indebted to the nymphs. He closed his eyes, not knowing how to extract Sinner and himself from this mess without making it worse.

Edra's hand brushed his arm. "I didn't know what else to do."

It's not as if they'd discussed where he took Sinner for her shots. The bigger problem was Edra feeding her too much bacon or pig head. Yet he was still annoyed that Edra had brought her there of all places. "How much is this going to be? What favors will I owe?"

"None, Knight. She is your family," the nymph said. "You won't be harmed if you sit with her."

The ogre rocked back. "She isn't in any pain. Her broken bones have been set, and her injuries treated. She needs to replenish what was spilled. Staying here will help her heal faster."

"Because of the magic," Jordan said as he sat and crossed his legs. Sinner seemed to have gotten smaller as she lay on the bloodied clothing. His throat thickened until he didn't think he could breathe. All he wanted was for her to wake up and be okay. He reached out his hand and hesitated.

"You can touch her. She will be glad you're here," the ogre said, giving Sinner's flank a light stroke.

"She asked for you," Edra added.

He cast a sharp glare at Edra, jealousy spiking that his mate could talk to his cat. Edra knew his cat better than he did.

Jordan stroked her forehead with one finger. When his eyes burned, he squeezed them shut. He drew in a couple of breaths and gave up trying to keep himself together. He'd been pushing through for too long.

Edra knelt behind him and looped his arms around Jordan's shoulders. "I know you're angry at me, but I'm here. I'll find them. I'll get the house cleaned up."

Jordan's shoulders sagged. "I'm not angry. I'm frustrated and tired. First you, now Katie and this, and I can't..." He leaned back against Edra. "I can't keep going."

Edra pressed his lips to Jordan's cheek as he held him. "If you don't keep going, you'll be stuck in this place."

He didn't want to be stuck here. There had to be something good on the other side. He needed to believe that this storm

would pass and that this wasn't the rest of his life.

“There is nothing wrong with resting before continuing, Knight. Have you forgotten those first few days, the first month after the collapse?” the ogre chided Edra. “All our hearts were breaking. Some never healed.”

Is that what Jordan was feeling, the breaking of his heart?

The loss of his world?

While he didn't want to be stuck, he didn't have the strength to move on either. Not yet.

His phone rang, and he ignored it. When it rang again, he pulled it out of his pocket and tossed it across the grass. If work wanted him, they were going to have to come down there and drag him out of the grove.

From deeper in the grove, the phone rang again.

Jordan groaned. He hadn't thrown it hard enough to break it.

“I'll deal with it.” Edra pulled away, and Jordan didn't stop him.

Instead, he lay on the grass next to Sinner. Perhaps the nymph was right, and he needed to rest.

“This is Knight Tendric. No, I can't put Kells on the phone.” Edra was silent for a few minutes. “The clothes and wallet left are mine. I'm not going to come over and answer questions right this second. Look, the people who did that nearly killed Jordan's cat. I suggest you knock on doors to see if anyone—” Edra sighed. “Great. Then you don't need me now. I will come down to the station to collect my things and answer your questions if I need to. No, I still can't put him on.”

“Who was it?” Jordan asked, more out of habit than actual concern.

Edra sat next to him; his fingers trailed through Jordan's hair. “Browning.”

“She’s new.” He closed his eyes, feeling as though the grass were cradling him and that he’d be able to sleep without nightmares. His eyes opened as he remembered that this place was the cause of most of those nightmares.

Edra leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You’re safe. Stay here and rest. Look after Sinner and yourself. I’ll sort this out and be back with dinner.”

“I should be sorting it out.” It was his house. Browning and Isaac didn’t understand how to deal with mytho issues, but he couldn’t find the will to move.

“I’ve got it. And your phone.”

Jordan pulled his car keys out of his pocket and handed them over. “It’s slower than flying.”

“Thank you.” Edra’s touch lingered for a moment longer before he got up.

Jordan lay there, relieved that no one was asking him to do anything and that someone else was going to fix things. He was so used to dealing with everyone else’s problems that having someone help him was unfamiliar. Guilt and relief warred within him. He closed his eyes. He’d stay with Sinner until she woke up. Then they’d go home, and everything would be fine.

He really wanted to believe the lie.



Edra stood. He glanced at the nymph and then the ogre overseeing Sinner’s care, and without a word, they all moved deeper into the grove.

“He’s broken,” the nymph said.

Edra glanced at the ogre women. They were great with physical injuries, and Jordan was great at pushing through and getting shit done, but the last couple of weeks... The last two days...

Grief wasn't a competition, and he shouldn't have made it one. He didn't remember falling apart, and yet he must have because he'd lived in the wild as a dragon before forcing himself to remember how to be a person. He'd listened and learned a new language and searched for Lyo for months before giving up.

Sinner was the last string to snap, and now Jordan was unraveling.

Jordan's house was where he was safe, and now it was a target.

"We see the news," Melody said.

Edra shook his head. "It's not only that. The LA vampires have taken his sister hostage, and he—we—have been banned from taking action because the situation is delicate." He would have said explosive, but he didn't want to remind the nymph about the fire in the grove.

Even now, he didn't know where else he could have taken Sinner.

"Can you do anything for him?" Because they didn't have time for him to rest and get ready to fight. Jordan needed to be on his feet and helping because this shit was only going to become worse until the vote on the Mythological Persons Bill of Rights.

"We can keep him fed and watered," Melody said.

"He's not a fucking plant." The hand holding the phone became cold and vanished.

"You are also broken," the nymph said as though it was a revelation.

If she wasn't a demi-god, Edra might have snarled at her. Physically, he'd recovered from his trip to LA. There were a few gray scars but nothing major. The memory of being chained up was much harder to heal.

"Yeah." He stared at the grass and sighed.

"Spend the night here. You will be safe and can rest. That is what the grove is for."



Sleeping there would be like spending the night out on Tariko. He'd never slept in a grove, though, in part because it was someone else's home. Now he'd been given permission, and he'd rather be with Jordan and Sinner than at home alone. "Thank you."

Melody clasped her hands. "I will have dinner brought, and I will have my second husband bring his drum."

Edra bit back a groan. A full-on ogre healing in the grove was exactly what Jordan would want. "Please don't go to any trouble. It is enough—"

"It is no trouble. There will be chanting and healing tonics for the heart."

The nymph put her hands over her chest as though she had a heart. "Yes, that is what is needed. Something to lift his soul and to revive Sinner. The little creature who lives in his heart."

Edra smiled and murmured his thanks, knowing there was no way out of this. A blessing from a demi-god. He was sure it was going to be fine.

## CHAPTER 5



There were two cop cars, one unmarked, on the street and four cops, two in uniform, standing around looking at the red paint that had been splashed around. Edra sat for a moment, considering his options. He didn't like dealing with the police without Jordan because he had to explain everything multiple times before they got a clue about anything mytho.

That there were four of them, all doing nothing, didn't bode well.

But this wasn't a mytho case, and Jordan needed to stay where he was. A part of him had known that it would only take a few more shoves for Jordan to fall because he felt the same way. His claws were sliding, and the edge was approaching. Losing Jordan would break him.

He was not going to lose another mate.

He never wanted to feel that again.

No ID, no shoes, and no idea what was going on, only that they weren't cleaning up the mess so Jordan could come home. If he saw this... Edra shook his head and got out of the car, looking more like he had stolen the car than lived on the street.

He rolled his shoulders as though he could dislodge the tension and crossed the road. The asphalt bit into his bare feet. The shorts and T-shirt weren't enough in the cooler weather. Not enough to hide his limbs if he lost visibility. The anxiety twisting in his gut wasn't going to help with that issue.

“I’m Knight Tendric. Who is in charge?” Not the two in uniform. It was either the young woman or the older guy who smiled, but his eyes had the hardness of someone who would never forget what he’d seen in the dark. Edra saw it in his own eyes, and it was growing in Jordan’s.

“Inspector Isaac.” The man offered his hand, and Edra shook it. “We’re new to Mytho investigations. Didn’t expect to be dealing with this.” He hooked his thumb at Jordan’s house.

“And is it dealt with?”

“How can we be sure he’s Knight Tendric?” the woman asked.

Edra turned his head, knowing that it was a move a human couldn’t do without breaking their neck, and glared at her. “For a start, you have my wallet, my phone, my pants, and my house key.” He pointed at the bundle she was holding. “And secondly...” He flicked his tongue over his lip, giving her time to note the color. “My photo, official and otherwise, has been all over the place for a solid two weeks.”

“Give the Knight his things, Browning.”

She handed them over but didn’t seem happy about it. “They should be processed for evidence.”

Edra pointed at the stairs and the front door. “Your evidence is there. It’s the trash can where Sinner was dumped and left for dead.”

“Sinner?” Isaac asked.

“Jordan’s cat.” Seeing her like that... The punch to his heart still echoed through his body. Watching Jordan collapse had been the follow-up he should’ve seen coming.

He shouldn’t have called him. He should’ve dropped off Sinner and come back to clean up, and then Jordan would never have known. But the lie would have lived and breathed between them, poisoning everything it touched.

Isaac nodded. “Vandalism becomes violence. Today it’s a cat, tomorrow it’s—”

“It’s a mytho or Jordan’s sister. Or anyone they decide is supporting mythos,” Edra finished.

“Will Sinner make it?” Isaac asked.

“I hope so.” If she didn’t, Jordan would fall apart, and Edra didn’t know how to help him. He had to believe the magic of the grove would heal her and Jordan. He fixed a smile and hope that it looked believable. “What next, or can I grab my shopping and start scrubbing?”

Isaac shook his head. “We are getting forensics to fully document everything. This is a secure site.”

“We gave him his pants and wallet,” Browning muttered.

“What does that mean? I can’t go home? I can’t put my food away? What is documenting this going to do?”

“Walk with me.” Isaac beckoned Edra away from the house. “This is a cop’s house. A cop who is engaged to a mytho. It’s a more significant crime.”

Edra turned to face him. “More significant than the nine other places that I have helped scrub clean?”

“Nine? I only have five on file.”

“The first four were before Jordan and I started working together. A lot of things weren’t reported.”

Isaac studied him for several seconds, then nodded. “I’ll call you when it’s all clear. We want photos and paint samples, and if we’re lucky, we’ll find some fingerprints on the trash can or door. I’ll need yours to exclude you.”

“You have them on file. I was the liaison officer. Is that all you’re doing?” Jordan would talk to people. He’d bang on doors, or at least that’s what he did when it came to mytho crimes.

“No. I think the vandal made their first big mistake. This isn’t a mytho neighborhood where no one will talk to the cops and security is...” he paused and glanced at Edra. “What I’m hoping is that all these nice houses have cameras, and we can get some images good enough to ID the perp.”

Edra turned and considered the neighbors for a moment. All the times he'd flown in and shifted and been naked on the balcony ran through his head. He hoped that their cameras weren't that good.

"No mytho house has cameras." Because no one wanted the cops to learn anything freely. "Do you need me to do anything?"

Isaac studied him. "You live there?"

"Yes."

"Then you can't be involved."

"Can I fly up and grab a change of clothes?"

Isaac's gaze narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I need to shift first. I can't fly like this." Edra lifted his eyebrows. While he was inside, he'd be able to eat something. "If we can't get back in tonight, then we are both going to need a change of clothes, and since the front door is off limits..." Edra pointed to the balcony. "I can get in up there."

"Is there a back door?"

Edra opened his mouth, then smiled. He hadn't thought of that. "I never enter that way."

"After you've given me a statement, an officer will escort you around the back." He pulled a notepad out of his pocket. "If you're ready?"

Edra sighed. "Sure."



He'd told Isaac everything he'd seen, then everything he knew about the previous vandalisms, before being allowed into the house. Without Sinner and Jordan, the house was too big around him, and he didn't want to linger. He packed a bag with things for Jordan and himself, made several sandwiches and ate them just as fast, and then left.

The next place he needed to go was Mytho Servo, even though he was supposed to be on leave. While there was nothing that could be done about the vandalism until he'd been given the all-clear to go home and clean up, he needed to talk to Ardel.

He needed to know that something was being done about Katie. Jordan needed to know.

Jordan's phone rang as Edra parked the car near the Mytho Servo building. The protesters out the front were growing in numbers again. It was so tempting to ask the dragons to fly over and drop a steaming load on them, but the stink would seep into the building, and no one would thank him for that. That and he was sure the humans would assume a mytho had arranged it and be furious.

But that didn't stop him from dreaming a little.

He hit ignore on the call.

He'd taken the phone, so Jordan wasn't bothered, not for him to take all of his calls—there was probably some rule about that. There seemed to be rules for everything else.

The phone rang again. This time, he checked to see who it was. *Sean*.

The mytho biologist, who thought he understood mythos because he chopped them up at work.

“Knight Tendric,” he answered.

The person on the other end took a moment. “I'm after Jordan.”

“He's unavailable at the moment.” Sean might be Jordan's friend, but Edra wasn't sure about him, and he certainly didn't want to be having a chat.

“I was calling to see how he's going. I saw the statement he made about Katie. I'm guessing he's not doing great if you're answering his phone.”

Edra sighed. Sean cared about Jordan, and Edra couldn't be bothered snarling at him. “He needs a bit of space. It's been a day.” And it was only lunchtime.

“And you’re okay, back from LA. Did you like it?”

He rubbed the base of his neck, sure that for a moment, he felt the weight of the collar and chain. There was no way he was ever going back. “No.”

“Right.” Sean paused. “Tell him I said hi.”

Edra scowled as the protestors started up another hate-filled chant. “I will.”

“And that things went well the other night, but given the situation... Did he tell you?”

Edra’s scowl deepened, and a growl rose in his throat. What secrets had Jordan kept? “I don’t know. What should he have told me?”

“I’m kind of seeing Troy. He’s an ogre.”

“I know who Troy is.” He tore his gaze away from the protestors and their hate. “When did this happen?” No one had told him. Not that they needed to, and a lot had been going on, but he’d missed out on something. “Why did it happen?”

“I met him at a basketball game. We all had dinner. I thought Jordan would’ve said something.”

There hadn’t been a chance to do anything after going to see the king. Everything after that moment had been a slow slide into ruin. “It’s been hectic. Are you using Troy to find out about ogres?”

“No. It’s not like I told him what I do. I’m not an anthropologist. I look at cells and structures. Things that wouldn’t have been studied on Tariko.”

“You study the bodies of the dead who were taken from us.” Those who had died in the internment camps had been taken by the government.

Sean was silent for a moment. “Yes. I’m sorry, that is painful.”

Edra closed his eyes. What if Lyo was chopped up into pieces and being examined? “Is there a lesser dragon in the lab?”

“A sample was shipped from over east.”

So not Lyo. He wasn't sure if that was better or worse. If there was a body, at least Lyo could be burned, and there could be a wake. What had happened to all those who had died? Had they been crushed between the two worlds? Had it hurt, or had it been over in an instant?

“You lost someone?”

“We all lost someone. I'll ask Jordan to give you a call when he's up to it.”

“That would be good. Maybe we could all get dinner.”

“Now is not the time to be publicly dating a mytho. And I'm not saying that to put you off.” Or to protect Troy. Troy would be a good husband; it was unfortunate that he hadn't found anyone who captured his interest. What he saw in Sean, Edra had no idea, but he was sure he'd hear about it at some point.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No,” he said a bit too fast. “But I'll let you know if there is. I need to go.”

“I hope Katie is okay.”

“So do I.” He hung up and closed his eyes for a couple of breaths. Bracing himself to leave the safety of the car. It would have been easier to fly. Then he could've landed on the roof and avoided all of this.

He still could avoid it. He picked his phone up and called Ardel. “Any chance we could meet somewhere other than Mytho Servo to talk?”

“You're on leave. You shouldn't be coming here at all.”

“Am I on leave to recover or because the mob knows my face?”

“Both. Why do we need to meet?”

Edra gave his boss the update on the vandalism, Sinner, and Jordan's break. “And there's one other problem. I didn't



even know about the unicorn, so who saw it and told the LA enclave?”

“I have a suspicion, but I have to tread carefully because it could have been a joyous announcement or a boastful one, not necessarily treasonous.”

“It doesn’t matter the intent when the result was kidnapping and blackmail.” And a kick in the balls to his mate. Jordan’s disintegration was very different than when he’d been coming off Bliss and unsure of the magic between them.

When Jordan had a task, something to fix, he could push through anything. Take that away, and he was rudderless. Throw in the personal attacks, and his boat was sinking in mermaid-infested waters.

“It means I can’t point fingers because there are too many defenses unless I can prove they were doing it to undermine the city,” Ardel said. “I don’t like having to rely on the humans but going to LA is out of the question.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Nothing. And stay away from Mytho Servo.”

Now he wasn’t even welcome at work. He tipped his head back against the headrest. “We’re going to need somewhere to stay until the cops let us go back home.”

“I’d invite you to the enclave, but I don’t think that would benefit Jordan. Go to a hotel.” Ardel was politely telling him to disappear.

“Hide.”

“Yes. The humans are fighting for their way of life, and they are dangerous.”

“And we are fighting for ours.” They were fighting on too many fronts.

Jordan was being pulled at from too many places, and he was unravelling. If Sinner hadn’t been attacked, he might have kept going and made it through this storm. If the house hadn’t been vandalized. If Edra hadn’t been sent to LA.

If. If. If.

“The ogres are having a drumming at the grove tonight. Hopefully, the nymphs don’t change their mind and kill us all.”

“Don’t speak such things into being.”

Once, he would have agreed with Ardel. But no one had whispered Katie’s kidnapping. No one had wished Sinner ill.

There wasn’t enough magic...

He paused. Wild magic. There was wild magic drifting around the city. Carlin was breathing the hate into being. The media was spreading the message, so even if the words had been spoken elsewhere, they could be heard and believed here.

“How much do you know about wild magic?” Edra asked.

“Enough to avoid it because it’s unpredictable.”

Edra stared out the window at the protesters. “Do you think it affects humans?”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m going to visit the Strega.” And he knew the questions he needed to ask.

## CHAPTER 6



Jordan knew he shouldn't close his eyes in the grove and that it wasn't as safe as it felt. But the two ogres were there and untroubled, and he wanted to stay with Sinner. It would be rude to take her to the vet when she was sleeping, her leg and body neatly bandaged. He stroked her forehead again.

Would he be able to take her home tonight, or would she need to stay longer?

If she had to stay, he didn't know what he'd do, only that leaving her wasn't an option.

He didn't know what to do about anything. And every decision felt too big for him to even contemplate. He should call Edra and find out when he'd be back, but when his hand touched his pocket, he remembered Edra had taken his phone.

"Huh." He hadn't missed it until that moment. Did he really need to call Edra?

Probably not. He could wait.

Lying in the grass, listening to the birds, and watching the leaves sway reminded him of when he'd been a kid. He'd ride his bike up the road and away from town. There was a small bridge, which he'd cross, even though his father had forbidden it because on the other side was a farm. He could hide his bike and lie in the field, unseen by anyone.

For those hours, he was free.

There was no yelling.

There was no creeping around to avoid his father's temper. He wasn't being told to move out of the way or to stop whatever he was doing. There were no kids teasing him and no teachers shaking their heads because he was another Kells. He didn't know what that meant until years later, but the worn-out shoes and hand-me-downs should've been a clue.

They weren't real poor—they had a house—but there was never any money. And his father begrudged every dollar he spent on his kids, as well as taking half of anything they made.

The few stolen hours lying in the field until he was thirsty and hungry enough to go home had been a refuge. It had been where he'd prayed for something to change.

A year later, the bridge was swept away in a flood, and it was never rebuilt.

Lying in the backyard and staring up at the clouds only earned him a kick in the ribs for being lazy.

He closed his eyes, remembering the field and the peace he'd had on his own.

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” The voice pressed into his thoughts.

Jordan forced his eyes open, not sure where he was for a heartbeat. It wasn't his mother staring at him, but an ogre. The deep sense of dislocation jolted him to full alertness. His skin prickled. He'd been...he wasn't sure where he'd been, but it wasn't here.

He pushed himself up, his limbs heavy as though he'd been sleeping for too long. “That would be great if it's no trouble.”

She smiled and knelt near him. “Here. It's only herbed water, bread, and cheese.”

“Thank you.” He took the offered cup and cloth-wrapped meal. “Am I taking your lunch?”

“No.” Her attention was already off him and onto Sinner. She checked the bandages and put her head down as if listening to her heart.

Jordan sat there, unable to eat, as he watched her work. “What are...” He swallowed. He talked about injuries and death all the time. He’d seen Edra ripped up on more than one occasion. Today even the memories ached as though they were causing fresh bruises. “What are her injuries?” He forced the words out.

He should’ve asked sooner.

“Broken bones, some internal bleeding. She was lucky to be found and that Edra brought her here so quickly. He was very worried.”

Jordan’s lips twitched, but he couldn’t smile. The only reason Sinner had been out was because Edra had let her out. Exactly the same thing he did before he went to work most mornings. That Edra wasn’t at work meant they had both been in bed when he’d left.

“And the magic? Is it working?”

“I believe so. You want to take her to your doctor?”

Part of him thought that was the right thing to do, that stitches would heal her faster than magic, but that was a lie. Sinner was asleep and not in pain, and at the vet’s, she’d be in a cage out the back surrounded by other sick and injured animals. At least here, he could sit with her.

“No.” He took a sip of the bitter water.

“Good. The magic will do you both good.”

Jordan opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn’t remember the last day he’d spent without his phone, just sitting. That was a magic all on its own.



‘Captain’ flashed up on the screen of Jordan’s phone. Edra wasn’t sure if he should answer or ignore it because it would be important.

The drive out to the Strega’s house should’ve been relaxing. But he’d been stuck in traffic for an hour. He was

about ready to take the next exit and go back to the city. The Strega would tell him that it wasn't meant to be if the way was blocked.

She was probably right.

He answered the call. "Tendric."

"What's wrong with Kells? Browning said you had his phone and his car."

People like Browning made his scales twitch. She didn't care about Jordan, only that Edra was stepping in when he shouldn't be.

"Jordan is with Sinner, his cat, who was attacked when his house was vandalized. Hopefully, Browning will give you a full write-up, including what was in my food shopping that she wouldn't let me take." The traffic inched forward. It would've been quicker to fly.

Though with the way things were going, he'd have been hit by a helicopter. He shuddered, glad he hadn't given voice to the thought.

*Fucking unicorns.*

"So what? Kells is babysitting a cat?"

Cold rippled over his skin, and his hands turned silver. He cranked up the heat until he could feel his toes pleurably burning.

"I think he might need a couple of personal days."

The captain was silent for several seconds. "It's not about the cat, is it?"

"It is, and his sister. These are personal attacks. And it's worse because they aren't wounding him; they are hurting those he loves." Leaving Edra in LA had taken a few small cuts and made them one. Everything else had made the damage worse, and there'd been no chance for the wound to knit together. "And he can't do anything."

The captain huffed out a breath. "I have two new inspectors, and they don't know shit about mytho policing."

Isaac hadn't been too bad, but then it seemed as if he'd been around for a while and had seen his share of shit.

"I'll give him two days and tell him he can't hand his phone off—"

"I took it off him, so he could have some peace." Already Edra wanted to throw it out the window.

"Well, I need someone to take Isaac and Browning to Mytho Servo and start showing them around. You're it."

"I'm not the liaison—"

"I don't care."

If the captain could give him his old job back, he'd take it, but that's not what this was. He needed to give a reason, not a refusal. "I'm not allowed near the Mytho Servo building because of the protesters. This is a really bad time to train people. There's a lot going on."

"I'm aware of the LA issue."

"Oh." But that didn't mean he knew everything about LA. Edra indicated to change lanes as the car inched forward. He could walk faster than this. "I can arrange a meeting with Carly somewhere less conspicuous."

"Where?"

Edra stared out the windscreen at the line of cars stretching out in front of him. "My usual options would be the temple or the den. Cow Hollow is too confronting, and the enclave is too dangerous." And he wasn't sure which vampires he could trust beyond Ardel and Delsie. Her parents were high on his suspect list.

"At least the protesters are leaving the temple alone because of the dragons."

"Yeah." And there was a coffee shop not that far away. He crept into the exit lane, almost free of the traffic snarl. "I'll call Carly and head to the temple. Give me an hour."

"I'll pass it on."

“And I’d like to go home tonight. Jordan hasn’t seen the house. I don’t want him to see the house. I want to get it cleaned.”

“I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you.” He hung up Jordan’s phone and grabbed his own to call Carly. Why in Hel’s name he was mediating between the actual liaison officer and the cops he had no idea. He was beginning to feel that he should’ve stayed in the grove with Jordan and pretended that the rest of the world didn’t exist.



Forty-five minutes later, Edra was at the coffee shop in desperate need of a double-strength hot chocolate with extra sugar. The lady serving him was giving him a look, and he wasn’t sure if it was because she knew who he was or because she thought he was putting far too much chocolate and sugar into his body.

In his mind, it wasn’t enough to make it through the rest of the day.

“And I’ll take all six of the half-price sausage rolls.” That they’d been sitting there unwanted through the lunch rush didn’t bother him at all.

She bagged them and rang them up. “Are you that mytho who’s married to the cop?”

“We’re not married.” He paid and picked up the bag and his drink, not wanting to hear what she said next.

“I don’t think it’s right—”

“It’s not your business,” he snapped as he walked toward the exit.

“What the media is doing is all I was going to say. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Edra sighed and turned around, feeling like shit. She was a supporter, and they had few enough of them, it seemed. “I’m



sorry. I'm not always wound so tight."

She nodded. "I've lived here all my life. I saw a lot of things before the mythos arrived. People will come around. Want the last slice of carrot cake on the house?"

Edra smiled, but it felt fragile on his lips. "I never say no to cake."

"I wasn't going to keep it, and you look like you need it." She pulled it out and put the slice in another bag.

Cake was the last thing he needed. But she was trying. "I'm all right, just tired of people asking too many questions."

She laughed and handed him the bag. "We all get like that sometimes. I hope you go unnoticed the rest of the day."

"Thanks." He took a sip of the sweet hot chocolate and walked out into the sun.

Browning and Isaac were waiting near the barrier. In the time it took him to walk over, he finished his drink and ate the cake, and he was feeling a little better.

"What's in the bag?" Browning jerked her chin his way.

Edra smiled. He didn't have to be nice to her. "Why don't you pull my credit card statement and find out?"

He flashed his ID and stepped into the temple and dragon nesting grounds without waiting for the Inspectors to follow. A couple of officers were stationed at the barricade at all times, but most of the time, the humans stayed away because they didn't want to be eaten by the dragons and their rapidly growing babies.

He hadn't been to the temple since Yamic had shown up. He didn't really want to be there today, either. There were too many good memories and too many bad ones, but all temples were like that.

For a couple of breaths, he stared up at the structure as though debating entering. The weight of history was more than he wanted to face—his own as well as that of the mythos.

The Inspectors were close behind.

“This is the temple. It’s satyr, but others use it when seeking blessings. It’s also used for wakes and serious meetings where everyone’s voice must be heard.” It was also used for everything from late-night hook-ups to grudge settling. While it had been the center of satyr life and was important for many other mythos, it was seen as safer than the grove because the god was more distant.

Possibly now absent.

“Were there other temples?” Isaac asked. “That didn’t make it?”

Edra turned. “Yes. But they were more about the request and less about the mytho. And, of course, the hope and requests of many over time increased the magic of the location. With no magic, less magic,” he corrected. “Those places fell apart.”

The ogres had put a lot of time and energy into the grove, and the magic there had strengthened. There must be other places where the magic was coalescing and growing. If the LA vampires hadn’t eaten all the other mythos, then magic might be returning there too.

“You really believe in magic?” Browning asked.

Edra pointed at the crucifix around her neck. “You believe in a dead guy.”

“That’s different.”

“How? He’s the son of a god. Where do you think the gods came from?”

She stared at him.

“I believe in magic. And magic is bigger than any god.” However, both could be capricious, even dangerous, if the wrong requests were made.

“But the temple is in honor of Pan, a god if I read correctly,” Isaac said. “I did some reading while Browning drove.”

Edra shrugged. “Gods channel magic.” Carly strode across the grass toward them. He hadn’t spoken to her since she’d

stolen his job. He jerked his head in greeting. “Carly Arche, this is Browning and Isaac; they are part of Mytho SiD.”

It was Isaac who moved first, sticking out his hand like he didn’t mind shaking paws with a werewolf. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Same. Is Kells no longer...” She glanced at Edra.

“Jordan is still working mytho cases. Now he has help.” A bit bloody late, but better than nothing. “I’ll leave you to it.”

He wanted to see the dragons and thank them for saving his ass—without them, he’d have been dead—and to impress upon them that they couldn’t raze buildings.

“I thought you’d stick around,” Isaac said like they were old friends.

Edra didn’t need any more friends, and if Isaac thought trying to be his buddy was going to give him an advantage, he was wrong. “Carly is the liaison. I am the Knight, and they are separate.”

“You’re a mytho cop.” Isaac smiled. “And you were the liaison. You should join us.”

A Knight wasn’t only a cop. He was an advocate—he upheld the laws, and he heard disputes and negotiated peace.

He glanced at Carly, who looked as thrilled as him at the idea of the four of them discussing the best way to tackle the ongoing problem of human on mytho crime. Edra would deal with the mytho on mytho issues the way he always had. Where possible, they wouldn’t be reported. Which wasn’t in the spirit of the arrangement, but it was a lot easier for everyone. He gave the bag of sausage rolls a jiggle to catch her attention.

Carly sniffed. “Did you bring food for the dragons?”

Edra lifted the now greasy paper bag. He wouldn’t usually offer them sausage rolls, but they liked a treat every now and again. “I need to pay my respects.”

And arrange for Jordan to come more often so he could improve his Dragon. There were differences between the way

he, as a lesser dragon, spoke it and the way the greater dragons did. Jordan needed to know both.

Or at least enough to get by.

Next time the dragon may not be in such a patient mood; that they had young meant they were being more tolerant and caring than usual. Thinking this behavior was the norm would be a mistake.

Carly nodded. “Why don’t you feed them? Wouldn’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Agreed.” Edra started walking before Isaac or Browning could say anything. He half expected one of them to follow, but maybe they’d caught the hint.

He’d done as requested and made the introduction. What Carly told them and showed them was her problem, not his. He tried to convince himself it was better that he wasn’t the Liaison Officer, but his removal still burned.

If he was the liaison, he’d be listing all the latest issues, much like he’d done with Jordan the first time they’d met. But he didn’t even know what the issues were at the moment. He hadn’t been into the office in a week, and even though he’d been back a couple of days, he hadn’t spoken to anyone other than Ardel, the king, and the Strega.

And no one had called him.

Jordan had said there’d been less coming through, which meant they weren’t calling Carly either. Mythos wouldn’t be calling the cops directly. He didn’t like how that thought felt because the dam would break at some point and tensions would spill over and the last thing they needed was mythos fighting each other.

He called to the dragons, greeting them. The female stretched and sauntered over.

“What is the food?” Her nostrils flapped as she tried to figure out what he had for her.

“Treat.”

Because he had no idea how to translate sausage roll into Dragon.

She tilted her head, mouth open enough that if he wanted, he could toss one of the sausage rolls in.

“For mate and young too.”

“I taste first.” She wriggled her butt, edging closer.

Edra pulled a sausage roll out of the bag and held it out. They were cold now, and the pastry was greasy against his fingers. He hoped she liked it because it didn’t seem very appetizing—though if he hadn’t eaten the cake, he might feel differently.

She leaned in and gave it a curious sniff. The warm moist air from her mouth swept over his hand, then she plucked the sausage roll out of his fingers with her tongue. It wasn’t even a mouthful, but it was something different, and they enjoyed trying new things, even if they ended up not liking them.

The dragon sat back as she held the sausage roll in her mouth. She gave it a bite, then swallowed. “Secret meat.”

“Yes, secret meat.” That was a good name for a sausage roll. He wasn’t even sure what meat was in there. “And for mate?”

She called to him, and he came over. Edra handed him the secret meat after the female had talked it up. He examined it the same way she had and took his time with it in his mouth.

“Good secret meat,” the male agreed.

Edra nodded, glad that the treat was being well received. “And young?”

The two dragons looked at each other and spoke, all ear twitches and wing tilts. Edra knew enough that the answer was no. “Too young for treats.”

He couldn’t argue with that. He held out an extra sausage roll for each of them. “Thank you for helping me with the bad fangs.” *And for not eating Jordan, for using his terrible Dragon.*

“Mate was sad.”

Edra nodded. Jordan still was sad. “He is trying to speak better.”

They both snorted as though his efforts had been amusing. Because they had young it was, they would’ve compared Jordan to their own babies and found theirs superior, which they would’ve also enjoyed.

“Young can teach him,” the male said. Which triggered another round of snorts.

“Good idea.” That would build Jordan’s relationship with the babies. “I will bring him.” Playing with the babies would make him feel better. It always made him feel better.

The dragons stopped and stared at him as if they hadn’t expected Edra to take them up on their offer.

The female’s toes flexed against the grass. “He will bring secret meat?”

That wasn’t something Edra wanted to agree to. “Not every visit.”

They considered him for several seconds before agreeing.

The next issues weren’t going to be as easy to address in Dragon. “Thin skins here.” He pointed at the ground. “Aren’t happy bad fangs were burned. They are scared.”

So, that wasn’t quite the truth, but he wasn’t about to explain politics to dragons, there weren’t the words, and he didn’t have the time to explain everything in a way they would understand. As long as they agreed not to burn anything in this city, it would be enough.

“Bad fangs never brought offerings. They hurt you. They needed to be cooked and eaten. Tasted bad.” The male huffed.

Bad because they had been feeding on other mythos or for some other reason? Would the dragons know why and be able to explain it?

“So you won’t be cooking and eating fangs here?”

“Do I need to?”

“No. No cooking and eating of anyone...or at least check with me first.” Then he stood a chance of talking them out of it or warning the targets.

The male grumbled.

“I am happy you took me from the bad fangs.” He said, trying to soothe the dragon’s scales. Asking them not to do something wasn’t always effective. “But bad fangs now want to make war. If they come, and the good fangs agree, you can cook and eat them.”

“No eating,” the male said. “Talking fish can have them.”

True, the mermaids wouldn’t care what they tasted like. Edra held out his hand to see if either of them wanted a scratch. The female leaned in first, and he rubbed around her ear until she purred.

The unicorn problem he’d discuss with them next time. Dragons only had so much patience with the issues of others if the solution didn’t involve eating the problem.

## CHAPTER 7



Sinner lay in Jordan's lap as if she was sleeping. He could feel the rise and fall of her ribs, and for the moment, that had to be enough. He leaned his head against Edra's shoulder. At their backs was a tree—one uninhabited by a nymph. Around them, the ogres handed out cups to the people who'd come to the grove for the healing. Others set up drums.

Jordan was skeptical this would make a difference, but everyone else seemed to think it was a great idea, and they'd come to watch and experience it. "Will this really help her?"

"I think it is for you as well."

"I'm fine." The words fell off his tongue, and he tasted the lie beneath the habit. He sighed. "Maybe not."

Edra's fingers threaded with his. "You're tired and stressed, and a little drumming won't hurt. It's meant to lift the spirits and give you energy."

Jordan pressed his teeth together. "I'm not the one in trouble."

"You are helping Sinner by being here. And there is nothing you can do to help Katie."

The first thing he'd asked when Edra had returned was if there were any updates. He shouldn't be sitting in the grove, doing nothing, even though he didn't know what else to do. He wasn't even needed at work, and he was fast becoming a liability because of all the media coverage.



“What did you think of Browning and Isaac?”

“That they will do their best to find the people responsible.”

Jordan studied Edra, knowing he wasn't saying everything. “I meant as people.”

“It doesn't matter right now. Take a few days.”

A few days here and a few there, and people were going to wonder if he was keeping it together. Which he clearly wasn't. But if people noticed the gap in his armor, then they might follow up with a sword thrust to draw blood.

He'd survived by never showing weakness.

Never let the bully see it hurts.

Now everything hurt.

Edra's words said in anger still stung because he had seen through it all. He saw the shield Jordan carried and knew that it wouldn't last.

“None of this is your fault,” Edra said.

It wasn't Edra's either, yet a part of him wanted to blame him because it was easy. If Edra hadn't pursued him, if he hadn't agreed to be his mate...the trouble and hurt wouldn't be the same, but it would have happened.

He tipped his head back against the bark and closed his eyes. “I want this nightmare to end.”

“Is it all that bad?” Edra's voice was low, but Jordan heard the hurt as much as felt it.

He gave his mate's hand a squeeze. “No. But it hasn't made things easier.”

Edra sighed. “I thought it would. I didn't expect the media...”

“I didn't expect the vampires.”

Melody came over and handed them both a cup. Edra thanked her with a smile.

“What is it?” Jordan had already drunk too many ogre brews today.

Edra sniffed it. “No idea, but if it takes away some of the sharp edges, I’m fine with whatever it is made of.” Then he drank it in a couple of swallows and set the cup in the grass next to him.

Jordan took a cautious sip. It was sweeter than the other water they’d offered him during the day. “They think Sinner should stay the night in the grove.”

Edra was silent for long enough that Jordan knew something was amiss.

“What?” Had Edra already known?

Edra lifted his head to look at him. “I think it’s a good idea. For both of you. You spent most of today sleeping, and the dark under your eyes isn’t from smeared mascara.”

“That bad?”

Edra tapped his chest. “I can feel it. I felt it while I was in LA. I didn’t want you to drive down, but I didn’t know who else to call.”

“I would’ve stayed to help if you’d asked.”

Edra shook his head. “I’m sorry for snapping at you last night.”

“You were right. I hate being helpless. It’s like being a kid again and knowing that the next beating is coming but not knowing when and that no matter how much I try to behave, I can’t stop it. It’s easier to pretend not to care.” He took a drink and hoped Edra was right and that the edges softened and the pain eased. If he could stop hurting for a little, he’d be able to think. “Back then, I didn’t have anyone relying on me. Now I do. And I’m letting everyone down.”

“If you push until you shatter, then you can help no one, including yourself.”

He’d seen cops burn out. Isaac had admitted he was ready to resign. “If it was work, I’d quit. But it’s not.”

Jordan tossed back the rest of the drink. Edra took the cup from his hand and stacked it with his.

“The rest of the world doesn’t matter. I’ll stay with you and Sinner tonight. Tomorrow we’ll see what the sun brings and make a plan.”

“You sure you want to sleep here?” He wasn’t sure he wanted to, even though nothing untoward had happened today.

“We have been invited, and the nymphs and ogres are working together, and everything here is as it should be. Out there...maybe we can’t do anything, and we have to sit back and wait it out. Which isn’t what you want to hear. It’s not what I want either.” Edra shrugged. “We’re waiting on the lines of fate to settle into a pattern.”

“You saw the Strega?”

“Tried to. I spent far too long sitting in traffic before giving up. It wasn’t meant to be.”

Jordan’s jaw tightened as he pointed at Sinner. “This wasn’t meant to be.”

“I didn’t say it was. We all have free will. Not everyone uses it wisely. Some like to disrupt, which changes the pattern.”

One ogre man started drumming as soft as a heartbeat and everyone fell silent.

“Are we supposed to do anything?” Jordan whispered.

“No, just sit and breathe it in like everyone else.” Edra indicated to a couple of satyrs and ogres and werewolves who were sitting much further from the drummers. Only the drummers were standing.

“So you’ve done this before?”

Edra shook his head and settled back against the tree. “I’ve attended a couple, but it’s never been done specifically for me or mine. So I don’t know if it will feel different.”

“Why would it?”

“Because we aren’t at the edge.”

Jordan glanced around the shadow-cloaked grove. Lanterns had been lit, casting yellow puddles of light for the drummers who had formed a half circle around them. He wasn't sure when that had happened.

He grimaced. But it wasn't for him; it was for Sinner. He could live with that lie. "It's too much for my cat."

Edra lifted one eyebrow.

Right, no one involved believed it was for the cat. He gave her a little pat and wished they were at home, watching TV with her needling his chest or legs as she purred.

The pulse of the first drum remained heartbeat steady. Solid and safe. Another one joined in, and then finally, the third. Despite the cool night air, Jordan began to sweat, as though he had a fever. His heart kept time with the first drum as night embraced the grove. He wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep when he saw it.

At first, it was a glimmer, like a shard of moonlight between the trees. Then it moved and took form as if drawn to the lantern light. It moved as though solid, but he could see straight through it.

A unicorn.

Edra's grip on his hand tightened and in his lap, Sinner purred.

The unicorn walked through the grove and vanished.



Jordan rubbed his eyes. Sinner head-butted his face and purred like a lawnmower.

"Hey..." the TV was on, with some movie playing. He must have fallen asleep with it on again. His mouth tasted weird, and he wasn't sure what was going on, only that something wasn't quite right.

Sinner head-butted him again.

“Okay, I’ll feed you.” He picked her up and set her on the floor before making his way to the kitchen. Something was missing from the kitchen counter, but he wasn’t sure what. His fingertips trailed over the counter as he tried to figure out what was different. Sinner wove around his ankles, rubbing her head against him as if he’d been gone for days.

Had he been gone?

He shook off the disquiet of not being sure and put some food into her bowl. When he put the tin in the fridge, he noticed how empty it was. He must have been away and hadn’t done any grocery shopping.

He’d do that later today. For the moment, all he wanted was a shower.

## CHAPTER 8



Edra exhaled as the unicorn moved through the clearing. It was both beautiful and terrifying. The drummers must have sensed it, but they didn't turn, and they didn't break rhythm.

No one moved, not wanting to draw its attention. While magic wasn't sentient, it was drawn to people or places. Had it felt the magic in the drumming and been drawn to the grove, or had it been here all along, too weak to be visible?

For an awful moment, Edra thought it was going to stop or enter the semicircle of light, but it had vanished into the night. Or at least disappeared from view.

He turned to Jordan to ask if he'd seen it, but his eyes were closed, and he looked so peaceful, Edra didn't want to wake him. The drummers wound down, ending with the solitary heartbeat pulse.

The tension he'd been holding all day had melted into the ground, and the scars on his back and legs didn't feel so tight. While he still didn't know what they were going to do about anything, the worries were smaller and with fewer teeth.

He let Jordan rest and thanked the drummers and the ogres.

One of the drummers, his skin sheened with sweat, shuddered at the mention of the unicorn. "I felt it. But I didn't turn, and I made sure to only think about the drumming."

There was a murmured agreement, yet some hoped the magic might settle in the grove. If it did, it would become safe to use. The sooner it settled, the better.

“Will you stay?”

Edra glanced over at Jordan and Sinner. Both of them resting. “I’ll stay with them. How is Sinner?”

“She is healing.”

“And Jordan?”

“Needs to admit that he needs healing first.” Melody sighed. “There isn’t much I can do for him. Not all bruises can be healed. You both need to rest.”

“Yeah...” That was a great idea but now wasn’t a good time. After the bill was settled one way or the other, Katie was safe, and the LA vampires had been stopped, they could take a holiday. But there’d be something else. There was always something else. They stole bits of time, but they didn’t carve out space for themselves or each other.

It had been a long time since he’d done anything but work to ensure the survival of mythos. For a heartbeat, he missed living wild, as a dragon, and hiding from people. His biggest worry had been finding food and not getting caught.

It was pointless to miss what existed before the collapse. But even then, his life had belonged to the city. There had been more mythos, and he’d worked his tail off.

But there were also feast days and celebrations. Days when the world stopped so everyone could enjoy it. The turning of the year, when it was easiest to cross between the worlds—when there had been two worlds—was only days away. That was the biggest celebration, closely followed by the solstices. “What is being planned for Samhain?”

“Nothing big. Our celebration is a few days before the human one this year. Is the king planning something? Or Ardel?”

Edra shook his head. They should. They could declare a mytho holiday, but the humans would expect them to tie it to theirs even though theirs was a fixed date that didn’t marry up with anything of significance. “I’ll mention it.”

Having a big celebration would be good for everyone... though having one right before the government decided if they were people was probably not a wise idea. “Maybe they can plan something for the winter solstice, like old times.”

They both smiled, knowing it would be nothing like old times. There wouldn't be whole animals roasted over spits in the city square. There wouldn't be dancing in the street and mead and wine and absinthe. There would be no fire lit and no sex—for those who wanted to start the new year that way—in the satyr temple. Not unless someone could get all the paperwork signed off, and Edra doubted it would happen.

They were doing their best to conform to human expectations, and it still wasn't enough. With a sigh, he returned to Jordan and sat next to him. He gave Sinner a pat and pressed a kiss to Jordan's cheek. Neither the cat nor Jordan flinched.

It wasn't that he felt something was wrong, but something was different. “Jordan?”

Edra gave his mate a little shake. Jordan's hand slid off his lap and landed in the grass with a soft thud as his head lolled.

“Shit. Jordan!” Edra was on his knees, shaking him. “You need to wake up.”

Nothing happened except Jordan's head bounced.

Edra glanced over his shoulder. “Melody?”

She was already jogging over. She dropped to her knees on the other side of Jordan and quickly checked his pulse. Then she lifted one eyelid and peered into his eyes.

“Did he drink too much of whatever was in the cup? Are humans allergic to it?” What if he'd been poisoned?

Melody pressed her lips together and glared at him. “Who is the youngest here?”

Edra sat back on his heels. It definitely wasn't him, though she was suggesting it was. Ogres had been treating humans in Tariko for as long as there had been humans. She wouldn't have poisoned Jordan. And Jordan had been fine until...



“Oh no. This is a pile of selkie shit,” he murmured. “The unicorn.”

“You think he was affected by the wild magic?”

“Do you?” The only thing Edra knew about unicorns was that they brought trouble. The wild magic was unpredictable and dangerous. No one wanted a unicorn around because they created chaos.

Melody shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen wild magic until tonight. It’s nothing I’ve done or the drummers have done.”

What had they been talking about? What had Jordan been thinking about? “And Sinner?”

“She was given pain medication. I won’t know until it wears off.”

“What does this mean?”

“That he’s getting the rest he needs.” She got up. “I’ll check with the others. They might know something.”

“Fuck.” He pulled Jordan close and whispered in his ear. “Please don’t do this. You need to wake up.”

Was he being selfish? What if Jordan needed this escape to find himself and heal? How had he missed the cracks in his mate? He squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe he’d sleep it off and wake up with the dawn.

Yeah. That seemed logical. Unicorn magic was fickle. It wasn’t the kind of thing that stuck. Or was he telling himself lies because he couldn’t stomach the thought of losing the man he’d fallen in love with? They were no longer only mates.

And if Jordan didn’t wake up with the dawn?

The Strega would have to come to him. He didn’t want to think about the size of that favor.



ordan stretched. He'd fallen asleep on the sofa again. He didn't remember doing it. Sinner purred and head-butted his face.

“You want something to eat?” He put her on the floor and got up, padding through the house. Something wasn't quite right, but he couldn't place it. He shrugged and fed her as he made himself a coffee and toast.

## CHAPTER 9



Edra squinted at the sunlight and tossed back the blanket. Dew glinted on the grass like spilled diamonds. A nymph stood nearby, watching him. She nodded once as if to acknowledge that he was now awake and then disappeared.

His gaze scanned the grove, but it was deserted except for Jordan and him.

He shivered, blaming the chilly morning and the fact that he'd slept on the ground as a human—not something he liked doing. Next to him, Sinner was curled up on Jordan's chest. They were both breathing, but neither was awake.

“Hey...” He gave Jordan a little shake, wanting him to open his eyes and smile at him. “It's morning. Melody will be back to check on Sinner soon. And you need to shower and...” Edra's breath froze in his lungs as the words died on his lips.

Jordan hadn't stirred, not even a flicker of his eyelids or a parting of his lips. On a whim, Edra leaned in and pressed his lips to Jordan's, hoping that his mate would return the kiss.

No response.

His heart tightened until it hurt to breathe. He drew back and roared his frustration, the dragon noise tearing at his human throat and startling the birds in the trees.

But Jordan remained asleep.

Edra sat there, arms around his knees, not sure what to do. Breathing took effort. His eyes prickled, and he blamed the sharp sunlight. Why was no one here?

Should he sit and wait until Jordan woke up?

Or should he make some phone calls?

And then what?

The nymphs would protect Jordan if he left—though Edra was sure that Jordan wouldn't want any tree-related deaths on his behalf—it was more that Edra didn't want Jordan to wake up alone. He didn't want to leave his mate again. He should never have gone to LA and left him behind. They should've gone together.

And then they would've died together.

Katie would've been safe.

So would Sinner.

He closed his eyes and pushed away the dark thoughts that tasted too much like those he'd had after the collapse. He hadn't survived all of that, to be brought down by a fucking unicorn. Jordan needed him to have his shit together.

Was he ever allowed to lose it?

For a heartbeat, he envied Jordan peacefully sleeping in the grass with the cat keeping him company. At least they had each other. He tucked the blanket around them and stood, cracking his back and stretching. He was too old to sleep on the ground in this form.

He took a couple of breaths to ready himself to make the call, then pulled his phone out of his pocket. It still had some charge, and there was only one number he needed to call, but finding the words was harder than he'd thought possible.

In the end, he made the call and hoped that the words would come. The phone rang four times before Ardel answered. "It's barely daylight, Knight."

"I spent the night in the grove with Jordan." That wasn't what he needed to say, but if he was talking, he'd get there.

"Again?"

"Not for that reason." He glanced at Jordan and wished it had been. "The ogres did a drumming for Sinner, but really for

Jordan because he'd been fraying at the edges." He'd noticed the exhaustion and the stress, but they'd both been pushing it aside until after the crisis was over. While he'd spent some time as a dragon, which had helped him a lot, Jordan didn't have that luxury. "And the unicorn showed up, drawn by the magic."

Ardel muttered a curse. "What happened?"

"Neither of them will wake up." He heard the quiver in his voice and hated it. "I thought dawn..." Edra bit his lip and stared up at the sky. If he dragged Jordan into the sun, would that wake him?

"I'm going to collect the Strega. You stay there. Do not leave him alone. Get the nymphs to hide you both if humans show up. The last thing we need is humans finding out and blaming us."

Humans wouldn't understand the wild magic was just that. It wasn't something that anyone could control. Not that it even had a will of its own. It was more like a snowball, rolling around, crashing into things, and getting bigger until it found a place to settle.

That it was visible meant it must be getting close to settling.

Which unfortunately also meant it was becoming more powerful.

"I'm not going anywhere," Edra said. It wasn't like he had to go into work, and he couldn't go home. He glanced around the grove. He didn't have to go anywhere. All he wanted to do, all he needed to do, was look after his mate.

He hung up and drew in a relieved breath.

Someone else was sorting the problem.

Someone else was taking care of him. He walked to a patch of sun and stood in the brightness, letting the heat sink into his bones and warm his blood. As it did, he tried to let go of the worry and fear. If the unicorn was lurking, then those kinds of thoughts would only bring more trouble.

Or maybe the unicorn would ignore him.

That's why wild magic was dangerous. It would sprinkle magic wherever it wanted, regardless of the consequences. In much the same way, lightning didn't plan where to strike or think about the damage it would cause. Edra sighed and turned his back to the sun. He blinked a couple of times to clear his eyes, hoping that Jordan would sit up and ask him why they'd slept in the grove.

They'd laugh about it later.

But he was the only one awake in the clearing.



Sinner head-butted his face. She had fish breath, which wasn't what he wanted to smell when he woke up. Her purrs rumbled through him, and he scratched under her chin. He didn't remember falling asleep on the sofa. The TV was on. Had he been watching something?

He picked Sinner up, and she purred in his ear as he walked around the house. In the kitchen, he grabbed a glass of water, but after a couple of swallows, he stopped. He didn't want water.

Or coffee.

He moved the containers near the kettle, looking for what he wanted, but he couldn't remember what it was called. It didn't matter.

Except he was sure it did.

Sinner pushed away, wanting down. He set her on the ground, and she ran toward the bedroom door and meowed, scratching at the wood.

"What is it?" Why was the door closed? He walked over and put his hand on the door handle.



“*I* can’t wake him.” The Strega looked up from where she was kneeling, with her hands on Jordan’s temple.

“What do you mean you can’t wake him?” Edra said, not caring that questioning her was not going to be in his best interest.

“He wants to be there.” Her lips twisted as though that wasn’t the entire truth.

“Where is he?”

“At home, with Sinner,” she said, as though it should’ve been obvious.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. He’s sleeping and...”

“And what?” Ardel pressed.

“And he knows something isn’t right, but he’s not worried enough to do anything about it.” Her fingers swept over Jordan’s forehead.

“Can you make him worried?” The words fell off Edra’s tongue before he could stop them. Just because he wanted Jordan to wake didn’t mean it was the best thing for him. “I didn’t mean it like that. But this...” He couldn’t find the words, so he shut his mouth.

“When I suggested he sleep at the enclave, he almost fell asleep on the spot,” Ardel said. “I thought it was exhaustion.”

“Maybe.” The Strega studied Edra in a way that made him want to slide behind Ardel and hide. “But it may not be about sleep. It might be that he wants to be safe. He keeps looping through the same set of actions, with only slight changes. If he wanted to leave, he would.”

“And it’s only him and Sinner?” Edra asked.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Just like it had been before they’d gotten together. Edra had been the one to turn Jordan’s life inside out. To show him beneath the veneer and reveal what wasn’t reported to the humans.

“Because they are the ones sleeping. Not because of you. Without you, his paths were all darkness with no good outcome. I didn’t tell you because that would’ve affected your decision. You saved him.”

Edra stared at his mate. “Then I did a shit job of it.”

Ardel put his hand on Edra’s shoulder before he could stand and stalk away. “What can you do, Strega?”

She reached out and ran one finger over Sinner’s head, her head tilted as though she were listening to the cat’s thoughts. Then she returned both hands to Jordan’s head. “All he needs to do is open a door. I can’t do that. He has to want to, and at the moment, every time he touches a door handle, his mind puts him back to sleep on the sofa.”

“He does that. Has his feet up and Sinner sitting on him. I used to land on the balcony...” And then Sinner would realize he was there, and they’d both get up and let him in. The biggest problem back then had been Jordan’s addiction to Bliss.

“I think it’s best we give him some time to work through this. He’s been pushed into a role that’s meant for lesser dragons. He’s young. And he’s never been exposed to magic in the strength that we are experiencing now. None of these humans have.”

Ardel flicked his hair back. “It’s nothing like it was at home.”

The effect of drinking satyr blood and eating enough Bliss to keep an army hard for a month hadn’t completely worn away. Ardel’s skin was less dull. The lines weren’t as deep. Or was it lasting because of the increase in magic in the air?

“We can’t leave him sleeping here,” Edra said.

“This is the best place for him to sleep. There is more magic here than anywhere else—”

“You said he’d had too much.” Jordan had overdosed on magic; more wasn’t the answer.

“This place is for healing. It’s a different magic.” Her voice was soft.



Edra knew she didn't watch TV, or have social media, so she hadn't witnessed the killings firsthand. Even if she had, she'd be on the nymphs' side. He was mostly, but it had been horrific. Could she sense the death? He wasn't brave enough to ask, not with the nymphs so close and whispering in the leaves around them.

"I will ask the king to post two guards," Ardel said. "He will agree without issue."

Edra growled. "The issue is that Jordan is asleep—"

The Strega shook her head. "It's not actually sleep. It probably wasn't true sleep in the enclave either."

Edra glared at her, beyond caring about rank and not saying the wrong thing. "Fine. The issue is that Jordan is not-actually-in-true-sleep. How long do we leave him?" Having a mate but not having a mate because of this magic was painful. There was an absence where Jordan should be. "And since we are mates, how long until this affects me?"

The Strega pursed her lips and glanced up at Ardel.

That had gotten their attention as expected.

"You don't want both of your Knights escaping into not-sleep." Edra yawned as though he felt a little tired. The idea of running and hiding from all the trouble wasn't a new one. Had he had something to do with this? Here he was in the grove, a mini-Tariko that felt as though it was miles from all the human dramas.

"We understand," Ardel snapped. "If you can't wake him or force him to open a door, what can you do?"

## CHAPTER 10



Jordan opened his eyes and stretched. As comfy as the sofa was, he needed to stop falling asleep on it. Sinner kneaded his chest and head-butted him. He picked her up and turned off the TV, then stopped.

What was that smell?

Sinner wanted down, so he set her on the floor. She ran over to the kitchen table and jumped onto a chair before putting her paws on the edge of the table to sniff at the bag.

Whatever it was, it smelled delicious.

How had it gotten there?

He scanned the room, but all the doors were closed. The house was silent around him. He padded over to the table. Whatever was in the bag was hot. He pulled the paper back and jerked his hand back.

A cooked pig head stared at him.

What the fuck?

His heart hammered against his ribs.

Sinner bounced off the chair and ran over to the closed bedroom door. She pawed at the door as if she could force it open.

He reached to his side, but there was nothing there. What had he been hoping to find?

He stepped back from the door. His gaze flicked between the head and the door and back again. He could almost taste

the sweet barbeque meat in his mouth. Why would he have bought such a thing?

He wouldn't have. The answer was through the door....

He woke up on the sofa and stretched, not sure when he'd fallen asleep.



Jordan's phone rang in Edra's pocket, and he was tempted to ignore it. Then Ardel's phone rang. He glanced at the vampire. That couldn't be coincidence. Edra pulled the phone out and checked the screen. Jordan's boss.

"You'd better take that," Ardel said as he took a few steps away to answer his call.

"Tendric."

"I hoped that Kells would answer."

"Not at the moment." And Edra had no idea when that would be. "What's the problem?" It was only eight in the morning. It was too early to be dealing with this shit, yet in his limited human experience, this shit always happened at the worst times. So even though he didn't know why the captain was calling, he knew it would involve mythos and that it would be something bad.

"There was an incident at Alcatraz this morning," the captain said.

"How many were killed?" asked Ardel.

Edra's stomach sank. Whoever was talking to Ardel was talking about the same thing. Dead mermaids meant his day had gotten about ten times worse. Thirty seconds ago, he hadn't thought it possible.

"What kind of incident?" Edra wanted to hang up, not ask for details. He didn't want to go anywhere near the mermaids.

"A man in a speedboat allegedly did a drive-by shooting with a semi-automatic before crashing into the rocks and

killing himself.”

“And how do you know this?”

“There were witnesses. It was called in fifteen minutes ago. I need you and Kells down there. You’ve dealt with mermaids before.”

“Yeah, and I was nearly killed.” But that was easy for some people to forget. “Jordan won’t be doing anything.”

“What is going on? Is it mytho related?”

It was now. “I don’t even know where to start.” He glanced at Ardel, whose fangs were far too visible, and his lips were drawn back in a snarl. “I’ll have Ardel call you, and I will go to the mermaid colony to... What am I supposed to do? Collect evidence? Statements? Stop them from drowning the city?”

“All of that. I want a police boat to collect the bodies—”

Edra laughed. “Not a chance.”

“The body of the man?”

“He will have been eaten already. They eat the flesh of everything, and this was a direct attack on their home.”

“The boat and weapon?”

Edra didn’t like his chances. “I can ask. Got something to pay them off with. Something nice and shiny?”

“I’m not paying—”

“Then you get nothing.” He was not going to make demands while they were grieving. All he could do was placate them and ask them nicely not to wipe out the city.

“They can’t do whatever they want. They are part of this city, and that means there are rules—”

Edra hung up. He was very tempted to throw the phone away in much the same way Jordan had. If that was the kind of support Jordan had, the kind of battles he fought daily, it was no wonder he was done.

“Who do I need to call?” Ardel snapped. His eyes were sheened red as if he was about to let loose.

Edra swallowed, remembering the feel of Ardel’s hand on his throat.

“Jordan’s captain. He wants me to negotiate with mermaids.” It would be funny if he hadn’t been serious. “Your call was about the shooting?”

Ardel nodded. “Carly has said she won’t go.”

“It’s her fucking job. She wanted it. Now she needs to do it.”

“Browning and Isaac are heading to the docks, expecting to meet someone. We can’t let them get on a boat.”

They could. They didn’t have to do anything but wave them off and prepare for their funerals. Edra sighed. He couldn’t turn his back on the mermaids—they might kill him—and he didn’t want more to die because the humans were incompetent. “I’m going to go. I don’t get paid enough for this.” He pointed at Jordan. “He doesn’t get enough thanks for this.”

Ardel nodded. “It’s harder when the humans don’t know the rules.”

Jordan’s phone rang. Edra answered because he didn’t have a choice. “Tendric.”

“You clearly got cut off because you wouldn’t hang up on me,” the captain said.

“I’m in the grove, so reception can be patchy.” Edra agreed with the polite lie. “I’m about to drive to the dock. Please inform Browning and Isaac to stay off the water.”

“Thank you. When you return, please come and see me.”

*You’re assuming I return.* The words formed on his tongue, but he swallowed them. Now was not the time to give voice to fears. “I don’t know when that will be. I’ll call you first.”

“I’m going to be here all day.” The captain hung up.

Edra glanced at Jordan, and for more than one heartbeat, he envied him. “I’d better go before the mermaids finish planning their revenge. Can you call the captain and explain this situation because I don’t know where to start with unicorns?”

Ardel was silent for several seconds. His fangs were still visible. “I’m going to make some calls. I swear I will not leave here until he is protected.”

The Strega ran her fingers tips over Jordan’s forehead. “I will stay.”

Edra frowned. “What of the elvish assassin?”

“I’m working on him. He is safe in his cage.”

“Cage?” Edra tilted his head.

“He is a pretty parrot at the moment. We are talking things through slowly, as I don’t want to break his mind.”

As one did with their baby daddy elvish assassin, who was under a vampire compulsion. At least Edra didn’t have psychotic parrot problems.

“If it would make things easier, I could turn Jordan into—”

“No,” Edra said too fast. He didn’t want Jordan waking up and realizing that he had four feet instead of two or wings instead of arms. That wasn’t going to end well.

“Let’s give him another day and night before we consider that,” Ardel added, as though it was an option they should consider. He glanced at Edra. “We can’t leave him here indefinitely.”

“I can take him home. As a person.” What the fuck was wrong with them? Messing up his body with magic wasn’t going to help his mind. “I’ll do it as soon as I’m allowed back in the house.”

“Leave Jordan with us for the day. You go. Don’t do anything risky; just turn up if that’s all you can do. I’ll sort this out with the king and the captain, and then I’ll have to talk to the chief about the dangers of wild magic.” Ardel shook his head and sighed. “This is going to get worse.”

“Don’t say that out loud,” Edra said as he knelt in the grass next to Jordan. He brushed a few strands of golden hair off his forehead. “Hey, I have to go for a bit. I’ll be back. Please find the courage to open a door. I’ll be waiting for you.” He pressed a kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

He squeezed his eyes closed and paused, giving Jordan time to hear him and wake. After six heartbeats, he lifted his head. He gave Sinner a stroke and murmured in Dragon, “Open the door.”

Walking out of the grove took everything he had. And he knew if he stopped, he would turn around and never leave. As his feet hit the concrete sidewalk, he questioned if he was doing the right thing.

The right thing by who was the thought that gave chase. Because the answer wasn’t the same. If he kept doing what was right for everyone else, when it wasn’t right for him or Jordan, there wasn’t going to be anything left of them.

He got into Jordan’s car and sat for a moment before starting it. Being a Knight here was harder than it had been in Tariko. And the closer the mythos got to integrating into human society, the harder it was becoming because there were more people to answer to. And more people to hate them.

As much as he’d like a shower, that wasn’t possible, so he changed his shirt to the spare he’d brought for Jordan, as that was the best he could do right now. With a sigh, he started the car and drove to the dock.

The dock was chaos.

There were news reporters trying to craft a story when they knew nothing except for what the witnesses had seen or recorded on their phones. Two TV station helicopters were in the air, no doubt filming the wreckage and the dead.

The only blessing was that there were no boats on the water. He parked and got out, casting his gaze around for the cops. In this mess, it was hard to spot them. Jordan had always stood out, tall and blond. Or maybe Jordan had always caught

his eye because they were mates. It didn't matter where he was; Edra would be able to find him.

He walked along the dock and saw the uniformed cops, so he walked over and showed his ID. "Are Isaac or Browning around?"

"They went up so they could see the scene." The cop pointed to the helicopters.

Edra looked up. "With the media?"

"Ours are in use."

"All of them?"

"There was a major traffic incident this morning, and..." He paused. "Anyway, they are all busy."

Edra pressed his lips together. He should've listened to the radio on the drive, but he hadn't wanted to listen to the ranting about the dangers of mythos. Given the situation, humans were far more dangerous to mythos. "Okay. I'll join them. I need a place to leave my clothes after I shift."

He also needed somewhere private because there were far too many people standing around with their phones out.

The cop blinked. "You can leave them here. But you can't change here."

"No shit."

But as he glanced around, there weren't that many options unless he went into the café and used their toilets, and he wasn't sure they'd appreciate that any more than he would. He should've flown in; it would've been easier.

Tied up along the dock were several boats. Some had nice cabins. That would have to do. "Back in a moment."

He strolled over to a suitable boat, then ducked inside. It was enough that he would be hidden from view, but it would take people only a few minutes to figure out what was going on. He stripped fast and shifted faster, jaw and spine cracking in a hundred unpleasant ways. When he could breathe without



fire in his lungs, he scooped up the clothes with the claws at the tips of his wings and walked back to the cops.

The one he'd been speaking to stepped back with his eyes wide, as if he'd never seen a dragon. Edra clicked at him. He didn't have all day. Finally, the cop accepted the bundle of clothes, and Edra launched into the air.

He paid attention to where the choppers were, but his focus was on the island. The wreckage of the boat was still burning. He swooped closer. The man was in the boat, or what was left of him was. Blood smeared the rocks, but the dead mermaids had already been taken below the surface to be mourned. From the stains, five were dead or injured.

That was five too many.

Where was Mistress Selena? He hoped that she hadn't been killed. He called out. Even though they didn't speak dragon, they would know it was him, and hopefully, one would surface. That or they were already preparing a storm.

He circled the island, but there wasn't a mermaid in sight.

That was never a good sign.

One of the helicopters hovered over the center. A man leaned out the side and waved at him, Isaac.

Edra ignored him. He flew low over the water, searching for the telltale flashes of light that indicated a mermaid was below.

On his second lap, he spotted the glimmer.

She broke the surface, and Edra got as close as he dared so he could hear what she said. "Get rid of them, and I will talk."

He nodded and flew straight to Isaac, landing on the runner and hooking his claw around the door handle.

Isaac drew back, startled at Edra's appearance. There was no way either of these two was going to understand anything he said.

"Can we land on the island? We need photos and samples," Browning shouted.

Edra shook his head and considered the best way to mime ‘get the fuck back to shore.’

He was going to have to shift. And they were going to have to buy him lunch—lots of lunch. He pulled himself in the rest of the way and shifted slowly, even though they were watching, because if he had to do another fast shift, he might snap something, and that would be bad for everyone.

He sat his bare ass on the seat opposite the inspectors and put a hand over his dick so they didn’t freak out and arrest him for being naked in public. Browning and Isaac stared. Edra put on a headset so he could talk to them—because while he’d be able to hear them without it, they wouldn’t be able to hear him.

He adjusted the mic. “Shifting doesn’t tickle. Give me a drink, and if you have anything to eat, I’d like that too.” He held out his hand.

A woman with a notepad and a phone in her lap handed him an open water bottle and an apple, which was next to useless, but he ate it in two bites anyway, not bothering to chew.

This was a media helicopter, so she must be the reporter. “You write anything about this or record me shifting, and it’s the end of your career, understand?”

“You can’t—”

Isaac lifted a hand. “You do not report anything beyond Knight Tendric attending the scene. What’s going on down there?”

“They don’t speak dragon and won’t talk to me until you fuck off. Get both choppers back on the ground and have a boat ready, but do not leave the dock until I get you.”

“You could call—”

“Where am I going to stick a phone while flying?” Edra bit back on a sigh. Jordan had been this ignorant once. “Look, mermaids are not cute and nice. They will drown this city if we aren’t careful. It might take me hours to negotiate, or it might take me minutes. Also, I want lunch on that boat.

Shifting takes energy, and I haven't had breakfast yet because I was dealing with another problem." He glanced at the reporter. "We will talk later."

"Do you always take orders from mythos?" The reporter asked, smelling a scandal.

"No. But if he's the only one who can negotiate, then I'll buy his sandwiches. I want to talk to whoever runs the colony." Isaac pulled off his coat.

Edra laughed. Then realized Isaac was serious. "You want to talk to a mermaid? Willingly?"

"I'm sure I've talked to worse."

"I don't think you have." Edra studied Isaac a bit more closely, though. He didn't know anything about him aside from the fact that he looked older than Jordan. He'd probably been a cop longer and had developed an edge. His eyes were hard. Cold. Edra leaned forward. "They have no empathy. They are what you would call psychopaths. If they were on land and you cut in front of them, they'd kill you without warning."

Isaac nodded. "So like any serial killer."

"Fine, I'll ask."

Isaac shook his head. "I don't want this separation between mytho and human—"

"Neither does Jordan, but this is how it is. And some mythos make us all look bad." He glanced at the reporter. "Did you catch that? We aren't all the same. What if mythos thought all humans were like the man who decided to kill mermaids and then himself?"

The reporter licked her lip but thought better of saying anything.

"Look, they may not even talk to me. They might make demands. They might threaten to sink anyone who gets close. In which case, I'll fly back to shore."

"So we might need to winch the boat up?"

Edra shrugged. “They may not let you take it. I’ll know when I speak to them.”

“If it’s safe to come over, wave this. You can carry it?”

“Yeah.” Edra took it from him. “While you’re down there, clear up the docks. It’s full of them.” He tilted his head at the reporter. “Trying to stir up hatred.”

“I’m reporting,” she said.

Edra glared at her. “With what slant? How dare we be people? On Tariko, we never thought humans were lesser or different; you were simply another kind of person. My society worked. We worked together. This—” He flung his hand out. “This is...” he shook his head and ripped off the headset.

He didn’t even have words that they would understand. How many cops wanted his help but didn’t even think him human?

He shifted and jumped out of the helicopter. For a second, he fell without bothering to catch himself, the jacket flapping from his claws. Then he spread his wings and flew back to the island. He landed on the far side, away from the cameras, and far enough inland that he couldn’t be dragged into the sea, but not so far that they couldn’t talk.

Then he waited as a dragon with his stomach rumbling and his mood souring with every passing minute.

## CHAPTER 11



*B*y the time the police boat pulled up at Alcatraz, Edra was a little sunburned—despite using Isaac’s coat as shade—very hungry, and extremely eager to leave the island. Though he would rather fly than sit in a boat.

Mistress Selena watched as Isaac got off the boat carrying a paper bag, which Edra hoped was full of food. “I would rather talk to your mate.”

“So would I.” But there was nothing he could do about that. That Selena had come out to speak to him was a minor miracle, which Edra was going to credit to wild magic. He’d also blamed the killer’s behavior on the unicorn too.

He’d had to add in a traffic accident—which had meant explaining to a mermaid what that was—and had told a white lie that the wild magic was making the humans act worse than usual.

And as he’d spoken the words, there had been something about them that rang true. The trouble was, Isaac knew nothing about wild magic. No one did because the king and Ardel had been trying to keep it a secret, hoping it would settle before it did any damage.

Not that they could force it to settle any more than they could bottle it up and hand it over to the LA vampires. The king was stalling by asking how they were supposed to catch it and deliver it. If the LA vampires knew and shared, Edra was at the point where he’d do it himself and deal with the consequences later.

Isaac handed over the bag of food to Edra, along with a towel.

Humans... They couldn't concentrate when someone was naked.

"Thanks." He wrapped the towel around his waist for Isaac's benefit. "Isaac, this is Mistress Selena. She is the pod leader and has been for many years." And she'd been told to not mention the wild magic, though she would if she thought it would be beneficial.

"It's an honor to meet you," Isaac said.

Edra managed not to roll his eyes. Selena would not buy the flattery.

"Don't lie, human. I can smell your fear." She grinned, revealing all her sharp little teeth that were designed for tearing flesh. "What have you brought me as a thank you?"

Isaac pulled three shiny teaspoons out of his pocket. "I am sorry for your loss."

Edra groaned. Humans... They were always sorry, but never did anything to change.

"Four are dead. Four of the pod's hunters. Three mates heavy with young now have no one to provide for them. And you say sorry."

Isaac was holding the teaspoons out as if he expected Selena to rear up on her tail and take them out of his hand. Edra took them from him and put them on the ground where she could reach. He glanced at Edra as though expecting some help.

Edra opened the paper bag and peered inside. Three fancy rolls filled with three different meats. Was there a file with what he liked to eat after a lot of shifting? Had Jordan made notes somewhere? That was disconcerting, yet he was also grateful because if they had been dainty salad sandwiches, he'd have been pissed—today had been covered in selkie shit from the moment he'd woken up, so a piece of cucumber would be enough to push him over the edge.

Isaac cleared his throat. Edra ignored him. Isaac had wanted this chat; now, he could enjoy it.

Edra took a large bite of the roll and chewed for effect, even though he wanted to swallow the eight inches in one go because he was starving.

“I know being sorry won’t bring them back, but if I can find out who he was and why he did it—”

“Wild magic made him act out his secret desires.”

Edra swallowed. He should’ve known that Selena wouldn’t keep her mouth shut. Never trust a mermaid. With anything. Ever.

Yet, with all the chaos, even humans were going to wonder what was going on.

“Wild magic?” Isaac glanced at Edra.

“Yeah, it’s different to the tame settled stuff. Is that not covered at the academy?” It was safer to let humans assume they’d overlooked something than to admit to hiding it. “We have some here, and it’s gotten big enough to cause trouble. That might be the reason for the traffic issues and some of the other incidents I’ve heard about.” He took another bite and swallowed, too hungry to care what Isaac thought of his eating habits.

“Right.” Isaac nodded. “Wild magic...it’s a mess in the city. I had to fly over in a media chopper.”

Mistress Selena stared at Isaac as if she was planning on how best to drag him under and eat him. She hadn’t even picked up her spoons—which wasn’t a good sign. Edra glanced at the police boat. How long did it take to hook up the speed boat and race back to shore?

Then he saw Browning on the island taking photos.

Shit. Only one of the inspectors was supposed to be on the island. Had Selena noticed? Edra didn’t want to point it out if she hadn’t. On the other hand, he needed to get Browning off the island before she did. His toes curled against the warm rocks.

“You are supposed to stop the humans from coming here. That is the agreement. Do you understand what one of them is, Isaac? I do not think so because you have broken one that was only just made.” She pointed at Browning.

Isaac turned. “Get back on the boat. That’s an order.” He turned back to Selena. “I told her to stay on the boat. That I would take the photos, but we would be gone sooner with both of us—”

“Or maybe I should take you both down to feed those without mates.”

Isaac paled, and his smile became forced. “We are taking the boat, and we will find out who the man was—”

“It doesn’t matter who he was or why he did it. Do you not understand? Who will provide for those without mates?” Her tail curved out of the water, exposing the poisonous barb.

Edra swallowed the mouthful. He needed to intervene before Isaac got himself killed and then Edra had to do paperwork and other pointless tasks so the humans felt in control.

“Mermaids don’t have social security. The young won’t hatch until spring, and the mermen are stuck to the bottom of the bay.” Edra said. “She is asking for a tribute to ease the suffering of the pod.”

Jordan would agree, negotiate the quantity of fish, and figure out the cost and details when they were well away from the island.

“Do these humans know anything?” Selena snarled.

“No. These two are new.” And he couldn’t be bothered teaching them when they ignored everything he said. For a few seconds, letting Selena eat them seemed like a good idea. But Jordan needed the help, which meant Edra had to make sure they weren’t eaten. “How much, Mistress?”

Selena considered him as though thinking, even though Edra was sure she’d already decided what she wanted. “A fish as long as my arm for each of the dead.”



“You don’t have the authority—”

Edra hissed at Isaac. “Do you want to reach the shore or not, Inspector?”

“Every quarter of the moon until the young are born.”

That was mostly reasonable. “We will not know when that is. Three full cycles of the moon, on the quarter, four fish each time.”

Selena’s fingers tapped on the rock as she did the breeding cycle math. “That is acceptable.”

Isaac shook his head. “I need to run that past—”

“No, you don’t. You tell the captain or the chief or whomever you want that this is the blood price. The mermaids don’t care about the reasons.” And neither did he. “Only that recompense is made.” He turned back to Selena. “Thank you for letting them collect the boat. I will deliver the first tribute to the island on the nearest quarter.”

“Three days, Knight.” She snatched the spoons and wriggled back. “Do not take long with your boats. My hunters grow restless with so many humans in our territory.” She slid into the water and was gone. Or at least gone from sight. She would be watching. Others would be watching.

“I suggest you hurry.” Edra shoved another roll into his mouth and swallowed.

“You can’t go around making deals with mythos. You bribed them not to kill us.”

“Think that sentence through, Inspector. Then tell me how much they are like every other serial killer when we are back on shore.” Edra handed over the jacket and towel.

“Where are you going?”

“To finish my lunch before flying over. There is no way I am getting in a boat with angry mermaids looking for fun.” Edra started the climb back up the rocks.

“What do you mean?” Isaac called after him.

“The longer you take, the more you’ll find out.”

He sat and ate the third roll more slowly—Isaac hadn't thought to throw a water bottle in the bag—then watched and waited for the police boat to leave. Their idea of hurrying was not the same as his. He was starting to worry they'd never leave when the engine rumbled to life and the little boat pulled away. They'd gone less than ten yards when the games began. He heard the knocking on the hull and saw the rocking of the boat.

Edra shook his head.

He'd warned them.

With a roll of his shoulders, he gave into a leisurely shift, allowing himself to stretch fully before taking off to meet them at the dock.



Edra dressed and then checked both phones. Two calls on his but only one message, and one on Jordan's. He checked his own first.

“Two elves are in attendance. I have spoken to the chief. Call me.” Ardel's messages were always to the point.

And since both calls were from him, Edra would return his call once he'd dealt with Isaac and the mermaid problem because if Jordan were awake, Ardel would have said so, and there'd be no need for the elves. Jordan's missed call was from the captain.

“Tendric. I've just been briefed. Be in my office before five.”

The captain was not his boss, but as tempting as it was to tell him to fuck himself, he couldn't because right now, he was trying to smooth over Jordan's issue—which was much harder than it should've been. Which part of magical not-sleep did the captain fail to understand? What could Edra explain better than Ardel?

He sighed and stepped off the boat he'd been using as a change room and office. Isaac was stalking up the pier toward

him, looking rather green, which didn't match the fury etched on his face.

If he thought Edra had power over the mermaids, he was a fool.

“What the fuck was that shit show?”

“That's mermaids. I told—”

“You could have told them to behave instead of having a good laugh.”

Edra stepped toward him; he was six inches taller than the human. “Is that what you think I was doing? Did you not look up the notes on the previous mermaid cases? Did you not read how dangerous they are? You are alive. I did my job.”

“You promised them nearly two hundred fish.”

“And you are alive, and the city won't be washed out. And you got your precious evidence. What is the problem?”

“You can't bribe people. Does Kells let you do this? Is this how he works? What a fuck up this was.”

“Oh, so we are people now. But tomorrow, mermaids will be little more than talking fish trying to take over the bay.”

“You know what I mean.” Isaac snapped. He put his hand over his chest as if his stomach was still misbehaving. “Every word of this is going in my report. This will come out of your pay.”

Edra snorted. “Try it.” He didn't blink as he stared down at Isaac. “Don't forget it was you who asked to speak to her. If you'd left it to me, it might have only been one hundred fish, but your demands and breaking of the agreement increased the price. I'll be putting that in *my* report.”

Isaac rocked back on his heels. “I'm going to be reading all of Kells' reports.”

“You do that.” Edra hoped that there was enough in them that Jordan didn't get in trouble.

“You aren't a cop. You don't dictate how things are done.” Isaac pointed at him.

Edra leaned in, so Isaac's fingertip was against his chest. He lowered his voice. "Then don't call me when you have a problem you can't deal with. Next time you go and bargain with them yourself."

"You know I can't. That's a no-go zone around the island."

Edra held his stare until the human blinked first, but Isaac didn't look away.

"And why do you think that is? Because they aren't like anything you are used to dealing with. Even mythos leave them alone unless it is to make offerings." He stepped back. "I have a meeting with your captain I need to get to. I'll tell him about the fish." He turned and walked away.

And Isaac didn't call out after him.

Browning stood at the end of the pier as though she were thinking about stopping him from leaving.

Edra paused to glare at her. "Never break a verbal agreement with a mytho. What you did today was reckless and only proved that humans, cops, can't be trusted."

Her mouth popped open, but he didn't stop. He didn't want to hear her explain. These two weren't just new; they didn't want to listen or learn.

And that was going to get them killed, which would no doubt end up falling on his head. There was already enough weight on his shoulders that he didn't need their deaths added. He opened up the car and sat, surrounded by the scent of Jordan. How long until that was gone?

With a few muttered curses, he started the car and made his way to the station. Not because he wanted to, but because when that was done, he could go back to the grove.

## CHAPTER 12



That smell again. It was familiar, and Jordan was sure it was what woke him. He peered inside the bag and stared at the pig head looking back at him. It was still hot. How had it gotten here?

Was it a warning of some kind?

But then why was it cooked as though ready to be eaten?

Sinner pawed at the bedroom door. He looked at the head, then at her. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't say what, and it was bothering him.

What had he been doing before he'd fallen asleep? When had he fallen asleep? It was daylight now, but what day was it?

Sinner kept scratching at the door. She meowed like it was important.

But he was sure he'd tried to open it before. He was sure he'd done all of this before.

"Let me think."

There had to be an answer. He was missing something. He took a few steps back from the table and leaned against the back of the sofa. His fingers dug into the fabric.

He could figure this out. Why he was so confident about that, he wasn't sure.

What did he know?

This was his house and his cat. He knew that opening the door wasn't a great idea and that he had done this before,

woken up and seen the head, that is. He was sure he'd opened, or at least tried to open, the door before.

So this was either a dream or...or he was dead, and this was Hell? It didn't feel very hellish. He was home with his cat and sleeping until he was woken by the scent of barbeque pig head.

He was sure if he ate the cheek, it would be delicious.

Slowly, he walked to the kitchen and opened a cupboard to pull out a plate. He grabbed a knife and fork and walked back to the head. It was time to test the theory.

And if it tasted the way he expected it to?

He was going to find some paper and do some real thinking because if he wasn't dead or dreaming, he didn't know what the hell was going on. Only that if he opened that door, he was sure he'd go back to sleep. If he wrote himself a note, would it remain, or would it vanish?

"Want some dinner?"

Sinner glanced at him as he cut a slice of meat. He tossed a bit on the floor, and she didn't hesitate to eat it. Didn't even sniff it first. She wasn't cautious the way she was with new food.

Assuming it was Sinner. She wouldn't be in his afterlife unless she was also dead. But everything he'd learned growing up said animals didn't have an afterlife. And according to those same teachings, he wouldn't be going to heaven either.

He put a piece of meat in his mouth. It melted on his tongue and tasted so real. For a moment, he could imagine sitting opposite someone and sharing it. Laughing about something, but he couldn't see who it was. Who would eat such a thing?

He swallowed and put down the knife. Then he picked it back up and scored the back of his hand.

If that remained, then he was confident any notes would remain. He didn't want to start breaking this down and writing a file of notes only to test a theory and wake up to nothing.

It was a risk, but one he needed to take.

He wiped the blood running from the cut on his hand on his pajama pants and opened the door.

He woke with a jolt, his hand stinging and the scent of barbeque filling his house. It took only seconds for him to remember why his hand hurt. And when he checked on the head, it was hot, and there was a piece missing.

Because he'd eaten it.

That door meant something, and once he figured that out, then maybe he'd be able to leave.



The captain rubbed his forehead and sighed. “When the chief told me that there is a unicorn problem, I thought he meant an actual flesh and blood unicorn.”

“That would make things easier,” Edra said. The captain was trying to grapple with the wild magic, upsetting the whole city issue. He had no idea what Ardel had said to the chief or how the chief had explained it, only that the effect of wild magic was not clear. “Think of it as everyone being drunk and doing the things they'd usually keep in their thoughts.”

The captain stared at him.

“Obviously not all the thoughts and not everyone, as it depends on where the unicorn is wandering.”

“And we don't know because we can't see it.”

Edra winced. “It's kind of visible in moonlight and if you are open to seeing magic. Most humans here aren't, and they aren't used to feeling it either, so getting hit with wild magic is...it's hitting them hard.”

“And Kells got hit.”

Edra nodded.

“And no one knows how long he'll be asleep for?”

“I wish I had an answer. I really do.” Because he needed one. And then he needed to find out what had caused Jordan to hide in his mind. He should be able to protect his mate.

“The media is already blaming mythos, calling it a curse.”

“I listened to the radio on the drive over.” He’d wanted a better idea of the chaos around the city before he had to sit opposite Jordan’s boss. There’d been a road rage incident that had resulted in a ten-car pileup. There’d also been a sandwich-related stabbing, two fires, and one person had jumped off the bridge—Edra was going to assume the mermaids got him.

“That’s not even all of it. And now the mermaids are involved and demanding fish.”

Damn, Isaac had gotten in first.

“It was a normal request, made higher because Browning broke the agreement. That doesn’t look good, by the way. You want mythos to trust cops, and that means keeping your word.”

“Isaac was fuming when he called. I haven’t seen him like that in a while.”

Edra kept his mouth shut. He could go on about Isaac and Browning, but the captain was already aware they weren’t Jordan and hadn’t learned the rules.

“I need Kells on the job.” He stabbed his desk with his finger, then he drew in a breath, and his eyes narrowed. “What would you do in this situation on Tariko?”

“I’ve never dealt with a unicorn. However, I believe the standard practice was to issue a warning to recognize out-of-the-ordinary behavior and watch the words that come out of your mouth. The king would deploy additional soldiers, and people would be arrested—but held without charge because they were wild magic affected. I don’t think you can do any of that.”

The captain considered him as though he were considering doing all of that. “A statement can be made, but I cannot let people off the hook, or some will treat it as an excuse to do whatever they please. Did you not have that trouble?”



“Crime was lower. It existed, but there was always a reason for it. I found that reason and helped to resolve it in a way that both parties could agree on if not solve it. Sometimes that involved violence and death.” It wasn’t as easy as he’d made it sound, because there were the deals and debts and everything else to take into consideration. Now he had to account for unpredictable humans and their rules that seemed to apply to everyone but suited none.

“And when the magic settles?”

“Then this madness is gone. The magic is safe and useable.”

“Useable by who?”

“Those with the ability.” Edra shrugged as though he didn’t know.

“Such as?”

He exhaled. “The Strega will be more powerful—which is a good thing given the LA threat. Elvish words will be more binding. The satyrs will be able to make more Bliss, and the ogres can put more into their healings. Not all mythos can use magic directly to cast spells.” He clarified. “But most use it as part of their being. Werewolves might be able to shift again. The lack of magic here affected us all.”

“I have money in my budget for a cultural advisor and translator. It’s not full-time, but it’s a position that Lew can’t touch. I want you to take it.”

“I don’t want to sit in an office and answer questions all day.”

“You won’t. You can go back to being Kells’ partner.”

“What happened to the conflict of interest?”

“I think we all want the same thing. We want everyone to feel safe in the city.” He smiled for a second before it faded. “And we sure as hell don’t want an enclave of magic-hungry vampires from LA thinking they can take over.” He shook his head. “If you’d told me fifteen years ago that I’d be worried

about wild magic and vampires, I'd have asked what drugs you were taking."

"I feel the same."

"Yes, I suppose so."

He supposed so? It took everything Edra had not to snap that his entire life had been upended. It was unrecognizable. "Was that everything?"

"Will you take the job?"

"Will I have to keep Browning and Isaac from getting killed?"

"If you could, I would appreciate it. It didn't take Kells long." He paused as if he realized the reason was sitting opposite him.

"That's because I was with him. I stepped in before he could put a foot wrong. I have convinced most mythos that he is one of the good cops who isn't going to arrest first and worry about facts later. I know Carly was locked up for something that wasn't a werewolf attack, and forensics dragged their feet, leaving my people, and yours, without a liaison. Things like that create distrust."

"We have a process."

"And so do we. Your laws are written for humans. We are not human, and we aren't trying to be." He didn't want to be. "But your officers need to understand the ripples—"

"Every arrest causes ripples. It affects families and jobs and reputations. I am aware. In that regard, you are no different."

"But we are because we are more likely to be arrested because the cops don't want to listen or learn."

"Good thing we now have a cultural advisor then, isn't it? I'll have the paperwork sent over to Mytho Servo."

This would have already been discussed with Ardel, so there was no point in him saying that he needed to talk about it. "I can't get into the building at the moment. Too much

media and too many protesters. I know you are busy, but you might want to keep an eye on them, given the unicorn situation.”

“It’s already on the list of potential hot spots.” He jerked his chin at the door. “Your house has been released. Do what you need to so Kells doesn’t see it.”

## CHAPTER 13



Edra stood on the front steps in an old T-shirt and track pants. He'd bought a heavy-duty scrubbing brush and some stuff that was meant to remove paint. And then, because the red paint was also on the front door, he'd bought a tin of blue paint so that whatever he couldn't remove would be covered. That would mean repainting the whole door, but that was okay.

He didn't have anything else to do, and even if he did, this was more important. He would make the house right again. For a few more seconds, he stood there staring at the mess and the scrawled words. The police had taken the signs because they were evidence or because they respected another cop's house?

It didn't matter.

He should start with the door.

So that's what he did. Scrubbing away the red and watching it bleed down the steps. His runners were quickly stained, so it appeared as though he'd run through blood. It splashed on his clothes and skin as if he'd been in battle.

"Do you need some help? I brought a scourer for scrubbing," Carly said.

Edra turned. The solvent had completely ruined his sense of smell, so he hadn't sensed her approach. She stood on the sidewalk as though unwilling to trespass. Like him, she was dressed in her worst and ready to clean. He could snarl and wish her ill, but she had come to make peace.

He nodded, unable to trust his voice.

It was only then she came up the stairs to help. She started on the words scrawled on the bricks, and they worked in silence until they were both on the steps scrubbing away the paint.

Carly spoke first. “Thank you for dealing with the mermaids.”

“Someone had to fly over.” She could’ve, but the mermaids would’ve laughed. They wanted to deal with the Knight, not the mytho liaison. “They wanted a tribute.”

“I’m not surprised.”

At least she got it. Isaac might have years on Jordan, but when it came to mytho things, Isaac had a long way to go. Maybe the years counted against him. And Browning...he didn’t know what to do with her. Letting her be eaten would solve as many problems as it created. Which was unfortunate.

“Reyman is taking some wolves to LA.”

“That’s their choice.” But Reyman was an alpha who understood how to needle the fears of his pack so that they agreed to whatever he said. They had never seen eye to eye because Reyman’s cunning words slid off Edra’s scales.

Carly sat on her haunches. “They’ve been promised something.”

The vampires were probably going to eat them. He should do something to stop them, but what? If they wanted to go, it wasn’t his place to stop them. And no matter what truths he told, Reyman would refute them with lies.

“There’s nothing I can do. People are free to leave.” He stopped and stretched his hand. The skin on his palm was raw and stained red.

“We both know that going to LA is not a good move.”

“They might be fine.” He suspected it was Reyman who’d begun the push for him to be removed as liaison. If Reyman was tied to LA, it made sense. That way, the push came from the mythos and the mayor. The LA vampires didn’t leave

anything to chance. He frowned. So why had they simply asked for the unicorn?

They hadn't.

There had to be another plan that he hadn't noticed because he was busy worrying about Jordan and mermaids and vandals.

"Why don't the other alphas intervene?"

"Because we are too cramped."

"They are right." But there were other places they could move to within the city. After being released from the internment camp, it had seemed like a good idea to live together. It had felt safer. Now there was friction not only between the humans and mythos but also between the different mythos because they were stepping on each other's tails, and there was resentment about who had been affected the least or most.

Without Reyman, Carly might lose the support of the wolves. Is that what she was really worried about?

"How is Xan? Where does he sit on the issue?"

"He does not care either way."

"And if I ask him to speak with Reyman?"

"I don't know."

He was going to have to ask outright. "Does he support me as Knight?"

She was silent for several heartbeats. "It would have been better if you'd taken a Tarikian as a mate."

Edra laughed. "I thought it would be more fun to make my life as difficult as possible." He indicated the remaining paint. "That I even found another mate. That there was enough magic to create the bond...that is more than I ever hoped for. And I wouldn't change it." He couldn't imagine a life without Jordan for all its trials. No one would have been as interested in mythos and their lives and culture. Their paths and lives were aligned.

He needed to believe that when Jordan woke up, he'd feel the same. That whatever he feared, he had faced, and that Jordan would not turn away from the bond. That was a wound that no amount of shifting would ever heal.

To have a mate and a bond and be unwanted wasn't something he wanted to think about with the wild magic dancing through the city. Pushing the thought aside, he returned to scrubbing. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could return to the grove. He'd paint the door tomorrow if needed.

Carly scrubbed with him. Even if she didn't want to, and her goal was accomplished, it was the honor of the thing. And if she'd left before the job was done, the apology would've been unmade. While she was trying to heal the rift, they didn't have to talk.

Even with the prickly silence between them, he enjoyed the help and the company. Having his back to the mostly human street as he scrubbed away the hate didn't feel like the safest thing. But no one came out.

As dusk wrapped around the city, they packed up, and Edra rinsed everything with water. The front door looked patchy. But he'd paint it tomorrow, and everything would be back to how it was...which wasn't fine.

"What are you going to do about the unicorn?" Carly asked.

"I don't know." What could he do? He didn't like being helpless. He liked solutions. He liked to know the answers or at least be able to find them. "What is Reyman going to do about it?"

"Why would he do anything?"

"You don't want to shift again?"

Her eyes lit up, and her tail swished before she schooled her features. "What has that got to do with it?"

"More magic in the city will mean changes. Werewolves and vampires will see the most obvious difference." He tossed

everything into a bucket to sort out later. “I want to talk to Xan. I’ll be at the grove tonight.”

“I can’t order him around.”

Edra smiled. “Tell him the Knight has issued a summons to discuss the unicorn.”

He was taking a guess, but if magic was increasing, there was extra at the grove, and Xan might experience the changes himself. He might get the werewolves back on side by fighting to keep the unicorn here.

How they were going to do that, he wasn’t sure yet. But he needed a plan fast because the vampires already had one, and it was in motion.



There were three cuts on the back of his hand and two pages of notes on the kitchen table. He crossed through several lines. Apparently, wanting to go to sleep in his own bed wasn’t the answer. Nor was being aware that this wasn’t real.

Sinner sat on the chair opposite him as if it were his fault that they were stuck there. Assuming, of course, it was Sinner and not a memory of her.

“Are you real or my imagination? How would I know?”

She was always going to the bedroom door, and he’d followed her every time. But there were two other doors. The front door and the balcony door.

He added that to his notes.

Aside from the obvious, what was the difference between the doors?

Like the pig head, they must represent something. All he knew was that it wasn’t something he bought for himself. Who did he buy it for? Who had shared it with him?



He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was there, almost out of reach. Like everything else, he couldn't quite grab what he needed. He'd had that feeling before.

All the evidence was there. He just wasn't reading it properly.

He placed his hands flat on the table. One of the cuts still bled, but the first two had scabbed. The light caught the ring on his index finger, and he frowned. It had been on his finger the whole time, but he'd discounted it as decorative jewelry. Now he examined it.

The ring was made of gold and silver, with delicate knotwork around the band. It wasn't his style, of that he was sure. Had someone bought it for him?

He wrote one word. Who?

That's what he needed to figure out.

Once he remembered who, he might find a way out of this place. The idea of escaping didn't fill him with excitement, though; there was trepidation instead. If he left, he wouldn't be able to return, and while he was here, he was safe from whoever or whatever he was hiding from.

He took the ring off and set it by the pig head, then sat back and stared at them. He rubbed his thumb over his lower lip. After a couple of seconds, he put the ring back on because it didn't feel right to take it off.

It wasn't the man who'd given him the ring he was hiding from. There was no evidence of that, though. Only instinct. And at some point, he'd learned to trust that.

He glanced around his house. There were more than three doors.

He hadn't opened the cupboards or the drawers. He didn't even know what he did for a job. He shoved back the chair and scribbled the note that he was going to open everything that he could. And if each opening knocked him out, so be it. He was going to get out of there, and he knew that the longer he waited, the harder it was going to be.

## CHAPTER 14



The grove was not as quiet as Edra expected it to be when he pulled up to the curb. He was becoming far too used to the ease of getting around in Jordan's car. To the point that he was thinking he should buy one himself—though he'd need a pay rise first.

He stared at the gathering made up of the two promised elvish guards, Ardel, the king—with his own guards—and the Strega. Edra felt as though he was late for a meeting he hadn't been told about. He was also underdressed, as he'd put on track pants and a hoodie so he could sleep in the grove with Jordan.

He got out of the car and locked it, carrying his thermos of hot chocolate along with a packet of cookies. He paused before stepping onto the grass. "Did I miss something?"

He was sure his phone, and Jordan's phone, hadn't rung.

"No, we decided to have our discussion here because we suspected you would want to be here," the king said. Like the others, he was sitting on the grass, so they formed a semi-circle near Jordan.

"And Jordan might hear us," the Strega added. Had she been there all day?

None of that explained why they were making such a concession to him. But since they were here, he did have something to add to the situation. He stepped onto the grass, and the tension drained out of him. His muscles eased, and all

he wanted to do was stretch and relax. Was that the magic of the grove or Jordan's not-sleep affecting him?

He suppressed a shiver. If he slept there, would he wake up?

If he was asleep, he could avoid the unicorn chaos.

He shook off the thought with a forced blink.

"While I was scrubbing the paint off the steps, it occurred to me that the LA vampires never have had only one plan in motion. They always have other options. Telling us to catch the unicorn, that's only one plan. What else are they up to?" Edra sat next to Jordan, facing the others. He reached out and touched Jordan's hand for a heartbeat, hoping that he could feel that he wasn't alone and that Edra had returned.

"I had a similar revelation while pleading ignorance on how to catch it and hand it over," the king said.

Edra nodded, then stopped. Pleading ignorance. "You know how to catch it."

"Catch is not the right word. It's more lure and encourage it to settle. I have dealt with wild magic before...well, my father did. I was in my twenties," the king said casually, as though this wasn't something he should have mentioned before.

Edra stared at him. "You told Jordan it was impossible. I thought there was nothing that could be done."

"I told Jordan it couldn't be caught. You didn't question if there was an alternative. I believe they are going to try to lure the magic away."

"If they do that, they will kill Katie." And Edra had no idea if the humans were making any progress and her rescue.

"We need to consider that she may already be dead," Ardel murmured as though he didn't want Jordan to hear. "They have shown no desire to be true to their word in their dealings with you, or Cassius, or the humans, for that matter."

Edra stared at the grass. "It's creating havoc. Do we want them to lure it away?"

The king shook his head, his dark blond hair trailing over his shoulders. “No. We believe that would be a bigger disaster. We want it to settle here.”

“Here, as in the grove?”

“The space is too small,” the Strega said. “Where the satyr temple is would be better. There is already magic there, though not as much.”

“We need to entice it there and then keep it there long enough to settle.” Ardel tipped his face to the sky. He was looking better, though not the beauty he had been. “It’s not easy, and there will be consequences.”

“Is magic ever easy?” the king smiled as if it was a joke.

The Strega laughed.

Edra scowled. He wanted to tell them to get fucked, and that he wasn’t interested in paying any magical price. He’d already paid enough and had the scars to prove it, but the worst ones were those they couldn’t see.

“How will you entice it to the temple?” Edra poured himself a hot chocolate. He’d been planning on saving it, but now was a good time to revel in the sweetness. He gulped down the first few swallows, wishing it was something much stronger so he could pass out for a few—no, he was really happy being awake.

“We are going to hold a Samhain party,” Ardel said as if that was the obvious answer.

Edra took a sip. Maybe it was. “The drumming lured it here.”

“Exactly.” The king nodded and held his hand out for a cookie.

Edra passed him the packet, even though he didn’t want to share with anyone. “I expected to sit here alone.”

“The party will draw it, and the magic will grow stronger until it settles. People at the party will be affected. Humans nearby will be affected. It’s going to be messy.” The king took

a bite of the cookie as though he was unconcerned by the idea of magical mayhem.

“Then we need to warn the police.” Not that there was much they could do against wild magic. All they could do was try to contain those who were acting under the influence.

“We do,” Ardel agreed.

“But we still don’t know how the LA vampires plan to lure it out of the city,” the Strega said. “I can locate it now that I have felt its energy. But what we need to do is start increasing our use of magic. There should be people at the temple, drumming or dancing or offering themselves to Pan for the next two days.”

Edra lifted one eyebrow. “Fucking? They’ll be arrested for that. So let’s not go that far.”

Though when he’d gotten naked in the temple with Jordan, he’d parked a dragon in front to hide what they were doing. So it was a possibility. Though, how many would be brave enough to strip with a dragon only a few yards away?

“We need the unicorn to feel at home so that it is harder to lure away,” she finished.

“The LA vampires won’t walk to the temple to take it,” Ardel said. “That would be an act of war.”

Edra finished his drink. “They don’t need to enter the city at all. Reyman is planning on leaving with his pack. He’s been promised something by the vampires. The pack is going to lure it away.” As usual, the LA vampires had someone on the inside. They were three steps ahead and had a dozen different plots.

“How will werewolves raise magic?” Ardel turned to glance at the road as the scrape of metal on sheath cut through the night.

The werewolf on the road lifted his hands. “I was told the Knight wanted to see me and that he’d be here. I didn’t realize it was a council.” Xan lowered his head in respect.

“Let him enter. He sits there.” The king pointed to a place just off the sidewalk and on the grass. “Why did you summon him, Knight?”

The tone of the meeting had switched from friendly discussion to formal in a heartbeat because of the outsider. “Because he and Carly are considering becoming mates, and he is the alpha of the biggest pack that opposes Reyman. Xan knows everything the werewolves are up to.”

The fur on Xan’s neck and shoulders lifted, but he didn’t bare his teeth and growl, even though Edra was sure that was what he wanted to do. This looked like a setup, which hadn’t been his intention, but it was too late to backtrack now, and he wasn’t about to admit to being surprised by the others either.

How much had Xan overheard before stepping forward?

“When is Reyman leaving, and how many leave with him?” the king asked as though he had the right to be told. It was polite to let someone know when an entire pack, or tribe, was leaving, but not a requirement.

“In two days...Samhain. He said it was a good time to break ways.”

The Strega nodded as though agreeing.

“And he takes twelve. Some have left their packs to join him.” From the snarl in his voice, Xan wasn’t too happy about that.

“Do you know why?”

Xan’s ears flattened. “They have been promised a permanent cure. And Reyman believes that whatever cured the vampires in LA will cure them.”

Reyman was partially right. Magic would allow them to shift again.

“Why aren’t you all leaving?” Edra tilted his head, listening for the tells of a lie. “Do you not want to shift?”

His growl was a low rumble. “Of course I do. But I do not trust those leeches.”

Ardel drew in a breath, his fangs gleaming.

“They do not smell right,” Xan added, glancing at Ardel as though sensing the danger.

“You have met with them?” the king demanded.

“I met with one. I went outside the city with Reyman, and I only went the once.”

“And you didn’t think to say anything?” Ardel snapped.

“It didn’t seem worth it. It was a meeting; she was talking up LA and the space. I like it here. This is my city and always has been.” Xan inclined his head to the rulers.

“But Reyman met her again, and that was when she made her offer,” Ardel said.

“He has met her several times,” Xan confirmed. “And she has given him gifts to prove her words.”

The Strega sat up a little straighter. “What kind of gifts?”

Xan’s ears twitched. “He said it let a werewolf shift.”

Edra glanced at her. What kind of magic was that? And did it have enough power to lure the unicorn away?

“Did you see it work?” she pressed.

“No. I don’t believe him. If he had such a gift, why would he not be parading about, showing that he was cured? That would’ve convinced many to leave, even if they like it here.” He glanced at the king. “There is not one among us who does not want what we have lost.” He lifted his paw. “I want to see my hands again. I do not want children that are born like this. That is why I haven’t taken Carly as my mate.”

How many other werewolves were not having children? Was that something they should be worried about? They were questions for another time, or never if the wild magic settled and werewolves could shift again.

“When I was at the enclave, there were many things from Tariko.” Including his bloody sword. “They were collecting objects. Not only from this city but from all over. Perhaps they have something that holds magic, and that is how they figured

out the cure for their looks.” He didn’t want to reveal everything they knew about what was going on.

It wasn’t the type of magic or even a spell; it was simply the amount of magic in the air and in their blood that had restored their looks. If the unicorn remained here, then the werewolves would be able to shift. They would pass as human. For many mythos, that was all they wanted. That little bit of ease to help them pass through this world without the constant paper cuts that came with living.

“Perhaps.” The Strega agreed.

“I do not trust them,” Xan growled. “He is a fool for leaving.”

Silence settled in the grove.

Xan’s tail flicked. “Is this about the unicorn?”

“Have you seen it?” Ardel asked.

“No. And I don’t want to.” He jerked his head at Jordan. “Magic is dangerous to those of us who cannot use it.”

Werewolves were probably the least magical being from Tariko. Their ability to shift was linked to magic, but it wasn’t something they could use. Much like him, he could shift and become invisible, but he wouldn’t have called it magic or even thought it magic-related until the lack of magic meant he had no control over his visibility. But even that had been stabilizing, likely because of the increase in magic, not because he’d gotten better at controlling it.

“Thank you, Xan,” Ardel said. “Tell your people we will host a Samhain party at the satyr temple and that they are welcome.”

Xan left, but it was several minutes before anyone spoke.

“You didn’t tell him it was to lure the unicorn,” Edra said finally.

“No, because I do not want word getting back to Reyman.” Ardel stood as though he was done with this meeting. He dusted off the grass that had the nerve to cling to his suit.



“They will be affected by the magic at the party.” The Strega rose to her feet as though lifted from the ground. “Do we stop Reyman or let him leave?”

“If he leaves and fails, the vampires will not welcome him,” Edra said. They would eat him and all those with him.

“That is not our problem. Our problem is settling the unicorn before it does more damage.” The king nodded at Ardel. “That is what you will tell your chief. Tell him we have a solution.”

Ardel nodded. His gaze drifted to Edra, then Jordan. “I will also enquire after Katie.”

“Thank you.” This was one of those times when words meant very little. As long as she was in LA, there was nothing else they could do.

The king sat for a moment longer as though he had something else to say. Then he stood and sighed. “There isn’t enough magic to bring Tariko back.”

Then he left the grove with his guards, and it was only Edra and Jordan and Sinner and the two elves standing watch. He lay down, adjusting the blanket so it covered him as well. Next to him, Jordan was warm, and his heartbeat was steady. He looked as though he was sleeping.

“I miss you.” *I need you.* He didn’t know when that had happened, but he couldn’t face sleeping at home, alone. “You will miss the party if you don’t wake up soon.” He pressed a kiss to Jordan’s cheek as he curled against him and draped an arm over him. He gave Sinner a pat, almost expecting her to stretch and wake and ease into the gap between her people, but she was as still as Jordan.

Edra closed his eyes, but that didn’t stop them from burning. Somehow, he was losing his second mate. What was wrong with him?

## CHAPTER 15



The contents of every cupboard and drawer were strewn over the table and kitchen counter. The opening of those doors hadn't put Jordan to sleep once, but he was filled with a sense of urgency and dread.

He was a cop and had the badge and gun to prove it, so he was suspecting the worst. Something had gone wrong, and he was injured. He'd never been in a coma, but this all felt very real. Except for not being able to leave.

Most of the things he'd pulled out were things he expected.

The half-empty tin of hot chocolate powder was not. He'd never bought any because he didn't drink it. Nor was the weird-smelling tea that had no label.

He was going to assume that the same man who ate pig head and had given him the ring also liked hot chocolate and weird tea.

So why couldn't Jordan remember him?

Sinner wove around his ankles, jumped on the table, and generally got in the way. It didn't seem to matter what he wrote, he wasn't any closer to getting out. He was keeping himself here. There was something that he didn't want to remember.

Had something happened between him and his partner?

He tapped his pen on the paper, and Sinner took a swipe at it.

“Do you know what this is about? Do you know who eats pig head?” Jordan reached out and plucked off another piece. He took a bite, then gave the rest to her. It was hot, as if no time had passed.

Maybe none had. How long had he been here, trapped in a place that looked like his house, but it wasn't? While it had been nice to do nothing but sleep and eat, he was bored.

He needed answers. He flicked the police badge with his pen.

“Which door should I try, Sinner?”

She jumped off the table as if to choose a door.

“Not the bedroom door. That one doesn't work.” Also, going into the bedroom didn't let him out. It would only let him sleep in his own bed, and he no longer cared about that.

“This would go much faster if you could talk. We could discuss theories. Do you only sleep when I do?” He hadn't seen her sleep while he was awake and when he woke, she was always on his chest. “Do you know what is going on?”

Sinner looked at him. “Magic.”

“Magic?” Jordan repeated, not sure he wanted to believe that his cat had just spoken. She couldn't have. She'd made a weird meow that sounded like magic.

“I have been trying to talk to you, but you have never understood.” She put her paw on his leg. “You really want me to help?”

“Sure.” His cat talking to him, and that wasn't the strangest thing going on.

She bounced into his lap.

“What is the last thing you remember?”

“Your dragon.”

And that's what happened when he asked his cat for answers. “A dragon? I don't have a dragon.”

But the thought caught in his mind like a splinter that he couldn't pick out.

Sinner stared at him, unblinking, like he was an idiot.

"I'd remember if I had a dragon, but they aren't real." And neither was this. But being rational hadn't gotten him very far, so perhaps it was time to listen to her and play along. "Okay, Sinner. Let's say I have a dragon. Does he eat that." Jordan tapped the head.

"Yes, it's his favorite. And he sometimes makes me chocolate milk, but only when you aren't there because he says you wouldn't like it." She jumped onto the table and head-butted the tin of powder to prove her point.

She shouldn't be drinking chocolate milk, so that part sounded like him. "The dragon uses my kitchen?"

"Yes. He sleeps in your bed."

Jordan lifted his eyebrows. There was no way he let a dragon sleep in his bed. But he'd never expected Sinner to talk back either. He had no idea where that left him.

Maybe it wasn't an actual dragon, but that was the only way his subconscious could express it. "So what does this dragon look like?"

"Silver, with wings and a blue tongue. He's always been able to talk to me."

"Does he talk to me?"

She gave him that look that was both pity and disgust and sadness all at once. "Yes."

"So why isn't he here with us?" Why didn't he remember? It seemed like something that would be hard to forget.

"I don't know. But everything smells like magic."

His stomach sank. "Did he do this to us?"

Sinner's tail flicked, knocking plastic tubs onto the kitchen floor. "The magic doesn't smell like him."

“But he is the last thing you remember?” He was having this conversation with himself and talking about magic and dragons as though it would solve his problems. He doubted either would solve anything if they were real. He tried to imagine dragons in San Francisco. But they weren’t silver the way she’d described; they were green and big.

Pain lanced through his head, and he grabbed his temples to hold his head together.

“Fuck.” What he needed was another nap. He stood and hesitated. If he went to the bedroom door, he would go back to sleep until he woke up. Then he’d have to read his notes again.

He added that Sinner now talked to the list and that she was blaming magic and dragons. That he had a dragon was something he underlined. So either his brain was throwing up some weird coma dreams—though he’d had trips that were less strange—or it was magic, and his cat could talk.

Neither option was great on paper.

And now that he was up, trying to force open the bedroom door didn’t seem like a plan either. Was the pain a good sign? Dragons were big and green and wouldn’t fit in his kitchen, of that he was sure, even though it was a ridiculous statement. His temples throbbed.

He needed to remember, even though it hurt. A part of him wanted to back away from the pain, to lie on the sofa and flick through the channels. He didn’t need to remember. He didn’t need the pain that would cause.

He closed his eyes, knowing he had a choice. One brought escape and painful memories, the other safety and the oblivion of forgetting. This was a bit more permanent than a trip or a high. Both of which he was sure he’d had. What was he trying to outrun?

He exhaled and opened his eyes. “So the last thing you remember is my silver dragon...what was he doing?”

Sinner tilted her head. If she were human, she’d have been scowling and trying to force the memory. Her tail lashed, and

she tilted her head further. “I don’t know. But I was safe with him.”

That was a good sign.

“What do you remember?” she asked.

“I was...” A heavy rhythm pulsed in his body. “I was at a concert, I think?”

Had he taken something to cause this? That didn’t seem like something he did anymore. But what the fuck did he know about anything?

He picked her up and stared into her eyes. “Are you really here or a dream?”

And he wasn’t sure which was worse. If she was real, did that make magic real? And if she wasn’t real, he was imagining talking to his cat would help.

“How would I know if I’m real? I feel real. The meat tasted real. You smell real, even though you smell like magic.”

“I smell like magic?”

“You didn’t use to, but you do now.”

“Because of the dragon?”

“When you started licking each other,” she said, as though serious.

He put her down. “There is no way I would lick a dragon. What is wrong with my brain? This is not helping.” He raked his fingers through his hair.

“Do you not like it when I talk?” She darted around to stand in front of him, stretching up and putting her front paws on his leg. She sounded so upset that Jordan picked her back up.

“Of course I do.” He scratched under her chin. “But I need to get out of here.”

“Why don’t you remember him? You need to keep this one. I like him. And he loves you.” She head-butted his face.

“Why can’t I remember him?” But it was as if nothing outside his house existed. There was a niggling sensation that he should be relieved that he had forgotten about the rest of the world, yet he was more worried that he didn’t remember. “Do you think he is worried?”

“Yes, he was scared.”

“Scared about what?”

“I can’t remember. He wrapped me in his clothes and carried me away.” She rested her head on his shoulder and sighed.

“Wait, the dragon wears clothes?”

“When he looks like a human.”

While it was reassuring that he wasn’t having a relationship with an actual dragon—assuming the coma dream version of his cat was telling the truth—a man who shapeshifted was equally implausible.

“You know what? Why don’t we wake up so my dragon boyfriend can stop worrying?” He drew in a breath. Nothing else had worked, so why not go with Sinner’s version of events? “I have a dragon boyfriend.”

He repeated the words.

Each time he said the words, they became a little more real.

Sinner’s claws dug into his shoulder, but he held onto her, not wanting to leave her behind in case something else was going on. Hell, maybe magic was involved. Why the fuck not?

The walls shook, and the ground rumbled like the world was tearing itself apart. Explosions rattled the windows.

And he remembered the night the world had changed. The memories rained over him, stinging his skin like shards of rubble until all he could do was drop to his hands and knees beneath the weight. Sinner crouched beneath him as he crawled for the glass sliding door. The need to escape his house and reclaim his life was greater than his need to forget and hide.

No matter what else was out there, Edra was waiting.



## CHAPTER 16



The breath Jordan took was more of a gasp, as though he was resurfacing from a great depth. And as he inhaled, he sat up. His hands moved to his chest, catching Sinner and holding her close as though he'd known she was there all along.

For a moment, he sat there, trying to figure out where he was. His heartbeat kicked up again as he saw the trees and smelt the Tarikian flowers. He was in the fucking nymph grove.

“What the hell?” His voice was rough, like it hadn't been used in a long time.

Sinner stretched in his arms.

“You're awake,” Edra murmured as he pushed himself up.

Jordan turned his head. How had he forgotten all about Edra and their lives? About mythos entirely? “How long has it been?”

“Only a couple of days.” Edra reached out and hesitated as though he expected Jordan to push him away.

Did Edra realize that he'd been forgotten? Jordan swallowed, not sure what to say. “How did it happen?”

Edra's hand dropped to his lap, and his fingers curled against the blanket. “If you don't remember, I'm not sure I should tell you.”

Sinner climbed out of his arms and into Edra's lap, rubbing her head against his hands. “I missed you.”

Jordan stared at her.

But Edra was looking at him. “Did you understand her?”

“Um, yeah. She started doing that while I was asleep.” He scowled. “I couldn’t tell if it was real, or if I was dead.” Maybe he was dead now. How would he be able to tell?

Edra ran his hands over her as though he cared more about the cat than him. “Are you feeling better? Does anything hurt?”

“Nothing hurts.”

There was something amiss between them. A gap that had nothing to do with him sleeping and everything to do with him forgetting.

“I think you need to tell me what happened. To her and me.”

Edra studied Sinner instead of meeting Jordan’s gaze. “What did you dream of?”

“Home, but I couldn’t leave. Then there was a pig head on the table, and I began to work things out. Sinner helped when I said it would be easier if she could talk to me.”

Edra shook his head. “What did you have to remember?”

Jordan bit his lip, but there was no way around it. “You.”

A flicker of pain crossed Edra’s face, but otherwise, he didn’t move. It was like he couldn’t.

Jordan turned and pulled him close. They weren’t boyfriends or even dating; they were mates, and that mattered to Edra. “I don’t understand why.”

Edra didn’t resist, but Jordan felt the tension in his body. “Because there was too much for you to deal with.”

Jordan shook his head. “No. You aren’t too much. I don’t want a life without you. But I need to know what happened, if only so I can make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Edra snorted. “A unicorn granted your wish.”

“The unicorn.” Memories bubbled up like a spring. He didn’t need Edra to tell him the rest because he remembered.

“You were exhausted and wanted to rest...and to forget me.” Edra pulled away, but Jordan held him tighter.

“No, I wouldn’t want to forget you. I love you.” But he had forgotten, so some part of him must have wanted that.

“I’m not human. Do you remember that?” Edra twisted in his arms to face him.

“Yes. And all the problems that has caused. That’s all I was hiding from. Not you.” In his house, he’d been safe from everyone and everything, but he hadn’t been living. He lifted his hand to cup Edra’s cheek. “I remembered you. You are the reason I woke up.”

“I told you, you had a dragon,” Sinner pushed her way between them and purred.

“But I won’t deny that I needed the rest.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” Edra said, his eyes dark and watchful.

“I thought I was lost too.” He didn’t want to let him go now that he had him in his arms. His thumb smoothed over Edra’s cheek, then he leaned in and brushed a light kiss over his lips. As he did, he sensed Edra’s hesitation and distance. “Are we still fighting?”

Edra glanced down. “I don’t want to, do you?”

“No.” But forgetting his mate wasn’t something easily put aside. That was why Edra was hurting. “If you’d been with me, I would’ve had no reason to wake up.”

Which was a terrifying thought. What would have happened to his body?

Edra’s lips twitched as if he was about to smile. “Do you want to go home?”

“Yeah.” He glanced up at the trees, but tonight that’s all they were, and there was nothing threatening about them. “It’s been two days, and I’d love a shower and something to eat.”

He drew in a breath, knowing he needed to ask. “What have I missed?”

Edra put his hand over Jordan’s heart. “No. You’ve just woken up. You can catch up tomorrow. I’ll tell you over breakfast.”

Jordan smiled. Edra was trying to protect him. And he understood why. He’d been tired and burned out with everything going on, but he’d felt like he needed to push through. He leaned in and kissed him. “Okay.”

“Really?” Edra’s eyebrows lifted.

“Yes.” No more pushing. He had to learn to stop before he destroyed himself and those he loved. “The rest of the world can wait for us.”



As much as Edra had wanted to peel Jordan’s clothes off and have him in the grove so they could reconnect, the invitation to stay was only while Sinner recovered and Jordan slept. That, and he wasn’t sure of the ground between them. He wasn’t sure about Jordan. Something was different.

While Jordan showered alone, Edra lay on the bed, trying to process his own thoughts about being forgotten.

Bloody unicorn.

It stung that Jordan had forgotten him, even though it wasn’t surprising. He was part of the reason Jordan’s life had spun out of control. Why the front door needed repainting, and Sinner had nearly been killed.

“So, how come you can talk now?” He glanced at Sinner, who was sitting in the middle of the bed, purring as though everything was right with the world when it was clear it was on fire and only held together with rope as it careened downhill, picking up speed.

“I wanted to talk to him like I can talk to you. I thought I was dead until you found me, and he would never have known

how much I love him. He brought me home when he could have left me to die.”

“I know he found you as a baby. So while you were sleeping, the unicorn gave you the gift of speech.”

Sinner plucked at the blanket. “All the magic changed me.” The water turned off. Sinner glanced at the bathroom door. “You’re going to lick each other?”

“Maybe.” Edra raked his teeth over his lower lip. He wanted his mate; it was a need that was part mating bond and part wanting to be remembered. But he sensed something had changed between them, and he wasn’t sure what or if it was Jordan who had changed.

Would he ever be who he had been?

“I don’t need to see that.” She jumped off the bed and strolled out the door.

Edra got up and pulled the door closed for the illusion of privacy. He turned as Jordan stepped out of the bathroom, naked and ready for more than sleep. Edra’s pulse quickened at the sight of his mate, but there was still something holding him back.

Sleeping for two days hadn’t hurt him any. If anything, he looked better for his magical rest. The dark smudges were gone from beneath his eyes. Eyes that were now framed with lashes that were darker than they had been only minutes ago and that had a glint in them that had been missing for a while.

“You look good.”

“I feel good.” Jordan held out his hand, and Edra accepted it. He didn’t resist when Jordan pulled him close. “Now I need to get you out of your clothes so I can feel you.”

His hands skimmed beneath Edra’s T-shirt and smoothed up his back before pulling the shirt off.

He shouldn’t feel slighted by the unicorn trickery. And he understood the reasons, but he couldn’t shake it off either. He was sure Jordan hadn’t remembered everything because he

hadn't asked after his sister. At least he wasn't the only person Jordan had forgotten about.

Jordan paused. "What is it?"

"Are you sure you're okay?" *That you want this? And me and the complications I bring?*

Jordan was his mate, but he was also human, and the human world didn't seem ready for them.

"I'll be better when you are naked." He kissed Edra. His lips were open and hungry for more than talking.

Edra flicked his tongue over Jordan's lip, then dipped in a little deeper, giving him what he wanted and sinking into the comfort of the familiar feel of Jordan's need for him.

Jordan groaned and pulled him closer so Edra could feel the hard length of his dick against his thigh. The scent of lust on Jordan's skin was enough to spark his own, smothering the doubts that had blossomed in the grove. He let his hands slide over his mate's body. It felt as though they had been apart longer than a couple of days. The emptiness had been bigger than when he'd been in LA.

The bond hadn't existed the way it should have because the unicorn had made Jordan forget. Now that he was awake and they were together, it was a living thing that Edra could feel between them. He fed on Jordan's lust and let it heat his blood.

Jordan's hand stilled over Edra's heart, and he closed his eyes. "What is that?"

"What?"

"It's like...like a fluttering in me, but it's you." Jordan opened his eyes. "Do you not want this?"

Edra covered Jordan's hand with his, knowing what Jordan was sensing. The wild magic had cracked open something else in Jordan. So even though the connection had been there from the moment they'd become mates, it had been weak and one-sided—though Edra had hoped that it would grow in time. Now it had bloomed. "I do. I wasn't sure if you would."

“I’ve slept for two days. I want to feel alive...but...” he frowned. “This is different.”

“It’s the bond between us. My concern.” And his doubts. Was this too much for a human not used to so much magic? “You were unconscious an hour ago.”

He dragged Edra’s hand to his cock. “I’m not now. Before you, my life was muted colors and dulled sounds. I never noticed. Now everything is brighter somehow.” He brushed his lips over Edra’s. “That doesn’t mean the world isn’t occasionally terrifying and that I don’t want to hide sometimes.”

“Everyone needs to escape sometimes. That’s living.” If he needed to get away, he took off as a dragon and hunted and went wild for a few days...sometimes longer. But he hadn’t done that in a while.

“It’s not you I need to run from, though.” His thumbs rubbed over the back of Edra’s hips. “It’s everyone else.” He rested his forehead against Edra’s. “I’m sorry I forgot you. I don’t know how to make it up to you.”

Edra could feel his confusion, as though he was aware something wasn’t quite right but was unwilling to press for answers. “It’s okay. Wild magic doesn’t ask why or understand that there are things that lurk deep within. It sets those things free with no regard for the consequences. And for you, that was—”

“Falling asleep.”

“Forgetting the things that stress you,” Edra corrected. “For Sinner it was the ability to talk—that is another conversation, though.” He didn’t want to find out what his would’ve been. Maybe the unicorn had gone after the easiest targets in the grove, those who weren’t mytho and had never lived on Tariko.

Edra’s hand skimmed up Jordan’s chest to sweep over the hard peak of his nipple.

Jordan hummed his pleasure. “I never thought much about them until you started playing with them.”

He pinched the tip, eliciting a gasp from Jordan. “You should pierce them.”

“Then you’d never leave them alone.”

“That a problem?” He rolled the peak between his fingers, loving the way Jordan’s heartbeat quickened. He kissed him before he could answer. It didn’t matter what he said. Edra let his tongue slide deeper into Jordan’s mouth as though fucking him.

Jordan worked his hand into Edra’s track pants and wrapped his hand around the hard length of his dick, but it was Jordan who groaned on the first stroke.

While Edra was used to feeling his mate’s desire and other sensations through the bond, for Jordan, it was new and strange.

“So the mating bond... Is this normal?” Jordan’s voice had a quiver.

“Yeah.”

“And you’ve had this the whole time? Felt...” He licked his lower lip, tempting Edra to reclaim his mouth. “It’s like extra lust...like being on Bliss, but not...”

Edra grinned and pinched Jordan’s nipple again. He liked playing with Jordan because he felt the little jolts of pleasure too. But it wasn’t something he was so acutely aware of because he was used to it or at least expected it with a mate.

Jordan dropped to his knees and dragged the track pants down with him.

Edra’s dick jutted forward, and Jordan didn’t hesitate, taking him in his mouth. Edra sucked in a breath, knowing that Jordan was doing it to find out what it would feel like for him, but he didn’t care because he loved seeing Jordan on his knees with his mouth full.

And from the noise Jordan made, he’d gotten a taste of that thought.

He glanced up, and Edra threaded his fingers through his hair, lazily fucking his mouth and making sure that he



appreciated the sight of his mate's lips around his cock and the liquid heat of desire in his blood, to flood the bond with those sensations.

In return, he felt Jordan's hunger for more keenly. It wasn't experimentation. He loved sucking Edra's dick. Something Edra already knew and was more than happy to fulfill. Fucking Jordan's mouth meant at least he got to fuck him.

Jordan rocked back, his eyes a little dazed.

"Too much?" Edra pulled him up.

He shook his head. "I guess I thought it was only a blow job... I didn't know."

"It's only because we are mates that you feel the pleasure." Edra wasn't about to remind him that he would also feel pain. If the bond had been like this while he was in LA, Jordan would've had more than a bad feeling. "You want to fuck me? Or are you worried that will drown you?"

"And you felt this the whole time and didn't say anything?" Jordan stepped back, leading him to the bed.

Edra winced. "I expected it...wanted it. And I hoped you'd feel it eventually, but I knew that may never happen, so I didn't want you to think you were missing out." The words tumbled off his lips.

This he hadn't expected. Not so suddenly for Jordan, anyway. And it had been slower for him, which he blamed on the lack of magic. But that was all changing.

Everything was changing again, and he wasn't sure if any of them were ready for it. Well, the mythos were. The humans...how would they manage with more magic around them?

"Yeah, and I might have freaked out if all of a sudden I felt how much you wanted me. I mean, I saw it in your eyes while you were waiting not so patiently for me to..." He swallowed. "Get off Bliss. But to feel that too?" He inhaled and lifted his eyebrows. "That would've been—"

“Too much.” Edra pushed Jordan onto the bed and shucked off his pants. “Is it too much now?”

“Too late if it is.”

Edra straddled him, pinning Jordan’s hands to the bed. “I can... Actually, I have no idea what I can do about it. I’ve never had to worry about it.”

“Then we will muddle through the same as always.”

There was that brightness in Jordan that had been lacking. Edra didn’t want him to lose that shine again. He needed to look after his mate better. He was a human, not used to the mytho world, no matter how much he thought he was.

“Muddling through doesn’t make it a good plan.” He rolled his hips, enjoying the way Jordan’s cock rubbed against his.

“Not always. But we’re good?” There was a flutter of uncertainty beneath the lust.

“Yeah.” Edra leaned forward, burying his own doubts about all the changes—what new ones would tomorrow bring? “I will be better when you are fucking me.”

“Are you going to let go?”

If he’d been in his dragon form, he could’ve grabbed the lube with his tail. But then, he wouldn’t have been sitting like this either. And he was one hundred percent sure that Jordan was not ready to have a dragon in his bed. Despite the media assuming it was already happening, why else would a human date a shifter, right?

“I guess I have to...”

Jordan lifted his eyebrows. Then he twisted his hips and moved his hands, and even though Edra was stronger, he ended up on his back.

Jordan pinned him with one knee between Edra’s thighs. “Got you.” He followed it up with a kiss, and Edra didn’t struggle.

He could have gotten free, but what was the point?

“And now we are in the same situation.”

“No, because...” he used one hand to keep a hold of Edra’s as he reached out and pulled the lube out from between the pillows. “I was organized while you were scarfing down extra dinner. You’re predictable.”

Was he that easy to read?

But again, the words were softened with a kiss. “And I want you spread out beneath me for a change.” Jordan moved his knee. “Roll over.”

Edra held his mate’s gaze for a moment. Was this a magic-related change? Edra liked to be on top and riding his dick. He liked to play with him, and if he was wearing lingerie, feel that too. The only time he was on his knees was if he was face down at the vice den, and it was because he was there to fuck, not make out.

Jordan waited.

And Edra gave in, rolling onto his belly. “You realize I can’t kiss you like this?”

“Yep.” Jordan nudged Edra’s legs apart with his knee. He kissed the back of Edra’s neck, then between his shoulder blades and over the pale gray scars that marked his back from the werewolf attack. “But I can kiss you and touch you, and you are at my mercy.”

Edra smiled against the blanket. “Are you saying that I am too controlling?”

Jordan’s lips brushed the dip of his spine. “I am asking that you let me explore the bond my way. If you are on top, you will take over.”

His teeth raked over one ass cheek before he soothed it with a kiss.

“I only take over because I know...oh.” He used the bond without even thinking about it. It was there, and to him, it was another sense to use to please his mate. He never stopped to question it because he felt the way Jordan enjoyed watching him. And Edra liked that. He liked coming on Jordan so he

smelled of him—humans wouldn't notice, but some mythos would.

Jordan's lips brushed the top of his ass, right where his tail grew as if he knew that was a sensitive spot. Edra hissed, and Jordan did it again. His hand traced up Edra's spine to his shoulders as though to keep him in place as his tongue dipped lower.

He was using the bond to find all the spots Edra liked to be touched—again, it wasn't something he'd ever thought of mentioning. With his last mate, there had been a knowing because of the bond, and the casual lovers in between the encounters had been a means to an end, involving a few words of want and nothing more.

At his soft touch, Edra spread his legs a little more. He bit his lip as his fingers curled into the blanket, fighting the urge to get up and turn around. He hadn't been this vulnerable with another since Lyo.

He closed his eyes. He didn't take control only because he could tell what Jordan liked. He'd been trying to protect himself. To pretend that it wasn't like last time and that it wouldn't hurt if it ended, but that was a lie. And the magic between them, binding them as mates, was as real as anything on Tariko, and he was unable to pretend otherwise.

His breathing became shaky as Jordan's tongue flicked over his hole.

Every muscle tightened as the sensation became too much. He'd been holding himself apart because he was afraid of being so badly hurt he'd be unable to go on. That Jordan now had the full experience of the bond was terrifying.

For several heartbeats, all he wanted to do was crawl away and put space between them. Jordan's hand swept over Edra's ass cheek and down the back of his leg as his tongue circled and teased. His fingers brushed the scar from the assassin's attack and the smaller ones from the bullet and plastic tube.

“What are you worried about?” His breath was warm on Edra's skin.

He lifted his head and opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. This was a lot easier when he was running the show because then he was thinking about Jordan instead of being lost in his own thoughts. "Nothing I can put into words at the moment."

How did he say that this was a reminder of what he'd had and lost and that it was rattling his marrow in a way he hadn't been ready for? That wounds he'd thought healed were, in fact, a little raw. That it was easier to keep that bit of distance, even though he wanted to pull Jordan close.

Where once Jordan might have pushed for an answer, he didn't. But he'd expect one later or tomorrow. And Edra might have one that made sense by then.

His breath was on Edra's balls a moment before his tongue, then he licked the length of Edra's crack to the tail spot. He shuddered; he couldn't help it. The ripple of pleasure continued up his spine, and he groaned.

Jordan's satisfaction swelled around him as he continued to make Edra squirm until he was alternating between lifting his ass and rubbing his cock against the blanket. The click of the lube cap opening was sweet relief.

"Get your butt in the air." Jordan tapped the side of Edra's ass cheek.

He pushed up onto his knees.

Instead of Jordan's tongue, it was his slick fingers doing the teasing. He didn't need this much prep. He was a lesser dragon, and his idea of a little rough was different from Jordan's. This was something else, though. He rocked back onto Jordan's fingers, wanting to feel them slide into him.

No, rough wouldn't kill him, but slow might.

"I enjoy seeing you desperate." Two fingers pushed in. "It feels like it's not only me needing it."

"I hide it better." The blanket muffled his words. His cock was like steel, begging to be touched.

"Now you can't."

No...now he couldn't. The little spark of fear that he could be ripped open danced through him. He'd wanted this, but at the same time, only having a part of it had been safe. Had the wild magic sensed that and granted him what he feared and desired most?

*Fuck.*

Jordan's fingers slid out of him, then the blunt head of his cock was pressing at his hole. Edra rocked back, more than ready to be filled. But Jordan took his time, breaching him slowly, each thrust barely going deeper than the last.

Edra growled. He was about ready to flip Jordan onto his back and take over.

The only thing that stopped him was Jordan's enjoyment at tormenting him.

He sank a little deeper, and Edra groaned, his fingers clawing at the blanket. Jordan gripped Edra's hips to stop him from trying to take control of the speed and depth. There was no point in trying to fight it if he wasn't actually going to turn things around.

So he surrendered, letting Jordan use him how he wanted.

Jordan gasped and thrust in fully. For a few seconds, he didn't move. It was only then he started fucking him with deep, hard strokes. Edra closed his eyes as the need to come tightened in his balls. Before he could even think about holding back, the heat rushed up his spine, and he came, spilling onto the blanket with a groan.

"Oh...fuck. Yes." Jordan thrust a few more times, each one sparking another jolt of pleasure in Edra's body, before he came, filling him.

Jordan folded over him and placed a kiss on his spine, then as he rolled onto his side, he dragged Edra with him so Jordan was still in him. His arm looped over Edra and their fingers entwined. "That was..."

"Intense," Edra finished for him. And he'd never expected to experience it again.

“Yeah.”

Jordan’s lips pressed against Edra’s shoulder. Edra turned his head to catch his lips, knowing that sharp edge of fear that Jordan could now feel the whisper of was something he was going to have to explain tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 17



Jordan hit snooze, wanting a few more minutes in bed. Edra wriggled closer, as if he was trying to move into the warm spot Jordan had left when he'd rolled over to silence the alarm.

Sinner walked over him so she could peer down at him. "Are you going to cook sausages?"

Jordan sucked in a breath and stared at his cat. With those few words, everything flooded back and made him dizzy even though he was lying in bed. This was not a normal day. He hadn't had one of them in a while.

"Well?"

He blinked. "Um, probably not. It's a workday."

"So I'll be by myself all day?" She head-butted his face. "I like it when you are home."

"You like sausages and wet food and this house, so I need to go to work so you can keep enjoying those things." Why was he justifying himself to Sinner?

All those times she'd jumped on him while he was in bed... Had she been begging for sausages and asking him to stay home? His chest tightened, and all the times he'd walked out and not come home until the next day piled on top of him. He was the worst cat-dad even though she meant so much to him.

"I'm sorry." The words didn't change anything, though, and they didn't make him feel better either. He rubbed her



head and scratched under her chin. “It’ll have to be canned food this morning.”

Edra sat up and put Sinner in his lap. “We need to talk about you talking.”

“Why?” her tail flicked from side to side.

“If only we can understand you, that’s fine. But if every human can understand you, that is a problem.”

Jordan looked at the two of them. Edra was behaving as if this was a normal conversation to have with one’s cat. Though he had no idea what the two of them had discussed before.

“Why?” Sinner asked again.

“Because some will be scared, and others will want to take you away to study you.” Edra paused, a crease forming between his eyebrows. “You are now part mytho, and humans don’t understand us, so we have to be careful.”

“I don’t want to be taken away. I won’t talk to anyone.”

“I’ll invite Sean and Troy over for dinner. They can be trusted not to talk if they can understand you.” He glanced up at Edra, who nodded as though it was a good plan.

“And if they can’t?” She tilted her head.

“Then it means that to everyone else, you are meowing like a cat,” Edra said with a smile.

If no one else understood her, that would make things easy.

“Hey, does that mean I now talk cat?” Jordan lifted one eyebrow. “Have I learned Dragon by magic?” He switched to Dragon. “My Dragon is good?”

From the look on Edra’s face, that was a no.

“Damn it.” But it had been worth a shot. “The unicorn could have given me that.”

Edra’s lips curved. “You’re in a rush to learn, are you?”

Jordan sensed Edra’s surprise. It took him a few seconds to piece it together. They’d made a deal about him being fluent and Edra getting to top. He held his mate’s gaze.

The tip of Edra's tongue flicked over his lip as if he was also thinking about the deal. If he was going to, there wasn't anyone he trusted more...

He smiled. "How fluent do I need to be? The dragons didn't eat me."

"Because they thought it amusing that you speak worse than their babies." Edra leaned over and kissed him. "The agreement is still in place. Though I think now you have an incentive to learn."

Sinner pushed between them. "If you have time to lick, you have time to cook sausages."

Jordan bit back a sigh, hating that she was right.

Edra kissed the top of her head before sliding out of bed and heading for the bathroom.

His alarm went off again. So much for an extra few minutes of sleep.

"If there are no sausages, I'm not getting up." She burrowed under the blankets and curled up in the warmth.

"It must be nice to be a cat." Jordan flicked back the blanket and sat on the edge of the bed.

Edra stepped into the bathroom doorway. "Please don't be making wishes or saying things out loud that you don't want to come true."

Worry prickled over Jordan's skin, and it took a moment for his brain to catch up, like he was still finding lost memories. "Because of the wild magic."

Edra nodded and pulled on briefs and pants as if it was going to be another day at the office.

"Aren't you on leave?" Had that changed in the couple of days he'd been asleep?

"It's a long story, and you are going to want to get dressed and have coffee before I catch you up because there are some things you haven't remembered. You'll also want to be sitting."

Jordan remained sitting on the edge of the bed. “I already don’t like where this is going.”

Edra pressed his lips together.

And it wasn’t his expression that created the additional ripple of unease; it was Edra himself. He was uneasy.

The bond. Jordan had it. It hadn’t been his imagination that he was sensing Edra last night. It had been real. And now there was a thing between them.

“Oh, shit. I feel it.” He stared up at Edra, his dark hair askew and his eyes troubled. “You don’t want to tell me something.”

“I’m going to tell you everything, but I want to make sure you’re prepared. Because there’s a lot you missed and a few major holes in your memory that are going to be un-fun to fill.”

What had he forgotten? Would he keep finding things he’d forgotten? What had the helpful unicorn thought he’d be better off without?

Jordan touched his chest where the knot of tension was. “You’re actually worried.” And he didn’t know if he liked this part of the bond at all.

Edra tugged on a shirt and sighed. “You not having the full bond was easier.”

“I’m beginning to see why.” Because he wasn’t sure he liked knowing every emotion Edra had. Had Edra always been able to sense his? That put a different spin on things, but he didn’t have time to go through every interaction.

“I’ll put on the coffee,” Edra said as he left the room.

Jordan forced himself off the bed. By the time he came out dressed and completely unprepared for whatever bad news Edra was about to deliver, his coffee was on the table along with scrambled eggs on toast. He knew which plate was his because there were two slices of toast. Edra’s had six and probably as many eggs, and he was still light enough to fly because of his hollow bones.

He sat, as expected, then put some salt on his eggs and waited as Edra sat opposite him. The scent of hot chocolate drifted across the table.

“Let me just...” Edra picked up a piece of egg covered toast, folded it in half like a taco and swallowed it whole.

Jordan’s dick twitched, but he pressed down on the heat that wanted to distract him. Whatever Edra needed to tell him, it was clear his dragon wasn’t ready, so Jordan reached for what he hoped was the easier option. “What couldn’t you tell me in bed last night?”

Edra grimaced. “I hoped you’d forget about that.”

Jordan took a sip of coffee and waited.

“When we became mates, I accepted the bond would be stunted and largely one-sided because of the lack of magic here—I wasn’t even sure there would be a bond and to have even a partial one was...” He drew in a breath and smiled. “It was more than I ever thought possible. I never expected to feel it again.” His smile faded. “I wasn’t ready. And last night fucking terrified me because now it’s complete.”

Jordan frowned because it wasn’t fear he was sensing—assuming that he was using the bond correctly. “Because I can get a better read on you?”

Edra shook his head and stared at his plate. “I like that, even though you used it to torture me.”

A buzz of pleasure washed over Jordan. “I think you like being tortured.”

He regretted the word as soon as it left his lips, but Edra smiled.

“Only when you do it.” He picked up his hot chocolate and cupped it in his hands but didn’t drink. “I thought Lyo’s death was barely a scar. Maybe his actual death is, but the memory of losing the connection, the tearing of my...” He winced. “My being. That is not.”

“And having an incomplete bond felt safe. Like you wouldn’t be hurt if something happened.”

Edra pressed his lips together and gave a small nod. “It would’ve ruined the moment, and I wanted that more than I wanted to show my wounds. So if you are freaking out about the bond, so am I because now it’s a proper thing.”

“Okay, I understand that, and I know what that feels like. I’m not jealous of what you had with Lyo. I might have been at first, but you had a whole life before me. And losing a partner is something that many people live with, plus you had the loss of the bond and the trauma of the collapse. I don’t know that you will ever be able to say it’s gone or healed; it’s there, and you live with it.”

Edra folded another piece of toast and ate it. “I tried to bury it, and it all rushed up last night.”

“I think we were both scared and excited.” He extended his hand across the table.

Edra’s fingers brushed his but didn’t take hold. “That was the easy bit.”

“I expected that.” He frowned. “Is that because I can feel your worry?”

“Or it’s because you’re a cop and have always listened to your intuition. Magic will amplify that. Not everything is the bond, and to be honest, most of the time, I don’t even notice it. It’s there, and it’s reassuring, but it’s not a conscious thing for me.”

“Because you’re used to it. I’m not. Give me some time to adapt. At least twenty-four hours.” He smiled, knowing it was going to take longer than that for every ripple of something that wasn’t his not to be distracting. He forced out a breath, knowing it needed done. “Give me the rest. In dot points, and I’ll eat and try not to interrupt.”

“Are you sure?”

“Bad news is never pleasant, for the deliverer or the receiver. I’ve been in your place, and I know it’s not easy. I’m not real fond of sitting here waiting for it either. So I’m acknowledging that this is going to be shit for both of us.”

Whatever Edra said, it wasn't his fault. The blame lay with the unicorn.

He needed to listen and process and fill in the gaps in his memory. Edra had said there were some, but Jordan didn't feel like there were, and he would, wouldn't he? He picked up his knife and fork and started to eat.

Edra drained his cup in a couple of swallows, placed the cup down, then took another couple of seconds before speaking. "Okay. A man shot up the mermaid colony, killing four. Humans are giving in to the thoughts they keep secret, so there's been lots of minor incidents and some major ones. I'm the new cultural liaison to your department. Your captain found a loophole. There's going to be a massive mytho Samhain party to keep the magic and settle it near the temple. Your house was vandalized when Sinner was injured—Carly and I removed most of the paint. The media are all over our asses, and I think you have forgotten your sister and maybe your whole family."

The food in Jordan's mouth became like glue. He forced himself to swallow. Then he took a swig of coffee, not sure where to even start with that list. It was his fault for asking for the update to be brief, but given that they didn't have all morning to go through everything that had happened, he'd thought it best.

That was a mistake.

It was Edra's last word that kept echoing. *Family.*

Where something should follow that word—memories of parents and siblings—there was nothing. "Why would I forget my family if I forgot the things that were stressing me?"

Family was supposed to be...

He didn't even have an answer for that.

"Fuck. My memory has more holes than a pegboard. What if I've forgotten cases that I need to testify on? I need my memories back."

"If we go to the Samhain party, being around the increased magic should do it. And if you are near the unicorn, think

about getting your memories back. If they haven't returned by then, that is, which they might."

"That doesn't answer why I forgot them." He stared at Edra. "And why did you mention my sister specifically?"

"It's more than a dot point summary, and you didn't take it well the first time." Edra pulled his phone out of his pocket and fiddled with his screen until he found what he was searching for. "You can watch it, but you need to keep your shit together because Isaac and Browning are not doing a good job, and everyone is stretched thin because of the wild magic situation. You aren't the only one under the influence of wild magic, and you won't be the last before this is over."

Jordan rubbed his forehead, then finished his coffee. "How is my sister mixed up with the unicorn?" Edra held out the phone, but Jordan shook his head. He wasn't sure he could keep his shit together. "For the moment, maybe only today, give me enough that I can skate by."

Edra's teeth worked over his lip. "You remember I went to LA?"

"I brought you half a cow to pay off a dragon. That is hard to forget."

"And the media?"

"Thinks I'm fucking a dragon and that this should be illegal—why can I remember that?" Surely that should fall under things that stressed him?

"Probably because you remembered me." Edra gulped down another piece of toast.

"How does this relate to my sister?"

"Because of those things, the LA vampires have taken Katie hostage."

There was an itch in his mind, like the fact was just out of reach. Like he'd read or seen something but couldn't put his finger on where or what. "And what do they want?"

"The unicorn."

“Of course. Because catching a magical, mostly invisible cloud isn’t going to be impossible.”

“Thus, the Samhain party. The unicorn was drawn to the grove by the drumming the ogres did to promote Sinner’s healing, your healing.” Edra’s eyebrows knitted together. “You were messed up, and Sinner was the final blow.”

Jordan frowned. But he was two feet in, and he had to keep moving to cross the river. “We don’t want the LA vampires to have the magic, but they will kill my sister if we don’t give it to them?” If his sister had joined them for breakfast, he didn’t think he’d recognize her. They could be talking about any vic.

“You’re a relative and not allowed to work the case. It’s being dealt with by people who are used to working on kidnapping cases. Ardel and the king ordered you to do nothing. And me, before you ask.”

Jordan closed his mouth. That had been his next question.

“So to skate by, as you said, you ask if there is any news about Katie.”

“Katie.” He spoke her name, hoping to conjure something. “And what if I don’t remember her?”

“That is a problem I don’t have an answer for. And I’m sorry, but it’s not our biggest problem either. The wild magic needs to be settled before the whole city acts out like a dragon after breaking into the brewery.”

“When did that happen?”

“About fifty years ago, during a drought. If drunk dragons are bad, hungover ones are worse.”

Jordan considered him for several seconds as he tried to sort all the information and prioritize. Edra was right. There was nothing he could do about Katie.

“Wild magic caused a man to shoot up the colony?” Jordan finished his now-cooled breakfast.

“Yes. I think so. He killed himself, so I don’t know for sure. Isaac was dealing with that.” Edra forced out a breath and shook his head. “Read my report, but now I have to fly out



to the colony once a week for three months to deliver four fish each time. I do not like flying to the colony or carrying fish. I am a lesser dragon, not a courier service.”

Jordan smiled, imagining that, but at the same time, he knew how dangerous the mermaids were. That, he remembered. “And you are back to being my liaison?”

“Cultural Sensitivity Officer. And it’s only part-time. Carly is the official liaison.”

“Okay. If you’re done, you might as well show me the damage before going to work. Wait, do they all know I magically lost my mind?”

“They believe you were dealing with Sinner and her injuries, plus I think with your sister’s situation, they weren’t shocked that you took a few days off. No one but the captain knows the truth.” Edra finished the last piece of toast. “I’ll do the dishes if you dry.”

Ten minutes later, they were standing on the steps. They didn’t look like they had been blood red yesterday, but they had a pink tinge. The front door looked terrible.

“I’m guessing there’re photos and a file?”

Edra nodded. “Isaac will have it. You need to speak to both of them about keeping their word. Vlash would have a field day tripping them up and binding them.”

Jordan smiled. “The only reason he didn’t manage with me is that you were there.”

Edra shook his head. “You can hold your own. You survived a twelve-hour car ride with him. That’s quite a feat.”

“I owe him a beer or three.”

“Don’t we all.” Edra tilted his head at Jordan’s car. “Shall we? Do you remember how to drive?”

“Just give me the keys, smart ass.”

Edra tossed him the keys and gave his ass a wiggle. “I heard no complaints last night.”

## CHAPTER 18



“*I* should have flown.” Edra leaned his head against the car door, unwilling to get out even though they had parked at the station.

“I could’ve walked quicker,” Jordan agreed. “I know you said things were chaos, but this is almost collapse-level chaos. People are looting. There’s a riot at the mall. And the breadsticks!”

The whole drive in, there’d been requests for assistance at various locations. They had stopped for the breadstick fight, which had involved seven people, a dozen breadsticks, several scones, three custard Danishes, and a very annoyed baker who was armed with a large knife.

They had arrested no one, only given warnings, and calmed everyone down. Jordan had ended up buying two dozen pastries to smooth everything over. For which Edra was very grateful because he’d then had something to eat for the rest of the drive. “Are you sure you don’t want one? They are very good.”

“I literally just ate breakfast,” Jordan said.

“Ninety minutes ago.” Edra licked his thumb, removing the last bit of icing.

“How long until the party to put this thing to bed?”

“Get it to settle, so it becomes part of the land and tame and usable. It’s tomorrow night. Then it’s the first fish delivery the day after. And after that, it’s vote on the bill.”

“Bill?” Jordan lifted his eyebrows.

“The Mythological Persons Bill of Rights that determines if I am human enough to be protected by human law or if I’m an animal.” Edra wanted to ask how Jordan could’ve forgotten that but didn’t because it was clear that Jordan already felt shitty. He could tell from the hard line of his eyebrows, the set of his lips, and the unease through the bond.

“Right. If it doesn’t pass, we’re fucked.”

“Yeah.” And it wasn’t going to be fun at all. “There’s a good chance you’ll be arrested because it’s public knowledge that we are together.”

“And you?”

“If I’m not a person, I can be locked up in labs and zoos or interred again.” He didn’t want any of that. “The elves should be safe, and maybe ogres and vampires, but the rest of us are damned.”

Jordan folded his hands over the steering wheel and blew out a breath. “Do you have a plan? Does anyone have a plan?”

“Not that I know of. They all think it will pass because of Europe and Canada. We can’t be people in one country and not another.”

“Your people are too hopeful.” He glanced at Edra. “Do you think the mermaids would help us flee to Mexico?”

Edra laughed for a couple of seconds before it died. “You’re serious.”

“I don’t want to sit around and wait for arrest. Cops don’t do well in prison. A gay cop? Who was fucking a mytho?” Jordan shook his head. “Not going to happen. I’ll be dead inside of a week. We need a plan, and we need to be half-way gone before the results are known.”

“You really think there’s a chance...” Until that moment, Edra had been sure that all the protests were just noise. That it was a small group of haters, not a silent, seething mass. “We’ve been integrating, working, building lives. We live no differently—”

Jordan put his hand on Edra's leg. "I have seen, and I understand. But I have also lived here longer than you, and I don't have any faith in people doing the right thing, especially when it comes to those who are different."

"So you remember something about growing up?"

Jordan paused, his gaze focused somewhere in the distance. "No. And I don't think it's anything I want to remember. Whatever I've told you, I don't want to know."

He got out of the car, and Edra followed, carrying the box of pastries. Everyone liked free snacks, so hopefully everyone would be too busy eating to ask questions.



Jordan made it to his desk and turned on his computer, but he didn't get to sit even though no one else was around. The building had been emptied because of all the wild magic going around.

The captain was standing near his office talking to a too-pretty Ardel. That was going to take some getting used to. They saw him and beckoned him over, so he pasted on a smile that he didn't feel.

"I wanted to check in, but should I get back out there?" Jordan hooked his thumb at the door.

"Not yet," Ardel said.

He didn't hear Edra as much as feel him move closer. Ardel's nodded greeting confirmed that Jordan's senses weren't off.

"The magic has gotten to them," Edra said. "I think we need to start the party early."

"I'd like to, but I'm still trying to arrange the permits." Ardel gave the captain and Jordan a look as though they should understand why that was a problem. "If I don't receive the permits, then this situation is going to escalate."

“I’m not the one holding it up.” The captain lifted his hands. “Are you right to work, Kells?”

“Yeah, I’m fine...have you got an update on Katie?” He didn’t have to fake a worried expression because being held hostage by power and magic-hungry vampires was not going to be fun for anyone.

The captain shook his head. “Nothing I can reveal.”

“Why?” Jordan’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s going on?” Edra asked, his hand landing on the small of Jordan’s back.

“The delegation is arriving tomorrow. It includes LA vampires, and they claim that because it’s for human issues, they should be given an exemption to enter the city despite the situation with your sister.” Ardel didn’t bother masking his snarl. “Lew granted it.”

“Of course she did. She’s in bed with them.” Edra’s annoyance fluttered within Jordan, increasing his heart rate.

“Allegedly,” the captain said.

“We have the documentation that her campaign was funded by them,” Ardel said, his tone slick and cool. “She is holding the door open for them to take over.”

“And they are arriving in time for Samhain... That’s plan three,” Edra said, as though it made sense.

“Plan three?” Jordan asked as everyone turned to Edra.

Ardel nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. I may not be able to get ogres there to drum, but satyrs can use their temple without a permit. I don’t care that they can’t hold a rhythm—”

Edra made a little noise, like a smothered laugh. Jordan was sure satyrs could hold a rhythm in the den.

“Something to add, Knight?” Ardel’s glare was enough to make Jordan want to step back.

“No.” Edra became serious. “What would you like the satyrs to do there?”

“Anything that attracts magic.”

Edra lifted his eyebrows.

“Except that. Besides, they’d need a bloody permit to fuck in their own temple.”

The captain’s cheeks darkened. “There are no officers to spare. You two are going to sort out the satyrs and make sure they don’t do anything that needs a permit and reinforce the two officers already there.”

“I can ask the king to deploy the elvish warriors,” Ardel said.

The captain shook his head. “That is a last resort because it’s going to be obvious, and when it’s obvious, the media—”

“The media are already all over this. They are holding mythos responsible, as though we can control wild magic and its ill effects.”

“Well, you can control it,” the captain said carefully with his gaze on Ardel.

“No, we can lure it,” Edra said, getting in before Ardel. “But if others are trying to lure it away, it’s much harder. I need to ask Xan to stop Reyman from leaving, knocking out plan two.”

Jordan had no idea what plan two was, but destroying the vampires’ plans, whatever they were, seemed like the right thing to be doing. “Do you want me on the protection detail for the LA delegation?”

“I’m going to stick Browning or Isaac on it because they can’t deal with the mythos. They fucked up with the mermaids.”

That was an easy thing to do, but Jordan nodded and hoped he appeared sympathetic. “I will sort them out after the magic is settled.”

“I never thought I’d be policing magic.” The captain ran a hand over his head. “People are getting hurt. Dying.”

“I know.” Ardel put his hand over his heart and lowered his voice to melodic elvish tones. “They are not used to it, and it is painful to watch. But it is good that magic is returning and wasn’t destroyed in the collapse.”

The captain sighed. “Good for who?”

“Werewolves,” Jordan said. “They will be able to shift.” He remembered talking to a werewolf woman and holding her baby. “They’ll be able to look in the mirror and recognize themselves.” He nodded at Ardel. “Vampires too.”

Ardel inclined his head. “Everyone benefits from an increase in magic. Cities become more stable and prosperous.”

“Which makes us an even juicier target for LA. It would be easier if we let them take it.”

“Easier now, but in six months’ time?” Edra shook his head.

“I know.” The captain checked his watch. “I have another meeting to go to, where I will not be talking about magic. Did I see you bring in a box of food?”

“Pastries from the bread fight we sorted out on the way in.” Edra glanced at Jordan. “Do you want to see the satyrs or the werewolves first?”

He thought about it for a second. “Satyrs.” Not because he didn’t like werewolves, but the satyrs would need time to go to the temple and make a start. “Once they are set up, does that mean the wild magic will move toward the temple?”

“It should. So you’ll be able to move your officers accordingly,” Ardel said to the captain.

“I’ll let the relevant people know. Then I can have my inspectors back, and we can untangle this mess. The courts will be clogged for months.” The captain stepped past them. “Keep me updated.”

Then it was Ardel, Edra, and him.

“I’ll have a handful of elves sent to the temple.”

“In armor?” Vlash hadn’t been inconspicuous on the trip to LA.

Ardel’s lip lifted, revealing a gleaming fang tip. “Of course not. They’ll look like people enjoying the park and watching the satyrs.” He nodded at Edra. “Keep me informed.”

“I will. What’s Carly doing?”

“Liaising, because the human on mytho violence has risen. Anyone would think a world was ending.” But there was no smile on Ardel’s lips, and his expression was grim. “I’m glad you are awake, Kells.”

“So am I.” Mostly.

But already, he was understanding why he’d wanted to forget. What if he forgot again instead of remembering the rest?



## CHAPTER 19



Even though it had been months, turning up at Leonaris's door to ask for what was effectively a favor felt wrong. Edra was sure that Leonaris would have no problems organizing something at the temple, as extra magic would mean they could make more Bliss. And Bliss was always good for business.

"I thought you liked satyrs," Jordan asked as they turned into the street.

"I do." As long as they weren't arming for war, satyrs were great. They loved a good time and were always ready to pour drinks and get naked.

Jordan flicked him a grin and lifted an eyebrow.

"You couldn't forget that, could you?"

"Never. Mostly because I'm curious."

"About being fucked? Because I can help you out." Edra's lips curved. He would eventually have Jordan. Now that Jordan was feeling the full effects of the bond, he would want more, so it was only a matter of time. And Edra wasn't in a rush because while he did want to fuck his mate, most of the time, he liked to be the one doing the riding.

Jordan's lips twitched. "We both went there for our own reasons. It was easy, and looking back, it was the worst thing I could've done." He parked the car. "Even then, I was looking to escape."

"We both were."

“I thought you were there for fun? That’s what people are there for, no matter how good the drinks.”

Edra was silent for a few seconds. Now that Jordan had been out the back of the den, there was nothing he hadn’t seen. “Have you ever fucked to forget? Like you want it to be on the edge of pain, so it feels nothing like what you had before?”

Jordan’s eyebrows drew together. “Not really. But then I have never lost a mate.”

Edra nodded. “But you have loved and broken up and had to move on.”

“I don’t think that’s quite the same.” He tapped his chest. “I can feel that now. But why go if you weren’t enjoying it?”

“Oh, I did enjoy it—no one fucks like a satyr. But that’s all it was.” He put his hand on Jordan’s thigh. “I didn’t want to feel anything. With you, I want to feel everything.”

Jordan leaned in and brushed a kiss over his lips. “Same. Even though the risk of getting hurt is that much greater.”

“So much greater,” he agreed. “Let’s get this done.” He pulled away and paused, his gaze flicking up the street. “Something’s not right.”

Edra glanced right and left at the houses.

“Nothing is on fire, and no one is brawling in the street.” Jordan’s hand was on the door, ready to open it, but he waited, watching Edra as if he had all the answers.

He didn’t. He was guessing because even though he was mytho, no one was ever correct all the time. “No one is on the street.”

“There are no kids. There were kids last time playing in the road and—”

“Exactly.” Edra opened his door and got out of the car. He inhaled, already expecting the worst. “Damn it!”

His body responded to the lust and magic in the air, and his dick hardened. He’d been around satyrs and to the den enough times to remember exactly what satyrs in rut smelled like.

Jordan leaned on the roof of the car. “What?”

“You can’t smell it?”

“No, but you can, and you like it.”

Edra glared at him. “You don’t like the smell of sex?”

“It depends on the moment. In the middle of a crime scene, no. In bed, yes.”

Edra shook his head. “The satyrs are in rut. Wild magic came this way, so their women are now in season.”

“They aren’t going to help at the temple, are they?”

“I wouldn’t risk my teeth to even ask.” He leaned against the car and rested his forehead on his hands. Breathing in the lust and magic wasn’t helping him think.

From one of the houses came the sound of grunting and moaning.

“Where are the kids and the teens? They won’t be caught up.”

It wasn’t a question, but there was a note of concern in Jordan’s voice.

“The oldest of the kids will have rounded up the younger ones and taken them to the elders because their parents will be busy for the next few days.” He sighed. “There is no satyr to ask.”

“What about those who don’t have a mate?”

“They have each other and anyone who wants to join in. There’ll be a big messy orgy going on.”

Jordan stared at him.

“You’ve never had a really big night?” Had his mate lived? “You really should have—”

“I had a few very busy months when I first moved here.” A slight frown formed as he spoke, as though he was trying to remember something. “Did you do that here?”

Edra shook his head. “It was before Lyo, and I had to shift afterward to recover.” Back then, he hadn’t known how having

a mate would change things. Change him. “We need a new plan that doesn’t involve satyrs.”

“Why don’t we go somewhere else to think?”

“Good start.” Because he needed out of the lust-scented air.

They got back into the car, and Jordan started it. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He would be. “Just thinking of things I’d forgotten.”

Jordan watched him for a moment. “I sometimes forget that you’re a hundred years older than me. You’ve forgotten more than I’ve lived.”

“Maybe.” He’d certainly grown up freer. “But not everything is worth remembering. To remember everything would be a burden I wouldn’t wish on anyone.”

Jordan started the car, and they left the satyrs to their rutting. They drove around aimlessly for a few minutes before Jordan pulled over at a cafe. “I need a coffee. You?”

“Yes.” He wanted more than a hot chocolate. The lust was sharp in his blood, made worse by the fact he was sitting next to his mate. He wanted to grab him by the lapels and kiss him hard enough that Jordan couldn’t think about anything but his next breath. He forced a breath out between his teeth. “I need to take a walk.”

Jordan considered him for a couple of heartbeats, his eyes darkening.

“We need some distance.”

Jordan tore his gaze away. “Yeah. I can feel that now.”

They got out of the car. While Jordan went into the café, Edra walked down the block. They were on the edge of mytho and human areas. This street showed scars of the collapse and numerous fights. But people still lived there. Human and mytho because there was nowhere else for them to go.

Even if magic returned in full over the next decade, this place wouldn't be home. Even if all mythos and magic disappeared in the next ten years, it would never be the home humans once had. They would live with the knowledge they had destroyed a world forever. Perhaps that was why some of them hated so much.

They didn't like the weight of guilt.

The heat in his blood subsided with each step, and by the time he walked back to the car where Jordan was waiting, he was almost fine. Until he saw Jordan's smile, then all he wanted to do was spread him over the hood of the car. He groaned.

Jordan handed him the cup. "Walk didn't work?"

"Shut up." He didn't need Jordan making it worse.

Jordan took a sip of his coffee, testing the temperature. "This mating bond is interesting because I know—"

"Unless your next stop is home, and you don't want to make it up the stairs. I suggest you drink your coffee." He pulled the lid off his drink and took a gulp. The hot chocolate was sweet and thick on his tongue.

"I don't think I've ever seen you like this."

"You have, but you weren't as aware."

"I didn't realize satyrs were so arousing."

Edra growled. "You can't smell them properly."

"Do you think they drew the wild magic to their street to create the...rut. That feels wrong to say."

"You're correct. It's what they call it. It's only once a year, and it has passed." He rested on the hood of the car. The metal was warm on his ass. He shuddered, knowing that if Jordan told him to roll over, he'd be halfway naked by the time he got there. This was not good. "I don't think they'd willingly risk drawing the wild magic."

"Accidentally, then." Jordan didn't sit next to him. He remained standing, which was both annoying and a relief.

“Would it be easier to lead the wild magic back there?”

He could see where Jordan was going with that thought. “Again, I don’t know. Possibly. But do you want the magic to settle on the street? Would you want it outside your house?”

“Tell me why I wouldn’t.”

“Because too much of a good thing is still too much. When it settles, it will take a form, like a spring or a tree or whatever. It has a presence.”

“It becomes a sacred site, and no one wants to live next to a church where people come and go at all hours.”

“Yes.” Edra grinned. Jordan had caught on fast.

“That’s why you don’t want it at the grove either. The nymphs already live there.” Jordan’s lips curved. “I’d take you there...but it’s a bit more hazardous and open than I like.”

Edra sighed, then licked the gritty sugar and chocolate from the bottom of his cup. It was the best part of any hot chocolate.

“You look like I said I’d never fuck you again.”

“If we don’t solve the unicorn and LA problem, then...” They’d be dead. They were top targets for the LA vampires.

“What draws the magic aside from ogre drumming and satyrs using their temple...what were they going to do there?”

“They have rites, the same as everyone else. They’d have done one of them. Probably the vigil before war.”

“That sounds like fun,” Jordan said, with no humor in his voice.

“Warriors need the right mindset.”

“They do not have it at the moment. So if we are invaded —”

“They will not be fighting. Unless the vampires can wait another four days for this to finish.”

Jordan sat next to him on the hood of the car and took a drink. “Let me come at this from a human angle instead of a

magical one for a moment. I'm going to assume they know everything we do because they have spies. We even know who two of them are."

"Lew and Reyman, but there will be others we don't know about."

"It doesn't surprise me. This is a large and established criminal organization. They have money and reach. They have a network."

"How does that help?"

"They knew how to lead the magic before we did. What if they made sure it found the grove when I was there?"

"They couldn't have predicted the outcome."

"No, but they knew it would knock us off balance. And it did. They take out the satyrs next, and they've removed another component of our defense." Jordan drained his cup. "So, who would you take out next to leave a city unprotected?"

Edra didn't even need to think about it. "The elves. So I hope you're wrong."

"So do I, but we have to protect the next target."

"Let's visit Vlash."

## CHAPTER 20



“*B*oth Knights... That’s not a good thing,” Francis said as a greeting.

“Not a social call,” Jordan said as Edra walked into Vlash’s store ahead of him.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better. The grove can be a good place.” Francis smiled at him.

Jordan returned it. “Heard anything from Troy?”

“No, which is a good sign.” His smile faltered. “Have you heard anything?”

Jordan shook his head. “I’ll give Sean a call. Things are unsettled, and I want them to be careful.”

“Because of the wild magic?”

That hadn’t been what he was thinking, but he nodded anyway. He was more worried about the mytho bill of rights. That Jordan felt safer in the mytho part of town was troubling and didn’t shed any positive light on humans at all. He walked into the shop and up to the counter where Edra and Vlash were already talking.

Vlash was wearing a green T-shirt with a unicorn on the front. Jordan wasn’t sure if it was in great taste or poor taste, and he wasn’t about to ask for the reasoning.

“As far as I know, all the elves are fine. But I will send out a warning—though there is nothing they can do against wild magic except get out of its way.”



Edra glanced at Jordan as he approached. His hot gaze flicked over Jordan's body, leaving a ripple of desire in its wake. He was now acutely aware of how much the satyrs' rut had affected Edra as it was seeping into him. There was a tension lodged deep within him that wasn't going to be slaked by anything less than, well, rutting.

Jordan blinked and looked over at Vlash. "That's not the only reason we're here."

"I'd imagine not." Vlash smiled. "Have you come to check your ledger and see what you owe for helping you save his scaly ass?"

"I think it was a couple of drinks. I haven't forgotten." No, he'd just forgotten his entire family and childhood. And as much as he wanted to dig because it didn't feel right to have such a big gap, now wasn't the time.

Edra licked his lip, but he kept his gaze on Vlash. "We need a counter-offensive. Who can you send to the temple to start drawing the magic there without it looking obvious that we are planning something?"

"Training exercise?"

"Or that we are preparing for war," Jordan added.

"We aren't preparing. We are ready," Vlash said as though offended. "I can use magic. I don't know how to attract it. You can't ask the satyr elders to babysit at the temple?"

"I'm not putting kids at risk," Edra said. "We don't know what will happen. Or how long it will take. Tired toddlers around wild magic will be a literal nightmare."

Vlash's lips thinned. "I thought that was a fable. But I see your concern."

Edra had referenced something that Jordan knew nothing about, and it didn't sound like anything he wanted to learn about, so he kept his mouth closed.

"Dad." Vlash's son, Lekso, put the box on the ground. "What about Cy's band?"

“You’re supposed to be stocking shelves, not eavesdropping on politics.” Vlash leveled a hard glare at him.

Lekso crossed his arms and appeared every bit as haughty as his father. “If the wild magic liked the ogres’ drumming, maybe it would be drawn—”

“There is nothing magical about that noise. Besides, Cy never helps anyone.”

“I wonder why that is?” Lekso scooped up the box and stalked off.

Jordan’s lips parted. Then he thought better of asking what the bad blood between Cy and Vlash was. It probably dated back fifty years and involved some unpaid debt.

“Excuse my son. He is upset that he may be kicked out of college if he is deemed not a person.”

Jordan felt the muscle in his jaw twitch, and he forced himself to relax because adding a headache into the mix wasn’t going to help. “We are all concerned about the vote.”

The silence between them thickened for a couple of breaths before Vlash sighed. “At least a decision will have been made, and that is something. It is a pity we can’t use magic to make them vote in our favor.”

“If it is in our favor, some will say we did anyway.” Edra shrugged.

Jordan frowned. “Can you do that?”

Vlash shook his head. “A Strega in the right place might be able to influence a few, but those kinds of things always unravel because it’s messing with a person’s mind.”

“What about a vampire compulsion or an elvish binding?” There must be a way to ensure the vote.

“No. Vampire compulsions are a blunt tool that leave no room for anything else. They are obvious. And elves require an agreement, even if it is made unwittingly.” Vlash gave him a grim smile. “Neither is the right magic. No one can change the way another thinks or what they believe for very long, even with magic.”

Edra glanced at him. “We aren’t affecting the vote. Aside from being unethical, it would bite us on the ass. Tell me about Cy’s band.”

“He and a few of those who refuse to fight have a human-style band.” Every word was spoken with a venom that Vlash usually did a better job of hiding. “They are always posting videos and drawing attention to themselves.”

Jordan grinned. “Nothing draws people better than live music. Are there other mytho bands? Can some be created? Can we have a mytho concert and call it part of the Samhain celebration?”

Vlash and Edra stared at him.

“What? The wild magic might be drawn to the energy.”

“That is not what Samhain is about,” Edra said. “The veil between our worlds is thin...was thin. It’s about mortality and endings and beginnings. It’s not a celebration; that’s Beltane.”

“And this is not about Samhain either,” Vlash said with a grim expression. “It’s about the wild magic. I can send archers to act as a crowd, but they will be ready to act if there’s trouble. Which I have no doubt there will be.”

“There’ll be trouble anyway,” Edra muttered. “I will let Ardel know about the satyrs and the alternative.”

“And I will notify the king and call Cy.”

That left Jordan to call the captain. “It’s going to be hard to call a concert some kind of temple rite.” He looked at Vlash and then at Edra. “Have you got anything I can call it for the paperwork?”

Edra stared at the ground, and Jordan was sure he could hear him thinking. “We could say that we are doing it for the mermaids. That people should bring something shiny, no a dollar for the fish fund.”

“That could work. Sort of a fundraising memorial. Do mermaids like music?”

“They do,” Vlash said cautiously. “They used to come to the shore to listen to the festivals. They were never turned

away. But do we want them coming close when there is wild magic about?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Edra lifted his gaze and glared at Vlash.

The elf kept his mouth closed.

“Then make your calls, and we will make ours.”

“No weapons?”

“Not unless you have permits for them. Lew will be ordered to shut it down by the LA vampires, so we have to be smart.” Although nothing about holding a fish fundraiser for the mermaids with the intention of drawing the wild magic felt very smart.



“*I*’m sure I could find a reason to lock Reyman up for a day or two if needed.” The drive to where Xan lived wasn’t nearly long enough, and after this, they were supposed to go to the Presidio and make sure everything was running smoothly.

That the captain even thought that was a possibility was a joke. He’d agreed the fish fundraiser for the now mate-less mermen, as they were calling it officially, was a good enough solution and that he’d sort the rest out.

Edra’s conversation with Ardel had been similar.

Even though he’d been awake for less than twenty-four hours, he already understood why he’d wanted to rest. To hide in his house with Sinner, where no one expected anything from him. But he also understood that wasn’t a solution. That was avoiding not living.

Edra lifted an eyebrow. “You want to draw wild magic to the lock-up. Do you want to think that through for more than half a second?”

“You could take the magical device or whatever it is.”

“Thanks. A unicorn beacon is exactly what I want in my pocket.”

“I’m trying to think of options, okay?”

“And I’m trying to stop you from getting killed trying to arrest a werewolf pack with an unknown number of magic-attracting things which could be anything because we don’t know what they look like.”

“Noted.” He gave Edra a smile. “And appreciated. But since we don’t want him to leave the city with the unicorn, how do we hold him?”

“Do we need to?”

“If we know where he is, we can control the damage more effectively. If he is at the temple, then there is a greater chance that the unicorn will be as well. Because we don’t know how many people are working against us, the more we can control, the better.”

“And when the cops arrest the wrong people?”

“Let’s assume that’s going to happen anyway.” Because it would. Whatever they did, it was going to be a mess.

“Xan will get someone to track Reyman. But getting him to the temple will be much harder—if not impossible. And I don’t feel like battling with a werewolf again.”

Jordan would rather that Edra didn’t, having seen the results of last time, and that had been a warning, not a fight for survival. “If Carly weren’t already busy—”

“I’d have had her on his trail already, but she’s needed out there as liaison.” The last word was almost a growl.

Edra might be back working with the cops, but it wasn’t the same as being the Mytho Servo liaison. Jordan parked the car. There was no shortage of spaces in the mytho areas, as few of them had cars.

“So we track him, then what?”

“Then let the werewolves deal with it. Some things not even I step into if I can avoid it.” Edra opened his door,

sniffing the air before getting out.

If the werewolves were also fucking, Jordan was going to call it done and go home to change for a night at the temple—and take the opportunity to get Edra naked. Edra gave him a nod and got out.

Jordan followed, not loving the idea of standing in the middle of werewolf territory. While no one was in their yards, there was a deserted air about the street that hadn't been there last time.

If Edra noticed, he didn't pause or say anything. He walked up to a house and knocked on the door. "Xan, open up."

He knocked again, then tilted his head as he listened.

"Did you hear someone calling for help?" He'd do the paperwork on it because the last thing he wanted was an angry werewolf knocking on his door demanding why he'd been in there.

"I think I did." Edra turned the handle, and the door opened. It hadn't even been locked. Edra took two steps inside and turned around. "There's no one here."

"How can you tell that fast?"

"No heartbeats. No blood or corpses, either."

"Okay, maybe he's at work."

Edra shook his head. "He works nights as a cleaner. Most of them do."

That married with what Reyman's sister had told him. They'd lost dexterity in their hands, which limited their options for work. "So we speak to someone else. Reyman's sister?"

Edra's scowl deepened as he stepped out of the house. "I think he's a step ahead of us again. What is the one thing the werewolves want more than anything?"

"To shift," Jordan said without hesitation. "And that's what Reyman can give them. What the LA vampires have promised

them.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Fuck.”

“Yeah. He must have shown some of them, and word spread.”

“That means Carly is compromised.”

Edra nodded. “If she is acting as liaison while also working for the other side, that will make things harder. She helped me scrub the bloody steps!”

“She may not have known when she did. She still may not know. Reyman may not trust her.” He was standing in werewolf central defending the person who’d stolen Edra’s job, and it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Xan would’ve told her. He doesn’t like Reyman, but the ability to shift again would’ve been too much for him to resist.” Edra sighed. “I’m going to make a couple of calls.”

“Same.” But Jordan doubted their orders would change.

“There are werewolves walking around the city looking just like humans.”

“Only if they are near the unicorn.”

“If they are leading it.” Edra corrected.

Whatever Reyman had was enough to not only convince the werewolves to follow him but also to catch the interest of the wild magic.

“Not all of them will be leading the magic around and creating distractions. So where are the rest?”

“Probably halfway to LA.” Edra swore in Tarikian. Or at least it sounded like swearing. “I need the Strega and the elvish army. I need the satyrs. The LA vampires are probably here already, with only a few being part of the delegation.”

Jordan grabbed his hand. “I can find that out. I can’t help you with the satyrs, but you will have officers. The elves are already mobilizing.” He paused as he heard the words falling out of his mouth. “For the moment, we can’t do anything.”

“I can find the damn unicorn and werewolves and speak to Xan.”

“You think you can reason with him when he’s been offered everything he wants?”

“If the magic stays here, then he gets the same benefit.”

“Does he, or does he have to live next to it when it’s settled?”

Edra’s eyes flashed with annoyance.

“I’m only asking if talking will help at this point.”

“They aren’t the enemy. They are people I have known for decades. They are shifters like me. It is by chance I didn’t end up half dragon and that I can still shift. I can’t abandon them.”

“And you can’t stop adults from making their own decisions, even the bad ones. You can’t save everyone. But you can save those who want your help. You can help those who are already willing to stand against LA.” He pulled Edra close and kissed his cheek. “It’s another distraction. The more we lose focus, the less chance we have.”

“Everything has been a distraction since Carly became liaison.” Edra’s words were muffled by Jordan’s jacket.

“Well, not everything, but there has certainly been plenty of trouble stirred up.” He smoothed his hand down Edra’s back. “Toss this one to Ardel. Let him deal with Carly.”

Edra sighed in Jordan’s arms and leaned against him as though even standing was too much. “I want to go home...”

His tongue flicked over the pulse in Jordan’s neck.

“I can tell. If you’d been with me instead of Sinner, I might never have searched for a way out.” They could’ve been happy, or would they have gotten bored?

Edra drew back. “I know that probably sounded sweet in your head, but can we not say shit like that while there is wild magic around?”



## CHAPTER 21



*B*y the time Edra and Jordan arrived at the temple, there was already an acoustic band playing and about twenty mythos watching, mostly elves. The elves were on the steps of the temple, and everyone else was on the grass. Some sat on picnic blankets with food; others were standing and talking. To Jordan's eye, some of them looked a bit too ready for trouble by the way they assessed everyone entering the area.

They waited near the barrier for Isaac and Carly to arrive.

Edra crossed his arms. "Carly won't show."

"Why?"

"Because she has to realize we know what the werewolves have been offered."

"Ardel won't have said anything."

"She's cunning and a survivor."

Jordan glanced at Edra. His jaw was set. Part of the tension was the remains of the satyr-fueled lust. "Do you want to bet on that?"

Edra turned his head, and his gaze skimmed over Jordan's body. "That depends. What do you have in mind?"

He did not want to end up naked in public again with Edra—that was a habit he'd like to break. But he did want to get Edra home and naked. There was no point in denying the bleed-through of Edra's lust into him. "If she shows, you cook dinner naked."

Edra considered him for a moment. “You don’t want to eat?”

“I do. If she doesn’t show, I’ll cook.”

“Naked,” Edra confirmed.

Jordan nodded.

“Can I distract you?”

He shook his head. “Not if you want to eat.”

“I’m not sure I like this bet. No food and no sex. Means no winners.”

“Or you get both if you wait.”

Edra lifted an eyebrow. “Have I ever been any good at waiting?”

“You were pretty damn good at holding out—”

“It nearly killed me. How about, if Carly shows up, we order takeout and fuck while we wait for it to be delivered?”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then you have to cook naked while I distract you.”

“That sounds like you win either way,” Jordan said with a smile.

Edra gasped as though shocked at the accusation. “Wasn’t that the idea, anyway?”

He wanted nothing more than to take his hand and pull him close and kiss him. But there were human cops on the barricade who might not be too happy about that.

There was the warning at the back of his mind that he was about to drop off a cliff there would be no recovery from. If the vote went against mythos, how long until they knocked on his door to take Edra and arrest him?

“What’s wrong?” Edra whispered.

Jordan shook his head. “I don’t want to say it out loud.”

“Try not to think it either.”

“It’s a bit late for that.”

“You should think about what you’re making for dinner.”

That, at least, was something safe to think about, even if the process of cooking while naked and distracted was not.

Isaac got out of a car and walked toward them. No Carly. Damn. He’d expected to win that.

Edra laughed.

Isaac jerked his head in greeting. “I was told I had to leave some money for the fish fund.”

“It’s not about the money as much as showing up for the memorial. Being present like you care.” Jordan said. “You are effectively the police liaison to the mytho community. Come on.”

“We’re not waiting for Carly?” Isaac asked.

Edra sniffed the air. “Is she coming?”

“She said she had something to deal with and that she’d meet us here.” Isaac glanced at Edra and then Jordan. “Why wouldn’t she be coming?”

“There are some werewolf issues,” Edra said as though he didn’t want to spill everything he knew—which was a first as he usually over-shared every detail of the case.

“We have unicorn, mermaid, and werewolf issues?”

“And vampire issues,” Jordan added. They had his sister, and even though he couldn’t remember her, it wasn’t right to hold people for ransom. Add to that, they were waltzing into San Francisco through a loophole, and it was making him uneasy.

That they could claim they were with the human politicians, on human business, and not even need to tell Ardel they were entering his territory seemed rude, like a deliberate snub when they could’ve sent a quick email or made a call. While Browning was already attached to the LA delegation, making their way from the airport, he hoped she fucked up,

and the vampires were killed by the unicorn they wanted so badly.

“Typical day.” Edra shrugged. “Why can I smell bacon?”

Isaac stared at Jordan with what Jordan imagined was the expression he’d worn for the first couple of months in Mytho SiD. It was a cross between ‘he can’t be serious’ and ‘you believe this bullshit?’ Every cop had both expressions mastered early on. Combining them was a skill.

Jordan gave him a grim smile. “He’s not serious...usually there’s no unicorn involved.” The wild magic was complicating everything. “How has it been so far today?”

“Assault, road rage, and one argument that involved wrestling in bacon.”

“I knew I smelled bacon. Who wasted the bacon?” Edra asked as though that was the crime.

“That was human on human. We were in the area. It’s weird out there. Some of it’s serious and some of it is like people—”

“Are doing the things they’ve always wanted but never had the balls to?”

“Yeah. Apparently, one guy was caught pouring jelly crystals into the pool at his complex because he wanted to swim in jelly. But two blocks up, multiple homicide,” Isaac said with a shake of his head.

Edra pressed his lips together.

They were going to be sorting this mess out for months—and that was only the investigations. Then there was the paperwork and court, and the list went on. Hopefully the less serious ones could be a fine, or they’d plead guilty, and everyone could move on. He was feeling lucky that his brush with wild magic had been so mild. “Would you say the trouble is moving in any direction?”

“I thought it was crisscrossing the city this morning, but I think it’s heading south.”

Jordan nodded. “Keep me updated.”

Isaac narrowed his gaze. “There’s something else going on, isn’t there?”

When Jordan didn’t answer, Isaac turned his gaze on Edra. If he expected Edra to blink or back down, Isaac would be disappointed.

“You don’t have the clearance,” Edra said, his voice as smooth and sharp as a knife.

Jordan coughed and turned away so Isaac wouldn’t see his grin. “It is a classified mytho matter. All you need to do is keep on top of the trouble and donate to the fish fund because if word gets out you were involved in pissing them off in the first place, it’s going to take a very long time for you to earn that trust back.”

“I thought mythos didn’t like mermaids, so why go to this trouble?” Isaac indicated to the gathering.

“We don’t like them. But we also have a healthy fear of them because they can be destructive psychopathic fucks. Pay the fish fine, and move on with some gratitude that you made it to shore alive. They could’ve dragged you under to feed the mermen.” Edra shuddered.

Jordan felt a ripple of fear wash over him.

“Right. Pay the merfolk mafia protection fish.” Isaac shook his head, a look of disgust painted on his face.

“You know who put out the fires over the summer? Those same people,” Jordan said. “There are rules and etiquette that we aren’t used to. Once you understand...” He wanted to say it would be easy, but that was also a lie. Despite the shit with the LA vampires, his relationship with the mytho community had come a long way. “It takes time, and we wasted ten years.”

“I’m going to speak with Leofric.” Edra tilted his head at an elf. “He works at Mytho Servo, and I want to find out what things are like there with the protesters.”

Jordan nodded, understanding that Edra was giving him some time with Isaac.

Isaac watched Edra leave. “He doesn’t suffer fools.”

“No. You get a couple of chances to fuck up, and then he lets you hang and clean up your own mess.”

“You learned the hard way?”

Jordan nodded. “It took me time to prove that I wanted to work with the mythos and that I wasn’t going to judge before asking.”

“You’re hoping the bill passes?”

“What do you fucking think?”

“I think, if it doesn’t pass, they aren’t going quietly to the camps like they did last time. It’s going to make the unicorn trouble look like a picnic.”

“They didn’t all go quietly.” He’d been part of the protests against the internment camps as a college student. He’d seen them be beaten. He’d known what tear gas felt like before he’d joined the police force. “Not exactly the easy switch you were looking for, is it?”

“I didn’t think it would be easy. But I’ve been wanting a change for months, and I was told there were no vacancies. Of course I was going to jump on it. It’s not what I expected, though.”

“Your timing was bad, no gentle run up.” He glanced over to where Edra was talking to a couple of elves. They were managing to smile despite everything. How many of them were old enough to have seen wild magic before?

“Yeah.”

“What’s Browning’s story?” He hadn’t spent enough time with her to get to know her or ask why she wanted to work mytho cases so badly.

“You saw how fast she wanted in.”

“I did. Why though? If the bill doesn’t pass, Mytho SID is gone. I wouldn’t have called this a career maker.” And now she was on the protection detail. There’s no way the LA vampires could’ve gotten to her, was there?

“And if it does pass, she’ll get her hands on everything. She’ll be able to pick her next move—”

“You really think they’ll let us move on before they close the division?”

Isaac sighed. “She’s green and enthusiastic. We were all that once.”

“We’re still green...jade.”

Isaac laughed but cut it off fast. “There she is.”

Carly walked toward them, looking very wolfy. Because she was too far away from the magic for it to have an effect or because she hadn’t been around it? If it was the latter, that was interesting.

“Looks like I won the bet.” And he was already looking forward to collecting later.

“What bet?” Isaac asked.

“Whether she’d show or not.” He extended his hand to Carly and smiled without his teeth showing—did Isaac know about that piece of etiquette? “Arche, how is it going? Edra said you helped with the paint clean up. Thank you for that.” The gratitude he meant, but he still didn’t trust her as far as he could kick her.

She shook his hand. “I owed him.”

“I was trying to find Xan earlier. Do you know where he is?”

Carly glanced at Isaac, then back to Jordan. “I haven’t been able to reach him either.”

It was hard to get a read on her. The muzzle and fur distorted her facial expressions, and he couldn’t tell from her heartbeat if she was lying. “Do you think he’s with Reyman?”

She growled. “They can’t stand each other.”

The promise of being able to shift might be enough to overcome hatred. “He wouldn’t be chasing the wild magic?”

If Jordan had blinked, he'd have missed the flicker in her eyes. She knew something. He glanced at Isaac, hoping he'd follow up and find out what the hell was going on.

"We need to head back out, so shall we get this done?" Carly didn't wait for an answer. Just crossed the barricade and walked onto the temple grounds. If she thought this was for something other than fish fundraising, she didn't show it. And he wasn't about to tell her.



Edra smiled at the familiar beat. Cy and his band weren't only playing human-style songs; they were playing some of the old ones that he remembered from home.

"They're good, aren't they?" Leofric said with a smile.

"They are." And while they all looked no older than Leofric, some of them were over a hundred. "You don't remember Cy's father playing for the king."

"No. I don't remember much from before."

Edra scanned the grassed area. He could barely taste the magic. They needed more people here to get the unicorn's attention. "Who else is going to perform?"

"The choir. I think the ogres are going to have a bash. I'm surprised the satyrs aren't here."

"Wild magic induced rut." Edra shoved his hands into his pockets. "If they were holding that here, it might be a good thing."

Leofric's cheeks darkened. "In public?"

"That's what the temple..." Edra glanced at him. "Oh... you don't remember before. Things were very different." He watched Jordan and Isaac greet Carly, glad she was here even though he wasn't sure what that meant and aware that he'd lost the bet. "What's going on at Mytho Servo?"

"About a hundred protesters. They've shoved a few people around, but there's no one available to help out because all the



humans have gone a bit wild with the extra magic. It's like a buzz, isn't it?"

"More like a sigh. It's nice to feel it again. You never noticed its absence?" How many more of the youth didn't know what magic felt like?

Leofric shook his head. "It's not going to stay like this?"

Jordan, Isaac, and Carly walked toward them.

"No." He hoped not anyway. Maybe it would take a while for the humans to grow used to. "We're going to add our money to the fundraiser, but I'll be back later when the party really gets going."

"As in orgy?" Leofric whispered as he glanced between Edra and the approaching Jordan.

"Ah, no. Just a party. It's not a spring rite." They couldn't go all out to draw the unicorn without attracting attention.

Jordan came over. For a moment, Edra wasn't sure if they were going with human formal and not touching because Isaac was there, but Jordan held out his hand, and Edra wrapped his fingers around Jordan's. Together, they walked up to the temple to leave some money and thank the elves for coming to play.

Edra drew Jordan aside as Carly and Isaac left. "I'm going to follow her."

"What?"

"As a dragon. Invisible. Can you take my clothes home, and I'll meet you there? Let Ardel know." He pressed his phone into Jordan's hand and took off his jacket. "And tell him it would be good to have the Strega here."

"You're stripping here, aren't you?"

"I'm behind a pillar and mostly hidden."

"This isn't how I planned on getting you naked."

Edra leaned forward and kissed him hard, and Jordan felt Edra's teeth rake over his lower lip. "I will be naked when I get home."

Jordan undid Edra's shirt. "Just look, no getting involved."

"I won't. But we need to know what the werewolves are doing." He peered past Jordan. "I'm going to lose her if I'm not fast."

Jordan kissed him and pushed the shirt off Edra's shoulders. "Please be careful."

"I want to make it home. Will you be waiting naked?"

Jordan laughed. "I'll even have dinner ready."

## CHAPTER 22



Edra soared over the city, invisible. He tracked Carly's car, not sure what he was hoping to see but needing something. All they had at the moment was the suspicion that Reyman was going to lead all the werewolves to LA with the promise that they'd be able to shift again. Which was true if they took the wild magic with them, but the LA vampires wouldn't let them have it for free.

He drifted on the air currents, content to conserve energy as he watched and waited. Below there were traffic snarls and fires. He thought he glimpsed the unicorn, and he wanted to follow it, but he held his position. If he lost Carly, he wouldn't be able to find her again.

Not in this mess.

She didn't stop at Mytho Servo. She went home. She went to Xan's and then stood on the street as though she couldn't figure out where everyone was.

Had she been out-manuevered? The thought almost made him laugh.

He stayed high enough that she wouldn't smell him. But he saw her make a call. If she couldn't find Xan, that meant the werewolf was in trouble. *Fuck.*

Carly wasn't going to give him anything. He needed a new plan.

She obviously thought the same because she got back in her car. Edra hesitated, then followed her until she met up with

Isaac, then he wheeled away, heading south to search for the unicorn.

He found it: a glimmer of white roaming the streets. It had form if not complete solidity. Edra perched on the spire of a church to watch it go by. People followed it. Men, women, children. They looked human, but he smelled werewolf on the breeze.

Several yards ahead of the unicorn was a man and a woman walking a large black dog. The dog limped, but the man didn't allow it to slow. Edra's eyes narrowed. Something wasn't right. He darted in front of the procession so he could watch them approach.

It had been over ten years since he'd seen Reyman in human form. His hair was gray in places now, but his face still wore that arrogant smile. Next to him was his mate. Between them was the black wolf. Xan.

They couldn't walk all the way to LA.

A plane rumbled over the city, and the tin roofing beneath his feet hummed in response. He scowled at the mostly visible unicorn, then up at the plane. He blinked. Of course. The airport... That's where they were going.

The LA vampires and their pet human politicians had flown in and would fly out. And the werewolves would be with them. Was putting wild magic on a plane dangerous?

Edra liked the idea of flying in a plane, where he was trapped inside, about as much as he liked getting on a boat—which wasn't much at all. He'd rather cling to a dragon's leg in human form and hope for the best. Which was also one of his least favorite things.

He didn't want to leave Xan as a chained wolf in Reyman's care.

If he swooped in, he'd distract everyone, but he couldn't pick Xan up. The wolf was too heavy. And he didn't want Reyman using the wild magic against him. Could he call the pound and bail him out later?

But any human he sent in would be affected by the wild magic, and probably not in a good way.

As he watched, people in the street either ran, dropped to their knees, or did some random activity at the sight or sense of the unicorn. One man punched the guy he'd been talking with in the face. A woman abandoned the stroller she'd been pushing. Someone leaped out of a window as if they wanted to ride the unicorn.

He'd seen enough. Before Reyman and his werewolves got close enough to catch his scent, Edra launched into the air and streaked across the city to home. He landed on the balcony and opened the door with a claw.

Sinner bounded up to him. "You're home early too!"

"I'll be going out again. I just need to eat." That was true, but not his only reason.

Jordan was in the kitchen, not nearly naked enough, as he was wearing boxer briefs. "The pasta is almost ready if you want to shift first?"

It was better that he did. His shoulders cracked as he shifted and then stretched his neck. He scooped up Sinner. "Did he give you chicken?"

"Yes. I had to say please." She appeared put out by the new development.

"Since you can speak, you can have manners," Jordan said.

Edra bit back on the smile that wanted to form. With Sinner in one hand, he snaked the other around Jordan's waist and kissed his cheek. "Xan is a wolf, and Reyman, who is in human form, is parading him through the city. I think they are making their way to the airport and that they'll leave with the delegation."

"Where are they now?"

"Heading south on Market. If they go much further, it will be hard to turn the unicorn around because our set-up will be too far away to get its attention." Sinner wriggled, and he set her down before she clawed him.

“What about getting someone to do something closer to them, to lead it away from the werewolves?” Jordan put the chopped tomatoes into the salad and handed the bowl to Edra. “Put it on the table.”

Edra held the bowl. He wasn't going to waste his time eating a bowl of salad. “The unicorn is visible and becoming solid. It's growing stronger, which means more dangerous. Anyone who gets close is taking a risk.”

“And if we don't?”

“Then we lose the werewolves to LA along with the magic. They'll then take the city, if not by force, then by magic.” Maybe both. Then they'd have prisoners to eat. “What did Ardel say?”

“That he will be there after dusk, along with the Strega. He implied we would also be there.”

“Of course we are going.” Edra glanced at the table ready for dinner, then back at Jordan. “If we are eating, I'll put pants on.”

“You can have five minutes now or longer later.” Jordan's boxers were tented, indicating his preference.

Edra let his gaze linger before lifting it to Jordan's face. “I'll take five now because I have no faith that we'll finish dinner without an interruption.”

“Agreed.”

Edra stared at him, startled that Jordan had agreed so readily. Then Jordan strode toward him and pulled him close, taking a kiss that threatened to steal his breath.

“Put your hands on the sofa,” Jordan murmured against his lips.

When he didn't move fast enough, Jordan spun him around to face the back of the sofa. Edra's heartbeat quickened with excitement at the idea of a rough claiming. He'd been waiting for what felt like all day for this.

Jordan's dick rubbed against his crack and Edra tilted his hips, wanting more than a tease. He growled. “You're wasting

time.”

“Lean forward and grab the lube.”

The bottle was on the sofa as if Jordan had tossed it there on purpose. He grabbed it and handed it to him. He’d have been happy without.

Jordan’s slick fingers rubbed against his hole. Edra grunted and pushed back, needing more fingers. But before he could say anything, Jordan’s cock pushed into him, stretching and filling him. He hissed. Part pain, part pleasure. A shudder of delight rolled down his spine as Jordan thrust deeper.

He folded his arms and rested his head on them as Jordan fucked him hard as if he needed it as much as Edra. Maybe Jordan wasn’t as unaffected by the satyr rut as he’d thought. His hands gripped Edra’s hips as he slammed into him.

Edra bit his lip and groaned with each thrust. His dick bounced in time, and his balls drew tight. “I’m going to…”

Jordan wrapped his hand around Edra’s dick. That was all it took. He gave in to the pleasure of release, and Jordan’s thrusts quickened and came, his dick twitching inside of him. A second shudder of pleasure rolled through Edra.

The grip on his hip eased, and a kiss was placed on his spine. “I think we have a minute or two to spare.”

Edra huffed out a laugh. “That will give me time to clean the sofa.”



When they reached the temple at dusk, it was far more crowded than it had been. Edra glanced at him and smiled as his grip on Jordan’s hand tightened. The weight of the hoops in his ears was one Jordan wasn’t used to. It had been too long since he’d gotten dressed up. At the temple, no one even gave him even a second glance when he wore makeup.

It seemed like half the elvish men did—not that they needed to look prettier.

The dragons had moved closer to the temple as though they were enjoying the music.

“This is a good turnout,” Jordan said. Whether it was enough remained to be seen.

Overhead, something cracked, then the sky lit up with ribbons of light. They weren’t like the shooting sparks of fireworks but something else entirely.

Next to him, Edra gasped. “That’ll get the unicorn’s attention.”

“What is it?”

“A blessing for the new year. There hasn’t been one in over a decade. Not a public one anyway.”

“You had a private light show?” How did the mythos hide that?

“More of a few light orbs at the palace. This is good. It means the Strega has more power. That the wild magic is close enough.” Edra tugged on his hand. “Come on.”

On the temple steps, four ogres were drumming. Their skin gleamed with firelight from within the temple. In the sky above, the lights wove with the music. All they needed were mythos handing out acid tabs, and it was a rave.

“Is this too much of a party for the mermaid wake?”

“Oh, I think we’re into Samhain now,” Edra said with a grin.

“I thought Samhain wasn’t a party?”

“It’s not a party as such. It’s about letting go and setting intentions for the new year.”

Right...from a wake to a new year in the space of hours. “The mermaids won’t be annoyed?”

“No, they will enjoy it, and they’ll like the fish even more.”



Around them, people danced and talked and laughed. “Where is Ardel?”

“He will find us.” Edra pulled him close. “One dance, please. Then I’ll go up and find the unicorn and see what effect we’re having so we can up the magic if we need to.”

For an answer, Jordan pulled him close, not wanting Edra to leave yet. “Is there a customary dance we should do?”

“No. Not really.” Edra’s hands slid around Jordan’s neck.

Their noses bumped together before their lips touched. The pounding of the drums pulsed through his veins. Even though the last time he’d listened to ogre drums he’d ended up unconscious, or in a magical coma, this time, he wasn’t thinking about rest.

There was only one thing he’d think about when the unicorn arrived.

Edra spun him around and laughed. “It’s like home. I can taste the magic in the air.”

Jordan caught him, wrapping his arms around Edra’s chest so his back was against Jordan’s chest. He nipped at Edra’s neck and breathed him in. Could he smell the magic, or was he just enjoying Edra’s happiness? Would he know what magic smelled like?

“When you have a moment, Knights.”

Jordan released Edra and snapped his head up as if they’d been caught making out in the wrong place. “Ardel.”

Edra sighed. “You want me to go unicorn hunting already?”

“If you could manage it without too much wind resistance.” Ardel smiled with fangs. “The Strega can’t do this all night.”

Jordan could. He’d be more than happy to dance with Edra until sunrise. “I’ll hold your clothes.”

Again.

“I’ll go behind the dragon, as there are more cops here than usual.” Edra tilted his head at the female dragon, who’d wriggled even closer to the temple.

“That was part of the approval,” Jordan said. Lew had been very much against it from what his captain had let slip but hadn’t been able to say no, given the mermaid situation.

“It’s irksome,” Ardel snapped. “It assumes we don’t know how to host a wake or a Samhain celebration.”

It looked very much like a party in a public space to Jordan, but then he’d never seen a mytho Samhain celebration.

Edra led him away from the light of the temple to the shadows of the dragon. He greeted her as he stripped. Jordan understood some of the words. She wanted to know why everyone was here, and Edra tried to explain the dead mermaid and the blood price of fish. He was leaving out the unicorn.

Naked, Edra handed his clothes to Jordan. “Just stay near the temple. Near Ardel and Vlash. In case things get out of hand.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you.”

“They won’t see me. It’s a high-level flyover, and I’ll be back before you have time to miss me.”

“I doubt that.” Jordan pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “Go. Then you can tell me how this Samhain celebration is meant to be.”

Edra rolled his shoulders, and as he did, his body twisted and changed to shiny silver. He stretched his wings, and his tail slapped Jordan on the ass before he leaped into the air and disappeared.

Jordan put Edra’s phone and wallet in his pocket before placing his clothes and shoes near a temple pillar. Without Edra by his side, some of the magic had gone out of the night.

For a moment, he just stood and watched the party.

He should be out there doing something, but he wasn’t sure what.

With a sigh, he made his way to Ardel, who hadn't moved. Ardel nodded but didn't say anything. Jordan was tempted to let the silence remain, but he couldn't.

"I didn't remember everything when I woke."

"I suspected as much." Ardel turned to face him, his gaze assessing Jordan as though searching for flaws—he didn't have to look too far. "Or you'd have been calling me about Katie."

"Edra told me. I need to know that someone is doing something. Even if I don't remember her, she remembers me."

"I have someone there. And the police are dealing with it. It's complicated because they are demanding the unicorn."

"Which we won't give up."

"If it was only about my looks, I would. But it's bigger—"

"That doesn't make it any easier. I'm missing a chunk of my life." He should remember growing up. Where he grew up. And how many siblings he had.

"And is the loss hurting you? Or is it the knowledge it is gone that is hurting? You wished it away for a reason."

"I didn't, not consciously anyway." He frowned and stared at the grass.

"You'll have the chance to ask for them back when the unicorn shows up. If you want it."

Even if he didn't want it, he should still have them, shouldn't he? Those memories were part of him. They had made him. Without them, would he become someone else? Would that be a bad thing?

Ardel muttered something that sounded like a curse. "My sister, Delsie's mother, is here. I need to see what she wants."

Given that Ardel's sister was one of the suspected spies for the LA vampires, nothing good, but he didn't say that. And Ardel stalked away.

Jordan's phone buzzed, and he checked the message. Sean was here with Troy.

“Fuck.” If it had only been a party for Samhain, he wouldn’t have cared.

He didn’t know what to say without admitting that there were other things going on.

*Not safe. Extra cops are here for a reason.*

He hit send and hoped that Sean would listen or that Troy would understand how dangerous the unicorn was unless the ogre wanted to see the unicorn. For those with more human lifespans, it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

And if he hadn’t known better, he’d have wanted to see it too.

The sky rippled with gold. If that didn’t draw the unicorn, nothing would.

Vlash strolled over. “Are you sure you don’t have some elf blood, Knight?”

Jordan rolled his eyes. “Are you drunk?”

“No. I gave you a compliment. Traditionally, you’re supposed to say thank you.”

“Thanks, I think.” He watched Vlash as though not sure what to do next.

“Dance?”

“I’m fine.” And he didn’t trust the elf not to fuck him over. They’d had a truce for the LA drive, but that was over.

“You’ll scare the magic away, standing there scowling like that.” Vlash held out his hand.

“And now you insult me.” But he let Vlash lead him away from the temple shadows and onto the grass with the other dancers.

“You seem to accept insults better.”

Because they weren’t friends. He didn’t know what they were. When Edra had said to stay close to Ardel and Vlash, Jordan was sure that he hadn’t meant this.

“I thought you’d be here with someone.”

“I brought Lekso. He’s with his friends.”

“I meant—”

“I know what you meant. But I have a shop, an army, and a teenager. When am I going to find the time to date? Just follow my lead and pretend that you know how to dance.”

So he did, and Vlash kept a distance between them that could be called respectable.

“Edra told you to babysit, didn’t he?”

“Yes. I will trick you if I have the opportunity because it’s fun, but we aren’t enemies—”

The dragon yelped, and they both turned.

Instead of a green greater dragon watching the party, there was a snarling bright pink dragon.

“Oh shit,” Jordan muttered. Dragons weren’t supposed to change colors.

Vlash nodded. “I think we can assume something has gone wrong with Edra’s flyover.”

## CHAPTER 23



Edra watched as Reyman danced around, trying to get the unicorn's attention, but a unicorn wasn't a sentient beast. It was wild magic coalescing into form, and even from his vantage point, it was rather more solid than it had been earlier in the day. But Edra was relieved it was heading north again. The Strega's magical light show was more compelling than Reyman's trinket.

The procession of now-exhausted werewolves followed. Though some were straggling. Those who had given up, and were several blocks back, had reverted into their half-shifted form. And from the howls, they were not too happy about being beyond the magic's influence.

Reyman stopped and snarled.

As a ripple of heat rushed over Edra's skin, he half expected to fall out of the sky. It was almost as bad. He was bright pink, like a fucking highlighter. Or a neon sign. No matter how he described the color, it was wrong. He wasn't meant to be any shade of pink, and he was entirely too visible against fucking everything.

He roared and, because he was no longer hiding, dived at Reyman. He swooped past and smacked him hard enough in the face that the human-looking werewolf fell on his ass and let go of the chain that had been keeping Xan by his side.

Xan turned and bit Reyman on the calf before snatching the chain up in his teeth and running north after the unicorn. Edra did the same, overtaking both wolf and unicorn.

He shot over the grass and pulled up short when he saw the dragons. Both adults and all three babies were also bright pink.

Jordan stood in front of the female, no doubt offending her with his appalling Dragon.

Edra looped once to lose speed before dropping to the grass in a landing that was a little less graceful than usual. He was going to blame the pink. It was throwing him off.

The dragons immediately turned to him.

“Why are we skinned meat color?”

That wasn't how Edra would've described it, but neon pink didn't translate to Dragon very well. “Wild magic. It will be fixed.”

It had better be fixed because he was not staying pink. Oh, selkie shit, what if he was pink in human form too? He glowered at Jordan.

“You look very fetching,” he said in English with a smile.

Edra snarled. “I prefer it when you are the one changing colors.”

Jordan's eyebrows knitted together as he tried to pull the meaning out of the clicks and whistles. Edra had to remember to keep his responses simple and short so his mate could understand.

“Is the unicorn on its way?” Ardel asked.

“Yes.” Edra nodded to make sure that he was understood. Did Ardel expect him to stay like this, or was he allowed to shift? He pointed at himself. “Can I change?”

“He wants to shift,” Jordan translated without missing a beat.

Edra gasped. He had someone who could speak English and Dragon. Well, kind of, anyway. He wrapped Jordan in his lurid wings—he was sure he looked like some kind of overgrown tropical flower—then licked the side of his face for good measure.

“Well, he can’t sneak up on them looking like that. It was my damn sister, reporting that he’d left the area. I’m sure of it.” Ardel was flashing rather too much fang to be anything other than furious.

“Coverings,” Edra said.

Jordan stared, and Edra swore he saw the cogs turning in Jordan’s eyes before he nodded. “Right, clothes.”

Edra wasn’t too worried about being naked at a party, but since no one else was, and people were taking photos of the pink dragons, he didn’t want his ass ending up in their shots. While Jordan grabbed his clothes, Edra cooed to the dragon, hoping to calm her down. She was upset that her babies, who seemed to grow an inch taller every day, were the wrong color.

He walked around her so he was hidden from most and shifted with his eyes closed, hoping that he had changed color.

Jordan made a noise, and it wasn’t one of relief.

Edra drew in a breath but couldn’t open his eyes. “I’m still pink, aren’t I?”

“Yeah.”

He cursed in Tarikian and then English and threw in a few Dragon ones too, which made the female thump her tail in agreement.

“We shall eat them,” she roared.

They couldn’t eat the unicorn, and even if they could, he wouldn’t want them to chance it. He opened his eyes and saw his bright pink toes. “Well, this is fucked.”

“Open your mouth,” Jordan said.

“Why?”

“Is your tongue still blue?”

“Oh.” He stuck his tongue out so he could see for himself. It was blue. And it didn’t help him in the slightest. He pulled on his underwear and jeans and continued attempting to calm the dragon down. “She is furious.”



And was able to express it while he was supposed to be rational about looking like a featherless flamingo. He forced a breath out between his teeth. “Xan is on the loose as a wolf. I have no idea if he’ll change back once he’s away from the unicorn. I didn’t so...” he lifted his eyebrows at Jordan. “You might want to make sure he doesn’t get picked up by the cops or shot.”

“What do you want done with him?”

“Just tell everyone to leave the big black wolf, with a chain around its neck, alone.” He glanced at Ardel. “The werewolves who fell out of the magic’s area of influence returned to their semi-shifted state. A lot of them were looking tired and over the parade, so Reyman’s influence might wear off along with the magic.” They could only hope. “But the unicorn is on its way, or it was. The Strega needs to keep up the light show, and the music needs to continue. Some mead and Bliss might help.”

“It’s not Beltane,” Ardel said with a sigh.

If it was, he wouldn’t have worried about being naked. He’d be overdressed in only his jeans.

A ripple went through the crowd, and this time it wasn’t because the dragons had changed to another color. The unicorn had arrived.

“Looks like you don’t need the mead,” Jordan said.

Oh, he did, if only so he could get drunk. Though being bright pink with a hangover didn’t hold much appeal. “Maybe turning the dragons pink created enough ripples of magic and delight that it got the unicorn’s attention.”

The crowd parted to let the wild magic pass. It was a solid beast now, with a mane and tail that glittered as though made of starlight.

“Keep your thoughts quiet and keep them focused,” Ardel whispered. “And don’t say anything out loud that you wouldn’t want to come true.” With the wild magic drawing closer, the lines in his face faded, and his skin brightened until he appeared as he once had, with beauty to rival that of an elf.

Jordan nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line.

The elvish band kept playing, but the music softened to something closer to a lullaby. Edra was sure the temple grounds were quiet enough that he could hear the heartbeats of every person gathered.

His fingers curled as the urge to pat the unicorn became overwhelming.

Behind him, the pink female dragon stood as though ready to tear apart the unicorn that turned her babies pink.

They did not need a confrontation between dragon and unicorn. That would be messy. Edra stepped between them, not sure who he was protecting. Jordan reached for him, but Edra shook his head.

“Return the dragons to their natural color.” There was a quiver in his voice Edra couldn’t mask. He didn’t let himself think of what might go wrong; allowing those thoughts would only ensure that it did.

The unicorn turned to face him. But where there should have been eyes in a living creature, there were only dark pits. The voids seemed to extend into the universe. For a moment, he was sure he glimpsed home. If he stepped closer, he could...

He forced himself to blink.

No.

He was a silver dragon shifter.

The greater dragons were green.

He held onto those thoughts even as the voids seemed to expand to swallow him whole. Heat rushed over his body, scorching his human skin. Behind him, the greater dragon growled.

Edra kept his thoughts empty of anything but gratitude that he was once again himself.

In the middle of the clearing, the Strega clapped her hands in time with the drum beat.

The unicorn turned toward the distraction.

Edra dropped to his knees with relief. He'd been so close to wishing himself home. The veil was thin. He was supposed to be able to travel easily between worlds, but Tariko no longer existed.

Jordan knelt in front of him, his hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "You?" His voice was so soft he wasn't sure Jordan had even heard it. "Did you remember?" That's what Jordan should have been thinking about. When he glanced up, he knew from one look at his face that isn't what he'd thought about. "Oh, no. What did you think of, or desire?"

What risk had he taken for someone else?

"For Katie to be rescued, alive and well."

Edra cupped his mate's jaw. "That might have been your only—"

Jordan covered his hand with his own. "I know."

"The unicorn is not yours to keep." A woman's voice cut through the reverential silence.

Ardel growled, his fangs and nails lengthening as though he were preparing to fight his sister. If that happened, there would be no stopping at first blood.

"It is wild magic, seeking a place to grow roots," the Strega responded. Her skin appeared to be lit from within. Now the unicorn was only four yards away from her. "It has gathered here for a reason."

"If you want your city, you will let the unicorn leave," she stepped forward into the clearing where the unicorn and The Strega stood. A bangle on her wrist gleamed with magic, and the unicorn took a step toward the vampire.

Ardel strode toward his sister. Both siblings bared their fangs.

"This is going to end badly if they spill blood," Edra murmured. "If they use blood magic and there's wild magic, it

will take that—”

“No blood will be spilled,” Jordan called out as he got to his feet. His words reverberated with the power of an elf’s. The magic making then binding.

Edra’s stomach swooped as if he was in freefall and testing fate to see if he could shift before he hit the ground.

The Strega glanced at him and nodded, still clapping. Then she smiled as though she was about to unfurl her own magic. They were about to be caught in the magical tsunami.

“Jordan.” Edra put his hand on Jordan’s arm before he could take another step. He didn’t want his mate to drown in whatever was about to happen.

“There will be no violence. If you want the wild magic, you will have to lure it away. Traditionally.”

“What does that mean?” Jordan whispered.

“We lured it here with music and dancing and magic.” Edra’s gaze flicked from Ardel’s sister to Ardel, the Strega, and then the crowd that was moving, as though lines were being drawn without a word being spoken.

Ardel’s sister wasn’t alone, nor was she relying on the werewolves to back her up.

Jordan turned and glanced at Edra.

The Strega clapped her hands over her head and turned in a slow circle. “We are peaceful. We honor the magic.”

Ardel’s sister stepped forward. She clapped her hands to a different rhythm, and she moved as though she was ready to step onto the dancefloor. “You are weak.”

The Strega stepped back, her light dimming.

What was said would become real.

*Fuck it.* They had not come this far to surrender. Edra walked forward until he was at the edge of the clearing. He kept hold of Jordan and snapped the fingers on his other hand in time with the music and the Strega. Magic sparked over his skin. “Kindness isn’t weakness. Where is your Strega?”

Another vampire stepped forward. “We don’t need one. We have blood magic.” He lifted his hand to his mouth, but he drew no blood as the wild magic made sure he had no fangs with which to bite.

The vampire put a hand over his mouth, but the horror was etched on his face as Jordan’s words held true.

This was messed up.

Ardel smiled, fangs hidden. He joined in, keeping time with the Strega, clapping as he moved around the unicorn. “What convinced you to sell out, sister? What did they promise you? Tell me it wasn’t just your looks because I have always been prettier.” As he spoke, he did become prettier.

Edra was still clicking his fingers. Others were joining in, keeping the rhythm going, building the magic around them with each breath. And the magic was becoming more dangerous with each heartbeat.

This was the dangerous part, as the magic was strong but unsettled.

“It doesn’t matter who is prettier. What matters is you have what I want.”

“A city? A people who I have a connection with and who I protect? You cannot rule without sacrifice. Something you have yet to learn.” Ardel’s words were carefully measured.

Delsie walked out of the crowd, hips swaying and fingers clicking to stand near her uncle. “I am disappointed, Mother. You turned on your city, and your city will turn on you.”

Edra was aware of the crowd joining in the clapping and drowning out the ones who wanted to steal the magic.

“You could have ruled them both,” her mother said.

Delsie laughed. “Do you really believe that? I don’t.” She turned and glanced at Vlash, extending her hand to him. “Archer.”

Vlash stepped forward and took her hand, letting the future ruler of the city lead the dance.

The tempo of the music increased from a lullaby to the spirit-raising beat of a war dance.

“You cannot be serious,” Ardel’s sister hissed.

Delsie laughed—by her own power or by magic? It didn’t matter. They had to act now to end this.

“Dance with me,” Edra said as he held out his hand.

“Dance?”

“To raise the energy and the magic, so the unicorn settles instead of leaving.”

Ardel and his sister stood on opposite sides of the unicorn. Then she turned and grabbed a dance partner. Her side grew in number, the ranks swelled by vampires from LA and the human-looking werewolves who had arrived and had thrown their loyalty to them.

They moved with purpose, never moving closer, always edging away.

The unicorn moved with them, drawn by the magic on their wrists.

“Dance to save the city,” the Strega called out her words, a command none could resist because of the magic. When she clapped her hands and stamped her feet, sparks formed. The cops on the barricade began to move with the music, and the humans who had been watching from the other side of the barricade also joined in.

With Delsie and Vlash leading, hand in hand and side by side, it was easy to follow their movements. Whether by design or intent, they all fell into a pattern. A simple series of steps that would be repeated until the magic settled or they fell.

He would not think of the dangers whispered about luring unicorns. He would only think of the dance. Of Jordan.

Edra’s skin tingled as the magic swelled around them.

From the corner of his eye, he watched as Ardel and the Strega spoke in hushed tones even as they danced together.

The wild magic pawed at the ground and swung its head from side to side.

The traitors and LA vampires edged back, and the unicorn followed.

Whatever they had, it was more attractive to the unicorn. What were they doing? What did they have? What were they thinking? Could they trap it if they spoke it into existence?

The Strega grabbed Ardel's hand, and he brushed her away. His lips moved, and her mouth hung open in dismay.

Edra spun. He released Jordan and moved toward them, his feet keeping time even though he wasn't doing it consciously. He didn't need to turn to know Jordan was at his back. The Strega's eyes were wide. Seeing her fear filled Edra with cold. It sluiced through his veins like winter ice in a river, but he remained visible.

"What are you doing, Ardel?" Edra's words were loud enough to carry to him, but he wasn't close enough to stop it.

Ardel glanced at him, beautiful as he had always been, but his eyes were filled with a sorrow Edra had never seen. "What needs to be done to secure the magic."

Ardel pulled off his lilac tie and let it fall to the ground.

The cold spread, twisting Edra's gut.

Ardel dropped to his knees and sat back on his heels. "My life for the city. My magic with yours." He spread his arms, offering himself to the unicorn.

Edra took a step toward him, then became stuck. The air had turned to honey, and he couldn't breathe as everything slowed.

Delsie turned, Ardel's name on her lips. Edra heard it. He felt her panic. But like him, she couldn't move toward her uncle as the wild magic turned to face the vampire.

"Get up!" The words sounded distant as they left Edra's lips. He tried to claw through the air to reach Ardel. His ruler. His friend.

The unicorn's black void eyes swelled, consuming its face as it paced toward Ardel, the magic flowing between them while everyone else was stuck. The LA vampires pounded on invisible walls. Their mouths were open and fangless as they screamed.

Ardel didn't move. Because he couldn't? Or because he didn't want to?

The unicorn lowered its head. The tip of its horn touched Ardel's chest.

Edra screamed.

The horn speared through Ardel.

Darkness spilled from the unicorn and consumed everything.



## CHAPTER 24



All Jordan heard was his own breathing. Overhead was a sky without stars. He blinked a couple of times. His chest ached as though he'd been kicked in the gut, and each breath was a hard-won battle.

He forced himself up, his body slow to respond as though the air was trying to pin him in place. No one else was standing.

And he was the only one sitting.

Was he the only one alive? His breathing rasped in his ears as he fought the air and got to his knees. Why couldn't he hear anything else?

He crawled over to Edra, who was only two feet away, but he was sweating like he'd crawled two miles by the time he got there. For several awful seconds, he thought Edra was dead. He was so still. As he reached out his hand, Edra's chest lifted. Relief washed through him and stung his eyes.

His hand landed on Edra's smooth chest, and he gave him a little shake. Edra's eyelids fluttered.

"Wake up." His lips moved, but he wasn't sure sound came out.

What the hell was going on? Every mytho was on the ground. Were they sleeping? How was he supposed to wake them all?

He got to one knee to stand, but his balance was off like the world was moving beneath his feet. He wobbled and

decided to remain kneeling.

A thunderclap shook the air and the ground and knocked him over. He fell on his side as the earth bucked like the collapse was happening all over again. He pressed his cheek to the grass and waited for it to stop. Nothing would be the same when it did. There'd been too much magic.

When everything stopped moving, he lifted his head. The stars had returned, and nothing had been destroyed.

He pushed himself up.

But something had been created.

Where the wild magic had killed, or should it be consumed, Ardel, there was now a tree that appeared to be decades old.

No blood had been spilled. But one blood-red pear hung from the tree, gleaming in the starlight. The leaves were black and the flowers lilac. It was beautiful and terrifying and like nothing Jordan had ever seen before.

The silk tie lay abandoned on the ground.

He closed his eyes, not wanting to believe what he was seeing. It wasn't possible. Yet a part of him knew it was and that Ardel and the unicorn were gone. The ache returned to his chest. They'd won the battle to keep the magic, but at what cost?

Next to him, Edra groaned.

Jordan opened his eyes and helped Edra sit up. "Are you okay?" This time, he heard himself speak.

Edra shook his head like he was trying to clear it. "I think so." His gaze snapped up to meet Jordan's. "Ardel?"

Jordan pointed at the tree. He didn't know what else to say.

Edra scrambled over to the tie. He grabbed it in his fist and brought it to his lips.

"Why did you have to?" He said something in Tarikian and then hugged the tree as if it was an old friend.

Maybe people turning into trees wasn't unheard of on Tariko.

Jordan wasn't sure hugging the tree was a wise move. It might eat Edra or something worse; there was always a worse with mytho magic. Edra stepped back and swiped at his eyes. He pressed his lips into a hard line as though he were furious, but Jordan saw the pain in his eyes and felt the ache of grief spreading through his limbs.

Jordan pulled him into his arms. Nothing he said would fix this. And he wasn't sure it could be fixed. The wild magic had settled, and that was what everyone, including Ardel, had wanted.

Edra melted against him, his head on Jordan's shoulder. "He didn't need to do it. We'd have won, eventually."

He rubbed Edra's back. For how long could people be caught in a magical dance before there were consequences? "He did what he thought he had to, to protect the city."

"And now he's gone," Edra snarled.

Saying sorry was the wrong thing. Edra hated it. Most mythos did as it meant little to them without reparation. He took a few moments and made new words that weren't hollow.

"I feel your loss and don't know how to help." The words felt awkward in his mouth. Admitting he was useless didn't sit right when all he wanted was to help and make things right.

"I've known him for close to a century. He's ruled for longer." Edra drew in a breath that was more of a sob. "I don't know a world without him."

Without Ardel, the mythos in San Francisco wouldn't have had such a strong voice. He led them toward integration and had worked his ass off to make Mytho Servo work. "He'll be missed by many."

Around them, people were getting up, recovering from what had to have been a magical shockwave—Jordan didn't know how else to describe it. People gasped as they saw the tree. Some cried.

Others howled in fury.

Delsie walked up to the tree; her fingers trailed over the bark as her lips moved. Finally, she stopped to admire the pear.

“Archer Vlash, Knight Tendric.” Her voice was steady as she issued the command.

The elf walked over to her, unsmiling as though he knew what was coming.

Jordan’s grip on Edra eased, and Edra pulled away to stand before Delsie.

Her gaze settled on Jordan, and he was sure the vein in his arm where she’d bitten pulsed hot. “Knight Kells.”

Jordan licked his lip, wanting to correct her that he wasn’t a Knight now Edra was back. But it was a title that had been granted, and it wasn’t returnable. He stepped up next to Edra.

She plucked the pear. “Arrest the traitors so they can enjoy the fruit of their efforts.”

Vlash inclined his head. “Yes, lord.” Then he turned to Jordan and Edra. “Would you like to take the vampires or the werewolves?”

Neither. He couldn’t be arresting anyone.

But the words didn’t form. This wasn’t the time or place to voice his opposition. Whatever was happening was mytho, and it was going to happen no matter what humans wanted or thought they wanted.

“Werewolves,” Edra said, then he walked across the grass, expecting Jordan to follow as he seethed with grief and fury. “We grab Reyman, and the rest will fall into line.”

“And then what happens?”

“They eat the fruit from the tree,” Edra said as though it were obvious.

“And they get knowledge?” What kind of pear was it?

Edra glared at him. “No, if they are innocent, they live; if they are guilty of treason, they die.”

“How could they not be guilty?” He’d seen them try to lead the unicorn away. Watched as they’d chosen a side and danced in opposition.

“People can be coerced.”

The werewolves were back in what Jordan thought of as their usual form, stuck in the partial shift. There were a dozen, and he couldn’t tell them apart. He didn’t know them well enough to have learned who had dark brown fur and orange eyes and who was more of a light brown with yellow eyes.

He should know.

He should be able to give a detailed description beyond werewolf.

“Reyman,” Edra called. “The lord of the city would like a word.”

Reyman snarled, fangs bared and claws extended as he stalked toward them.

Oh, shit. He wasn’t carrying, and he’d seen what damage a werewolf could do to flesh.

Something fast and black barreled into Reyman, knocking him over. The black wolf bit Reyman’s throat and shook his head, tearing out a chunk of flesh.

Jordan took a step forward before Edra stopped him by grabbing the back of his shirt.

The black wolf was Xan, Jordan realized.

Xan stepped back from the body and sat as though he didn’t care about all the witnesses to the murder. The chain around his neck coiled on the ground at his feet.

Reyman lay dead, his blood seeping into the ground. Jordan guessed the rule about blood spilling no longer applied.

Was it murder or self-defense? Either way, he couldn’t arrest Xan while he was a very large dog, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to try.

“You have a choice. Accept Xan as your pack leader, or eat the traitors’ fruit,” Edra said, loud enough for the werewolves

to hear.

One by one, they knelt and lowered their gazes.

Around them, the elves arrested the vampires that remained, binding their wrists and then leading them to the tree where Delsie and the Strega waited.

“Mother, you may have the first taste.” Delsie held out the blood-red pear for her mother to bite.

“I wanted what is best for you.”

“And I want what is best for everyone. Eat.”

Delsie’s mother bit into the pear. She chewed for several seconds, and it appeared as though nothing was going to happen to her, even though she wasn’t innocent.

Jordan frowned, questions forming even as Edra stood silently next to him with his arms crossed.

Delsie’s mother burst apart in a shower of sparks. Jordan shielded his eyes from the sudden glare. When he looked back, there was nothing left of her. Delsie stood in front of the next vampire.

“I’ve seen enough.” Jordan turned away. He didn’t want to watch as more died tonight.

“We stay. We watch, and we make sure no rules are broken,” Edra said as though they were refereeing a game of football.

“We are witnessing—allowing—murder. We are accomplices to murder.” When he checked the barricade to see what the cops were doing about this, not a single one had woken. No doubt the Strega’s doing.

“If she had done nothing, everyone would’ve questioned her loyalty. The king would’ve refused to swear her in, and Vlash would not have heeded her orders.” Edra didn’t look at him as he spoke. “This way, it is done. It is over.” His voice cracked, but his gaze remained steady as though he had turned to stone.

“It isn’t done. There will be questions that have to be answered.” And he had no idea what he was going to say. What could he say that anyone would believe?

“There are no bodies. That is Ardel’s last gift. It’s for you. Traitors are left for the crows to pick clean. So you watch.”

Jordan clamped his teeth together, bitterness and anger and fear flowing through him. But he stood as expected, and he didn’t look away until the last vampire had bitten the pear and died like a star exploding.

## CHAPTER 25



All Edra wanted to do was flop onto the bed and, since it was no longer dangerous to even think, forget about tonight's events. Jordan was silent on the drive home, and Edra could feel the storm building between them. Jordan had something to say—he always had something to say.

This time, Edra didn't care about how it was wrong or why it should have been different, or any of the other things Jordan usually claimed. He was right from a human perspective. But he wasn't mytho, and he didn't understand the events the way the elves, werewolves, ogres, and vampires did. They had seen and known with no words needed.

Edra had no words.

His heart ached for the loss of Ardel. It was different from the loss of Lyo and the loss of so many others in the collapse. He'd thought he was done losing people. He closed his eyes, squeezing them tight.

They hadn't been friends at first. There had been professional respect and frustration when they'd had to negotiate. Decades of working together for the good of the city had softened those edges. As Edra settled into the role of Knight, Ardel had trusted him more, and he had been able to deal with things without heavy consultation. A friendship grew from there.

He needed Ardel because who else was he going to call at two am if there was a problem? Who else would call him at two in the morning expecting him to sort out trouble?



He was going to have to hold Delsie's hand the way Ardel had held his after the old Knight had died. He drew in a breath, and just like when the magic had become so thick in the air, he could barely breathe, but this time it was the loss crushing him. Jordan parked the car, and they got out in silence, traipsing up the stairs.

Jordan shut the door. "Did you sleep with Ardel too?"

"Fuck off." He was not dealing with that now. Edra brushed past.

Jordan grabbed his arm, pulling him around to face him. "Yes or no."

"No. That you even feel the need to ask..." Edra curled his lip, unable to keep the disgust locked away. "You're the one who spent the night in the enclave and don't remember a thing."

"There are a lot of things I don't remember because I've become mixed up with mytho magic."

"Yeah..." He studied his mate. The way there was an edge in his eyes now. The set of his mouth was different, too, as if by forgetting, he was becoming someone else. He could no longer pretend that the changes were in his imagination. "And you aren't who you were."

"What does that mean?"

"What do you think it means?" Edra wasn't sure if he wanted to pull him close or shove him away. Either way, there would be consequences because they were both too raw to be touching anything or anyone.

"I feel different. I didn't think anyone would notice." And he didn't seem troubled.

"I noticed." He was Jordan's mate; of course he was going to notice. "You didn't question wearing makeup tonight. You just did what you wanted. Is it more confidence or less caring what others think?"

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"No."

Jordan kissed him hard. Their teeth clicked, and his fingertips pressed into Edra's skin.

Edra cupped the back of Jordan's head, his fingers curling into his hair. "You're rougher. Like you don't care."

"You're a lesser dragon. You've told me before you aren't going to break."

There was heat and hurt and hunger, but were they his or Jordan's? "That's different from you wanting to push. From you wanting to hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you," Jordan exhaled but didn't release him.

Maybe Jordan didn't want to hurt him, but he wanted something.

Edra tightened his grip on Jordan's hair, tugging his chin aside. "You want to play hard?" He nipped at Jordan's exposed throat, and Jordan groaned. "I can stop holding back and meet you in that dark place."

Jordan turned his head and held his gaze. "Meet me there."

His teeth raked over Edra's lip before biting it. The sting rolled through him. A sharp spike of wounded lust. He should step back and shift. Sleep as a dragon so they would be calm come morning. But he didn't want that distance. He needed his mate to fix everything that was going wrong—an impossible task.

His hand fisted in the fabric of Jordan's shirt, unable to stop himself from the delectable distraction. *He* needed to forget.

Edra returned the painful kiss as Jordan pushed him back against the door. His kisses were hungry, and his touch harsh as he pulled at Edra's clothing. Edra twisted, slamming Jordan against the door. At the back of his mind, he needed to remember that Jordan was human. But all he could smell was the lust and anger on Jordan's skin. It mixed with his own hurt and bled into something else. His thigh wedged between Jordan's legs, and he ripped open the shirt Jordan was wearing. Buttons bounced over the floor. The tearing of the

cloth was so satisfying he was tempted to tear at the jeans too. His fingers clawed into the waistband of the jeans—

Jordan's hands grabbed his biceps. Then he was in the air.

In a couple of steps, Jordan dropped him onto the sofa and quickly pinned him in place with his greater weight. Their hips jammed together, legs tangling as they wriggled and grappled. Jordan's erection ground against him, and for a moment, Edra wasn't sure if he wanted to throw him off or stay there pressed against him.

Jordan's lips crashed into his, bruising and claiming. And the heat in Edra's blood became jagged. He gasped, and Jordan's tongue slid into his mouth.

His next breath was a groan.

When Jordan relaxed, as though thinking that he'd won, Edra seized his chance. He used his foot as leverage and twisted his hips. Jordan rolled off him and onto the floor. He swore as he smacked his elbow, but Edra was on him. One leg on either side of one of Jordan's thighs, catching his hands and pressing them to the ground. There was nowhere to go and no room to move between the coffee table and the sofa. He had him.

He used his free hand to tug open Jordan's belt and then his jeans, freeing his mate's cock. Jordan bucked his hips and twisted his wrists. Edra was strong, but Jordan was squirmy. He yanked one hand free and grabbed Edra's hair, drawing him down to steal his breath and claim his lips. His hunger matched Edra's.

The need to claim and be claimed.

Edra rutted against him, enjoying the friction of his clothes on his skin and the hot length of Jordan's dick against him. Jordan dragged Edra's head to the side and bit his neck hard enough that there was going to be a mark. The knowledge sizzled in his blood.

With a grunt, Jordan rolled, pushing Edra's back against the coffee table.

Side by side, they glared at each other, both breathing hard, the heat between them ready to ignite the air. Edra attacked first, claiming Jordan's lips and pushing his tongue in, fucking his mouth with it. He tugged open his own jeans, freeing himself. Jordan batted his hand away and hooked his leg over Edra's hip, keeping him close.

His hand wrapped around both their dicks, gripping hard. Edra growled as he thrust into Jordan's fist. His grip on Edra's hair hadn't eased, using it to control the depth of the kiss. He tugged back, exposing Edra's throat so he could bite along his jaw.

The nips were hard and sharp and designed to mark.

Edra was on the razor edge of climax, and he didn't care about anything but falling over it, even if he cut himself on the way down.

Jordan's grip became slick. On the next nip, Edra fell. The pleasure rolled down his spine in a wash of heat. He came over Jordan's hand and chest. Jordan jerked his hand twice more, and his head dropped back as cum splattered on Edra's shirt and over himself.

For those few seconds, with his eyes closed and his face relaxed, he was the person Edra knew. Words formed on his tongue. *Was I too rough?*

Jordan opened his eyes. The doubts that had once been there no longer existed. "You enjoyed that."

There was no point in denying it, so he nodded, not wanting to admit that he'd been wanting to bite and be bitten. He'd thought marking might be too much for his human mate. Had a part of Jordan felt that urge and not known how to deal with it other than with aggression?

The man he'd been wouldn't have done that; he'd have wanted answers before action.

"So did you." Edra licked a scratch that he didn't remember making on Jordan's neck.

Jordan brought his hand to his lips and licked his fingers. Edra flicked his tongue over Jordan's palm, needing the taste

of them together.

Soft footsteps padded into the living room.

Sinner bounded onto the back of the sofa. “You two should be ashamed. I’ve seen tomcats with more decorum.” Her tail swished, and she glared at them. “My bowl is almost empty if either of you can be bothered.”

When neither of them replied, she huffed and jumped down.

Edra glanced at Jordan. Jordan’s lips curved in a smile, and then he laughed. It was like a dam filled with poison broke, freeing them of the toxic build-up.

The relief in Edra was instant. The tension eased, and even though his laugh felt like a jagged thing that shouldn’t exist after the death and bruising, it felt good to join in.

Jordan’s grip on his hair loosened to cradle Edra’s head. He pressed a kiss to Edra’s temple. “I never thought I’d be told off by my cat.”

“I’m not yours. I let you take me home,” she muttered from behind the sofa.

Jordan huffed out a half-laugh that dusted over Edra’s cheek. His fingers danced over the back of Edra’s neck. “I know you’re hurting and that I’ve changed...am changing. But I still love you. Even if I hate what is happening around us.” While Jordan might be harder, his words sharper, there was no deceit, only fear and confusion at what was happening.

“I love you, too. I hope you can live with the changes.” He hoped he could.

Jordan sighed. “When Katie is safe, I will see the Strega. I will pay the price to get my memories back.”

Edra propped himself up so the leg of the coffee table wasn’t biting into his shoulder. “Is that what you want, or what you think you should do?”

His lips parted, but no words came out. The uncertainty clouded around him.

“Think carefully. Don’t do it for me or anyone else.” He stretched, not sure how they were going to get out of the gap they were so well wedged into.

“I have scars on the backs of my legs that I don’t remember how I got.”

Edra stared at him. “Do you want me to tell you?” When he didn’t answer, Edra changed the question. “How do you think they got there?”

“They weren’t accidental.”

“No, they weren’t.” Even though it was Jordan’s past, it wasn’t his place to tell if Jordan didn’t want to learn. “You won’t be able to pick what you remember if you even can. Take your time to decide.”

“What would you do?”

“I don’t know. Those memories made you, and now you are being remade.”

Jordan pulled him close, and Edra let himself be held. “I know Ardel was your friend and that you had a deep connection to him built over a lifetime I can only imagine.”

Edra nodded, his cheek against Jordan’s. “Why did you have to be a dick about it?”

“The anger rose up, and I couldn’t stop. I wanted to make sure you were mine.” His fingers traced the bite marks. “I’m not like this.”

Edra was silent for several heartbeats. He couldn’t leave this mess at Jordan’s feet. “I am. I was angry, and I wanted reassurance that everything will be all right with us, and on some level, you sensed that.”

“I didn’t give you any of that.” Jordan kissed Edra’s cheek again as his fingers ruffled his hair.

“You did. You made it clear I am yours, that you trust me, and that you can share my pain. It was very dragony...and a little terrifying.”

“Because of the bond?”

“Yeah.” If it was broken now, he’d lose another part of himself, and then there would be nothing left. The safety he’d felt had been ripped away.

“I don’t know who I am,” Jordan murmured.

Edra held him a little tighter as if he could make up for everything they’d lost. “You are my mate.”

## CHAPTER 26



“So, I am expected to believe that Ardel was killed by the unicorn, and in the magical blast, several others were also killed, and this tree that looks like it’s been here for a decade grew overnight?” The captain stood six feet away from the tree, which in daylight didn’t look any less cursed than it had last night.

It was the black leaves and white bark. And maybe the small lilac flowers that bloomed even though it was suddenly cold like the magic had brought winter early, Jordan decided. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Next to him, Edra was silent, bundled up in a coat and scarf as if he was in danger of freezing. The scarf didn’t do much to hide the teeth-shaped bruises along one side of his jaw. Seeing them brought an odd mix of pride and shame that he’d behaved like that, and Edra seemed to be in no hurry to shift and heal them.

Last night they’d fed Sinner, showered, and gone to bed, and everything had felt okay between them. But nothing was okay outside of them, which was somehow worse because the outside stuff, he had no control over. This morning, there was frost on the car, and the air had a snap that he wasn’t used to, even though the sting of cold air on his cheeks was a weirdly familiar sensation that made him think of snow even though he didn’t remember ever seeing it.

The captain turned to Edra. “Well, Tendric? You’re the cultural consultant.”



Edra sighed as though talking was an effort. He'd eaten breakfast without enthusiasm and drunk his hot chocolate so fast that Jordan was sure he couldn't have tasted anything.

A part of him understood it was grief and that Edra was processing without being given the time and space that he needed. Jordan was glad the wild magic was now settled because if Edra had escaped into his own mind, he'd be fucked. More fucked. If he didn't know who he was, how was he supposed to know if what he felt was something bleeding over from Edra the way it had last night?

"The greatest magic is sacrifice. Ardel knew it would be irresistible to the unicorn..." Edra's voice caught.

Jordan put his hand on Edra's lower back. How would he have behaved in the past? Since Edra could see the changes, how long until other people noticed something was wrong with him?

Edra rocked back into his touch.

The captain looked at Edra as if expecting more. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Nothing. The magic has settled."

"I meant about Ardel and Mythological Services," the captain said.

"Delsie has taken over. She was his successor and will be sworn in by the king later today. There is nothing to do. It is done." Resignation and sadness surrounded Edra, leaving no room for the relief that they'd won.

"Lew won't like it."

Edra's lips twisted into a bitter smile. "I don't give a fuck what she likes. She's a traitor. And if the bill doesn't pass, it's not going to matter, is it?"

"It's going to pass."

"You don't know that. This—" Edra flung his hand out at the tree.

Jordan caught his hand and spun Edra to face him, then pulled him close, not caring that his captain watched. He whispered in Edra's ear, "I'm not the only human who wants it to pass." He lifted his head and spoke to his captain. "It's been a bad week."

The captain jerked his chin. "We could all do with a good one. So what happens if the tree is cut down?"

Edra tensed in his arms. "Why would you do that?"

"Vandals. This is a prime target."

Jordan took the opening to change the topic. "Any word on my house?"

"Isaac has a lead." The captain's gaze flicked to Edra, still in Jordan's arms. "And the people who are suffering from the effects of wild magic?"

"There are none, so if they claim it as an excuse for bad behavior, it's a lie. Those who made bad wishes"—wishes wasn't quite the right word, but it was near enough and easy to understand—"will be able to see the Strega. She'll be here every afternoon to help for the next three days," Jordan said.

Edra and he had spoken with the king this morning. Well, Edra had spoken. Jordan had listened.

The captain watched him closely as though he sensed something was different. Could he see the scratch on Jordan's neck? The bruise on his elbow was a red and purple bloom, and there was another on his inner thigh. "You haven't asked about your sister."

Jordan swallowed and glanced at the tree, knowing he'd fucked up by not asking immediately. "I have every faith she will be released."

"I was notified on the way down here that the rescue operation had commenced." The captain checked his watch. "Shall we wait?"

Jordan nodded. "I would appreciate that, sir."

The three of them stood in silence, watching the black leaves sway in the cold morning air. If the operation took too

long, there would be no good news. Edra squeezed his hand, and Jordan wasn't sure who was giving who the support.

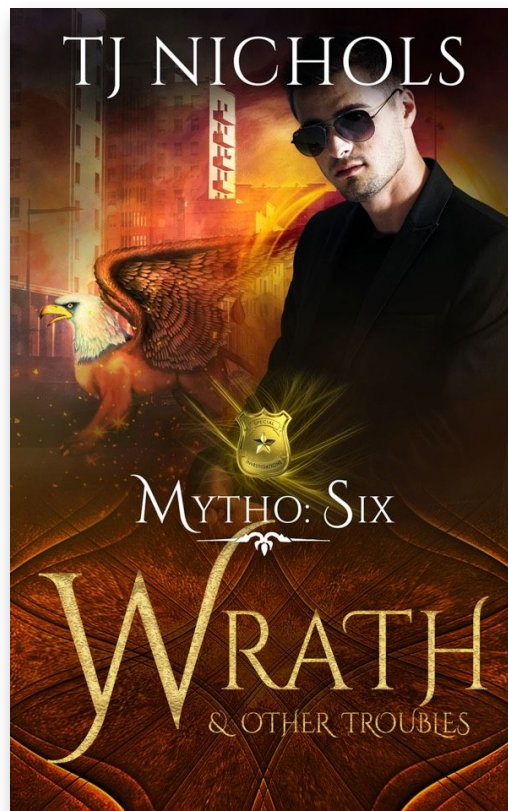
When his phone rang, he almost didn't want to answer. He pulled it out of his pocket and stared at the screen. He didn't recognize the number. "Kells."

"Jordan," a woman's voice said. It was shaky as if she'd been crying. "It's Katie."

He felt the same sympathy he would for any victim, but the love he'd once had for his sister no longer existed. That man didn't exist.



Jordan and Edra's story continues in [Wrath and other Troubles](#).



## OTHER BOOKS BY TJ NICHOLS

### Audiobooks

#### *Studies in Demonology trilogy*

Warlock in Training  
Rogue in the Making  
Blood for the Spilling

#### *Mytho series*

Lust and other Drugs  
Greed and other Dangers  
Envy and other Cravings  
Vanity and other Monsters  
Sloth and other Delights  
Wrath and other Troubles  
Gluttony and other Hungers

#### *Familiar Mates*

The Witch's Familiar  
The Vampire's Familiar  
The Rock Star's Familiar  
The Vet's Christmas Familiar  
The Detective's Familiar  
The Siren's Familiar  
The Soldier's Familiar  
The Billionaire's Familiar  
The Firefighter's Familiar  
The Bodyguard's Familiar  
The Spy's Familiar

#### Outcast Pack (Familiar Mates world)

Wolf Heart  
Wolf Blood  
Wolf Soul  
Wolf Mate  
Wolf Lust  
Wolf Hunt

A Summer of Smoke and Sin (historical urban fantasy)

Liminality (fantasy)

Captured Earth trilogy

Resist

Regroup

Revolt

*Holiday novellas*

Elf on the Beach

The Vampire's Dinner

Poison Marked

The Legend of Gentleman John

Silver and Solstice

Solstice Wishes and Christmas Kisses (novella collection)

A Wolf's Resistance

Hood and the Highwaymen

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TJ Nichols is the author of the Studies in Demonology, Familiar Mates and Mytho series. They write mostly gay fantasy and paranormal romance, but sometimes gay action/horror as Toby J. Nichols.

After traveling all over the world and Australia, TJ now lives in Perth, Western Australia.

You can connect with TJ at:

[Newsletter](http://www.tjnichols-author.com/lp) (www.tjnichols-author.com/lp)

