

LAYLA FAE

FINGER
LICKING
MONSTERS

TRICKSTER

AN OLD GOD ROMANCE

TRICKSTER: An Old God Romance

Finger Licking Monsters Book 2

Layla Fae

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What to Expect?

Games and tricks, of course! After all, we're dealing with Loki. Apart from that...

Romance tropes in no particular order: kidnapping/saving, enemies to lovers (a variation: he is obsessed, she hates him), semi-slow burn, banter, power imbalance, no pregnancy/baby, groveling, monster in disguise, lies, secrets, games, and magical claiming.

Spice CWs: spit play, hate intercourse with clear consent, seduction, shapeshifting peen, peen roulette, flavors, forced Os, betting for spicy favors, plant play, monster (fur, fangs, size difference, monster peen, knotting).

Action CWs: magic fight scenes, grisly magic-inflicted wounds, a torture scene where the baddies torture one of the main characters.

There is a romance plot and an action plot, both intrinsically connected, both ending with a HEA. The action is a part of the overarching plot connecting the books in this series, but there is no need to read the previous book, *DRACO: A Dragon Chef Romance*, for clarity (though, I recommend reading it for entertainment).

Enjoy!



Chapter 1: The Cursed Meet Cute

Loki

Sitting on the roof opposite the restaurant, I watched as Calli walked to Dragon's Lair. I was comfortable in an armchair, a tray of drinks hovering by my elbow, my eyes magnifying the view so I could see every detail.

This was a delicate operation, and I needed to be prepared to play it just right. It wouldn't hurt to ogle her some more, either. In the months I had spent stalking Calli, I had grown very fond of watching her mannerisms and analyzing her fashion choices.

Like me, she dressed to impress.

Today, she was clad in red and white, both professional and sexy. A white skirt hugged her ass, and I zoomed in, searching for the panty line. Predictably, it wasn't there, and I zoomed out again, taking a sip of my cold cider.

Her nails were painted red, the shade on her feet darker and more sparkly than the one on her hands. The red blouse accentuated her cleavage, but subtly. This was not a date.

At least, she thought it wasn't. She didn't expect to be rescued, which was just as well. I preferred our first meeting to be a surprise.

Calli stopped in front of the restaurant and took off her white-rimmed sunglasses. I focused on her face, taking in every detail with the focus of a connoisseur appraising a precious gem.

All signs were on display for everyone who knew how to look. Her hair, impeccably twisted into a chignon, which she smoothed down every minute even though there was no wind.

The way she nervously pressed her lips together. The worried lines around her eyes that I knew she would try to smooth out with a jade roller in the evening.

The absolute terror in her eyes.

I knew why she had come and admired her for it. She had done a wrong, and now she was here, ready to suffer the punishment. Other people might prefer to live with guilt rather than face a dragon.

Not Calli. She was one in eight billion.

Now, she took a deep breath and walked up the steps. At the last moment, she wavered, her hand hovering over the handle. Suddenly, she turned and ran down the steps, her heels clicking. She hurriedly turned the corner and kept walking.

I sent one of my ravens up to watch her path. Was she about to run away? If she did, I would be very disappointed. Enough to stop caring and let Draco kill her, because I had no use for a coward.

The raven circled over Dragon's Lair, and I watched through its eyes, finally humming in approval. She wasn't running, after all. She only decided to enter through the back door.

I had a mole in the restaurant's kitchen, so I settled in and waited, listening to what was happening. Idle chit-chat for now. Draco wasn't in yet. When he arrived, though, I really hoped he would take Calli up to his office. The window was exactly opposite my post, and I would have a first-class seat for the show.

Though it wouldn't be long until I stepped onto the stage myself.

But first, I would watch. I was curious how Draco intended to punish his ex's betrayal. Even though I knew their arrangement had been mostly fake, and Calli's crush on him was long extinguished, there was bound to be a lot of passion and hate.

Enough for a good show.

I knew what I would have done if my woman had betrayed me the way Calli betrayed Draco. She would die a slow, painful death, possibly dragging on for years, because I liked my revenge cold. And it might take years to soothe the burn of such treachery.

Draco was hot-tempered, though. He would act rashly. That was why it was so important for me to be right here, ready to step in.

I wouldn't let him slaughter Calli. Even though there was no claim on her now, she was as good as mine.

Draco's car arrived, and I sat up, excitement buzzing in my veins. There he was, his new mate right by his side. The woman's aura was beautiful, I had to admit. Indigo and pink, it stretched like a halo around her, brushing against Draco's silver.

They made a good match and it would be a pity if something were to squash their young love. One more reason to save Calli, because if Draco killed a human, he would be in much more trouble with the Magic Council than he already was.

They entered through the back door as well, and I listened to the conversation through my mole's ears. It went as expected. Calli attacked at once, because she was so scared she couldn't think straight, while Draco went cold with rage.

I listened to Calli's shouts, smiling to myself at the way she couldn't admit why she had truly come, not even now.

"Once, just once, I had everything perfectly lined up, and you had to come along and burn all my hopes and dreams! You fucking beast!"

I laughed, recording her little speech in my mind to replay to myself on lonely nights. It took balls for a human to call a dragon a beast. Especially one as terrified as Calli.

Her excuse to come had been to get paid for years of serving as Draco's conduit. It was bullshit, considering Calli had stolen from him, thus betraying his trust and incurring the

famous dragon wrath. She had taken his special dragon spice, the same one she had helped him make for years.

Calli stole from Draco, knowing perfectly well he was a dragon, a supernatural creature capable of tracking her down and burning her to a crisp in revenge. That knowledge hadn't stopped her.

It might have been brave or foolish, or maybe both. But I knew one thing: a mortal woman who would dare to steal from a dragon was legendary.

I had to have her.

I perked up as Draco invited her to the elevator, pretending to be calm, though I knew how rageful he must be. Moments later, they entered the office, and I zoomed in on the window.

Calli did what she did best. She goaded him, as gorgeous as a goddess in a blaze of fury. At this point it was difficult to say whether she was acting with purpose or giving in to her instincts, but the result was the same regardless. The show got heated fast.

"You owe me," she spat, looking at Draco with the confidence of an expert gambler.

That was the perfect thing to say if her goal was to get torn in half. I watched as Draco's horns and scales manifested in a blink, turning him from human to half a beast. And Calli's fear, so well hidden until now, broke through. She stumbled and fell, her face etched with horror.

It was too much.

I realized I was standing, the cider glass shattered at my feet. All I wanted was to teleport right in there and take her away, but I forced myself to wait.

They both needed closure. And Calli, though she would never admit it, wanted her punishment. That's why she had come. She needed the betrayal burned clean so she could be free of the guilt that still tormented her in her dreams.

She tossed and turned every night, mumbling through her sleep. Every time I watched, I wanted nothing more than to

crawl between the sheets and soothe her cries with caresses and thrusts.

Soon.

But now, as Draco tied her to a chair and gagged her, I had enough. He used duct tape, for Ymir's sake. The man had no panache. I teleported just outside the office and opened the door, dismantling Draco's wards with a flick of my little finger.

Time to start the show.

“Oooh, kinky! Can I play?”

Draco watched me with barely contained fury. Normally, he would deal with me politely since I was his better. Not today.

“Fuck off,” he snarled.

I grinned the way I knew humans found uncanny, and sure enough, Draco's mate shivered with fear. Calli tried to speak, but the crude gag was in the way. I pretended to ignore her.

“Is this the way to treat a messenger who's come to warn you?” I asked, mocking Draco. “Fine. Then I'll keep my warning to myself. And yet, I can be generous, so I will not report this obviously criminal situation to the Magic Council. But I want to know what's going on. I have a feeling I'll enjoy it immensely.”

There, all lines were perfectly delivered. Draco's anger became fuzzy, unfocused in the face of my distraction.

“This woman betrayed me and I'm punishing her. Now get lost,” he said with far less bite than before.

I walked inside, shutting the door. The trap was set, all the pieces in place, and I smiled with the thrill of the game I knew I would win. It was so simple, all the paths leading to one outcome. I would come out of here with Calli in my arms, and Draco would be content enough with my solution to never touch her again.

“What was her crime?” I asked as if I hadn't known all too well.

“She stole some of his jizz,” Draco’s mate, Jo, said with little reverence. When Draco gave her an offended look, she added, “What? It’s the truth. And I think talking it over might help you pick a punishment suitable for the actual crime.”

Draco breathed fire at her, though the flames fell short of Jo’s face. I snorted. Unbelievable. But those were dragons for you. They respected no one and nothing, not even their mates.

“Whose side are you on?” Draco asked.

“Yours,” she said. “Always yours. And that’s why I don’t want you to maul or kill her, because it will come back to bite you in the ass. And I’m not losing you over this. I just won’t.”

Drama, a touching moment, filler content. I clapped, getting the show back on tracks.

“May I propose a fitting punishment for the thief? One that will not come back to bite you in the ass, as your lady aptly put?” I asked.

I looked at Calli, struggling to get free. She was crying, but underneath the tears, I saw her anger. A fighter to the very end. Not surprising, since she was a woman who dared to steal from the dragon. I could barely hide my adoration, such was the impression she made on me.

“Propose away,” Draco said, most of the fire gone out of him.

I took a bow and conjured a showy microphone stand and pink disco light. At the snap of my fingers, a huge screen appeared behind my back. It would show exactly what I wanted.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you... The Midas touch!” I said, enjoying myself way too much.

I knew what was happening on the screen, so I watched the faces of my audience. Their reactions were gratifying when the first scene appeared, ranging from shock on Calli’s face to horrified amusement on Jo’s.

What they saw was Calli sitting on the toilet and reaching for the toilet paper. When her hand touched the roll, it turned

into gold. She screamed with frustration and despair, and the video blurred.

“But what did she steal?” I asked, dimming the lights. “It wasn’t riches. It was not gold. No, the little thief stole nothing other than... spunk!”

The lights came on, and an old-fashioned milk bottle half-full of cum appeared on the screen. Everyone stared with big eyes, and Calli’s brimmed with fear. I knew this would be hard for her. But it was the only way to stop her from going after Draco once this was over.

She would have a delicious new target for all her passions, hate and lust alike.

“Her punishment must suit the crime,” I said, confirming their suspicions.

“Stop this,” Draco said, very predictably.

It was so like a dragon. Burn somebody to charred bone? It’s fine, not a problem! But a creative, slightly disgusting curse that won’t actually hurt anyone? Evil!

As he stepped closer, I snapped my fingers, and an impenetrable barrier appeared between us. Now for the final act.

“Fucking stop. It’s not your place to do this. She is not yours to punish,” Draco raged, which was honestly so cute. How quickly he turned from abuser to protector.

“She won’t make gold,” I continued. “Instead, anything she touches will become wet and sticky, just like the thing she stole.”

On the screen, Calli picked up a banana. It was covered with fake cum the moment she touched it. The real Calli, still tied to a chair, tried to scream through the gag, thrashing and crying.

I took pity on her and made the gag disappear.

“Fuck you! You can’t do this to me!” she screamed. “Come on! You don’t even know me! You don’t have a reason to do this!”

I grinned, proud and already possessive, though she wasn't technically mine. But there she was, brazen and fierce despite the tears and her smudged makeup. What a beautiful, stimulating sight.

I crouched in front of her, putting my hands on her bare knees, because there was no way I would resist that first touch.

"I have plenty of reasons to do this, *ást min*. And don't worry, it is not forever."

"For how long, then?" Calli asked, shaking from fear.

I caressed her cheek, looking into her scared eyes and silently promising that I would make it up to her. She would have everything she wanted, and once she gave in to me, I wouldn't let her out of my bed for months.

"We'll see," I answered. "For now... Let your touch be your punishment."

I cursed her, and as my magic enshrouded her like fine, invisible snow, I painted my claim over her skin. It shimmered, green and golden, and I reveled in the sight. Now everyone would know I had claimed her.

Everyone who knew how to look.

But Calli didn't know about the claim. All she knew was the curse, which slid into her body like a cool breath. When it was done, I freed her from the bindings with a snap of my fingers. Fast like a cat, she tried to scratch my face, but I stepped back with a laugh.

To get her balance and stand up, Calli put her hand on the armrest. Predictably, it became instantly sticky. I watched her, curious how she would react now that she knew I hadn't bluffed.

For a moment, she only gaped at her hand, lips trembling. But in an instant, her fighting spirit was back. She jumped at me, nails poised to strike, her face twisted with fury. I caught her, delighted by my little tigress.

As she scratched my cheek, drawing blood, I laughed. It was perfect. Because no performance could be complete

without at least a few drops of blood on stage.

“So quick to discover my little caveat, I see,” I said with a chuckle, pressing her writhing body close so she couldn’t escape, while my cheek healed.

It was time to put the seed of an idea in her head. I wanted the two realms, me and sex, to be intrinsically connected in her mind from the start. Right now, I was just an enemy. But I needed her to see more shades than one.

More possibilities.

“Everything and everyone you touch will become slimy and wet... apart from me. Now, I’m not unreasonable, and this is not real semen. So for example, if you touch yourself, you won’t get pregnant. See? I am a considerate man,” I said with a laugh. “Now... We can discuss the terms and duration of your punishment in private. Goodbye, dragon.”

I teleported us away to Calli’s place, laughing all the way.

We arrived still pressed together, my arms around her back and hips, her breasts squished against my chest. For a moment, I only stood there, absorbing her with all my senses. The smell of her perfume, the heat of her body, tense and strong from the flood of adrenaline.

Her breath, a caress against my neck.

“I put a claim on you,” I whispered, tasting her earlobe with my lips. “I painted your skin with my magic, and oh, how it shimmers. Now, everyone who matters will know you belong to me.”

She thrashed against me, screaming and cursing, but I was stronger than any man, and certainly stronger than her. I pressed her close and delighted in her foaming anger. But I would have hated to leave her with only hate for me and no hope, so I did something I almost never did.

I gave her my word.

“Don’t worry, my treasure. I will soon come back and woo you properly. For now, this was necessary. We had to appease the dragon and protect you from anyone else who would hold

a grudge. Now that you're mine, no one will dare to touch you. Aren't you grateful?"

"You sick, perverted pig," she hissed, trying to break away. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

"Everything," I answered honestly as I stepped away, my hands reluctantly sliding off my love.

She instantly attacked again, but I spun away, already plotting my return. I would be back in a day or two, giving her enough time to cool off. And I would bring her gifts, all the things I knew she loved the most. Day by day, I would earn her trust, until finally...

I stopped spinning in the middle of my mansion and stumbled from the shock. Instead of standing in the beautiful marble foyer, I was surrounded by charred ruins sizzling with foul magic. A moment later, with only half a second of warning, a magic missile exploded where I had been standing, while I teleported into the garden to watch the attackers from a distance.

"Mr. Trickster," came an emotionless, dry voice that sounded like a choir whispering perfectly in sync. "I am here to deliver your deportation notice. You are to return to your pocket reality. Effective immediately."

I stared into the cold, insectile eyes of the Magic Council official as my home turned to ashes behind my back.

"I can't go back," I said, my voice perfectly calm, though inside, I was raging. "There is nothing to return to."

"Then we will be forced to take violent action," the official answered, the whispers growing excited.

"Do."

With a flip of my wrist, I turned him into a beetle and crushed him under my shoe. Casting one last glance at my earthly home, a place of many delights and hopes, I teleported away, completely focused on my new mission: survival.

I was at war with the Magic Council, the only organization that could pose a threat to a god. That meant I would need an

army.



Chapter 2: The Midas Touch

Calli

I gripped the kettle with a tight focus, clenching my jaw to keep myself from cursing. Or crying. Or screaming. Or doing one of the other things which, while perfectly justified by the circumstances, would only bring curious neighbors or the police to my doorstep.

No, thank you. I had enough problems as it was.

I poured the water into the instant ramen cup and gingerly put the kettle back. My glove was too big, and the sticky stuff inside squelched like jelly, making it not only difficult to hold anything, but also fucking disgusting.

The upper edges were taped to my wrists, trapping the goo inside, but the volume increased gradually. I'd need a fresh pair soon, but putting the gloves on was such an ordeal that I postponed it as long as I could.

I leaned against the counter, holding my hands in the air in front of myself as had become my habit, and sighed. Was this really my life now?

My phone rang, and I cursed, this time out loud.

“Fuck you, too.”

It was an unlisted number, and a pang of worry churned in my stomach. Could it be... *him*? He had promised to come for me and break the curse, but so far, a month had passed without so much as a word.

In that month, I lost my new position as a chef because I was no longer able to work with my hands. My savings were rapidly dwindling, and soon I would lose the apartment, too.

I would be homeless. And it was all because of that sick, psycho pervert who decided to curse me for his amusement.

If this was truly him, I would love to tell him to fuck off. I couldn't, of course, because he was my only hope of getting the curse removed. But having that option was like a balm for my poor, cursed soul.

I tried to pick up. The touch screen was supposed to react when touched through latex gloves, but the jelly inside them provided a cushion, making the touch of my finger weaker. I jabbed the screen time and again with more and more force while the phone kept ringing its cheerful tune.

Finally, I jabbed too hard. The overfilled glove burst, flooding the screen with a wet, slimy substance that looked and felt like jizz. I shrieked with rage.

I turned to the sink, whipping the gloves off, and flicked on the tap. I washed the goo off my palms and kept them raised in the air, letting the water drip to the floor. If I tried to dry them with a towel, both my hands and the towel would instantly get covered with the vile substance.

The phone stopped ringing and I closed my eyes, taking deep breaths. But it was no use. My ribcage would not expand. My stomach was hard and bloated from the instant food I had been eating for a month, and my nerves were so frayed, I barely held it together.

In and out. I was a fighter, and I wouldn't let such a small inconvenience ruin my day. In and out. In and out.

Fuck, whom was I kidding? This was the end.

Even my phone would die now, flooded as it was with the sticky stuff. I slid down to the floor, wishing I could at least bury my face in my hands or hug myself, but of course, I couldn't. Not unless I wanted to smear my curse all over myself.

It was all my fault, I reminded myself. It helped me get a grip when the despair really got to me. I had gotten tangled with a dragon. I served him as a conduit, basically for free.

And then I stole from him, sealing my fate. Dragons were notorious for holding grudges.

And so when I couldn't handle the wait anymore, knowing Draco would find me whether it took him a month or ten years, I went to him myself to get it over with. And what did I get for my troubles?

This fucking curse.

The point was, I reminded myself in steely tones, it was all a chain of irrevocably stupid decisions that I had made. And if I had caused this, it also meant I could undo it.

The power was mine.

And I knew one thing. As soon as I was free, I would kick the supernatural world goodbye. No more dragons, magic, or Tricksters with a pathological sense of humor. Only I was responsible for my decisions, and as soon as Trickster did what he had promised and broke the curse, I would never see him again.

I could do this. It didn't matter that I had dreamed about him every single night since we had met. My unconscious brain was a freak and a glutton for punishment, but I would rein it in. As soon as I got closure and Trickster was out of my life, I vowed, the dreams would end.

Even if a moronic, lunatic part of me would be sorry to lose them.

Last night, I had dreamt about him fucking me on a yacht.

Even now, I could picture it, the dream as clear and tangible as an actual memory. There had been a salty breeze spraying over my face and into my open mouth, the cries of seagulls overhead, bright, summer sun sparkling on the waves.

I was leaning over the railing and he was behind me, thrusting hard, his mouth right by my ear.

"I will give you everything, Calli," he said, slamming into me with force. "Anything you want. The only thing you have to do is ask."

I came hard, my scream of pleasure drowning out the seagulls and the rush of waves, and he laughed as he came inside me, his cum spilling down my thighs.

At least a part of that dream turned out to be true.

I woke up with my hand in my panties, the slimy curse spread all over my inner thighs as if someone had blown a huge load inside me.

Disgusting. Nauseating. I couldn't be more furious with myself if I tried.

And yet, even just thinking about that dream filled me with heat that was not exactly the hate I should have felt.

Another phone call jerked me out of my reverie. I groaned and got up off the floor without using my hands. One advantage of my situation was that my legs and core became so much stronger.

Then again, my hands got weaker, so it all evened out.

I peered at the screen. The thought of bringing the gooey mess to my ear made me nauseous, but it was the same unlisted number, and something told me I should pick up. It was high time I started listening to my instincts, too.

Ignoring them got me into this mess in the first place.

My finger slid across the screen to no avail. I cursed, jabbing at the screen, but it was too wet and would not respond.

“God-fucking-dammit!”

And then I shrieked, jumping back. The phone transformed before my eyes, growing a pair of real, mobile lips.

“GET DOWN,” the mouth said and disappeared.

I stood frozen for a breath. And then I flattened myself belly down on the floor, not caring that my hands went under my chest to cushion my fall. I had to do as he said, because those were Trickster's lips.

And I would know. I dreamt about those lips every fucking night.

A moment passed. I lay on the floor, panting, and waited for something to happen. But it was quiet.

Eerily so.

I realized I hadn't heard even one miniscule sound from the street outside, even though the window was open to let in the summer breeze. I held my breath, listening. Not a sound of a car passing or tree leaves rustling in the wind. Nothing.

And then, something.

A whistle growing louder. Fast.

I whimpered once, pressing myself onto the floor, squeezing my eyes shut. Whatever this was, I knew it was bad. Nothing normal could make all sounds disappear from the street. Nothing but magic.

And I had learned my lesson too well. Tangling fates with magic only led to disaster.

Something flew in through the open window, whizzed over me, and crashed against the wall. I turned my head to peek. A mist of red, glittering powder hung where the thing had crashed. It didn't seem to be spreading, but you never knew with magic. I took a deep breath, clenched my jaw, and crawled toward the bedroom.

The glittering mist cut off my way out of the apartment, but at least I could get out of the enemy's line of sight. The bedroom curtains were perpetually closed because I couldn't be bothered to touch them.

I stayed low while in the bedroom, crawling on my hands and knees. My palms left a slimy trail down the bare floor. I allowed myself a wry smile and a thought about snails.

Thud!

A crash against the bedroom window made me flinch. So they knew where I was. Would they be able to break the window? I looked around frantically. My only route of escape was the bathroom, but then I'd be trapped.

What to do? Lock myself in and pray for the best? Or brave the magical red mist and try to get out of the

apartment...?

Someone pounded on my front door. I squealed and scrambled inside the bathroom, locking the door.

I sat down on the toilet, my shivering hands held out in front of me, some dirt stuck to the goo after I'd crawled on the floor. The walls vibrated as something hit the apartment from the outside, and I bit back a whimper.

Who was this? What did they want? For a moment, I thought it might be Draco trying to get his revenge for my betrayal, but I quickly discarded this thought. No matter how unfeeling and cold he was, he kept his word.

And he'd let Trickster punish me. So no, it could not be Draco. Which was actually terrifying, because now, I didn't even know who or what was targeting me. And why. I would take an enraged Draco any day over this uncertainty.

The apartment shook again, and this time, I moaned in fear. They were magic creatures attacking in broad daylight, which meant they were determined enough to risk breaking the laws set by the Magic Council. Whatever they wanted from me, they wanted it badly.

I was as good as dead. Or worse.

But that did not mean I would allow myself to sink into panic. I would go proudly, like a fucking queen, even though I was currently broke, cursed, and sticky with a jizz-like substance.

Yup. A real queen. I giggled hysterically, my eyes watering.

Then I stopped this madness and forced my brain to hold on to reason. There was hope, I reminded myself in steely tones, stomping on my panic. He had warned me. That meant he knew I was in danger.

He cared.

Or did he? I flinched when a loud crash reverberated through my apartment. Oh no. Whoever had been at the door

was inside. Now Trickster was truly my only hope, and that thought made me nauseous with fear.

I was no more to him than sick entertainment. A game he played when he got bored. Would I really matter to him enough to merit saving?

“Calli!”

My heart stopped and then resumed its pounding at a doubled speed.

He came. He fucking came.

“I know you’re in there! Open the door!”

I tried, but my fingers slipped on the lock. They were covered in slime and shaking. I wrestled with the lock, groaning in frustration.

Suddenly, the door was no longer there. I stared at a flurry of purple ribbons hovering in the air.

And blinked. The curtain of ribbons floated down to the floor, making a silky nest on my bathroom’s threshold. I looked up into Trickster’s handsome face, for once completely devoid of a smile. Though his shockingly green eyes sparkled when they met mine, making me shiver as a scene from a dream flashed in my memory.

Not now!

One thing differed from my recent dreams. He was fully clothed in an emerald tuxedo with glittering accents, a silver and amber kerchief tied around his throat, polished shoes that must have once been an exotic animal’s skin on his feet.

“Fucking finally,” he growled and grabbed my palm.

Three things happened in close succession. My hands became dry, all the goo magically disappearing. That was the first one I noticed, the most astonishing, really. I had lived with this curse for over a month. To suddenly be able to touch something—someone—and not be covered in slime was bliss.

Then he pulled me after him through my bedroom to the living room. As soon as we cleared out, the window in my

bedroom shattered and the apartment shook as something heavy landed on the floor.

“RUN!” Trickster roared, pulling my arm so hard I feared it would pop out of its socket. There was no red mist in our way, only a small pile of rose petals on the floor where it had been.

We shot out through the door and went up the stairs. He led the way, and I didn't question him, not once. I was in over my head, but he seemed to know what was happening, his confidence allowing me to follow without hesitation.

One floor. Two. I panted from the adrenaline and effort, and yet he kept pulling me faster, his grip never wavering. I didn't understand why he was in such a hurry, because nobody seemed to be following us.

And then I heard it.

There was a sound below. Not loud, but it made my skin crawl. It was something between a hiss and an exhale, a blow of breath so loud, it carried in the staircase.

My feet froze to the steps. One moment, I was running. The next, I was falling on my face, my legs forced completely immobile. The soles of my feet burned through the flimsy socks. *Cold.*

At the last moment, Trickster caught me and straightened my wobbling body. His eyes were filled with white fire.

“*Swina bqlr!*” he growled, and from his tone of voice, I knew it was a curse.

There was another sound. Cold, hard scales crunching against the steps, coils and coils of a heavy, powerful body. Something slithered up. I whimpered, terror filling my chest.

Trickster made a cutting motion with his hand, and my feet became enveloped in a purple fire for one frightening second. It vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and all that was left of my socks was dust. I could move again, and my feet seemed perfectly fine, neither cold nor burned. We ran up again. Another floor.

There was another hiss from downstairs, and Trickster picked me up, preternaturally fast, and kept running. One strong arm was under my knees, the other supporting my back, pressing me sideways to his chest. Being in his arms made me burn with rage, but at that moment, I didn't dare complain. I was too scared of the thing chasing us.

"One more," he murmured in my ear, the *r* harsh.

He carried me without slowing down. His breathing was calm and even, and although I knew I'd lost weight on my diet of anxiety and ramen, I couldn't imagine a human man could carry me so effortlessly.

But that was the thing. He wasn't human.

The slithering sound got inexplicably closer, and I couldn't help it. Even though Trickster was my sworn enemy, my executioner, my curse, I clung to him with all my might, because he wasn't as bad as the unknown monster below.

We burst out onto the roof, and Trickster whistled. Something neighed in response, and the next thing I knew, a flying horse landed on the flat roof in front of us, its hooves barely making a sound.

I stared, lost for words.

"Up you go," Trickster said.

All kinds of alarm bells rang out at once, filling my head with one certainty. I would not get on his fucking horse.

"Fuck yourself," I said, turning to him. "I'd rather die than get on a magic animal that belongs to *you*. I mean every word."

Trickster gave me a wide, enraging grin and flexed his fingers. I swayed on my feet, suddenly loose and unable to control my body. He caught me deftly and put me on the horse's back. Strong ropes wound around me, securing me in place, and I couldn't so much as twitch.

I could only watch and hate him, hate him, hate him.

"I'd love to show off my fighting skill for you, but it will have to wait. Don't fall."

He patted the horse's backside. The powerful muscles under my thighs bunched, the massive golden wings spreading wide, and the horse jumped off the roof. I regained my ability to move, although I was still bound. My hands were buried in the mount's silky, pale-gold mane, and I grabbed it from sheer terror. The wind swallowed my scream, and I squeezed my eyes shut, gripping the mane with all my might.

The horse soared higher and higher, and I focused all my thoughts and resources on containing the panic threatening to burst. After everything I'd been through, having my life depend on a beast that was purely magic made me weak with fear.

So I held on, counted my breaths, and plotted my revenge on Trickster. That at least calmed me down a bit.

When we were far outside the city, blue lakes glittering below us, I realized my hands were no longer covered in goo despite holding on to the horse's mane. My curse was fully gone. I was free.

Five minutes later, we landed, and it turned out, my joy had been disastrously premature.

The curse which had destroyed my life proved to be an inconvenience. I was in for something much worse.



Chapter 3: Magic and Wit

Loki

I watched as Tove carried my prize on her back, making sure Calli wouldn't fall. I had secured her well, so I was fairly certain she was safe. And Tove was as reliable as a glacier. Calli would be fine as long as she didn't freak out too much.

I would have preferred to teleport her out of danger, but alas, the Magic Council thugs weren't completely useless. They had put up an area ward that prevented anyone from leaving the building using magic spells. That was why I had brought Tove. And why I would have to fight my way out of there.

But Calli was safe. That was what counted.

That concern alleviated, I cracked my knuckles and created a transparent, magic-inert film over my eyes to protect them. Thanks to it, Jadwiga wouldn't kill me when I looked at her. Though of course, her deadly gaze was only one of her weapons.

The door to the roof banged open, and I flicked my wrist. A huge chunk of the floor in front of the door collapsed.

Basilisks could move fast, their powerful muscles making up for their massive weight. But they weren't that great at jumping.

She stopped on the threshold, squinting at me with azure blue eyes full of malice. She had vertical irises like a snake, her huge, muscular body long and flexible just like a serpent's, most of the bulk still hidden behind the doorway. But I knew she was massive. If she straightened to her full size, her height would rival mine in my original form.

In my human one, the disproportion was larger. We were like a fox and a bear, and that comparison made me chuckle inwardly. A bear might be strong, but a fox was smart. I'd take smart and small over large and dumb any day.

For a moment, we just looked at each other. Her scales gleamed in the shade of the staircase, purple and toxic green, and I watched her for any signs of tension or movement. Jadwiga's gaze flicked to the missing chunk of the floor, but her expression remained stony.

Not a great achievement. If someone had a face such as hers, her skin tight with violet scales, with a mouth that would not stretch sideways and nostrils that would not flare, her only expressive feature were the eyes.

And those, she used to kill.

Jadwiga's squint became more pronounced, and the air between us shimmered with her vile, mustard-yellow magic.

I smiled as widely as I could, my cheeks splitting partly open. Humans found that smile unnerving. She only blinked. My grin widened and I took a flamboyant bow. This was a stage, and I was the star of the show.

"So that's how it is," she hissed, her lipless mouth not moving. "She isn't here."

"Your bosses made a mistake sending you," I said, walking to the right, the perfectly tailored coattails of my emerald tuxedo flapping gracefully. Jadwiga's eyes followed me, the only hint of movement about her maw. "I felt your presence as soon as you entered the city."

"I was a contingency plan," Jadwiga said, her voice cool and detached.

"Mmm. Yes. They wanted to teleport her into a cage, no doubt, and use it as leverage. I turned that particular trap into roses. Just a thought to amuse yourself with when you're down licking your wounds later."

I walked to the other side, pretending to be highly entertained, even though I was just a tad worried. I had

insulted the basilisk, and she didn't so much as blink. If my plan didn't work...

That meant I would have to bluff.

“By the way, kidnapping Calli would never have worked. I know how to cut my losses, *gargan*. No matter whom you kidnap, I won't bow before your council. Now, I want you to give them a message.”

Jadwiga shifted, tightening her coils like a spring being wound. She hadn't reacted to my clever insult, so she must not possess any linguistic magic. Or maybe she just didn't mind being called a snake. Well, at least I had her attention.

I made another part of the floor disappear. *Jump, you dumb, clueless fool. Jump and fall in the hole.*

“What message?”

I stopped in front of her and waved my arm in a slow, expansive arc. The air around her thrummed with magic as a forest of weapons ranging from stiletto knives, through Caucasian daggers, to machetes that could only be wielded by giants, appeared in the air around the basilisk.

I made sure to leave a wide opening just where the hole was. The point was to make her jump over it.

Which she didn't, even after my impressive martial display.

All blades were pointed at Jadwiga, hovering in the air, the cold steel glinting in the sunlight. I panted with effort. It was just an illusion, as I had depleted my magic stores in the wild effort of transporting myself and Tove from the base to Calli and had no more juice to create the real thing.

But Jadwiga did not know that. Probably. And the hole in the floor was real, at least. It was much easier to destroy something than create it from nothing.

Her eyes flicked left and right to assess the weapons, her head not even moving a fraction. Either she was that dumb or she didn't care, or she saw through the illusion.

Shit.

She shifted again, her coils tightening even more, tension rippling under her scales. I kept smiling even though the situation was not as much to my advantage as I'd like.

Well, I was screwed, plainly speaking. With no juice, my only way out of the roof was through the door she was blocking. And that meant I had to make Jadwiga move.

Time to play a trick.

I was no snake charmer, but I had an ace or two up my sleeve. I would make her dance.

“The message,” I repeated, “is this: you are no match for my magic. If you stand in my way, you will be tortured. I will transform your body cell by cell, leaving your nervous system intact to feel every painful stretch, every abominable growth, every abscess.”

I waved my hand, conjuring an illusion hovering above my open palm. A basilisk, disfigured and hideous, writhing in pain as black pus spurted out of the enormous boils covering her skin.

“It will take weeks. You will lose your mind, your abilities, any looks you were ever proud of. You will be a monster even by monster standards. And do you know what I'll do next?” I asked, grinning a manic grin, because I had her.

Jadwiga stared at me, mesmerized, her icy blue eyes open wide from curiosity.

“I will let you go free,” I whispered, letting the light breeze carry my words to her as the illusion dissipated. “I will let you live out your life, mutilated and magicless. So take care. That's the message. Should I write it down for you? In case your tiny reptile brain can't manage.”

She hissed and sprung forth, all that energy waiting in her coils released in one long leap. I pivoted to the side, rolling my eyes as I went. Polish basilisks. They were so predictable.

Call them stupid, and they would prove you right. Every single time.

Jadwiga landed with her front paws and the bulk of her enormous body on my side of the roof, but her back legs and the powerful tail fell in the hole. She scrambled against the roof, hissing as her claws gauged deep lines in the concrete.

I was on the move, circling her while her tail was mercifully out of the picture. She was slow but powerful, and one well-aimed swipe of that tail would send me flying off the roof.

And a flying Trickster was a dead Trickster. Wings were the only thing I couldn't get the hang of, probably because my original form was so heavy it would be physically impossible for it to ever fly.

Just as well.

I was almost to the door when Jadwiga hissed again. I drew in a breath and instantly knew she'd released the poison. My lungs froze, my trachea closed, and when I instinctively tried to breathe in, I couldn't. My stomach hollowed out, chest muscles tensing with the effort of drawing a breath. The venom had paralyzed my respiratory system.

Gritting my teeth as my magic levels became dangerously low, I released my reserves to heal the damage and conjure a protective bubble around my head.

I could breathe again, and I did so with a shuddering gasp. But the world swam before my eyes, my vision going in and out of focus, and I had to grip the metal fence to stay on my feet.

Something moved behind me. On instinct alone, I dropped to the floor, and the shimmering basilisk tail swished in the air where my torso had been a second before.

So Jadwiga had pushed herself out of the hole. I stayed down and rolled, aiding the effort with a small burst of speed that depleted me further but allowed me to avoid another swipe of her tail. Not good.

If I died before I could make Calli mine, that would be no fun at all.

I sprang to my feet, breathing deeply to keep my head from spinning. Before I could even get my bearing, I ran again from Jadwiga's deadly tail. That sprint took me further away from the door, but at least, there was still the hole in the floor separating me from the basilisk.

While I could circle it and walk by the side of the roof, Jadwiga was too bulky to do that. She would have to leap again to cross it. It was the only thing currently protecting me from her claws and fangs dripping with yellow venom.

The tail swiped again and I ducked, stepping out of its reach. Jadwiga shrieked, her ungodly voice reverberating in my skull, and I grinned despite the pain and dizziness. Even on the verge of collapsing, I still made her scream with rage.

"Have you heard the story about a basilisk and a goldfish?" I called to her, standing still, my smile mocking. I did my best to hide the trembling of my hands and legs. "A basilisk once caught a goldfish in the Vistula River..."

Jadwiga released another cloud of her noxious gas, but I was protected. She stared at me, her eyes filled with hate and no sentience at all. That's a basilisk for you. If you make it angry enough, its brain will basically fuck off.

"Once the fish was out of the water, gleaming gold in the sunshine, it begged the basilisk not to eat it. '*I am the goldfish that can make your wish come true!*', it said."

Unable to stop myself, because if I was delivering a performance, I had to do it right, I sent a tiny spark of magic her way. A goldfish leaped into the air in front of Jadwiga's nose. She was distracted.

I took one small step closer to the door. The basilisk's tail didn't attack, even though I was in range. But I reminded myself not to underestimate her. She could be waiting until I was so close, I wouldn't be able to duck in time.

"The basilisk, which was about to eat the goldfish, stopped. She was intrigued and wondered what wish she could ask the fish to make true."

I took another step closer while talking, and the illusory fish did a graceful pirouette, sparkling in the sun. Jadwiga's eyes were focused on the spectacle, and I had no doubt she was listening to the story. I clamped down on my body, strengthening myself with one last jolt of energy. It sucked the final magic reserves out of me while giving me a small burst of physical strength.

Enough for a mad dash to the door.

“Time passed, and the basilisk kept thinking. She had a lot of wishes, but none of them seemed good enough. Finally, she decided: she would ask the fish to give her wings, because she had always wanted to fly, as nimble as a hummingbird.”

A flying basilisk appeared next to the fish, soaring easily on its enormous, silver wings. Jadwiga didn't move, enchanted. I crept closer to the door, but not too close. I didn't want to tip her off.

Now or never.

“She spoke her wish, but nothing happened. The basilisk had thought for many hours, and because she was as dumb as all basilisks, she didn't realize the fish needed water to live. The fucking fish was dead. That's why basilisks don't have wings: because they are as dumb as rocks.”

The illusory basilisk's wings vanished, and it plummeted to the ground right as the fish turned belly up, its eyes covered by two black Xs.

Jadwiga screeched and leapt at me, but I was ready. I sprang to the door, not sparing her a glance. Something cold lashed at my shoulder, making me stagger, but I righted myself and kept running. A moment later, I was on the staircase and leaping down five steps at a time.

When the stairs took a turn, the hole loomed above me, and in it, Jadwiga's back paws paddled helplessly in the air. I ducked underneath and kept running. My shoulder was numb, the wound probably full of venom, but there was nothing for it. I clenched my teeth and sprinted as fast as I could.

When I burst out of the building, the car was already waiting, thank Ymir. Lynx had set out from the base right after I had teleported and must have driven like the devil to make it here in time.

Now, she rolled down the passenger's window to let me know without a doubt it was her. I opened the door and fell inside. It closed when she set out with a screech of the tires.

"Whose blood is that?" she asked, keeping her eyes focused on the road while something crashed into the asphalt behind us. Fucking council gnomes. They always carried a loaded bazooka.

"Does it look like pus?" I asked through clenched teeth. The numbness spread, and a cold, pulsing pain bloomed in the center of my wound. My body was clearing the venom and doing its best to heal, but in my depleted state, the process was much slower.

Lynx's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

"Not pus."

"Then it's mine. Basilisk blood looks like syphilitic discharge. Keep driving."

All my body wanted was to shut my brain so it could heal more efficiently, but I didn't let it. From the magically expanded glovebox, I took out my Smith & Wesson revolver and checked if it was loaded, glancing into the mirrors to see if anyone was following us.

But as I suspected, they decided to stay away. Pity, because in my current state, I would be easy pickings. And it would be such an interesting development if they managed to capture me and Lynx.

But I've taught the Magic Council thugs that aiming directly at me led to heavy losses. That's why they finally abandoned their rules and principles about not involving humans. If they had stuck to the laws they had written centuries ago, they would have never targeted Calli.

Clenching my jaw to keep myself from groaning in pain, I kept watch for the entire ride back to the compound. Only

when we passed through the gate did I allow my muscles to relax. And when I finally collapsed on my bed, it took no time at all for heavy slumber to claim me.



Chapter 4: Mistress

Calli

“What do you mean, I can’t leave?” I asked the guard, who was twice as tall as me, with dark green skin and tusks.

I’d never seen an orc in my life, but the scarred creature covered with reddish tribal tattoos had to be one. He wore a bulletproof vest and a belt heavy with weapons, and on his back, a huge, gleaming ax was strapped, the handle sticking up over his shoulder.

I looked back at the courtyard, but the magic horse had flown away after I had gracelessly slid from its back. As soon as we had landed, the ropes dissolved, turning into purple smoke, sliding over my skin like a caress.

I waved my arms as if it had been a cloud of mosquitoes I desperately tried to dispel. That was when the horse neighed nervously and took to air.

Pity it was gone. If not for that, I would have tried negotiating my departure with it.

I stepped from one bare foot to the other, the smooth cobbles of the courtyard cool against my skin. Running away on bare feet would probably hurt like a bitch. Not to mention what my poor soles would look like after that.

But I was ready to take my chances. If only that stupid oaf would move out of the way.

“Master’s orders,” he said, looking straight ahead. He hadn’t glanced at me once since I approached him. “Mistress is to stay in the compound.”

“Mistress?” I sputtered, trying to stare the obstinate oaf down, which was difficult, seeing how small I was compared

to him. "I am nobody's mistress. You're mistaking me for someone else."

"Master's orders," the orc repeated indifferently.

Fine then. I moved to pass him and get out through the gate, and he stepped to the side, barring my way. I changed direction and tried the other side to the same effect.

"Stop playing this fucking game and move out of my way," I said, employing the tone I usually used to get misbehaving employees in line.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't even threatening. But I'd polished the undertone of menacing calm to perfection, and the orc flinched. He arrested the nervous twitch at once, but I saw it anyway.

He also shot me a quick glance, making me feel just a bit satisfied. At least he had looked at me.

"I am getting out," I hissed and tried to pass again. The orc barred my way.

"Come on!" I yelled, losing my patience altogether. "Do you just do anything that psycho fucker will tell you? Can't you think for yourself? I am nothing to you! I'm just a human being, for fuck's sake. And you lot are forbidden from messing with us. Even I know the Magic Council will get you for this. So fucking let me through!"

The orc didn't so much as look at me this time. His face remained stony, his huge body an impenetrable barrier in front of me. I stomped my foot, hissing in pain from the impact, and tried to circle him again. No use.

"This threat won't work on him," a clipped female voice said behind me. I whirled on the spot.

A short-haired Asian woman stood in front of me, dressed in a bulletproof vest and cargo pants. She was tall and muscular, her frame at odds with her delicate face. She had smooth skin, long-lashed eyes, and baby lips. Even her tough expression couldn't mitigate that sweet, pretty look.

I gaped a beat too long, and her soft lips curved in a mocking smile.

“Hasn’t your mother taught you it’s rude to stare?”

I scoffed and crossed my arms, which felt entirely too good. I hadn’t been able to do that in over a month. Ever since that kidnapping psycho fucker cursed me.

“She was too busy teaching me that holding people captive against their will is illegal. Something your mama must have failed to put in your head.”

The mocking smirk disappeared from her face, replaced by an angry scowl.

“Don’t talk shit about my mother, princess. And know that if it were up to me, I would let you out of here right now and let them hunt you. You’re lucky the boss saved you, and even luckier that we’re loyal enough to follow his orders and keep you in the base. If not for that, you’d be dead or wishing for death right now.”

I had a cutting riposte ready, but held it in. In that, at least, she was right. Trickster had saved me. Although...

“I suspect I was in danger because of him in the first place,” I said, watching her reaction.

The woman’s lips tightened and her shoulders slumped a bit as she sighed. Just as I thought.

“It doesn’t matter right now,” she said, visibly striving for calmness. “You’re here, and I was charged personally with your protection. So please, step away from the gate. I can give you a tour while we wait for Master Loki.”

“Loki? Trickster is actually... Loki?” I asked, glancing nervously at the orc who still barred the way out.

This was bad. If he was a god, I was screwed.

Working for Draco, I had picked up this and that about the magic world. I saw my share of various creatures after I’d learned to see through the flimsy glamours they put on to fit in with humans.

Draco was a dragon. That made him royalty, someone no other creature would dare pick a fight with. And there was only one type of supernatural being more powerful than a dragon.

A deity.

The woman rolled her eyes and gave me a scornful look.

“You’re fucking him and don’t even know who he is?”

I gaped, but my shock only lasted a moment.

“Bold of you to assume I would ever touch that slug,” I hissed. “And what’s your problem? It’s logical for me to hate you since you’re keeping me here against my will. What’s your excuse?”

She pressed her lips together, staring daggers at me before she answered:

“We’re at war. If we lose, we’re dead. All of us. And you are a liability, princess. Entitled, obstinate, and ready to run back into danger as soon as you’re saved. We call people like you TSTL.” At my uncomprehending look, she clarified. “Too stupid to live.”

Instead of doing the one thing I wanted, that is, clawing her eyes out, I stayed put. She was strong, bigger than me, probably military trained. I could tell from the glint in her eye, she wanted nothing more than to teach me a lesson, maybe give me a few bruises or a concussion.

And I needed to be healthy and well to make a run for it as soon as a chance appeared. As became apparent, I also needed to be much better informed. I had no idea what war she was talking about or what my role in all of this was.

I took a deep, calming breath and closed my eyes, clenching my still dry, still uncursed hands into tight fists. I hated Trickster and couldn’t wait to run from the fucker. But this woman had a point.

“What’s your name?” I asked, moving further down the cobbled courtyard and away from the gate.

“You can call me Kang,” she said, sounding mollified, though her expression remained unfriendly.

“I’m Calli. If I promise to cooperate for now, will you tell me what’s going on?”

She stared at me, looking incredulous.

“Have you lived under a rock for the last month?” she asked, a look of uncertainty crossing her face. “How can you be his woman and not know?”

I snorted and shook my head with disgust.

“For the last fucking time, there is nothing between me and that fucker. So will you please stop insulting me? He is literally the last man I would ever touch.”

“You’re Calli Moore, aren’t you?” Kang asked, her frown deepening.

I nodded, and she nodded back, her look of confusion replaced by cool resolve.

“Then it doesn’t matter what you say. We have our orders.”

I stared at her, because honestly, what the fuck? How could she be so cold about it? I had been kidnapped, and apparently, that slimy fucker’s orders were more important than my basic human rights, even though he’d clearly lied about me.

Kang continued, oblivious to my growing outrage.

“All right, Calli Moore. We started on the wrong foot. Since you know nothing, I forgive your idiotic behavior. Obviously, we need to get you up to speed so you don’t get any more stupid ideas.

“This is what you need to know: Master Loki is at war with the Magic Council. He claimed you officially as his, so you are a target. Until this conflict is resolved, you are under our protection here at the base. This is all I can tell you. You need to talk to the master if you want to learn more.”

“Fucking hell,” I groaned, covering my face with my hands.

As if I didn't have enough problems without a war to boot. How did I end up in these situations? Hadn't I vowed to never get tangled with stupid supernatural stuff again? And yet, here I was.

Fuck my life. I made one little mistake and now I was forced to keep paying for it forever.

"So that attack today... that was the Magic Council?" I asked, my hands still pressed to my forehead.

"Yes."

I looked at Kang, realizing with a start, I was desperate enough to beg. What a humiliation. *This is what magic does to humans*, I thought with a shudder of revulsion. *It turns them into pathetic, helpless bugs and forces them to rely on the help of psychopathic supernaturals.*

"Please, let me go," I asked, cringing internally at how weak my voice sounded. "I've met Trickster exactly once. Twice, if you count today. All he did was curse me and turn my life into hell. How could I be responsible for his mess? It's not my war.

"And the Magic Council is supposed to protect humans. I'm sure if I can only explain what happened, they will leave me out of your war. And besides, you said it yourself: I'm a liability. It will be much easier for you without me here. Please, Kang."

She watched me with a thoughtful expression and finally sighed in defeat. I perked up, expecting this to be a sign of her giving in to my logic. I held my breath...

"I value loyalty above all things," Kang said slowly.

She looked me straight in the eye, and I had to admit her confidence was impressive.

"If you convince the boss to let you walk, I will have no problem with that. But as long as I have my orders, I will not act against them. Come on, Calli. I'll show you around the compound while we wait for him to come back."

Right then, there was a shout at the gate, and the orc barring the way stepped aside. I watched, wondering if I should just take my chances and run, when a black sedan passed through. The gate closed immediately, thick metal doors as tall as the wall sliding into place.

I exhaled, the moment gone, although the shot of adrenaline I got just thinking about that opportunity still fizzed in my veins. But trying to run now would be useless. I would need a ladder to scale that wall, which seemed to be built from one slab of smooth, gray rock. No handholds in sight.

The car stopped by the nearest building, a low barrack, and a tanned woman dressed similarly to Kang jumped out of the driver's seat and circled the car. She opened the passenger door, leaned in, and quickly stepped away.

My blood boiled with anger when the passenger got out and I saw it was Trickster. All my adrenaline, my fear and anger focused with sharp precision on the tall man wearing a green tux, the flamboyant jacket torn and stained. I jumped after him with a shout, ready to tear him a new one.

“Hey, you! Let me out of here, you sick fuck!”

He didn't even turn my way, didn't acknowledge he heard me at all. Instead, he walked further into the compound, and when I tried to follow him, the woman who had driven the car barred my way.

I glared for a moment, taking in her short hair, a swarthy face with deep smile lines and crow's feet, and unsettling amber eyes. It was obvious she spent a lot of time in the sun and probably didn't wear sunscreen. Like Kang, she looked strong, though she was shorter.

“Oh for fuck's sake, what is it with you people?” I groaned, trying to pass her.

She caught my arm in a strong grip, and I hissed in pain.

“Master should not be disturbed,” she said calmly.

I looked over her shoulder at the retreating figure. His coattails fluttered behind him in a way that could not be completely natural. I fixated on that one detail while another

scene from a dream, one involving a ballroom and a swinging chandelier, replayed in my mind.

The image of Trickster from that dream, with his shirt half open, cock out while he hiked my dress up to my waist, filled my head with a haze of stupidity.

I stepped back with a groan of frustration, gripping my head in both hands. This should stop. He was my enemy, one I had to run from, and I needed my brain one hundred percent with me on this.

No more dream flashbacks. We hate that guy.

“I can’t believe this man,” I said, letting my hands drop. “This is fucking surreal. I don’t get how you can work for someone as fucked up as that kidnapping madman. And call him Master. I bet he ordered you to do that, didn’t he? That fucker’s fucking ego!”

I shouted that last line, hoping he would hear me, but Trickster was already gone, having disappeared between the buildings. The woman standing in my way didn’t say anything. She and Kang exchanged glances, and I was ready to scream from rage.

Instead, I tried to calm myself down. Screaming and hurling insults felt wonderful but would not be very effective. And I had to remember my goal.

“All right,” I said to Trickster’s driver after taking a few deep breaths. “When can he be disturbed again?”

“When he comes out,” she said, eyeing me with curiosity. “Is there a problem? Are your rooms not to your liking? We can make any adjustments you need, Mistress.”

“Fuck my life,” I bit out, burying my face in my hands again. “The next person who calls me that again will have my nails in their eyeballs, just so you know. I don’t care if you’re all some freaking action movie bodyguards or something. When I’m pissed, I can be really fast. So don’t you fucking call me that word again.”

Kang sighed deeply and muttered something to the woman, who nodded.

“This is Lynx,” Kang said. “You can talk to her about any issues with your food or living quarters when Master Loki is unavailable. Normally, he will take care of all your needs himself.”

“Tell him I have an urgent need for him to fuck himself with a toilet brush,” I muttered, clenching and unclenching my fists.

Kang made an appalled noise, and Lynx coughed violently. I sighed and waited for them to calm down. If I couldn’t run or talk to Trickster, at least I could take the tour Kang had offered. Maybe I would find another way out of this place. It was doubtful, but if I expected failure, I would never succeed.

“It’s stuff like this that makes it difficult to believe you’re not his woman,” Kang said, her eyes suspicious.

“Do all his women curse at him all the time?” I asked, not hiding the sarcasm. “Because that would not surprise me at all.”

Lynx shook her head, watching me with curiosity.

“He hasn’t had anyone in... I’m not sure. I’ve only met him three weeks ago, but when I heard the rumors over the years, he was always single.”

Kang sighed, looking at me with something akin to resignation.

“He’s like me. We mate for life. And if you were anyone but his chosen mate, he would have turned you into a worm and then thrown you to a flock of hungry chickens. He does things like this to people who insult him.

“And when he’s in a good mood, he might turn the situation into a betting event, put a lot of gold on the worm, and cheer for it to escape. That’s the kind of sense of humor he has.”

“Charming,” I said, my voice dripping in sarcasm. “And I’ll take that tour now, if you don’t mind. A pair of shoes, too. And something to eat. You have to feed and clothe me since you insist on keeping me here.”

Lynx nodded and gestured in the direction Trickster had gone earlier.

“All right. There should be something left over in the kitchen. And the wardrobe in your room is fully stocked, so the shoes won’t be a problem. This way, Mis... Calli.”

At least she called me something normal. I followed her and Kang, my mouth watering. Finally, I could eat like a normal person. For a moment, I felt a pang of disappointment in myself that food would take precedence over my escape plan, but I quickly quashed it. My escape could wait.

And anyway, plotting on an empty stomach wasn’t half as much fun.



Chapter 5: Sharing Dreams

Loki

As always when I needed to heal, my magic tried to revert me back to my original form. When I wouldn't let it, keeping myself firmly in the human disguise, it forced itself into my dreams.

Outside the bounds of my Northern Kingdom, an eternal snowstorm wages war with the living. Among snow dunes as tall as mountains, whipped by a freezing wind that pierces uncovered faces with shards of ice, I stand with my army.

Before us, ice giants loom, their faces hard like sleet, their eyes burning bright blue. We defeated them time and again, but when our numbers dwindled, the fallen dead forever, more and more giants kept coming.

They are born from the ever freezing chasm of ice, the gate to the underworld of permafrost, and having no purpose and no thought, they march as soon as they come to be, born from the unholy matrimony of ice and fury, of hate and hail.

My palace shines like a beacon in the frozen landscape, so this is where their steps always take them. They hunger for the light and warmth of my abode.

I stand tall, eyes narrowed against the wind, my shaggy fur heavy with snow. We shall win, no matter how small our chances seem. We will defend our home. And one day, we will find a way to shut the abominable chasm forever.

I raise my ax with a roar, and my people answer. We shall be victorious. Today and always.

Behind us, the line of dead bodies, as hard as stone and frozen to the ground, is a mile long. My warriors who will

never return to me. Their loyalty was rewarded with a cold death, their bodies left without proper burial rites since everyone who could send them on the eternal journey were too busy fighting the enemy.

I failed them. The dead and the living alike. Now, I grip my ax, eyeing the endless lines of my foes. No matter how dire it seems, we must fight. We must win.

No matter how tired I am of this endless, hopeless war.

A brush of warm breath caresses my cheek. I let my eyelids close, breathing in the familiar scent. She should not be here. I would never allow her to enter my lost kingdom, to witness my failure and defeat. To feel the cold that has become my heritage.

She shall never see my true form, either. If I want her to stay, I must keep it locked away.

I open my eyes and see her, dressed as she was this morning when I saved her from the basilisk. She is standing on no man's land that will soon become the scene of ruthless bloodshed. With wide eyes, she looks from me to the giants and back, her face frozen in terror. She shivers in a thin tank top and leggings.

With a sigh, I tell my mind to remember it's just a dream. There is no need to come back here. No matter how many times I relive this battle, the outcome will always be the same, because it has already happened. My kingdom is lost, my people are slain, and cold wind dances over their frozen bodies, snow covering them like a shroud.

I disengage from myself, leaving the old me trapped inside the memory of his greatest woe, and step over to Calli. I wear my human disguise, the perfect fit for my shrunken, defeated soul.

I look into her fearful face and grin, making her flinch.

"How did you slip inside my dream, ást min?"

I woke up with her hand in mine. It was gloomy inside the bedroom, the coals in the fireplace painting reddish highlights

and sooty shadows on her face. She tried to break free, but I held fast.

“Let me go,” she gasped, trying to shake my hand off.

“No,” I told her, grinning with pleasure. “You came to my bed out of your own free will. I’d be a fool not to accept such a beautiful visitor. Come under the covers. It’s warm in here.”

Calli hissed like an offended cat, and I laughed. Riling her up worked like a charm, dispelling the last tendrils of my hateful nightmare. I would bet the dreams would go away once she finally slept with me.

Soon.

“First of all, I didn’t even know this was your bedroom,” she said, trying to pry my fingers off her hand.

I let her loosen two, and when she tried to slip her hand free with a satisfied huff, I gripped her wrist back. She snarled and pinched my thumb with her appallingly long nails, making me chuckle despite the pain.

“And as soon as I came in, I was... It became... snowy and cold, and those monsters were everywhere...”

She stopped struggling, fear darkening her face. I frowned. The bond wasn’t complete, not until she claimed me, too. So why could she enter my dreams so easily?

I would have to be more careful. Maybe sleeping in one bed wouldn’t be such a good idea for now. I didn’t want her to figure out one of those abominable monsters was me.

“So you were just sneaking around?” I asked, running my thumb over the delicate skin of her inner wrist. “Very good. I admire an adventurous spirit.”

“Is that so?” Calli asked, heat returning to her face as she yanked her hand back, almost pulling it free. I readjusted my hold with a quiet laugh. “Then let me go and take my chances with whatever monsters are after me because of your stupid games. I won’t stay here. I’d rather the Magic Council get me, because they at least play fair.”

“Fair?” I asked, quirking an eyebrow. She was delightfully fierce, but just a tad too naïve.

I would fuck it out of her.

“I’m sure you meant boring. Unimaginative. Limited. What I did to you was unorthodox, and viewed in the right light, could be considered amusing. What they would do... Let’s just say it would be calculated, efficient, and fucking painful. You’re not leaving, *ást min.*”

Calli sighed, slumping in defeat. But when she looked back at me, her eyes burned with the same angry heat.

“You called me that before. What does it even mean?”

“My love.”

“You fucker!”

She yanked her hand back, and this time, I let her go. Calli jumped away, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips, her face red with fury.

“You know what your people call me? Your fucking mistress! Kang, that evil witch, thought I was your whore. What the fuck is wrong with you? Can’t get a woman to fuck you, so you make up stories? How pathetic is that?”

“Technically, they call you a mistress because I’m their master. They don’t mean it as a kept woman, but as the lady of this place.”

When she didn’t reply, I stood up, well aware I was wearing only a pair of dark green sweatpants. It wouldn’t hurt to show off.

As I straightened to my full height, towering over Calli, her eyes slid down my chest and stomach to the waistband of my pants sitting low on my hips. She swallowed and took a step back, her eyes snapping up to my face.

“What are you doing?” she asked, backing away with her hands raised in front of her.

I grinned, slowly walking toward her, one step for each of hers.

“What’s wrong? Am I intimidating you? Are you scared? Or...” I lowered my voice to a whisper, stopping in front of her, her back flush against my ornate wardrobe. “Are you aroused?”

She sputtered, raising her face in a challenge.

“As if,” she jeered, jabbing my sternum hard with her claw. “And if you fucking touch me, I will end you. I don’t care who the fuck you are or how powerful, or how many goons you employ. I will find a way to take you down, and then I’ll gut you open and watch you bleed out. So don’t you fucking dare.”

I frowned, looking into her eyes to understand why she sounded so frantic. She breathed hard, her hands raised protectively in front of her chest. I took in her wide, frightened eyes... And then it clicked. She was scared I would force myself on her.

I took a step back, giving her space.

“Let’s make one thing clear,” I said calmly, even though I was angry she suspected me of wanting to hurt her.

Then again, I hadn’t exactly had time to build trust between us. That fucking council and their untimely attack had derailed all my plans.

“I will never hurt you,” I said. “I might play games, rile you up, tease you. I might hold your hand. But I won’t rape you.” She flinched as I said it, but it was important to be direct. I needed her to understand. “I won’t touch you intimately without your permission. I won’t kiss you against your will. And though I have magic that could fool you into giving consent, I won’t use it.”

Calli slumped against the wardrobe, still breathing hard. Her eyes were mesmerized, her lips parted in confusion. The red of her blushing cheeks and the dark, untamed hair framing her face looked delicious against the polished wood.

I would feast on her. Soon.

“But make no mistake,” I added quietly, stepping back into her personal space. “I will seduce you. And you stand no

chance against me, Calli. You will beg me to fuck you by the time I'm done with you."

She drew herself up and hissed, furious eyes boring into me.

"In your fucking dreams," she spat, her heaving breasts brushing my bare chest.

The air between us fizzed with intensity, charged and electric. In the gloom of my bedroom, with the curtains tightly shut and the fireplace the only source of light, her pupils were blown wide, eyes dark.

We stared at each other, Calli's mouth open as she panted, and her eyes lowered to my lips. I allowed myself a grin and leaned in, almost touching her nose with mine.

"It will be sooner than you think," I whispered, relishing the look of helpless fury on her face.

Calli pushed me away, her talons leaving scratches on my chest. I hissed in surprise and frowned, watching the skin as it knit itself together. This wouldn't do.

"You need a manicure," I told her. "What's your favorite color?"

"The color of your fucking blood," she hissed, raising her hands with claws poised to strike. "And it's your fault I couldn't even properly cut my nails for a month."

"True," I said, eyeing her fingers with a pang of remorse.

A very weak one, though. She had brought this on herself, and if I hadn't intervened, Draco would have probably ripped her to shreds. My way had been much more fun.

Still, it was a pain to watch. Though her skin was smooth and delicate, probably from being in constant contact with the cursed pseudo sperm, her nails looked pitiful. Some were long, sharp claws, while others were broken and uneven.

Calli was usually very put together, and I could tell being unable to take care of herself had caused her sorrow.

"Red as blood," I said, eyeing her hands. "As you wish."

In an instant, her nails transformed. They became short and even, the tops straight rather than pointy, because if Calli continued to express her anger so physically, I was in for more scratching. And I'd be a fool not to make her kitty weapons as blunt as I could.

The paint covering her nails, durable and impervious to damage, was the exact same shade as my blood. Slightly darker than human, with a rich sheen.

Calli brought her hands close to her face, frowning, and examined her nails. I opened the curtains with a flick of my finger, letting the afternoon light spill inside. She drew a surprised breath and extended her hands in front of herself.

She liked pretty things, as did I. Only a bit vain, Calli didn't even realize she was the prettiest of all.

"Do you like them?" I prompted, smirking because I knew she did.

She looked up, startled, and as she focused on me, the look of delight vanished from her face.

"A bit plain," she said archly but without the heat of anger. "I thought you could do more. Though maybe the only ace up your sleeve is fake jizz."

I laughed, though it came out darker than intended. Although I knew she was pretending, her dismissive manner rankled me. She should be impressed.

"Plain? I apologize," I said, my angry tone clashing with the polite words.

Calli gasped as the manicure adorning her hands shimmered and changed. On top of every nail, like a ridiculous version of French manicure, I added a line made up of tiny diamonds. They were polished to perfection, cut to catch the light in a prism of colors.

Calli let out a delighted gasp and walked over to the window, watching with awe as the stones sparkled and glittered.

"They are real diamonds," I said, feigning nonchalance.

This trick had actually cost me. Conjuring things of value took more out of me, and I wasn't completely recharged after fighting Jadwiga this morning. But the look on Calli's face was worth it. She couldn't hide her awe. Not this time.

I grinned and conjured a tray with two champagne flutes, making it hover in the air between us.

"I see you're no longer angry. Let us drink to buried hatchets and fresh starts, *ást min.*"

Calli looked up from her sparkling nails, shot me a baleful look, and grabbed a flute of champagne. Instead of raising it in toast, she flung the contents in my face. I was far too surprised to block it, and it splashed all over me, making me sputter.

The champagne I had called straight from France fizzed down my face and chest while Calli stormed out of my room, the door banging shut behind her.

So much for my first attempt. I sighed and trudged to the shower, a pain caused by magical exhaustion throbbing in my temple.

What an obstinate woman.



Chapter 6: You Better Run

Calli

I stormed through the villa, scratching at the diamonds in an effort to pry them off. The building was small for a godly residence, but the décor was opulent. Deep, luxurious carpets swallowed the sounds of my angry steps. I reached the end of the bedroom corridor, a small French balcony, and burst outside.

With my still impeccably manicured hands, I gripped the iron railing wrought in an art deco style, and cursed under my breath. What did that fucker think of me? A cluster of diamonds, a bit of nail polish, and a flash of his abs. So that was supposed to make me jump into his bed?

Either he was a massive idiot or thought very lowly of me. Probably both.

Good thing I didn't care about his opinion.

I scratched at the diamonds on my thumb, but they seemed to be magically stuck to the nail polish. Not one came off, no matter how hard I tried to loosen them, and I gave up with a sigh.

It only made me angrier.

Why did he even want me? We hadn't seen each other for a month, and when he cursed me, we had been strangers. At least, he had been a stranger to me.

I spent long hours dissecting that first meeting for any hints about his end game, and I concluded he couldn't have just cursed me on a whim. The way he behaved and spoke to me...

He had called me *ást min* for the first time then.

It had been confusing, that first meeting. I was sick with fear, and it got worse as soon as I realized I had lost all control. When I was certain I had miscalculated and Draco would actually kill me, Trickster waltzed in and stole the show.

And at first, I thought he would save me. His appearance gave me hope, and buoyed up by that, I saw him in a bright, positive light, noticing his fine features, the elegant, flashy clothes, his posture...

First impressions. How deceiving they are.

Because he didn't save me in the end. He cursed me, but he did it in such a gentle, playful way that I was confused, my emotions in a complete turmoil. The touch of his fingers on my cheek ignited me even as his words made me sick with hate.

I blamed my subsequent dreams on that confusing moment. He had fucked with my head, I was sure, and he would continue to do so. It was crucial that I didn't give in to his games.

And the best way to keep myself safe was to get as far away from the perverted psycho god as I could.

A shout in the inner courtyard jolted me out of my memories. Kang was sparring with a powerful man who wore only a pair of cargo pants. They were in the training ground right by the villa, in the center of the base.

I tried to take in the rest of the large base, but from my vantage point, I couldn't see the gate. The roofs over the numerous barracks obscured my view. Like all the other buildings, the villa was low and squat, having only two floors, the first one halfway underground.

During our tour, Kang had explained low buildings were safer. They would be more difficult to target from the ground, and since we had some magical protection from aerial attacks, the compound was pretty secure. Though there was also a bunker, just in case.

If anyone tried to take the base, they would only be able to aim at the outer buildings, which didn't house any personnel. And anyway, they would have to shoot over the wall, which would limit their accuracy.

The base was also large, making it unlikely anyone with limited troops would attack it from all sides. The gate was always considered the weakest point, and so any attacks would focus there, which had also played into the final layout of the base.

All in all, it looked quite professional to my untrained eye. According to Kang, Trickster had built the compound in three days, expelling huge amounts of magic in the process. After they moved in, he fine-tuned all the details as they figured out what they needed.

I pointedly was not impressed.

The training ground was equipped with stations for archery training and a ring for hand to hand combat, where Kang now breathed fast, looking furiously at her grinning opponent.

He cut an impressive, terrifying figure. His blindingly white teeth had sharp ends as if they had been filed to resemble fangs. There was something feline to his gait, and he moved with liquid grace, stalking Kang while she stayed put, following his movements with watchful eyes.

I had seen soldiers with other disconcerting features during our tour, so I wasn't that surprised.

There were over thirty people in the base, Trickster's personal army, and Kang had hinted they were all more than they seemed. Well, apart from the orcs. With them, you knew exactly what you got. Big, strong, impossible to reason with.

On that note, I sighed and returned to my plotting. I had to run. It was non-negotiable, because no matter what Loki said, I could not trust him. And the things he had said...

I shivered, partly from fear, partly from sick excitement that I immediately suppressed. For some reason, he wanted me very much, and since I was determined he would not have me, I was in danger. No matter what he claimed, I knew gods were

used to getting their way. Sooner or later, he would go back on his word.

And when that happened, I would be far away from here.

Still, someone had attacked me in my apartment. The Magic Council, if Trickster's people could be trusted. I would take them over Loki any day.

It wouldn't hurt to have a contingency plan, though, in case they actually attacked me.

That was why I had explored the base even after my tour had ended. I drew the layout on a sheet of perfumed paper I had found in my room, listing the protections Kang had told me about and anything else I thought was important.

In case I was captured, I would trade this knowledge for my freedom.

With a shout, Kang descended on her opponent, pummeling him with her fists. He twisted out of the way and aimed a low kick at her knee. She jumped, his leg missing her by a hair. She had barely landed before she pivoted on the spot and sent a high kick into the man's sternum.

Woah. I had been right not to give her a reason to kick my butt.

I tore my eyes away from the fight and brought the sheet full of my scribbles to my nose. Like everything in my room, the paper was of an obscenely high quality. It smelled enticingly of apricots and musk.

That room called to me, but I was determined to resist the temptation. That was why I refused to go back there. Because if I saw it all again, I would rummage through all the delights Trickster had prepared for me, getting distracted and wasting precious time.

According to Kang, he had spent long hours arranging my room to make everything perfect for my arrival. I had been meant to live here from the start, except he didn't want to drag me into his war.

Yeah, right. I snorted in disdain. Of course I ended up right in the middle of his mess. And if I didn't stop this now, I would get dragged into every supernatural conflict he incited, and no amount of perfumes or jewelry would make up for it.

But oh, the wardrobe. I closed my eyes, cringing from how much I wanted to explore it. It was three layers deep, the hangers full of outfits in beautiful colors, their fabrics delightful to the touch.

I had allowed myself exactly one brush of fingers over the dresses before I grabbed a pair of running sneakers and shut the door with too much force, earning a scoff from Kang.

Speaking of Kang, she circled her sparring partner with an air of a predator cornering its prey. Her teeth were bared, and I swear I heard growling. The man looked determined, too, but there was something wrong with his leg. He stumbled, walking sideways to keep the distance between Kang and himself.

The sparring match had attracted an audience. I counted over ten heads surrounding the ring, men and women cheering and whistling. Then, a top hat sparkling in the late afternoon sun joined the crowd. My heart beat faster. Trickster was out there. A large portion of his force was distracted, and no one was keeping an eye on me.

I walked back inside, slowly in case someone was watching, and ran down the corridor with my heart beating fast. There was a small gate hidden in the outer wall, one Kang had pointed out as an emergency exit where I was supposed to go in case the main gate was breached. It was hidden and impossible to open from the outside. From the inside, though...

Kang hadn't told me whether it was locked and I didn't dare find out while her suspicious eyes were on me.

But now, I was itching to try it.

I sneaked out of the villa, using the back door which was out of sight from the ring. My heart in my throat, I walked quickly, casting furtive glances around. I weaved my way

between the buildings, passing the armory, the living quarters, the stables.

If I saw someone, I changed direction to quickly disappear from view, but most of the soldiers were watching the sparring match or occupied with their jobs.

I was almost to the small gate, and no one had seen me. The guards manning the four towers in the wall were focused on the outer perimeter, so they hadn't spotted me.

But it also meant I would be in view as soon as I stepped out of the base. It was about half a mile between the compound and the forest growing in the north. It was necessary, I had been told, to have a forest nearby for those soldiers who needed to hunt.

It was better not to think about who they were and why they couldn't just eat dead, cooked things like everyone else.

On the other side, the base was surrounded by flat, deforested land. That made a surprise attack virtually impossible, Kang had boasted.

The forest was my only chance at escape. I would have to sprint and then hope I'd be able to lose my pursuers among the trees.

It was unlikely I would succeed, I had to admit it. But there was still a chance, no matter how slim.

If I didn't try, I wouldn't even have that.

Out of breath and dizzy from adrenaline, I got to the small gate and tried the ornate handle. It moved easily under my hand, but the gate didn't open. Figured.

Refusing to give up hope, I tried two more times and let go. All right. It would be idiotic to waste this perfect moment, so I crept between the buildings and the wall toward the main gate. Just to check, because you never knew.

As soon as it was in my view, I could see it was partly open. The orc guard stood about forty feet away, his back to me. He was talking on the phone.

Without waiting for my brain to catch up with my instincts, I launched into a run. The sneakers didn't slip on the cobbles, and I thundered ahead, the gate looming in front of me. I squeezed through the opening and turned, sticking close to the wall.

I needed to circle the base from the outside to get closer to the forest, and it was best to stay in the wall's shadow. This was the only way to avoid being seen by the tower guards. I ran, my chest bursting with the need for oxygen, my heart pumping euphoria into my veins. I did it!

I ran away from a fucking god!

That was when I heard something. A cry of a bird from above, a shout from somewhere on the wall, and then...

Something strong and flexible wrapped around my middle and tugged me back. The impact was so great it pushed the air out of me. I wheezed, instinctively grabbing the thing around my waist.

It was warm. I looked down and struggled to understand. The thing was green, the exact color of Trickster's tux, and warm like a body... But it was wrapped around me like a rubbery sort of rope.

It pulled. I dug my heels in the grass, fighting against the grip. I could breathe, though my stomach was still squeezed tightly. Despite my struggle, inch by inch, the force that had caught me dragged me back. I cried out in frustrated fury, and Trickster laughed in the distance.

Still fighting to loosen his hold on me, I looked over my shoulder.

Fuck.

What I saw distracted me enough for me to resist wavering. I was dragged back ten feet, and even though I tried to fight, it was no use. I lost.

The thing wrapped around my middle was Trickster's arm. It was over thirty feet long, but it became shorter as the distance between us shrank. He pulled me toward him,

seemingly without straining a muscle, the grin on his face too wide to look even remotely human.

And behind him was an orc guard, Kang, and a few other soldiers. I blinked. There was also a cheetah, lean and golden, poised to leap.

There was no way I could run from a fucking cheetah. With a sigh, I gave up and hung limp, letting Trickster drag my full weight to him. He did so without a sign of effort, and when I was finally next to him, he caught my hand and unraveled his elongated arm. It returned to its normal length and he caught my hair with it, pulling back.

I cried out in outrage, and he closed the distance between us, his face looming over me, white teeth blinding and disturbingly numerous in a too wide grin.

“I love it when you defy me, *ást min*,” he said, eyes dancing with mischief. “It gives me a perfect excuse to strip you... of your privileges.”

That pause had unnerved me enough to gulp, and he chuckled knowingly before letting go of my hair, though my hand was still ensconced in his.

“Told you,” Kang muttered. A bloody gash ran down her cheek, and her short hair was messy. “TSTL.”

I pursed my lips and refused to rise to the bait. So I lost. And I would grieve this lost opportunity when I was alone. Now, though, I needed to keep my head. I could lose with dignity. There was nothing more humiliating than being a sore loser.

“Nothing to say?” Trickster asked, eyes glittering as he studied me. “No insults? No words of defiance? Come on, sweetheart. Give us a show.”

I wanted to. Oh, how I wanted to struggle, and spit, and curse him in every language I knew how to curse in. But I was determined not to give him this satisfaction, especially since I knew what would happen now. They would watch me around the clock. Every chance I’d had at escape was gone, and I would be stuck with these people.

And that meant I needed to earn their respect. Only this way would they finally let me off the leash again.

“Do your worst,” I said to Trickster, forcing my voice to ring strong.

I almost managed it, too. There was just a tiny hint of anger in my voice.

He cocked his head to the side, watching me intently, and I struggled against the urge to turn my head or snarl at him. Instead, I looked back into his glittering green eyes, pretending to be cool, even though his gaze unraveled me in the worst way.

Even Draco hadn't made me hate him as viciously as I hated Loki at that moment.

“Very well,” he said after a moment, his smile shrunk to normal proportions, though his eyes brimmed with mirth. “You have just lost the autonomy to choose your clothes. You won't be running in this outfit, my love.”

Cool air slid over my skin and feet, and I looked down in horror, expecting to see myself naked. Thankfully, I wasn't, but it was almost as bad.

I was wearing an emerald green dress of shimmering satin decorated with ribbons. It hugged my figure flawlessly, and the hem was just loose enough to let me take short steps. On my feet were high heeled, silver shoes. They sparkled like diamonds even in the shadow.

The worst thing was, it was all exactly in my taste, and in any other circumstances, I would have loved it. Except now, this was the worst type of outfit I could have worn to earn the respect of the people standing before me. Which Kang confirmed, turning away with a sneer.

I looked up at Trickster, whose eyebrow was raised in a questioning expression, his amused grin still on his face. Until his eyes slid to the ground where a crumpled piece of perfumed paper lay. He frowned, and I closed my eyes as realization hit.

Oh no.

He picked it up, letting go of me, and turned my map slowly in his hands. Even though he hadn't opened the folded sheet, I suspected he already knew what it was.

"You're making this so much harder than it needs to be," he said quietly, looking up.

His smile was completely gone.



Chapter 7: Ribbons

Loki

“What should I do with you?” I asked Calli.

When she didn't answer, I simply looked at her, trying to see past the defiant eyes and pursed lips. She was quite a sight. The dress shimmered over her skin, soft satin clinging and flowing over her curves. Her hair was in disarray, falling in a mane over her tense shoulders.

But the one thing I particularly admired about the view was Calli's position.

She was tied to a chair. There was a delicious irony in that, considering our first meeting face to face, when she had been tied up in Draco's office.

But unlike Draco, I used silky green ribbons to bind her. There were pretty bows on her wrists, and she looked like a present ready to be unwrapped. The ribbons were sturdier than ropes, though, and no one would unwrap anything soon.

What a shame.

I sobered up, forcing my eyes away from her tempting body and to her face instead. At least she had the decency to look embarrassed, but probably only because I caught her. And if I hadn't...

Rows of dead bodies hard from the freeze, soon to become only vague shapes under the soft, white snow. All dead.

All apart from me.

The cold took hold in my chest, settling right under my heart, and I looked away from the venomously beautiful woman whose fate was in my hand. As the freeze spread

inside me like a sickness, I now saw her in a much different light than before.

For the first time, I saw a threat.

It was obvious Calli had meant to share the map with our enemies. If she had done that, they would have gained a deadly advantage. Calli's betrayal could have cost my people their lives.

And I would never let my soldiers die for my cause again. Not if I could prevent it.

I studied her. She sat meekly with her legs pressed together, body hunched with uncertainty. I hadn't gagged her, and yet she didn't say a word. Smart, considering the situation.

She waited for my move, but I was conflicted.

So I considered my options, pacing the length of the sun room where I had put her. It was in the southern part of the villa, and now, the glassed room was filled with the glorious light of the setting sun. It caressed the heavy white flowers blossoming in huge pots and slithered along the vine leaves climbing the walls.

Calli sat quietly, and I thought.

On the one hand, the price for betrayal was death. If one of my people had done what she had tried, I would have cut them down in a public display, making a show for myself and my loyal soldiers.

But Calli wasn't here of her own free will. She hadn't pledged her loyalty to me, and what she had planned wasn't strictly a betrayal.

And yet, we had saved her. We showed her nothing but hospitality, even though it might have been forced.

In return, she tried to bring death to our home.

No one apart from me knew about the map. That, at least, was a blessing. My mouth twisted at the thought of how Kang, already biased against Calli, would react.

She would cry for blood. The others would follow her lead, and I would have to give it to them, or I would lose their confidence.

And one thing I knew without a doubt: I didn't want Calli to die. I didn't even want her to suffer. Much. Even now, my claim shimmered over her bare arms, green and gold, a moving tattoo that meant a promise and an invitation.

She was mine, for better or worse.

But I couldn't let her off the hook, either. She had meant me and my people harm. An apology would never fix this, not that she even tried to apologize. Stubborn vixen.

"What would you do in my situation?" I asked her, honestly curious. She had a devious mind hidden in that pretty head of hers, and maybe I could use it to find the perfect solution.

Because there would be one. There always was.

She sighed and squirmed in the chair. I smirked when she flexed her wrists, testing the ribbons. When they cut into her skin, she gave up with a grimace and finally looked up.

"Throw me out on my ass," she said calmly. "So your enemies can do your dirty job for you."

I scoffed at her transparency. She would not leave, no matter how complicated her stay with me became.

"Remember who you're talking to. Tricks won't work and if you try to bluff, I'll come up with a creative punishment. You have one more chance, Calli. Let's try this again."

She huffed out a frustrated breath and looked at me with far more anger than before.

"If I were you, I wouldn't have kidnapped myself in the first place, and all of this wouldn't have happened! Or even better, I wouldn't have cursed myself. You should learn to not stick your nose in other people's business."

I conjured a plum purple armchair opposite her and sat down, putting my ankle over my knee. Now we were getting somewhere.

“I normally don’t discuss what-ifs, but I believe you have a misconception about what actually happened that day. Let’s straighten this out.”

I spun my finger, conjuring a cup of rum tea and a saucer of mint chocolate truffles. I raised my cup in a mock toast and took a sip while Calli glared. When I put a truffle in my mouth, her stomach gave a faint grumble.

“Do you want one?” I asked.

Calli shook her head, giving me another hateful look. She tested the ribbons again, and when they would not give, she sighed deeply.

“Can’t you please just let me go?” she asked, her voice so pitiful my heart would have melted if not for the cold anger that kept it frozen. “And about that map... Listen, I know what it looks like, but I wasn’t really trying...”

I sent a truffle flying in her mouth, silencing her.

“Stop. Excuses aren’t amusing. Answer my questions, or I will decide what to do with you without your input.”

Calli chewed and swallowed, unable to hide the look of pleasure on her face. So she was impressed with my offerings, after all. I smiled grimly, the little victory tasting like muddy slush.

“What would Draco have done to you if I hadn’t interrupted him?” I asked when she licked her lips, looking at the remaining truffles with her eyes slightly dazed.

Calli looked up and stared at me vacantly until I snapped my fingers.

“You wanted to play what-ifs. Don’t delay.”

She sighed, squirming in her chair, but the ribbons held fast. I let my eyes slide down her legs, this time with not even a throb of temptation. I was cold, and if Calli didn’t start showing remorse or sense, I would soon lose my patience.

“All right,” she said, glaring at me. “The truth is, I don’t know, all right? At the moment, it was pretty scary. He was furious, plus he’s a dragon, so you can’t expect him to be

reasonable. No matter how well they blend in, they can never be human... But I'm not sure. I think he wouldn't have truly hurt me, because I had known him for years and he just wasn't like that."

I sent another truffle her way and let it rest against Calli's bottom lip. This time, she would have to take it into her mouth herself. It was amusing to watch how she struggled, keeping her lips sealed while her throat worked, swallowing as her mouth watered.

Finally, she snatched the treat out of the air with her teeth and chewed angrily.

"We're making progress," I said, clapping slowly. "You told the truth. Yes, I suspect Draco wouldn't have hurt you, not seriously anyway, but he is a dragon. They are volatile and unpredictable. I had to act in case he was going to hurt you."

Calli shot me a sharp look and straightened, gripping the armrests so hard, her knuckles paled.

"You say you had to act. Why you? What gave you the right?"

I stood up and walked to one of the glass walls, looking out on the barracks where most of my people lived. The windows shone with light in the falling dusk, and I saw shadows moving inside. My soldiers, whose lives Calli deemed cheaper than her own.

My heart was too cold to answer her today. But she was persistent.

"You want to use me, don't you?" Calli spat, so vicious despite the circumstances. "You need a conduit, just like Draco did. Well, you can give up now. I will never be your fucking tool."

I regarded the scenery with a frown. She was wrong, although I understood why she had come to that conclusion. Some beings, like dragons, had infinite pools of magic, but they could only use it to shift between their dragon and human forms.

If a dragon wanted to use his power for something else, he needed a conduit: a mortal touched by magic in infancy. Those kinds of encounters made humans sensitive to supernatural energy and able to direct it.

Calli had almost drowned in the ocean as a child. A merman saved her, granting her the ability to breathe under water until she could reach the shore. That was why she had some affinity for the supernatural, and why she had been so important to Draco. Conduits were rare.

But I had no need for a conduit. Whatever Calli still was to me after her stunt, she was not a tool.

“I’m not the one tied to a chair,” I said without turning. “It’s your interrogation, not mine. Tell me, Calli. What would be worse: my curse or third-degree burns? Take your time to think it over, because everything you say will weigh in on your punishment.”

She was silent for a long time, and I watched the night fall. The guard towers became dark silhouettes against the starry sky. Not a cloud obscured the constellations, and I watched the slow dance of the spheres with somber admiration.

Skies over Earth, no matter how polluted and crowded, were the most beautiful of all.

“The burns would have been worse,” Calli said, her voice quiet.

I nodded, knowing she could not see me when I stood behind her back. I should celebrate this small breakthrough or push on to an even bigger one, but I was mostly numb. For tonight, that would have to suffice. I was done with her.

“I’m glad we had this conversation,” I said, crossing the sun room in long strides. Calli protested as I closed the door behind me, but I was so cold I didn’t even want to look at her.

Had I made a mistake claiming her so quickly? She had seemed perfect at the time. Smart, brazen, fearless. But what if she were just pointlessly defiant and self-absorbed?

I let my thoughts about Calli turn into crows and sent them up into the sky as I left the villa. They flew away, cawing, and

I joined my people in the mess hall with a far lighter heart, my little vixen almost forgotten.

We ate nachos with seven kinds of dips thanks to Lynx, who liked to cook in her time off. I congratulated Kang on her victory against Asphor. She had resisted the urge to turn into her true form, an important skill if we ever had to fight within the sight of humans.

All in all, the evening was pleasant, but I felt the weight of their unspoken questions about Calli. Even though no one even said her name, every fleeting look or brief silence reminded me of her. She was alone, trapped in the dark sun room, the night lurking behind the windows.

I had half a mind to send the vines moving. I would make them slither up her legs and wrap around her throat just to make her truly scared. I could climb the wall to the window and watch the spectacle. Maybe seeing Calli genuinely afraid would thaw the lump of ice that sat in my chest.

Then again, it would probably obliterate any progress we had made.

Hours later, when the night was quiet, only the guards in the towers holding their vigil, I made my way back to the villa. I walked to the door of the sun room and stopped, listening. It was quiet within, so I turned a small rectangle transparent to peek inside.

Calli was slumped in the chair, her head hanging low. Asleep.

Still no wiser about how to deal with her and more importantly, consumed by my internal battle between fire and frost, I made the ribbons flutter to the floor. When she woke, she would be free to walk out, though I made sure to tell the walls and gates to keep her in the base.

I wouldn't repeat the mistake of trusting her again.



Chapter 8: Messes to Clean

Calli

I woke up with a crick in my neck, my legs numb from sleeping in the chair. Only when I raised my hands to rub my eyes, I realized the ridiculous ribbons were gone. I was free.

How free, though? It was time to find out. I stood up too fast and fell back into the chair when my legs protested.

Ow.

All right, not too hasty then. I spent a few minutes just moving my feet and trying to get proper circulation before I stood up.

Behind the glass walls, the sky burned with a summer sunrise. It had to be very early, hours earlier than I usually got up. When I used to work as a chef, my shift usually started around noon and ended late in the evening. I slept through dawns and mornings.

Still, seeing the world at this hour had some magic to it. Everything looked new, as if just born from the fire of the rising sun. A fresh start.

Just what I needed.

With a sigh, I wobbled to the door and put my hand on the ornate handle. Would it let me out...?

The door swung open easily and I slid out, squinting to see in the gloom of the corridor. What now? Should I run again? No one seemed to be watching me... But no. I sighed and leaned against the wall, considering my options. Running didn't feel right at all. Not after *that* conversation.

I squeezed my eyes shut and remembered how Trickster had looked. Under his veneer of charisma, I saw it clearly. Betrayal and sadness. Damn him, at one vulnerable moment he even looked a little broken.

Since he was my captor, I should celebrate.

Instead of making me feel vindicated, it just felt... uncanny. Like I could finally see the humanity inside the inhuman monster, and it was disconcerting. I should never forget who—*what*—he was.

But what if he's right? a tiny voice in the back of my head whispered. *What if he truly saved you? What if he's keeping you safe right now?*

I shook my head, dislodging that thought. I walked down the corridor in fast, small steps, running my fingers over the doors as I passed them. I crossed the small gallery over the open hall and walked into the corridor on the other side, the one with the bedrooms.

The point was, I decided, he was going about it all wrong. *He cursed me, remember?* I told the doubtful voice. *And then he broke his promise. He said he would come soon, but he didn't! My life was in shambles!*

I stopped, breathing hard, that old anger resurrected like a vengeful phoenix. I stared at the door in front of me, the one leading to my bedroom.

He's a god, the voice argued. *Maybe he counts time differently.*

I hit my head against the door in the hope of subjugating it to my will again, but I knew from experience that little voice was here to stay. Once a seed of doubt was sown, I was doomed to question myself.

If you want to always be exactly right, this is the price you have to pay, the voice said reproachfully. *Doubting yourself from time to time is healthy, you know. And it helps you avoid stupid mistakes.*

I banged my head against the door again, making a dull thud. That little part of my mind that loved to contradict the

rest of me was much too smug, considering it hadn't kept me from making the worst mistake in my life: getting tangled with the supernatural.

That's because you don't listen to me.

I groaned and stepped away from my bedroom door. Its forbidden charm seemed lackluster this morning, and I didn't feel like going inside and seeing how perfect it was for me. How thoughtfully prepared, filled with delights that were tailored to my tastes.

Seeing the wonders would only give that little voice more ammunition against me.

Instead, I walked further down to the next door. The one to his bedroom. I stood there, listening. Not a sound. Maybe I should apologize?

I bristled at the thought, deciding that I had nothing to be sorry for.

But the map?

I leaned my forehead against the cool, polished wood and focused on breathing. The map. I hadn't intended to use it, not unless the Magic Council caught me. But if they actually did? Would I hand it over just like that?

Yes, I would. That little hidden gate was on that map. The emergency exit people could use to save their lives in case the compound was taken. If the Magic Council knew it was there, they would capture or kill anyone escaping that way.

A hateful feeling burned hot in my chest as I stood there, leaning against Trickster's bedroom door. It was a shame.

It could be Kang. Or Lynx. Or that teenage boy you saw running around and teasing the soldiers.

I didn't point out it wasn't my fault Trickster kept children in his military base, because that was a stupid excuse. I could defend myself all I wanted to other people, but in my own head, I was helpless against the truth.

And the truth was, I was worse than him. At least, Trickster tormented only me. I had intended to endanger

people who did nothing wrong apart from doing their jobs.

Though it *was* their fault they served an unhinged kidnapper of a god, I amended.

I straightened, looking speculatively at the door in front of me. I raised my hand to knock, thinking what I could say. Apologize? Well, maybe. But also demand explanations. Why did he care so much about me? What did he want?

It was high time I found out, because it didn't make any sense. From what I had seen, he had a superb command of his magic and it didn't look like he needed a conduit.

Why then? I burned for answers.

But then I thought about what had happened the last time I entered his bedroom. First, I was transported straight into a snowy, magical landscape filled with monsters. A uniform army of gigantic creatures that seemed to be built of snow and ice on the one side...

And a group of almost as tall monsters with shaggy white or gray fur, long claws, and terrifying muzzles on the other. They wore armor and carried weapons, which meant they were not animals.

I shivered at the memory.

Even though I knew it had been just his dream, however that worked, I didn't want to step into something like this again.

But there was another, even scarier, reason not to enter.

When he advanced on me, promising seduction, showing off that half-naked body of godlike proportions, speaking to me in that velvety voice... I wanted to give in. I blamed it on those dreams I had had about him, or on insanity. Yet no matter the reason, the fact remained.

My body wanted him. In a purely physical sense, of course, because I hated his guts and would never want him in any other way, but it wasn't just something I could ignore.

So no, I would not go into his bedroom again. In fact, I would do anything in my power not to be alone with him,

because something about that man made me unable to trust myself.

I backed away from his door and went inside my bedroom. I locked it and stripped off the beautiful dress, which I hated only because he had forced me to wear it. I kicked off the shoes and went to the bathroom, where I took a hot shower, washing away the aches and pains after my night spent in a chair.

When I was done, my hair dry and braided, I opened the wardrobe, intending to pick out a comfy outfit that would look nothing like the dress. That I decided not to run didn't mean I let him win.

But when I looked at the clothes, I only cursed.

Before, the wardrobe had been filled with various outfits that I longed to explore. It was still full of clothes now, but they were all the same dress. Over twenty hangers in the first row, and on each was a variation of this one dress.

Some were darker, more emerald in tone, others lime, and all shades of green in between.

With a growl, I parted the hangers to look at the second row. The same. All green satin. I knew it was hopeless, but I checked the third row all the same. There, on the right end, was a flash of red. I took the hanger and brought it out to the light. It was the same dress, only much sexier, because it was scarlet.

On the bottom of the wardrobe stood over ten copies of the exact same pair of killer heels I had just worn.

I sighed and snatched a dress that was in a sage shade of green. Then I remembered I needed underwear, too. With an unpleasant but slightly thrilling realization I would have to wear underwear he personally magicked up for me, I headed to the dresser by the wardrobe.

It contained much more variety than the wardrobe, but I had to abandon the hope of finding comfy panties or a simple cotton bra. There was only high-end lingerie. At least, it wasn't all green.

I picked a black set and got dressed, doing my best not to admire how the soft lace and satin felt against my skin.

Honestly. Couldn't he have started with the clothes and diamonds, and *then* curse me? I would have hated him much less.

Dressed for the day, my face bare save for sunscreen, which I found in the bathroom along with a plethora of other cosmetics, I headed out. It was time to act smart.

I forced myself to forget Trickster's promises of punishment from last night and suppressed a shiver of dread. No matter what he came up with, I could fight him and win, and if not that, I would at least survive.

And no matter what happened, I would not give in. My body could crave him all it wanted. It was my head that made the decisions, and I would keep it cool.

Pushing the fear deep down, I straightened and took a deep breath.

My heels clicked on the cobbles as I headed for the canteen. I was hungry since I had had nothing to eat the day before apart from that one meal with Kang and two truffles in the evening.

They had been good, though.

Damn, I wished that voice would shut up just for a second.

Cursing under my breath, I walked through the spacious but cozy dining area with wide tables and benches strewn with colorful cushions. The morning light spilled inside through the windows, and the air smelled...

I coughed, following my nose to the kitchen. It smelled like burned eggs.

When I opened the door, clouds of greasy smoke flew out, instantly tangling in my clothes and hair. I pushed my way in, snatched a towel from a hanger, and pressed it to my mouth. Waving my hand in front of me and coughing, I reached the stove, where two huge pans full of charred food were still on the fire.

I turned off the burner and opened all the windows and the back door to air the place out. Then I waited outside for the kitchen to clear, looking around sharply in case the idiot who had left the food to burn came back.

No one came in, though. A few people were out in the training ground, doing pushups and running laps. It was still early. There was no clock in the kitchen, but if I had to guess, it could be before seven. Probably time for breakfast.

I stared at the soldiers doing their morning routine, thinking. I was going to be smart now, wasn't I?

All right then. I could be smart. Especially in the kitchen.

When Kang entered about forty minutes later, I had four pans already on the fire. It would be a simple breakfast, just crepes with two kinds of fillings, three varieties of eggs, bacon, sausages, and French toast, because that stale bread I had found in the pantry needed using up.

She stopped on the threshold and watched me without a word, her arms folded on her chest. Her silent appraisal distracted me, so I turned after flipping a crepe and pointed a spatula at her.

“Are you going to just stand there?”

Kang looked me up and down, focusing pointedly on my heels.

“Do you always cook dressed like this?”

I could tell she tried not to laugh, because her voice came out a bit shaky and much too cheerful for my personal bodyguard witch.

“Yes, rub it in,” I said, checking the bacon. Almost perfect. “And in the meantime, why don't you make yourself useful and lay the tables? I assume you use plates and cutlery here.”

She shrugged, walking over to take a look at the stove. I slid a crepe off the pan and started another, while Kang sniffed the bacon, her eyes closing in pleasure.

“We do. Why are you cooking for us now? The boss make it worth your while last night?”

She looked up, smirking, but she could tease me all she wanted. I was in my element. Stupid innuendos had no power over me while I had a spatula in my hand.

“Spot on,” I said, feigning nonchalance. “He ate me out like a pro and I decided to share the love. Hope you enjoy today’s breakfast just like I enjoyed myself last night.”

Kang’s smirk slid off her face, and I shot her a smug look before taking the bacon off the stove.

“If wishes were horses,” came an amused voice from the door.

I turned so fast my neck echoed with last night’s pain. Loki stood in the doorway, leaning against it in an insouciant pose. He wasn’t wearing his usual showman costume, but he stuck to his trademark color. The sweatpants were dark green, and his tight T-shirt was the exact same shade as my dress.

Yet no matter how casually he dressed, there was still that air about him. The shimmer of magic I noticed only out of the corner of my eye... And something more. The attitude of a performer who was about to step onto the stage.

Glitter and shine. Smoke and mirrors.

Those abs look solid, though.

“If wishes were horses, you could ride a horse-drawn carriage like the extra princess that you are,” I retorted, deciding my blush was only caused by standing over the hot stove. Definitely not by how good he looked. “And if you don’t stop distracting me, I will burn everything like the idiot before me.”

Kang, whose eyes were wide and a little scared, turned on her heel and fled the kitchen. Trickster didn’t listen to me, though. He walked over and examined the charred, unsalvageable pans in the sink.

“That would be Jean,” he said, coming closer to look at the food. “He always wakes up hungry and has big plans to feed everyone. As soon as he feeds himself, though, he flies wherever fancy carries him. He’s a French lutin. Don’t call

him an idiot to his face or he'll turn your hair into dreadlocks. This looks delicious, by the way."

"Yes, well," I shrugged, flipping a crepe before checking on the muffins baking in the oven. My elbow brushed against him, he was so close. "Thank you. But if you don't mind, I wanted to make eggs Benedict, and it's always a little tricky, so if you could..."

"Are you trying to poison us?" he asked, the glitter of amusement vanishing from his eyes.

They looked cold and alien, and I took an involuntary step back. Those were not human eyes. Of course they weren't. But it was so easy to forget his true nature when he looked so impeccably manlike. I should have known better.

"No," I said, keeping my voice steady even though my heart beat like crazy. "I just... I don't know. I saw the mess and took over. And really, poison? That would be low even for me. Food is an art. Using poison is plebeian."

His alien eyes bore into me, and my skin crawled with the cold intensity of his gaze. I shivered, rubbing my arms instinctively until he stepped back. In an instant, the warmth was back in his face, and he smiled a normal, human smile.

"Then I'm looking forward to trying your art. And that horse we talked about, too. I bet she will taste delicious."

I turned my back to him, glad he was going away. Right, the muffins should be done soon, and then I would have to give them a few minutes to cool down, and in the meantime, I could whip up the sauce and...

"What fucking horse?" I asked, turning to the door.

But he was gone, so I got back to cooking, though now with a frown. It bothered me that I hadn't been able to keep up with him. We talked about... Someone called Jean, who was apparently a lutin, whatever that was. And I called Trickster an extra princess, ha, that had been good! I didn't lose my cool, not even after he had overheard...

I pressed the spatula to my mouth and allowed myself one tiny squeak of humiliation. *If wishes were horses.* Did the

horse mean eating me out? And what did he say next? *I bet she will taste delicious?! For fucking fuck's sake.*

I finished my eggs Benedict with laser-sharp focus, promising myself I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing he distracted me. I simply would not mess up the one thing I was good at.

Not because of stupid horse jokes.



Chapter 9: Fun and Games

Loki

Calli's breakfast tasted divine. I would freely admit it was better than anything I had recently conjured, and my people's appetites reflected that. Everything disappeared so fast, Calli barely kept up with the supply.

I knew she was a chef. After all, she had worked for Draco. The one thing I hadn't known was how good she was. Every dish seemed simple, yet in every bite, the balance of flavors was just right. I closed my eyes once or twice to better appreciate the experience.

As someone who had dined in the halls of the gods, I hadn't expected earthly food would ever surpass the divine creations, but it did.

Maybe because knowing that Calli had made it for me and mine was the perfect seasoning.

After breakfast, she came in to clear the tables. No one had stayed to clean since I said I would take care of it, and now she stopped in the middle of the mess hall and glared at the dirty plates.

"Honestly. They can't expect just one person to deal with all this," she muttered, her eyes flashing angrily. "What a demotion."

I stood invisible, hidden behind a shimmering veil, and watched as she stacked the dirty plates into precarious towers and carried them to the kitchen, balancing perfectly on her heels. When she came back with a tray to pick up the glasses and cups, I revealed myself and waited for her to notice me.

But her eyes were vacant, face pinched. I suspected she was lost in unpleasant thoughts and didn't see much of her surroundings. When she set the last glass on the tray and straightened, stretching her back, I spoke.

“You didn't have to do that.”

Calli shrieked and jumped two feet up, going from a full body stretch to a protective hunch in an instant. I couldn't hold back a laugh, and she glared at me.

“You have to admit it was funny,” I said, waving my hand.

A replay of Calli's comical leap appeared on the wall, where she stretched and jumped in a loop, her funny little shriek distorted into a chipmunk voice. The real Calli drew herself up, watching my little display with painful intensity.

“I might leave it here,” I said, grinning in response to her scowl. “We'd had a tough few days before you arrived, and I think my people need reasons to laugh.”

Calli walked up to me, her heels clicking. She poked me in the sternum, her eyes burning with anger.

“Is this really the best you can do?” she hissed, her voice venomous. “Stupid slapstick comedy? I thought you were better than that.”

I kept grinning, but I knew the smile no longer reached my eyes. She knew exactly where to hit for me to notice. Something dark twisted inside me, and suddenly, all I wanted was to wipe that defiance off her face. I wanted to see her reduced to begging.

“Why don't I show you what I'm good at, kitten?” I said, walking closer. Close enough for our bodies to touch. “It might hurt, but I'll make you like it. Let's see if you are impressed.”

She laughed mockingly and stepped back, looking at me with furious eyes. Her throat worked as she swallowed, and I glanced at her fists. They were clenched tightly, but there was no hiding their slight trembling.

“So this is your big game?” she asked, almost spitting with venom. “Humiliation and threats? What happened to ‘I will seduce you’ and all that shit?”

I watched her curiously, cataloging all the signs of her fear. Like always when she was terrified, Calli lashed out, so this was not a surprise. But why did she fear me so much more now?

“I’m not interested in that anymore,” I replied, pleased when she flinched as if slapped. “Someone who would sell my people is not a good match for me. I’ll have to look for another queen.”

Calli stepped back, and for one brief moment, I saw her true emotions before she subdued her expression. She looked betrayed. But at once, her mask fell back into place, and she gave me a cold smile.

“Good. You can let me go then.”

I laughed as if she’d just told the funniest joke ever. There was no way I would let her leave. Not after all that time I’d spent watching her from afar and learning all her tells. Not after what she’d done.

Calli was going to pay, and I would do exactly what I had promised. I would have her begging yet.

Even if I didn’t plan to ever listen to her pleas.

The perfect punishment for Calli crystallized in my mind, and I grinned when she huffed and turned away, frustrated and helpless.

“You’ll spend today with me,” I said, smirking when she paled. “One full day. When the sun sets, I will decide your punishment for betraying me.”

I had to give it to her. Even though all color had bled from her cheeks, she still faced me like a warrior, with her back straight and eyes unflinching. After staring me down, though, she cast a longing look at the kitchen. I realized she had planned to spend her time there, cooking and avoiding everyone.

“Can’t I at least...”

“No,” I cut in, relishing the flash of annoyance in her eyes. “I’ll take care of lunch and dinner. You’ll provide entertainment.”

She eyed me with mistrust, her arms folded on her chest. Finally, she sighed in defeat.

“You want to make fun of me, right? Humiliate me all day long? Fine, do your worst.” She braced herself, her fear replaced by a grim determination. “But I want to do one thing first. That Jean, who almost burned down the kitchen, needs to be taught a lesson.”

I shrugged, smiling in spite of myself. She looked adorable, like a queen readying herself for a proud march to the guillotine. Calli’s refusal to ever look vulnerable made for an exquisite show, especially when I knew what hid underneath her tough exterior.

“Sounds like entertainment. I’ll take you to see Jean.”

Calli went to the kitchen to fetch something, and I sent all the dirty dishes after her, making them fly in the sink and wash themselves. I could have just snapped my fingers to make everything pristine and organized in a second, but I wanted Calli to see this.

It was only to show her what she was missing out on, I reasoned. I was past wanting to impress her.

She returned with a plastic box, her face blank. Then she gave me one piercing look and straightened, raising her chin.

“Are we going?”

I laughed quietly, charmed by her composure. It was so obvious it was just a mask.

My hands itched to peel it away.

I had thought I knew Calli so well from watching her for such a long time. And yet, there was so much I didn’t know, things that could only be discovered through interaction. She was beautiful, crafty, daring, yes. But she aggressively

projected those qualities at the world, hiding her fear behind a veil of anger.

Up close, she was much more vulnerable, and that made her twice as interesting. It's not fun to challenge someone who can take it in stride. Seeing her struggle to control her emotions and keep up was the real show.

I found myself rearranging my plans to put Calli to an even more interesting test. And I couldn't wait to see what she would do.

"Jean will be in the armory," I said, offering her my arm.

When Calli pursed her lips and folded her arms on her chest, I shrugged and flicked a finger. A diamond choker shimmered into existence around her throat, a silver loop in the front. Another spell, and a silvery chain wound itself into the loop, the end flying to my waiting hand.

"You're joking," Calli said, clawing at her collar. "Take this off me, you sick pervert!"

"Then take my arm," I said, smiling at how beautiful she looked with eyes burning with fury, lips trembling. "You won't get a chance to run, Calli. So it's either this... or let me keep an eye on you in a less humiliating manner."

I extended my elbow again, and she hooked her arm through mine with a violent movement. Her short, blunt nails dug into my skin, and I grinned, congratulating myself on that manicure. When she was pressed to me, her bare skin warm against mine, I let the collar dissolve into a silvery mist, making it smell like acacia flowers.

They were her favorite.

Calli twitched, inhaling the scent, and closed her eyes tightly, her entire face closing off. I brushed a finger down her cheek, and she jerked away, her eyes snapping open.

"This face is usually so composed," I whispered, tracing the curve of her cheek with a light touch. "Making that composure crumble is very satisfying."

“Fuck you,” Calli said, too angry to wrestle her features back under control.

I only laughed and started walking, her arm secure in my gentlemanly hold. With every step, her hip brushed against me, and even though I told myself I would never fall under her charm again, I enjoyed that proximity.

“Jean likes playing pranks, and he’s responsible for our special weaponry,” I explained, walking through the compound. My people were at their tasks, and since it was a beautiful day, everyone who could, worked outside.

Kang and Huitz were still discussing the latest attack, their notes and maps strewn on a table next to the training ground. I made a big sun umbrella manifest over their heads, quickly followed by a tray of cold drinks.

Kang gave us a wave, and Huitz raised his glass in acknowledgement, his bronze skin glimmering even in the shade of the umbrella.

“Who’s that?” Calli asked, slowing down as she stared at Huitz with wide eyes.

No wonder she was intrigued. He stood seven feet tall, and his face looked ageless in that ancient, seen-too-much kind of way.

“Huitzilopochtli,” I said. “We call him Huitz. He used to be an Aztec god, but ever since the human sacrifices stopped, he’s lost power. Now, he’s just a minor deity, but since his area of expertise is war and the sun, he’s exceptionally talented at strategy. My talents are better suited for winter warfare, so he’s our current expert.”

Calli shot one last look over her shoulder. Huitz leaned over the table, pointing to something on the map. He talked in a quiet, urgent voice that didn’t carry enough for his words to be understood.

“So... you’re at war with the Magic Council,” Calli said, clearly a segue to get more information.

I merely smiled and kept walking, and when her hand on me tightened, her eyes flashing in an annoyed look, I grinned.

“If you want something, all you need to do is ask.”

Calli's nostrils flared and she pursed her lips. I laughed, stopping in front of the armory and pressing my hand to the door to make it translucent so I could peek inside.

“I think we can go in.”

Jean sometimes had the area booby trapped, but I'd convinced him to stop. It had caused difficulties during the surprise night attack three days ago. It was when Jadwiga attacked us for the first time and we realized the council had been recruiting.

Which made this game far too interesting.

We came in, and Calli blinked in the gloom. While it looked just like any other building from the outside, it was tightly sealed from the inside in case my wards above the base failed and a magic missile landed on top of it. If all the magical energies stored in the armory exploded, we would be wiped out in a second. Hence the additional wards.

“Jean? Come here. Calli wants to see you.”

He walked out of the extra secure chamber I had designated for his experiments. He had a stupid grin on his face, and I felt tempted to ask what he had been working on, but I didn't. It would be much more exciting to see his weapons in action, and I was certain they would be magnificent.

“This is Jean?” Calli asked, her voice accusatory. “How can you keep a child in a military base, not to mention letting him be alone in the armory...” She broke off, looking from my grin to Jean, who was giggling like a teenage boy, the illusion almost perfect save for the eyes.

They gleamed old and cunning.

“He's not really a teenager,” Calli finally said. “Of course. You missed breakfast, Jean. I brought you something.”

She gave him the package, and he opened the box carefully. The smell of bacon and fresh pastry filled the room, and he bit into something that looked like a savory roll.

“Damn, it’s good,” he said around a mouthful of food. “I finally get why you keep chasing this skirt, boss. If she weren’t yours, I would wrap her braid around my hand and...”

I flicked a finger, sending a bite of food directly into his windpipe. Jean choked and then broke out in a hacking cough, while I examined my nails, deciding not to overthink the cold fury simmering in my chest.

Calli didn’t protest or rush to his aid. She glared at Jean, waiting for him to stop coughing. When he finally straightened, his face red and streaked with tears, she smiled sweetly.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him, enunciating clearly. “If you burn any food ever again, I will never let you eat a thing I make. The same applies if you mess with my hair. *Est ce que tu comprends?* Great. We can go.”

She pulled me back to the exit, and I followed, watching her with grudging admiration. Not only had she gone against my advice by calling Jean an idiot, it looked like she would get away with it.

“Let’s see,” I said when we came out, and Calli stopped by the door, shading her eyes from the sun. “You knew he liked food and was vengeful and difficult to control. Acting on that information alone, you devised a way to get him in hand without making him your enemy.”

Calli shrugged, though I could see she was pleased.

“You learn a thing or two while managing a big kitchen full of idiots.”

“Come, then,” I said, tightening my hold on her. She squinted and followed, stumbling a bit.

For fuck’s sake.

The morning sun beat against the light gray cobbles and walls, making the entire base bright and uncomfortable for human eyes. Calli was clearly in need of something to let her see better, and I struggled against the urge for a moment, but finally gave in.

It was only a small gesture, and I did them for everyone in the base. Why not her? And so I conjured a pair of sunglasses. They rotated in the air for a moment and finally perched on Calli's nose. Clear from the outside, they allowed me to see her eyes, while also protecting them from sunlight.

Calli touched the rim, and for a moment, I thought she would fling them off and stomp on them... but she didn't. Instead, she looked up, her brows raised.

"Thank you. What now?"

"I want you to meet the rest."

We spent over two hours walking from one post to another, and I introduced everyone to Calli, telling her some of their stories. We talked to Asphor, who was in the stables, mucking out the griffin stalls. He had had a human wife and a child, which allowed him to evade deportation for a time. Until his wife and daughter were killed.

The very next day, a Magic Council representative appeared with a deportation notice.

"I won't go away," he said now, leaning on a shovel and baring his triangular teeth in a snarl. "Not until I find out who slaughtered my family."

Then we stopped by Lynx, who fiddled with the cameras on the outer walls, trying to rearrange them for a better coverage of the area.

"Don't try anything," she called out when she saw me. "This is delicate work, and your abracadabra will only spoil my progress."

"You weren't so averse to the abracadabra when I made your fancy camera filters," I reminded her with a laugh.

Lynx waved me off and I turned away, telling Calli about Lynx's sister.

"The Magic Council wanted to deport her, but Lynx and her sister had been banished from their pack's pocket reality. I don't know why, Lynx is cagey about that. Point is, her sister was caught and refused to leave Earth, and they bound her

magic. She couldn't shift, and losing her magic drove her crazy. She's in the care of a friend, and Lynx is determined to get her magic back."

Calli frowned, looking back over her shoulder.

"I thought binding one's magic just meant the person couldn't use it. I didn't realize it could make them sick."

I nodded with a sigh. If not for the ability to take away the power from any magical being, the Magic Council would have long ceased to rule over us.

"Magic is not just an ability, *ást min*. It's a part of everyone who has it. A soul, if you will. Lynx's sister, Nina, was young when it happened. Only twenty. They ripped her apart, tearing away the most integral, most precious part of her, and left her to suffer without hope. They wanted to break her for daring to rebel, and this is what they did. She is broken. Lynx blames herself, because she hadn't been there to protect Nina when it happened."

"Was there anything she could have done to save her?" Calli asked, pragmatic as always.

"No," I said, clenching my jaw. "Doesn't stop her from feeling guilty."

We stopped for a moment in the shade of the wall, and Calli leveled a cool look at me.

"Aren't you a god? Can't you help her?"

I laughed then, though it was a cold, mirthless laugh that felt bitter as it pushed its way out of my throat.

"Oh, Calli. There are limits to everyone, me included. If someone's magic was taken away, I can't give it back. Our only hope is that someone in the Magic Council knows how to reverse the binding. It's why Lynx joined me. She wants a cure for her sister."

It went on like this. I introduced my people to Calli and told her their stories and reasons to join my fight. She was mostly silent, listening and nodding, her arm never leaving mine. After a few more visits, I was exhausted by the solemn

mood, but my people's suffering had to be treated with respect.

No jokes about dead wives and crazy sisters.

"You're fighting the Magic Council," Calli said when we stopped under the umbrella I had conjured before. I called forth two glasses of cold sparkling water and watched as Calli drank hers greedily, her smooth throat moving.

"That's right," I said, wondering if she had figured it out.

"They mind the order and protect humans from supernatural beings," she said slowly, looking somewhere past my shoulder. "And they do this by... binding magic and deporting anyone who is a threat? Did Lynx's sister hurt anyone before they tried to deport her?"

I smiled and drank my own water, my hand on top of Calli's. We had touched constantly for the entire time, and I loathed to break contact. I didn't let myself think about what it meant.

"She didn't do anything. None of them did. Well, Asphor might have frightened a few people with his teeth, but it's not a crime. He eats animal meat nowadays."

"Nowadays?" Calli made a face, but then her expression turned speculative. "I always wondered how long pig actually tastes, and since I'll never have any myself, I might ask him. Is he going to mess with my hair like Jean or something?"

I laughed, refilling our glasses with a flick of my finger.

"He might threaten to eat you if you piss him off, but he wouldn't actually dare."

Calli sipped her water, her hand warm underneath mine, and put away the glass with a faint thud.

"All right. So you gathered them all because the Magic Council wanted to deport you, too. Right? And now you fight... what, to stay on Earth?"

I grinned, unable to tear my eyes away from her. Practical and direct, Calli figured it out, just as I had expected. Soon I

would see if the other things I had meant to impart made it through as well.

“Yes. We’re not hurting anyone much apart from a trick or prank here and there. Well, Kang might have a trail of broken hearts a mile wide, but it’s not like a human woman as beautiful as her wouldn’t manage that. The Magic Council is not about protecting humans. Not anymore. It’s about segregation, or maybe even something more sinister. We don’t know yet.”

She nodded with a frown. I leaned back, observing the fierce lines around her mouth, the cold glint in her eye. Exquisite. When Calli went on a warpath, she looked just like this. But I didn’t dare hope I had managed to bring her to my side. It would have been too easy.

And there it was, right on cue. Her eyes focused on me, sharp like shards of glass, and her face grew hard.

“Are you trying to trick me?”

I took her hand up to my lips, and before she realized what I was doing, I kissed her knuckles. She jerked her hand back with an outraged gasp, and I held on.

Even when she struggled to break away, the feel of her skin on mine soothed something inside me, something cold and feral, buried deep. It was obvious, and I had to admit it to myself now. I was still affected. I still wanted her.

And the tug of war between us made it all the more thrilling.

“Only one way to find out,” I said while she tried to wrestle free. “Trust me and see what happens.”

Calli stopped struggling and just glared, breathing hard.

“It looks like I don’t have a choice, anyway,” she said.

“Actually, I wanted to give you one,” I said, smiling when she huffed in annoyance. Finally, time to have fun after all that seriousness.

“You can leave right now. I won’t stop you.”



Chapter 10: Tug of War

Calli

“What?”

I stared at him, my distrust growing to gargantuan proportions. If I had been suspicious before, now I was alarmed. This had to be a trick, so I didn’t even move, only waiting for him to say more.

He still held my hand—*the touchy feely bastard!*—so I couldn’t leave anyway. Yes, it had to be a trick.

“You can leave,” he said pleasantly, that smile making him entirely too handsome.

I looked away from his face, rebuilding my inner resistance to his charm. Somehow, ever since I’d seen the cracks in his armor the night before, I couldn’t help but notice his attractive qualities even more.

The way his eyes sparkled. That chiseled strong jaw with a five o’clock shadow that I just itched to rake my nails over. The way his height was just perfect: overwhelming when I was barefoot, well-balanced when I wore heels.

His laughter made me squeeze my thighs every time, and his knowing smirks sparked flashbacks of the lewd dreams still lodged in my idiotic head.

He’s a powerful monster god. Not a man. A creature. Get a grip.

“Where’s the catch?” I asked, looking into the distance over his shoulder to avoid the sight of the intoxicating sparks playing in his green eyes.

“The Magic Council will get you, but you already knew that would happen. You were even prepared for this contingency. No catch apart from that.”

He stared at me, that unnerving smile plastered on his face. I knew in my bones this was a game, but what did he stand to win? If I actually left... what would happen?

“I see,” I said through my teeth, watching Asphor, who was walking across the training ground, dirty with muck from his work in the stables. He raised a hand in a wave, and I looked away, thinking about his wife and daughter, who were dead.

And the Magic Council, who hadn't even waited for their bodies to cool before they tried to evict him to his pocket reality somewhere in Maghreb.

“You're saying that if I leave, I'll be captured and forced to spill all your secrets, endangering all the people you've introduced to me today. Irresponsible Jean. Asphor, burning for justice. Lynx, who wants to save her sister... They will all be in danger if I leave. Fine. I'm not going anywhere.”

His grin widened into that disgusting caricature of a smile, with his cheeks partly split open. A joker smile. I refused to flinch, so I watched him, pretending it didn't affect me at all.

Well, it didn't. I wasn't scared in the least. And whatever else I felt was simply hormonal.

“Well done. You passed my test. Now, in the name of that trust we should be building, I can tell you it was a bluff. I would never let you leave. Though, I hope you try, because I've set a delicious little trap for you.”

He raised my hand to his lips, and I pulled it out of his grip with so much force I stumbled back and almost fell. He laughed, his eyes flashing with delight. Ugh. Even if I tried to be utterly not entertaining, he would still find reasons to laugh at me.

Easily amused idiot.

“If you somehow manage to get outside the gates,” he said, watching me with laughing eyes, “you will be transported

straight to my bed. Naked and tied up, you will stay there until I let you go. Elegant, isn't it?"

My cheeks burned red, I just knew. And I could pretend it was only from anger, but the truth was... His persistence got to me. The vision of myself stretched out on his bed and tied up in ribbons while he watched seared my mind, and suddenly, I knew I wouldn't be able to get it out of my head.

Which was probably what he had counted on. *Of course.* This was all a game, and he had just admitted he had lied to me, right? This was a trick, too.

"I call your bluff," I said, turning away.

He laughed, clapping, and a frisson of unease crawled down my spine. What if I was wrong...? Well, it was too late for that. I walked between the buildings to the main gate, which opened to let me through as soon as I approached. Heart hammering, I walked out. One step, two...

As I took the third step, a warm wind blew all around me, a whirlpool of green, shimmering magic. Suddenly, the world disappeared, and I was trapped in a vortex of green flames, but only for a moment.

The next thing I knew, the whirlpool was gone. My body stretched out, hands pulled over my head, legs pulled straight, while strong, shimmery material wrapped around my wrists and ankles.

I shivered, cool air nipping at my breasts. My very naked breasts.

So it hadn't been a bluff after all.

Fuck.

I allowed myself one long furious shriek before clamping my mouth shut and trying to work my hands free. But of course, the binds held fast, no matter how flimsy they seemed.

The worst thing was, I had only myself to blame. He had told me exactly what would happen. But since it seemed like our every interaction from the very beginning had been either

a performance or a game, I acted like this, too, had been a game of poker, and I made him show his hand.

And he had a fucking royal flush.

I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned. Why did I lose all the time? I had been good at poker, and I had loved playing card and board games in college. I hadn't played anything in years, though. Was I just getting rusty? Or was I doomed to lose anyway, since my opponent had probably designed all those games?

The bedroom door creaked, and Loki came in. I opened my eyes and stared at him, determined not to miss another cue, not to misjudge him again. No matter how charming or handsome he was, I would not turn my eyes away. I would not tremble with fear, either.

Because I was done losing.

"Lovely," he whispered, stopping by the bed.

His eyes raked me slowly from face to my legs and back. He stared at my breasts, and I just knew my nipples were tight. Clenching my jaw and wishing the blush spread over my face and collarbones would disappear, I stared at him stubbornly. His throat worked as he swallowed, his face tense, eyes gleaming like emeralds.

Not a hint of a smile on his face.

I braced myself, knowing I was utterly helpless. Whatever he wanted to do with me, he could. But I was not powerless. If he had tested me before, this was a test as well, this time for him.

He had given me his word earlier. If he touched me now, I would know his promises meant nothing.

For the longest moment, we only looked at each other. Loki's eyes burned green, his lips pressed together, jaw tense as he swallowed again. He didn't move but stood there, muscles hard as if poised to leap, fists clenched.

I knew I was probably as red as a beetroot. Despite my embarrassment, I focused on the power I still possessed.

Whatever he did now would give me the ultimate proof about the kind of person he was.

But the wait killed me.

The moment stretched. I shifted on the bed, trying to alleviate the pull in my shoulders. The satin rustled around me, and I sighed in relief when the pain lessened. At that, Loki gave a low sound and turned on his heel. He burst out of the bedroom, the door slamming shut behind him.

What the fuck?

I lay there, slowly calming down. I hadn't looked away from him, not even once, even though I burned from embarrassment. And what I saw... He looked starving. Like a man starved for sex who had just seen a woman he wanted.

And then, he ran away.

Relaxing, I stretched more comfortably on the bed, allowing myself a small smile. I saw only one explanation for his behavior: he found me so enticing he had to run away from his own bedroom. Fleeing from the prey caught in his own trap. If that didn't count as a win, I didn't know what would.

Unfortunately, my satisfaction was short-lived. The door clicked open and Loki came back. He shot me one disinterested glance and went to his desk, where he sat down with his back to me. I turned my face to see him, his head a dark silhouette against the bright window.

"Back already?" I asked, unable to resist. After everything I had been through, I wanted to gloat, even just a bit.

"There was an alarm," he said, voice cool and polite. "I was needed. It's dealt with now."

He bent over the desk, and the sound of a pen scribbling on paper filled the room. I frowned, staring at the back of his head. I hadn't imagined it. He had been completely smitten, I just knew. And he was bluffing now, because he was embarrassed. Right? That had to be it.

"Yes," Loki said suddenly, and I flinched. But he didn't speak to me. There was a faint buzzing of a distant voice, and

he listened. “That’s interesting. Go on... Are you certain?”

Soon, the buzzing stopped, he thanked the voice, and returned to writing.

“What was that?” I asked, because it had seemed like a phone conversation, yet there was no phone in sight.

Loki didn’t answer, and I huffed angrily, amusing myself with the recollection of his face when he looked at me. Another thought occurred to me as well, and I grimaced, because it complicated things.

He wanted me. I was naked and tied up in his bed. Nothing could stop him from taking what he wanted. And yet, he kept his word. Did it mean I could trust him?

I shook my head, sighing. Maybe I was wrong and had misinterpreted the look on his face.

The longer he ignored me, the more I doubted myself. Finally, the last dregs of satisfaction seeped out of me, and all that was left was my discomfort from staying in one position for too long, and the cold. Loki kept his room a tad too cool, and the fireplace was cold and empty.

“Turn down the AC or cover me with something,” I said. “Or better yet, let me go. You proved your point. You won, I lost. Good game.”

“Oh, *ást min*,” he said in that same detached voice, without turning back to me. “It’s not a game, and if it were, I wouldn’t consider this a victory. Maybe just a point scored. Also, it’s supposed to be uncomfortable. This is your punishment, and you walked into it on your own.”

“So you didn’t want to see me naked, did you?” I asked, losing my composure fast. “You just wanted to humiliate me yet again?”

He stopped writing while I spoke, but now he resumed without answering my questions. I stifled a curse, tugging at the ribbons tying my wrists. To no avail of course, but at least the effort made me a bit warmer.

“So how long will I be here?” I bit out.

“I told you,” he said, his voice much too cool.

As long as he wanted.

I suddenly craved nothing more than to shatter his calm. I would break him and make him show me that vulnerable man who hid underneath the grinning mask. My position was just an inconvenience. Even now, I had the power to make him bend, I just needed to find a way.

The pen scribbled, and my mind ticked with frantic thoughts, until an idea clicked into place.

“Having me naked in your bed is just a point scored, then? Are we back to our original game? The big seduction plan?”

He tensed and didn’t reply, but he didn’t resume writing, either. I smiled, tightening my hands into fists. I had him.

“What if I told you I want you?” I asked, lowering my voice and hoping like hell it sounded sultry.

This was a dangerous game, and I wasn’t sure I would be able to stop it once I got it rolling. And I couldn’t lie to myself, not now. There was something about being naked and tied up in my enemy’s bed that forced me to be honest with myself.

I was scared. I wanted to play him. And yet, I also hoped he would call my bluff and actually do what I asked for. This was what made this game truly dangerous. I cared, and that meant he had as much power over me as I had over him.

Maybe more.

Because what terrified me the most was the possibility he might not take the bait. His rejection would be utterly crushing.

But I would not back down, even though the back of his head revealed nothing. Oh well. Time to bluff.

“You said you wouldn’t touch me without permission,” I continued, forcing my lips into a smile, so he heard it in my voice. “You said you wanted me. Do you still? Because if you do, I am ready to give it to you.”

I held my breath and paused for dramatic effect. My heart beat so hard, I heard it. Apart from my heartbeat, there was no sound in the bedroom.

“Here is my permission,” I whispered. “Touch me, please.”

He whipped in place, the chair falling to the floor, and leaped. One moment he was across the room, and the next, he was on top of me, his body pinning me to the bed. I tried to scream or protest, but his landing knocked the breath out of me, and I could only gulp air in shallow inhales, my fear choking me from the inside just as his weight squeezed me from the outside.

Oh no. What have I done?

Through the haze of rising panic that froze me into place, I realized he wasn't doing anything, just lying on top of me, his body covering mine. I shifted under him, and he hissed.

“Close your eyes. You can open them when I say.”

His voice sounded so commanding, I obeyed at once. As soon as my eyes were closed, something tingled under my eyelids, as if someone was painting over my corneas with a soft brush. I whimpered, and he shushed me.

“Open. Don't move.”

His bathroom door and the surrounding wall exploded, showering us with shrapnel. I squeaked, but nothing hit me, even though I heard crashes and thuds all around. Above me, Loki hissed in pain. A moment later, he rolled off me, and the air filled with an unpleasant, chemical smell.

It was gone in an instant, and tiny white flowers fluttered down, covering my body and the bed.

“Ah, ah, not so fast,” he said, and for a moment, I thought he was addressing me. But no. He was talking to whoever had blown up the bathroom.

I tried to raise myself to see over the foot of the bed. There was something there, but the gaping hole in place of the door seemed to be covered by a barrier. It looked like thick, old glass, distorting whatever was behind it.

“Let me guess,” he continued, stalking right up to the barrier, where he stopped with his back to me.

“They teleported you to the traces of your venom, am I right? That’s why you landed in my bathroom. You were counting on the element of surprise, no doubt. Hoping you would land directly on top of me? But come on. Even you will admit it was a dumb plan. Or did you really expect me to keep wearing a jacket befouled by an overgrown reptile?”

He laughed, and something hissed viciously, raising the hairs on my nape. My mammal brain immediately gave the order to run, and I struggled against the binds, panic fizzing in my veins. That was a monster, a predator, and I had to get away.

“Shut up,” Loki said, his voice angry. “You’re scaring my beloved. Now, where were we? Ah, the jacket. I should have burned it, though on the other hand, I like this development, Jadwiga. I’ve never had a pet basilisk before.”

I gulped, staring at the back of his head with wide eyes. A basilisk? *Pet*? And it was in his bathroom? My heart beat like crazy, and honestly, he should tell himself to shut up, because he scared me more than the vile beast.

But Loki only laughed, a delighted, smug laughter so loud it vibrated within my chest.

“You’re mad,” I whispered, struggling harder against the binds. “Fucking crazy.”

Loki turned to me, grinning widely, and he snapped his fingers. The ribbons holding me in place fell away, and I scrambled from the bed, immediately putting a chair between me, him, and the monster in his bathroom.

“I’m not done with you,” he said, his smile growing.

In an instant, the chair turned into a flutter of jewel-colored butterflies, and I jumped back with a shriek. He snapped his fingers, and five huge bolts appeared on the door. With a series of thuds and clicks, they fell into place, trapping me.

“You’re kidding,” I moaned, pressing my back against the door. “There’s a fucking basilisk in your bathroom!”

“Oh, that.”

He turned away and raised both arms. The floor shook, and I whimpered, holding on to the door’s handle, while something rumbled like a storm or an earthquake. The room shook harder and harder, and I fell to the floor, covering my head with my arms and squeezing my eyes shut.

This was it. I would die naked and scared in a madman’s bedroom.

The room settled with a series of weaker thuds until all was still. I lowered my hands and peeked around, half expecting the walls to be down, the entire villa collapsed around us.

Instead, the bedroom was pristine, the bathroom door back in its place, open to show me a glimpse of the inside. No basilisk in sight. Just a normal bathroom.

Steps thudded in the sudden silence, and I looked up, too shocked to speak. Loki crouched in front of me, taking my face into both hands, his thumbs caressing my cheeks.

“Now the *gargan* is dealt with, let’s get back to us.”

I had no time to react, no chance to move away. His lips fell on top of mine with a crushing force, and I inhaled sharply, drawing his breath into me. He kissed me deeply, his tongue parting my lips with one violent shove, and I fell back against the door, dazzled.

I was limp, my lips open but unresponsive, and he kissed me more aggressively as if to force me to react. I made a choking sound, too overwhelmed, and he snarled quietly. He tugged me closer, and I fell into his lap.

His lips bruised mine in an unrelenting conquest, and the fabric of his clothes brushed against my naked skin. All the adrenaline, the terror, the high of our game coalesced into a powerful drumbeat of excitement in my lower belly.

I kissed him back.

With a low sound, Loki pressed against me as if he were trying to meld our faces together. I gave back as good as I got,

letting all my emotions pour out in the push of my tongue, the frantic grip of my hands. I tangled one hand in his hair, gripped his shirt with the other, and pulled him closer yet, kissing my hate, fear, and fury into his hot mouth.

He tasted like those chocolate mint truffles.

I moaned, drinking him in, and he snarled, yanking my head back. The sudden pain registered as just another level of excitement, soon forgotten as he kissed down my throat, painting it with liquid heat. I closed my eyes and held on, breathing fast, because I was lost in his touch.

My body was as hot as a furnace, and each press of his lips, each stroke of his tongue ignited me further, unraveling all restraint.

Restraint?

I moaned and pushed him away enough for his lips to detach from my collarbone. I claimed them in another kiss, dragging my teeth over his lower lip, hissing in pleasure when my canine nipped his skin.

He snarled and forced his tongue back in my mouth, and I bit it, too, light enough for it to be playful, yet hard enough to hurt.

Loki bit me back, making my lip explode with a stinging pain. Blood dripped down my chin, or maybe it was saliva, I didn't care, because his hand was on my breast, pinching fingers claiming my nipple, and that pain only turned up the throbbing between my legs.

I wanted him to fuck me.

Fuck. Stop.

I shoved him so hard he fell, and since I was sitting on his lap, I fell, too. We landed on the floor, our legs tangled, both panting.

“You are...” I gasped out, fighting the lusty haze filling my mind with nonsense. “You can't... No more. No more kissing.”

He sat up and gripped my hair, his thumb flicking over my nipple.

“No kissing, got it,” he said, his voice so rough I did a double take. His eyes burned, so emerald they seemed to be filled with magic, and his face was drawn in complete, fierce focus.

He looked like a toxic fire ready to consume me, and all I wanted was to leap into the flames.

No.

“No more touching,” I gasped out as he teased my nipple, his lips right by my throat, his breath hot on my skin. “No nothing. You don’t have my permission anymore.”

He froze, his hand on my breast, the other still in my hair. We both panted, so close that his heat fizzed against my skin.

At last, he removed his hand from me slowly, slipping his fingers out of the mess on my head, and pulled back.

He stared at me, and the fire in his eyes turned cold.

“Let’s see how soon I can get it back,” he said, standing up in one graceful motion. “Let’s make a bet, *ást min*. I say you will last no more than an hour.”



Chapter 11: Hate Burns Just As Hot

Loki

She stood up, her cheeks blushing, eyes dark and glistening, and I knew that I could turn her desire into light and it would blind us. But the cunning vixen would not listen to her lust.

This was her revenge: to make me hot and mad with passion, and then deny me.

Damn me, but it was working. I had half a mind to send her into a full-blown heat. I could inject unquenchable thirst into her bloodstream, something so potent, it would reduce her to writhing on the floor in front of me and begging with animal sounds, because she would be incapable of speech.

But I'd given her my word.

Besides, forcing her into giving in would not be a true victory. I wanted her to beg me with words, fully aware of who she was and what she was doing.

Only that would satisfy.

"I'm not betting, but go ahead. Do your worst," she said, her lips twisted in scorn. "And while I wait for you to come up with something, give me back my clothes."

I watched her with open interest, sliding my eyes over every inch of her body. Even though she covered her delightful tits, there was so much more to entice me. The pink blush over her collarbones. The dark hair between her legs. Her thighs, soft but firm, and the curve of her hip.

"The beauty of this situation is that I told you exactly what would happen," I said, walking closer.

But not too close. I wanted her to see the big picture.

“You knew you’d be naked in my bedroom for as long as I wanted. And yet, you walked into this on your own. So no, you won’t get any clothes. But I’m willing to level with you.”

My clothes vanished, putting all of me on display. Calli gasped, one hand flying to her mouth while she devoured me with wide eyes. I grinned and spread my arms wide.

“You... But...”

I laughed, turning in place to give her the full experience. A showman doesn’t need a tux or a top hat, though they certainly add panache. I could give her a show without a single prop in hand, and it would still reduce my usually well-spoken beauty to stuttering.

I faced her again and grinned, seeing the way she eyed my hard cock.

“You did this,” I said in a low voice. “I’ve been hard for you many times, Calli. But today, you did this on purpose. Own it, at least.”

She dropped her hands to her hips and glared at me, and I licked my lips. Furious Calli was much more arousing than the bashful, stuttering one, though I adored both.

I adored all versions of her, even the shrieking harpy with sharp claws that had attacked me yesterday.

“So what, this is your plan?” she spat, taking a step closer. “To show me your dong? And what do you expect me to do now? Jump on top of it because I just can’t help myself? Newsflash, mister god: I’ve seen better dicks in my life.”

“Was it supposed to hurt my ego?” I asked, stepping closer, my eyes glued to her rapidly rising and falling chest. “This is not what my cock really looks like. You wouldn’t handle the real thing. But we can play this game. I can make it look like anything you want.”

With a snap of my fingers, I turned my cock into a long, purple tentacle. Calli recoiled, but I snapped again, transforming it into a dark red cock with a swollen knot.

Another snap, and there were two dicks instead of one. Again, and a blue horse cock manifested, it's top sporting black spines.

One final snap, and my cock turned almost normal, but it was as thick as a fist, with one protruding ridge running along the top.

"I like this one best," I said, grinning when she stared, speechless.

"You see this here?" I asked, fisting my dick and running my thumb over the ridge. "It's perfectly positioned to stimulate your G-spot in missionary. And if I decide to take you from behind, I can just flip it. You would come screaming my name if I fucked you with this. Do you think I'm bluffing now? Do you want to check?"

Calli turned her back to me, breathing fast. I didn't touch her or offer comfort, only watching out for signs of overwhelm. Too much would kill the game in its tracks. It was all about balance.

When she still didn't turn to me, her back moving with rapid breathing, I stepped away and sat in my armchair. I gave her time to calm down, and soon enough, she turned back to me, her face much more composed.

She looked me over, still blushing but calm, and sat down on the bed, crossing her legs and folding her arms on her chest.

"As you can see, I haven't jumped your bones. And just to note, that was disgusting. So I guess we will just sit here like this until you get bored and let me out?"

Instead of answering, I snapped my fingers. The curtains closed, swathing the room in darkness. I opened my palm, a globe of light hovering over it, and nodded.

The globe projected a movie, which played all around the room, the images sliding over the walls, the ceiling, the furniture. The movie was me and Calli entwined in a lustful embrace. It was all my fantasies, all the frenzied dreams I had

had about her translated into a spectacle of sensuous scenes and breathy sounds.

All around us, a fantasy took to life. Calli and I writhing together, our bodies slick with sweat. Her lips were parted and red, moaning my name, while I lapped her cunt, eating from the feast between her legs while she shook.

The fantasy changed.

Amorphous and feverish, the visions bled into one another, and so here was Calli with her lips wrapped around my dick, eyes open wide and staring at me as if I were her god. The fantasy smoothly transitioned into us lying together, me behind her thrusting slowly, her mouth open in a moan.

I looked at the real Calli. She watched my spectacle with lips parted, eyes wide open and dark. She was mesmerized, and I flicked my finger, making her desire visible as golden dust. She was instantly covered in it, her skin painted gold and shimmering. To see it manifested made me growl.

Oh, how she wanted me.

Displayed on the ceiling, Calli rode me, her head thrown back, face scrunched up in pleasure. My fingers dug into her hips, and I met her halfway, thrusting my hips up. The look on my face was painful to watch, pure want and devotion, and I turned my eyes away.

My most precious, most impossible fantasy would not make it to this show. It was me as I truly was, a giant and a monster, with Calli kissing my muzzle with acceptance and love.

It would never happen.

But these could. My heart beating hard, I watched the lovely fantasies of her kissing down my body, of me pressing her to the mattress with a grin, of us making love or fucking like animals. Time lost all meaning, and I drowned in the visions, my cock hurting from how much I wanted them to be real.

A rustle called me back to reality. Calli stood, her body trembling, her dark eyes burning as she watched me. Gold dust

fell from her skin, painting the carpet, and she shed more and more, her thighs entirely covered by it.

I opened my arms, calling her to me and praying she would come.

She took one halting step, then another. Even in the darkness, her blush was obvious, her skin as hot as that of the Calli moaning her release in my fantasy. I held my breath and waited, and she stepped closer, looking at me with hungry eyes.

Finally, she stopped right in front of me, our legs touching, and breathed out in exasperation.

“I want you,” she whispered. “But I hate you so much.”

“Fuck me with hate, then.”

She stood there, trembling, her breath the only sound in the room while I turned off the moans from my erotic movie. If she truly gave in, I wanted to hear nothing but the real sounds she made.

With a low snarl, she straddled me and gripped my hair and shoulder. When she kissed me with burning hate, the projecting globe fell from my hand and rolled along the carpet, forgotten, because I was already lost in Calli’s lips, her naked skin on my naked skin, the heat of her pressing into my thigh.

She tore away from my mouth and bit down my throat, her teeth leaving marks though not piercing my skin, and I gasped, fingers digging into her buttocks.

“You should have taken the bet,” I choked out, unraveling under her vicious assault. “You lasted one whole minute over an hour. You would have won.”

Calli pulled back, looked into my eyes, a furious goddess painted gold.

“Shut up.”

She kissed me, teeth tearing at my lip, tongue wrestling with mine. I laughed, and she devoured my laughter like she devoured my breath, unsatiated. She was a tigress biting into

her prey, and I bled under her furious kiss until the wound healed.

Enough of that.

I stood up, holding her to me, and threw her on the bed, pinning her wrists to the mattress. She thrashed under me, but I held fast. This time, I kissed and bit down her throat, bruising it red for everyone to see. She moaned and snarled, writhing, until finally, she hooked her legs around my waist and tugged me closer.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” I whispered in her ear, rubbing my cock over her core until I shivered as her wetness spread over my shaft.

Calli hissed and thrust up her hips, pressing herself into my cock. I held her down and nuzzled her earlobe, smiling. This was it, this was my moment of payback. Just as she had denied me before, I would make her beg and then turn away.

Because two could play this game.

“Yes!” she finally bit out.

I pulled back as much as I could while still holding her down. I watched her dark eyes full of passion, her soft cheeks, the raw expression of want painted all over her face. She took my breath away.

“Damn, you’re beautiful,” I whispered. “Even more beautiful than I imagined. Beg me.”

She looked confused for a moment and then furious. She struggled against me, but she could never be a match for my strength. I grinned and blew her a kiss, kneeling between her thighs to make it impossible for her to kick me.

Calli shrieked in rage and spat, her spit landing on my cheek. I laughed and pressed her wrists harder down, grinning over my trapped little tigress.

“Open your mouth, and I’ll return the favor,” I said, mocking her. “Actually... You do that and I won’t make you beg. Not today.”

She watched me, breathing hard, the gold dust of her desire on the bed all around her. She was more turned on than I would think possible, and I laughed with satisfaction, seeing how she liked our game.

Finally, her expression softened, anger mingling with want, and she closed her eyes, lashes fluttering. When she opened them, she smiled.

It was the most arousing smile in the world.

“Fine,” she whispered and opened her mouth, keeping her eyes wide open.

I leaned over her, my lips positioned high over hers, and let my spit fall into her mouth. As soon as it landed on her tongue, I kissed her and thrust.

Calli cried out, stretched wide by my cock, and I thrust again, swallowing her scream. There was no stopping now, and whatever thoughts of denying her I had entertained were forgotten.

This, now, with me buried deep inside her, was victory.

She dug her heels into my buttocks while I fucked her, still holding her wrists. She writhed under me, trying to raise her hips to devour me whole, meeting my hard thrusts with loud moans, and I couldn't help it. I laughed, it felt so good.

I let go of her wrists, and she raked her nails down my arms, and I laughed harder, pushing into her with all the urgency of my months-long lust. She gripped my hips, her nails pressing into my skin, and pulled me closer, always watching my face with dark, bottomless eyes.

Gold dust fell from her lips as she moaned, and she painted it over my skin with her hands, her body tightening in pleasure. The hot drumbeat of her looming orgasm reverberated inside me, and I snarled, fucking her faster, close to my own release.

When she screamed, closing her eyes while her body grew hard, pulsing hot around me, I thrust into her with one last vicious snarl and came, buried deep in her cunt.

The gold dust settled around us as I lay on top of her, breathing hard. Calli's chest rose and fell under me in a quick rhythm, her body still pulling me in with a slow wave after slow wave. I kissed her cheek and raised myself on my forearms without pulling out.

She looked innocent and bare, finally without the mask.

I drank her in. Calli without her mask was a vulnerable, shaking mess. Even now, her eyebrows were drawn as if in pain, her lips trembling. I caressed her cheek, watching her with fascination, and she turned her face away, closing her eyes.

“Let me go now.”

I frowned, not moving yet, trying to read her meaning. Was she ashamed? Embarrassed? Did she feel humiliated?

“All right,” I said finally, twitching when her cunt pulsed around me again. “But you'll tell me what's wrong.”

I pulled out and moved back, taking a satisfied look at my cock bathed in her juices. I could fuck her again right now, and still, it would not be enough.

Calli sat up, avoiding my eyes, and went to the bathroom, closing the door with a soft click. While she was inside, I picked up the globe that had projected my fantasies all over the room, and put it on top of my desk. It would store real memories now, the first sex between me and Calli recorded forever, for me, for us, to see whenever we wanted.

Then, I lifted all the gold dust that had fallen off her into a thick cloud of sumptuous glitter. I let it turn and spin, until I finally decided what to do with it. Directing the process with my hands like an orchestra conductor, I fashioned the glitter into a shimmering evening gown, one that would seem translucent while covering everything.

Calli would be the first woman in the world who would wear her desire fashioned into a dress, a fantastic shimmering gossamer thing that would look like diamonds and gold dust sprinkled all over her.

I made the dress settle over a mannequin and waited. The bathroom was quiet, but there was no way out other than through the door, so I had no doubt Calli was inside. Putting her mask back on, I was sure.

Fool's errand. I had seen her without it. There was no going back from that.

Five minutes later, the bathroom door opened and Calli walked out, wrapped up in my silk bathrobe. She looked cool and composed, and I laughed quietly, conjuring a cut crystal tumbler of absinthe.

Pretending to ignore her, I made a sugar cube drenched in alcohol hover over the glass and set it on fire with a flick of my finger. A small performance I couldn't deny myself and another way to make Calli yet more irate. I needed her to explode.

When the sugar caramelized partly, I made water drip slowly onto it until it all fell into the glass, clouding the absinthe. Finally, I looked up at Calli with a grin, but my only reward was a slight narrowing of her eyes. She was in control of herself.

She stood in front of me, her arms folded in a show of indifference, and I took a sip, watching her over the rim of my glass.

"This was a mistake. That's what's wrong. Can I leave now?"

I patted my knee, giving her a grin. The projecting globe came to life, displaying a still frame of Calli's face in the middle of her orgasm, her expression locked in supreme ecstasy, skin painted glittering gold.

"I wouldn't call *this* a mistake," I said calmly when she glared, her nostrils flaring. "But I know you're telling the truth. You really think you shouldn't have fucked me. What I want to know is why."

She huffed and turned away, heading for the bed. I snapped my fingers and made it disappear. Calli shot me a venomous

look and turned to my desk. I made it and the chair vanish, and then removed all furniture from the room for good measure.

“You can stand, sit on the floor, or come here,” I said, when she groaned in anger, stomping her bare foot on the carpet. “Come, my love. Don’t make it more difficult than it already is.”

“Stop calling me that,” she hissed, dropping her hands to her sides, palms clenched into fists. “You’re... You... Fuck. I should have never had sex with you. And I never will again.”

I nodded and swirled the green liquid in my tumbler, inhaling the cool smell of anise. When Calli’s breathing calmed down, I looked up.

“Why?”

“Because you cursed me!” she burst out.

I sat back and studied her, nodding encouragingly.

“Go on. Let it all out.”

“Aaaargh!”

Calli’s scream of frustration would have shaken cobwebs from my ceiling had there been any. I hid my smile behind the rim of my glass, waiting.

“Because you put your sick, perverted curse on me! And you promised you would come back, and you fucking didn’t! And then I was attacked because of you! And you kidnapped me, and didn’t explain a fucking thing, and you keep chasing me around, playing cat and mouse, and I don’t even know the rules of your stupid games!”

The bathrobe fell open, revealing a hint of her breast and her stomach, and I sighed, losing the smile. She showed me her face. I could show her mine.

I got up, whisked the tumbler away, and stood in front of Calli, watching her angry, betrayed face.

Well then. If I was going to do this, I would do it properly.

I fell on one knee in front of her, took her hand in mine, and bowed my head over her knuckles. Then I looked up,

serious and unsmiling, and told her.

“I’m sorry. I should have come for you much sooner. I had my reasons, but you are right, I didn’t explain them to you. I made a promise and broke it.”

Calli stared at me, her hand limp in mine. I kissed her knuckles lightly, and she took a shivering breath.

“As for the curse, we talked about it. At the time, it seemed like the best solution to get Draco off your back and put my claim on you. It was supposed to be just for a few days. But I was attacked, and I didn’t want to endanger you. You were protected by the law, so I decided it would be better not to drag you into my war... A mistake. I gave my enemies too much credit. I’m sorry you suffered alone.”

Calli shook her head weakly, raising her hand as if to touch my face, then dropped it. I smiled and continued.

“I’ll be happy to explain everything as long as you promise not to run away again. I can keep you safe here. If you stay and let me protect you, I will be able to tell you whatever you want to know. I’m sorry for keeping you in the dark.

“And the games... I like playing them. It’s who I am, and that won’t change. There are no rules. And for the record, I think you did very well. It was challenging and exhilarating. I’d love to play more with you. We can set some rules if you want.”

This time, she touched my cheek, her fingers trembling, and I leaned into her palm with a deep sigh.

“Is there anything else I should apologize for?” I asked, grinning up at her. “Think hard while you have me kneeling at your feet. I don’t kneel often, and not for anyone.

“Not until now.”



Chapter 12: Stories and Kisses

Calli

“I would like to sit down,” I said, too overwhelmed to make any more demands.

How did he do it? With that one showy apology, he had flipped our dynamic so much that I didn’t even know where I stood or how I felt about him.

Well, I knew one thing. The sex had been out of this world, and seeing him kneeling in front of me gave me some ideas to explore.

He stood up, though, and took my elbow, guiding me to his armchair. I plopped down in the exquisite emerald seat, putting my forearms on the armrests, while he made the furniture reappear with a flick of his finger.

A chair appeared in front of me, a beautiful thing of dark wood inlaid with jade. It rotated in the air until it settled on the floor, and he sat down, putting his ankle on his knee.

My eyes jumped instinctively to his cock, hard still, and so girthy, I couldn’t fathom I’d had it inside me. Well, I did, and it felt divine.

So this I knew for sure. I liked the sex.

I looked at his face when he chuckled. He had one eyebrow raised, and his eyes sparkled even more brightly than usually.

“Enjoying the view?”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t hold back a smile. Now that we had this tentative truce, or whatever it was, I could acknowledge I liked his manner, the unabashed self-

confidence, the performative flair. He could be annoying, overwhelming, sometimes tactless, but he sure as hell wasn't boring.

"I promise I won't run away," I said, because I was burning for answers. "Please, tell me everything."

"Very well," he said with a grin. "From the beginning, then."

He pointed at the ceiling, and a film started playing. I stared, wondering what it was, until I recognized myself. It was the night I had stolen Draco's samples. In the movie, I walked on the pavement, a grim smile on my face, a cooler bag in my hand. A moment later, a car pulled over and I got in. I met that Zauber rep who bought the samples from me.

"I was watching Draco, because I knew he had a deal with the Magic Council," Loki said, mischievous fires playing in his eyes. "I wanted to find out how he dealt with them, so I spied on his every move. Of course, it didn't take long until I noticed his fiery little conduit. You drew my eye from the start, and I admired you from afar like someone might admire a painting. You were his: untouchable. Until you stole from the dragon, and I realized two things."

The scene changed. It showed me popping open a bottle of champagne barefoot, wearing just a tank top and panties, in my new apartment's kitchen. It was after I signed the contract. I was mad with joy and drunk on that victory. It was a happy night.

"One: you had a delicious vindictive streak and a natural talent for scheming. And two: you were bold enough to challenge a dragon. You were mine in that moment, even though you didn't even know I existed."

The scene changed again. I was sleeping on the couch, two champagne bottles on the floor. I snored softly, and behind me, Loki emerged from the shadows. He stopped by my head, his face curious, and just looked at me for a long moment. Then, he walked around my apartment, and the camera followed him.

He painted green, shimmering marks on my windows and doors, and they burned bright for a moment before disappearing completely.

“Okay, stop,” I said, too stunned to be angry yet. “What are those?”

“Protection runes,” he said with a small smile. “They kept you safe and untraceable until the Magic Council neutralized them before attacking you. I had to make sure Draco wouldn’t find you and turn you into a roast.”

I nodded, anger flickering in the pit of my stomach.

“What else did you do while you snooped around my place?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at the shameless bastard.

“I watched,” he said, grinning mockingly. “If I had done anything to you, trust me, you would have known.”

“This wasn’t what I meant, though thank you for clarifying,” I said. “Did you touch my stuff?”

Loki laughed, leaning closer, and I pointedly kept my eyes trained on his face.

“I spied on you, looked at your clothes, and spent a very educational hour rifling through your underwear. Everything I did was with the intent to get to know you better, so I found out what you ate, what cosmetics you used, what kind of porn you watched. I was very thorough.”

Too stunned by that confession, shamelessly delivered with a smug grin, I could only stare. Loki sighed theatrically and nodded, pretending to be contrite.

“Oh, all right. I might have had a wank or two in your shower.”

“What?!”

He shot me an innocent smile, which looked entirely out of place on his mischievous face, and shrugged.

“I washed it all off after.”

I shook my head and pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes. I should be furious, but I could only manage a small

flicker of annoyance. The news was overwhelming, and a significant part of me felt flattered by his in-depth research into my preferences, which was very disconcerting.

“So you basically stalked me,” I said, looking at his face. He didn’t even have the decency to look abashed. “Isn’t *that* something you should apologize for?”

He shrugged, his grin widening to his trademark monstrous smile, and I realized with a start I had got used to it. It didn’t make me shudder or even twitch.

“Time’s up for that,” he said with a laugh. “You should have demanded apologies while I was on my knees.”

I sat back with a sigh, watching as his grin widened, and trying hard not to keep checking on his erection.

“I think I just discovered a cure for your perpetual fury,” he said. “A nice orgasm, a little grovel, and you’re meek like a lamb.”

“Fuck off,” I said, my blood pressure instantly rising. “This lamb can kick you in the nuts if you’re not careful.”

He laughed, his mirth sending pleasant shivers down my back despite my anger.

“That’s my girl,” he said with a wicked gleam in his eye. “I was getting worried. All right, back to the story. I watched Draco as he plotted his vengeance and the retrieval of his samples, until someone threw a wrench in his plans. Little Jo sauntered right in and made the dragon fall for her few but significant charms.”

The scene on the ceiling changed, showing a woman in her twenties and Draco. They were in the woods at night, and she held a shining flower in her hands. It cast her face in a magical glow. Draco looked at her lips and leaned in, the light of the flower licking over his chin and mouth.

The scene froze just before their lips would touch, and Loki got up and offered me his hand.

“You were almost safe,” he whispered when I stood up, and he leaned in to brush his lips over my earlobe. “But not

quite. Not until that business was concluded. And so I devised a plan. It hinged on your propensity to face everything you fear like a tigress. You delivered. I cursed you.”

He put his thumb under my chin and forced my face up, claiming my mouth in a long kiss, one I could not resist returning. I closed my eyes, and as I kissed him back, tasting mischief on his tongue, gold dust exploded under my eyelids.

“As soon as I left you,” he continued, his voice hoarse, lips brushing against mine, “I returned to my home, and it was a ruin, destroyed completely by the Magic Council. They wanted to deport me. So I turned the official who delivered the notice into a bug, which I think is very fitting, and crushed him. That was the start of our war.”

He stepped back and pointed at the ceiling. It split into two screens. On one, a montage of Loki appeared. Him in the desert, talking to Asphor. Then in thick woods, chasing a large lynx. Next, somewhere on a cliff, his arms raised, a green storm raging over his head.

And on the other screen was me. The first day, when I was still coming to terms with my curse. Me, crying. Throwing things around in fury because I couldn’t stand that sticky sensation after touching something.

“I needed an army,” he said quietly, his constant smile gone. “And so I gathered those who would fight by my side. And you suffered alone. I should have been there, showering you with gifts and making up for the curse. But I wasn’t.”

This time, I kissed him first. I dragged his face down to mine and pressed a promise of forgiveness into his lips.

I wasn’t yet completely over what he had done to me. It would take time to soothe my hurt and cool my anger, but in the meantime, I could explore the thing between us and play the game.

“Are you winning?” I asked after we broke apart, his eyes dark and gleaming, focusing on my lips even when I stepped back.

“We were for a while. Then, new players joined the board. Jadwiga was the biggest threat. With her locked up in our dungeon, I think we might finish this war much faster than I expected.”

“The basilisk?” I guessed, making a face. “It had the worst possible timing.”

“On the contrary,” he said with a laugh. “Nothing stirs a man’s libido quite like defeating his most dangerous enemy. On that note, I want to show her off. I promise to fuck you later. We might even play a game.”

I shook my head with a laugh. A part of me wanted to stay in his bedroom, sharing stories and kisses, but I also knew taking a break would be healthier. I still hadn’t figured out where I stood, and getting drunk on him, while euphoric, would only daze me further.

“You’re intoxicating,” I said. “Not in a good sense. Yes, show off your new pet. And I need clothes.”

“But of course,” he said with a small bow, as if it hadn’t been a point of contention before.

He flicked his fingers, and a cloud of golden dust flew off my skin, whirling around an exquisite dress displayed on a mannequin. It settled onto the fabric, shimmering, and I gaped. I had never seen anything like that dress. It looked like it had been woven from gold and sunlight.

“It’s yours,” he said softly. “Soon, there will be an occasion to wear it. Also, I made your desire manifest as gold dust. Don’t get horny in public or you’ll shed gold flakes.”

Before I had a chance to protest, a warm breeze flew around me, and my green satin dress was back in place, a pair of glittering sandal heels in front of my bare feet. I stepped into them with a sigh and looked up.

Loki had his trademark green tuxedo on, emerald cufflinks gleaming at his wrists. A green, sparkling top hat on his head. He raised his hand, and a carved cane of dark wood with an emerald knob flew into his waiting palm.

“My lady,” he said with a grin, offering me his arm.

And I would have lied if I said it hadn't appealed to me. The magic display, the flamboyant clothes, the thrill of being surrounded by beauty from all sides... I could live with that. But all that splendor came at a price.

I didn't want to belong to Loki.

But I took his arm and smiled, because he delighted me, and I reminded myself it wasn't forever. I could have fun for now.

The door opened for us, and we went down the staircase to the hall. Dressed the way we were, we wouldn't have looked out of place at a cocktail party, and I smiled, understanding a piece of him. He turned every ordinary day into a special, exhilarating event.

When we walked out of the villa, I instantly noticed a set of stone stairs leading underground. They were right by the main door, guarded by a metal art deco balustrade, and I was sure they hadn't been there before.

A gleaming chrome megaphone appeared in front of Loki's mouth, and he spoke into it.

"Everyone but the guards gather in front of the villa. I have a surprise for you."

The sound of his voice reverberated over the compound, and soon, his people came running, over twenty of them. We stood in front of them like performers in front of an audience, and I suddenly felt uneasy. I didn't belong on a stage before this crowd.

So I tried to tug my arm free, and Loki didn't let me. With a low chuckle, he held me close.

"Get used to it," he murmured while we waited for the last stragglers. "You will always be by my side."

"We'll have to discuss this later," I replied, trying to look composed, even though alarm bells were going off in my head. I hadn't liked the sound of that *always*.

"As you can see, we have a new addition to our premises," he said with a flamboyant wave at the stairs.

“We’ve just acquired a dungeon, and there is one very special guest currently locked inside. You can go down there five at a time, and there is no need to worry about covering your eyes. She is surrounded by an impenetrable, magic-inert barrier. She won’t be able to hurt you. So taunt her all you like!”

Excited voices and shouts exploded in the crowd, and immediately, a small group went downstairs to have a look at Jadwiga.

“She attacked us a few nights ago,” Loki said quietly while his soldiers formed a queue to the dungeon. “She can breathe cold, and she froze the gate, making it more brittle. One well-aimed missile made it shatter, and before we could even mobilize fully, there were over twenty enemies in the base.”

“That is horrible. How did you deal with them?”

Loki smiled coolly, looking at the stairs to the dungeon.

“We fought. But before we realized what she was, Jadwiga killed one of my people with her deadly stare. He was called Kyl.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “So, it’s personal for you.”

He gave me a rueful look and ran his knuckles down my cheek with a thoughtful hum.

“Everything is personal to me, Calli. You should have noticed by now. Anyway, I figured out how to protect everyone from her eyes. And then I made Jadwiga molt. Quite literally. Jean is experimenting with the skin, since it has some magical properties.”

He looked at his shoes with a smile, and I frowned, deciding not to ask.

“Finally, we drove them out of the base, and they retreated. Only half of them made it out alive. It was a victory, but a painful one, so that’s why capturing Jadwiga was such a treat. Seeing the basilisk in the dungeon should boost morale.”

I chewed on my lip, wondering how safe it truly was, and whether the dungeon was as secure as Loki claimed. I

understood his reasons, though. He was looking out for his people.

“We need to talk,” Kang said as soon as she emerged from the dungeon, her beautiful face twisted in a frown.

“I’m listening,” Loki said with a pleasant smile, twirling his cane.

Kang gave me a pointed look, and I got her meaning immediately. I wasn’t to be trusted. She was right in a way, but on the other hand, I wanted to know what was happening.

“She stays,” Loki said before I could fire a sharp comment of my own. “She has my trust. What is it?”

Kang gave me a suspicious look, eying our linked arms, and rolled her eyes.

“Fine. I don’t think it’s a good idea to hold the basilisk here. I know you can keep her contained, but what if she somehow manages to break out while you’re not here? It’s not so far-fetched. And you are our only defense against her. We’ve been over it. None of us are strong enough to fight a full-grown basilisk.”

“All very valid points,” Loki said, laughter ringing in his voice. “Except, she won’t get out. Nothing magical can touch that barrier. I’ve used it before, and you saw what happened. It’s safe.”

He twirled his cane, giving Kang a smile so gorgeous, I was surprised she didn’t swoon on the spot. And then he said:

“But in case she somehow managed to get out... Wouldn’t it be fun?”

Kang’s nostrils flared, and I huffed with annoyance on her behalf. He seemed so flippant, even though multiple lives were on the line. That right there was the ultimate dealbreaker when it came to Loki.

“I didn’t join you to play games,” Kang hissed. “I joined you to fight and win, because I want to protect my friends. And you insist on jeopardizing our cause. First her...” she said, casting me an unfriendly look, “and now the reptile.”

Loki chuckled, and I whirled to him, stomping my foot to an underwhelming effect, because stomping in high heels could never be a thing.

It irked me that he would make such a comment after he had just spoken to me so seriously about this very thing.

“Why didn’t you tell her the real reason why the basilisk is here?” I asked.

“Because Kang doesn’t understand that sometimes you have to take a big risk to reap a big reward,” he said, his smile gaining a sharp edge. “Something you grasp naturally, *ást min*. Luckily, I have something else up my sleeve that will convince her.”

He turned to Kang, who looked at us with a disgusted sneer, and gave her a predatory grin.

“Look, I just took out our most dangerous opponent, Kang. With her out of the picture, we could strike fast and win this war. But not in the nearest few days. I’ve had news. Huitz!”

The tall Aztec god joined us, his face expressionless, and gave Loki a nod, ignoring me completely.

“All the Magic Council forces have pulled out,” Loki said, looking at Kang. “They are heading for Nevada right now. Apparently, there was an enormous magical explosion there this morning, unauthorized no doubt, and it gets a higher priority than us. It means they won’t attack until that’s dealt with, and we can’t do anything either. But.”

He turned to Huitz, looking up. I smiled despite the seriousness of their discussion. Seeing the tall, commanding Loki craning his neck to look at someone was amusing.

“I want to attack as soon as the majority of their forces are back here. They will be tired and depleted, and also without their strongest weapon. If we strike hard enough, we might force them to surrender. Or at least weaken them enough to attract more allies. Everyone’s afraid of the Magic Council, but once they see it bleeding in the dirt, the tables will turn.”

Huitz nodded and walked away without a word. Kang remained, chewing on a loose cuticle on her thumb with a

thoughtful expression.

“That certainly changes things. If the basilisk is our only threat at the moment, I agree it’s better to keep an eye on it despite the risk. Why do you think they sent her in just now?”

“No one’s strong enough to quickly transport a basilisk over state borders,” he said with a slow smile. “She would have had to stay here, anyway. So they decided to use her. If she had taken me out, they would not have to worry about us anymore. It was a risky plan. I’m guessing they counted on a stroke of luck.”

He laughed, tossing something gold and gleaming up in the air. It fell onto his outstretched palm, and I saw what it was. A golden dime, polished to perfection, a green shimmer blinking in and out of focus around the edges.

“As long as we have this,” he said, making the dime hover over his palm, spinning in place, “luck is on our side. Kang, can you live with Jadwiga staying here for a few more days?”

She didn’t look pleased, but nodded.

“As long as you keep her contained.”

“Perfect. Come, *ást min*. We’ll have lunch and then play a game. You need to brush up on your poker face.”



Chapter 13: Winners and Losers

Loki

After having a late lunch in the mess hall, I led Calli to my game room, rearranging the interior while we walked. We had had a little bowling tournament a week before, and that bowling alley setting would be very ill matched to what I had in mind.

“Look, before we start another game...” she said, but I made a glass of champagne pop into her hand, making her break off.

“I know,” I said without looking at her. “You’re not ready. It’s you, not me. You need time to think and get your head straight, and probably also get as far away as you can. The sex is great but my personality is the problem. You don’t think it will work. I know.”

Trifling obstacles, all of them. As long as she didn’t know who I truly was, I could still make her mine.

She stopped, and I turned to her with a smile.

“I’m sor...” she started, but I pressed a finger to her lips with a laugh.

“I’m not. I like a challenge. Now, out with this serious talk. We’re going to play poker, and you need to focus. There is much at stake.”

When I opened the door, everything was already in place. The round table with a black marble top gleamed in the middle of the room, lit by green-tinted, intimate lamps hovering under the ceiling. There was a bar on the far side of the room with a bottle of champagne cooling in a silver bucket.

Romantic art deco paintings adorned the walls, on each, a couple in period dress, their faces turned away. Though if I squinted, I could just make out the curve of Calli's cheek or the corner of my smiling mouth. Each painting depicted us, but subtly enough not to be noticeable.

She was freaked out enough as it was.

I tossed the lucky dime up and made it hover over the table, suspended.

"It's my lucky amulet," I said. "I won't have it on me, so you'll know I'm playing fair."

She stopped with her arms folded on her chest and cocked her hip to the side. I mimicked her posture, grinning.

"Damn, you're making me hard again," I said. "I would love to fuck your mouth while you're making this face."

Calli rolled her eyes and came over in quick, angry steps.

"Don't distract me," she said, poking me in the chest. "Why do you want to play poker? What do you want me to do? You said you would tell me the rules before another game."

I caught her finger and sucked it in my mouth, watching her in amusement. Calli gasped, blushed, and then glared, pulling her finger back violently.

"I won't play."

I pulled out a chair for her and flicked my fingers for the champagne to pour itself. Calli still held the glass I conjured for her before, and I took a step back, remembering what happened the last time I treated her to some.

"You will. And I just told you the rules. We'll play poker. I want you to do your best. As to why... I have a fun plan. It will work better if you don't know too much, and I promise you'll love it. Will you trust me?"

We eyed each other for a long minute and I smiled, watching her emotions play across her face. If she played poker with the same transparency, I would win every game. It would be fun once we started betting.

“I don’t trust you,” she finally said, taking her seat anyway. “But I’m curious. Fine. I know how to play Texas Hold ‘Em.”

“The very game I had in mind. Splendid. You’re the dealer for this hand.”

A deck of cards appeared on the table in front of her, back side up. It bore a shimmering emerald and amber pattern, and Calli took a moment to admire it before she took the deck and shuffled it.

“Are you going to cheat?” she asked while riffle shuffling the cards.

“No. These are just normal cards. I don’t need to cheat. And you know how to shuffle properly, which is a surprise. I haven’t seen you playing card games in the recent months.”

“I played in college,” she said, dealing us two cards each. “We bet chores or candy with my roommates. I always lost on purpose when we bet who would make dinner. Normally, I would never lose if I could win, so that made me realize how much I really loved cooking. I dropped out after the first year and enrolled in a culinary school.”

I snapped my fingers, and two stacks of chips appeared in front of each of us. Calli picked one up and frowned, looking at me questioningly.

“We have low value chips,” I said, already grinning, because I couldn’t wait to see her reaction. “The green ones with an image of the lips. One chip is for one kiss. Mine are red, so we can calculate how many kisses each of us has won. And the black chips are for oral sex. Yours have dicks on them, mine have vulvas. If I win a dick chip off you, you will owe me a blowjob. And vice versa.”

I braced myself for shrieking and maybe scratching, so Calli’s reaction caught me completely off guard. A slow, delighted smile lit up her face, and she laughed quietly, her eyes sparkling.

“I’ll have you kneeling for me again,” she said, turning a black chip between her fingers. “You really should have

thought it through.”

“Oh, I have, *ást min*,” I said, returning her smile. “Let’s play.”

Calli was the dealer, so she went in with a one kiss bet, and I bet two. We looked at our hands, and she called. We both bet two kisses each, and she laid out the flop—the first three community cards.

After barely glancing at the table, I watched her like a hawk, but she was good. Whether it was the betting or something else, she had grown much more focused, her face cool and pleasant.

“Raise,” she said calmly, throwing four kisses on the table.

“Call,” I said, barely glancing at my hand. My chips joined hers, and we moved on to reveal the turn card.

Nine of diamonds. With the two nines in my hand, it gave me three of a kind. I looked away with a faint smile, and focused on Calli. Her face was impenetrable, and when she looked at me, she smiled back, her smile easy, eyes bright.

Damn. I really couldn’t tell. She looked satisfied and calm, and while three of a kind was a good hand, she could have something better. Unless she gave me something more to go on...

“Check,” she said.

I laughed quietly, because that had told me everything I needed to know. She wasn’t confident enough to bet anything, which meant she probably had something, but not much. I threw a black chip on the table, the gold-etched image of a vulva gleaming in the light.

“Raise.”

Calli looked up, her face cool, a faint smile playing on her lips.

“Call.”

She flicked her black chip from the stack, and both our chips joined the pot, the images catching the light. I revealed

the last community card, the river. Calli smiled, a cool, indifferent smile, and looked at me with a challenge in her eyes.

“Check.”

Eager to see her reaction, I didn't bet, either. Instead, I showed her my hand, pointing to the nine on the table.

Immediately, Calli's calm crumpled. The easy smile turned into a bitter twist of her lips, and her eyes, brimming with focused intensity just a minute before, now burned with anger.

She threw her hand on the table. She had two of a kind. Queens, yes, but still weaker than my hand.

“Let's play again,” she spat, and I laughed out loud, my cock already twitching in anticipation. I grabbed my chips, making the black dick one spin in the air, and blew Calli a kiss. She huffed in annoyance while I made the deck soar to my hand so I could shuffle it.

“You're a sore loser,” I told her, still laughing. “It's very satisfying to watch how hard you're taking it. And later... Oh, you'll take it. Even harder. Damn, I can't wait to see you kneeling, and I really hope you will be as angry as now. What a treat. Though I'll make it fun for you, too, don't you worry.”

“Shut up and play,” she hissed, and I laughed harder, calling over the champagne bottle and topping off our glasses. Calli threw hers back as if it were a shot. She made a funny face, coughed, and then sat back, her eyes watering.

“Be careful, it's quite fizzy,” I said with a grin, to which she flipped me off.

For a moment, I was worried I had overdone it, but one look at her burning eyes and the stubborn line of her lips told me it was fine. She was still here, invested and burning with passion. The game was on.

“Isn't it fun?” I whispered. “Tell me honestly. You haven't felt so alive in years.”

She looked up without a word and tapped her champagne glass, which I refilled immediately. But her anger was

dissipating, replaced by a cool focus. Since I was dealing, I went in with the one kiss bet, and Calli bet two. We looked at our cards, and Calli raised to four kisses.

Apart from the more aggressive betting, she revealed nothing. I had a ten and a queen of hearts, which had quite a potential, but not enough to go big yet. I called her bet, and we moved on to the flop.

As soon as she saw the three community cards, Calli gave me a challenging smile and bet two black chips at once. I still had nothing usable apart from a pair of fives on the table, so I smiled back and called her bet, praying for the last two cards to save me.

I could fold, of course, but what was the fun in that?

And so I did my best to look confident and at ease through the last two rounds of betting, which seemed to fool Calli into thinking I had a good hand. She didn't raise as aggressively now, and we ended up with twelve kiss chips and two black ones in the pot for each of us.

“Check.”

Calli gave me a bright smile and laid her cards open with a flourish. With the community cards, she had a full house. I revealed my weak hand with a tight smile, and Calli jumped up and whooped, doing a little dance and laughing.

I instantly felt better, because now I would eat her out twice, which was a double victory even though I had lost.

“When do we claim our prizes?” she asked, stopping behind my chair and leaning to whisper in my ear. “Because I can't wait to see you back on your knees. And you should know there's definitely some gold dust on me right now.”

I stood up, making the chair disappear so it wouldn't hit her, and turned fast. I picked her up with a grin and carried her out of the play room like a bride, the door opening for us. Behind me, the chips we had won off each other followed, a glittering host of prizes, and Calli laughed, gripping the back of my head.

“Who goes first?”

“You won more,” I said, grinning. “And I have a fun idea. We’ll play in the sun room. Two chips count for two orgasms. Acceptable?”

She gasped, gold flakes shimmering on her cheeks. I leaned in for a hungry kiss, tasting champagne on her tongue, and Calli’s grip on me tightened. We kissed all the way to the sun room, and the trail of gold dust on the carpet marked our path.

When I tore my lips away from hers, I made one kiss chip fly ahead of us, making it explode in a miniature show of fireworks.

“One.”

Calli gave a shuddering breath, already squirming in my arms. In the sun room, I quickly tinted the windows, making them opaque from the outside, and locked the door with a nod. I put Calli on her feet by the wall most verdantly overgrown with vines and snapped my fingers. The flexible, strong shoots came to life, instantly creeping up her legs and arms.

Her clothes vanished.

She yelped and tried to break free, but it was too late. She was immobilized, dark green vines trailing along her skin, one wrapping around her throat.

“You wanted to see me on my knees,” I whispered, trailing my fingers down her sternum to her belly. “You’ll have me there. But I want to put my own spin on your reward.”

I trailed my fingers further down and dipped them to her cunt, teasing her opening. She was wet, and when I raised my fingers, they were covered with gold. Looking Calli in the eyes, I licked them clean while she panted, shedding more glittering dust.

“I’ve dreamed about this,” I said quietly, swirling my fingers in her wetness again and teasing her clit. “About making you come all over my tongue. I wondered how it would be? Would you fight it? Would you try to stop your orgasm only to make me work harder for it? Because I hope you do just that, *ást min*. I hope you fight me like a tigress.”

She moaned, throwing her head back, and I rubbed delicate circles over her clit, making the vines tease her nipples. Calli gasped when the firm shoots slithered over her breasts, wrapping around her dark nipples when they tightened.

She opened her eyes, already glazed over and flecked with gold, and I grinned, my cock growing harder as I fingered her.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

“I am,” I said, dropping to my knees.

With a flick of my finger, the vines wrapped more tightly around her left leg and raised it up and to the side. It hung there, comfortably suspended, and I leaned in to worship at the altar of her pleasure.

Calli tasted horny and wild, and I committed those first laps on her cunt to eternal memory, knowing I would return to this moment in my dreams. Above me, she writhed and shook, pleading with low, broken sounds, but I wasn't in a hurry. I licked over her cunt, explored her labia, licking between and over them, and flicked my tongue over her clit.

The vines slithered along Calli's body, pressing into her waist, rubbing down her back, playing with her nipples. When her moans turned into strangled gasps, I sucked her clit into my mouth and ran my tongue over it in lazy swirls, listening to the high-pitched cries of her pleasure.

Gold dust rained all around me, and I pulled back. Kneeling between her legs, my mouth wet with her taste, I looked up at my goddess with a grin.

“Don't you ever give in to me,” I said.

She shook her head frantically, fighting the vines holding her arms over her head, and I attacked her with more focus. My mouth on her clit, two curved fingers up her cunt, I played Calli's body like a virtuoso, listening to the breathy music she made for me.

Soon, she fell silent, her entire body trembling, and I knew she was almost there. I pressed harder, sucked faster, and she came apart with a scream of fury, her pussy clamping down on my fingers.

I licked her slowly through her orgasm and stood up, licking my lips with a grin. I pushed the fingers that had been inside her into her mouth, took them out, and kissed her, her taste mingling on both our tongues.

“Two kisses,” I said, walking back with a satisfied grin.

Another kiss chip exploded in a fury of pink lights, and I spun the black chips over my palm.

Calli hung in my trap, breathing hard, her entire body shimmering with gold. I turned the armchair that was still here after our previous encounter and sat down, watching her with hungry eyes.

“You’re still owed many kisses and one more orgasm,” I said, calling forth a glass of champagne, which I raised to her in a toast.

Calli took a deep breath and straightened as much as the vines allowed, looking at me with dark, open eyes.

Exquisite. A woman sated and conquered, if only for a few minutes. A sight no one but me would ever see, I vowed.

“This one won’t be so easy,” she said, but her voice sounded hoarse and sensuous, the sound traveling straight to my dick.

“Then let’s start at once,” I replied, standing up and sending a vine to tease her clit gently while I stalked her.

“Because once you break apart for me again, it will be my turn. And I have something very special for you, my love.”



Chapter 14: The Roulette

Calli

I was still sensitive after that first time, and had to grudgingly admit, he was good at this. The best I'd had. Though I wouldn't tell him, because his ego was already big enough.

When the cool vines slid over my exposed core, I shivered. It was almost painful, and yet, I was hungry for more. It wasn't only that Loki was so good with his tongue. It was the thrill of victory thrumming in my blood, the knowledge I had won these orgasms from him.

Even though I was tied up and shaking, I was in power now. And then, it would flip, and I would be the one kneeling.

I could get addicted to this dance.

Loki came over slowly while his vines teased my clit just lightly, the other vines sliding over my nipples and stomach with soft rustles. He tucked a loose lock of hair behind my ear, cupped my cheek, and pressed his thumb into my lower lip.

"Let's bet, sweetheart," he whispered, leaning so close I only saw his eyes gleaming with mischief. "If I make you come in less than ten minutes, you will stay with me for a year and one day. If you win, I will give you a restaurant of your own and freedom to walk away when you wish."

He slid his fingers to my throat, and when the vine untangled from there, he wrapped his hand around it in a tight collar. I gasped, my eyes glazing over, and fought the vines holding up my leg. I managed to land a weak kick to his knee before the vines tightened, wrestling me back into position.

He laughed, pressing closer, and I groaned in disappointment. Nuzzling against my cheek, he reached down

and ran his fingers over me. His touch sent tingles into my lower belly, and I gasped, already tumbling down the familiar path of pleasure with a sense of doom.

“Time is ticking. Don’t be a coward and take the bet.”

“Fuck,” I hissed, knowing full well he was manipulating me, but then, logically, the outcome of this bet would lie with me. And so I braced myself, telling my body to hold on for just ten minutes, and nodded. “Fine. We have a bet.”

Instead of attacking me with his tongue and fingers like I thought he would, he stepped back and folded his arms. A crystal green clock appeared under the ceiling, starting the countdown from ten minutes.

“What are you doing?” I asked, disappointed.

“Giving you a fighting chance,” he said with a smirk.

I scoffed, promising myself I would absolutely not come, whatever he did. I would just think about... burned food, rotten eggs, old spaghetti crawling with maggots. Yeah, that would do it.

The countdown ticked down to seven, at which Loki approached me, a smug grin on his face. He knelt and pressed his lips to me, his tongue moving in skillful circles. I closed my mouth and tensed, trying to force down the pleasure buzzing between my legs.

A moment later, something wet touched my asshole, and I jerked. I shot him an outraged look, and found his laughing eyes already trained up, sparkling with a challenge.

The cunning fucker.

I sagged, bracing myself, because I knew exactly what he would say if I took this weapon out of his arsenal right now. *Coward*. This was a bet, and I would withstand anything he came up with.

But for fuck’s sake. How did he even know I enjoyed having my butt played with?

His finger slipped easily in my ass while his mouth focused on my clit, sucking greedily, his tongue pressing

firmly into me. The vines slithered over my nipples and pushed into my mouth, forcing it open. I panted, shaking from the tension as the pleasure mounted, gathering inside me like a raging storm.

Five more minutes.

I groaned and thrashed, trying to move away from his mouth and fingers. It was difficult not to give in, and yet it seemed I could win. I was all hot and tight with pleasure, but I could surf that wave, never letting myself lose control.

Until he chuckled, his laughter vibrating against me. I froze, that vibration not unlike something a sex toy might produce, and completely impossible to achieve with human sound alone.

But he was not human.

He looked up, his lips still pressed to me, and gave me a cunning look.

“Oh no,” I whispered, just as he laughed again.

I cried out, thrashing in the vines, and he laughed almost continuously right against my clit while his finger slid in and out of my ass. I tried to kick, cursing, but the vines held fast. My hips were as if in a vise, immobilized and exposed to him. No matter how hard I fought, I couldn't move an inch, and he ignored my thrashing completely, playing my body with absolute authority.

I was panting, my clit thrumming to the rhythm of his laughter, everything inside me tightening, tightening...

“Fuck!” I bit out, tensing up further, trying to push that looming orgasm away, to make it stop for just a moment. But all that effort only made me climb higher. Everything inside me shook, and he laughed louder and louder, the sound enveloping me from all sides, masculine and rich, my clit gripped in its powerful vibration...

I plunged down, my body tightening into one hard ball of bliss, and I screamed out my release.

I still shook with the powerful aftershocks when Loki stood up, kissed my cheek, and brushed his lips against my earlobe.

“With a minute to spare,” he whispered, so smug I could choke him.

I roared and tried to kick him, but he jumped back with a laugh even as the vines loosened, still supporting me but allowing for movement.

Loki spun his two black chips higher and higher under the ceiling until they both stopped for a moment, quivering in the sun. Then they exploded, each breaking into a cloud of black and gold glitter that rained on the room. Loki caught some on his tongue and threw me a satisfied look.

“Tastes like you.”

I clenched my fists, squeezed my eyes shut, and took a deep breath through my nose. It didn't make me feel better, but it did calm me some.

“A year and a day,” I said, my voice sounding hollow. “Isn't it a bit cliché?”

“It's enough,” he said, his smile shrinking. For a moment, he watched me with serious, burning eyes, and I shivered. “Though you might get your restaurant anyway. You could get it in another bet. You'll see, we will play all kinds of games. It will be fun, Calli.”

“Fun,” I repeated dully.

Oh, I was sure it would be. But would I be able to give him up after that year? No, I would most likely get hooked and want to stay forever or as long as he would have me, even though our relationship could never be healthy.

“And after that year?” I asked, striving to sound indifferent.

“Eternity,” he said quietly, sitting in his armchair. “I won't let you go.”

I shook my head and sighed. My body felt weak, my emotions were all over the place, and suddenly, I wanted

nothing more than to get lost in another game that would take my mind off everything.

The vines released me completely, one giving me a playful pat on my bottom, and Loki spread his legs, sitting back comfortably. My black chip with the gold dick etched on it whirled in front of my face, and I snatched it out of the air.

Behind the windows, the sun was setting, the sky painted glorious orange and pink. Soon it would be night, and I shivered in anticipation. Would we stay in one room? Was that a level of intimacy I was ready for?

And on another note, would I get trapped in his dreams again? A cold dread crawled down my spine. A frozen landscape with a raging snowstorm and monsters. Why had he dreamed about it? Was it real? There was so much I still didn't know.

"I'm ready when you are." Loki's warm voice called me back to the present, and I shook off the cold echo of that dream. "And after this, we're going to Vegas. The VIP room opens at night, which will come two hours later than here, so we'll have some time to have fun together first. I'll take you on a real date."

"Vegas," I repeated dumbly. "Oh, right. It's only, what, a thousand miles away? Of course. A fun, short trip."

"Fifteen hundred miles, give or take a few dozen," he said with a grin. "And stop delaying. I have a treat for you."

That shook me out of my disbelief. I managed a laugh, eyeing his bulge critically.

"What, another fancy cock?"

"Well, we're going to Vegas, so I thought we might play a little roulette, though not the casino type," he said with a grin. "Come, have a look."

I approached him warily, too curious to turn away. Even though I've just had two orgasms, arousal still thrummed in my veins, my body responding to the idea of sucking his cock, and I left golden glitter footprints on the black marble floor as I walked.

He was sprawled in the purple armchair, his hands on the armrests, legs open wide. I knelt between them and unzipped him fast, curiosity getting the better of me.

He chuckled and I lowered his trousers, frowning. It looked like...

“Is this... a revolver in your pants?” I asked, my voice completely calm despite how freaky this thing was.

“Good guess,” he said with a low laugh. “It’s just the cylinder. See, I call this game the cock roulette. Like Russian roulette, only less deadly. Can you guess what it does?”

I tilted my head to the side, intrigued in spite of myself.

“Does it spin?”

His white teeth glimmered as he smiled a wide, unhinged smile.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

I touched the cool metal of the revolver cylinder. There were six round holes in it, each the width of a cock, I assumed. That meant...

“If I spin it, a cock will come out?” I asked, looking up with a frown. “And each is different?”

“Correct. Now, don’t worry, all the options will be perfectly manageable for your sweet little mouth. Each comes with a special flavor, too.”

I sat on my heels, staring at the six perfectly round holes. In other circumstances, I might have been amused, but it had been a long day, and its weight sat on my shoulders, making everything seem harder.

“Could we not do that?” I asked with a sigh. “It’s one game too many for today. Just give me the cock you usually have, or better yet, that real thing you said I couldn’t handle. Give me something real.”

His grin vanished and he shot me a sharp look, so unexpected that I did a double take. A moment later, it was gone, replaced by his usual amused expression, but I still

couldn't shake off that image of his face twisted into something sinister.

"It's my reward and I want to do it this way," he said, his voice warm and smiling, making me think I must have imagined that sudden change in his manner. "But if you're not up for this, we can do it later."

I looked at the revolver... cock... cylinder. Six options. And what had he said? Flavors?

"I hope neither of those is fish sauce," I muttered, and Loki laughed.

"Only one way to find out."

I sighed and leaned closer, finally giving the cylinder a spin. It turned with a faint clicking sound, and I watched, mesmerized, as it turned more and more slowly until it stopped entirely.

Glittery green smoke shot out of the top chamber, obscuring the view for a moment. When it dissipated, the metal cylinder was gone, in its place a cock with a tapered head and greenish veins running under its surface, protruding through the taut skin.

It was unmistakably hard, the skin smooth and covered by a very faint, green shimmer, and there was a drop of precum glistening on the tip.

It was the color of absinthe.

I looked at Loki, raising my eyebrows, and he only nodded. His grin looked fixed now, eyes bright, and he watched me intently, his nostrils flaring slightly with every inhale.

"I will hold your head down after you get the first taste," he said quietly, eyes gleaming. "Last chance to back out."

With a mocking laugh, I braced my shoulders and took his cock in my mouth, because I never backed out once I committed.

Famous last words.

I immediately tried to pull back, and true to his word, he pressed his hand to the back of my head and forced me to keep his cock in my mouth.

It tasted awfully, acidly sour. I thrashed and beat his thigh, until suddenly, the taste turned sweet. It was still sour, but with a sugary aftertaste, and I made a surprised sound, which soon turned into a giggle.

Loki released my head and I pulled back, laughing.

“Sour candy? Really?”

He spread his hands as if to say I should have expected this, and I leaned closer with a smile. I licked over his shaft, running my tongue over the protruding veins, and sucked the head in my mouth, making a face when that first sour taste hit my tastebuds. Soon, I settled into a rhythm, my performance punctuated by his hard breathing.

He tangled his hand in my hair, gently pulling to make me look up, and I sucked in almost all of his cock, perfectly manageable just as he had promised, while looking into his glittering, otherworldly eyes that pierced me with a serious, uncanny severity.

He panted, his face sharpening when his grin turned into a tense grimace, and I sucked the sugary sour taste out of him, setting a challenge for myself. Because if he could get me off in six minutes, I could do the same.

I flicked my tongue over him, working with my lips, my eyes always trained up. It wasn't long before he made sounds, low masculine moans that only made me try harder. I pressed my lips into the warm, smooth skin of his cock and teased the narrow slit in its head with the tip of my tongue.

Soon, he thrust his hips up rhythmically, pushing himself deeper into my mouth, his hands buried in my hair. He groaned and cursed, eyes wide, and I watched his face with watering eyes, mesmerized by how savage he looked.

His polished, charismatic persona was gone. Only the man was left, and he was in my power.

Hard cock pushing in the back of my throat, Loki's loud groans, and my valiant attempt at keeping an even breathing rhythm mixed into a sensuous fever dream. I took all he gave me, determined not to back out now that he unraveled under my touch.

Loki came into my mouth without a shade of a grin on his face, his features distorted into something feral, and as his sour, then sweet, cum flooded my tongue, he didn't look away even once, didn't even blink.

"Put your claim on me," he said when I pulled back, wiping a drop of his cum from the corner of my lip with my thumb. I plunged it in my mouth because that taste had grown on me.

"What?"

"Your claim," he said, slowly moving a hand over my arm.

At this, my skin became as if painted, dark green and gold brush strokes running over my bare arms, collarbones, and breasts. I rubbed the paint, trying to get it off, but my skin felt normal to the touch, as if nothing was covering it.

"It won't come off," he said softly, and I looked up.

He looked so serious, so utterly unlike his grinning self, that I gasped softly, suddenly wishing I had had some clothes on. A cold shiver danced down my back, and I edged away without standing up.

"This is my claim," he said. "Something I put on you when I cursed you. It lets everyone know you are mine and only mine. I would like you to do the same for me. I want to wear your claim so everyone can see I belong only to you."

I shook my head, alarmed by how dark his eyes had turned. And the room suddenly seemed dark, too, the dusk settling over the buildings now that the sun had set. It was a warm summer evening, and yet I shivered as if November wind had just blown inside.

He kept looking at me with the same savage expression, and I shook off the strange mood and stood up, resisting the urge to cover myself.

Whatever this was about, I would solve it later. The claim seemed to just sit on my skin, doing nothing, and I decided to ignore it for now. I wasn't ready for a serious conversation.

"You said something about Vegas," I said, striving to make my voice sound cheerful.

He closed his eyes, rubbing the point between his eyebrows, until he finally smiled and looked at me, his eyes back to normal.

"You are right. Let's go to Vegas. We have a fun, dangerous mission ahead of us. I like those best."

He gave me his hand and we walked to his bedroom, where he siphoned away the gold dust covering us both and added it to the gorgeous, shimmering dress. Then, he made it rise from the mannequin, letting it float under the ceiling, the fabric seeming so light, even the faintest breath would make it flutter.

"Hands up," he said, and I obeyed, the thought of refusing such a beautiful gift barely crossed my mind.

The shimmering, gossamer light material settled over me like an intricate spiderweb. Loki spanned his fingers, turning the doors of his wardrobe into a mirror. I looked at myself, speechless, and slowly swayed from side to side.

The dress reacted to my faintest move, the material fluttering all around me, and each flutter made it catch the light in a slightly different way. I was a shimmering vision, something better than glitter or diamonds, and Loki laughed with satisfaction.

"Allow me to arrange your hair and makeup."

I nodded, unable to tear my eyes away from myself. At once, my hair raised itself and twisted, intricate braids flowing down the strands and twisting with each other, forming a crown on the top of my head. One gold braid wove in and out of the pattern, subtly resembling a diadem.

A faint sprinkle of golden dust, only visible when I turned my head just so, finished the beautiful creation.

My face became suddenly clear and fresh, and then the faintest golden shimmer covered my cheekbones, my eyes growing dark and sultry, eyelashes looking long and heavy, even though they felt normal. A light glow settled on my lips.

“Have you considered a career as a makeup artist?”

He smiled, eyes flashing gold, and turned his finger around. I spun obediently in place, and the gossamer layers of the dress fluttered around me like butterfly wings, as light as air, as striking as sunlight.

He snapped his fingers, and his outfit straightened out, the top hat he had lost during our game settling on the top of his head, the ornate cane flying into his hand. He gestured to the floor, where a pair of shimmering, almost translucent gold shoes awaited.

I stepped into them, wobbling a bit, and he caught my elbow. We turned to the mirror, and I gasped at the image we made. His green complemented my gold. Even in my heels, I was shorter than him, the difference made more pronounced by his top hat.

We looked otherworldly, like tourists from the land of fairies. His showman’s garb could suit a high-end circus arena, but with me by his side, he suddenly looked kingly.

“Trickster with the capital T,” I said with a smile. “That’s what you look like.”

“And you look like a goddess. All right. I’m at full capacity right now, so a trip there and back should be easy, even with complications. Still, should something happen, I want you to wear it.”

He extended his hand palm up, and the lucky dime he had shown me before spun over it, glittering gold and green. It hung on a thin, gold chain.

Loki sent his amulet to rest in the hollow on my throat, the chain circling my neck.

I touched it, looking at the dime in the mirror. It shimmered against my throat, looking magical and out of place with the rest of my outfit, and I frowned, wondering

about its significance. Was it just a flashy trinket? Or something much more valuable?

“Shouldn’t it be silver?”

“I like gold better,” he said, offering me his arm.

As soon as I took it, we spun in place, a glittering darkness descending upon us both. We hung in it, suspended, no floor under our feet, and I gripped Loki’s arm with fear. He laughed, and suddenly, the darkness dissipated.

I looked around. We were outside, a glorious sky nearing sunset stretching over our heads, tall, opulent buildings and palm trees cutting into the summer blue.

“Welcome to Las Vegas, *ást min.*”



Chapter 15: To the Wolves

Loki

She looked around with huge, delighted eyes, and I smiled, preferring to watch her rather than our surroundings. I'd been to Vegas before, and its splendor was nothing compared to the beautiful woman by my side.

She drew other pairs of eyes, and I held her arm firmly, projecting ownership to anyone who dared to look. The finest jewel of all, she was mine.

“We have a few hours to kill,” I said, calling her awestruck gaze back to me. “Would you like to just explore? We could get dinner and play some ordinary games before we go to Cleopatra’s Pearl.”

“It’s a casino?” Calli asked, ignoring my date plans.

“Yes. One where supernaturals play. Now focus. What do you want to do?”

She turned in a slow circle, looking at the opulent facades of the hotels on either side of the alley, their windows glittering, gold and silver details catching the late afternoon sun rays.

“Everything,” she said, facing me, her eyes brighter than the kitschy luxury around us.

I kissed her, unable to resist, and she kissed me back with the fervency and passion of her delight.

“It could be like this every day,” I whispered against her lips before breaking away.

She smiled and took my arm, and I led my love on the first of many outrageous, expensive dates I had planned for her

over the months.

We were overdressed wherever we went, but nowhere is flamboyant dress as appreciated as in Vegas. Calli turned heads and incited whispers, and I smiled proudly, leading her through a casino floor or to a restaurant table, my hand always on her.

We talked, we laughed, we played roulette and blackjack, and Calli won each and every game. As soon as I sensed trouble brewing, because someone who's constantly winning is never left alone in a casino, we cashed in our chips and changed the venue.

Until it was time.

"Cleopatra's Pearl," Calli breathed, gazing up at the stunning edifice.

It was already dark, and a mild breeze made the tiny locks on her nape flutter, her dress dancing to the tune the wind played. The casino's lights, white, gold, and blue, played on Calli's face and reflected in her eyes as she took in the establishment.

"It looks like it was made entirely from gold," she said, looking at me with an outraged expression. "Please, tell me you didn't take me here because you're a fan of the architecture."

I laughed and pressed my finger to the lucky dime and then pretended to kiss her cheek while whispering.

"I'll take it off you at one point but you'll get it back. Just be yourself."

"We came here to play supernatural poker," I said out loud, offering her my arm. "And the VIP room where I'm taking you is much more tastefully decorated."

The foyer, black and gold with blue accents, was brightly lit to compensate for the black walls and floor. As soon as we entered, the host nodded and extended his arm toward the discreet elevator on the right side of the room.

Calli was already heading for the main floor, toward the faint sounds of slot machines, and I gently pulled her toward the elevator.

Like everything else, it was mostly golden, only two buttons on the gleaming black display. I picked the lower one, and the elevator glided down.

Calli looked at me questioningly but didn't say anything, and I grinned, kissing her one last time before showdown. Somehow, she knew not to ask questions or speak now, as I suspected she would.

The best partner in crime was someone who could follow unspoken cues.

"I chose well," I told her when the elevator doors slid soundlessly open.

We walked down a wide corridor, its golden walls adorned by crystal wall lamps that gently twinkled when we passed. The floor here was black and bare, and the clicking of Calli's heels echoed in the empty space.

When we reached the door at the end of the corridor, it opened automatically. We were welcomed by Chiara, the hostess for the VIP room. She was a beautiful black woman with striking eyes as golden as the rest of the casino.

"Welcome, sir. Madam," she said, nodding politely with a smile. "You are just in time for the first game. Who will be playing?"

I chuckled, knowing what she meant. I had been banned from the VIP room as soon as the casino realized who I truly was. Tricksters with pockets full of luck charms are not good for business.

"My lady will play tonight. Take the entry fee from my account," I said.

Chiara's eyes jumped to the lucky dime on Calli's throat, but she said nothing, only smiling and nodding for a waiter, who stood behind her. He came over with a crystal tray supporting a single champagne glass half full of water and a large gold pearl on a saucer.

With a pair of golden tongs, Chiara picked up the pearl and dropped it in the glass, where it dissolved instantly, turning the drink pale gold and fizzing like champagne.

“Am I supposed to drink that?” Calli asked, looking from Chiara to me.

“It’s symbolic. A promise you won’t cheat,” I said, taking the drink and offering it to her.

She took the glass and sniffed it. When she still didn’t drink, Chiara smiled and asked whether she knew why the casino was called Cleopatra’s Pearl. When Calli shook her head, she told the story.

“Legend has it, when Marc Antony was her guest, Cleopatra wanted to impress him with her power and wealth. She owned the biggest, most expensive pearl in the world, and when they were having dinner together, she dropped the pearl in her drink. It dissolved, and she drank it in a few gulps.”

Calli watched the glass incredulously, so I put my arm around her shoulders and leaned in, speaking softly.

“This one wasn’t a real pearl, and the drink tastes quite good. Unlike Cleopatra’s. She actually dropped the pearl in vinegar, as it was the only way it would dissolve quickly. And then she drank it with a smile on her face. She was a determined woman.”

Calli raised her eyebrows, and I shrugged, grinning.

“What? Gods talk. And Anubis is a real gossip monger.”

She shook her head without a word, eyeing the golden drink resembling champagne. Finally, she turned the glass in her fingers and drained it, but only after flashing me a harsh look, which I took as a warning. If anything happened to her, her eyes had said, she would make me pay.

It was adorable.

“You can go in. Have a fabulous evening,” Chiara said when a set of black doors opened on the far side of the hall.

Glimpsing the interior, I chuckled, seeing the casino still hadn’t found a way to reverse my magical redecoration. After

the opulent gold and black décor, the VIP room was a pleasant breath of taste.

“Oh, I see,” Calli murmured, seeing the emerald green wallpaper and white and dark gold fixtures, much less flashy and more tasteful than the bright yellow gold that was the casino’s trademark. “You said it was better decorated, because it’s completely in your style. Your doing?”

“Yes.”

While she was still processing the room, I turned my attention to the players. There were six, and the silver haired, severe-faced dealer, Joseph, stood opposite us, his milky white eyes focused on me.

He was the one who had sniffed me out first. Blind in human terms, Joseph saw and sensed much more than an average supernatural person, which was why the casino employed him. I would explain myself in a second, but for now...

I grinned, letting my cheeks split open in an aggressive show of amusement. The head councilor was present, just like I had suspected.

The Magic Council was mostly made up of alien, insect-like creatures who had no emotions or empathy. Devoid of humanity, significantly more so than even the most psychopathic supernaturals, they were supposed to be impartial and staunchly devoted to their law.

But years of living among humans had taken their toll. Councilors developed vices ranging from a taste for expensive cigars to gambling addictions. It was the reason why Draco had managed to get by, bribing the councilors with his cuisine.

And why the head was here tonight.

“Councilor,” I said warmly as soon as we stood on the threshold, speaking before anyone could react to our arrival. “It’s so surprising to see you in the same state as your ground team. You’re famous for overseeing the council’s work from much greater distances.”

Right in the work ethic, and in front of important players, too.

The borrowed face of the head councilor turned red, but his features remained as cool as ever. Those bugs. No matter how they tried to blend in, they could never master human expressions.

Nor did they have any taste.

Tonight, the councilor wore a middle-aged man with a paunch and loose jowls, complete with glasses. Honestly, if one could use any fresh corpse as one's body, why not choose someone attractive at least?

"Our work is done," he said, his voice dry and phlegmatic, even though I knew he was pissed. "I had a free evening. And you are quite audacious to show your face here."

I kept grinning, even though the news was terrible. If their work was done, his troops could return to harass my soldiers right that moment, and not as exhausted as I had initially predicted. But at least I knew now.

So typical of the head councilor. Imply he was less than professional and he would instantly defend himself, spilling valuable information.

Arrogant, too. He was so convinced of his superiority, he didn't even see the point of keeping his cards close to his chest. A weakness I was happy to exploit.

Pity he didn't have more of those. Councilors were famously immune to pain and unkillable. If their host died, they just moved on to a new body, which made fighting them a menace. But that was fine. I would find a way to make those bastards scream yet.

"What can I say?" I replied, laughing. "I am like a moth to the flame. Can't resist playing in such an excellent company. You excluded, sir."

Before he could process my insult, I turned to the woman on my left, who eyed Calli's dress with a haughty look. As a dragon, she was the highest in hierarchy apart from me, which demanded I greet her first.

“Lady Shinxi,” I said with a respectful nod. “You are as beautiful and fierce as ever.”

She wore a red and gold cheongsam, accessorized with a black pearl choker. Her hair was held up with a number of gold pins, which I knew could be used as weapons. Not that she needed any when she could breathe fire. She was, in fact, one of the few Chinese dragons who had that ability.

Notably, she wore a ring on every finger. An aggressive better, Shinxi always came prepared to win—or lose—a queen’s ransom.

“Has your ban been revoked?” she asked me, tearing her eyes away from Calli. “Why are you here?”

I smiled, vowing to myself I would bring her down a peg tonight. Dragon or not, she should address me with respect.

“I’m here as a spectator. My lady in gold will play.”

Shinxi’s eyes flicked to Calli, seemingly indifferent, and returned to me.

“A bit overdressed, isn’t she?”

I laughed, pulling Calli closer. She let me, her body loose in her bewilderment. I knew she would find her bearing fast, and I would help her by dragging the greetings out a bit.

“Your envy is the highest compliment,” I told Shinxi with a grin, to which she scoffed, opening her gold fan with a snap.

“Grand Marquis,” I said, nodding at Aamon, who stood to my left, which meant he would be Calli’s neighbor at the table.

The tall, princely demon nodded back without a word, as haughty as ever. I took a moment to assess his clothes. Loose brocade jacket, a perfect hiding place for any number of weapons. Like Shinxi, he was one to watch. I suspected he would get much more passionate once the game started, true to his Italian roots.

“Madam,” I said next, nodding at an auburn-haired woman in her forties, wearing diamond earrings and a fur stole draped elegantly over her creamy gown. “Your aura seems familiar, but forgive me, I must not have seen your face before.

“Meredith,” she said with a smile, offering me her hand for a kiss.

I merely nodded and didn’t move, but her smile didn’t lose its warmth. If any, she watched me and Calli with fondness.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I said, probing at her aura to get a feel for her magic.

She smiled, sensing what I was doing, but didn’t call me out on it. It wasn’t exactly polite to go pawing at other people’s auras... But at least I knew who she was now. A shapeshifter with a taste for the razzle-dazzle of Hollywood, she had had many names, most of them displayed in gaudy letters over movie theaters.

“The last time we met, you went by Marilyn,” I said with a smile. “Fond of the letter M, I see.”

She nodded and sat gracefully in her chair. I turned to the last two players and greeted them by name. Goran was a lesser demon from Europe and a fine gambler, and Andrea was a spirit who sometimes came to Vegas propelled by south winds and never stayed for long.

Drawn to flashy entertainment and high stakes just like these players, I had met each of them over my short but numerous excursions to the human world. It was before the ice giants crushed my palace and forced me to abandon my home for good.

When I was just a tourist, visiting for a week here and there, the Magic Council had left me in peace. Only when I started living on Earth did they start pestering me.

Well, I would solve a part of that problem tonight if my love did her job.

“If we’re done with the pleasantries,” Shinxi snapped, shooting Calli a spiteful look, “I want to know why his tart is allowed to have an amulet.”

I shot her a cold smile and snapped my fingers, making the lucky dime fly off Calli’s throat. As it slowly soared to my breast pocket, everyone watched it with gleaming, covetous

eyes. It was a gambler's wet dream, and I had put it on Calli on purpose.

I wanted them to know the Dime was in the room. This way, it would make an even greater impression once it made another appearance.

"If you insult my love again, you will feel the back of my hand," I told Shinxi with a smile while pulling out a green-upholstered chair for Calli.

The old dragon scoffed but didn't reply, and I stroked down Calli's arm one last time. She shivered under my touch, scared and out of her depth, surrounded by the very thing she hated: supernaturals all pitted against her.

I would have felt sorry for her if I hadn't known how aggressive she got whenever she was afraid. Calli was as vindictive as another of that name, Kali, the Goddess of Death, and she would come out victorious in the end.

With a showy flourish, I conjured a chair for myself behind Joseph, where I wouldn't see anyone's cards but could have a clear view of Calli's face. Soon, others took their places, and the game began.

Stacks of glittering chips appeared before each player, and Calli shot me a lost, angry look before focusing on the game with ferocious intensity.

I chuckled to myself and watched my love get slaughtered.



Chapter 16: The River Rat

Calli

I folded on the first two games without making any bets, which earned me pitying or downright scornful looks. When I finally started betting, I lost half of my chips in just a few games.

Soon, Shinxi hijacked the conversation with a long rant about the natural inferiority of the mortal races, to which I listened with tight lips, tuning her out as much as I could while I focused on how the others were playing.

It took a few games, but finally, I got a feel for some of them. Shinxi, especially, was quite transparent. She always raised in the first round of betting, no matter her starting hand. Then, after she saw the community cards, she usually toned her betting down, but if more than half of the players folded, she raised again, trying to intimidate the remaining ones into folding, too.

Aamon never folded, though, and when the third game ended with just him and Shinxi, he won with a flush while Shinxi only had a pair.

The head councilor was difficult to read from his facial expressions and his strategy was hard to pin down. He would raise aggressively only to fold out of the blue, or played very carefully with what turned out to be a very good hand.

After five games, he was the one with the biggest stack of chips, though, which made me believe there was a method to his madness.

Goran swore a lot in a European language I couldn't identify and played very flamboyantly, throwing his chips

around and gesturing wildly. Andrea seemed serene and only half-present, folding more often than me, though once she played doggedly to the end and won a big pot.

And Meredith did everything with a secretive smile and inhuman grace, losing and winning equal amounts. She seemed to be here just for the vibe or company, and I got the feeling she didn't care whether she won or lost.

Overall, it was a curious bunch, and certainly not a group of professionals I would expect to play in a casino's VIP room.

Until Shinxi threw her ring on the table, and I realized all the previous rounds had been just a warm-up.

It was the last round of betting. I had a good hand for once, a full house with a pair of kings and three tens, and I had been raising confidently ever since I knew the hand would work.

"A blue diamond imbued with glamor magic," Shinxi said as the ring fell on the table with a soft tinkle. "Can be used to sustain a glamor on its own for days before needing to be recharged. Quite valuable if I say so myself, and very magical. Which means the mortal is out unless she can call my bet."

She gave me a smug look, and I looked at the others. Meredith's turn was next, and she folded. Goran fussed for a moment, muttering under his breath, until he stood up, unwrapped a beautiful silk belt from his waist, and put it on the table.

A pair of long, rust-colored horns grew out of his head immediately.

"Same magic," he said gruffly. "Glamor, specifically works for horned individuals. I call."

And then it was my turn. I squinted at Loki, furious that he had thrown me into this game without explaining anything. As soon as I caught his eye, he smiled and flicked his finger. A beautiful diamond necklace fell on the table in front of me, shimmering violet.

"Magic reservoir and a beauty glamor in one," he said with a smile. "But in case you didn't want to raise, love, I could come up with something shabbier."

Shinxi huffed angrily, and I gave him a grin, my annoyance dissipating. He hadn't left me alone. No, he had my back in matters I couldn't manage on my own, and trusted me enough to deal with everything else myself.

For some reason, this game was important to him. Seeing as the head councilor was here, it could be crucial to the war with the council. And yet, Loki didn't stand behind my back, whispering directions in my ear. No, he helped me from afar and only when I needed it.

His confidence in me was sexier than everything else about him, and I cleared my throat, pushing down a sudden rush of horniness.

Later.

"I raise," I said, throwing the gorgeous, glittering piece of jewelry on the table, where it shone coldly, its magic light sliding off the golden chips in the pot.

Aamon was next, and he produced out of his loose sleeve a knife in a beautiful scabbard, its leather white and printed with gold ornaments.

"I call," he snarled, shooting me an angry look. "And you'd better be bluffing. This is an ancestral weapon."

With his lips pulled back and face twisted in fury, he seemed to be on the verge of attacking me. I gave him a cool smile.

"If you're afraid to lose, don't bet with a weak hand," I said, looking into his unhinged, fire-tinted eyes, even though under the table, my legs were shaking.

We stared at each other for a long moment until he turned away with a grunt. Loki chuckled and gave me a wink.

"I'll call, then," said Shinxi, trying to sound indifferent, though I heard the fury in her voice. Somehow, she reminded me of Draco, and I wondered if she was a dragon, too.

It was likely. That kind of hot-blooded arrogance couldn't be faked.

She added another ring to the pot, and next was Goran, who folded while cursing something awful. I called, and everyone looked at Joseph. The white-eyed dealer raised his hands, and the items we had bet slowly lifted off the table, hanging suspended in the air. For a moment, Shinxi's rings rose higher then lowered, while my necklace soared, followed by Aamon's knife.

Finally, all items hovered on a roughly equal level, and Joseph nodded sharply.

"All bets are of equal value."

Each item spun in a glittering, golden circle, until all of them transformed into black chips. They joined the pot, and Joseph nodded once more.

"Wonderful," said Shinxi, laying out her cards.

Three of a kind. My heart beat fast in my throat as I put my hand on the table, looking at Aamon's. Also three of a kind, lower than Shinxi's. Which meant...

"Seems like the mortal tart has won," I said as calmly as I could, even though inside I was giddy with triumph. Joseph waved his hand, and all the chips soared to me, the black neatly stacked together next to the gold ones.

"She's cheating," Shinxi said instantly, her voice full of anger. "She still has a luck amulet somewhere. After all, she is *his* woman. Do you really think he would let her play without help?"

Goran shot me an unfriendly look, and Aamon nodded in agreement, while the others looked indifferent. Apart from Meredith, who gave me a kind smile.

This time, I didn't even look at Loki. I could figure this out on my own.

"Sore losers get wrinkles," I said with a cutting smile at Shinxi, standing up slowly. "And I'll be happy to prove I am not wearing any amulets. What's the usual procedure, sir?"

Joseph looked me up and down and motioned for me to sit.

“The lady in gold spoke the truth. She won fairly. Does anyone else have any objections, or can we return to the game?”

I wondered briefly why he called me the lady in gold, and then realized Loki had introduced me this way. He hadn't even told them my name.

We kept playing, and soon, everyone ordered drinks or snacks. I stuck to sparkling water and held on to my wits, knowing very well supernaturals had a much better alcohol tolerance than humans.

I lost Aamon's knife back to him, not by my design, but managed to keep most of the other black chips and even snag two more rings off Shinxi. The head councilor folded out of every game including additional items, until...

“Two six-month visas to the human world,” he said, throwing a pair of thin folders on the table. “Good for any law-abiding creature, spirit, or being. With my personal guarantee.”

I blinked, looking around the table. No one seemed appalled by this obvious display of corruption, and I looked sharply at Loki, wondering if this was the reason we had come. Did he want me to win those visas?

He shook his head gently, as if reading my mind, and I sat back. I wouldn't have won anything with the hand I had unless I bluffed really convincingly, so it was just as well.

I folded and watched the others play for the visas and a handful of valuable items. Meredith finally won the pot, pocketing the visa chips as soon as they fell in front of her. Loki had watched that gesture, too, a knowing smile on his lips.

We kept playing, the atmosphere growing rowdy with everyone shouting and laughing for around five hands, and after that, it got more focused. I was getting tired, and it felt like I had sat at that table for hours. I was ready to ask for a break or ask Loki if we could go, when...

I looked between the community cards and my hand, then back again. Doing my best to hide my excitement, I realized I had an excellent base for a straight. With a king of spades and a queen of hearts in my hand, and then a ten and a nine of hearts on the table, I was only missing the jack to have a king-high straight.

But the problem was, two community cards, the ten and the nine, were of the same suit. This meant someone could potentially have a flush or even a straight flush, depending on the turn and river cards, and that would beat my measly straight.

Which I didn't have yet. If neither the fourth nor fifth community card turned out to be a jack, I would have just a big pile of nothing.

When Shinxi went all in, quickly followed by the head councilor, I realized I would have to bet everything while having a hand that was pretty useless at the moment. And then I would probably lose and be out of the game for good.

So I could fold. But that hand had the potential to turn amazing. And then I would hate myself for folding...

Shinxi all but glowed with the certainty of triumph.

I bit my lip, thinking. Just then, something tingled down my spine, as if a touch, and I looked up sharply. Loki watched me intently, and I stared back at him, trying to understand his meaning.

There was another brush down my nape, and this time, it filled me with a warm, mellow heat, while golden-green sparkles danced in my periphery. I almost laughed out loud, suddenly sagging in my chair. I felt... I felt...

Like nothing bad could happen to me. Because I was the luckiest person in the world.

I looked up at Loki, who grinned and gave me a small nod. Just in time, because it was my turn to bet.

Wordlessly, I slid all my chips to the front. The gold chips provided by the casino and all the black chips I had won off my opponents—all of them joined the pot. Seeing this, Aamon

folded for the first time, and only the three of us remained in the game: Shinxi, the head councilor, and I.

Joseph closed this round of betting and uncovered the fourth card, the turn.

I could weep for joy, and I barely restrained myself. That card was exactly what I had needed, a jack of hearts, which gave me a nice high straight. I looked down at the king of spades in my hand. If only it had been a king of hearts, I would have had one of the highest possible poker hands, a straight flush.

But a king-high straight was a pretty good hand, too.

The high councilor threw more visas on the table, and I felt a pang of worry. I had just gone all in and had nothing left to bet. Maybe Loki could provide. Or maybe...

“I would like to bet my dress. But I won’t take it off unless someone wins it off me. Could we do that?” I asked Joseph, who only nodded and made a black chip symbolizing my dress join the pot.

“I doubt it’s worth as much as three visas,” the head councilor said without inflection.

“You are almost right,” I said, smiling sweetly. “It’s worth more. I’ve seen over a dozen of those visas tonight. They seem to be as common as lice, while this dress is one of a kind.”

Loki clapped slowly, and I shot him a grin. Shinxi took off her last piece of jewelry, the black pearl choker, and Joseph weighed the items.

“We need one more for an even balance,” he told the councilor, proving my point.

Loki laughed out loud at that, and Goran grinned, nodding. Even Andrea smiled faintly, though her eyes seemed to be far away. The councilor threw another folder on the table, and Joseph nodded, satisfied.

We all turned to him, watching as he uncovered the river card, the final of the five community cards. I wasn’t that

excited, because it wasn't likely to change my situation much...

And then I froze.

The king of hearts.

This one card transformed my common straight into one of the highest poker hands, a straight flush, and king-high at that. I thought quickly, eyes dancing over the community cards. No one could possibly have a better hand. My victory was certain.

I was, in fact, what was called a river rat in poker slang. Meaning someone who got a winning hand after the river card was revealed.

Damn. I breathed fast, trying to calm myself down, because if I let them know now...

I would still win. But there was one last round of betting before that, and I could win even more than was already in the pot.

"Love, it's your turn to bet," Loki said.

I arranged my face as best I could, looked up, and gave him a cool smile.

"If you would like to raise, I have just the thing," he said, eyes twinkling as if he had known exactly what my hand was.

Suddenly, the lucky dime appeared in the air in front of me, shimmering gold and green. There was a collective intake of breath all around the table, a curse from Goran, and a sensual moan from Shinxi.

"This is a class A item," Joseph said calmly while everyone stared with wide eyes. "Invaluable. Rule seventeen applies."

I stared at him, confused, and Loki smiled.

"Rule seventeen states the owner of a class A item can ask for specific items to match the bet. If my lady in gold allows, I will state her preferences."

"This is a farce," Shinxi hissed, smoke curling over her nose. I had been right, then. A dragon. "It's obvious she is just

his puppet. If you banned him from playing, he shouldn't be allowed to play by proxy!"

"Your objections have been noted but cannot be addressed while a game is in progress," Joseph said. "If the lady in gold agrees, her partner can name the price for the class A item. It is not against the rules."

I saw the fight on Shinxi's face and finally understood. The lucky dime was apparently a powerful item. Something they all wanted badly enough to continue playing, even at the risk of losing everything.

"I agree," I said, realizing this moment had been the whole point of the game. Loki was about to ask for something very important. I held my breath...

"From Shinxi, a bracelet made from her scales," Loki said with a laugh, looking at the dragon lady with mocking eyes. "It would make an excellent conversation piece."

Shinxi roared, suddenly growing so tall her head almost touched the ceiling. Her eyes turned snakelike, and two yellow feelers grew out over her upper lip, floating in the air in front of her face. Her neck was covered in bright orange scales, and long black claws grew out of her fingers.

"If Lady Shinxi cannot control her original form, she will be escorted out," Joseph said calmly.

But Shinxi settled back, huffing through her muzzle. She brought one clawed hand up, bright orange scales glittering over her forearm, and she tore a few off with her claw. They fell on the table, eight, ten, fifteen...

When twenty scales, each the size of my nail, were on the table, Shinxi shrunk. Her dress was partly torn, and she looked at Loki with eyes full of deadly promise.

"Enough for a bracelet," she said, holding the tear in her dress closed.

"This is acceptable to the lady in gold," Loki said with a wide grin. "She will wear this daily, and I will make sure everyone knows who shed the scales for her bracelet."

“She hasn’t won yet. And won’t,” Shinxi spat.

“And from the head councilor, if he wishes to call our bet, I will ask for but one thing: the name of his next target, meaning the person or entity the Magic Council will attack after our war is concluded,” Loki said, looking at the head councilor with a bright, innocent smile.

I frowned. This didn’t seem like much. He could have asked for a ceasefire or even immunity from the Magic Council. And instead...

“Is that all?” the councilor asked dully, producing a piece of paper and a pen. “I shall write it down immediately.”

Once all bets were done, Joseph nodded, and I revealed my hand.



Chapter 17: Monster

Loki

Just as I had expected, Calli had the winning hand. No wonder. She was the luckiest person in the room right now, though her luck was already running out.

In the quiet moment when everyone stared at her cards, the moment of bafflement and incredulity, I flicked the residue of a green shimmer from my fingers. No one would know what I had done, but they would suspect, oh yes.

The lucky dime that was in the pot, that class A item no one could match, was in fact an empty shell right now. Hardly anyone knew I had made it as a vessel for luck charms, not an infinite amulet. Its power would run out with use, and then it needed to recharge before it could be used again.

And before I tossed it on the table, I had drained all of its magic and sent it flying into Calli. It had been enough for one very lucky win.

I chuckled, looking at Shinxi's slack jaw and the head councilor's dull expression. If only they knew.

For one more heartbeat, everything was quiet. Then Joseph slowly raised his hand and silvery rays as thin as spiderwebs connected each player's right hand to him. A reminder of the rules that bound everyone who had chosen to join the game.

It would not hold them back.

"No fighting, violent action, or malevolent magic are allowed in this room, ladies and gentlemen. I will not remind you more than once."

"Or what?" Shinxi hissed, her voice shifting into the dragon cadence, which meant she was beyond pissed. "You

will throw us out? I will never play here again. Not when this place allows such obvious cheating.”

I stood up slowly, getting ready. Shinxi’s claws came out, smoke billowing out of her nostrils. Dangerous, since Calli was across the table from me, too far to protect her.

“He should be banned from even being here,” Aamon said, giving me a hostile look. His eyes shimmered with fire, another bad sign. “Why did you allow him?”

“Because none of you protested against his presence,” Joseph said calmly, tightening his grip on the silver threads.

Of course they hadn’t. My presence meant a good show, one that was about to get ugly. I snorted to myself. There would be blood, as per my requirement for a great performance.

My only job right now was to ensure it would not be Calli’s.

I knew any sudden movement could start the brewing fight. Shinxi and Aamon were good to go, and the councilor had planned to arrest me from the moment he saw me, no doubt, though he couldn’t do that inside the room. The rules forbade it.

What I needed was a calm, innocent distraction...

“Well, it was a pleasure,” Meredith said with a smile, standing up. “Until next time.”

I followed her slowly, and as I predicted, no one attacked while Meredith crossed the room with that genteel smile on her red lips. When I stopped by Calli, I lifted out the chips for the council’s visas from the heap of her winnings and sent them flying to Meredith’s purse. When she turned with a confused look, I made a shooing motion. She nodded and walked out, and I put an arm around Calli, facing the players.

“It was fun. We should do this again,” I said with a grin, allowing myself to mock them. As I spoke, all of Calli’s chips hovered over the table, puffing out of existence one by one. I transported them home, knowing they would turn into the

original items and gold as soon as the game was officially over.

I left only the chip representing Shinxi's black pearl necklace, objectively the most valuable item of the lot.

"The lady in gold is grateful to the house for hosting this game," I said, making that chip fly to Joseph, who nodded and whisked it away. "Now if you'll excuse us..."

There was a whispering sound, as if a flutter of many wings, and the silver thread wrapped around the councilor's wrist broke. He opened his mouth wide, releasing a black, moving mass of insects, which instantly dove for me.

I flicked my wrist, wrapping myself and Calli in a protective barrier. It was invisible, and the insects beat their wings against it, obscuring my view.

I caught a flicker of movement from Shinxi, grabbed Calli harder, and turned with her in my arms. The dragon's fire beat down my back, burning through my barrier, my clothes, my skin. I gasped in pain and sent a whirlpool of freeze blindly into the fire, making Shinxi choke.

My skin healed, and I rebuilt the barrier, but the insects had changed their strategy. They were now eating through the invisible protection, their angry buzzing filling the air. I reinforced the barrier, adding another layer, and looked out for another attack.

Andrea flitted out of the room, followed closely by Goran. Joseph stood on the far side of the room, a shimmering golden dome enclosing him while he talked urgently on the phone.

That meant someone would be there soon to get us in line. Calli and I would have to be gone by then.

Shinxi let out another angry stream of fire, her body growing slowly to her full size. I met the wall of flames with a stream of deep freeze, and the two forces clashed over the poker table, sparks and ice shards falling on the elegant top.

Calli shivered against me, and I held her in a fierce grip, thinking fast. We had to get out, but I couldn't teleport out of

this room. It had magical wards that I had no time to dismantle right now.

As soon as Shinxi pulled her fire back, I ceased my attack, conserving energy. Aamon jumped on top of the wet table, taking his ancestral blade out of his sleeve, and turned to me.

For Ymir's sake. Just what I needed.

"You made a fool of me," he snarled, raising the knife, which instantly elongated, becoming a saber. Before he attacked, I conjured a saber of my own, making it hover in front of Aamon. I fought him from a distance while focusing on the head councilor.

His insects were through the first layer of my defense. I reinforced it again, the magic trickling out of me in a steady flow. This would not do. I lashed at the buzzing cloud with a scourge made of ice and hail. The insects dropped with a crunchy patter.

As soon as I made a dent in the black mass, Shinxi attacked again, aiming at me and Calli with her claws. She couldn't move fast in the cramped quarters, and I managed to jump back, lifting Calli in my arms.

That was when Aamon knocked my blade to the side, and the head councilor opened his mouth wide, spitting a few angry looking bugs the size of rats. Each had over a handful of glittering orange eyes and sharp looking pincers.

Fuck.

My magic reserves were dangerously low. I growled, helplessly backing away, fighting the urge to morph into my original form and scatter my enemies with a flick of my hand.

I couldn't. Calli was here.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I hated losing or running away, but she was in my arms, defenseless against magical opponents, and I was nearing depletion fast. The only way out of this... was out.

Right then.

I turned, feeding magic into my body for a burst of speed. In an instant, I was at the door, throwing a glittering smoke bomb in my wake. As I wrestled with the door handle, outraged shouts let me know the smoke bomb had worked. I was about to blow the door out of its hinges, when...

Agonizing heat scorched my back, making my vision go white with pain.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

I fell to my knees, holding Calli with all my might, unable to answer her frantic questions. The tightly focused fire burned and burned, cutting through my tissues, burning my back to the bone until I felt the touch of air against my charred vertebrae. I locked myself in consciousness, reinforcing my mind with magic to make it unable to shut down.

The pain made me seize, and my eyes rolled back. But I was conscious.

I shook, foaming at the mouth, my fingers digging into Calli with a crushing force... until finally, the fire stopped.

Too late. We would never make it.

I swayed on my knees, teeth chattering, my entire body engulfed in the hot, excruciating agony that was beyond pain, beyond sense, beyond death. Had I been mortal, I would have died. That pain was death. Death rapping on my bones, demanding to be let in, and I wanted... I wanted...

The door in front of me opened, and in a slow, dazed moment, I looked down at the treasure in my arms. Calli’s eyes were wide and full of fear, and she held my cheek, searching my eyes for meaning and contact.

The pain grew sharper, but less deadly, and some clarity resurfaced in my mind.

I allowed myself one grunt and got up on shaking legs while my magic poured out of me in a flood, recreating my charred tissues, rebuilding muscle and skin. Barely conscious from the pain and magic depletion, I stepped out of the room and teleported away with Calli in my arms, only one thought clamoring in my head.

Home.

A fatal mistake. One I realized too late.

We teleported over too big a distance when I was in no state to use magic at all. And so, when true death caused by magic depletion loomed, my instincts took over.

My body shifted on its own, not waiting for permission from my mind. It was what always happened. In my original form, I could siphon magic out of my surroundings much faster, speeding up healing and bolstering my fighting abilities. My natural form called to me at all times, and I kept it at bay.

Unless I was so weak the instinct took over.

I felt it deep in the pit of my being. The pulling, the stretching out. As we whirled between the spheres, magic carrying us over the land faster than light, my bones grew and thickened, my skin stretched and changed, its hue becoming pinker.

In the middle of the vortex, I screamed helplessly as fur sprang out over my limbs and torso, my scream lost in the velocity. I spun as flashes of green and gold burst behind my eyelids, pressing Calli to me with hands that could crush her more easily than they could caress her.

It was the last time I held her, I knew.

My original form, once a source of strength and pride, was a constant reminder of my loss. That last battle, the one I relived in my dreams, was the ultimate failure for the old me. I had disappointed my people, lost my kingdom, and barely made it out alive.

And then, it turned out I could live on Earth, a world which considered my original form beastly and monstrous. No one would look twice at the luxurious sheen of my fur, at how proportionate and strong my limbs were, how white and sharp my teeth.

No. They would be too busy running. Which was why I had vowed to never show myself to Calli.

And now it would happen anyway. I couldn't stop it.

We arrived in front of the villa. Calli was still in my arms, so much daintier and more fragile. Her eyes were closed, and I grunted once, readying myself for what would happen when they opened. My pain was gone, my injuries healed, and I recharged much faster, some of my spent magic already trickling back.

Not fast enough to shift.

Her eyelids fluttered, and I clenched my jaw, making sure my teeth, at least, were hidden. Would it help?

She moaned, turning her head, her cheek pressing into my fur. I watched with bated breath as she frowned. Then she smiled.

Don't you dare hope.

Finally, she froze, breathing faster, and I breathed out in relief. Her terror, I could deal with. On some level, I had braced for it from the start.

Her entire body tense, Calli opened her eyes and looked at what was in front of her. My chest, covered with smooth silvery fur, rising and falling with every breath.

She made a tiny little sound in the back of her throat, something inquiring rather than fearful, and I crushed the hope that suddenly burst inside me like a flame. *No.*

There was no hope.

She turned her neck gingerly, and her eyes traveled up my chest, up my neck, and to my muzzle. I looked at her, steeling myself to hold her down when she started thrashing.

Monster or not, I wouldn't let her fall.

Calli opened her mouth and eyes wide, her face twisted into a primal expression of fear.

For a moment, there was no sound.

And then she screamed.

Instinctively, I clamped down on her when she struggled against my grip. Slowly, I lowered her to the ground, which

seemed so far away in my original form. At eight feet, I stood even taller than Huitz, and it took time to adjust.

I put Calli on the ground and stepped back. At once, she scrambled back on her hands and butt, still facing me. At least she wasn't screaming any more. But her tiny, terrified whimpers were even worse.

"I told you. You can't handle the real thing," I said, wrapping my heart in layers upon layers of armor against that ultimate rejection.

Calli screamed again, staggering to her feet, and ran. I watched as she sprinted away, and at the last moment, removed the wards keeping her inside and opened the gate. She dashed through it without a backward glance, and I grunted in grim satisfaction.

I couldn't stand holding her here now. Not when she ran from me, from what I truly was.

And with the council's troops not yet in place, she was safe.

Unlike with me.

I laughed bitterly, honesty forcing me to bare the real, shallow reason why I let her go. It had everything to do with appearances. With the performance I constantly played.

Calli being kidnapped by a handsome Trickster who could make her every wish come true had style and panache. She could hate me then, but that hate glittered.

A monster holding a woman captive was a horror tale. There was no place for hate, for games, for romance in that story.

Only primal fear.

"Let her go," I called out to the guards, making my voice carry to each tower. "Kang will retrieve her."

I sat down right there on the ground, pressing my hands into the cold stones. The moon was almost full, and the light gray walls of the base reflected its silver light, bleaching

everything of color. I looked ahead, listening to Calli's heartbeat, which retreated fast, frantic and stuttering.

Soon, I couldn't hear her anymore.

It was time. I stood up, weariness making me slump. "Kang," I called out, sending my voice to wake her.

I would have her bring Calli back. It was my duty, after all. I had put her in danger in the first place.

And after she returned, there would be no more games. No more seduction. That year and a day nonsense? I would never enforce it.

There was no possibility she would want me now. Even if I wore my disguise, she would always see the monster beneath. She would recognize the lines of my muzzle in my grin, see the monster's lethal gaze in my eyes, think of my fur when she ran her fingers through my hair.

"What's wrong?" Kang asked as she burst out of the barrack, pulling her belt hastily on. "Oh. Hello, boss. Haven't seen this side of you in a while."

I nodded, looking at her composed face with a sense of relief. Kang was a beast, too. She understood.

"Calli ran away," I said, the words like lead in my throat. I let them fall out, heavy and abrasive, and Kang watched me with pity. "I want you to find her and bring her back. Keep her in one of the barracks. If she won't stay, you can tie her up."

Kang frowned, then nodded sharply and turned without a word. Quiet and fast, she ran out through the gate, her body becoming one with the shadows.

I allowed myself a smile, revealing all my fangs, and hunched, unable to stay upright in my weariness. Slowly, I slunk inside the villa, disappearing in the darkness.



Chapter 18: Karma

Calli

I was running out of breath, and still I hurried on, unable to think, unable to process. All I knew was the terror and the adrenaline coursing through my body, propelling me ahead. The ground was hard under my feet, and I saw far ahead in the moonlight.

There was no sound to be heard over my wheezing breath, no unnatural light or movement, and still, I was unable to stop. I looked back, and there was no one, only the walls of the base looming in the distance. And yet...

I fell with a scream, my ankle twisting painfully. Moaning in pain, I glanced around, desperate to see where the monster was. I had seen it, felt it, smelled it, and I knew it was after me.

But maybe I had managed to escape, because I couldn't see it anywhere. I got up slowly, hissing when my ankle burst with pain as soon as I put weight on it. Not good. I surveyed my surroundings again, breathing hard, but the landscape was still and calm.

A cool wind ran down my back, making me shiver. I was drenched in sweat, which rapidly cooled my overheated skin. Combined with the wind, it made my teeth chatter. Nights here were cool, and I needed to get inside.

But the closest place I could go to was the base, and there was a monster in there.

I stood motionless, eyes frantically scanning the area, while my breathing gradually calmed down. I tried a few steps, and when my ankle twinged in protest, I sat down and

took off my shoes. Gold and shimmery, they glittered in the moonlight, and I frowned.

Something wasn't right.

I turned back to the base. There was no one in sight, and the gate loomed open. *Why would they leave it open in the middle of the night?* I wondered. Especially when Loki had been away with me in Vegas.

Loki.

I gasped, pressing a hand to my mouth. Where was he? One moment, we had been in the casino, getting attacked, and he was holding me...

And then I was back in the base in a monster's grip.

I looked at the sky, trying to fit the puzzles together. However I turned them, they would not fit, so I looked around vaguely, my thoughts growing less focused as I wrapped my arms around myself, cold and tired now that the danger had passed.

Finally, a memory surfaced, something I had barely registered in my haze of terror.

I told you. You can't handle the real thing.

I shivered from the cold and violent disbelief, because it couldn't be, it simply could not... But a part of me already knew, and something hot and angry rose in my chest like a wave. I pressed my lips together and pushed back to my feet, hissing in pain.

Out of all the things he could have done, out of all the tricks, and games, and cheats...

I cursed under my breath and clenched my fists.

That lying bastard!

I had known from the start something was wrong about him. That freaky smile, his constant need to impress, all those manic games... and the ease with which he could change the appearance of anything or anyone he wanted.

Should have known from the start, I thought grimly. Cock roulette, my ass!

All smoke and mirrors. Lies, secrets, roles to play... and I had danced right onto his stage like a fucking puppet.

It was so humiliating, I wanted to cry.

Gripping my beautiful shoes in one hand, because I refused to just leave them, I hiked the dress up to my thighs. This wasn't over.

Determined to get even, I set out for the base, clenching my jaw against the pain.

How dare he, I ranted inside my head, getting more furious with every aching step. How dare he make me show him everything, bare myself to him!

How dare he make me fall in love!

His audacity infuriated me the most. It spoke of such incredible disrespect, I was tempted to just dump his lying ass on the spot. I had been so convinced he had been ready to level with me, treating me like a partner, trusting my choices...

And all the while, whenever I showed him my true face, whenever I gave an inch, trusting him a bit more, giving in a bit more... All that time, he had worn a mask!

I was ready to tear at his fur and slap his muzzle until he got down on his knees again and gave me a proper apology. And then he would have no fucking choice but to explain everything and let me see his face like a normal person, without scaring me into delirium.

Oh yes, I would fucking show him who couldn't handle whom! When I was done with him, he would be the one running in terror.

There was movement at the gate, and I stopped, breathing hard, and let my ankle rest.

“You fucking liar!” I screamed so he would know I was coming for him.

The shadow got closer. I braced myself and started walking again, when a hand fell on my shoulder.

“Trouble in paradise, dear?”

Before I could answer or even turn to see who it was, I was sucked into a vortex of oppressive, foul-smelling darkness. It squeezed me from every side, pushing the air out my lungs, and I gaped like a fish, unable to take a breath. I spun in the dark, a piece of flotsam in a whirlpool, until suddenly...

I fell onto my knees, crying out when they scraped against bare concrete. My head was pounding, and I groaned, shutting my eyes. The floor moved under me, or maybe something was wrong with my brain, making everything dance and swim.

As if from afar, I heard a creak of hinges and a clinking of metal against metal. Then all was quiet, and I groaned, breathing deeply through my nose to make my head stop spinning.

When I finally felt stable enough to look around, I frowned in disbelief.

I was in a cell. There were actual bars over the tiny window and covering the view hole in the door. The floor was raw concrete, clean but for the smear of my drying blood where my knees had fallen. As for the furnishings, they were few. A wooden bench that could serve as an uncomfortable bed in a pinch, and a bucket in the corner.

“What the actual fuck...?” I whispered to myself, reeling from this sudden development.

Who would go to the trouble of transporting me inside a cell?

I got up, biting my tongue to hold back any sounds of pain, and limped to the door. There was no handle, so I pushed it with as much strength as I could muster. Nothing. It didn't budge.

I limped back to the bench and pushed it toward the window, huffing and puffing with effort. It was heavy and scraped loudly against the floor. Halfway to the window, I

stopped, breathing hard, and plopped down on the bench to catch my breath.

And then I got up and pushed it further until it was right under the window. I climbed on top of it and cursed. Almost. I couldn't quite see over the edge. And when I tried to stand on my toes, my ankle wobbled and I almost fell.

I turned back to survey the room and noticed my glittering heels.

Swallowing my moans of pain, I put them on, climbed back up, and looked out.

Flat, grassy terrain, similar to that surrounding Loki's base. And something glittering in the moonlight... A lake. A few buildings in the distance.

I gathered my strength, climbed down, and lay on the bench, wishing for a jacket or a blanket. When someone finally came to talk to me, I would bully them into getting me something warm.

Because I had figured it out, or at least I thought I had. Apart from Loki, the only entity interested in capturing me was the Magic Council. Logically, I was their leverage to hold over Loki, and that meant I was probably safe.

They wouldn't kill me, and once they let Loki know I was here, he would come and save me.

Right?

You ran from him, my annoying little voice said doubtfully. *He might be a tad offended after that.*

I scoffed, curling into as tight a ball as I could manage to conserve heat. He would come. Loki cared about me in his own twisted way. Besides, he had sunk so many resources into getting and keeping me that even if he didn't like me anymore, the sunk cost fallacy would push him to rescue me.

He would come.

In the meantime, I just had to wait and not freeze to death.

After about ten minutes, the door swung open, and I sat up fast, ready to argue for my freedom or at least a blanket. But when I saw the person standing in the doorway, the words stuck in my throat, and I could only stare.

“We meet again, lady in gold,” said the head councilor.

He was dressed just as he had been in the casino, in a boring suit. But now, there was something in his hand, a long grayish thing that wiggled like an earthworm. I stared, hypnotized, and all my alarm bells went off.

“I’m human,” I said through a tight throat. “You can’t hold me. It’s against your laws.”

“How unfortunate,” he said, his voice emotionless. “I do not care at the moment. And you deserve this, anyway. You threw your lot with Loki, and choices have consequences. Welcome to our humble abode, lady in gold.”

Faster than I suspected he could, he threw the long, wiggling thing at me. It latched onto my temple, and I screamed, but not from fear or disgust.

I screamed from pain. As soon as that thing connected with my skin, my entire body exploded with the most debilitating, awful pain I had ever felt. I sunk into it, screaming and screaming while my body disintegrated.

My liver was stabbed over and over, someone crushed my kidneys, my lungs were full of water, and my heart burst, and then burst again, and again, while my brain melted, leaving only the raw pain and my screaming, begging voice.

Time passed, and I couldn’t scream anymore, my throat burning raw with acid. I was spiraling, the pain devouring all, and I couldn’t remember where or who I was, only that I wanted it to end.

Finally, it stopped. I lay on the floor, my face wet from tears and drool, gasping for breath, feeling as if I hadn’t breathed for hours. My entire body ached, but now that the pain was gone, that ache ebbed away, and all that remained was a horrible weariness and fear.

I was terrified it would happen again.

“Please, do me a favor, lady in gold,” said a voice somewhere above me.

I slowly raised myself to a sitting position, frantically straightening the dress that had ridden up to my butt. I looked up at the head councilor, flinching as soon as I saw the horrible, gray worm wrapped around his wrist.

“I would like you to tell me everything you know about Loki’s base,” he said, his voice as dull as the droning of insects. “As long as you’re talking, it won’t hurt.”

I tried to laugh, but only managed a weak cough. Funny how the world turns around. To think that only days ago, I had been willing to give over that information freely...

Karma is a fucking bitch.

I looked into his face with as much challenge as I could muster and smiled, though I suspected what came out was more like a grimace.

“Is that thing a substitute for your cock and balls? Because from the way you’re acting, I suspect you don’t have any. A real man wouldn’t torture a woman to get to another man, so...”

I couldn’t finish, because the gray worm had wrapped around my throat.

And all I could do was scream.



Chapter 19: Claws and Fangs

Loki

It was dark and quiet in the villa, the emptiness instantly palpable. She wasn't here, nor would she be ever again. I had built this place for her, an opulent insanity in the middle of a war and a bridal gift to show off my strengths.

And it would stay empty forever.

I was ready to admit I wasn't perfect, but this I could give her. Everything she desired, all custom tailored just for her. Excitement, glitter and shine, and all the luxuries in the world she deserved.

With a heavy sigh, I headed for the state-of-the-art kitchen she probably hadn't even seen. Without turning on the light, I curled into a ball on a soft rug. I had once fantasized about fucking her here, which didn't make the rug special in any way.

I had wanted to fuck Calli all over every inch of the villa. The month that had passed since our first meeting was a long time to fantasize about a woman who was just a short trip away, yet so unattainable.

Staying away for her safety, bowed under the burden of knowing every day could be my last, was the hardest thing I had done in my existence. I was so used to getting everything I wanted instantly that denying myself her, of all things, had been a torture.

And a mistake.

I could have had a month with her. Instead...

Instead, I would be doomed to relive those few days together for eternity, the nightmare of losing Calli adding to

my nightly dream show.

What would I have left now? My war, yes. Fight, blood, losses and victories, all so serious I could puke. My love, the only glimmer of beauty and joy, was gone. But at least I'd have my fight.

I laughed a dark, hollow laugh and snapped my fingers, calling the casino chip Calli had won from the head councilor. A sheet of casino paper flew into my waiting hand, three words written on it.

Hyde, Luxior Academy

That was my future, then. I shook my head, crumpling the piece of paper in my hand as a wave of raw grief rose within my chest, threatening to suffocate me from within. I didn't normally remember it, but I was old. Ancient, some might call me. Definitely too old to get so fucking invested in a woman, only to lose her when I thought I had her.

There was a sound in the pantry, and I growled, raising my head. A moment later, Jean ambled out of there, a jar of peanut butter in his hands.

"Hello, boss," he said without a shade of embarrassment at being caught. "What are you moping about in the dark?"

"I'm not moping. And there is a stocked kitchen for you to raid. This one is off limits."

Jean got a spoon from a drawer, proving he had been here before and knew where the cutlery was kept, and jumped on top of the kitchen island, where he sat, his lanky legs dangling.

"I'm a growing boy," he said, his cunning, old eyes flashing in the dark. "I need to eat. Although after that pastry your girl made for me, everything tastes inadequate. Any chance she will bake those again?"

I stared at him, trying to decide whether it was just an innocent question or if he already knew what had happened. Lutins were crafty and notorious insomniacs. For all I knew, he could have seen my and Calli's arrival.

"It's unlikely," I said through gritted teeth.

“So you are moping,” Jean said with an evil cackle. “The lady expressed complaints when she saw you naked? Don’t worry, we’ve all been there.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I said, standing up. My shadow fell on top of Jean, who looked up with wide, innocent eyes that would never fool me. “Careful, or I’ll tear you to shreds and dig all that stolen food out of your stomach.”

“You can’t gut me,” he said, licking the spoon. “Loyalty goes both ways. Anyway, I was going to ask you something. Why haven’t you run after her? It’s what the man is supposed to do if he wants to get laid again, no?”

I scratched down the island’s top right next to his hip, the horrible screechy sound making Jean flinch. My claws left deep gauges in the marble, and I lowered my muzzle to his face, showing him my fangs.

“You were saying?”

“That you should stop being a drama queen,” Jean said with a squeak.

I was about to throw him off the island, pacts and loyalty be damned, when Kang appeared in the doorway. She was in her original form of the glorious gumiho fox, her nine white tails spread behind her like a luminescent fan.

“Later,” Jean called, dashing out through the back door while Kang walked inside, barely fitting through the doorway.

The spacious kitchen became suddenly crowded with two large, furry beasts filling the space.

“Someone teleported her away. I think a hag,” she said, scrunching up her black nose. “They have this foul smell. It was all over that spot.”

I stared at her for a beat, refusing to process what she had just said. But denying reality wouldn’t take me far, so I gritted my teeth and switched gears. Time for moping, as Jean had called it, was over.

“Let me check.”

I closed my eyes and tried to sense Calli. My claim was on her, and I should be able to pinpoint her location easily, but something blocked me. It was as if my senses crashed into a barrier, a dense, blunt fog, impenetrable to my magic.

Whoever had Calli had cloaked her, so I wouldn't be able to find her with my magic. But there were other options.

“Do you have any idea who the hag was?”

Kang shook her head, her muzzle twisting. Much less expressive than a human face, it could still convey emotions. Right now, Kang was embarrassed.

“I'm sorry. You tasked me with her protection, and I let her be kidnapped. I was too far to do anything, and the hag just appeared out of nowhere.”

“Did she say anything? What did she look like?” I asked, rushing out of the kitchen with Kang following closely. “And it's my fault. No one's blaming you.”

“Erm, well, the hag said something I didn't catch but before that... Um, Calli shouted one thing.”

I stopped, turning to her so fast she almost walked into me, her tails twitching nervously.

“Well?”

“Erm, she said... And I'm quoting here... She said: *You fucking liar*. She seemed pissed off and was walking back here. Limping a bit. I think something was wrong with her ankle.”

Cold rage exploded in my skull, making red bleed across my vision. Calli had been walking back, ready to confront me... Which meant not all was lost. Didn't it? And right in that moment, they dared to fucking kidnap her?

I would rip them limb from limb and rain acid on their bones.

“Get Lynx. She's always fiddling with those cameras. Check if she has a recording. While she's looking into that, wake everyone. Check on the guards. I want everyone to be ready and geared up.”

“Why?” Kang asked. “Are you taking everyone there? You must know it’s a trap, not to mention we still don’t know where she even is.”

I showed her my fangs, more impressive than hers, and started walking to the gate.

“Of course it’s a trap. They want to lure us out, which is not going to happen. I’m going alone. And you must be ready to defend the base in my absence.”

I would get Calli back if it was the last fucking thing I did.

Kang let out a soft yelp and bounded off, while I went out through the gate and dropped to all fours, sniffing the ground. I instantly found Calli’s scent, a heady perfume of sweat and terror, following it to where it disappeared.

Kang was right. A hag had been here, her foul smell lingering and mixing with Calli’s. I stopped, forcing myself to draw it in and analyze it, but it wasn’t familiar. With an angry growl, I turned back and ran to the base.

Lynx was at her computer station, clicking through camera feeds. I caught the sight of myself frozen on one screen, the image black and white but pretty clear despite the distance.

“Good job. That’s the spot.”

Lynx hummed, clicking faster.

“I know, but I thought there might be one more angle, and... Okay. I have it.”

She made the two feeds expand while all others shrank. One feed looked normal, black and white, and the other screen was completely black. Lynx set both recordings on rewind, and I watched myself sniff around the scene, then move away. Then Kang appeared, checking it out, and stepped away. And then...

“Here.”

Lynx stopped the recording. Calli stood in her beautiful dress, a furious frown on her face. And behind, reaching with a dark skeletal hand, was the hag.

Her face was hidden in the shadow of a cowl. She was shorter than Calli, looked frail, and wore a dark robe that hid every detail from view.

“Could we get a shot of her face?” I asked through gritted teeth, refusing to be disappointed.

“I don’t think so, but there’s something else,” Lynx said, fiddling with the keys. “Remember those special filters I had asked for once? This second camera has one installed, and I wondered... See? It works!”

The black screen came to life. It depicted the same scene, but from a different angle, the image filled with shimmering, oversaturated colors. The grass was acidly green, the sky looked pink and dark blue, and Calli... Calli was resplendent in gold and green, my claim painted all over her skin.

Behind her, there was a foul, brownish vapor. The hag’s aura.

“*Bravo*,” I said, stepping closer to the screen. “Now, if only I could...”

I reached my hand, black claws casting a shadow on Lynx’s desk, and almost touched the screen. With a frown, I pulled with my senses, twisting my hand here and there, looking for a thread, while my eyes locked on the image.

An aura was a magical fingerprint, something unique to its owner. And if I could touch it and get a feel for it, I would be able to teleport to its owner, which was a rare form of magic hardly anyone apart from me could use. In theory, it should work. But I had never tried it without meeting my target in person first.

A strand of the foreign magic brushed against my claw as I coaxed the image out of the frame, and I was about to grasp it, when it shattered.

“Damn. I need to see it in motion. Play it on a loop.”

Lynx did that, and I focused, making the screen become my entire world, letting it fill my field of vision, both natural and supernatural. It took me a few tries, precious minutes trickling away, but I was confident I could do it.

It was the only option to find Calli fast.

Finally, feeling around with my fingers, I pulled the image, strand by strand, from the screen, until a small model of the hag's aura hovered in front of me, having disappeared from the screen.

"Holy shit," Lynx whispered. "I didn't even think you could do that."

"Me neither," I said, frowning at the brown mess. The hag seemed to be old and powerful and I had barely begun recharging. I was no match for such an experienced player in my current state, but that wouldn't stop me. "The key is to never start wondering if you can. You just do it."

I plunged my hand into the spectral image, letting the magical blueprint inform my senses. I let it pull me a little, already knowing the hag, unlike Calli, wasn't cloaked. I could teleport right now and land on top of her in an instant.

"Good job, Lynx. Keep those cameras going. Can you watch the aura feeds live? If someone invisible approaches, they will get caught on those, right?"

Lynx nodded, bracing her shoulders. She set her mouth in a grim line, and I gave her a wide grin, one predator acknowledging another.

"Are we expecting an attack?" she asked.

"I damn well hope they come for us, Lynx. We will finish it tonight."

She nodded, swiveling back to the screens, which immediately filled with numerous feeds from her cameras, some black and white, others colorful. I left her to it.

Outside, Kang waited with Huitz. She was back in her human form, loading her belt up with grenades from a basket Jean must have brought from the armory.

"I'll be back soon," I said. "They might not attack once they realize the base is well guarded. Stay vigilant and hold the fort."

I closed the gate, reinforcing it for good measure. Then I recalled the hag's aura and twisted, letting the magic pull me to her location. As soon as I moved, I knew it was somewhere nearby, and a shiver of excitement ran down my spine. Maybe I would finally see where the council troops were stationed.

They hid very well, and while we'd had a few leads, nothing led us to their doorstep.

Until now.

I corrected the course in the final leap, intentionally landing a distance away from the hag. I didn't want to repeat Jadwiga's mistake and get myself cornered in someone's bathroom.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I dropped to a crouch, scanning the area with all my senses. It was quiet around, the only sound made by soft waves on the lake behind me. And ahead... I squinted, grinning when I realized what I was looking at.

A shimmery curtain of an area glamor. Very effective from a distance, and a great way to hide buildings and people from aerial view, for example. I used a type of it myself.

From close quarters, though, it was easily noticeable. I sheared through the curtain with my claws. The shimmery, translucent fabric tore open without making a sound, and I slunk through the opening, the council's base blinking into view.

The arrogant bastards didn't even have a wall.

There was a cluster of low buildings, looking old and decrepit, one of them definitely a barn. I couldn't see anyone around, but a few windows here and there were lit despite the late hour. I inhaled, cataloging the smells. Grass, water, rot, and then...

Sweaty gnomes, a hag, the musty stench of the council officials. I grinned. Bingo.

Yet, no Calli. I tried to sense her again. I should be able to get something from up close, and if she were held here...

A faint shimmer appeared on the wall of a squat building in the back, a green and gold shadow near the ground. I set out in that direction, watching out for an attack and wishing dearly some of them would dare.

Anyone who'd had a hand in taking Calli away from me would suffer tonight.

A swarm of black insects descended on me with a buzz, and I laughed. Not bothering with barriers, I conjured a flamethrower and sent a stream of white hot fire into the swarm. The bugs sizzled and dropped to the ground, and I charred the wall of the nearest building for good measure.

Hearing the excited chatter of gnomes ahead, I dropped into a crouch, peeking from behind the building. I pulled my head back just in time to avoid being hit with a missile. It exploded a good twenty feet further, making wet earth pelt the grass.

At that point, I itched for some hand to hand combat. I reached with my senses, and to my delight, there was no magic protection on the gnomes' bazookas. Panting with the effort, I twisted my arm, changing them all into snakes.

A warning twinge low in my chest told me I was flirting with depletion again.

That was okay. I didn't intend to use my magic now.

As soon as the gnomes screamed, I sprinted to where they were hiding behind a rusty car. I lifted it from the ground, revealing a screaming, thrashing heap of dirty gnomes wrestling with snakes. I grinned, waiting for them to notice me.

When they did, their wrinkled, ugly faces looking up, I dropped the car on top of them.

Not waiting to see if any of the gnomes survived, I ran, bent low, scanning my surroundings with all senses. Whoever had conjured the bugs was gone. The gnomes were neutralized. All in all, the defenses left in the council base had proven inadequate which meant I had been right.

The majority of the council forces must have moved out to attack my base as soon as they had spotted me here.

I forced my way inside the building where I had seen the trace of my claim. Inside, I smelled her at once. She was scared and in pain, and I growled, holding back a roar.

Led by my nose, I tore through the unkempt rooms to a sturdy door with a small window covered with bars. Not waiting to see what was inside, I made the door turn into dust and walked in.

“So glad you could join us,” the head councilor said, and I froze in the doorway.

He was sitting on a bench, Calli sitting on the floor between his legs, her head lolling over his thigh. Her face was streaked with tears, red and blotchy, her hair plastered to her sweaty cheeks and temples.

“I’m afraid your bird is broken,” the councilor said without a hint of emotion. “She cannot sing.”

There was a loud, buzzing sound all around, and I couldn’t tell whether it was just the blood rushing in my head or his insects. With one flick of my hand, I cleared the air of any creatures and turned his palms into dry leaves.

I was so furious, I no longer felt the internal warnings as my magic burst out of me.

The councilor raised the stumps of his hands to his face, looking at them curiously while they spurting blood.

“Rather underwhelming, if you don’t mind me...” he started, but I turned his tongue into a tarantula. He made a funny face, the first real expression I had ever seen on him, and looked like he was going to vomit.

I dashed ahead, shoving him hard, and picked Calli up. She was hot to the touch, her entire body clammy with sweat, and I cursed. She didn’t open her eyes, didn’t even make a sound. Unconscious.

The councilor convulsed on the floor. I turned the tarantula back into his tongue and on a hunch, pushed a burst of nerve-

healing magic into him.

At once, he broke into a scream, raising his bloody hands to his face. That was interesting. I had suspected the councilors kept their bodies insensate by killing off their nerves. And if you healed the damage...

They felt pain.

All I wanted was to torture him now for kidnapping my love, his screams a balm on my feral heart, but it would have to wait. I made the bleeding stop, knowing he had to be alive to tell me what was wrong with Calli.

Councilors could not be killed, anyway. If I slaughtered his body, he would quickly find a new one. This wasn't the point.

"Tell me what you did to her, and I will take the pain away," I said, making the false promise without a twinge of conscience.

"I will, I will, I will," he cried out, cradling the stumps to his chest while he cried, the body's instinctive response to the pain of mutilation. For the first time, he seemed human. "It's inside her. I made her swallow it."

"*What* did she swallow?" I asked, growing so cold with rage I could not breathe.

"The pain worm," he cried out, snot streaming out of his nose. "Please, make it stop, make it stop!"

"I lied," I said, turning away from him. "I guess you can just fly out of this body and find a new one. I won't stop you."

"I can't! You have to kill me, I can't..."

I made his tongue twist into a knot, silencing him, and walked outside the building. Creating a rudimentary barrier around us, I laid Calli on the grass, pressing my hand into her stomach to turn her dress and flesh translucent. As soon as I was able to see inside, I knew what he had meant.

A pale, gray worm the size of a small snake wiggled in her stomach.

Calli moved her head, moaning, and I shushed her instinctively, touching the worm gently with my magic.

I hadn't seen anything like that before and didn't know how it would react if I tried changing it into something else. There were magical creatures that were immune to magic or had unexpected reactions to it, and since it was inside her body, I couldn't take any risks.

The thing twisted, as if sensing my spark of magic, and pressed itself as close as it could to me. Muttering a curse, I retreated, and the worm calmed down.

I took a deep breath, forcing my limbs not to shake. It was uncanny how seeing Calli hurt disturbed me, when I could easily play for stupidly high stakes and smile throughout, my hand never flinching.

Yet now, I had to bolster myself up with a spell, because otherwise, I would lose it.

"All right, my love," I told her, striving to sound calm. If she could hear me, I wanted her to know she was safe. "Here is what we will do. I will insert a very thin strand of magic down your throat and pull this thing out. It will be unpleasant but won't take long. Hold on."

Calli moaned, her eyelids fluttering, and she twisted, breathing faster. I pressed a hand into her forehead and pushed a claw inside her mouth to keep it open. Then, I manipulated my magic into a barely noticeable strand and coaxed it down her throat.

As soon as the shimmery green thread reached her stomach, the worm seized and jumped up to follow. I retracted the thread and it went after it.

Calli seized, gagging, and I held her down, keeping her mouth wide open. The worm moved up, and in a moment, it peeked out of her mouth. I caught it in my claws, careful not to touch it, and conjured a reinforced glass jar. I dropped the thing inside and sealed it, and then looked back at Calli.

She turned to the side, coughing, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I stroked down her back gently, feeding a slow stream

of healing magic into her. Not too much so as not to overwhelm her. Just enough to make her start recovering from whatever had happened.

Calli stopped coughing and just lay there, panting, her face twisted into a grimace of pain.

“My love?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

She looked up, her eyes red-rimmed and angry, and I suddenly realized I hadn’t shifted back. I was still the monster, and she would get scared again, especially after what had just happened. How could I have been so stupid?

I had only thought about saving her and didn’t even consider what would happen after. And now, weighed down with magical exhaustion, I was in no state to deal with her rejection again.

I wouldn’t be able to calmly let her go like before.

“Don’t call me that,” she said hoarsely, glaring at my muzzle without a hint of fear. “And I didn’t tell him anything. You should give me a fucking medal.”

I laughed, feeling lightheaded and stupid from the relief. She was all right, she was herself... and she wasn’t afraid.

“Anything you want, *ást min*,” I said when she pressed her face into my hand with a quiet moan of pain. “It’s yours.”



Chapter 20: No Damsel

Calli

As I sank into Loki's embrace, pressing my cheek into his soft fur, all I felt was relief. He had come for me. He saved me. Most importantly, the pain, which had been eating away at me from the inside, making it feel as if I was disintegrating, was gone.

My entire body ached, still. I screamed, all my muscles pulled taut, for what felt like an eternity. But as he carried me in his arms, stepping carefully to avoid jostling me, the soreness eased until it became just an echo of pain deep in my chest and gut.

"Did you kill him?" I asked, pressing a hand into Loki's warm fur.

For some reason, it was deeply comforting, like snuggling against a cat, and I sighed with relief.

"They can't be killed. But I made him feel pain. When I see him again, I will make him swallow this worm. Then I will seal his fucking mouth and asshole shut so it won't crawl out."

He growled the last words, and his chest vibrated against me with each word. I smiled, pushing my fingers deep into his fur to touch his skin underneath. Loki gave a low sound, an unspoken question, and I scratched down his skin softly.

"I didn't know it was you," I said, some of my anger returning. "You should have told me."

He kept walking without a word and I sighed, deciding to leave this fight for when we were both better rested. Although I felt quite well as a sense of deep relaxation and wellbeing

settled into my bones. It was the feeling I would get after a day in the spa, and I frowned.

“Are you doing something to me?” I asked.

“Healing magic. How are you feeling?”

His voice had a slightly different cadence in this form. Deeper and a bit harsher, his accent more pronounced. Still, he spoke flawlessly, and if I closed my eyes, I forgot he was a large, furry beast.

But I didn't want to forget.

This was Loki as he truly was. I wanted to look at his face, but the way he carried me made that impossible, so I just sighed and settled more comfortably against him.

“Much too well, considering the circumstances.”

He acknowledged my reply with a deep rumble and sped up to a run, his breathing calm and even.

“Good, because we'll have to teleport to the base. Hold tight.”

We were sucked into a whirlpool of emerald flames, so much more pleasant than the foul magic that had transported me before. The trip was so short, I barely had time to adjust before we stopped spinning in Loki's bedroom in the villa.

It was the middle of the night and the room was lit only with moonlight falling in through the uncovered window. And yet, I heard shouts and noises from the outside. Clanging of metal, shattering of glass... explosions?

“We're under attack,” Loki said, putting me down.

He stepped back, and I finally took a closer look, cataloging his features quickly. His head almost brushed the ceiling. He had a pair of pointy ears covered with fur, eyes that burned even more intense emerald than in his human form, and a muzzle with a lipless mouth that was pulled back in a feral expression, revealing a row of sharp, gleaming fangs.

He looked humanoid, but not quite. His powerful arms ending in black, long claws were longer in proportion to his

torso than in a human. His powerful legs looked inhuman, too, his thighs too long in proportion to his shins.

And between his thighs... I squinted, but there was nothing. Just a faint shape under the thick, lustrous fur.

“Huh?” I asked, stupidly distracted.

“Stay inside whatever happens. You can look out through a window, but stay in the villa. Promise me.”

I looked up, flinching when I saw even more teeth out on display. His muzzle quivered, a deep growl vibrating in his chest, and I had a sudden urge to back away, but stayed put. The meaning of his words registered, and I looked out the window, where an orange explosion brightened the night.

“But who...”

“Promise me!” he snarled, and this time, I took a step back.

“I promise.”

Loki turned and dashed out through the door. I followed him, but when I made it out of the room, he was gone from the corridor. A moment later, I heard the bang of the front door. And then another loud explosion shook the villa so much, I wobbled.

“Fuck.”

I ran back to the bedroom and pressed close to the window, taking in the scene. From this vantage point, I could see the roofs, the passages between the buildings, and in the distance, a piece of the courtyard by the main gate. It was dark, but I could just make out darker shapes scurrying here and there, and then sparks as something went off with a quiet hiss.

The sky above shimmered, as if covered with a film that distorted the view beyond. It was pockmarked with holes, their edges ragged and burning purple. The holes showed a clear image of the sky, and as I watched, a shape flew over one and dropped something through.

I screamed out a warning, looking below, where a large, luminous animal stood... Suddenly, a darker shape burst from

behind a building and pushed the white animal away while raising a hand above, a burst of green energy shooting up. Loki.

The flight of the object was arrested, and it hovered in the air until it suddenly burst, obscuring the scene with an oily, black smoke.

Another flash of light drew my eyes to a guard tower. It was enveloped in blue flames, which rose high into the sky, casting long, trembling shadows on the base. There was a high pitched, blood-curdling scream and an answering roar.

I pressed my hand to my mouth, watching through my disbelief.

I had known Loki was at war with the Magic Council. But because of his flippant attitude and the big seduction plan, I hadn't realized what a war truly meant. It hadn't seemed serious with all the games and then the trip to Vegas...

And the worst that had happened, at least from my point of view, had been the kidnapping.

Yet this, here, was a real battle.

I flinched when another blast rocked the base. A building right next to the villa exploded, shrapnel flying in every direction. I jumped back with a scream as a huge piece of rock hit the window, but it didn't shatter it, just bounced back from the glass.

Which meant the villa was safe. Unless an enemy made it inside.

With a shiver of panic, I turned away from the window and looked around for any weapon I could use. Loki's room loomed dark and opulent, only lit by an occasional explosion. I didn't dare flick on the lights for fear of making this window a target.

I patted down his desk, picking up a pen, a heavy glass globe, an ornamental letter opener... I tested the edge with my finger and hissed when it stung. Sharp. Good.

Opening Loki's wardrobe, I cursed at his short-sighted way of punishing me. I had no shoes apart from fancy heels and no clothes other than a dress, neither did I have a belt or other means of carrying the knife.

Shivering from cold and fear, I rummaged among his clothes, finally producing an emerald hoodie. I threw it on top of my dress and rummaged some more until I found a belt. I put it around myself, tightening it as far as it could go, which thankfully made it fit well enough over the hoodie. Loki had narrow hips.

I stuck the knife into the belt and crouched awkwardly, looking at his shoes. All too big. I resigned myself to the heels, but at least my ankle didn't hurt anymore after Loki had healed me.

Walking fast on the balls of my feet, I got out into the corridor. There were no windows apart from the balcony exit at the end, and it was much darker and quieter here. I ran to the grand staircase and raced down, stopping by the front door.

I tried the handle, and it opened easily, so I slammed it shut and patted the door frame for a keyhole or any other way of locking the door, but there was nothing. I cursed Loki's neglect and turned around to check the back door in the kitchen.

A sound of shattering glass and a muttered oath made me freeze in terror. My breathing sped up, and I pressed a hand to my mouth to keep it inaudible. Slowly, I crept to the open kitchen door, while the base rocked again, brilliant red light spilling in through the windows.

I pressed my back to the doorframe, gathering the skirts of my dress tightly around myself so they would not float in a breeze, betraying my position. I deepened my breathing and listened, trying to find out whether an enemy or ally was inside.

A voice spoke in a language I didn't understand, the words short and clipped, the tone inquiring. Another voice answered, this one sounding angry and frenzied. Soon, more sounds

followed. Clinking of glass and metal, something that sounded like pans crashing together...

I peeked around the door frame, but all I could see was the island and a faint shadow moving to the side, cast in the moonlight falling in through a window. I squinted, trying to make out the shapes...

A creature walked out from behind the island, and I whipped back. I stopped breathing, holding a hand to my chest, wondering if it had seen me. Because I knew I hadn't noticed anyone like that in the base, so they were probably enemies.

The creature was small, its head almost shrunken, and very wrinkly. A pair of black eyes glimmered over a large, squishy nose. On top of its head, it wore a pointy hat.

The voices spoke again, and I realized with a start, they were coming closer. I looked around, but if I ran, they would see me. There was no one here but me and them, either. I was completely on my own, and those were some kind of supernatural creatures.

My worst nightmare. Me, a mere mortal, forced to fight magical beings. I bit down a whimper and straightened my spine.

I was alone, but I could save myself. Whatever happened, I would deal with it.

So I gripped my knife, hiding it in the skirt of my dress, and stood in the doorway, begging my legs not to shake.

"Hwhat are you doing here?!" I asked severely, my inflection dropping into a posh matron voice.

Huh. You never know how you'll behave in the face of real danger.

The two small creatures, each standing as tall as the middle of my thigh, stopped right in front of me, looking up. Each of them held a sack, and one dropped his when he saw me. The sound of shattering glass and clanging pots rang out.

"You're looting our kitchen?" I asked in disbelief.

One of the creatures shouted something in harsh tones, and the other reached to his belt, bringing up both of his hands and in them, a gun.

“Fuck.”

I kicked just as the shot rang out, and the gun skidded across the floor. The bullet must have gone wide, because I was unharmed.

Both thieves screamed, one of them already diving for the weapon. I ran after him, my dress tangling between my legs, and managed to catch his hat. I expected to pull it off his head, whatever good it would do me, but the creature screeched and fell.

Even though every sense was screaming at me to drop the hat, I didn't. I held on, nauseated, because the thing which seemed to be made of felt was actually organic to the touch. Warm and a bit wet, it felt like skin covered with very fine, short hairs, and I almost gagged.

And then, I screamed. The other creature had his teeth in my shin, his small jaws crushing my flesh in an abnormally strong grip. I let go of his friend's hat and hit blindly with the knife that was thankfully still in my hand.

The creature let go with a pitiful sound, and I fell to the ground, reaching out for the gun. The other dwarf was lying on his side, holding his hat that was still on his head with trembling hands, and the gun was just behind him. I picked it up and stood, wobbling.

A burst of angry chattering resembling the language of these two came from deeper within the house. I swore, looking frantically around for more weapons or an escape route.

I couldn't deal with more of these when two had almost shot me. These fuckers were small but crafty, and even though I had a gun, I didn't know how to use it.

The voices got nearer, and I straightened, swiping a lock of hair off my face. Only then did I notice the blade of my letter opener was wet with blood, and the dwarf who had bitten me

lay motionless in a dark pool of liquid. The other was still crying, curled up, and didn't seem like a threat.

I stared for a moment, gripping the knife in my sweaty hand. That dwarf was dead. I had killed him. And now, even more of them were coming, and they would see their dead friend as soon as they entered.

Grinding my teeth, I forced all unpleasant, nauseating thoughts to the back of my head and focused on my highest priority.

Survival.



Chapter 21: Showdown

Loki

I glanced at the sky after pushing Kang out of the way of the bomb. My barriers were failing, and I didn't have enough magic or time to fix them. It wouldn't do us much good, anyway. The enemies were in the base.

"How many?" I asked Kang when we both got up, crouching low next to a wall.

"About two hundred," she answered. "Fewer now, though new ones keep coming. There are council officials, a horde of gnomes, and a few hags. Asphor's having fun with the gnomes. Jean sits in a tower and drops his grenades on anyone who comes in range. The rest are spread over the base, fighting to kill."

I nodded. They were in the base, in much larger numbers than ours. We didn't have time to take prisoners.

"Who's fighting the hags?"

Kang looked up briefly as another dark shape flew over the sky.

"Nea and Lythian took the griffins and fight the airborne hags. There are two more by the gate. They keep us from closing it."

"I'm on it."

I set out toward the gate. I passed a pack of gnomes running from Asphor, who was in his original form of the desert ogre, chasing after them with a blood-curdling howl. I left him to it, knowing gnomes were no match for the legendary Asphor'ulehóa, the son of the ogress from the deserts of Maghreb.

A second later, I flattened myself against a wall when a large missile whizzed past. It landed on top of one of the living quarter barracks, tearing it to shreds. Another one followed, and I turned it into a bunch of balloons mid-flight.

Ignoring the pangs reminding me how low on magic I was, I ran faster. Past the mess hall, past the provision hall, past the bodies of gnomes... Balzag waltzed right into my path, his ax raised as he whirled through the air, slaughtering overgrown bugs with a deadly focus. He moved fast despite his heavy orc build, and I jumped out of his way.

Soon, Svag followed, and both orcs stood back to back, going through the swarm until no uncanny bugs were left. With a nod, I pointed at a shadow where the council official responsible for the attack was hiding.

“Get the queen bee.”

Balzag grinned, swinging his ax, and they advanced. I moved further, catching the sound of a wet splat as an ax cut the councilor’s host in half.

Further down, under one of the towers, was a funny crowd of what appeared to be gnomes. They lumbered around, falling into one another as if blind, and each and every one of them was covered with thick, lustrous hair that seemed to grow out of every inch of their bodies.

“Hair bombs!” Jean called out from the top of the tower, jumping up and down gleefully. “Work on everything, even the best protected creatures. And they make hair grow out from everywhere. Hairy eyeballs, boss! Fuckers are blind!”

I grinned and gave him the thumbs up. Calli didn’t like Jean, but I would admit any day he was a lutin after my own heart. I poked a few gnomes, tripping them up, and moved on, chuckling under my breath.

This was how wars should be fought.

Finally, I was at the gate. Two hags stood on either side of it, each holding up one end of a complicated barrier that also enveloped their bodies in a sickly yellow glow. Huitz was

directing four people, one orc and three shifters, to try and distract the hags.

I watched for a moment, noting all the blades and bullets seemed to slide down the barrier. When Laika, a shifter cheetah, tried to cross it, she jumped back with a yelp of pain.

And yet, right after that, three gnomes stepped right through, carrying a bazooka and chattering excitedly. Huitz swiped them off their feet with one low kick, and they scattered. The hags didn't do anything to protect the gnomes, which likely meant all their resources were focused on holding up the barrier.

I squinted, noticing a familiar brownish aura. One of them was the hag who had kidnapped Calli.

“Huitz, throw me a living gnome!” I called out, a plan forming in my head.

No sooner than he had done it, more enemies crossed the barrier, and Huitz, with his troop, got busy fighting the newcomers. I noticed how tired they were, breathing hard, some bearing shallow wounds. We had to get that gate closed.

But if I forced the hags to drop the barrier, they would fight us. I couldn't handle both, so that was why...

“I sacrifice this blood and life to Huitzilopochtli!” I shouted, tearing the gnome open, my claws piercing his heart.

A thunder clapped, celestial power gathering, and Huitz straightened, growing by a head. He turned to me, his eyes burning with a red glow, and smiled for the first time since I met him.

Then he turned back to the council officials pouring in through the gate, each surrounded by a cloud of deadly insects. Huitz raised his arms high, as if in worship, and brought them down fast. The officials fell as one, their insects raining to the ground.

“Pace yourself,” I said, coming closer now that the coast was clear. “And the one on the right is mine.”

Huitz followed my gaze to the hag and nodded. The glow of his eyes had dimmed, but I still felt the raw power radiating off him. Damn. Being fueled by blood sacrifices definitely had its merits. I wished I could try it, but my godhood didn't come from the blood of lesser creatures.

If someone sacrificed a virgin to me, nothing would happen apart from a perfectly good virgin going to waste. I would have to recharge the slow way, by sucking the magic out the world around me.

Huitz took position next to the left hag while his troop fell to the back, waiting for anyone else to step in through the gate. I stood right opposite my hag. When her dark, cold eyes set in a shriveled, brown face looked up, I gave her a wide grin.

“How many hags does it take to spot a trick?” I asked her, showing her my fangs.

She glared at me without answering, and I clapped my hands once, focusing. I conjured two tall mirrors, placing them right in the path of the magic energy forming the barrier.

The currents of the yellow energy reflected off the surfaces, and each hag got a stream of her own magic when it returned straight to the source.

As soon as the barrier was down, I closed the gate with an effort, forcing it to move despite its broken mechanism. They must have busted it when they forced it open. I groaned, magic flowing out of me, but it paid off. Inch by inch, the gate moved until it locked into place.

The hag screeched, stopping the stream of magic, and flung something at me. I raised my arms up, reinforcing them, and her spell splashed over my forearms. The smell of singed fur filled the air, and I pivoted, aiming for the hag with my claws.

She attacked again, foul magic licking down the side of my head, and I jumped back with a hiss. Healing kicked in, repairing whatever damage she had done, and I growled, dropping to all fours.

When the hag trained her palms on me, face distorted in a snarl, I jumped on top of her, sinking my fangs into her arm. I let go immediately, spitting and coughing. Hag blood was poisonous, but luckily, little enough had gotten in my mouth.

She tried to roll away, screeching like a bird of prey, and I rolled with her, landing on top. I raked my claws down the side of her face, severing skin from bone, and the hag pressed her clawed hand into my chest.

A pulse of energy went into me. At the last moment, I built a mirror around my heart, and the current glanced off, wreaking havoc inside my chest.

I fell on my side with a low whimper. Internal bleeding, internal bleeding, broken rib... My chest shook and sparked as healing magic desperately repaired the damage, sucking me completely dry of all resources.

Shaking, I got to all fours and caved the hag's chest in with one well aimed hit of my hand. She fell unconscious, foul, black blood seeping from between her lips, and I managed to get up, though beneath me, the ground danced.

I braced myself against a wall, taking long breaths and forcing my vision to cooperate. Everything seemed fuzzy, my surroundings going in and out of focus, the lines and shapes overlapping. I blinked, growling at myself in frustration, and finally, I could see almost normally.

But my head was still pounding, and every thought came at a snail's pace. I knew the symptoms. I was so depleted, nothing worked properly. Even recharging took much longer in this state, which meant I wouldn't be able to pivot in a few minutes.

Only one thing could bring me back to normal: a night of restful sleep.

Damn.

Magical depletion while in my true form could be lethal. No final transformation would save me this time. If I went too far now, I would die, and for good, too. If I simply lost a body, I could grow a new one with time.

If I used up all my magic, I would be gone.

But the gate was closed, and my people were winning. With Nea and Lythian patrolling the skies, and Huitz powered up with that blood sacrifice, I was fairly certain we would win. All they had to do was clear the base, and then they would have to watch out for aerial attacks until I recharged enough to rebuild the barrier.

We could do it.

No sooner had I thought this, the ground under the villa shook. I leaned against the wall, straining to see what was happening. As soon as I realized what it was, I tried to run to the villa, but the ground shook so hard I fell, my head spinning.

There was an enormous crash, a thud, and a roar of the ground being torn apart.

The villa collapsed.

I cried out, trying to crawl forward, but even as my body strained, my head already knew it was too late. There was no way Calli could have survived the entire building falling down on top of her. My chest squeezed tight, a horrible, broken sound making it out of my throat as I fell, my body limp and exhausted.

She was gone. And it was all my fault. I had told her to stay behind.

The pain in my chest grew until I realized I was crying, tears of liquid silver flowing down my muzzle as my body shook, the loss like a physical hole deep inside me, growing and growing, a horrible abscess that could never heal.

I couldn't lose her now. Not after I had seen her as she really was, her vulnerable eyes revealing a soul no one else could ever see. Not after I had tasted her, been inside her, seen her come apart under me. She had been my partner in crime, opponent in a game, my punishment and my prize.

She touched me as I truly was and smiled.

To lose her now, after I had seen what it could be like... It was too cruel. I couldn't do it. I couldn't just mourn her and move on, because there was no future without her that I wanted.

Suddenly, I laughed, throwing my head back. I was depleted and on the verge of dying myself. It wouldn't take long until I joined Calli, or at least ceased to be, no longer weighted down by my grief.

One way or another, I would be dead soon. All I had to do was wait for a worthy opponent and...

The rubble moved, something way too powerful making its way up, and I cursed. Of course. It would have been too easy to just die in peace. The fate brought another twist, another way to cause me pain, and the only thing I could do was roll with the punches.

Though I had only myself to blame for this, I thought as soon as I realized what creature could have caused the collapse of the villa.

I had been so stupid, and now I would pay. First with Calli, and then with my people.

It wasn't the time to die, then. Not yet. I couldn't let my people down the way I had let down Kyl, Jadwiga's first victim.

I folded my grief down, turning it into a black, pulsing globe of darkness nestling just under my heart. When the time came, I would let it consume me. But before that happened, I had one more job to do.

The rubble shook again, and I got up, looking around frantically. Huitz was nearby, choking his hag with a slow smile, oblivious to the deadly spectacle behind his back.

Kang was right, and it was all my fault. Even though I was right here, I was still helpless to deal with the consequences of my arrogance, because if I used magic now, I would die an eternal death. And I couldn't let it happen just yet.

The show must go on.

“Huitz!” I shouted.

He looked at me but didn't move. I cursed under my breath, because every delay brought death closer to everyone in the base. But Jadwiga was still under the rubble. As long as she didn't look at anyone, there was still time.

“The basilisk broke out,” I said. “And I'm drained.”

Huitz let go of the hag, who fell to the ground, and strode over to me. He looked calm and ready, the reddish glow dancing in his eyes.

“Sacrifice more to me and I will fight her.”

I shook my head while the ground vibrated with another forceful push. Jadwiga would soon be out.

“No time, and you're not immune to the eyes. But you will be. I need someone to take one of Jean's bombs and drop it on her head. She will be blinded. It's a deadly mission. But it's a chance.”

Instead of rushing ahead, Huitz loitered, looking unconvinced, while the ground shook again. I gripped the wall with my claws, refusing to think about Calli's dead body shaking in that pile of rubble.

Later. I had people to take care of. When I knew they were safe, I could join her.

But not sooner.

“Nothing can hit a basilisk unless you aim straight for the eyes,” he said. “And before a sniper can shoot, they will die from looking into...”

“I know,” I snarled, gripping his bicep. “But Jean's bombs work on all targets. He's experimented with basilisk skin. Go.”

Huitz launched into a sprint without another word, and I clenched my jaw, looking around for anything that could serve as a cane. I wouldn't leave my people alone with the basilisk. Even blinded, she would still be a deadly threat, and I had a vague idea of going out in the glory of battle while giving her the final blow.

The ground shook again, and I heard a furious roar. Jadwiga was out.

Just as I stepped toward a promising stick, someone landed right next to me. I blinked, the image doubling and tripling, until it finally settled on the hideous, grinning face of the head councilor.

“There is a hole in your ceiling,” he said with a sick smile.

There was something wrong with him. His hands seemed to be intact again, but his palms were entirely black and seemed fuzzy, as if he were wearing gloves... of insects. I clenched my teeth, staring. His palms were made of insects, and more crawled over his skin, black and orange fuzzy dots.

He seemed to be no longer in pain. A pity.

“You just told a joke,” I said through gritted teeth. “Congratulations on your recent personal growth.”

His grin became fixed, and he reached his hand up to my muzzle. I took a step back, struggling against the weakness trying to overwhelm me.

“It’s no use,” the head councilor said, while a few insects tore away from his fingers and settled on my face.

When I tried to slap them away, they just crawled deeper into my fur. A moment later, I felt the stings.

“Ah, yes,” the councilor said with a deep sigh of pleasure. “Gods are usually too powerful for us to feed. But you are almost dry. If I bound your magic now, you would never play another trick on anyone. Should we see?”

I lurched back, a dizzy mist filling my mind. The places where the insects had bit me turned numb, but I felt the final reserves of magic that kept me alive draining out slowly through the wounds.

“What the fuck...?” I asked, falling against the wall in a desperate bid to stay upright. “Feed?”

“We call it binding to keep you beasts from overreacting,” he said, advancing on me slowly, while a cloud of black slowly rose up from his shoulders, hovering around him.

“Everyone has to eat, Mister Loki. And it so happens, we eat magic.”

The insects rose higher, posed to descend on me, and I fell to the ground, weak and helpless.

So after all, I would not go out in the blaze of glory. I wouldn't be able to take a final look at my beautiful beloved, crushed and broken under the rubble. No, I would be bled dry by fucking bugs.

There had to be a joke in that.



Chapter 22: Conduit

Calli

I watched the villa fall apart, holding on to the handle of the emergency gate. It was locked, turning the entire purpose of that hidden exit void, but at least I had something to hold on to while the ground shook and strained.

And Loki wouldn't be angry that I had broken my promise.

Running from the villa had been my only option. I wasn't a fighter. And while I had somehow dealt with those two looting dwarves, I knew I had no chance against a larger group, especially if they bore firearms.

So I ran. Passing corpses and Loki's people fighting with more of those dwarves and other creatures, I made it to the stupid little gate, and now, it turned out I was trapped.

And something had just made the villa collapse.

When the ground stopped shaking, I took a deep breath of the smoky air and squinted at the cloud of dust slowly settling over the rubble. I hadn't seen any explosions, so what...

The pile of stones moved, as if something was underneath, and it dawned on me. I pressed my dirty hand to my mouth, biting back a whimper. It was the basilisk. Had to be. Somehow, they had set her free, and now, Loki was the only one who could fight her.

I had to find him. But Loki would probably be where the battle was the fiercest, scattering enemies left and right with his power. To get to him, I would have to walk through lines of enemies...

The villa's rubble moved again, and I set out, keeping close to the wall. On second thought, I didn't need to find

Loki. He was a god. He could take care of himself. And what I needed was to get out and wait until he sorted it all out.

That was the smart thing to do.

I trotted ahead carefully, cursing my heels, but at least they offered some protection. The ground was strewn with sharp stones, glass, and pieces of blown up people that I refused to look at closely. Now, if only I could get to the gate and slip out quietly...

Fuck.

There were more dwarves in front of me. I was about to turn and find a safer way among the buildings, but something made me stop. They were just ambling aimlessly, bumping into one another and screeching, and their faces...

Their faces were completely covered with glossy hair that wouldn't look amiss in a shampoo commercial.

There was a sound above, a cry of a bird, and I looked up. A dark shape, something big and seemingly quadruped with wings, hovered by the tower. Another cry later, the thing flew away, and I heard Jean's voice.

"Get out of here, pastry girl! The basilisk is free!"

I gritted my teeth and made my way along the wall, doing my best not to brush against the apparently blind dwarves. As soon as I was through, I rushed ahead. I could almost see the gate from here, and just a few steps...

Oh no. I stopped, fear and anger curling up in my stomach like nausea. The head councilor was there, no worse for the wear, surrounded by a disgusting cloud of flies. I recalled his slimy touch over my skin, his hand pressing over my mouth while I heaved, blinded by pain and disgust as the gray worm slithered down my throat...

I turned to the wall, closing my eyes and coughing, the memory making me gag. Loki had dealt with him, so how was the bastard walking again? It was so unfair.

Feeling a little bit stronger, I turned and looked closer. There, slumped against the wall, was Loki.

He looked... defeated.

As I watched, he cried out in pain and slid further down the wall until he was sitting, boneless like a rag doll, his head lolling as he breathed laboriously while the head councilor gloated.

I didn't even realize when I started walking, my nostrils flaring with every breath. I was fucking terrified, and all I wanted was to run, but that was the thing about me: when I was cornered with no way out, my anger took over.

Loki didn't see me. His eyes were closed, his chest fluttering with shallow breaths. A crumpled figure in a black robe lay by his side, its fingers twitching feebly, the slack mouth in an ugly face caked with a black liquid.

"I was hoping to see you, lady in gold," the head councilor said.

I walked right to him, not even bothering to hide the bloody knife in my hand. As soon as I was close, I pushed the blade into his stomach. It went in too smoothly, as if there was nothing hard under the first layer of skin, and I yanked it back.

A swarm of black, buzzing insects flew out of the wound, and I jumped back with a scream. They didn't attack me, only hovered in the air between me and the councilor.

He grinned, a creepy, disfigured expression, and plunged his hand into the hole in his gut.

I stepped further back, watching him with wide eyes. He rummaged a bit, his eyes never leaving my face, and finally extracted his hand. A pale, gray worm wiggled, and I whimpered, the memory of the pain pushing me into a panic. I turned and broke into a run, only to trip against the black-clad figure and fall on my face.

"Stay there," the councilor said, walking slowly to Loki. "He's almost gone, and I imagine you want to see your god's final moments. You will be next."

No.

No, impossible. Loki couldn't die. Wasn't it a thing about gods? That they were immortal? Suddenly, all the terror I felt, the fear of the pain, the fear for my life, became overshadowed by this much bigger horror.

That I would lose Loki.

I stared around, but there was no one to help. In the background, I heard shouts and thuds. Of course. Everyone was busy fighting the basilisk. And Loki...

And Loki wasn't breathing.

I lurched to him, tears streaming down my face, and I pressed a hand to his chest, losing my knife in my panic. He was completely still. I leaned closer, looking into his face, then pressed my cheek to his muzzle. No breath. Not even the faintest whisper...

The head councilor laughed, a hollow, uncanny sound that could never be mistaken for a real laugh, and suddenly, I burned with rage. If anyone had a right to defeat Loki, it was me. That monster wouldn't stand there and gloat, because the game wasn't finished.

I would not let it end like this.

The councilor must have seen something in my eyes, because he stopped his abomination of a laugh and peered at me.

"You cannot fight me. You are a mere mortal, without any power and of no use to anyone. Better give up, and maybe I will let you live."

A mere mortal.

A wicked sense of triumph filled my chest, overshadowing the numb grief, the hate, the nausea. *A mere mortal.* The thing I had always wanted to be but couldn't. I was not normal. I had been cursed with a rare ability, something supernatural like Draco used me for, something that had been the source of all my problems and bad luck.

An ability I had tried to get rid of to no avail. Luckily, I hadn't succeeded. Because now, finally, there was a real

purpose for it.

I smiled, the world falling away in the face of my epiphany. He was wrong. So woefully, painfully wrong. Because I wasn't just an average mortal.

The head councilor didn't know it, but he had just given me an idea.

I had one power. I was a conduit. And thanks to serving Draco for over two years, I knew exactly how my ability worked.

I could conduct magic. A supernatural creature could feed it into me, and I could direct it. So all I needed...

The black shape lying next to Loki groaned and turned. Without hesitation, I grabbed the vaguely female head by its thin, greasy hair and knocked it against the ground to make the woman unconscious. I didn't want her to fight me.

Then I laid my hand over her neck and focused. A stream of foul, dark magic thick like tar flew into me, and I clenched my teeth, grim satisfaction overcoming my nausea. It was perfect.

I aimed my palm at the councilor, who watched me curiously, and directed the magic to flow along my arm. Just like I had done with Draco when he would sometimes ask me to draw magic runes using his power. All I needed was to touch a source of magic and direct the flow with a thought. Really, it was quite easy once I had got the hang of it.

A stream of dark brown energy shot out of my palm and splashed against the councilor's chest. He made a squeaky sound and stepped back, tripping. I followed the trajectory of his falling body with my palm, making sure the foul magic would flow into him.

Die, you bastard!

I got up to a crouch to see him clearly, still gripping the woman's neck. It seemed to be working, even though all I was doing was directing the raw magic. I couldn't shape it into a spell. I couldn't even make it act on me, nor did it affect me in

any way. All I could do was conduct the energy, and I didn't even know whether it would do any lasting damage, until...

The head councilor's body burst into a cloud of black matter, which fell onto the ground in a wide radius. I fell back, my hand sliding off the creature, and the stream of magic ended. But he was gone, scattered into a thousand dead bits. No longer a danger.

Behind me, there were roars and loud thuds. People screamed, bombs exploded, and there was gunfire, but I didn't even turn to look. I knelt in front of Loki, bringing my shaking hands to his muzzle, and cried.

My tears fell into his fur and rolled down the lustrous coat, and I pressed my face to his chest and wept, holding him desperately.

He was still. Not a breath, not a twitch within his lifeless form. I wept, holding on to his fur as my insides twisted and curled into a hard, black shape full of grief and rage. I couldn't accept his death. I wouldn't, because if he was dead, I didn't have a future worth living.

Why hadn't I seen it?

It all happened so fast, and it was so intense, but somehow, during those few crazy days, I fell in love with him.

He was right for me in every way. Challenging, exciting, and powerful. I had only got a glimpse of the shimmering, glorious future we could have had, and now he was dead, my dreams dead with him.

The earth shook, and suddenly someone was thrown into me, a heavy furry weight. It jumped back with a yelp, and I looked around, right into the face of an overgrown fox with luminescent white fur and a tail that spread into a fan like a peacock's.

"What happened here?" asked Kang's voice, and I just nodded, too overwhelmed to be surprised.

"I... The head councilor did something to him. He... I don't know. I siphoned the magic out of... that," I said

pointing at the motionless body in black. “And I threw it at him. And he burst but... It’s too late. Loki’s not breathing.”

Kang came closer and pressed her muzzle into the crook of Loki’s neck. She stepped back with a pitiful sound and shook her head, her pointed ears twitching.

“He’s depleted,” she said, her voice thick. “That’s why he couldn’t heal... No magic.”

The ground shook again, another loud roar coming from the ruins of the villa. Kang yelped softly and cried out. Her bright eyes were wet.

“But I...” I suddenly looked at her, a new urgency lending me strength. “Kang, maybe I can give him some magic. Maybe... Can you bring that thing over? If I could direct some of that magic into him...”

Kang growled softly and shook her head.

“No! Hag magic is poison. Take mine.”

I stared at her, and she lowered her head, nudging me with her nose.

She was right. There was no time, and as long as there was hope, I would not give up. So I nodded, burying my hand in the fur on her side.

I put another on Loki’s chest and focused. Kang’s magic, a beautiful, bluish current, flew into me, and I splayed my fingers wider over Loki’s fur, pushing the energy into him. It flowed through me, warm and electric, and I stared at him with wide eyes, waiting for just a twitch, maybe a hint of breath...

Nothing. More current ran down my arm, and Kang gave a low groan.

Still nothing.

I was about to let go, because Kang was trembling, clearly in pain, when...

Loki coughed.

I let go of Kang and leapt closer to him, running my hands up and down his muzzle until he stopped coughing. He moved

feebly, breathing deep, shaky breaths, and a moment later, he opened his eyes.

They focused on my face, and he smiled, revealing rows of white fangs.

“I was hoping I’d see you here,” he managed to say before another coughing attack bent him in half.

He coughed for a moment, during which I just sat there, stroking my hands down his fur and sobbing with relief, until he finally straightened.

“But Calli, why does it still hurt if I’m dead? And why is she here, too? Kang, why did you get yourself killed, you idiot?”

“You’re not dead!” I burst out, crying for real, though I was smiling through the tears. “You just didn’t have magic, so Kang lent you some.”

“How...” he started, but then looked up over my shoulder as another roar tore the night. “Look! Huitz just killed Jadwiga.”

I turned, my hands never leaving his fur because I wouldn’t let go of him ever again. I caught the sight of a large, serpentine creature draped over the roof of a building, and Huitz, seeming even larger than normally, standing on top of her with a bloodied spear in his hand. The basilisk fell slowly to the ground with a loud thud, and Huitz jumped off, disappearing from view.

“I need to get the barrier up and then, we have to...” Loki started, trying to stand up, but Kang put a paw on his chest, forcing him to lie back.

“You need to fucking rest. Or do you want to die again? We’ll kill off anyone who’s left and then keep watch until you’re at one hundred percent again.”

She took a few steps back and looked at me.

“You’re not so bad, Calli Moore. Keep him from straining himself, and hit him on the head if you have to. I’ll bring Lynx to look at these,” she added, motioning with her muzzle at the

bodies strewn around us and the sad remains of the head councilor.

She bounded off, and Loki looked at me, his emerald eyes burning in his dirty, tired face.

“I thought you were dead,” he said, his voice sounding reverent. “I was sure I lost you when the villa collapsed, so I wasn’t even sorry to go myself... But you’re here.”

He pulled me on top of him, making me straddle him and held me close while I cried, shaking and sobbing quietly. I was spent and done after everything that had happened, and now that all was finally over, I couldn’t hold back my reactions.

Finally, I stopped sobbing and just pressed close to him, relishing every rise and fall of his chest. He was alive. He was here.

“I’m a conduit, remember?” I said into his fur, my voice muffled and thick. “Not completely useless. I directed some energy from Kang into you. As for why I’m not dead... I suck at staying put when a horde of dwarves is chasing me.”

“Dwarves?” he asked, his chest rumbling under my cheek. “You must mean gnomes. What, did they get into the house? Those cunning, little buggers. I suppose I should thank them before I throw them over the wall.”

I managed a weak laugh, and Loki shifted under me, groaning.

“What is it? Are you in pain?” I asked, immediately moving to get off. “Should I...”

“Stay,” he said, putting his powerful arms around me. “I’m quite well. And all my body parts are fully functional, which is very reassuring, but it might get embarrassing if someone comes over. Stay exactly like this, just in case. So no one will see.”

I froze, trying to decide whether he was actually talking about his cock. I hadn’t felt anything of the sort between our bodies, which made me doubt it, but then...

Let's see. I shifted, sliding a bit higher up, and Loki hissed just as my core pressed into something smooth and decidedly hard. Also, not covered with fur as far as I could tell, though my dress was in the way, and I couldn't feel much through the thin material.

“How am I supposed to rest now?” Loki asked with a low laugh, settling more comfortably against the wall. “Oh no, no, don't move away. This feels nice. We'll just sit here... All innocent...”

He rocked his hips slightly, and I gasped, gripping his fur. Loki huffed a laugh and did it again, making me ride a bit up his cock.

“Stop! Someone will see us,” I whispered, though he had a point. It *did* feel nice.

“I was dead, Calli,” he murmured in my ear, his furry jaw brushing against the side of my head. “You can't fault a man for wanting to test if all systems work properly, can you? Also, coming back to life makes one so horny.”

I pulled back enough to look at his face. His eyes shone bright, full of amusement like normal, but the rest of him would take getting used to. He had large, powerful jaws full of fangs, a black, doglike nose, and his entire face was covered with short, gray fur, now wet and blackened with soot in places.

And yet, I could recognize his features in this monstrous face. His muzzle was flexible enough to convey his trademark grin, and his eyes burned with sentience and humor. It was him, and now that I had seen it, I could not unsee it. This was Loki, and since I was in love with Loki, I was in love with this face, too.

“Didn't I essentially give you a transfusion?” I asked, burying my hand in the fur on his chest. “Of Kang's magic? Isn't she, like, present inside you right now? Because that would put a damper on my lady boner quite a bit.”

He grinned, rocking his hips again.

“Nah. Nothing will put a damper on this bad boy. Now, if you could just move up and down, you know, just for some nice frottage, we could... *Swina bqllr!*”

I turned. Huitz was coming over, his clothes burned in places, blood covering his arms and face. He and one of the orcs were leading a council official between them. The man was wearing a suit, and a few insects buzzed around his head.

His young, dirty face was expressionless.

“Talk to the boss,” Huitz snarled, throwing the official on the ground.

“We would like to walk away,” the man said, his face dead, eyes expressionless. “The head of our council has been eliminated permanently. We shall have to reconvene and resume our duties without him.”

Loki murmured a curse and sat up straighter, pressing me to him as if worried I would get up. I stayed put, though blushed a bit at our position. When Jean peeked out from behind Huitz and looked at me, he gave me a laughing wink, and I blushed harder.

“Walk away? No, I don’t think so,” Loki said, arrogant and cold. “You have attacked us multiple times. And you lost. I will take a surrender, official and on paper, and a promise to never bother any of my people or their families. In writing, too. Writs of immunity for everyone.”

The official stared at him expressionlessly until he finally said:

“You are not in a position to negotiate these terms. You are not a threat to us. If you choose to kill our hosts, we will simply take others and come back here.”

“He could do to you what he did to him,” I cut in, pointing at the remains of the head councilor. “You said it yourself: he was eliminated permanently. Would you like to be eliminated as well?”

The official stared at the scattered black bits, suddenly shuddering, maybe in recognition.

“Loki does not possess an ability that would...”

“He does now,” I interrupted. “Or would you like to check? Is a demonstration required? I’m guessing you will do fine as exhibit B.”

The official took a step back with a sound of loud, frantic buzzing. Huitz stood right behind him, though, and poked him in the back with the blunt end of a spear until the official stumbled.

“Answer the lady,” Loki said, playing right along. “You have ten seconds. Nine... Eight...”

“We surrender,” the official said. “Writs of immunity.” He looked around, and Huitz poked him again. “And reparations for damages caused. All this in return for your future good will. If you attack the Magic Council in person, or someone else attacks it at your incitement, this agreement will be void.”

“Agreed,” Loki said. “Give the man a table far away from me so he can compile the paperwork. If I have to look at him much longer, I might get violent.”

The official turned away and disappeared among the ruins without a word.

“Lynx,” Loki said when she approached. “See if we have means of containing these two hags. Securely. If not, hack their heads off and salt the remains. We’ll catch us some more if we need to. And tell me, please, if everyone survived.”

Lynx tore her eyes away from an unconscious hag and looked at us, her expression professionally cool.

“We lost a griffin, and your horse flew away. A few are wounded, but nothing serious. One orc lost a pinkie. He’s very excited about it, so ask him before you make it grow back. He seems to be proud of the stump.”

Loki fell back with a sigh, his body relaxing as soon as he heard his people were fine. He waved Lynx away.

After she came back with an orc and they loaded the hags onto wheelbarrows, we were left alone.

“What really happened?” he asked me, still pressing me close. “I know I didn’t kill that fucker. I can’t.”

I looked at the spot where the hag had lain and sighed. Loki would appreciate the irony, I was sure.

“Well... I think I poisoned him. Despite how plebeian that is.”

He looked at me questioningly, sparks of mirth dancing in his eyes.

“Because... I’m a conduit, as you know. And you were dying, and he was gloating, and I really wanted to hurt him. So I sort of shot him with that unconscious hag’s magic. It made him burst. And then Kang said hag magic was poisonous...”

He shook with laughter, and I shook with him, relief pouring out of me. It really was over. We were both alive, the war was over, and everyone was safe. Now, I needed one more thing for a truly happy ending to this day. Judging by the slick hardness under me, I would get it.

“But why did you say it was my doing?” Loki asked when he stopped laughing. “Wouldn’t you rather take the credit for offing the bastard who tortured you?”

I shrugged and settled into him with a sigh, moving my hips to give him a little nudge.

“No. Because you shouldn’t show your enemy all your cards. I’d rather be the ace up your sleeve. Your secret weapon.”

He groaned, shifting under me, and his hands slid down to my lower back.

“Why don’t I show you my last card, *ást min*? I bet you’ll like it. Since you’ve seen the rest, and yet you’re not running.”

“Oh, I might run,” I said, grinding into him with a sigh. “But only because I know you’ll catch me.”



Chapter 23: Celebrations

Loki

I was very lively for a dead man. My magic trickled back, the pool not large enough to start rebuilding, but big enough for a little glamor. So I created a shimmery curtain that hid us from the world—and the world from us.

The setting wasn't very romantic, but that's what glamor spells were for.

"No one will see this," I whispered in Calli's ear, breathing in her delicious scent. "If anyone comes close, they will remember an urgent appointment and go away. We're well hidden."

"Oh," she said, pulling away to look at me, her face deliciously pink. "But... here? Now? Shouldn't we, well, shower or something? Isn't there... stuff to deal with?"

"It can wait."

I flicked my fingers, and she yelped, giving me an outraged look, to which I only grinned.

"All the important bits are clean as of now, and that includes hands and faces. Hop on. It makes more sense for you to be on top anyway."

She rubbed her cheek and looked at her hands. As I had promised, they were clean, that manicure I had given her still flawless.

Still the exact color of my blood.

When she gave me an uncertain look, still not convinced despite the desire I knew she felt, I sighed and bared myself to her. I had already accepted Calli would see more and more of

my naked self until there was no disguise left to shed. But it was still hard to be so vulnerable.

“I thought you were dead,” I said, looking into her eyes. “And I couldn’t bear it. I still can’t believe you’re here, that I’m not dreaming. I need you, Calli. Please, show me it’s not a dream.”

She huffed out a breath and leaned closer. Our faces were almost touching, and Calli stopped, taking a deep breath, and kissed my muzzle, right along the seam between my jaws. I growled in surprise, and she kissed me again, pressing her mouth into me. And again. I opened my muzzle in surprise, and she kissed me again.

“You never got back those kisses you’d won,” she murmured, her mouth brushing right against my fang. “I think it’s a good moment to pay up.”

I realized I hadn’t breathed and took a shuddering breath, my exhale fanning the loose hairs over Calli’s cheek.

She kissed me again, and I made a sound, something that didn’t sound very human, a lone, pitiful moan, and she pulled back with a frown.

“I... Is that okay? I didn’t think to ask, I just...”

“Yes. Yes, please,” I said, my heart pounding impossibly fast as I held on to my love, my prize, my future. “Do it again.”

She smiled and peppered my face with kisses, dropping them over my jaws, on my nose, around my eyes. She stroked over my ears and my head, then kissed me some more, and I just took it all, frozen in a strange, impossible rapture.

If I hadn’t known earlier, this moment would prove it to me once and for all.

She was the one for me.

Finally, she pulled back, and we just looked at each other. I drank her in, her hair in disarray, her eyes bright, cheeks blushing. Her mouth was red and a bit wet, bringing back the memory of when it had been wrapped around my cock. It was

then, when I saw her at my feet, ready to give in, that I suddenly longed for something impossible and poignant that I knew only she could provide.

Seeing her looking at me now felt like a promise of that longing being fulfilled.

“Please, Calli.”

The irony didn't escape me. I had boasted she would beg me, and yet here I was, begging her instead. But it had been doomed to be this way. From the start, I thought she was mine, yet I had been hers first.

Hers forever.

“Are you sure no one will see us?” she asked, grinding into me.

“Yeah.”

I moved my hips up to make the friction even more delicious. Calli laughed, a throaty little laugh, and moved up a bit.

“All right. Let's have a look at your card.”

I was nervous despite myself. I had never intended for her to see me, all of me, yet here we were. My cock, normally hidden in its furry sheath, was out. She would see it as it was.

No tricks, no games.

Calli shifted back and stared at my dick without a word, and I stared with her, wondering what her reaction would be.

The red, hard shaft was marked with darker veins, decidedly girthy and long. Too long, I was afraid, though that was for the lady to judge. The head was flat, wider than the rest, and surrounded by a ring of slightly protruding flesh below the first two inches. It would pulse with every thrust, enhancing her pleasure.

If she decided to fuck me.

What she couldn't see but would definitely feel right before I came inside her was the bulbous knot at the base of

my cock. It would swell and lock us together for a while. But only if she could take all of me.

I looked at her face, bracing myself. Calli looked up, too, her eyes wide and dark, her lips parted. She breathed fast, her blush delightfully red, and I realized with a start, she was even more aroused.

“That’s a rather big card,” she said, licking her lips. “I’m not sure...”

“I bet you can take me,” I said, not letting her finish. “I’ll bet a week of being at your every beck and call. If you can’t, and you win, I’ll be your willing slave. For a full week, all my power at your disposal. If you take me whole, though, and I win, you will be my slave. I’ll have you crawling, Calli. Walking around in an apron and heels. Bending over at my every whim for a full week.”

She licked her lips again, her blush becoming deeper even as her eyes ignited in anger.

“Are you aware the outcome of this bet depends on me?” she asked, her tits heaving so hard, I could see it even through the loose hoodie she had on.

“I like a challenge,” I whispered, looking into her eyes with a smirk. “If we lock together at the end, it will mean my knot is inside and I win. If we don’t, you win. Do we have a bet?”

“Knot? Isn’t that... Never mind,” she breathed, her fists clenching on my chest, pulling on my fur. “Yes. It’s a bet.”

She kissed me again, dragging her nails through the fur on my chest, and raised herself above me. I fisted my cock, training it up. I had been inside her, I had felt her come apart for me, but this felt much more intimate. There were no masks and disguises between us now.

It felt like a first, and I held my breath in awe.

She lowered herself over me, her tight heat enveloping the head of my cock, and I threw my head back with a groan.

“Fuck. I’m too old to be coming so fast. Please don’t move so I can save my dignity.”

Calli laughed, but her laughter was hoarse and shaky. I looked at her, poised over me, her thighs tight from holding her up in this position. When our eyes locked, I swallowed with difficulty, still unable to believe she was here, with me as I truly was.

She gave a small whimper and moved, taking me deeper. I clenched my jaw to keep a hold on myself. I was so raw, it felt like my emotions would burst at any moment, and I would either laugh manically, start spouting sonnets, or fucking cry.

It would not do.

So I leaned forward, slid my forearm under her butt to make a sort of bench for her to lean on, and hugged her to me. Calli let her weight rest over my forearm, and I held her up, my cock half-buried inside her.

“When I called you my love, I didn’t truly mean it,” I said quietly, pressed so close I felt the rise and fall of her chest. “It was just a way to rile you up, as you probably knew. But I do mean it now, *ást min*. My love.”

Calli gasped shakily and put her hand on my shoulder, keeping me close. We didn’t fit very well when I was in this form, I knew. Her legs were spread too wide over my hips. She didn’t reach high enough to put her arms fully around my neck. I was too big for her.

But I’d be damned if I let that deter us.

“I’m in love with you, and I don’t know how it happened,” she whispered, moving a bit up over my forearm and slowly coming down. “I hate you a little, too. But I love that you don’t mind.”

“I’ll fight with you as much as you want,” I promised, smiling. “Fuck me, *ást min*. Let’s see who wins.”

She rode me slowly, her fingers digging into my shoulder, her chest brushing against me. I supported her butt, and for a time, she took in just the upper half of my cock.

She moaned with every rise and fall of her hips as the ring surrounding my head pulsed inside her.

I reveled in her. The slick heat of her enveloping me, the look of painful rapture on her face that I knew was not a physical pain but the agony of giving in. She knew she was losing as she slowly unraveled, thirsty for more. As she danced over me in a mesmerizing rhythm, she kept pushing down on my forearm with impatience until I lowered it an inch, then another inch.

We both breathed hard, and I held myself in an iron check, groaning and panting right in sync with her moans. She felt insanely wonderful. I was ready to come inside her, and forcing myself not to give in felt like delicious agony.

The hot energy pulsing through my pelvis, the pleasure ready to burst at any moment, was like a wild animal that refused to stay leashed. I strained and struggled to keep it contained, but with every rise and fall of Calli's hips, it became more powerful.

And the look of her, so close, so entirely mine, would be enough to send me over the edge. Her mouth was open wide, brows furrowed in a deep frown, half-open eyes looking dazedly at me.

She moved over me rhythmically, and I groaned, both in pleasure and from the effort of holding back. I licked over her shoulder, tasting the salt on her skin, breathed her in, and panted from the agony of not succumbing.

Not yet.

I had to wait. Because there was a chance that she could, after all, accommodate me if I just gave her more time.

“Fuck!” Calli breathed out, gripping my fur so hard it hurt. “More... Please...”

My forearm rested completely on my thighs, and the only way she could get more was if I removed it. I did, and she trembled, poised over me, my cock almost fully sheathed in her.

“You can take it,” I murmured, mesmerized by the exquisite, raw look on her face. “Take it, love. Take it all.”

She lowered herself with a low moan until I felt her opening wrapped around the base of my cock, pulsing and quivering over me. Calli gave a low, throaty sound and opened her eyes. They were dazed and drunk with pleasure.

“My goddess,” I whispered, a hot tightness gripping me from within, filling my chest with reverent need.

She answered with an incoherent moan and raised herself, the friction making me groan. Calli panted, shaking, and still rode me, her face distorted in raw passion. I gripped her hips and helped her, speeding up her rhythm until she bounced over me, her mouth wide open, not a sound, not a breath escaping.

She tightened over me with a guttural moan, her body clenching me hard, and I thrust up, fucking her through her orgasm until the base of my cock swelled to twice its girth. She descended on me, swallowing the knot with a low cry, and I came inside her, my entire body tensing as her muscles pulsed, making my orgasm last longer and longer, until I was dizzy with the lack of oxygen.

I slumped back, and Calli fell on top of my chest, breathing hard and shaking.

“I couldn’t...” she started and broke off, taking a gulp of air. “Couldn’t help myself. I don’t even mind I lost.”

I held her close, my most precious treasure, and smiled.

“We both lose, and we both win in these games. You should set the terms for the next bet. I’ll gladly lose to you.”

She shifted, moaning, and I gasped when she pulsed around me again.

“We’re really stuck,” she said with a shaky laugh. “You sure no one will walk in on us?”

I checked on the glamor and arranged her dress over us to cover everything in case it failed.

“We’re good. And I’m afraid I’ll have to nod off for a moment. I died today, you know.”

Calli shook with a teary laughter, pressing closer to me, and I wrapped my arms tightly around her. My cock was sheathed inside her, snug and warm, and it was enough to make me feel safe and completely relaxed.

“You’re cuddly,” Calli murmured, sounding sleepy, too. “This feels nice.”

I fell into slumber with a smile on my muzzle, knowing that I would sleep without nightmares for the first time in months.



Chapter 24: Yours

Calli

A loud booming sound woke me. I opened my eyes with a start, my heart going from a peaceful rhythm to anxious hammering in an instant. Were they back? Was someone shooting?

“The idiots set off fireworks,” Loki said, his voice amused. “Don’t get up, love. Just look at the sky.”

I looked up just as a brilliant, pink and indigo rose exploded with a loud boom. A moment later, a bright flurry of green and blue stars shot across the night sky, leaving fluttery afterimages in their wake. A white and gold orchid bloomed next, the image scattering into fizzing dots that spun and spun, shooting golden stars.

I looked at Loki, whose eyes weren’t trained on the magnificent display above us, but at me.

“Hey there,” he said quietly, smiling.

I smiled back, blushing when I realized he was still inside me. It felt entirely too good. A viscous, relaxing warmth enveloped my lower belly, and I squirmed, raising myself a bit. There was a loud wet sound as his cock slid halfway out of me, and I burst into giggles.

“Mmm, stay. There’s no rush,” Loki said, pressing my hips down.

“But shouldn’t we...”

“In a moment.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and I sank into his warm, cuddly embrace, the fur tickling my cheek. We stayed like this

until his cock pulsed inside me, making my pussy instantly clench around him.

“Oh.”

Loki laughed quietly, his chest shaking, and pressed me closer.

“This is a superb way to wake up. Hold on tight.”

I squeaked when he rose, with me still impaled on his cock, and laid me on my back. I expected to land on the hard, cold ground, but instead, my body sank into fluffy pillows. Loki braced himself on his forearms, his wide grin full of fangs giving me a pleasant frisson of excitement.

“The female body never ceases to amaze me,” he said, pulling out almost fully. “You seem so petite, so compact,” he continued, pushing slowly back in until I cried out, “and yet you can take all of my cock when you put your mind to it.”

He pulled back, thrust faster, and I moaned when his cock pulsed inside me, pressing delightfully at a spot somewhere deep that I hadn’t even known could feel so exquisite.

“I love how determined you are, my love,” he continued in a smooth, velvety voice, thrusting in a slow, thorough rhythm that gradually drove me insane. “So determined to have all of my cock in your tight little cunt. So very driven to take me whole. So thirsty for my cum. Aren’t you, love?”

I moaned in response, wrapping my legs around him and tugging him closer, but he stopped entirely, his cock only halfway in.

“Tell me, Calli. Aren’t you?”

I looked up at his face, nonplussed. What did he want again? Why wasn’t he fucking me?

And then I knew. He had that infuriating, smug look on his face, teeth partly bared in a smirk, and his eyes danced with amusement. I sighed angrily, trying to pull him back inside, but he didn’t even budge as his smirk widened to a grin.

“Do you want me to fuck you, love?” he asked, voice politely inquiring, and I groaned, covering my face with my

hands.

“Always with the fucking games,” I said, looking at him through my fingers. “Yes, I want you to fuck me. If you can’t tell by now then something must be very wrong with you.”

He chuckled, not even moving an inch even though I squirmed under him, breathing hard in rising anger. Damn. If I had any self-respect, I would just tell him to go to hell, but my pussy positively quivered for his cock. I wanted him. Even more now that he’d made me furious.

“I know you do,” he said, leaning in. “I want you to say it. And then, I want you to beg,” he whispered in my ear, his warm, rough tongue swiping over my earlobe.

Just then, another firework exploded, so close it seemed like the pink sparks would land right on top of us. I whimpered, moving my hips again, but he pulled completely out, leaving me empty.

“Fuck,” I groaned, my pussy clenching over nothing. “Fine! I want you to fuck me! Please, please, fuck me!”

I had shouted those words, angry and frustrated, and he only laughed in response.

“Love, you need to make it sound like begging. Try again.”

I sighed, clenching my hands into fists, and bit my tongue to keep from hurling insults at him.

Because the truth was, a part of me delighted in this game. The power play was exciting and stoked the fires burning inside me, especially since I knew he hated losing and giving in just as much as I did.

And when we had fucked the last time, he had been the one begging. And he would beg again, I would make sure of that.

For now, though...

I looked up into his face, letting my defenses fall away. Vulnerability felt like asking to be hit or rejected, but I

swallowed thickly, took a deep breath, and let him see me anyway.

“Please, Loki. I need you inside me. I need you to fuck me right now. Please. You’re the only one I need and want, and it feels so empty without you.”

The smile vanished from his face, and his throat moved as he swallowed hard.

“Anything you want, *ást min*,” he said, thrusting back into me with a jerk of his hips. “Anything.”

I cried out, my back arching up as I felt him deep inside me, deeper than I’d ever felt anyone. No longer slow and composed, he thrust fast and hard, giving low growls that would make the hair on my nape rise in horror in any other circumstances.

Now, they only made me want him more.

Loki bottomed out inside me with a low snarl just as the sky above us colored with another explosion, pink and gold flowers bursting with a bang. But the effect was muted, and I realized dawn was coming, the sky lighter by a few shades than just minutes before.

I cried out when Loki thrust hard and stayed deep inside me, panting.

“Eyes on me, love,” he said, and I looked at his muzzle.

He was high above me, bracing on both clawed hands on either side of my face, his eyes burning with a harsh light.

“Keep your eyes open when you come.”

He thrust again with a low snarl, and I cried out, squeezing my eyes shut as a burst of tingly, vibrating energy enveloped my clit. At a low growl from Loki, I opened my eyes wide and kept watching him as the energy grew in intensity, reverberating deep in my hips bones.

I panted, climbing the high fast, and he panted above me, his face distorted in a beastly expression. He thrust again... and again...

I came with a violent shudder, my mouth open and unable to draw a breath, his face becoming the sole focus for my eyes. He fucked me through my orgasm, snarling loud, picking up the pace as another orgasm built inside me.

“Oh god. Oh god...” I repeated as the pressure increased, another jolt of ecstasy slamming into me. I clenched over his cock so hard, he groaned, and it suddenly felt too tight, too impossible that he was inside me, thrusting in a frenzy...

Loki bottomed out with a feral look on his face, and I cried out as he swelled inside me, making it feel like I would burst from the pressure of being so full. More vibrant energy pushed against my clit, attacking it from every side, and I howled, half in pain, half in bliss, as the third orgasm gripped me.

I writhed under him, my body hot and hard, and he laughed hoarsely, pressing close but keeping his weight off me. As the pressure lessened, and I gulped deep breaths, clenching and pulsing around his cock, Loki licked the side of my face and rolled us over so I was on top of him again.

He pawed at my backside, dragging the hem of my dress down over my hips, and then wrapped his powerful arms around me. I laid my head on his chest, listening to his quick heartbeat, and sighed in contentment as my body slowly relaxed, the pleasure settling deep into my bones.

“Can we do this every day?” I asked, still shivering from the orgasmic aftershocks thrumming in my pelvis.

“Every day, every night, every fucking hour,” he breathed. “At least for the next week. You will be so sore, love. But happy. I’ll make sure you’re happy.”

“Oh right,” I groaned. “A week of slavery. Fine. I bet you won’t be able to hold back from fucking me during the next twenty four hours. If you fuck me, you’ll be my slave for seven days once my week is over.”

Loki laughed, the warm, masculine sound making me smile, and he patted my bottom.

“It’s a bet. And of course, you already know you’ve won. I can’t keep my hands off you.”

We lay contentedly until his knot released, and Loki's cock slid out of me, followed by a trickle of his cum. I rolled off him with a groan, but time for lying around was over. The sky was already pink, the sun about to rise. The soft light painted the rubble and bodies strewn around the compound in pastel shades, turning the grimy landscape into something hazy and not at all as horrible as it had been in the dark.

Loki got up, too, looking around with a sigh.

"Let's find the others," he said, taking my hand.

"Um, shower first?" I asked, my thighs feeling too sticky. My dress was long, but I still knew I would smell of him, especially to sensitive shifter noses.

Loki grinned and shook his head. When I glanced at his cock, it turned out to be hidden, back in its furry sheath, just a faint shape between his legs.

"I'll wear your scent and cum, you wear mine. At least until you can claim me properly. Because you will, love. I won't have it any other way. Now, come. I think I'm up to conjure a little feast."

We found everyone in the back, behind the villa, where the fighting had been the least intense. Two barracks were completely whole, not even the windows busted, and there, most of Loki's soldiers had moved. There were tables outside, at one of which the council official still sat, another official by his side, an orc and Lynx overseeing their work.

"There he is!" Kang, who was back in her human form and looked very happy, shouted, raising a bottle. "The man of the hour!"

"Finally found a reason to get drunk?" Loki asked, grinning at her.

Kang hiccupped, her pretty face red and soft, and I realized she was swaying lightly. She took a swig from her bottle and laughed.

"I never drink on the job, but the job's over," she said, raising the bottle in a toast. "You did exactly what you had

promised. Though you fucked up hard along the way, you know. I told you so and all that.”

Loki laughed in response, not a bit fazed. He tightened his grip around me, pressing me close, and this time, I didn't feel self-conscious. I belonged at his side. It was time to accept it.

“I'll take it like a man. Yes, I fucked up. Huitz here saved the day. Where is the carcass, by the way?”

Huitz came over, back to his normal height, and spat on the ground.

“Jean's skinning her. He wants to open a fancy boutique from what I understand. Selling furry basilisk skin accessories, because she's covered in fur, thanks to his ridiculous bombs. And we know how she got out.”

He handed Loki a small device. I leaned in to take a look. It was black and looked partly melted. He opened his palm and let the object hover over it, until he sighed and closed his eyes.

“Of course. It's a kind of sonic weapon. She must have arrived having it on her. My barrier was magically inert, which they knew, but this fancy gizmo is not magical. It could have made it shatter, I'll admit. Damn. Those fuckers were too smart by half,” he said glaring at the council officials.

“Or you are too predictable, my love,” I teased him quietly.

He shot me an outraged look, and I burst out laughing. He was easy to rile up, too. And it seemed like I finally knew which buttons to push.

The council officials stood up, leaving behind a stack of documents on the table.

“Please, read through and sign,” one said, giving Loki a document on a clipboard.

Loki read it through while a few of his people checked the rest of the documents, distributing them and reading to make sure the immunity writs were all in order. When Loki was satisfied everything was as it should be, he signed the document with a smirk that told me he was very pleased about something.

The officials left, and Loki raised his arms high, making the air over the base shimmer. The barrier was back. Then, he pointed his hands at the tables, and instantly, they were filled with food, plates, glasses, and drinks.

“Before we eat and get drunk!” he shouted through the excited chatter. “We did our job. You and your families are safe. But this war is not over. I know the next organization that will be attacked, and while this agreement,” he said, waving the document he had just signed, “forbids us from fighting directly or inciting others to do so, it says nothing about helping out other victims of the Magic Council.”

A slow murmur and a few claps sounded in the crowd. Kang burped loudly and then laughed.

“You are free to go your way,” Loki continued. “But if anyone feels like staying and causing some more mayhem, I will keep providing room, board, equipment, entertainment, and anything else you require. You can also just stay without fighting. Each one of you has earned your place here, and you have my eternal gratitude and trust. Now dig in.”

There was a loud cheer, many nods, and Loki’s people turned to the tables. I was about to go, too, when Lynx came over, looking unsure and very tired.

“I talked to them,” she said in a quiet, urgent voice. “They said they can’t help Nina. That... they said binding one’s magic is irreversible. And even if it weren’t, they said they wouldn’t help her.”

I realized she must be speaking about her shifter sister, the one whose magic was bound by the Magic Council when she refused to go back to their world. From what Loki had told me, I understood the binding had been so awful it drove the sister, Nina, into madness.

Loki nodded, not a hint of a smile about his mouth or eyes.

“Binding is just a word they use,” he said, his voice quiet and serious. “When I fought with the head councilor, he said they feed on magic. He did it to me. He fed so much I was completely depleted, and I died. Until Calli conducted magic

into me and revived me. If you agree, we might try this for Nina.”

Tears shone in Lynx’s eyes when she looked at me, her face, which had looked completely defeated just a moment ago, beaming with hope.

“I... If you did this, you can’t even imagine how grateful we’d be...”

I shook my head, a bit aghast at having so much hope directed at me. I was no one’s savior. Though apparently, now I had a chance to be, and I would never decline.

“Look, I’ll try. This I promise you,” I said to Lynx, stepping from foot to foot in discomfort. “But please, don’t expect too much. We don’t even know it will work.”

She shook her head, though I could see it was no use trying to deter her. She smiled, suddenly bouncing with energy, and Loki smiled back, nodding at her.

“Grab a bite and go get your sister. We’ll be right here. Rebuilding.”

Lynx thanked us, her eyes brimming with hope, and turned to the table.

“It should take her a day or two. As for the others, I don’t know who will stay, but no one has to make their decision now. Apart from you, that is,” he said, taking my face into his big, clawed hands.

“Me?” I asked. “What do I have to decide right now?”

“Whether you’ll claim me or not,” he said, his voice urgent. “I need it. The sooner you do it, the better.”

I shook my head, glancing longingly at the table. I was hungry and thirsty, and I just wanted to lie down on a mattress that wasn’t all furry and have a nap.

“How does it even work?” I asked with a sigh, because I could see it in his eyes. There was no escaping this part. “And can I have something to drink while you explain?”

A tall glass of water sprung into my hand, and I gripped it instinctively. I sipped, the water tasting exquisite because I was so thirsty, and Loki talked.

“It’s like a marriage of souls,” he said, watching me closely, probably gauging my reactions. “It’s magic at its core, though not the flashy kind. It’s the kind of magic even mortals have access to. In fact, I’ve seen many human couples who unknowingly wore each other’s claims.”

“How so?” I asked after draining my glass, and Loki refilled it with a snap of his fingers.

“They claim each other without knowing. It might happen during the marriage vows. Or just on a normal Tuesday night. One partner will touch the other with a firm thought and intention of making them theirs, and it happens. A claim is placed.”

I sighed, lowering my hand with the glass, and it popped out of existence. Loki still watched me with serious, alert eyes, and I realized just how tight strung he was.

“You care about this very much,” I said.

He released a long breath and stroked up my arm, the green and gold claim painted on my skin becoming visible.

“It irks me not to wear your claim,” he said slowly, looking into my eyes. “Because I’ve belonged to you from the moment I wanted you for the first time, Calli. I am yours in every way possible. I know it. My people know it. Even the Magic Council knows it... Hell, everyone who sees us together will know at once. To belong to you so utterly and yet be unclaimed is a dissonance I cannot bear.”

I stared at him, wishing for the glass to hold or something else to do with my hands, because I was completely out of my depth. This seemed like a very serious, deep confession of love or something even more powerful, and I wished I could respond with equally meaningful words, but didn’t know how.

“I am already claimed, Calli,” he added when I failed to say anything. “I am yours. You just need to make it visible. Just paint on my skin what’s already there, love.”

I gave in. Still a bit tongue-tied, I just nodded. The relief in his face was so open and surprising, I gasped softly.

“That much?” I asked. “I didn’t even know it was a thing before I met you, and still don’t understand it in full, I’m afraid.”

He stroked down my cheek, his eyes glittering, and gave me a tender smile.

“That’s okay. You will understand with time. And we will have all the time in the world, Calli. It’s forever.”

I paused, hesitating. Forever sounded... Much more permanent than marriage or anything else I might have agreed to. If he proposed right now, I would spend days thinking about it. But was he proposing? No. He simply told me we would spend eternity with each other.

And then I smiled, grabbed his hand, and followed him as he stepped carefully over the rubble, lifting me easily when a bigger obstacle was in the way.

Who was I kidding? I would never find anyone like him. He was everything, and I was not about to lose another moment by wavering.

“Looks like the mess hall survived,” Loki said, leading me there.

Inside, the floor was strewn with broken glass, the tables messily rearranged, the benches gone. He spread his arms wide, and all of the mess disappeared while the tables shot right next to the walls, leaving the floor open.

Another flick of his fingers, and the glass tinkled, reappearing in the windows as an opaque shimmer settled over the panes. The door righted itself on its hinges and closed. We were alone and probably well hidden from the outside.

My heart quickened, and I looked at him questioningly.

“I would like to kiss you, so I will shift into my human form,” Loki said, eyes shimmering.

A moment later, he stood before me as he had been in Vegas. I blinked, taking in his human features, the stage-

worthy green suit, his slightly messy hair.

His eyes were the same, just as green, just as serious.

He came over and kissed me deeply. As his hand twisted in my hair, the intricate hairstyle dissolved, and my loose tresses fell down my shoulders. I kissed him back, answering his urgent need with my own, our lips claiming each other hard, breathes mingling.

I claim you, I thought, brushing my fingers over his brow. *You're mine*, trailing them down his cheek. *I belong to you, and you belong to me. Forever.*

I tried to slip my hand under his shirt, but the showman's suit was difficult to get under. Loki felt my fumbling, though, and pulled back just enough to shake off his jacket, his lips still on mine.

Quickly, I unbuttoned his shirt to the sound of his satisfied groan, and laid my palms on his chest, trailing them down his skin right to the waistband of his trousers, all the while thinking, *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I couldn't see if the claim worked, but I grew less interested in that. The belt fell off me, landing with a soft clatter on the floor. Loki grabbed a fistful of my hoodie and tugged it up. We broke apart just enough for him to slip it off me, followed by the dress, and then he kissed me immediately back, one arm going around my waist while his other hand claimed my breast.

The desire, so recently sated, thrummed in my lower belly again. I squirmed, reaching for his fly, and Loki made an impatient noise, his trousers disappearing under my touch. I grabbed his cock at once with a triumphant thought that it was all mine, and laughed into his mouth when I realized what I was holding.

"You seemed to like it," he said, thrusting his real cock in my hand, and I tried to grip it fully to no avail.

"I do," I said, straddling his thigh.

"Is that why you've painted it all green?"

I stepped back and looked. The skin on his red shaft was stained with a shimmery shade of vibrant green in the exact impression of my fingerprints. I looked slowly up. His entire torso shimmered with chaotic messy marks, as did his cheek and forehead.

“I could make it more even?” I asked, not entirely certain what he thought.

But Loki shook his head and laughed before he picked me up and spun with me in his arms.

“It’s perfect. You greedy little beast. Leaving your paw marks all over me. Makes me want to start flashing people just so I can show off how well you claimed me.”

I laughed with him, his joy completely infectious. We laughed together until he sat me down on a table, spread my legs wide, and raised my chin with his finger.

“Then it’s official, my love. My bride. You will never get rid of me.”

“And you of me,” I said, grabbing his head for another kiss.

As our tongues danced together, the head of his cock pressed into my pubic bone, and I bent my legs, planting my feet on the table. He murmured in appreciation, and a moment later, he pushed into me.

He went in slowly at first, stretching me wide, and I moaned, freshly surprised by how he could fit despite his sheer girth. But I was wet and mad with need for him, and so he kept pressing, encountering no resistance, until we were so close there was no space left between us, his cock completely sheathed inside me.

“Mine,” he said, kissing my forehead as I quivered around him, impatient for more. “Forever.”

“Yes, I am. And you just lost a bet, so please, make it worth it,” I said, pulling his head down for a kiss.

He laughed against my mouth, the sound entering me with his breath, and I sighed in pleasure. He broke the kiss, pulled

back, and thrust into me so slowly, I distinctly felt the hard ring on his cock drag against every inch of me, pressing into a delicious point after delicious point.

“Oh my god,” I gasped out as he pulled back, equally slow, and the tension inside me grew.

“That’s very convenient, you know,” he said, his voice strained. “I wish you meant it, though.”

He pushed in again, and I shook, taking him with a bated breath, my pussy quivering as he plowed through it with a slow, meticulous intent.

“I won’t call you my god,” I tried to scoff, but it came out more as a moan as he retreated again, trailing fire in the wake of his cock.

“Why not?” he growled, thrusting so fast I cried out in surprise. “I am a god. And I’ve bestowed all kinds of blessings on you. Worship me a little.”

He bit my earlobe, his breath so hot, I shivered, and pulled back slowly, only to thrust hard and fast. I held on to his shoulders, and the tension inside me unspooled, my orgasm building with every hard thrust, every slow pulling out.

“Fine,” I said, the word followed by a loud moan. “You are my trickster god. Please, bless me with an orgasm. Or three. And, I don’t know... Can’t do fancy words right now, so I guess... You are the best?”

He laughed, the sound so luscious, it felt like warm wind stroking my skin. In the next moment, he pressed me down so I lay on my back on the table, and he fucked me hard, a hot, insistent energy pushing at my clit until I unraveled, screaming out my release.

It didn’t let go, though, a magical heat feeding into my oversensitive nerves until I came again, all muscles pulled taut as I arched my back. The tension became even more insistent, and I writhed, trying to escape it as it pressed into me relentlessly, feeding more and more into my pulsing, hot clit until I came the third time, my body so hard with tension, it was painful.

Loki snarled, thrusting a few more times until he whipped his cock out of me and came all over my stomach and tits, golden spurts of his cum painting my skin.

“Open, swallow, and say thank you. This is how you worship your god,” he said, only a hint of a smile around his eyes.

He gathered the cum on my stomach onto his finger and plunged it in my mouth. It tasted just as it had tasted the time I sucked him off, horribly sour at first, and I whined in protest, though a moment later, the taste mellowed with sugary sweetness.

I licked his finger clean and swallowed, and Loki grinned, pushing more into my mouth. He fed me his cum as my body slowly went off the high of the triple orgasm, his eyes glittering with power, and I succumbed easily, finding pleasure in giving in.

Finally, he fed me the last drop of his cum, grinned with satisfaction, and knelt between my legs.

“And now, I will worship my goddess.”

He tasted, licked, and finger fucked me until I was shaking, another orgasm looming despite how spent I was.

It took him probably less than six minutes to get me off, and then, he still remained kneeling between my legs, licking me slowly with so much reverence and pleasure, I couldn't hold back from telling him.

“I love you.”

He looked up, green eyes glittering between my legs, laughter dancing in his gaze.

“I love you, too, Calli. But if you think for a minute I'll let you off the hook if you trill sweet words at me, you will be greatly disappointed.”

I laughed, and then he licked me to another orgasm.

And then, it was just as he had promised. We rebuilt. He ruled me for a week, making me sore, and yes, happy. And

then, I ruled him, and he did everything I demanded with a smile.

And then we played another game. Sometimes I lost and sometimes I won, but it was always worth it.



Epilogue

Calli

I sat at a table on top of the wall and watched Lynx, whose real name was Kerri, as she raced with her sister, Nina, on the meadow outside the compound.

Nina, who had recently regained her ability to shift into a lynx, adjusted really well to life with her magic back. She couldn't resist shifting, though, so she and Lynx spent a lot of time out of the base, playing, hunting, or just lying around in the fragrant grass.

"They are so cute, aren't they?" Loki said with a smile, sliding into a chair next to me. "You did this."

I drained my glass, and as I was putting it away, I took an admiring look at the custom bracelet that caught light on my wrist.

Loki had insisted I wear it all the time, claiming it was the best way to teach an arrogant dragon her lesson. So I did. I would be lying if I said it didn't give me satisfaction.

"Oh, please. Don't remind me," I said. "It's enough that Lynx practically prostrates herself in front of me in gratitude every time we talk. I'd rather she treated me like normal. Kang can do it without trouble. She called me mistress again today, and then cackled all the way out of the mess hall."

"Kang likes you," Loki said with a laugh. "It's her way of showing affection. She calls me a dandy boy with a daddy complex."

I laughed out loud in surprise, shaking my head.

"Well, do you? Have a daddy complex?"

“I adore the way you didn’t even question the dandy part. I’ll make sure to show you just how dandy I can be tonight. As for father, you won’t be meeting him, because he refuses to grace this pestilent world, in his own words, with his presence.”

I shrugged, glancing back at Lynx and Nina, who were lying stretched out in the sun, their glorious coats of fur shining.

“I cut ties with my parents, so you won’t be meeting them either. So. How did the meeting go?”

Loki nodded, waving his hand over the table. New drinks arrived, accompanied by a plate of the mint chocolate truffles. I immediately took one and closed my eyes in pleasure as it melted on my tongue.

“Hyde knows they are targeting him. Do you remember that big magical explosion in Nevada that made all the Magic Council troops pull out of here? It was actually the building of the Luxior Academy. They used some ancient reservoir of magic to manifest the building. Quite powerful, and I’ll definitely keep an eye on all parties involved. Anyway, Hyde is the academy’s headmaster.”

I took another truffle, but kept my eyes open now. Loki sounded serious, which never boded well.

“Is it a magic school or something?”

“Precisely. A magic school. The first one on the continent, which you might find surprising, considering how many supernatural beings actually live on Earth. But few of them were born and raised here. Until very recently, when there was a series of human-supernatural matches. There was a baby boom of sorts, with many half-magic children born. They need to learn how to control their powers.”

His smile was completely gone, and I cocked my head to the side, watching him carefully.

“So, the Magic Council wants to shut it down? That’s why they are targeting Hyde?”

Loki nodded and brought his glass to his lips, but then put it down without taking a sip. He looked into my eyes, his gaze burning with intensity.

“Maybe we’ll have some offspring to send off to a magic school one day. What do you think, *ást min*? After we help Hyde deal with the council, of course.”

I smiled despite his seriousness and reached out to put my hand on top of his.

“We have time. Which is a yes from me. Just not now. And on the topic of future projects, I want to play a game. If I win, you’ll give me a restaurant.”

He smiled back with a nod and turned his hand to lace his fingers with mine.

“Of course. What do you want to play? I’ll do my best to win since I don’t care for my love being away for long hours every day, shouting at her employees and spending all her vicious energy on others.”

I laughed, having predicted how he would respond. That was why I had picked my game carefully, and if I didn’t win, well, there was always the next game. Because no matter how much he grumbled, he always paid up.

“Hide and seek. If you don’t find me within fifteen minutes, I win. And if you find me, I lose.”

He leaned forward, his green eyes sparkling with interest.

“What do I get if I win?”

I pretended to think about it as if I hadn’t prepared for this question beforehand, knowing full well what would entice him most to play my game.

“If I lose, I will worship your cock on my knees, my god.”

He closed his eyes, throwing his head back with a groan. When he looked back at me, there was laughter and warmth in his eyes, and I shivered in anticipation.

“Game on, love. Go hide. You have five minutes.”

I ran off, smiling to myself, all giddy with excitement.

Whether I won or lost, it didn't matter. Because Loki had been right: when we played against each other, each of us was a winner.

THE END

Books In This Series

Finger Licking Monsters

DRACO: A Dragon Chef Romance

My boss is a dragon and he tastes like magic.

When I say I'm clumsy, I'm not being cute. With the amount of things I have tripped over, dropped on myself, and fallen into, it's a miracle I am still alive.

So how did I end up working in a restaurant kitchen? And not just any kitchen. It is run by the notorious chef Draco Domanski, who cannot abide people tripping on asparagus or spilling coffee down his shirt.

Draco can't stand my klutzy ways. Sowing chaos in his precious kitchen, I've come to know the signs of his monstrous displeasure. Eyes gleaming red. Smoke fuming from his nose. Tail wrapping around my leg while he growls threats in my ear, making delicious shivers run down my body. But no matter how furious I make him, he won't let me go. Soon, I discover why he needs me. I learn his other mouthwatering secrets: that he is doubly endowed and tastes like heaven.

Draco is passionate, tenacious, and... I can't fall for him. He is my boss, keeps calling me Rabbit, and his fangs could rip me in half.

If I ignore the tension cooking between us, it will go away. Right?

Falling for Mr. Hyde

I have one task: assassinate headmaster Hyde. He is powerful and has secrets more dangerous than my own. So why am I kissing him again?

When the Magic Council threatens to deport me, I must agree to their demand I kill Mr. Hyde, Headmaster of Luxior Academy. I am the least qualified shapeshifter for the job. I've never killed so much as a spider.

Not surprisingly, my mission starts with a series of disasters. I shapeshift into a student, but instead of blending in, I end up fighting for survival. The magic academy students break the laws of physics for fun, so attending classes is a deadly hazard. And headmaster Hyde is a devious opponent.

Suspicious from the start, he forces me to shed my disguise, stripping away my only advantage. Suspicion turns to obsession. He hounds my every step, and to my dismay, his commanding gaze unravels my restraint. We hunt each other among the fire-lit corridors of Luxior Academy, where magic chips away at the laws of time and space.

The deadly dance soon becomes a sensuous play of power and seduction. As Hyde tries to uncover my secrets, his skillful hands prying at my hidden places, I search for his weak spots. It is my fatal mistake. Instead of weaknesses to exploit, I find a man who is devoted, passionate, and as hard as steel. I don't want to kill him.

No, I'd rather kiss him. Kneel for him. Do anything else he commands. I could even be tempted to risk my life to spare his.

As I venture deeper into this bewildering darkness, I know I'm risking not just my freedom but my magic, too. The stakes are high, and even though I'm in over my head, I need to play dirty to win this game. The problem is, Headmaster Hyde wrote its rulebook.

Books By This Author

JACK: Halloween Monster Erotica

Jack is a monster full of tricks... with one very special treat in his pants.

Suzy is feeling lonely on Halloween. She performs a love spell, hoping to summon a nice, perfectly safe Mr. Hunky to keep her entertained... but she fails. The creature that answers her summons is neither nice nor safe, but oh boy, is he hunky!

Jack-o'-lantern is a devious ancient monster who once tricked the devil himself into granting him immortality. Now, Jack is here, a grinning pumpkin in the place of his head and a thing out of this world in his very bulging pants. The monster will have Suzy in every way he pleases, filling her close to bursting with his fertile seed... and nothing can hold him back.

BUNNY: Easter Erotica

The Easter Bunny is shredded, adorably clueless... and bent on feeding me his honey.

When I see the buff naked stranger in my garden, I think he's just a figment of my imagination. I am a divorcee so starved for romance, it's possible I am seeing stuff – especially if stuff is heavenly buff and equipped with rabbit ears and a fluffy ball of a tail.

By the time I realize he's real, it's too late. My offspring has seen him and is asking all kinds of questions about the Easter Bunny in our garden.

Mr. JINGLE: A Christmas Monster Romance

The faint jingling of bells is the only warning she'll get when he comes.

Mr. Jingle has been trapped for millennia, his only entertainment the faces flashing outside his prison, all as indifferent as snowflakes, all as cold.

Until her.

She captivates him. Her smile is as glorious as her tears. There has never been a more beautiful face, a more radiant personality, a more mesmerizing voice. She doesn't know he watches, so she lets him see everything. Her naked body. Her unguarded soul.

And he burns with passion. He's been trapped forever, cold and unused to affection, but for the beautiful woman who shines like his sun, he will break the walls of his prison.

Come Christmas Eve he'll break out and claim her. Because even if she does not know him, he knows her... And all her darkest desires.

The Orc's Bride: A Monster Romance

Orcs killed my family. They order us around and take from us what they want. And I am determined to end their rule. So when the ferocious silver-eyed orc says he'll carry me away from my backwater village right to the orc capital, I take this chance. Being among orcs and having access to their Emperor, I can save humankind.

There is only one complication. This orc wants me to become his mate. He promises, or rather threatens, to court me over the journey. And orc courtship isn't about flowers and holding hands. It's about showing me his desire. I must pretend to be attracted to him so he doesn't discover my secret.

The problem is... I don't really have to pretend. I'm falling in love with my deadliest enemy.