



THE  
GARGOYLE  
PROTECTOR'S  
MATE

CELESTE KING

# **THE GARGOYLE PROTECTOR'S MATE**

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CELESTE KING

PROTHEKA PUBLISHING

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheka” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

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# THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA



## CHASE

The crow of the rooster wakes me, though it's not like it takes much. With eleven children in my care, I don't know the last time I slept soundly. If it wasn't the rooster, it could be a cough or a loud wind.

My eyes blink open tiredly. I don't want to get out of my warm bed to face the cool autumn day, but I know there's no use in putting it off. As always, there's too much to do. Chores aren't just something to pass the time around here – they're essential to our survival, and laziness can only hurt us.

So, I shake myself awake, wincing slightly when my feet touch the cold floor. It'll be colder soon, when winter comes. But it's still a bit of a shock, initially, on my system, a startling way to leave my nice warm bed.

The house is still dark, as dawn is just now beginning to creep across the landscape. I fumble around to light a candle beside the bed, then carry it through the house as I rouse the older children for the day. We all have to chip in around here, to make ends meet.

It only takes a few moments for everyone to gather, knowing their role. Wendy and William, thirteen-year-old twins, will feed and water the chickens. Roger, who is fourteen and deafmute, gathers the eggs.

Roberta has a green thumb that's impressive at fifteen, and she helps me in the garden. Uri, the oldest of the children at nineteen, stays inside to make breakfast. She'll also take care

of the younger children as they wake up, making sure that they're prepared for the day.

We split up, moving through our tasks with the precision that comes from a carefully planned routine. I work in the garden with Roberta. Distractedly, I pull weeds, but my attention is fixated on a little wall of brambles on the side of the garden.

Behind them is my favorite hidden spot in the garden. It's a little secret patch of rare herbs and plants that only I know about. Most of our money comes from selling these plants in healing recipes and potions.

I keep them a secret, protective since we need them to survive. I can't check them now, with Roberta here, but I still think about them while I work.

When everyone meets again for breakfast, the veneer of responsibility quickly fades. The children – young and old – start acting like children.

It's something I hate to chide them for, as they get so few opportunities to be silly and carefree. But breakfast time tends to be an overdrawn affair, with twelve bodies crammed around a small table, and today is no exception.

Tony and Scott, brothers who are ten and twelve respectively, are jockeying each other and rough housing. They accidentally spill five-year-old Jessie's drink. It runs off the table onto her lap. She screws up her face and screams tearfully.

The boys turn to each other, looking ashamed.

"We didn't mean to," Scott defends himself.

"It was an accident," Tony says, speaking over his brother.

Uri sighs, and the world-weary tone in her voice makes me sad. "It doesn't matter what you intended," she cuts off their apology. "Fix it. Get a rag and clean it up."

"Come on, Jessie," I say soothingly. "We'll get you changed."

I take her back to the bedroom, wincing at the idea of more laundry. By the time I return her to the table, in fresh clothes and wreathed in a sunny smile, two-year-old Tina has spilled her drink. Her plate of eggs is drowning in the liquid, and Uri stops eating to make her a new plate.

“It’s sorry,” Tina whispers, and my heart clenches again. It’s so unfair that even a minor struggle is a devastating loss in this house. Everyone is at the end of their rope, all the time, with so little room for error.

“It’s okay,” I say, trying to hold back the sigh that desperately wants to escape. “Uri, you eat. I’ll do it.”

I trade places with Uri so that she can at least finish before her eggs are cold. By the time I am done, kids are already scrambling away from the table. I try to coax up a few extra smiles for the younger ones, who are still eating, and scarf down my meal.

Wendy and William gather the younger children, taking them into the yard to play. The stone walls of the old dark elf strong house, where we reside, help keep us warm. But they’re not great for fresh air or sunlight, and the kids need to be outside if they can.

Haley, who is ten, washes the breakfast dishes. She has a hard time with the other kids, and I don’t think she minds missing out on their play.

Haley’s a bit of an odd duck – she’s more interested in dead animals than toys. I suppose I shouldn’t complain, since dead animals are easier for us to come by here. But it’s a little creepily morbid, even though Haley’s harmless. Still, it doesn’t make it easy for her to fit in with her peers.

I’m eager to get out to my garden, my preferred chore, and enjoy the company of my little stone garden statue. When no one is around, I like to vent and tell him stories. It might sound silly, but I’ve even given him a name – Stan. It’s something of a joke, because all he can do is ‘stan’d around and listen to me.’ I guess when you’re starved for adult company, you learn to make do.

But I don't have time to pal around with Stan right now. Uri and I head out to the storehouse to fetch some of our picked goods. It's an easy, cheap, and reliable way to keep our garden produce from spoiling so that it can last us over the winter, when food becomes scarce.

As we approach the heavy wooden door, my ear pricks up at an unfamiliar sound. I stop short, listening. Someone's inside the storehouse.

Uri and I meet each other's eyes. Hers are dark with worry. I'd imagine that my own expression must mirror hers. But I don't want her to panic, so I try to act like I have everything under control.

I reach into my pocket for a curved blade that I found in the garden and had sharpened. It's an old relic from the dark elves, but I've hung onto it for practicality. In this moment, I'm glad that I have it.

Uri's eyes go wide when she sees it in my grip. She presses her lips together in a thin line and holds her breath, trying to look brave. I gesture for her to stand behind me, and slowly push open the door with one hand, my weapon poised in the other.

The first thing I notice is that everything is a mess. Items have been pushed around on the shelves haphazardly, and some are even scattered on the floor. I tense the hand holding the blade, ready to strike, when I see the offender.

"Thomas," I shout in a voice that's half a scold, and half a relieved exclamation. "You scared me silly!" My breath whooshes out of me, realizing that it's just my own brother scavenging around. I pocket my weapon, feeling annoyed.

"Sorry," he mutters apologetically. He does sound sorry, but also distracted. My brow furrows, wondering just what he's up to this time.

He wheels around to face me, his eyes big and panicked. "I didn't mean to scare you," he admits. "But I'm in big trouble. Big, big trouble. I owe the Bowler Street Brothers some gold. I was hoping I'd find your medicine here. I could sell just

enough to cover my debts.” He blows out a breath. “Or they’re going to kill me.”

I can feel the headache forming behind my eyes. Thomas is going to be the death of me. “How much gold do you owe?” I ask, trying to sound calm.

“100 pieces.”

Behind me, I can hear Uri suck in her breath, shocked by the sum. I grit my teeth, barely resisting the urge to do the same. The announcement is like a slap in the face. We’re barely getting by as it is. I don’t have the means to dig him out of this hole, even if I wanted to.

Even if I hadn’t spent the past few years digging him out of holes that he just keeps climbing right back into. At some point, I have to find a way to take away his shovel. Because I just don’t have the means to keep fixing his mistakes.

I rub my temples wearily. “I don’t have anything to give you,” I tell him slowly. It hurts me to say it because I do love my brother. I want more than anything to help him,

But we need that medicine to sell to cover our own needs this winter. I can’t take one more thing away from these innocent children. Thomas is a grown man. He needs to do better.

“Winter is coming,” I inform him, remembering how I could smell it in the morning air. “We don’t have many days left to gather, and everything that I have needs to last us. There’s no extra, Thomas. I have too many mouths to feed.”

His shoulders slump, and he hangs his head dejectedly.

“What is wrong with me?” he moans in a weary sigh. “The only sure thing in life is that I’m going to screw up. How can you keep everything together, run the house, take care of the kids, and I can’t even keep my own self out of trouble? Why am I a constant failure?”

It pinches something in my heart, to see him give up. I do think that he means it. He always feels bad when the consequences catch up to him. It just seems as though he’s

unable to stop and think ahead, to avoid the mess in the first place. He's full of good intentions and the poorest execution.

I sigh and pull a loose brick out from the wall to find my secret money stash. I rummage in the satchel, pulling out a few coins.

I thrust it into his hands, wanting him to take it before I change my mind. "Take this and get out of here," I instruct him. "Go to Camp Life. The Bowler Street Brothers won't find you there."

I try to ignore the pain I feel at the idea of losing my only brother this way. He's the only family I have left since my parents died years ago. I've taken care of him for this long and already said so many goodbyes that another one feels unbearably cruel.

I don't have time to fixate on that, though. I push the thought aside, reminding my practical side that this is the best move for everyone. I have to let him go, because I can't take care of him any longer.

There are too many children who need me, and not enough of me to go around. Thomas will have to start fending for himself in Camp Life.

His face lights up, squeezing the money tight in his hand and pumping his fist. "Thanks, sis!" he exclaims, hopping like a little kid. Almost frantically, he throws his arms around me for a whirlwind hug, kisses my cheek, and darts toward the door.

He moves so fast that he nearly mows down Uri, who jumps to get out of his way. He pauses for a brief second at the door, somber again. "You really did save my hide," he says. "This will be the last time, I promise."

I'm not sure what to say. I'd like to believe that, but somehow, I also feel like if Thomas is in my life, I'll always be bailing him out. If this is the last time, it's because I never see him again, or he winds up dead. Neither of those ideas appeals to me.

Finally, I reply, "Be safe, Thomas."

He grins again. "I'd rather be me." And with that, he slips out the door, the heavy wood slamming behind him.

I stare in silence at the spot he just vacated, while Uri waits patiently. Then I shake myself out of it. There's no time to waste.

We'll get what we came here for. Then while I work in my secret garden, I can tell my 'friend' Stan all about my morning.



## LEVIAS

The branches of the tree came to life, wrapping tight around my arms. I let myself be caught off guard, but it only takes a moment for my brain to kick in. I know what is happening. We've been ambushed by the purna.

Gargoyles and purna have waged this war for as long as any of us remember. The gargoyles know to watch out for signs of deception, but I was lulled into complacency on this sunny day. And now, I know, we're going to pay.

I struggle against the branches that hold me captive, feeling annoyed that they won't give. Gargoyles are much stronger than the purna, and I can't accept that they're besting me. I'm too powerful for this.

When I untangle myself, I've lost sight of the rest of my pack. They were small to begin with, and in the woody area, they've disappeared. Whether they are safer wherever they are is a mystery that I will never get to solve.

I spin in a slow circle, feeling the hackles on the back of my neck rise. Someone is close but I can't get eyes on them. Purna are a tricky bunch, a coven of women who look harmless but they rely on their magic. No one could know what to expect from such shifty degenerates.

Something sparkles next to a nearby tree, as the light bends around an invisible form. I whirl around, arms outstretched. It is gone, in a flash, and suddenly, beside me.

The ground beneath me splits apart, dirt and moss flying everywhere. The debris ricochets off, some pelting my eyes. I

wince reflexively, temporarily blinded. That defenseless moment is all it takes, and the force of a magic blast explodes into me.

Everything is flashing and buzzing as I careen through the air. For a creature so large, I've never felt so weightless. I don't stop for several yards. Even then, it is only when my side connects with a tree trunk, cracking both my ribs and the trunk.

I drop unceremoniously to the ground, dizzy from the pain. My momentum forces me forward, against my will. I roll another few feet, finally stopping when swallowed up by a clump of bushes.

They are thorny and pierce my skin painfully. But I'm too dazed by everything else and lay there, unable to muster the energy to untangle myself. The pain of the thorns is barely noticeable over the much more obvious injuries that wrack my body.

At some point, I gather my wits enough to realize that my attacker has left me alone. I don't know how long I lay here. I strain my ears, listening. Several more minutes pass, and I am confident that there is no sign of the purna.

They must have lost sight of me, hidden in the growth. Assuming that I was near death, they didn't put forth much effort in their search. I'm not certain they were wrong in their assessment. I'm hurt badly. I need to get somewhere safe to enter my 'stone' state of regeneration before it is too late.

I grit my teeth, slowly making my way out of the thorns. With one hand over my broken ribs, I limp away, keeping my eyes and ears peeled. But the path out of the woods remains clear.

I don't get much further than that, crouching down in the small hollow of a hill a few yards away. From here, I'm hidden from the view of anyone in the woods. It is the closest acceptable place, and I'm too tired to look any further. Shutting my eyes, I hear and feel the stone tightening, leaving its protective case around me

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I wake up from the dream that I've had, time and time again. It seems that I'm cursed to keep reliving that last day, that final moment of my old life. Since then, I've been unable to come out of my stone shell.

Gargoyles are supposed to be able to enter, and exit, their stone stasis at will. We use it to rest and to heal when we're hurt, but then we return to our mobile state. I haven't been able to reclaim my body for a very long time. It's hard to keep count, but I'd guess at least a century has passed.

At the beginning, I didn't know any different. I just remained in my deep sleep, unaware of the world continuing around me. I don't know how many years, or decades, or maybe even centuries passed in that time.

When I woke up, my surroundings were completely changed. I was in the same spot – I recognized the wood line and the hill, though both had changed considerably. There was now a garden surrounding me that hadn't been here before, and a stone house nearby. The vast changes to the landscape are what hinted to me that there had been a significant passage of time.

My other clue was the people who live in the house. They are all so different from anyone from my time. I thought they were purna, but there are males among them, too. I've never seen male purna. Their speech, their clothes, everything about them tells me that this is a different world than the one I fell asleep in.

In my current predicament, I can wake, and can see and hear what goes on around me. But I cannot talk, or move, or show any real signs of life. I might as well be a statue, as far as anyone who sees me would know.

Even in this state, it feels like years have passed. It must be a purna curse, as it's the only explanation I can come up with. I wonder how long I will have to be frozen here, observing others live their life but unable to have my own.

I woke up for the first time, after my deep and prolonged slumber, when the oldest woman in the house came to my garden. I'm not sure if it was the contact with another being that roused me, perhaps the sound of her voice. For all I know, I had been here in isolation until then. I don't know the terms of the curse on me, to be able to offer any justification.

Stone or not, she's the only one I like having around. As far as I'm concerned, I'd just as soon go back to sleep forever as deal with any of the other ones. They're too loud and obnoxious.

But the woman...she's different. She took care of me, from the very beginning. She spent days removing the vegetation that had grown over me and scraping off the bird droppings. She cleaned me until I shined, gently and appreciatively. She made me something beautiful, even in this useless form.

She even talks to me, dubbing me 'Stan' and introducing herself as Chase. Of course, she doesn't realize that I can hear her. In her mind, she's just talking to herself. I like the company, though the 'Stan' name I could live without.

I can hear someone coming down the hill now, though I can't see who it is. They're behind me, and as a statue, I can't just turn my head to look. One of the many aggravating things about my current state is all the things that I hear happening around me but cannot fully understand or witness.

In this case, however, the mystery solves itself a moment later when her shiny blond hair crosses into view. She's poking her head through the curtain of brambles that hide this part of the garden from view. Stepping through the gap that she's just created with her hand, she lets go of the vines. They snap back into position, closing behind her to re-form a makeshift wall.

There's a small woven basket dangling from one arm, which she sets off to the side. I'm so excited to see her that I wish, desperately, I could call out. I wish I could greet her, the way that she greets me. She's the only thing I have in this horrid, insufferable existence. This miserable life that isn't.

She rummages around in the basket, getting out a few primitive tools. Then she sets to work, poking and prodding to

pull weeds and tend the plants. For a few minutes, she just hums quietly to herself.

“It’s a nice day, isn’t it, Stan?” she calls over while she works, interrupting her little song. “This morning, I could smell the winter air. It’ll be here soon, but it’s nice that we can have a few more fresh days left.”

I like the way she talks to me, even though she has no idea I can hear her. She does it for herself, not me. As far as she knows, I’m just a hunk of rock.

It’s interesting, though, to be in this position. Since she has no idea that I’m a gargoyle, she doesn’t treat me with fear like most other creatures do. We’re the fiercest, baddest, toughest creation, basically gods in our own right. I’m used to a lot of things – being feared, being worshiped, being ran from.

I’m not used to someone who chats casually about the weather. If she knew my power, she’d never treat me like her gentle little tea-mate. But in a strange way, I kind of like it. Perhaps it’s just the novelty of it.

She unearths a rock that’s in her way. Taking it in her hand, she stands up and chucks it off past the edge of the garden. “I saw Thomas today,” she comments drily. “He needed money again. Can you believe it?” Her tone is sarcastic.

If I could bristle, I would. Thomas has been the main character in too many of her stories, and every one of them involves her suffering for him. If I had the use of my body, I’d wipe him out completely. He’s nothing but a pox on her existence.

“He’s going to go spend some time at Camp Life,” she says, a hint of wistfulness in her voice. “I’ll miss him, but I hope it does him good.”

I’m surprised by the strange sensation that I feel. As much as I just wanted to tear Thomas apart with my own hands, I feel a longing when she sounds sad like that. I can’t understand why she’d worry about someone who brings her so many problems.

She works for a bit longer, chattering on about this and that. Then she stops and fetches a little book from her basket. She sits on the ground at my feet, leaning her back against my legs, and begins to read out loud.

It's a book of poetry, which is something I never cared for. But I do like listening to her resonant, lilting voice fill the air. She imparts a lot of emotion into the words, and I find myself captivated. If not by the subject, by the cadence of the speaker.

She flips the book shut, standing up with a reluctant sigh. "I better go, Stan," she says. "There's too much work to do, to spend the day lollygagging here. Perhaps I should take a husband to help me out around here," she muses.

I don't like the thought of that at all. We don't need one more person around, and she certainly doesn't need a husband to lay claim to her. The idea is repulsive.

I'd give anything to say so. I can almost feel the words rising in my throat, but of course, it's my imagination. I can't move or speak. Nothing I can do will talk her out of it, even if the notion leaves me raw and desperate.

She bends over to harvest a few of her special herbs, placing them carefully in her basket and resting the book on top. "Thank you for being a good listener," she says politely. She steps closer, rising onto her tiptoes to place a gentle kiss on my cheek.

"Sometimes I wish you were real," she says in a shy, quiet voice unlike her normal one.

As she disappears behind the brambles once again, I wonder how much the purna knew about the curse they were placing on me.

Did they know the future? Did they see the hell that they were creating, letting me remain forever next to the one I desire but always keeping her just out of reach? It adds a depth to their evil that even I didn't know was possible, to force me to live with a love that I know I can never have.

## CHASE

The next day, after breakfast, I leave Uri in charge of the children. Though she's capable of managing them, I try not to task her with this too often. Ten children are a handful, even for a resourceful and mature nineteen-year-old.

But sometimes, it must be done. I have goods to take into the trading market in Camp Hope. I'll sell or trade our extra eggs and produce, not to mention my special medicines and tinctures. The medicine is what keeps us afloat, able to afford our meager existence, though the other items help.

Most of the kids are used to it, and don't bat an eye when I announce my departure. Tina and Jessie, the youngest of the three Darwin sisters, seem to think of Uri as their mother more than me, anyway.

It's only the oldest sister, Felicity, who blinks at me with big, anxious eyes. At nine, she still remembers the death of their real parents. "You'll be back later?" she confirms, a trace of worry in her voice.

I give her a comforting hug. "Of course, I will. You just stay here and play with Uri. You'll have so much fun that it'll feel like I'm back before you know it," I say, trying to soothe her.

She returns the hug. But as I pull away, I notice the tense expression on her face, and the way she chews on her lip. She's trying her best to match the other kids, but her unease is apparent.

I sigh inwardly. Uri notices it, too. “Let’s go to the field and pick flowers,” she suggests brightly. “We can make the table pretty to welcome Chase when she gets back.”

The distraction works. The cloud is lifted from Felicity’s pretty face. I smile gratefully at Uri. She returns it briefly, then chases the kids outside.

I carry a few boxes of produce out to the mule cart. The rest has already been loaded. I work quickly, hitching up the team, then begin the journey into Camp Hope.

It doesn’t take long, and luckily, our two mules are well-trained. They’ve made the journey so many times that they know it by heart, and work by some sort of animal intuition. I can relax in the cart, only occasionally urging them to speed up or slow down.

In town, I hitch the mules up at a post in the market. I start by making my usual rounds, knowing some of the most likely buyers of my wares.

The general store, made from rough-hewn lumber, takes my eggs like they do every time. I’m a bit disappointed when I enter, to see Lucy at the counter instead of Sarah. Lucy always tries to haggle over the price of eggs. I ask the same price every time, and she always gives in. I’ve never let her cheat me yet, though she tries. Sarah never puts me through this.

Then, I wander the farmers markets, where little make-shift stands are set up for people to sell their fruits and vegetables. Here, I trade our extra produce for things from other gardens. With winter coming, I need to make sure that I have the right materials for pickling and canning.

Most of the farmers are used to me. They like me, and the children, and they have no desire to scam me. They’re just trying to make a living, the same as me, and they lack the mercenary business zeal that Lucy has.

In the end, I’m satisfied with my work. Now, I focus on the specialty shops, trying to trade my medicines. These are my most powerful bartering tools, so I need to take my time. A



few of the shopkeepers try to underestimate the value of what I have, but I'm too smart for them. I know better.

I end up with some dried meat, several yards of fabric for new, warm clothes for the children, soap, candles, flour, sugar, honey, pickling spices, and salt. Not to mention the vegetables that I traded for. I even got some baked pies for the children. It will be a pleasant surprise when I return with a special dessert for dinner tonight!

By the time I leave, I'm feeling rather proud of my success. I've had a good day here at the market, and I'm excited to go home with my new goods. We've had plenty of days where we can't afford things like sugar, and it makes me happy to think that we'll at least have properly seasoned food and warm clothes. I can't provide much for these kids, but there's been times we've had less.

I load my goods into the wagon, and let the mules take me home. On the way, I sing under my breath. It takes me longer than it should to notice the hefty clomp of hooves following close behind me.

It isn't until the hoqins gallop ahead on either side of me, surrounding the wagon, that I realize something's amiss. The riders in the front tug their reigns, guiding their mounts in front of my wagon and bringing the mules to an abrupt stop. The others come closer, encircling me.

With wide eyes, I stand up. I can feel the panic start to rise, tight in my chest. Am I being robbed?

I swivel in a circle, putting my hands out defensively as I take in the scene. When my eyes land on the man in front, everything clicks.

It's James, second in command of the Bowler Street Brothers. His brother Arthur is the brains of the operation, but he sends James to do his dirty work. My heart begins to sink, knowing that whatever happens next, it isn't going to be good.

Inwardly, I have a few choice words for Thomas, and whatever he's dragged me into now. But I keep them to myself, eyeing the gang warily.

James snaps his fingers. “Hawk, get ‘er down from there,” he commands. One of the thugs reaches forward, snatching the waist of my dress to haul me off the side of the wagon. I consider kicking him in the face for a second, then realize how foolish that would be. I’d just make the rest of them angry.

So, I don’t resist as he pulls me down, but I do shoot daggers at him when my feet are safely on the ground. I smooth out my dress in irritation, and he chuckles.

James hops off his hoqin. He snaps again, and the rest of the gang follows his lead. He pushes his way over to me, leaning down with a sneer. I try not to cower and avoid his gaze by staring at the collar of his shirt. Even that requires me to crane my neck, as James is tall – very tall at around six and a half feet.

“Your brother owes us some money,” he says flatly. “Since we can’t find him, we’s found you. Where’s Thomas hiding out?”

I lift my chin, trying to look proud, and look him in the eye. His eyes are gray and cold, and I waver temporarily. It’s hard to look fierce when you’re facing a monster.

I collect myself quickly, hoping that he didn’t notice my weakness. “I don’t know,” I reply calmly.

He growls, and strikes me, hard, in the cheek. I fall to my knees, stunned by the force of it. “You still don’t know?”

Hot tears sting my eyes. “No,” I manage to rasp out.

He kicks me in the stomach. My head cracks against the side of the wagon, and I see stars. I lay on my back in the dirt, dazed. I’m vaguely aware of the mules getting skittish, and one of the men unhooking them from the wagon.

Before I know it, the rest of the gang is piling into this ‘fight.’ It’s a flurry of hands and feet, as they pull my hair, drag me around, punch, kick, and step on me.

At first, I stubbornly make up my mind that they won’t get a word out of me. I can take it, and I’m not going to sell out Thomas. Even if he does kind of deserve it, and he’s the reason I’m in this damn position.

But it doesn't take long for me to realize that they're not just trying to rough me up. This isn't about scaring a woman. Woman or not, they're willing to kill me unless I give them what they want.

And then, in my hazy, battered head, I suddenly replay Felicity's worried behavior this morning. I promised her I'd be home. What will happen to her if I'm not? What will happen to any of the children?

"Stop," I croak. They ignore me, until James thunders over the commotion. "Freeze, boys." His deep, booming voice brings everything to a halt.

He slowly gets down onto his knees, to whisper in my ear. "You got something you want to tell me, princess?" he breathes out harshly, his voice dark and threatening.

"I gave him some money and supplies so that he could get out of Camp Hope," I admit. "He was talking about catching a ship to Milthar to become an indentured servant for the minotaur." The second part is a lie, but I hold my breath and hope they accept it.

James shuffles back to his feet, just as slowly as he got down. He's a large man, far from spry. It's a long silence while I wait for his reaction.

"Shit," he finally says. "Arthur's gonna be pissed." He glances over at the one he called Hawk and gestures with his head toward the wagon.

Hawk jumps into the wagon and starts rummaging around. I'm suddenly glad that I sold all my medicine today, because at least they can't steal that. I get to my feet, painfully, anxiously waiting to see what they'll leave me with. I look for the mules, and find them standing a few feet away, waiting patiently.

Hawk doesn't seem to care about most of my supplies. I guess flour and salt don't excite thugs. He ends up emerging with the pies, handing them out to the gang.

"Shit," James remarks again. "Better than nothing, I guess." He eyes his men. "Blow it down. Can't believe she

wasted our time for this shit.”

The men move to line up on one side of the wagon. The ones holding pies lean into it with their shoulders, and the others use their hands. Before I know it, they’ve flipped the wagon over.

And then, in a whirlwind, they mount their hoqins and disappear. I stare at the wreckage, holding my throbbing head. Gritting my teeth through the pain, I manage to get everything put back together. The flour is hopelessly lost, but everything else appears salvageable.

The mules know their job, leading me back home. As I ride in the wagon, my unoccupied thoughts drift back to the assault. Now that my mind has nothing else to focus on, I can’t distract myself from the pain. I sob the entire way back, wracked by my own fear and helplessness.

Back home, I realize I don’t want the kids to see me like this. I grab a bucket and a few cleaning rags from the shed and clean myself up as best I can. I’m not thinking clearly, a bit delirious from my experience and the lack of blood.

I’m still bleeding a lot, so no matter how much I wipe, it doesn’t seem to get better. I finally give up, deciding to go rest in my secret garden where they won’t see me. I stumble my way there, nearly passing out several times.

When I get there, I slump against my Stan statue. “Bet you never thought you’d see me like this,” I try to joke. But then the tears spring fresh. I sob, leaning on him to support me and keep me upright.

My nerves are on fire, traumatized and raw. When I hear a snapping twig, I jump to attention as though it were a firing gun. It might as well be, when I look up into a tree to see Hawk watching me.

With cool, dead eyes, he leaps off the branch gracefully. “We wanted our money. We figured we could take those herbs you make the medicine out of instead.” He leans over, plucking a fuzzy green leaf. “Bingo.”

I felt myself sliding down Stan to meet the ground, where I might just stay forever.

## CHASE

I lay lifeless, face down in the dirt. The soil is cool against my bruised face, though it burns where it touches my scrapes. I'm devoid of any hope, and too broken to care. The sensation barely registers, such an insignificant inconvenience against the rest of the pain coursing through my body.

I could get up, but why? This horrible man named Hawk, this gangster, is going to steal the only thing I have of any value. He'll probably kill me while he's at it, and he might as well. I'll never be able to take care of myself and the children without the medicinal plants that we eke out our livelihood from. If he takes them, we'll starve anyway. A quick death would be better than that. What's the point of resisting, anymore?

I made it through the beating. I survived the ride home. I dragged my bloody body out here to the garden. And a member of the BSB gang has found me here, too, in the one place I wanted to keep private. There's only so much that I can take when it seems clear that I'm up against insurmountable odds. I can't muster the energy to fight any harder against what seems inevitable.

I can hear Hawk's heavy footsteps tramping through the garden. My heart races, knowing that he's coming for me. I can only hope that he'll make it quick, though I doubt I could be so lucky. Haven't I been through enough today?

"You can't play dead, little girl," he croons maliciously.

As I lay, motionless, I am certain I know what comes next. Suddenly, something happens that I never could have expected, though.

Above me, I hear a grating sound. It's loudly obnoxious and makes my already dizzy head ring. It reminds me of when the children use a rock to scratch a message or drawing into another rock, that hideous scraping that resonates until your teeth hurt, times a thousand.

It's unexplainable and disorienting, and I struggle to pinpoint the source. It seems like it's coming from everywhere, all around me. My mind is reaching for something to justify this. The only thing I can think of is that Hawk is responsible, but I can't figure out how. What would he have to make that noise? It's unlike any weapon I've ever heard of.

Something touches my shoulders with hands that are somehow both heavy, but gentle, and I almost instinctively know it can't be the gangster. I don't know what's happening, but my intuition knows it's beyond me at this point.

I suck in my breath, shocked, and my body locks in place. Whatever it is, it leaves me afraid to move. Everyone talks about fight or flight, but I have unconsciously chosen freeze.

The clattering and grinding of stone gets louder as I'm pulled off the ground. For the second time that day, I find myself in the grasp of a stranger—or maybe not. But instead of being annoyed, this time, I just gasp.

It's Stan, my garden statue. He's holding me in mid-air, his hands nestled underneath my arms. The noise is coming from him, his stone surface grinding and crunching with the friction of each movement.

He takes a few steps, his movements heavy and forced. It's somehow as if I'm watching a human body, encased in stone. Because of the limitations and the weight of his stone exterior, his motions are labored and burdensome, but deliberate.

My mind reels as he sets me carefully down on the wooden fence of the garden. Am I dead already? This must be some

sort of a hallucination, a fever dream from a mind that doesn't know it's broken. Perhaps I hit my head on the wagon harder than I thought, and never made it home at all.

Because stone can not move. Statues do not walk.

And yet, somehow, Stan is.

Stan is now standing between me and Hawk. I look past Stan to see Hawk, wide-eyed and trembling. All the blood has drained from his face, leaving his complexion a sickly white.

*If I am dreaming, why is he here? I wonder. Why can't I make up a nice fantasy, where Stan comes to life, and then we pick flowers together?*

Stan turns away from me, to face Hawk. As he does, the noise of his cracking stone façade changes. Instead of grating, it's now like hearing the breaking of ice on a pond.

The stone shell, already covered with a spiderweb pattern of splinters, begins to drop away. It's like a puzzle in reverse. With each piece that falls, another comes loose, and soon all the bits of stone lay in a dusty pile at his fit.

I gasp again, one hand flying up to cover my face. The reaction would be comically underwhelming under any other circumstances. Here I am, facing a living, breathing creature that I thought was inanimate. And all I do is gasp?

I think, in a way, I'm still not convinced any of this is real. It feels too ridiculous, too absurd, defies reason on too many levels. It's easier for me to believe that I passed out in a ditch on the way home and dreamt this, than to believe a statue could really come to life.

"You-you're real?" I ask tentatively. I'm not sure what I expect the question to prove. If I'm delusional, I doubt a figment of my imagination is going to point it out.

He twists his head back to look at me, though he doesn't answer the question. His skin is a dark gray, matching the color of the stone that he wore until now. His muscles look realistic now, the tone and texture of each one varied the way that a human's would be. His chest rises and falls with each breath, and I watch it in fascination.



But then I sense that he is staring at me. It draws my attention away from studying his moving, life-like body, and I meet his gaze.

His face is stoic, even without the stone, emotionless. There's something in his look that makes it, somehow, more profound. His eyes bore deep into me. I can't tell what he is thinking, behind his serious, intense gray eyes.

Slowly, I bring my hand down from my face, captivated by his stare. I can't explain why it feels as though I must look, as though I can't break myself away. My hand rests nervously at my collarbone, uncertain.

'Stan,' or whatever this thing I thought was Stan really is, suddenly whips his head back to the thug. He tilts his head back with a deafening roar, and his face clearly conveys the first emotion I've seen him have.

My blood runs cold, seeing that it's hate. My sweet Stan is filled with hate, an expression so merciless that it leaves me chilled. A bitter taste fills my mouth, watching the scene unfolding.

He lunges forward, grabbing Hawk. In a rage, he growls, dangling him easily from the tips of his fingers. Hawk's legs swing wildly in the air, desperate. For a moment, I'm reminded of what he did to me, but it doesn't take long for my natural empathy to kick in.

This seems to be on a whole other level, and I can't help but feel a stab in my gut, worrying at the fury on Stan's face.

"I'll go," Hawk pleads. "I'll go, and never come back. I won't say nothing to nobody."

Stan stops Hawk's struggling by holding Hawk with one hand and grabbing his foot with the other. Then he pulls the leg off with one jerk, swinging a bloody stump.

I cover my face, not wanting to see anymore. But the sounds will haunt me for a long time. For a time that was probably only a few minutes, but felt like hours, I could hear Hawk's pained cries. Stan stuffed his mouth with something,

muffling the sound, but I couldn't bring myself to look and see.

I could hear him ripping and clawing at the flesh, dismembering Hawk bit by bit. Soon, the muffled noises turned into a gurgle, as Hawk made the rattling noise that comes with death. But Stan did not stop, tearing viciously into him as my stomach turned. The acid started to rise unbidden in my throat, disgusted by it all.

I can't believe that this creature, my sweet Stan, is a vicious, bloodthirsty monster. I think of all the times that I wished he was real, that he could be my companion in the garden. I recall the stories I told him, the personality that I facilitated for him.

I had assigned him the essence of a friend; of someone that I could chat with over tea. In my wildest nightmares, I never could have guessed what lurked beneath his stone exterior. I'm shaken and horrified, disgusted by what he has turned out to be.

Finally, the smattering noises begin to cease. I grimace, my eyes still shut. But the silence begins to haunt me. I can't decide if it's better to know, or not know, what will happen next.

I cave, unable to take it any longer. One eye peeks cautiously open, tentatively searching. He's staring at me from across the garden with that same serious, soul-searching gaze as before. This time, it chills me, terror claiming me fiercely in its grip.

Blood is splattered everywhere. A wave of nausea hits me as the smell fills my nostrils. Seeing it is, like I suspected, a thousand times worse than keeping my eyes closed.

But now I can't look away. The intense look on Stan's face tells me that I'm next. I was afraid of the pain of another beating from Hawk, but now I've traded one terrible death for a worse one. I briefly wonder what curse has been invoked on me to bring this kind of suffering.

He stretches his bloody claws out, stalking towards me like a predator who has found his next prey. His gray eyes glint at me. Now that he's shed the stone skin, he moves with ease and precision. And I'm his target.

I open both eyes, wide and frightened. I can feel the scream rising in my throat, but nothing comes out but a hiss of air. My vocal cords are paralyzed, all my muscles in a state of tense shock.

I can only stare as he comes closer. He's covered in blood, and I start to swoon. Too late, I realize that I have been holding my breath, and I'm about to pass out. There's no chance of escape.

Even if my battered body was capable of running, I can't make it obey. My brain has shut down completely, unable to give commands. And now, dizzy, and lightheaded, it's too late to save myself.

The edges of my vision begin to darken, a gray filter creeping over my eyes. Everything is cloudy as I try to take one last, desperate breath of air. My throat is too swollen to take the oxygen that I need, and my lungs burn violently as I slide off the fence, collapsing to the ground once more.

As though I am spineless, I slither down, landing on my bottom. Slumped over, my head rests on the wooden post behind me. Flitting in and out of consciousness, the last coherent thought I can string together is an apology to Felicity and the other children.

*I'm sorry I didn't come home.*

## LEVIAS

She looks drained and depleted, though I can hardly blame her. She's a soft sort of woman, and clearly has had a difficult day. I have no regrets about killing the man for what he wanted to do to her. I assume he's the reason her skin is currently marred.

Even if he's not, I still have no regrets. I would have killed him just for the way he was speaking to her. I couldn't stop Thomas from being a thorn in her side. But this strange man was an affliction that I could eradicate.

I bend over, gently caressing her cheek. Her head, rolled back against the fence post, doesn't move. But her eyes, after a beat, flutter open, and then shut again. She seems to be fighting to rouse herself.

It could be a side effect from her wounds. She's lost a considerable amount of blood. I can tell by her pallor, and by how much blood currently stains her skin and clothes. There are several large, painful contusions and abrasions on the visible skin. Her cheek is swollen and red, and a spot under her eye is mottled with a purple-blue hue. Her arms and legs are covered with friction burns and bruises.

Even with all of this, she's the most beautiful creature that I've ever seen.

I continue my administration, brushing the pad of my thumb across the side of her face. I want her to understand that I am here for her. I want to offer her the consolation that she so regularly brought me when I was a captive.

Her eyes flicker open and closed several more times, but they seem to be brightening. Each time, they're a little less clouded. Her face, though confused, becomes more alert, more conscious, and aware.

She studies me with her stunning green eyes. The bewilderment begins to slip from her face, replaced by a marveling amazement. I understand her bafflement because I feel some degree of it myself.

I don't fully understand how I got trapped in that stone form for as long as I did. But I have no more clarity on what has set me free. For all the years that I spent frozen, what suddenly allowed the stone to fall away for the first time? What is it that released me?

The only thing I can piece together is that the woman I wanted for mine needed me. Somehow, I shook the curse to be able to save her. I'm as shocked, amazed, and confused as she is.

I know, in a way, I owe her an explanation. This is all out of her grasp, even more than mine. But I don't have an explanation to give her. The only thing that I could say is already visible and obvious – that a living creature lurked beneath the statue's surface. I'd have nothing for the follow up questions that would be sure to come.

And I don't want to waste my time on such matters now, anyway. I've taken care of her attacker, but she's still in need of assistance. She has a lot of wounds to address. I hope that my magic is as good now as it was a century ago.

I glance over her, evaluating her constitution. This will be better if she's relaxed. I quickly decide that, though astonished, she seems more comfortable than she did a few moments ago. She's not panicking or anxious. She's ready and receptive for healing magic.

I slip my hands off her cheek and rub my fingertips together. I can feel my magic growing, tingling in my hand. When it's built up to the proper frequency, I lay my hands on her arm. I move from spot to spot, carefully healing each wound while she gapes at me, stunned.

The magic that I've imparted to her will continue to work, mending her injuries over the next hour or two. If there are any more serious blows beneath the skin, this will cure them as well. But by directly treating each spot that I can see, the process is hastened.

Her skin is soft, and it's no wonder that it tore the way that it did. It stitches back together under my healing touch, leaving her looking as perfect as she always did. It's warmer than I expected.

She offers no objection as I work my way across her body. I start on her arm, and then the other one. When I make my way down to her leg, I can feel my blood start to hum in my veins. She's an attractive woman, though I can't let myself get distracted now. I have a job to do.

I try to ignore the tingle of my fingers, knowing that the sensation is more than the magic flowing through them, as I feel the sculpted muscle of her leg. My hands drift over to the next leg, feeling it out. As gentle as I try to be, she winces a few times under my touch.

Next, I tenderly feel out her back and middle. It's covered by her clothes. I let her keep her modesty, trying to sense where she may be hurt. I line my hands up with the blood stains, letting them guide me as I visualize the injuries under the surface.

When I move to the last place, the mark beneath her eye, I let my hand linger longer than necessary. With my free hand, I push her hair back from her face, smoothing it out. I don't know, if I'm being honest, if it's for her or for me. The silky blonde locks seem to shimmer in my grasp.

It's been a long time since I've touched a living thing, but never anything as impressive as her.

She blinks her big green eyes at me, looking mystified and a little shy. I can already see how the healing has improved her appearance, and it continues to work before my very eyes. Her eyes are bright and clear now. Her skin has a healthy hue, a slight pink flush resting at the top of her cheeks. Her lips,

which were so white, dry, and blanched, now have a vibrant red stain coloring them.

She bites her lip, looking uncertain. Her brow furrows, thinking to herself. I can almost see the war that her mind is waging, trying to sort out how this can be real. It makes no sense, certainly, that a statue is alive. And yet, it makes no sense for her to see me, if I'm not alive. Since neither answer is logical, she doesn't know what to think.

Chase lifts her hand, bringing it to meet mine on the side of her cheek. It hovers, just above my own, never quite touching. Her fingers tremble, and I can tell she is overwhelmed. "Stan?" she murmurs.

I shake my head forcefully, finally pulling my hand away. "No. Levias. I am Levias." I always hated that silly name. Now that I can object, she will not use it any longer.

"And you, Chase Reed, are now mine," I declare. I stand abruptly, taking her hand to pull her to her feet.

She rises, offering no resistance. When she stands, I grip her waist in my hands and lift her. Crushing her against me, my mouth seeks hers, as if claiming my prize.

She stills in my grasp at first. But then, after a brief pause, I can feel her melt and relax. She opens her mouth, and my tongue slides against hers, taking the kiss deeper and deeper. Her mouth is soft, like her skin, and there isn't an inch between our bodies.

I slant my lips against hers, again and again, ravaging her. What starts as possessive turns into something much sweeter, almost gentle. She's so warm and light in my arms that it reminds my foggy, addled brain to treat her tenderly. The way that she took care of me, washing and cleaning me as a statue, so kindly.

The need for air finally convinces me to release her. She slides down my front as I put her back on her feet. Her shocked green eyes meet my gray ones, her mouth still hanging open slightly in surprise.

She raises a shaking hand to her lips, her cheeks flushing. Her lips are swollen, and her expression is thunderstruck. The kiss was fantastic, the sweetest thing I've ever known in my long existence. But it's gone straight to my head, decadent and luxurious as it was.

I sink down to the ground, resting my body into a sitting position. My long state of torpor has left me drained, with less energy than I used to have. Between the fight, using my magic for healing, and now a mind-blowing kiss, I'm suddenly too exhausted to even stand.

I lean forward, resting my horned head in my hands. I try to look firm, not wanting her to view me as weak. I am her protector. I take a few deep breaths, trying to gather myself.

Everything swims in my vision, and my body feels flushed. There's a prickling, clammy sensation at the back of my neck. I try to wipe it away, but it clings to me, sending a shiver down my back.

Is this a side effect of the magic breaking? Is whatever force that kept me captive draining my life force? I push the thought aside, not wanting to focus on it. I am strong, capable, and ferocious. A tiny chill can't bring me down. I square my shoulders, trying to look confident, even in my current state.

She kneels to bring herself to my level, so that our faces meet. Her forehead wrinkles in concern, studying me. "Are you okay?" she asks in a quiet voice. "Do you need something? Water? Food?"

Hmm. Perhaps she has the right idea. I haven't eaten for decades, maybe as much as a century. My reaction may be due to malnourishment. I've performed a lot of physical labor on what must be an extremely empty stomach.

"Yes," I agree, pleased by the thought. I find myself cheered by such a practical solution. This Chase is not just beautiful. She's clever, for a woman. "Bring me meat and wine," I command.

"I have meat," she says, sounding excited. "I can give you meat. But," her voice changes, now hesitant. "I-I don't keep



any alcohol in the house. What with the children.”

I sigh, reminded of those nuisance children. They’ve always aggravated me, and they cause Chase such grief. She shouldn’t have to waste her life as a nursemaid for orphans.

They provide nothing and drain her resources. Some are downright disobedient, like the two rowdy boys. If she didn’t have to take care of other people’s children, imagine the life that I could give her.

Now that Thomas seems to be gone, that’s one problem out of the way. But she’s still saddled with these beasts of burden.

“These orphans are an inconvenience,” I think out loud. “They take up too much of your time. Time that will now be spent with me. I should destroy them so that you are free.”

I stand, heading toward the house to do just that. Even in my weakened state, it shouldn’t take long. The children are weak and small. Though annoying, they’re ill-trained, and won’t resist for long.

It’s a gift that I give to her gladly. She has freed me from my stone prison, and I owe her the same. Soon, she, like me, will be free – free of their millstone around her neck.

And then we will be left to each other, the way it was destined to be.

## CHASE

**H**e pushes his way past the brambles, out of the garden. For a moment, I'm too stunned to react. He can't have said what I thought I heard...did he?

My heart rises into my throat as I make a frantic dash after him. "Stop," I shriek, panicking. All I can think of is what he did to Hawk. The gruesome scene of destruction from earlier replays in my head in a maddening loop. "Stop!"

He did that to Hawk because he was a bad guy. *Right?* I try to convince myself. I don't necessarily agree with taking a life, but it makes it more palatable to convince myself that Hawk had set himself up for it. If he hadn't threatened me, if they hadn't beaten me, if he hadn't followed me home...it all could have been avoided.

But the children are just children! They've done nothing wrong. They're young and innocent. Does he just kill recklessly, anything he can find? Is this how he entertains himself?

"STOP!" I shout louder, catching up to grab his shoulder from behind. He hesitates at first, wavering, then complies. He turns around to face me, looking surprised by my objection.

"What is the problem?" he demands. "They aren't even your own offspring."

"That doesn't matter," I answer truthfully. I love the children as if they are my flesh and blood.

He nods. “It’s admirable, the efforts you make for your species. You care for children you didn’t birth, a valid means of limiting the loss to your race. But there’s no shortage of children, and no need to keep them all. There will always be new parents to bring about life, and the burden is not yours to carry.”

My head is reeling, though I notice he makes no mention of love. He sees it as purely transactional, a chore that one can choose to do or not. He sees them as an obligation and seems to have no concept of a family.

“If the children are removed, you won’t have to care for them anymore. It’s better this way, for everyone. In the best case, they’re just humans, and the world won’t suffer for the lack of a few. You’re spending your own valuable resources on creatures too weak to be useful.”

I gasp, so bewildered by the statement I almost don’t know how to argue. Everything he says is, of course, utterly ridiculous. You don’t kill children, and certainly not because they’re weak. But he says it in such a matter-of-fact voice, as though it’s obvious, that I’m stumped in trying to rebuttal him.

“They don’t have to be useful,” I insist. “They’re children. The youngest is only two! You can’t kill a two-year-old just because she isn’t useful!”

“Why not?” he replies stoically. The idea doesn’t seem to faze him, in the least.

“They can learn to be useful,” I offer. Truthfully, I have no idea what it will take to convince him. What does he want from them, to justify their right to live? I always felt that all life has value, but somehow, I doubt that will be enough to sway him.

“Look at Uri. She watches the children, she helps me cook, she even helps me pickle and put away food for the winter. She’s very useful.”

He scratches his chin, thinking it over. “Are you suggesting that this Uri merits a pardon? I suppose I can take that into consideration if she’s necessary to you. However,

with the time that I save you by removing the other children, you may no longer require her services either.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I mean, yes!” I quickly amend, not wanting him to misunderstand me. “She deserves a pardon, but they all do. What I’m saying is that children are still growing and learning. We don’t kill them just because they can’t do everything we can.”

“They’ll die soon anyway. Humans don’t live more than a century. Two or twenty, death is always near. I’m just hastening it, so that you don’t have to spend your short life carrying such a burden.”

“But even a short life can have meaning,” I try. “Think of everything those children might grow up to do. If you take their life now, you’ll never know what they could have become.”

“It won’t be much,” he argues. “Humans are too weak, too limited to ever amount to much. In the scheme of your lifespan, their achievements may seem impressive. But in the grand scheme of things, a gargoyle understands the futility of human efforts. In a thousand years, no one will even remember them, whether they die tonight, tomorrow, or fifty years away.”

Levias begins to walk away again, considering the topic resolved. I run to cut him off, dropping to my knees and wrapping my arms around his legs. Anything to stop him.

“Please,” I plead, clinging to his knees. “Please, please, I beg you. Don’t do this to them.”

He is, at least, temporarily halted. He looks down at me in frustration. His face is annoyed, but quizzical, as though he really can’t understand my objection. He furrows his brow, then lets out a loud sigh.

“Fine,” he acquiesces. “I will give them quick, painless, merciful deaths, if that makes you feel better.”

“It doesn’t,” I shriek, breaking down in tears. I grip his knees tightly, as though I can stop him myself, and sob against his legs. “Please, I will do anything. I will do anything you

want, anything you say, anything, as long as you don't hurt the children."

He says nothing, just stares at me with an inscrutable gaze. A long silence passes where the only noise is the sound of my tears. My head hurts and my rib aches from the force of my sorrow.

He leans down, peeling himself out of my grip. He's much stronger than me, and I know there's nothing I can do about it. I can't hold him forever. I collapse on the ground, wracked with my sobs.

He kneels beside me, taking my elbow to guide me to my feet. His eyes are still unreadable. I wipe my tears, silently begging him with my eyes.

"Very well," he agrees. "I will not harm the children. But you are now mine, Chase Reed. I will hold you to your promise to do what I say."

I nearly faint in relief. "I promise," I agree hastily, rubbing the remaining tears from my eyes. I sniffle, feeling giddy. "I promise!" I don't know if I'm about to laugh hysterically, or vomit. Maybe both.

"I won't hurt the children," he repeats. "But I'm still going into the house. I'm not going to sleep in the garden any longer."

This isn't as terrifying as the idea that he's going to kill the kids, but it's still a bit uncomfortable. I can't let him into the orphanage.

The kids will be terrified at the sight of him. He's a literal monster. The little ones will, certainly, have nightmares about it. How do I explain it to them when I don't understand it myself?

Not to mention, I'm a bit concerned about having a bloodthirsty monster who just threatened to kill them five minutes ago hanging around. He did change his mind and promise that he wouldn't. But can I trust him?

I don't even know him, not really. I know my made-up version of him, my Stan. But this Levias creature is much

darker than I ever imagined Stan. What if he loses his temper with them?

But what else can I do? My mind races for another solution, trying to think.

I can't keep him in the storehouse. It's full of breakable glass, and it's too small for him. He's easily more than seven feet tall and at least four hundred pounds. Thomas isn't even six feet, and he has – had – to duck in there.

Same with the chicken coop. He'd never fit. And I can't afford to lose my flock. We're dependent on those eggs. If the chickens get spooked and stop laying, we'd all be in deep trouble. In fact, I better keep him away from the chickens altogether.

Then it occurs to me. The perfect spot for him. I just hope the mules don't mind. But they're a lot calmer than the chickens. Almost nothing rattles them, and I guess we're really about to put that to the test.

"You don't want to do that," I begin, trying to convince him. I can't just tell him that he's not allowed in the house. I have to get him to agree that the house is all wrong for him.

"You just said how much the kids irritate you. The house is too crowded, too loud. It's not right for you. I can find you a space where you can sleep, away from them. Somewhere secluded."

He purses his lips, looking intrigued as he thinks it over. "I do value my privacy," he agrees. "I'd prefer a quiet place, away from the children. My own domain would be ideal," he muses.

"Then you're in luck!" I crow, trying to sound excited. I want to sell him on the idea before he has second thoughts. "There's a building, separate from the house. It's near enough that you'll be close, but you'll still have privacy and a space all to yourself. Come with me!"

I lead him in the opposite direction, away from the house and toward the stables instead. Maybe he won't know the difference, really. He's spent the last who-knows-how many

years living as a statue in a garden. He probably doesn't know much about the comforts of a house, right? A stable will seem like a huge improvement, I hope.

He follows me without argument, walking contentedly behind me. We reach the outside of the stables. I turn to flash him an encouraging smile, trying to be positive.

If I don't react and pretend like I think this is a great place to be, maybe he will too.

I pull open the heavy wooden door, stepping inside. He comes behind me, looking around eagerly.

It really isn't an awful space, to be honest. It's not a house, of course, but it's better than outside in the garden. There are a few large windows, which bring in plenty of fresh air and sun if the weather cooperates. Soft hay is scattered on the floor, and there's enough extra that he could make himself a somewhat comfortable bed.

The hay gives it a refreshing, comforting smell that mingles with the leather scent of the tack. The mules, who are penned together on the far wall, are generally quiet roommates.

For all of the positives that I have come up with, I can tell that he is less than impressed. His face immediately falls, and he scowls as he surveys the space.

"A barn!" he scoffs, outraged. "I can smell animal dung! I will not lay down with barn animals!"

He stalks over toward the mules, waving a hand in exasperation. "This is their home, not mine! Do you consider me a beast, and therefore deserving of these living conditions?"

He turns around to face me again, his wings curving defiantly behind him as a sign of his pride. "It is beneath my station! I am a fierce and impressive gargoyle, the highest species on Protheka, and made as the equal of the gods! If a god came to visit you, would you ask them to slumber in a barn?"

I do not have an answer to that as I just stare at him.

**LEVIAS**

“**W**ould you?” I snarl, vexed by the suggestion. “It is beneath someone like me!”

It aggravates me that I even must point this out, as it should be obvious to anyone. I’m a gargoyle, nearly a god in my own right! Birthed by the cosmos to rule over these lesser beings, and one dares to suggest I sleep in a stable? It’s infuriating.

I grit my teeth, glowering at her for even thinking such a thing. She swallows, hard, looking uneasy. It makes me feel a bit better, and I consider her properly penitent.

“Fine,” she blurts out nervously. “Fine. But let me go wa-I mean, tell. Let me go tell the children that you...that we have company!”

I stare at her, indignant. “Are you saying that you’re going to leave me waiting here?” I can’t believe the nerve of these humans. They’ve gotten cocky since I began my sleep. She’s lucky that I let any of them live, and now she wants me to stand around a smelly barn?

“Please,” she begs. I’m growing tired of this whining of hers. I found her much more pleasing when she wasn’t nagging and cajoling all the time, the way that she does today. The constant pleading and pouting are wearisome.

“Please, let me just talk to them. They’re going to be surprised to see you, the same way I was. I just want to prepare them for it, so they aren’t caught off-guard.”



My lip curls into a sneer, my exasperation with her coming to a boil. In the garden, when we had one-sided conversations, she was so much more enjoyable.

The thought is enough to send me skittering back across my memories, remembering how kind she was to me in the garden. We had good times, as she read to me from her books and entertained me. She told me stories about her childhood, her day, her routines. She tried to teach me about plants, and even sang to me.

I would have been very lonely indeed without her. And that's enough motivation for me to tamp down my rage, at least for now. "Fine," I reply, trying to unclench my jaw. "Fine. Make sure you tell the children that they are not to touch me. Children are dirty savages and carriers of filth, and best kept to themselves."

She nods hurriedly and scurries out the stable door. The wooden door bangs shut behind her, and echoes loudly through the space. I glance around at the stables, trying to occupy myself while I wait.

The stable is made of rough-hewn stone. A few gaps in the wall, presumably where stone has fallen out, are stuffed with hay that has been cemented in place by mud. It looks, overall, sturdy but aged. It's been here for a significant amount of time, and though it's seen better days, it's clear that it will last a while longer.

Two mules are penned into their stall on the far side of the room. The stall is a shared space where they keep each other company, and it runs the length of the wall. One is a tawny brown color, and the other has a reddish-brown fur, with tints of cinnamon.

They eat from opposite ends of a long trough, watching me with dull, stupid eyes. They seem unconcerned by my presence as they look me over. Bits of hay spill out of their mouth as they take sloppy bites, staring.

I bite back the exasperation that I feel, to be here in the company of these brainless beasts. Instead, I begin to clean the leather tack that hangs on the wall. It's been put away

carelessly, still damp, and dirty. I'm a warrior who knows the value of taking care of my tools, and I'm not going to leave it like that.

Besides, it surprises me that Chase would hang it like that. This is the woman who carefully scraped and shined me as a statue, spending hours cleaning with painstaking precision. I'm guessing that the current state has something to do with the way she arrived in the garden, battered and bloody.

I can hardly fault her, in that condition, from not being able to take the time to clean up. And Chase has enough problems and works hard to provide. So many depend on her, and if she won't let me help her my way, I can at least help her this way. I can intervene before the condition of the leather is damaged, and take care of this one job for her.

I look around, finding a rag and a small vial of oil. I take the tack down, setting each piece on a long wooden work counter. Then I dip the rag in the oil, and trace small circles across the surface of the leather, doing the largest sections first.

I'm wiping off the last few pieces of soft leather when the door creaks open slowly. I put down the rag, turning to face the sound.

Eleven pairs of frightened eyes stare back at me from the door frame. Chase stands behind them, her arm protectively around a few of the children. The youngest one is being carried by the oldest, positioned on her hip.

I stand, waiting expectantly. I won't be bothered to spend much time on these children, but I'm sure they'll have a few questions. It's only natural, as I'm surely a stronger creature than anything they've ever seen. These soft species, with their short pathetic lives, are fascinated by us more advanced beings.

The toddler child rests her forehead against the neck of the older child carrying her, hiding her eyes partly from view. She peaks around the girls' neck, wanting to see and hide all at the same time.

The rest all do various versions of the same cowering. They hold each other's hands, whispering and staring. Some shy away, taking refuge in Chase's arms.

They come in various shapes and sizes. Two of the girls are nearly grown, close to Chase's size. The smallest children are females as well, with the youngest only slightly more than a baby. There are three boys in all, though the older one is significantly less troubled than the younger two.

I make a point of giving an extra fierce glare at the two more mischievous boys. They're both rowdy and rambunctious, often causing Chase unnecessary grief. She's complained about them more than once, and the trouble that they can cause. They are impulsive and hardheaded, as young males can be.

I've heard them myself, as they play in the yard. They push boundaries and get too rough. It's inappropriate for the circumstances, and in the presence of the girls. If I can make them think twice about their disobedience and wild nature, even out of fear, it's for the best.

Their eyes go wide, and they turn their heads to look at each other. The younger one grabs the older one's shirt, squeezing the material tight in his fist. The older one swallows hard, looking pale.

I like this reaction. Perhaps I don't have to kill them after all to make things easier for Chase. With the right motivation, I can keep them all in line, and keep life at the orphanage humming.

I eyeball the rest of the children, scrutinizing them in my gaze. The oldest one makes me uncomfortable, though I can't quite put my finger on it. There's something I don't like about her, but she has an appropriately meek expression. I'll tolerate her for now.

The rest have similar expressions, startled and nervous. They seem to understand that they're in the presence of greatness, even if Chase was rude enough to leave me here in a stable. It's only the second youngest, who looks at me in pure fascination. There isn't a trace of fear on her face.

She pushes her way ahead, wanting to get a closer look. She circles around me, taking me in. “What’s your name?” she demands boldly.

I raise an eyebrow, both appalled and impressed by the spunk of this child. She’s remarkably courageous, to speak to me in such a tone, though I wouldn’t want it to continue.

“I am the scourge of Protheke,” I begin with a fierce glare, reminding the child to know her place. “The font of orphan’s tears, the maker of widows – Levias.” I arch my wings proudly, making them rattle for maximum effect.

The creature gawks at me, completely ignoring my rebuff. She shakes her brown hair around her face. “That’s a long name. Can I call you chicken wing?”

I grind my teeth, incensed. “No, you most certainly may not,” I snap. And I thought Stan was bad!

The other children are distracted by her words. They begin to exchange looks with each other, no longer frightened. They titter and giggle amongst themselves. One starts to chant, and the others chime in. “Chicken wing! Chicken wing! Chicken wing!” they cheer.

I preferred their fear to their taunts and begin to contemplate ways to gain it back. I bet if they watch me snap the head off the first creature, the most obnoxious one who began all of this, the fear will return. Let’s see how loud they laugh then.

Though that hardly seems fair. She may have started it, and certainly, she deserves to die first. I have no qualms with that.

But they’re all guilty, as they annoy and provoke me. I had the right idea before, when I told Chase that I should get rid of the children. Killing one will not solve the problem, as then another will simply become the most irritating. And another, and another, until they are all removed from my sight.

They’re making the argument for me, right in front of our very eyes. Such uncouth creatures, and so much hassle for no reward! Why would anyone put up with these things, if they weren’t your own offspring? I could tear their heads off and

drink the blood from the stumps of their necks. It's the most useful they'll ever be.

I'll kill two birds with one stone. Not only will I have the nourishment that I need after my long sleep, but I'll be rid of the nuisance children. I know I promised Chase that I wouldn't, but she'll have to understand. She must be able to see how worthless and aggravating they are – look at them!

I look up at Chase, wondering what she thinks of their antics. I half expect her to approve of my killing them, certain that she must see know why it's the right choice. It's plain as day. How can anyone listen to this nerve-blistering cheering and noise and think it should continue?

But then, as I gaze at her face, I don't see the irritation I expected. Instead, a shadow of a smile flickers at the corners of her lips. Her eyes sparkle at me with enjoyment.

I've never seen anything like it. Not only is it breathtaking and beautiful, but it's a rare sight from Chase. It warms the pit of my stomach, spreading through my extremities like a fine wine.

I soften just enough to know that I want her to keep the smile, whatever that means. I won't take it from her, even if that means I can't take the children.

I don't have to like it, of course, and I don't. Their giggles gall me, piercing my calm. But I'm a warrior, and I've dealt with much worse.

I'll find another way to work out my frustrations later. I can make a different kill, someone who isn't as special to Chase.

Maybe another idiot in a bowler hat. I had fun with the last one.

## CHASE

I know, of course, how to prepare meals for a large family. I do it every night. The younger children don't eat much, but the boys regularly take in a lot of food. Multiply that by the fact that there's eleven of us at the table, and suffice to say, I've learned to cook for a crowd.

But cooking for Levias is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Dinner begins with three roasted chickens. That means an entire extra chicken for Levias, who I know is starving after his long dormancy.

He gobbles it down so quickly that I can hear some of the smaller chicken bones splintering in his massive jaw. I only manage to serve a few of the children before he grabs the second chicken, ripping off large hunks of meat and stuffing them into his mouth.

I do the best that I can, splitting the remaining chicken amongst the children. The portions are quite small, but they don't seem to mind. They're too busy gaping at the scene Levias is making.

Tony and Scott snicker to themselves and pretend to use their teeth to bite at the chicken animalistically. I kick them under the table, shooting them a warning glance.

"There's potatoes," I suggest, gesturing to the bowl. "And mixed vegetables, and salad."

Levias stares, his face disgusted as though I suggested he go eat some bark. "I'm not going to eat...vegetables," he says with a frown. "What warrior would survive on plants?"

In a loud whisper, I tell Uri to go get two more chickens out of the ice box. Normally, I would do it myself, but I'm afraid to leave him at the table unsupervised. One more giggle out of anyone, and he might eat them when my back is turned.

She doesn't argue, just scampers off obediently. While he waits, he chugs down an entire gallon of milk. "Go fetch more milk, please," I ask Roberta. She bites her lip, trying hard not to laugh, but follows my directions.

"I'm very sorry," I tell him politely. Nervously, I begin to circle the table, dishing out the vegetable side dishes to every plate but Levias'. I give them all generous portions, wanting to make up for the tiny serving of meat. "I did not anticipate your appetite to be so much...healthier than our own. It won't happen again." I do my best to sound demure, hoping he won't be too angry.

Luckily, he seems nonplussed by it. "We are voracious eaters," he agrees. "Humans are too weak to understand the nourishment we require."

Roberta returns with another gallon of milk. He drinks that as well. She gives me an exasperated look from behind him, where he cannot see, and leaves the room to fetch another.

"Bring two," I call after her.

"I'll go help," Wendy says hastily, scrambling away from the table.

"Where is my chicken?" he asks. "Why hasn't the big girl come back yet? Must she yet skin it? I don't eat feathers."

"No, no," I reply. "No, it's butchered. But they take a while to cook," I explain hesitantly. "Are you sure you don't want some vegetables while you wait?"

At this, he starts to get annoyed. He huffs under his breath, his lip curling into a sneer. "I told you, I don't eat vegetables. Bring me the chicken as it is."

"It isn't cooked," I remind him softly.

He glowers.

“Haley, tell Uri to bring the chicken now,” I amend. His angry expression clears.

“Is he gonna eat it raw?” Haley asks, wide-eyed. “That’s so cool!”

I bite back a sigh. All I need is the children copying Levias and eating half-cooked chicken. I need to remember to talk to them about food poisoning later. “Go,” I repeat.

She scurries off, nearly running into Wendy and Roberta who have returned with four gallons of milk. In my head, I begin to do the math, trying to figure out what – if anything – is left for later.

He polishes off another gallon while I remind the children to stop staring and clean their plates. They’ve hardly touched their food, though I can’t blame them. I can hardly look away from Levias myself. It’s somehow both incredible and disgusting, at the same time, to watch him eat.

Haley comes back, with Uri following close behind. The two chickens are on a platter as instructed, though her face looks hopelessly confused. She looks at me uncertainly, and I nod.

She sets the chickens down in front of Levias. He eats them both nearly as fast as the first two, only pausing for an occasional half-gallon drink of milk.

When he is done, he stands up abruptly from the table. “I will go stretch my legs, and return presently,” he states. Folding his wings as he walks away, the occupants of the table all stare in stunned silence.

With Levias out of earshot, everyone starts to speak at once.

“I can’t believe he ate them raw,” Haley says gleefully.

“Should I go get another chicken?” Uri worries.

“Do you think he has teeth in there?” Scott wonders. “How did he eat the bones?”

“Everyone, calm down. Everyone!” I interject, getting louder when no one seems to be listening. “Eat your food. Uri,



you too. Forget the chicken, just eat. We have enough other dishes to make up for it.”

Dutifully, the children begin to poke at their meal. I can tell that they’re still brimming with barely contained excitement, however. Which reminds me...

“Everyone understands that we can’t tell anyone about Levias, right? I know we find our new guest very interesting, but he must be our secret.” I sign to Roger, to make sure he understands. Though, to be honest, he’s the least of my worries. Being deafmute, he can’t communicate with most people in town, anyway.

And Tina, at only two, is easy enough to excuse. No matter what she says, I can cover up for it, telling people she has a vivid imagination.

No, I’m mostly worried about Jessie and Haley. They’re both old enough that someone might take them seriously, and unconcerned with whether people would think it’s weird or not. In fact, Haley would probably enjoy it more because everyone thought it was weird.

The children begin to murmur their agreement. I give a particularly pointed look to the two girls, making sure they understand that I’m very serious. Jessie agrees quickly. Haley looks down at her plate for a while, pushing the food around, but finally promises not to tell.

I finish my food in a hurry, wanting to leave the table to find Levias. In a way, I’m glad he went for a walk, because at least he’s away from the children. I don’t want him to lose his temper or hurt them, so the more time apart, the better.

“Keep them in the house for now,” I instruct Uri in a low voice. “I’m going to go find him, but I want the children to stay away and give him some space. Have them get ready for bed early, and then they can take turns telling stories in the big bedroom.”

I leave the table, and head outside. It doesn’t take long to find him, ambling leisurely in the yard. His eyes brighten

when he sees me, and it makes my heart skip a beat to have someone want my company.

I used to joke that I talked to ‘Stan’ because I needed adult conversation. But now that he’s real, it doesn’t feel as much like a joke anymore. I do worry about him around the children but at the same time...I kind of like having a friend of my own. Another adult, who sees me as a real person, and not only as an ersatz mother figure.

And the passionate, toe-curling kiss wasn’t bad, either.

He’s a little...strange, to put it mildly. But I think maybe I can reason with him, and we can work out some sort of a compromise. At least with him around, I won’t have to worry about the Bowler Street Brothers. I wish he hadn’t killed the one earlier, but I guess it’s better than me getting killed.

And he did promise to leave the children alone. If I keep them from annoying him too much, maybe it won’t be so bad.

I just need to figure out a way to keep him occupied, or the children. That way they’ll stay apart, and their paths can mostly remain separate. That’s going to be key.

That and, of course, finding an endless source of milk.

“You look concerned,” he notes, interrupting my thoughts.

“What?” I reply, shaking my head to focus.

“Your face. It looked like you were thinking about something.”

I don’t know how to reply at first. I’m so startled by someone taking the time to ask me what I’m feeling. He didn’t ask, exactly, but at least he noticed it. That happens so rarely around here that I’ve forgotten how to answer.

“I was just thinking that I have to go into the market again tomorrow,” I explain. It’s part of the truth, anyway. I lost the pies and the flour when I was attacked by the BSB gang. We can live without the pies, but I need the flour.

Plus, I guess I’ll have to buy some extra food. We raise and butcher our own chickens, but I wasn’t expecting a guest that

can eat four in one sitting. I'll have to increase our flock size, but in the meantime, I'll have to purchase more.

And same for our milk supply. Levias must have left quite a dent in our milk rations. If we're lucky, we have enough to get through tomorrow morning, but soon we'll be dry. I'll pick up a few extra gallons to offset his consumption.

"I'll come with you," he says firmly. He makes it sound like an announcement more than a question.

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I reply with a nervous laugh. He can't possibly think that he can show up at the market looking like...well, like that, can he?

"I insist," he continues. "I will escort you there and through the market, to make sure that you are safe. I am content to offer my assistance."

With a shaky smile, my mind races for an excuse. There's no way he can go to the market. I was just lecturing the kids on keeping him a secret, and he thinks he can wander through town. I don't even want to think about what kind of a scene that would be.

"No, it would be most discourteous of me to expect you to debase yourself like that," I say. "Fetching groceries is a woman's job, and one far beneath you. Please, let me perform the tasks that I'm best suited for, and don't compromise your purpose by lowering yourself to such a menial chore."

He sighs gruffly, but nods. "True," he remarks. "I suppose it would be most disagreeable to see someone of my skill and power wasting my time with errands."

Levias seems to be thinking it over. "Fine, I'll stay here while you go. But hurry back, before the children annoy me."

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I hitch up the wagon to the mules and make the trek back to town. At least this should be a quick trip, as I've done most of my bartering already. I just need to fetch a few things.

I pull into the marketplace, looking for a hitch post to tie the mules up at. Seeing one, I pull gently on the reins to guide them forward. I'm nearly ready to park the wagon and hop out when I hear footsteps clambering across the wagon bed.

I turn at the noise, just in time to see Arthur, the head of the BSB, climbing over the back of the seat. He stretches one long leg over and then the other, plopping down beside me.

He slips an arm across my shoulders, giving me a greasy smile. "You and I need to have a little chat."

## CHASE

Arthur leans against the wagon seat beside me like we're old friends when he's probably my biggest enemy and I've done nothing wrong to deserve it. He's the brains of the gang, whereas his brother James is the muscle. His frame, at about six feet tall, is impressive but not astounding.

He's leaner and trimmer than James, and his black hair is cut into a tidy, respectable style. To an outsider, he could give the impression of a businessman, which I suppose he technically is – if one doesn't question the business.

Arthur is the reason that the BSB isn't immediately run out of town. He knows just who to impress and how to keep the right people, people in power, on his side. He makes the connections and greases the palms that ensure everyone who matters pretends they have no idea what the gang is up to.

As long as the key players get their cut, the BSB has nothing to fear. They'll never be held accountable for their actions. No one understands the crucial power of networking the way that Arthur does. He's slimy as a snake, under the surface, but he can play it cool as needed. The BSB only steps on the toes of people who don't matter anyway.

He tightens his arm around my shoulders, as though he wants to get closer. "I'm so glad I ran into you today! Here I was thinking I'd have to make the trek out to your house."

I stiffen at his touch but refuse to show fear. I know that he's trying to dominate me, and if I seem intimidated, it will only empower him. "Get out of my wagon and leave me

alone,” I order, hoping my voice sounds more assertive than I feel.

I glance ahead at the mules, wishing for once they weren’t so calm. If they took off now, I could push him out of the wagon and make a run for it. But they’re completely indifferent to his presence.

Arthur must sense my thoughts. With one arm still draped over me, he reaches for the reins with his other hand. He flicks them out of my reach, draping them on the far side of the wagon.

He tightens his grip, pulling me tight into an intimate embrace. To anyone passing by, it would look like we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Only I can feel the tension in his fingertips, and how they squeeze my shoulder hard enough to pinch.

He lets out a low, mirthless laugh. Then he leans his head over beside my own. “One of my men didn’t come back last night,” he says in a low, rough voice. “What did you do to Geoffrey?”

“Who?” I reply instinctively.

It takes me a moment to piece together that he must be talking about ‘Hawk.’ My mind flashes back to the horrid scene from earlier, though I try my best to remain expressionless. I don’t want to give him any clues to my involvement, unwilling though it was.

He’s unperturbed by my denial. “I know you and your urchin scum had something to do with it,” he growls in my ear. “I don’t know how you got the drop on him, but you did. That’s my property you messed with.”

I try hard not to react, though the way he claims a person as property makes my stomach turn. I won’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

But I do kind of wish Arthur had showed up at the orphanage, instead of here. If only I could show him how I ‘got the drop’ on Hawk. Imagine if I could have the pleasure of introducing Levias to this jerk.

The thought comes to me in a flash, and I instantly wish that I could take it back. Murder is not my way, and I don't like the immediate guilt that washes over me. Arthur is scum but wanting harm for anyone – even him – is a step too far.

Briefly, I worry that I'm becoming desensitized by all this violence. Only a few hours ago, I regretted Hawk's death, and now, I'm secretly wishing for another.

It's hard to wish for good things for someone as slimy as Arthur and the BSB, though.

"I'm willing to overlook this if you do something for me. Give me something more valuable than what you've taken, and we'll consider it a trade. You can buy my forgiveness with a hefty supply of your ringworm tincture."

This catches me off guard enough that I meet Arthur's gaze. His piercing gray eyes make me instantly regret it, as a shiver runs down his spine. Arthur's eyes are devoid of any spark of humanity. They are cold and calculated, and the evil inside of him is evident with just one look.

I look away quickly, trying to swallow my discomfort. I take a beat to pull myself together, trying to banish his haunted eyes from my thoughts. "Why do you want ringworm tincture?" I ask warily.

He gives a sinister grin, looking smug. "It turns out your tincture can be very useful to me. If you apply it on the skin, you can treat ringworm, sure. Adequate, but dull. But if you apply it under the tongue, it becomes something else entirely."

Arthur waits for me to answer, expecting to feed off my curiosity. When I don't say anything, he looks annoyed. But he continues anyway. "It's a powerful narcotic, the best that I've got access to. I can do a lot with this stuff. It's better than gold."

He studies my face, trying to see if I knew. I didn't, of course. If I did, I never would have made it in the first place. I do my best to conceal my surprise, not wanting to give him any advantage over me. I know that, as far as Arthur is

concerned, it's important to always stay guarded. There's no telling how any slip-up can come back to haunt you.

“You're going to make me the tincture. A lot of it. My men are going to spread it around camp. It only takes one try to become addicted, and there's enough reckless idiots that'll fall for it.”

He smirks, a crooked sideways smile that makes my skin crawl. “Once I get the people in the camp hooked on it, they'll do whatever I say for more. If I control the supply, I control them.”

I'm horrified by the idea. I don't want my tincture to be used that way. Not only is it morally reprehensible, but I can't imagine what my dead parents would say.

They're the reason that I know everything I know. They were herbalists and apothecaries before their death. They taught me how to identify medicinal plants, to grow them, and how to turn them into life-changing concoctions.

Of course, life-changing for us meant lifesaving. I've never been asked to destroy anyone with my mixtures, and the notion repulses me. That's not what I do, and I'm not going to start now.

Besides, why would I want to help the Bowler Street Brothers? I'm not going to appease them, trying to befriend the enemy to save myself. They're bad people who sow torment and destruction. Even if I assist them for now, it's a matter of time before their wicked ways would come back to me.

Like I said, Arthur is a snake. He wants something from me now, but what happens in a few months? He'll be the first to sacrifice me to save himself or find a way to remove me as an obstacle. He already sent Hawk to find the source of my plants. He's only cutting me a deal now because that failed. I can trust him as far as I could throw him.

“Get out of here,” I scoff. “I'm not going to make you drugs.”



He narrows his cold gray eyes, and the masked veneer of friendliness that he's been wearing slips from his face. His strong, square jaw tightens, and he looks at me with loathing.

"You're going to do what I tell you, bitch," he asserts calmly, but I can hear the vitriol bubbling in his words. "You got an awful lot of kids to worry about. It sure would be a shame if something happens to them."

"You wouldn't!" I gasp.

"You test my patience, and you might as well consider it done. I'll start with the little ones, they're easy to deal with. The older ones can get a special treat. I'll barter off their bodies before I slit their throats."

I close my eyes, trying to tune him out. I don't want to hear these horrible words. But the visual flashes before my eyes of Uri being sold to the highest bidder. My palms grow clammy. I open my eyes, trying to turn my head away from him.

He uses his free hand to squeeze my chin, drawing my face back in. He knows that he has my attention now, and he takes it a step further.

"In fact, some guys like combining the two. I bet I can get a high price for that. And won't you be sad to see the boys turn out just like Thomas? Because I can make sure it happens. Once you're out of the way, I can take them under my wing and teach them right."

Then he shrugs, and his face relaxes. "Or maybe I'll just turn your house into a midnight bonfire and watch you all burn alive."

I lean against the back of the wagon seat, feeling nauseous. It's too late to pretend his threats don't bother me. He's gotten to me, and he knows it. The malevolent smirk on his face makes that clear.

"Why do you need narcotics?" I can't help but ask. The words sound like a whine, surprising even me. I'm just so tired, and I don't want to be part of this. Doesn't he have

enough power already? He practically runs the camp as it is. “You control everyone as it is.”

He laughs. “True,” he agrees, sounding genuinely amused for the first time. “But right now, I’m just buying their cooperation. Imagine if I could get them dependent on me. They’d have no choice but to do everything I say. They’d need me. Doesn’t that sound like a dream?”

“No,” I reply dazedly. “No, it sounds cruel.”

His eyes flash with glee, and it occurs to me that the cruelty is the point. This isn’t just the means to an end, or a misguided way to take care of himself in a rough world. In Arthur’s mind, the only choice is to bully or be bullied. He wants to ensure that he’s the biggest bully of them all, with more power than any one person ever really needs.

“Are you in or out?” he replies. “I’ll do it without you, but that’s going to add some extra steps to my plan, and time is wasting. Digging the graves for the lot of you is a big job if it’s going to come to that. Luckily, I have a lot of helpers.”

“Okay, fine,” I agree reluctantly, avoiding his gaze.

I can’t bring myself to look at him, overwhelmed by the guilt and shame that floods me. The words burn as they come out, making the back of my throat feel raw. There’s a tight knot in my stomach, like I swallowed a rock that’s rolling around inside.

He squeezes my shoulder, and finally lets me go. It tingles a little as he releases me, and I reflexively rub the sore spot where he held me tightly. He pats my knee condescendingly. “Good girl,” he replies, standing up. Jumping off the side of the wagon, he lands gracefully on his feet. He tips his bowler hat at me with a sly wink.

“I’ll be by tomorrow for the first batch. I want fifty vials, ready when I get there. You’d better hurry home and get in the kitchen.”



## LEVIAS

Chase arrives home much later than I expected. It hasn't, really, been that long. But even five minutes alone with those children is more than I wanted.

And there's so many of them! I tried to keep to myself, avoiding them as best as I could. But it's impossible to ignore eleven children. Every time I turned around, one of them was in the way or staring at me.

Luckily, the older one is good about keeping them outside. That gave me some much needed peace and quiet. I could hear them playing in the yard, but it was much less objectionable than having to listen to them up close in the house. Although, I'm not impressed by all the play time they get. If these children helped with chores a bit more, Chase wouldn't be run so ragged.

I can hear the wheels of the mule cart when she pulls in. I decide to go help her put the beasts in their pen and put away the tack. I'll leave her to handle the groceries, since she's made it clear that's a woman's job.

I meet her outside the stable, where she's unhitching the cart. "You're back," I comment. "Does it always take so long at the market?"

She glances up at me, looking harried. "I went as fast as I could," she defends herself.

"Hmph," I reply.

I look over the cart, noticing that there isn't all that much in it. It seems that the market must be poorly organized if it takes this long to get only a few items. But if it's run by humans, I should have assumed as much.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't judge a human by gargoyle standards," I admit. "You're considerably weaker than us. I'm sure you did the best you could."

I can't help but wonder if it wouldn't have been better if I had gone with her, after all. I'm sure she could learn from me. Chase is clever, for a human. She just needs better leadership.

Chase rubs her forehead, saying nothing. I take the reins and begin to lead the mules into the stable. "The children eat too many snacks. It makes their bodies weak and their mouths loud," I call behind me.

I can't hear her response, if there is one, from inside the stable. I quickly pull off the tack from one animal and wipe it down, setting it on the counter. I put the beast away in his pen, then return to do the same for the other.

Grabbing a bucket for water, I make a sojourn to the well. The children are flocking the cart, helping her to carry in her goods. "They are capable of work," I observe sarcastically, muttering to myself. "Who would have known?" It doesn't make me feel significantly more charitable in my view of them, and I take an extra-long path to the well to avoid the crowd and noise.

I take my time drawing to fill the bucket. I'm anxious to have Chase to myself, but for now those children are clambering for her attention. I return to the stable to dump the bucket into their drinking trough.

I believe, very strongly, in taking care of animals destined for work. They must be provided for if they are expected to remain useful. As far as I'm concerned, the mules serve a greater purpose than the children do. Perhaps they should be the ones getting snacks.

I clean and hang the tack carefully on the wall, making sure everything is in its proper place. I take my time, waiting

for the commotion in the yard to die down. When it seems as though everyone has cleared out, I conclude my chore, nodding at the mules as I go.

I leave the stable, shutting the door behind me. Chase is coming out of the house, and I'm pleased to see that the children are not following her. I meet her as she walks toward the stable, already having planned for the rest of our day.

"Read to me from your book," I state. "The poetry that you read the other day."

"I need to go pick herbs from the garden," she replies, shaking the basket in her hand.

"Make someone else do it," I demand. "You have spent hours at the market already. It is time for us to enjoy each other's company. I want to hear your poetry."

She looks frustrated. "I can't right now, Levias, okay? I need to pick these herbs now."

"Why now?"

"I...someone's coming to pick up a big order," she replies. Her face looks pinched, as though she might cry. I find my irritation beginning to crumble.

"Fine," I say begrudgingly.

I don't know why this woman has this power over me. I've spent my long life giving orders and not caring who likes it. Why, at the slightest displeasure from her, do I cave? It's maddening.

"I'm going with you," I insist, wanting to feel like I at least won something. "I won't spend another minute with those children instead of you. I'm not a nursemaid and won't be treated as one."

"Fine," she replies with a sigh, and I begin to feel annoyed again. She's lucky that I was so agreeable in the first place.

But then she brightens, making me forget my aggravation. "No, that will be nice. I always enjoyed our time in the garden together," she admits. "It'll be our first time gardening together since you...well, you know."

I follow her across the lawn to the garden. She ignores the main section where the vegetables grow, walking through it without a glance and heading for the brambles. She pushes them aside, slipping into the secret area where I used to reside.

I do the same, close on her heels. She kneels in a patch of herbs and begins to work. I'm distracted by the memories that come flooding back, being in this place with her again.

For so long, she came to see me here every day. But I was trapped in my stone body, unable to reach for her. Tempted by everything that lay just out of reach.

So many hours I spent longing for her! Wanting to hold her, to kiss her, to claim her for my own!

Now, she's here once more, and I can finally do all that I dreamed of. She's in my grasp now, and I realize that I don't want to wait another moment.

I come up behind her, kneeling as well. Leaning over, I wrap my arms across her front, embracing her and pulling her against me. I place a soft kiss on the side of her neck.

She turns her head, opening more of the warm skin to my touch. It thrills me to see her respond, and I react appropriately, peppering her with feathery kisses up and down the expanse of her neck.

Her eyes close, enjoying the sensation. I move my hands to cup her bosom, and she responds with a light moan. Something stirs deep in my gut, wanting more.

I let go of her, temporarily, tugging on her shoulders so that she turns to face me. She does as I ask without hesitation, her green eyes wide. Still on our knees, my arms clamp around her to bring her so close that there isn't a molecule of space between us.

My lips find hers, ravishing her. Everything seems to fall away but the two of us, as we tangle in each other's embrace. She brings her hands up to my shoulders, sliding them across the skin.

My brain is hazy, and my heart races in my chest at her touch. Fire licks through my veins, encouraging me to

continue. She offers no resistance, which only spurs me on.

My hands slid up to tangle in her hair, enjoying the silky soft feel of it. My mouth temporarily breaks away from hers, to nuzzle her neck once more. Soon, my hands are everywhere, running across the curves of her body.

My tongue slides across every bit of bare skin that I can find, as she fills my senses. All I can think, all I can smell, all I can feel is her. She moans, and my hands move to the buttons on her shirt.

With unsteady fingers, blinded by my passion, I fumble with the buttons. I finally manage to undo the top, and her breasts spill out. I run my fingers across the nipples, enjoying the way that they stiffen in my grasp. She closes her eyes, tipping her head back.

I tug on her arm, pushing her to lay down on her back. Then I straddle her legs, my prominent erection pressing into her thigh. Bending my head, I take the tip of one breast into my mouth, sucking and licking it gently. My hand strokes the other one, trying to pleasure them both.

Her back arches at the sensation, and I smirk to myself. I continue until she is panting, but I want more. I reposition myself so that my hands can travel up her thigh, feeling her.

When my hands reach the top of the leg, I can feel the heat radiating from her center. Hiking her skirt up, I press one finger against the underwear, feeling how sticky it is. Leaning forward to kiss her, my tongue darts into her mouth as my finger shoves the fabric aside and penetrates her.

She wraps her hands around my head, holding me in place to bite my lip. It sends an intense sexual charge through every pore of my body, electric and mind-blowing. I begin to move the finger in and out as she writhes beneath me.

Letting go of my head, she slips her hand down to the fabric wrapped around my waist. When she grabs my cock, I groan. It feels so good in her warm hand.

She grips it firmly, moving her hand up and down the shaft. I slip another finger inside her pussy, and we build each



other to a feverish high.

I have to bite my lip to stop from taking her, and it's the first time that I've ever worried about satisfying a female. Normally, I just take what I want, and it's as simple as that. But there's something so erotic about the way she moans and twitches at my touch, that makes me want to draw it out. Her desire appeals to me, and challenges me to do more.

I've just about reached my limit, imagining my cock plunging deep into her wet hole. Her face is flushed, and her cries reverberate through me. She's ready for me, I know, and I'm ready for her.

Just as I'm about to push myself into her slick folds, a voice cuts through the red haze that fills my brain. "Chase!" a feminine voice yells. "Chase!"

I pause, distracted by the sound. My brain is trying to reassemble itself, switching focus off the current, pleasurable task at hand to figure out what is happening. I look around for the source, realizing belatedly that, from our secluded spot in this private garden, no one can see us and we can't see them.

Chase reacts with lightning speed, lacking my delay. With one hand on my chest, she begins to push me off, scrambling to sit up. It happens so fast that I don't have time to argue.

In haste, her hands fly to pull up her top, buttoning it back up. Then she runs her fingers through her hair, trying to straighten it out. "Chase!" voice calls again, sounding panicked.

"Sorry," Chase whispers at me, fluffing her blond hair. She wipes the dirt off her arms and legs, brushing herself as though to hide our recent near tryst. She scurries past the brambles, leaving me shocked by the rapid turn of events.

I knew these children were a problem.



## CHASE

“Chase!” Uri shouts. I can hear the panic in her voice, and I instinctively know something is wrong. My heart jumps into my throat, instantly filled with a sense of dread.

This is what I get, thinking I can have a normal moment to myself and forgetting about the children. As much as I – and my body - enjoyed everything that was happening with Levias, I have responsibilities! What was I thinking?

I brush the dirt off myself, trying not to look too disheveled. Uri’s nineteen, and old enough to know better. Not only am I shirking my duties, but I’m a bad example.

“Sorry,” I whisper to Levias, feeling conflicted. But I don’t have time to stew on that right now, not as Uri needs me. I dart past the brambles to see what’s going on.

I run out of the garden and toward the house. “Uri!” I shout, trying to get her attention. “Uri, I’m here, what’s the matter?”

She turns at the sound of my voice, and rushes over. When we meet in the middle, I put my hands on my knees, resting to catch my breath. Uri doesn’t wait, diving right in.

“You forgot the butter,” she begins. “It wasn’t a big deal, really, and I didn’t want to make you run into town for the third time. So, I left Roberta in charge, and I went into town to get it.”

“Okay,” I reply slowly, not sure where she’s heading.

“On the way back home, you’ll never guess who I saw.”

“Who?” I respond, starting to feel a bit vexed. I thought there was an emergency. If she called me out of the garden for some gossip, I’m going to be peeved.

“Thomas,” she blurts out. “He’s at the tavern, playing dice. Gambling. I don’t think the BSB knows he’s in town yet, but they’re bound to find out any minute.”

I’m speechless, my mind reeling from my brother’s utterly incompetent decision making. He didn’t leave town when he had the chance? And not only did he stick around, but he’s hanging out at the tavern – the easiest place for the BSB to track him down? Gambling away the money I gave him?

I can feel my face beginning to redden with anger. “Thanks, Uri,” I stammer out. Without waiting for a response, I head to the stable. I have to get to Thomas before the BSB does.

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At the tavern, Thomas stands out like a sore thumb. His blond hair stands out in the dim lighting, not to mention the fact that he’s quite drunk, and being obnoxiously loud.

“Hey, sis,” he cheers when I approach. “Surprised to see me?”

“You could say that.” My lips are pressed into a thin line, not the least bit amused. “What’s the plan, Thomas?”

“I’m gonna double your money,” he brags. “I am the dice master! Isn’t that right, boys?”

The guys around the counter barely look up. They mutter assorted, unintelligible responses under their breath, but that seems to be enough for Thomas. “That’s right,” he agrees to no one in particular.

“How close are you?” I ask.

He frowns. “What?”

“If you’re the dice master, how close are you to doubling the money?”

He purses his lips. “Well, I started off at a loss,” he hedges, avoiding a direct answer. “I spent most of your money on this.”

Thomas stumbles to his feet, and struggles to unsheathe a sword from his side. His drunken, uncoordinated fingers finally manage to close around the hilt, pulling it out to show it off.

“Easy,” I warn, not particularly comfortable with the way that he’s swinging around a weapon he can barely hold.

“It’s a magical sword,” he announces. “If the BSB show up, I’ll deal with them myself. I can take ‘em all on with this!”

“What makes you think this sword is magical enough to fight the BSB?” I ask, feeling a growing headache.

“Just look at it,” he says, swinging it recklessly again. The men begin to voice their disapproval, but it clatters to the ground before anyone gets too incensed.

“Can I see it?” I ask. Not waiting for an answer, I bend down to retrieve the weapon.

“Sure,” he agrees affably, collapsing back onto the stool. “The seller told me all about it. It’s magic, and it’s stronger and sharper than any man-made sword could ever be. The BSB won’t have anything like it.”

I take a few steps away, checking it out for myself. The blade glows blue, which might certainly give the impression of magic. I’m not sure exactly how the trick works, but I doubt it’s as special as Thomas has been promised. If it was, it’s hard to believe that anyone would trust him with such a thing.

I glance over at Thomas, who is already back to rolling dice and paying me no mind. Walking out the door with the sword in hand, I look around for something to test it out on. A spare bit of rope in the wagon is enough to prove to me that there’s nothing magical at all. In fact, the sword is quite dull, and it takes a remarkable amount of strength to even begin to

saw through the rope. I'd have more luck with a pocketknife than this sham.

I sit down on the edge of the wagon, dropping the 'sword' carelessly to the side. I focus on trying to slow my racing pulse before I storm back into the tavern and beat Thomas myself. I understand that Thomas always had limited options in life, with our parents dying young. He didn't have the means to have untold success, but sometimes it feels like he's going to settle for absolute destruction instead.

I know nobody quite like Thomas who can, so regularly, make any situation worse. And it's a shame because he's a clever guy. He's humorous and likable and generally means well. He's not cold and hateful like the BSB and doesn't want to harm anyone. So how did he let himself get dragged into their business in the first place?

He never stops to think, and I don't know how to get through to him. Maybe I should have been harder on him when he was younger, and it's my fault for not knocking enough sense into him. Now, as an adult, he's an absolute disaster. Good intentions don't mean anything when you're gambling away the money you need to live.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my frazzled nerves. Thomas may be the death of me someday, but I can't let the BSB get a hold of him. He's still my brother, and I have to look out for him.

I know that I won't be able to talk him into leaving the tavern, not in the mood that he's in. He's convinced that he can fight off the entire gang with that counterfeit sword that he got bamboozled into buying. Not only that, but he also thinks he's doing a good thing by gambling to make up the money.

I bite my lip, trying to think of a solution. My eyes land on a stout stick laying beside the road, and it comes to me in a flash. I hurry back into the tavern, hoping this works.

His eyes are glazed, and his cheeks flushed from the alcohol as he watches the other men take their turns rolling the dice. "I'm going to head back home, since you have this under control," I inform him.

“I do,” he says sharply, giving me a suspicious look.

“Can you just come out with me to the wagon before I go?” I ask, trying to sound as innocent as possible. “I have something I want to show you.”

“Kay,” he agrees. “But hurry up. I don’t want to miss my turn.”

He staggers to his feet once more, tripping over the stool in his attempt to walk around it. He stumbles, but catches himself, and then does a strange little dance to show off. “Told you I can take care of myself,” he asserts, which seems like a bizarre claim for someone who was nearly bested by a piece of furniture.

Outside, he squints at the sunlight. “Ugh,” he complains. “Let’s go back in there.” He starts to turn around, but I catch his elbow.

“Wait a second. I have something in the wagon to show you first,” I remind him.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” he remembers. “I know that. Of course, I know that. Where is it, again?”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, leading him over instead.

“Right where I left it,” he agrees. I don’t bother to correct him, focused on getting him just where I want him at the back of the wagon.

He offers no objection, reflexively going where I indicate. I leave him there, taking a few steps behind him, and picking up the stick that I found earlier. “Wait,” he pauses, confused again. “What’s wrong with the wagon?”

“Just look at it,” I reply. He leans forward, peering. With the stick, I whack him once, hard, in the back of the head. He pitches forward into the wagon, unconscious.

Looking him over, I sigh. “Sorry, Thomas,” I say, though he can’t hear me. “It’s for your own good.” I think I offer the statement to assuage my own guilt more than anything.

I chuck the stick over my shoulder, getting rid of the reminder. Untying the mules from the post, I climb into the

wagon seat. I let them lead me on the familiar path home, checking on Thomas occasionally over my shoulder. He's probably going to wake up with a doozy of a headache, between the drinking and the head injury. *But maybe it'll finally knock some sense into him*, I think grimly.

Maybe I'll be able to talk Arthur into letting Thomas off the hook if he wants my tincture so bad. I can't quite shake the unsettled feeling that dealing with the BSB – even for what seems to be a good reason – is a mistake. I want to help Thomas, but I don't want to get dragged into this mess.

But it seems like I'm already in the thick of it, whether I want to admit it or not. I can't risk the children, and I believe every word of Arthur's earlier threat. If anyone can do such horrible things, he can. I'm not about to try to call his bluff and find out.

I'm distracted by these thoughts all the way home. My mind goes around in circles, never quite finding a suitable answer no matter how hard I try. I know that getting involved with the BSB's plans is bound to end badly, but I just can't come up with any better options.

We're nearly home at the orphanage when my ruminations are interrupted. I see something bizarre and unexplainable in the sky. It seems to resemble a large bird, but it's not like anything I've ever witnessed before. Large wings stretch on either side, but the wingspan is remarkably wide.

Whatever it is, it's cutting back and forth in a wide arc in front of us. It takes me a few minutes to realize that it's getting closer. I yank the reins, bringing the mules to a halt so that I can observe. As it draws near, I can make out that the center is gray, and the wings are black.

It's almost directly overhead when it swoops down, targeting the wagon. Too late, it clicks. It's Levias.

He snatches Thomas's limp body into his clawed hands, and leaps off the wagon into the sky. His wings beat to keep him afloat in mid-air, about ten feet over my head.



As Thomas dangles precariously in Levias' grasp, I scream and stand up from my seat, reaching one hand out for Thomas. Levias stares at me with cool, gray eyes, his face emotionless. "I'm going to kill Thomas," he growls. The threat resonates from him, striking deep into my heart.



## LEVIAS

I swore that if I ever got free from my stone prison, I would remove the blight from Chase's existence that was Thomas. I thought that my freedom came too late, but he's back into our lives once more. It's time to keep my word.

My clawed hands grip under his arms, holding his limp body in mid-air. It suits me that he's not awake to see the fate that's about to befall him. It will be easier and cleaner this way.

I don't particularly mind if he suffers a bit, as I have no sympathy for the creature. But the way that Chase went on about saving the children makes me suspect that she prefers I give him a quick, painless death. I don't particularly understand her inclination, as I find the bloodshed satisfactory and pleasing. But I'll humor her and avoid drawing it out for her sake.

"I'm going to kill Thomas," I declare matter-of-factly. She's standing up in the wagon, her arm outstretched toward us. "You can leave now for home if you don't care to witness it," I offer. Human women seem to be rather fragile and excitable, especially to bloodshed, from what I've observed.

She makes a strange, strangled noise, gesturing wildly with her arm. "Please don't. Please, please, leave him. Let him live. I don't want you to kill him at all," she screeches at me. "The problem isn't whether you wait until I get home or not."

I continue to beat my wings, just enough for the force to keep me hovering in the air, as I puzzle over the words. But I

can't make sense of what she's saying. If she insists on keeping the children, she should at least let me remove Thomas from the equation. He disrupts the balance of the house and takes from the others, without contributing.

Unable to understand her reasoning, I finally lower myself to the ground in confusion. I don't release my prey yet, however, keeping Thomas in my arms.

"Why can't I kill him for you?" I demand. I examine him in my arms, finding nothing remarkable about him. He is quite average, and not worth much concern at all.

I remember, perhaps more vividly than she seems to, how much trouble he has caused her. So many days she came into the garden with one complaint or another. Sometimes she cried because there wasn't enough money left after he gambled it away. He's a constant source of distress.

She wouldn't let me kill the children, which was nonsensical enough. They're small, weak, and useless. But Thomas, who is even more burdensome than the children? He's worse than useless because he's actively undermining all that she tries to do. He ignores his responsibilities in favor of alcohol and entertainment, not caring that it is to Chase's detriment.

She should be grateful that I'm exerting myself on her behalf, to put him out of his miserable existence. I'm performing a necessary task so that she doesn't have to and saving her the effort. Chase and the children will be further ahead when they are free from his crushing weight.

Humans, perhaps, would not be so weak if they were stricter about cultivating their bloodlines. I doubt it's the only thing that's wrong with the species, but it's certainly a consideration. It can't bode well for them and explains many of their failings.

"He's my brother," she gasps, looking horrified. Her face is pale, her mouth shaped into an 'o' of surprise. I shake my head, dismissing this meaningless claim. Brother is irrelevant. One can have many brothers, but it does not guarantee that it is in one's best interest to claim them all.

“This link matters not,” I point out. “He is fully grown, and defective. He is weak in mind and temperament. Expand your family in another direction and try again. But it is impractical to continue to waste limited resources on a failed experiment. He has been, largely, unsuccessful. The only reasonable action is to cut your losses and start over, for the good of your pack.”

Her legs seem to collapse underneath her, and she sits down loudly on the wagon seat. Her face contorts in a most bizarre way, her normally beautiful features marred by tears. Sniffing loudly, she covers her face with her hands and sobs.

Through her tears, and her hands that muffle her mouth, it's hard to make out much of what she says in response. I catch bits and pieces. That Thomas isn't a failure, that he's trying.

She says something about how it might be her fault, though I'm not sure what that means or how that could be true. He's old enough to be held accountable for his bad decisions, which have nothing to do with her. She's hardly forced him to do anything against his will, and I don't see how his soft character is her doing.

A part of me is furious at the way she coddles this man-child. If he has been measured and found wanting, it's in everyone's best interest that he be disposed of. Her excuses do not help. She should see that I'm doing her a favor! I do it to help her!

Her continued support of his draining behavior only complicates things further and keeps her indebted on his behalf. He must be held accountable, and her willful ignorance is both baffling and enraging.

And yet, something about her sobs cuts me to the quick. I can't explain the power that they have over me, but somehow every time her tears come out, I find myself unable to argue.

I could not give a damn for anyone else. Lamentations and wailing do not move me. I cannot be blackmailed by emotional pleas.

Unless it's Chase, it seems. Her sorrow rends something deep inside of me, and I cannot bear to see her suffer. Whether I understand the motivation for her tears or not, it seems that I'll do anything to make them stop.

She's the first person that I've ever been willing to move mountains for if it would mean her happiness. In this case, all she's asking is that I not do something. It goes against my own judgment, but I suppose that I can spare his life, if it's that important to her.

I can't just cave, however. She's already agreed that she belongs to me and will do as I say. I must see that she proves it and keeps her word.

I will not be at her beck and call, constantly forced to give in to her demands. If she is mine, she should demonstrate it. So far, I seem to be losing every argument, mostly because I'm helpless to her tears.

It occurs to me, in that moment, that it's time to ask for the one thing I expect if she truly belongs to me. We live in a house full of other people's children, and her family. I want my own, and she is the one to give it to me.

"Fine. We will make a bargain," I offer. "A life for a life. I will spare his life if you provide one for me. Be my mate and bear me a child."

She drops her hands from her face, staring at me in disbelief. Her green eyes go wide in surprise, and her mouth drops open. Traces of tears remain on her cheeks, but aside from a few sniffles, she has at least ceased crying.

"If you won't kill him, I'll do it. I'll do anything," she replies with little hesitation. Her face still looks bewildered and uncertain, but I've gotten her promise. I have every intention of holding her to her word.

"Then it's a deal. Your brother's life I spare for you, and you provide a child for me."

She nods speechlessly and I drop Thomas's form unceremoniously into the back of the wagon. I leap into the wagon bed beside him, planning to make sure that she keeps

her end of the bargain soon. I haven't forgotten how close we nearly came already in the secret garden, and I'm more than ready to consummate our relationship.

Silently, she shakes the reins, urging the mules homeward. I try to ignore Thomas, who lays at my feet. Thoughts of him will only aggravate me, and I have something much more pleasurable to look forward to.

I can feel my pulse begin to quicken, remembering how she felt in my arms earlier. The way we kissed and touched, and how it flooded my senses with delight. The feel of her curves in my hands, her smooth skin gliding under my fingertips.

I glance ahead at her, in the front seat of the wagon. Her face is impossible to read, but I wonder if she's imagining the same things that I am. She certainly seemed eager enough before we were so rudely interrupted. I heat from the inside, recalling the way she moaned beneath me.

At home, I grab Thomas roughly off the wagon and carry him into the house. I could care less if he was left outside for the bugs, but I know that Chase wouldn't have it. I don't want her to struggle with the burden of moving him inside. Besides, anything that moves this along brings me one step closer to my desired goal.

I drop him on the living room floor, not bothering with his comfort. He's lucky to even be alive, as far as I'm concerned. I'm still not convinced that he should be, but I've made a promise to Chase. Uri looks at me with wide eyes, but I ignore her. She can deal with him for now.

I head back outside, where Chase is leading the mules back into the stable. I follow her inside, grabbing the bucket to fetch their water. As I fill the drinking trough, she wipes them both down.

Then we clean and hang the tack, though I'm not particularly thorough or careful about the job. I'm too eager for what comes next, and my body is beginning to stir with awareness. My blood pounds through my veins, drumming in my ears and filling me with fire.

Chase is still silent, though she bites her lip in a most provocative way. When we hang the last piece of leather, I pull her against me. One hand trails up and down her side, and I kiss her.

She stirs against me, opening her mouth to me. After a long, blissful moment, I pull away. "To the garden," I command.

She nods, and I take her hand to lead her outside. I have to slow down, to stop from dragging her. My legs are much longer than her own, and she hurries to keep up. I entertain myself instead by letting my hands graze across her body, feeling her everywhere as we walk.

The curve of her hip, the jut of her bosom, her round bottom. Each place that I touch seems to be better than the last, to my aching hands. I can't get enough of her.

We stumble awkwardly into the garden, our limbs tangling together. I stop to pull her against me once more, kissing her deeply.

Then we push our way through the brambles together, into the secluded, private territory that is our secret garden. Together, where we belong.

From now on, we will always be together. Chase has promised, and I believe in my heart it must be so.





## CHASE

**M**y feet tremble as Levias sets me on the ground. This secret garden has been such a comfort to me— now my heart hammers in my chest. Part fear, part...something else.

*Do I want this?*

“I can’t be gone for long.” My voice cracks, and the fortifying breath I take stalls in my lungs as Levias gently drags his claw against my cheek. It’s warmer than I’d thought it would be. “The children...”

“These cursed children,” he says. “They are lucky they bring you such joy. Although I wonder at your sanity.”

“That makes two of us.”

He doesn’t smile at my joke, but his dark eyes warm. They’re full of heat, actually, scorching my skin with his stare as they travel across my body. His eyes are like a caress, and I shiver in response.

“Are you cold?”

*The opposite.*

Embarrassed by my reaction to him, I nod instead. We are already so close, and he pulls me closer still, until my breasts graze the top of his chiseled stomach. Gods, he’s so much *larger* than I am. How is this even supposed to work?

I’m not completely naive— who can be, on this damned world? I know the mechanics of how this is all supposed to work. I’ve seen barn animals go at it, and more than I’d like to

see of people whenever I had to drag Thomas home from the bar.

I wince. I really don't want to think of my brother right now, even though he's the reason I'm in this mess.

*A life for a life.*

Gods below, how am I supposed to bear this man's child?

Levias shifts, and the tips of my nipples send an unfamiliar thrill straight between my legs. I swallow an involuntary gasp.

His clawed hand tilts my chin up. "You're thinking too much."

"I—"

Levias pulls me up with one hand and guides my legs across his waist. They stretch deliciously around him, and I'm barely aware of the bark of a tree biting against my back before he's devouring my mouth.

It should be a sin to kiss like this. I dissolve into it, thoughts scattering until there's nothing but the feel of his solid muscle beneath my hands. Nothing but the hot, delirious pull of his teeth against my bottom lip and his tongue against my own.

"Do you have any idea," he says, bringing his mouth against my neck and dragging his teeth gently down. "What it did to me? Having you sit against me, so close, and unable to move so much as a finger to touch you back?"

As if to demonstrate, his hands run up and down my back, across my stomach, and over my breasts. My legs squeeze against him, searching for friction, and he growls in response when I find it.

The terror I'd once felt at the prospect of our mating returns for a moment. His cock is huge and hard as stone. I look up at him with wide eyes.

"I've...I've never..."

"*Good.*" His possessive tone should irritate me, but I'm too distracted. His large hands guide my hips, moving against him

in a thoughtless, easy rhythm.

He kisses me again, and I whimper against his lips.

“Please.” It’s as though there’s a string drawing taut between my legs, winding tighter and tighter. I should be embarrassed at how wet I am there; surely he can feel it even through my underwear, my skirt shoved up around my hips. But all I can feel is an all-encompassing need for more. More of this, more of *him*. I can’t bear it. “*Please, Levias, please.*”

His hands are rough as they remove my clothes. I don’t care. Normally, I’d be worried about spending money I don’t have on thread to mend my tunic, but normally a gargoyle isn’t ripping my clothes off with his teeth, so I suppose I can be forgiven for my distraction.

Levias’ thumbs hook against my underwear. They tear a bit as he tugs them down, and then his mouth is against me, and *oh my gods...this...what...*

I must be screaming. Frantically, I press my arm against my mouth and bite down against my own flesh to stifle my voice. Blinding, white-hot pleasure drowns all coherent thought, and just when I sag against him in relief, his tongue drags me to yet another, more vicious peak.

“Oh.” I slide to the ground, boneless. I couldn’t walk if I tried. “That...you...”

“That was just a taste.” His words are deep and gravelly, as though speaking takes effort. “Did you like it?”

“Mmm.” I can’t form words. He’s made me stupid. What is wrong with me? “Mmm-hmm.”

The simple cloth he ties across his waist has long fallen aside, and the sight of his swollen, gray cock should inspire the same fear I’d felt when we began this. It doesn’t. I stare at it, swallowing against a suddenly dry throat.

My waist tilts towards him as if pulled by a magnet, and his smile is predatory.

“You want more?”

Want? I *need* more. I've never had an orgasm that I haven't given myself with my own hand, quickly at night before the children wake up, and it's addicting. I could easily spend the rest of my life with Levias in this garden, twisting beneath his tongue.

*Riding him.*

The image of it, me climbing on top of him and sinking down, has me biting my own lip. I want it badly. Levias is always so controlled, so strong.

I want to make him beg.

“Just a taste, for now.”

His brow furrows as I rise to my knees and approach him. He's kneeling before me with his cock jutting out, proud.

I trail a curious finger along its edge, and his jaw goes slack.

“You want a taste of this?” He shifts his hips, and a small drop of liquid escapes his cock. “Chase...”

I like how he says my name while I squeeze his cock. I look him in the eyes as I try to figure out the best way to move my hands across him. I have to use both, his girth is too much for just one hand.

“Here,” he mutters, guiding me. “Here.”

His hands cover mine, and he teaches me how to please him. He seems to like it. His breath comes faster, hitching whenever I twist my hand around his tip, but then he winces.

“It's good,” he says. “Just...dry.”

Dry.

I think about the shocking pleasure of his tongue against me, and before I lose my courage I flick the tip of my tongue against the tip of his cock.

The reaction is instant. He *howls*.

I have to press my legs together tightly. The sensation of power nearly undoes me, and my heart beats faster as I lick

from his tip to his base. Levias could tear me apart with one hand, and now he's helpless. Completely at my mercy.

“Good,” he murmurs. His clawed thumb is cautious but determined as he brings my jaw open. My gaze drifts up to his face. His eyes are dark and lidded, his lips stern. “Open for me.”

How had I ever thought I was the one in control? My mouth opens of its own accord, and his giant hand wraps itself in my hair. He could ram into my face, fucking me with his mouth, but he doesn't. His hand remains gentle in my hair, applying no pressure, tightening only slightly as I take him into my mouth.

I run my tongue in a circle across his tip, and he hisses. My jaw has to stretch a bit to accommodate him, but it doesn't hurt. Anyway, the slight discomfort is worth the dazed look in his eyes.

He tastes like salt, like the earth. I breathe through my nose, deep, and then take him as far as I can, until he reaches the start of my throat. Levias strokes my cheek, and the tenderness of the moment tugs at my chest, and then his hand glides lower to tease my breasts.

“I want to be inside you,” he says as his clever fingers play against my nipples until they're tight, budded peaks. “To make you mine.”

My pussy throbs, all too aware of how empty it is. But still, the thought of him inside me is overwhelming. He's huge, and I've never done this before. I keep sucking his cock. Couldn't this be enough? His tongue had sent me to another dimension, and he seems to enjoy the feel of my mouth against him.

I redouble my efforts, and he groans. The deep timbre of it sends a thrill down my spine.

“Enough.” As if reading my mind, he pries me off his cock. “I won't hurt you.”

That doesn't seem physically possible, but as he positions himself between my legs, I struggle to even care. Going down

on him has worked me up more than I realized. Now I'm panting with need, stretching my legs around his waist.

"Levias, let me..."

His hands hold me firm, keeping me from pressing against him. "Patience."

Something strokes up my thighs, tantalizingly close to my pussy, and I lie back down. It strokes me, soft and insistent, until my hips move of their own accord.

*His tail.*

The tip of it is thin, and works inside me easily. My mouth drops open, and he pulls me against him for a kiss. It feels like I'm melting, like the borders of my body and his are melding together, becoming one.

Levias murmurs sweet words that I can't understand. I don't know if it's another language or if I'm simply unable to comprehend him, so lost to the spark between our bodies. He stretches me open diligently, patiently, until my entire body thrums with need.

"Do you feel that?"

"It's kind of hard not to," I pant. "More. I want more."

"Not that." His lips pull back into a feral grin. "That you're *mine*. Do you feel it?"

I don't answer, but I can't deny how right it feels to have him against me like this. I've entertained the idea of taking a husband more than once, more for the help with chores than anything else. But I can't imagine any other man taking me like this. I can't fathom wanting anyone else the way I want him.

"Levias," I say instead. Gods, I could chant his name all night. I love the way it trips against my tongue, sibilant and alive. "Levias, I want you."

"I can tell."

He removes his tail, and I'm too busy missing the feel of him inside me to care about how cocky he sounds.

Levias sits back and pulls me forward, until I'm sitting just above his cock, just like I'd imagined. He kisses me, breaking away with a gasp as my hands grasp onto his horns. They must be sensitive, because his eyes go out of focus whenever I touch them.

His cock presses against me, and it's my turn to gasp. I thought I'd already experienced pleasure with his tongue and his tail, but this is something I've never imagined.

His hands move to my hips, helping me take him slowly until he slides in as far as he can go. I've never felt so full, so complete. It's nearly unbearable. The stretch should be painful, but all I feel is desire.

"There you go," he says, encouraging me as I try to move my hips. It's more awkward than I'd thought, even with the leverage his horns give me, even with my feet digging into the soil.

But soon the same tugging I'd felt when I moved against him fully clothed returns, and I find that I don't need to think about what my body is doing anymore. I move on instinct, with full abandon, and if it's my voice I hear shouting, I can't find it in me to care.

Levias flips us over, eyes wild. The shock of the ground beneath my back sends me over the edge. My body tenses so tightly it feels as though I might break, and the pleasure gathers into one, blissful point before ricocheting across my body.

*His*, I think, dazed.

He wanted a life for a life. Somehow, this feels like even more than that.





## LEVIAS

I freeze above Chase as she falls apart, even though every instinct I possess drives me to claim her brutally. She is not like the gargoyle women I have had in the past. Chase is soft. Weak.

It should disgust me. I've never had time for softness, and weakness is even worse.

Perhaps I've been encased in stone for too long, or perhaps it's because she is my mate. But the responsive way she falls apart with just the slightest touch drives me insane. I love how she mewls with just the slightest twitch of my hips, even after she's just come.

"Levias." She stares up at me with her innocent green eyes. She doesn't have to tell me what she's thinking – her lost, dazed expression does it for her. "I..."

I thrust against her again, slow and grinding, and she trails off with a moan. The feel of her, warm and tight, radiates all the way from my cock to my teeth, to the tips of my toes. I want to take her, to chase my own pleasure, but there's something else I want even more.

"Levias, I *can't*," she says on a sob. She's lying. Her hips rock against me eagerly, seeking even more pleasure. "It's too much."

"Shh." Her pussy squeezes against me, milking my cock, and I bury a groan against her breast before suckling her nipple. "Shh. You don't have to do anything. Just let it happen."

Her mouth opens to argue, but she moans instead. Our angle is perfect, letting me grind against her just right with every thrust. The years have given me much experience, and I use every trick I've learned against her, until she's bringing her arm against her mouth once more to muffle her screams.

I pull her arm aside.

"I want to hear you."

I'm at the edge of my control. My balls tighten and my toes curl. The sight of her, with her swollen, well-kissed lips and desperate, unfocused green eyes is nearly enough to undo me.

"The...I can't...I..."

"I want to hear you," I insist, thrusting faster. My orgasm is building, inevitable. "Say it. Say my name. Say who you belong to."

"You. Oh, you. I..." Her breasts bounce with the force of my thrusts, and her jaw stretches wide. "*Levias!*"

It's over for me then. With how long I've spent encased in stone, unable to reach release, it's a miracle I didn't come as soon as she touched me. Chase tightens against me as she comes screaming my name, and I follow, filling her with my seed.

The sharp pleasure melds with satisfaction.

*Mine.*

"Levias?"

Shit. I blink stars away from my eyes and realize Chase is trapped beneath me. I must be crushing her. Reluctantly, I pull out of her and move to lie on my side, but her hands reach across my back to pull me closer.

She blinks, and the hoarseness of her voice gives me primal satisfaction. "Stay."

Stay?

It is beneath my station to lie in the dirt with anyone, much less a human who bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the

purna who trapped me in stone. And yet I find myself doing just that, cradling her soft body in my arms as she succumbs to sleep.

Stroking her hair.

*Did the stone affect my mind as well?*

I've never stuck around to cuddle, but I've never had a mate, either. Somehow, through some sort of sorcery, she's managed to trap me next to her with just one word. And worse, I'm content to do it. I lie there in the dirt, and with her beside me, it's as though the soft rasp of her breath is some sort of music.

It strikes me that this is the same spot in the garden where I was frozen for so long. How many nights did I spend staring at these same stars, cursing the purna? Swearing revenge?

Now I'm happy to stay here as long as Chase requests.

An hour or so later, Chase bolts up in a panic.

"Where..." She looks around, blinking, and then seems to remember why she's out in the garden with me in the middle of the night. "Oh. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"You needed the rest." Those orphans drain her energy. I don't understand why she enjoys taking care of them so much, but I let it be for now. "You don't need to cover yourself from me."

She's reached up to shield her breasts, and crossed her legs with a furious blush. "Oh. Right. I suppose you've seen it all by now."

And I have no objection to seeing her again. My eyes drink her in. Her sweet blush deepens, but so does the heat in her eyes as she crawls on top of my lap.

"You must be sore."

Is that really me speaking? My pulse thrums in my body, and my cock twitches between her legs, already more than halfway hard. What care do I have that this human might experience a bit of pain with her pleasure?

Apparently a lot, because I pull her in for a kiss instead of thrusting inside her like my body screams at me to do.

Chase scowls at me, as displeased as my cock is.

“I’m fine,” she insists.

*She’s fine*, my cock agrees.

I kiss the unhappy twist of her lips until she melts against me, and then I set her on the ground and crawl between her legs before she can launch much of a protest.

I could spend ages here, I think. As long as I spent being made out of stone. The taste of her is heaven against my tongue, and I savor every gasp, every twitch of her thigh muscles whenever I hit the right rhythm.

Turning the clawed side of my hand towards me, I brush the small, pink nub with my knuckle as I gently suck against it, working my tongue in waves. It isn’t long until she’s crying out in shocked pleasure.

My cock aches, but her pleasure satisfies me regardless. It’s a strange feeling, one I’m not accustomed to at all. When have I ever put the needs of another ahead of my own?

Except for when I spared the lives of her annoying, although admittedly somewhat amusing brood of children.

Or when I forced myself to keep her worthless brother alive, when my time would have been much better spent rending him limb from limb.

I’ve spent so much time insisting that she’s mine, and not enough time wondering if I might be hers, too.

She comes against my tongue, and I lick my lips.

I am not soft. I am not some love-stricken pet out to do her bidding. I yank her roughly against me, letting her feel just how hard I really am.

“You promised me a child,” I remind her. Somehow, this thing between us has grown larger than I’d anticipated. I have to tear it down to make it more manageable. If she flinches at the reminder, so be it.

Even if it tears at my chest.

*She agreed to this, I think, vicious in my denial. She agreed to be mine, to bear my child. I will do with her as we both wish. Wasn't she climbing on top of me only minutes ago, desperate for my cock?*

I breach her slowly, gently, despite the violence of my thoughts. I groan despite myself. Being inside her feels *right*, right in a way I've never felt before. Even though I've told her this is just to bear my child, I have to admit at this moment that it's so much more.

Her legs cross tightly behind my waist, urging me faster, but I keep moving slowly. As slow as the blue flowers in front of us blossom. I remember watching them slowly open, unable to look at anything else, as her blonde hair tickled my stone chest.

I pour all my longing for her into our kiss. Every time I ached to touch her, to speak her name. She clutches my horns, and my eyes nearly roll back in my head. I've forgotten how sensitive they are to touch— how many women have I ever allowed to grab me like this?

“Faster.” She bites at my bottom lip, and my hips stutter. “Faster, damn it, Levias. I can take it.”

“You are in no place to make demands.” It takes all my effort to keep my voice even, to keep my hips from slamming against hers.

I keep moving slowly, like waves on a shore, until she's begging me for release. Until her hands are scrabbling across my back, desperate for purchase. Until her pussy clamps against me in need.

Then I go slower.

I can't think beyond the heavy beat of my pulse. I'm not even sure why I'm continuing this tortuously slow pace until her back bends suddenly in pleasure. And then I am just as lost as she is, torn apart by a rising tide that nearly drowns me as it crashes down.

We collapse together.

I don't know what lesson I'd meant to teach her. All I've learned is that I want her beyond all reason. We kiss softly until we finally pull apart, and we lie next to each other until the sweat cools on our skin beneath the breeze.

Then she turns away.

I frown, puzzled, but she merely reaches for her tunic and tugs it over her head. The threads on one shoulder are frayed, but she covers them with her hair.

"I have to get back," she says. Her movements are brisk. Business-like. "I can't stay out all night, not with the children. And the gods only know what sort of trouble my brother might find himself in without supervision."

"I could always kill him for you."

"Yes, you've offered," she snaps. "It's such a good thing we made this...this bargain, isn't it? Otherwise you'd have killed my only living relative."

She doesn't sound pleased by my generous offer, and I say as much. Her eyes nearly pop out of her head, so I allow the sounds of the night to replace any conversation.

We both dress and then head back to her house. She walks slowly, and an unfamiliar feeling stirs in my gut when I realize she must be sore. It's a sinking sort of feeling, as though I've eaten a stone.

*Enough, I tell my twisting gut. Wasn't she demanding I go faster the entire time? She's the one who climbed on top of me to start with!*

But I was the one with experience, the one who knew most virgins wouldn't be able to handle sex more than once in a night. It must be even more difficult for a human.

I growl in frustration, and she has the audacity to shush me with a finger against her lips.

"It's bad enough I'm getting in so late, looking like..." She waves a hand across her outfit, which admittedly looks a bit worse for wear. There's a small twig in her hair, but I don't dare to pluck it. She looks as though she might bite me.

My cock approves of that potential turn of events, and I sigh.

This is my life now. Being chastised by some tiny human woman and somehow liking it. Even the purna couldn't conceive of such a devious curse.

Still, before we enter the door, I tell her. "You've got some of the garden in your hair." I pause, considering. "And a smudge of dirt on your cheek."

Her cheeks flush, and she swipes her hands all over her hair and face.

"Now?"

The garden is gone, but she still looks freshly fucked. Her lips are kiss-bitten, and her eyes are bright. Her hair looks as though hands have tugged it. She looks thoroughly used, and it's all I can do to keep from tugging her back into the bushes again.

*Soon.*

I temper my desire. I've pushed her far enough tonight. Enough that she knows she's mine.

I let her sleep on her own tonight and dream of tomorrow.





## CHASE

Sleeping with Levias left me feeling conflicted. On one hand, it was fantastic. It's hard to feel too resentful of an experience so enjoyable.

Still, I wish he had let me decide for myself. He used it as a bargaining chip, coercing me into something that I, to be honest, wanted anyway. I suppose it's better, knowing that I wanted it. But it casts a certain pall over the whole thing, having to come to terms with the fact that he didn't care how I felt. He got what he wanted, and it meant nothing to him whether I was willing or not.

I wish it could be clear that we both chose each other. We could have had a mutually beneficial relationship. I would bear a child for him, not just to save my brother. But he robbed me of the choice, settling for overpowering me. How can we have a relationship of equals, when he's eager to manipulate me for what brings him satisfaction?

I want a lover who does not turn each encounter into a game, keeping a scorecard that determines who is winning. I hate that Levias has tainted my romantic ideals, making it something dark and dirty.

He never even asked how I feel about him. He doesn't seem to want to earn my love as much as steal it. And it's a shame because I would have given it freely.

The next morning, after our sordid encounter, he demands to be fed as soon as he awakes. I do as he asks, though I feel more like a prisoner than a partner. There's no point in

explaining myself to him, as he's made it clear he doesn't care. He just wants the performance, at any means.

The table is empty, the children already having finished their meal. He sits down and waits, tapping his foot impatiently, as the eggs cook. I don't even bother to offer fruit, not wanting to hear his ridiculous speech on how 'fruit is for the lowly' again. I like fruit, even if he thinks that makes me less than him.

I sullenly scrape the food onto a plate, carrying it over to serve him. He grabs my wrist as I try to turn away. "Aren't you going to sit?" he asks.

"Why?" I demand, feeling annoyed. So that we can talk? He's made it clear that he doesn't care about my opinions and input anyway.

He narrows his eyes. "Your temperament seems less agreeable than in the past. Is there a problem?"

"No," I reply curtly. "No problem." I return to the stove, ready to scrape out and wash the pan.

There's a long silence while I work. Finally, I can't resist any longer. I glance over my shoulder, wanting to see his response.

He hasn't started eating yet. He's just watching me, quietly observing. When he catches me looking, he speaks up.

"As your mate, I'm here to provide for you," he begins. "If there's a problem that requires my assistance, you must describe it for me. You did not approve of my last few plans," he points out, sounding a little bitter.

I turn my back to him, returning to my cleaning. Behind me, I can hear him start on his meal. He's said his piece and considers it resolved. I don't say anything, but inwardly, I'm fuming by how he can be so perfectly dense.

On one hand, he's very committed to his belief that he should assist me. I admire that about him, and it's one of the things that makes him so attractive. He does contribute, by helping me with difficult chores. He looks out for me and tries to be a good protector.

But that's also the issue. He's so wrapped up in what he thinks he should be doing that he never asks me what I want. He makes up his mind that he has all the answers, and that as a weak human female, I'm not worth considering. He knows better, even about my own life.

He doesn't try to see my side because he thinks it's beneath him. And it makes everything that he does feel patronizing and condescending.

My biggest problem, at the moment, is the fact that Arthur will be here any moment. But I don't even want to tell Levias about the situation I'm in. He'll just offer a solution that I probably don't want, likely another killing. Not only that, but I'll only be confirming to Levias that I'm weak and helpless, and it's fine that he wants to tell me what to do all the time.

I want someone who can listen to my problems, and maybe commiserate with them. Not someone who jumps into fixing them, without even asking me what I think.

I dry the pan hurriedly with a towel and put it away. I still have to prepare the ringworm tincture for Arthur, and don't have time to waste arguing with Levias, anyway.

I leave him to his meal and grab the basket of herbs. I had only picked a small amount before Levias and I became... intimate, in the garden. It won't be anywhere near enough, but it's a start.

I take the basket into the pantry, rummaging around for the glass vials that I use for the tincture. I load several handfuls into the basket, then carry it all out to the stables. I want to work in private, away from Levias. I don't feel like explaining myself or listening to his comments.

In the stable, I pull each vial out of the basket, carefully setting them on the work counter in several rows. I count out the leaves, stuffing the proper amount into each vial. Then I sneak back into the house for the oil, taking care to avoid Levias.

I carry the oil back out, to finish filling the vials. I put the cap on the finished product, taking count. I've only made ten

of the fifty doses that Arthur ordered.

I glance nervously out of the window, eyeing the path that leads up to the house. There's no sign of Arthur yet, but I'm running out of time. I hurry to the storehouse, wanting to grab my already-prepared stash of tincture.

There isn't much here since I sold or traded most of it when I went to the market just a few days ago. I manage to gather eight vials, and hurriedly do the mental math. 32 more to go. Yikes.

I run back to the stable, dropping off my latest addition. Then I practically race up to the secret garden to pick more Zingcuma leaves. I move as quickly as I can, painfully aware of the ticking clock.

I mix up one last batch, filling each vial and pouring in the oil to cover it. I snap the lid, shake it up, and move onto the next. As I go, I count in my head. 34, 35, 36.

A noise from outside catches my attention. I poke my head out the door, a feeling of dread coming over me. A wagon is coming up the path. Even before I look, I know that it's Arthur, but my eyes confirm it.

I dart back inside, letting the door slam beside me, and frantically stuff each vial. 37. 38. At 39, I run out of Zingcuma.

Shit. Well, he's just going to have to understand. I can make him more when the plant grows back. I'm tapped out, for now. I never anticipated an order of this magnitude.

I pour the oil in, though thanks to my shaking hands, as much of it lands on the counter as in the vial. Just as I'm putting the cap on, and giving it a quick shake, the door opens.

"Saw you were waiting out here," Arthur drawls. His eyes flit across the counter, taking in the scene. "This my stuff?" he asks, sounding pleased. He comes inside, followed by James and their sister Sarah.

I nod nervously, my throat suddenly dry. I clear my throat, trying to find the courage to speak. "I only had enough for 39 vials," I say, figuring it's best to get that out of the way from

the start. “I can make more eventually but I didn’t have enough stuff.”

His expression darkens, no longer impressed. Like a switch has flipped, he’s suddenly surly and combative. “You’re trying to stiff me, huh?” he snarls, his gray eyes flashing.

“I’m not trying to do anything,” I insist. “Look, the plant doesn’t grow on demand. I harvested it all and there wasn’t enough. I’ll make more when it grows back.”

His shoulders stiffen. He reaches out, taking me by surprise when he grabs my hair, roughly. I wince, my head reflexively turning in the direction that he pulls.

“Take it easy, Arthur,” Sarah notes calmly. “If she says she’ll make more, she’ll make more. What good is roughing her up?”

For a moment, I’m hopeful. If she’s sticking up for me, and acting as the voice of reason, maybe she can get through to him. But her words only seem to spur him on. He yanks, hard, glowering at her.

“This bitch needs to remember who is in charge here. I asked for fifty, and I want fifty. I don’t want a bunch of stupid excuses and whining. I want what I came here for.”

Sarah sighs. “Let’s at least see what she got for us,” she tries. Arthur makes a face at me, snapping his teeth as though he intends to bite me. I jump at the motion, startled, and he laughs cruelly. But he does finally release his grip on my hair.

He slowly paces the length of the counter, pretending to examine each vial. He holds it up, checking it over as though he is a connoisseur judging the quality. I don’t think he has any true criteria that he uses to evaluate my offering, but it doesn’t stop him from pretending.

He snaps his fingers at James, who quickly steps forward to stand at his shoulder. Arthur hands the vial, seemingly approved, to James, who sticks it in a satchel that hangs over his shoulder. This goes on for some time.

Near the end of his routine, Arthur seems to get distracted. He turns to hand a vial to James, but his gaze shifts to something behind him. He starts to walk away, heading for the door, and I turn to follow his movement.

Too late, I realize that Jessie's round face is peeking at us from a teeny crack in the slightly ajar door. She makes a yelping noise when she sees Arthur coming, and slams the door shut, but it's too late.

He flings the door open and takes two big steps outside to snatch her by her collar. I scream. To my surprise, Sarah shouts her objection at the same time. But it's no use. He lifts her easily into the air, dangling her like a fish on a hook.

“And here we have what is called a window of opportunity,” he comments. “I was concerned that we would be unable to rectify our current quandary. See, I could just kill you, but then who's going to make the rest of the tincture? But at the same time, I can't just let you walk away, neither. I gave you a job and you failed. This is problematic for me.”

She swings her legs wildly, trying to kick him, and screams. He pauses in his speech to gesture to James, who pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and wraps it across her mouth like a gag.

James looks around the stable, and quickly finds a spare rope. While he binds her hands and feet with it, Arthur continues talking. “So, we're striking a new deal. When I get the medicine you promised me – all of it – I'll give you the kid back. But for now, she's coming with us.”

He grabs the last few vials off the counter, stuffing them into James's satchel, and stalks out the door. James follows, carrying Jessie easily over his shoulder. Sarah hesitates, looking almost sick to her stomach. Her gray eyes are sad as she gives me an uneasy frown. But then she follows her brothers.

The door slams as they go, and it feels like a punch in the gut. I burst into tears, sinking to my knees in the hay.





## LEVIAS

**T**here's a deep ache snaking itself around my core, clenching every now and then. It's a miserable sensation and it starts the moment I see her collapsed on the ground, bawling into her hands.

This is not right. Something is wrong with her and I must fix it. I can't stand to see her in such a state.

She's the one who saved me! Our blood is intertwined – that much I've realized in my time left to sit and think. When she broke the curse, we were made one. I cannot leave her alone in a time like this. Even if I tried, my body is not going to let me stray too far.

I approach gradually without making any noise. She doesn't realize that I'm next to her until I'm reaching around her shoulders, tugging her close. Small gasps escape her lips. She doesn't reach out to grab me. Instead, she hugs herself and refuses to look at me. The tears never stop.

“Chase.”

Silence. Not even a glance. No, there's something deeply wrong.

“*Chase.*”

“Please,” she whispers, shaking her head. “Please leave me alone. I don't want to talk about it. Not after what just–”

“I am not going to leave you.” My grip on her shoulder tightens. “You're the one who saved me. Do you think that's any small feat?”

“I don’t... No.”

“Why are you crying?” I don’t recognize my own voice. “Seeing you like this makes my heart break in two.”

“I-I don’t know where to begin.”

“It is easy. Just speak.”

Chase swallows hard. I can see the movement in her neck. Humans are intricate creatures and the one next to me is the most fascinating of them all.

“Please don’t do anything out of line if I tell you the truth, okay?” Chase looks at me. Her eyes are full of tears, threatening to spill over any second. The tip of her nose glares red. “T-There are too many issues in my life right now and I don’t need another.”

“Depends on what you tell me. Did someone hurt you?”

“A man came by and he threatened me. He’s intimidating and he’s dangerous. He’s the leader of the Bowler Street Brothers. Arthur Ripley.”

She sighs. My eyes narrow. Is he the one I must kill to make her happy?

“He was very upset with me, so in response, he took one of my children!”

“Why did you talk to such a vile creature?” I ask. Gradual, but potent, rage fills me up on the inside. “Why didn’t you tell me about him in the first place? I would have ripped off his head already.”

“It’s not that simple! He has a lot of influence here!” Chase exclaims. Then, she grits her teeth. “He *stole* one of my orphans! He took one of my babies! That’s what he has always wanted, he always wanted to hurt my kids and now he has one of them! And now... I don’t want to imagine what comes next. I don’t.”

Chase runs her trembling hands through her hair. Tears and snot drip onto her upper lip. Her right leg doesn’t stop shaking.

“He’s going to hurt more of them, I know it. He’s going to come back and take them all because I wasn’t able to... make him happy.”

“Why is he being allowed to do this?”

Chase blinks at me. “What do you mean? Arthur does what he wants.”

“Clearly, but why? Don’t you humans have authorities who can handle a problem like this?”

“W-We do have authorities, but I’m trying to tell you that Arthur is well-known and he has power over many important people. Even if I were to report him to the authorities, they aren’t going to do anything about it because Arthur has paid them all off!”

Does this human think he can trample over others with no consequence? Does he believe he can hurt the woman I cherish? My grip from her shoulder falls away as I rise to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Chase asks, panic in her voice. She scrambles to stand. “Please don’t go anywhere. I-I told you the truth and I plan to figure out a way to make things right—”

“The human you told me about seems to have no regard for the law or any sort of authority.” Arthur Ripley. I can’t wait to feel his blood dripping down my hands. “It’s time to bring him to the highest authority in the land.”

“Whose?”

“Mine.”

I stretch out my wings and flap them a few times, making sure that they’re ready for a flight. After many years in dormancy, it feels as if I have to break into them again.

Chase throws herself around my arm and pulls at it until I glance at her. She’s crying again. Are all humans this sentimental?

“Please, don’t! Don’t do anything! I don’t want you to hurt—”

“Hurt the human who hurt you?” I interject. That’s quite an unreasonable request. “He stole your young creature. What if he killed it already? And if he did, what makes you believe he won’t come back for more?”

“I have already thought about that! Please...” Chase’s bottom lip trembles. Her nails dig crescent-shaped marks into my skin. “Don’t go. I beg of you. I’ll do anything to get you to stay.”

“I’m going to get the child back. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Not like this,” she whispers. “You’re going to—”

“I’m going to find that group... What’s their name? Bowler Street Brothers? They’re going to learn a lesson. They will know, from now until eternity, not to mess with what’s mine.”

My wings are ready. Powerful gusts of wind accompany each flap, which causes Chase to lose her footing and fall backwards. She’s staring at me with wide eyes, full of awe.

“Levias, no! No!”

As I take off, she tries gripping onto one of my legs, but I kick her off. She isn’t going to survive the flight if she’s hanging off my body like that. Humans can be silly.

Now, it’s time to find their headquarters. It shouldn’t be too difficult. Humans like living in close proximity to one another, piling their buildings on top of each other for a semblance of community. Then, they end up quarreling and destroying one another after a certain period of time.

Screams in the distance release me from my focus. I gaze at the ground, where I see a distinctive dirt trail carving through the trees belows. It’s Chase. She’s following me, riding on one of the mules I’ve never seen move that fast and following my flight pattern.

I want to tell her to stay away, but she’s too far and I have a mission in mind that she isn’t going to stop, no matter how she begs and cries. She should be thanking me for this. I’m

going to get back one of her little creatures. Shouldn't she be happy?

There's horror in her eyes, mixed with the heavy tears that haven't stopped since I first saw her. I can't understand it. Why isn't she cheering me on? Instead of begging for mercy, she should beg me to bring her back Arthur Ripley's head. It's not like he will be missed.

There. I see it on the horizon. Small buildings gathered around one another, bordering the various dirt paths that snake through their village. This is where Arthur Ripley is, I'm sure!

The ground shakes when I land. My wings curl inwards while I make my way towards the center of this human camp. They're watching me with their big eyes and open mouths. They're puny compared to me! I can fit numerous of their small heads in my fist.

"You." I point to a cowering human man with a smaller one hiding behind his legs. He places his hand upon its head and keeps it behind him. "Can you tell me where Arthur Ripley and the Bowler Street Brothers are? I need to find them."

"I-I don't know who you're talking about. I'm sorry. Please don't hurt me."

"You're not the one I want to hurt," I reply, turning away. Once I do, the humans watching me back away in droves. They murmur quickly to one another. "Can anyone tell me where I can find Arthur Ripley?"

"What are you doing in our camp?"

I turn around. There's a trio of human men standing alongside one another, staring at me with their arms crossed over their chest. The sight nearly makes me laugh. Do they think they intimidate me with such a stance?

"I am looking for Arthur Ripley and the Bowler Street Brothers. If they are here, tell me. I need to see them."

"Your kind isn't allowed here."

A murmur of agreement spreads throughout the crowd. I watch as some of the humans hurry away to hide their young ones in nearby buildings. The ones that stay behind are becoming more boisterous with their remarks. Do they know what they are dealing with?

Do they know that I do not want to hurt them? At least not now. They should be grateful for that.

“I do not want to stay here for long. I’m searching for the human named Arthur Ripley. He has wronged me and he needs to pay for what he’s done.”

“We don’t want you in our camp!” A man pokes his head above the crowd and holds a sharp weapon in his hands. I see more of these weapons in the hands of the humans surrounding me. “We don’t know who you’re talking about! You need to leave right now.”

“I am not going to leave until you tell me where you are hiding Arthur Ripley and the rest of those creatures.”

These humans are more combative than I first thought. I never would have believed that they had it in their tiny bodies to put up a fight. Chase doesn’t act this way. She’s fragile and cries easily, but these humans carry rage within them.

They’re annoying me.

“Are you hiding the human?” I ask, approaching a small group of human men. Their hands tremble violently and one of them drops the weapon he is holding and flees the scene. “Tell me the truth! Where is Arthur Ripley?”

“Stay back!”

I grab the sword he’s holding. It’s not much of a hassle taking it from his weak grip. I bend the metal until it’s twisted and useless, then toss it to the floor. The human stares at me with an unhinged jaw, as if it’s surprising that I possess that strength. Of course I do! Are humans imbeciles?

“Leave them alone!”

I turn around and see a man pointing a crossbow at my chest. He fires the shot into my chest, but because it isn’t

magical, it bounces off my skin and pierces the ground below instead. He's reloading his weapon. I watch his every move.

Then, I storm forward with enough strength to cause their buildings' foundations to crumble. My hand swings for his body, sending him flying into the nearest building side. His body collides with a satisfying crunch and he falls to the ground, unmoving. The humans around me scream and cry, but I've had enough of their sorrows.

I want to find Arthur Ripley, but they're in my way.

Another human crosses my path, trying to pierce me with those sorry little blades they call weapons. I take him by the arm and rip it clean off, flinging the limb somewhere behind me. Then, I thrash his body into the ground until he's nothing but a pile of blood and flesh, hanging desperately onto his skeleton by a few threads.

More humans. There's a frenzy in this camp now. Why don't they get out of my way? Why are they still trying to bother me?

I rip out their intestines. I smash their skulls into the ground. I steal their swords and slash through their bellies. Behind me, there's a trail of bodies and their blood coats my skin.

It's the wrong blood, though. I need to find Arthur Ripley. I want to hold his severed head and feel his blood coursing down my arm.

The woman's head I'm holding doesn't bring me the same euphoria, so I fling hers to the side and continue on my way.





## CHASE

I hear the screams before I see the destruction.

I ride hard into town, my entire body slamming down against the saddle while I grip the reins in my hands—tight enough to bruise my palms. My lungs draw in sharp breaths, the pungent smell of smoke and fire hitting my nose and giving me a sinking feeling in my gut.

Had I known that Levias could be this volatile, I would've tried to hide the truth from him a little bit longer in order to figure how I was going to get Jessie back myself before even thinking about involving him.

Clearly my emotions for Jessie's kidnapping affected the way Levias reacted to things somehow.

I'm not sure if it could be due to him seeing me upset or if he'd somehow started to care about the children, but either way, the BSB had created more of a mess than I'm sure they intended to by threatening me.

Having a gargoyle at my beck and call is, I'm sure, something none of them considered in even their wildest dreams.

The first building that I come upon is the tavern.

I watch in horror while people stumble out of it and onto the cobbled streets, their screams terrifying me while the entire building begins to collapse in on itself. The fire inside of it rages with loud pops that spark out from the heavy dark smoke pouring out of it.

The heat makes me dizzy, causing me to pull back on my reins and guide the mule away from the tavern.

My eyes dart around frantically, searching for any sign of Levias within the confines of the burning building. Are gargoyles fire-proof? I know that Levias had an unusual resistance to things, but is fire one of them?

More screaming from further down the street draws my attention away.

I kick my mule and guide it into a canter again, taking us down to where the market is.

All around me, people scatter into the streets. Their faces are frantic and frightened as the town slowly transitions from bustling to war-torn. How did Levias manage all of this destruction in such a short amount of time?

I swear I was following him at a close distance until he pulled up and disappeared through the tree line, leaving me to try and catch up as fast as my mount could carry me.

Up ahead, I notice that there is another building on fire. More people stream out into the streets, darting around like ants while a massive beast hovers above them looking like an omnipotent god.

Giant wings flap in the air, beating a heavy tone that makes my heart race.

My eyes widen as I grow closer and realize that it's Levias.

I watch as he descends down onto those that make a run for it, his claws coming down to dig into the backs of two men. Their screams are cut off by claws that slice through their shoulders, careening them into the cobbled ground beneath them.

I watch in horror as he rips through them, tearing them apart as easily as rice paper. His chest coats in blood spatter, dripping down in rivlets and creating grotesque patterns that make me want to throw up.

My hands shake as I pull on my reins, getting my hoqin to come to a halt a few hundred feet away from everything.

Levias lifts his head, noticing me. He tilts his head and stands, turning his body to make for me when the sound of a child's scream interrupts him.

I suck in a breath and call out, "Jessie!"

Levias lifts off of the ground and flies back to the building, one that I can now vaguely recognize as the BSB headquarters. I quickly flick out of my stirrups and swing my leg over the side of my hoqin, my feet hit the ground with a dull sound as I land.

I can hear my pulse racing in my ears, drowning out the sounds of the town around me while people scramble to find shelter somewhere far away from the chaos. My shoulder slams into one of the men, almost sending me sprawling but I quickly catch myself and move on.

I can't believe things have descended like this. A mess that has been caused by the creature who I once thought was an innocent statue. I know that Levias is only trying to protect me and perhaps Jessies, too, to an extent, but the sheer amount of destruction that lays in his wake is mortifying.

The heat from the fire is hot enough to make me wince and put my arm up to shield my face. I cough at the smoke billowing out of the front doorway, black clouds making it hard to see inside.

I hope that Jessie isn't in there, and if she is, Levias has her.

My heart squeezes. I can't think about returning home empty handed—or worse, with a burnt corpse—without wanting to cry. Even though Jessie can be a troublemaker, that doesn't mean she deserves to die, especially not in such a gruesome way.

She is still a child with a bright future ahead of her. She needs to live to see that.

I cough harder and pull away from the BSB headquarters. My eyes sting from the heat and the smoke, making it hard to see where I'm going. I trip, sending myself backwards and

falling onto the ground while practically knocking the wind out of me.

I groan, shifting slowly to my side and spot the round lump that had tripped me.

I kick at it, watching it roll a few times before coming to a stop. Dull eyes gaze up unseeingly at the sky above us. Black hair had been pressed together in clumps from the blood that had dried there, and a mouth that lay slack-jawed had trickles of it crusted at the corners.

I slapped a palm over my mouth.

*Arthur?*

I feel my stomach heave.

“Chase, what are you doing on the ground? Get up! It’s disgusting down there.”

I suck in a shaky breath and sit up slowly. My body pivots, spotting a taller figure emerging from the black clouds of smoke.

Levias stands proudly with Jessie draped over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I can’t help but let a few tears fall from my eyes, leaving track marks in their wake.

“Is... is she...?”

Levias raises a brow, following my eyes to where Jessie lay.

“She’s alive. Is that what you’re asking?”

I nod.

“I obviously wouldn’t be bringing a dead corpse back to you. What do you take me for?”

I can’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of his question. Clearly I took him for the blood-thirsty creature that had just ransacked out town, and not the cool, calculated monster that currently stands before me.

How silly of me.

“Sorry,” I manage to mumble. “I just want to make sure...”

“Yes, she’s alive.” Levias gives Jessie’s back a hard pat, jostling her into making a small groan. Most likely proving to me that the child is, in fact, alive like he said.

“Thank you.”

I have no idea how I’m going to show my gratitude to him or thank him properly for saving Jessie.

Maybe I’ll make him some kind of extravagant meal when we get home. Something with five chickens this time instead of four. And maybe I could scrounge up some ingredients that I’d been saving for a special occasion and make him a pastry dessert. Or maybe just gallons of milk, because pastries might be beneath him, too.

Standing slowly, I brush myself off and try my best not to look over at Arther’s dismembered head next to me. As much as I want to feel sorry for him, I don’t. He’s caused my family enough grief over the years that I felt kind of vindicated at this point.

Now I won’t be forced into a drug trade with him and I can keep my medicinal herbs for their intended purpose.

Down the street, I hear a rally of voices joining together into some sort of battle cry. I swallow thickly. It’s only a matter of time before the villagers come looking for Levias, wanting to string him up on the high post in the center of town for his crimes.

I can’t let them do that. He’s our only source of protection now if the BSB comes back to the orphanage seeking revenge for the downfall of their leader.

I walk over to Levias and push at his chest. He doesn’t budge an inch.

“What... are you doing...”

I ignore his raised eyebrow and shove my entire body weight into him. “Please go.”

“Go where? Chase, you aren’t making sense. I’ve gotten your little goblin back for you. You should be thanking me.”

“I will.” I can feel the hysteria start to creep up my throat, my anxiety over the villagers finding him making me feel jumpy. “Can you please bring her back home for me?”

“No.”

“Levias, *please*.”

He makes a small noise, either because of the desperation in my voice or because he’d simply had enough of my incessant demands. Whatever it is, I don’t care. As long as he leaves right now.

“How will you get back, hm? I must fly you.”

“The mule. I have to grab him so I can bring him back to the barn.”

He makes another noise, a grunt this time as if he’s annoyed that I have an excuse not to fly back with him.

“Fine. Hurry back soon.”

Without another word, he takes off into the sky. His powerful wings beat loudly while he climbs high into the air. I’m in awe, watching his magnificent body coil and then glide away. He truly is an incredible creature.

I sigh slowly, my legs threatening to give out from under me. Maybe I can sneak away before anyone notices. If they believed that a random creature of the night attacked the village without seeing that I was somehow involved, my family and I could go unscathed.

I jog over to where I’d last seen my mule and wave my hands out in front of me to cut through the smoke. Not surprisingly, he is standing exactly where I left him, but his ears are perked up and his head is turned towards the sound of more yelling down the street where we’d come from.

I quickly grab the reins and get back up into the saddle.

I need to—

“Hey!” a voice calls. “There she is!”

My heart lurches as I'm quickly surrounded on all sides. Hands pull me down from the saddle and separate me from my mule. I cry out when I'm roughly shoved through a crowd of people.

"She's with that monster!" I hear someone shout.

"She needs to answer for this!" another one shouts back.

My arms are twisted behind my back, shackles clamped over my wrists while men in tattered, burnt clothing, drag me down the street.

My feet barely scrape against the ground.

"I didn't do anything!" I yell at them, hoping that a miracle happens and they all stop to listen to me.

But I'm not so lucky. Of course, I can't be. I'm ignored and silenced almost immediately.

They drag me through town and into the holding cells underneath the courthouse, locking me inside with the promise to bring me out into the town square to face my judgment come morning light.





## LEVIAS

I wait for what feels like hours, staring out at the road leading from the town to the orphanage.

I hate being stuck inside with all of those children running around. Their incessant voices all bicker with one another over menial things while the oldest one runs around trying to wrangle them all.

I don't envy the girl, the oldest, nor do I envy Chase for deciding to take on such a heavy burden of so many hungry mouths all clamoring for their spot at the dinner table.

Once again, I wonder what is the point of being responsible for offspring that aren't hers in the first place?

I sigh in annoyance and cross my arms over my chest.

The sun is starting to dip over the horizon, bathing the trees in a fiery glow that is much like the ones I let loose throughout the town.

I have to admit, the screams of those villagers elated me. I'd somehow forgotten what it was like being able to rule over humans and control their fear. I'm reveling in it when something distracts me.

My ears perk up when I hear the distinct clomp of hooves against the worn path leading back from the village.

Finally, she's back.

I allow myself to relax and let my shoulders drop from the tense stance I've been standing in for the past hour or so.

Chase's mule comes into view, though not with the rider I'm expecting on top of it. I frown deeply and uncross my arms, letting them drop to fist against my thighs.

The woman who rides in the saddle is not my mate, but some pale thing with black hair and rosy cheeks. I bite back a growl, letting her dismount from Chase's mule before stalking over to her.

I hear her draw in a gasp when she spots me, her entire body tenses as her eyes go wide. She cranes her neck to stare up at me, the hands that are fisted around the reins are white.

"Who the hell are you?" I don't bother hiding my annoyance, letting my sharp teeth punctuate each word as I speak them.

The woman swallows visibly, her throat bobbling and her tongue clicking against the roof of her mouth.

"I... My name is Sarah."

My hand moves before I think twice. It wraps around her neck as I drag her away from the mule. Her shoes dig into the ground, leaving lines in the dirt behind where she'd been standing only a moment ago.

"Where the hell is Chase?"

"I-I came to tell you!"

Her small hands grapple for my wrist, tugging at the hand that is still wrapped around her neck. Her throat constricts under my grip, making me want to squeeze tighter until her eyes pop out of her skull.

"Tell. Me. What."

"She's been detained!"

I raise a brow. "By who?"

"The town!" The woman lets out a shrill 'yelp' when I lift her into the air by her neck. "They took her into custody! They saw you two together and they think that you both planned the attack!"

I want to roll my eyes. How ridiculous. Humans are so over-dramatic; it's a wonder that they've made it this far. How in the world would Chase and I have ever had time to stage an attack against the only food source she currently had?

If those villagers had stopped for a moment and thought about it critically, perhaps Chase wouldn't be locked up. It made no sense that she would design an attack with so many children depending on her for food and accommodations that came from the very town. It's not like we robbed it.

I toss the woman to the ground. "Where is she being held?"

The woman slowly rolls over onto her side, pitching herself up from the ground to crane her neck back up to look at me.

"There's a jailhouse underneath the court building. They most likely took her there." She coughs, rubbing her reddened throat. "She's being guarded, though."

I snort.

I don't care about blowing through more humans in order to get to my mate. In fact, I might even relish in it. If they were so determined to keep her away from me, then I would take all the pleasure in the world of showing them just how stupid of an idea that had been.

I unfold my wings from behind my back. "You're to stay here with the children."

"W-What?"

I glare down at her. "I'm not repeating myself. Stay here and look after them while I go to retrieve Chase."

I lift off into the sky, not bothering to stick around for another moment of this woman's protests. I can just as easily smite her right where she stands—or rather lies, in this case—but knowing how soft of a heart Chase has, I know she'll disapprove of that.

In fact, she will chastise me for it the moment she finds out that this Sarah woman came all this way to tell me what the

town has done to my mate and where they are keeping her.

Although I know that Chase is mine and I will never let her go, I don't want to upset my mate more than need-be. I want her to want me, not avoid me as she has today.

I want her to like me and trust me. She's my mate, after all.

I fly off into the darkening sky and head right to town. The journey takes me less time than it had coming back from it before, mostly due to the fact that the blood thrumming through my body screams for my mate.

How dare they keep her captive and away from me?

Finding the center of town isn't hard. It sticks out like a sore thumb against the rest of the destruction that I had wrought only a few short hours ago. I smile at the still burning pits that lay in the wake of chaos I'd created.

It feels good to be at the top of the food chain and watch all the helpless little ants scatter around trying to recover the things that they once had. It serves them right.

I land on the side of one of the buildings and blend in with the shadows. While I'm not exactly sure what the courthouse looks like, I can take a guess. Considering that there are multiple men standing outside with weapons in their hands, I can say with confidence that I've found the right place.

I shift on my feet and crouch, getting a good look at the entrance to the building. I'll most likely need to burst through the front of it. If the men standing at the front of it are giving me any indication, it's that there is going to be a fight to get her out of there, whether I'm amicable or not.

I turn my neck, cracking it a few times before leaping off the side of the building and gliding down over to them.

There are surprised shouts when they see me.

Weapons are drawn and pointed my way, making me want to laugh at the absurdity. No human weapons are capable of taking down a gargoyle, even if they have some kind of magic in them. We are impenetrable for a reason.

I swoop down and take out two of them with my arms, cracking their heads against the hard ground below. I barely take another second to right myself before turning and slicing another man whose knife is drawn to my face.

It knicks me cleanly, clearly a dark elf relic, but heals up almost instantly.

“Quickly!” I hear them shout. “Tie him down!”

I snort. I want to ask them how exactly they think they’re going to be able to do that and with what, but I don’t have the time nor the patience to do so.

I grab another one of them and throw him through the front of the building. The doors concave inward, the man’s body creating the perfect hole that is large enough for me to step through.

Inside, the building is much more bland than I thought it would be just from looking at the outside of it. There is a small area with chairs and a window that face outside to the street. I head down the opposite way, where a long hallway takes me deeper into the building.

A set of stairs takes me down into a dank-smelling basement where large cages line the walls. My eyes scan them all before falling onto a small figure in the furthest cage from the stairs. The slumped figure is tucked into the corner facing the wall.

Behind me, I can hear shouting.

The noise makes the figure pop their head up, a familiar head of blonde hair that is now dull from the poor lighting down here, could be seen on top of her head.

“Chase.”

She lets out a slow breath. “Levias... you found me.”

I smile. “Of course I did.”

I head over to her, my hands wrapping around the bars caging her in. “I need to get you out of there.”

Chase stands, making her way over to me. “I’m not sure where they’re keeping the key...”

“Key?” I let a wry smile cross my lips. “I don’t need a key.”

She gives me a puzzled look. “Then... how will you...?”

I don’t give her anymore time to question me. Instead, I beat my wings and fist my hands around the bars, lifting her cage up off the ground with me. Chase lets out a startled yelp and clings to the bars.

“Levias!”

I ram my back into the roof of the basement, con-caving it and pushing through to the surface. It crumbles easily, giving me enough room to pull the cage through as we ascend up onto the main floor again.

Men scatter and jump out of the way as debris from the floor catapults everywhere.

I try my best not to jostle Chase too much inside of the cage and fly out the front of the building with her. I’ll need to figure out where I’m going to keep her while I come up with a plan to deal with the townspeople.

I’m not going to allow her to go back to that orphanage while there are those that wish to put her on trial for crimes she never committed. If anything, I should be the one behind bars, not her.

I carry her high into the sky and take her out of the village and far away from any semblance of society. There are a few places that I can recall from my memories of being on this continent where very few humans have ever visited or know about at all.

I hope that even though those centuries have passed me by, that those places have been left untouched from human life.

It takes less than half an hour to find the mountain where I know there is an old purna watch tower that I used to frequent before I’d been cursed and put into my stone slumber. Left

over from the war, the watchtower had been embedded in the side of a small mountain overlooking Camp Hope.

I fly to the edge of it, holding up my hand to let out a bit of my earth magic in order to carve a path through all of the overgrown growth that had overtaken the tower many decades ago. It burns with an acidic smell, making my nose wrinkle and Chase cough loudly.

I beat my wings hard, pushing all of the smoke away from her and dissipating it into the night's sky.

When I set the cage down right by the stairs leading up into the watchtower, I land next to it and curl my hands together in order to form a small ball of light. We'll have to make due while we're up here for a while on our own.

Perhaps in the morning I'll go out and hunt for Chase and serve her an actual gargoyle-style meal.





## CHASE

**W**hen Levias bends back the bars to the cage, I can't help but gape a little.

I know that gargoyles are strong—he's displayed that much bursting through the walls of the courthouse in order to get me out of there—but seeing it up close and personal like this is a whole other level.

I can't help but shrink away a little when he thrusts his arm inside of the cage and offers me his hand. Even from the glowing light he created, I can still see the caked on blood and ash from his rampage in town.

I hate that my stomach squeezes at the thought of him tearing through people and dropping bodies on his way to rescue Jessie.

I want to be happy that Levias had gone out of his way to help me like that, but the image of Arthur's dismembered head still flashes in my mind. The cold, dead eyes that stare straight into the sky along with the slack jaw and bloodied mouth.

I hate that each time I close my eyes, that's all I see.

I want to be grateful towards Levias but all I can feel is anger. Would things be different had I told him about the BSB and Arthur's exploitation of me? Did he know in the back of his mind about it and that's why he'd caused such destruction?

Maybe it was everything combined. At this point, I'm too tired to tell.

I reach out and grasp Levias' hand, letting him pull me out of the cage and onto solid ground once again.

The ride over here had been scary, bouncing around inside of a cage while a gargoyle carries me to some place in the dark is never something I want to repeat ever again.

I breathe out slowly, looking at the glowing orb that levitates near us. It provides a wide arch of light, bright enough to see quite a few feet while also having a soft glow that isn't blinding.

“Come, Chase.” Levias steps around me and starts to climb the stairs leading up into the tower. “We'll prepare for sleep, and in the morning I shall fetch us some breakfast.”

I put my hand over my stomach.

The thought of food makes me feel nauseous. Whether it's from worry or the stress finally starting to leave my body, I can't tell. But either way it leaves my body feeling exhausted.

I don't bother protesting and follow him up the stairs into the watchtower.

It's surprisingly very well-kept considering it looks like it's very old from the outside of it. The windows lining the tower are in a complete 360-view, overlooking the town's dim street lights that can be seen through the trees down in the valley.

I tuck my arms around myself and turn back to Levias. He is bent over the single bed, fluffing up some of the pillows and brushing off the blankets that were left from the previous tenants.

I walk over slowly.

“When can we go back home?”

He stands up straight, cracking his neck. “Not for a while. I need to figure out what to do about the villagers before I let you go back there.”

“You're not going to kill them all, are you?”

He turns around slowly to look at me. “And if I say yes?”

I frown. “You can’t. There are innocent people down there.”

“They all want to hang you, Chase. Why can you not see that?”

I bite my tongue, the words that I hold back desperately want to burst out of me.

I want to yell at him that it isn’t my fault that he decided to destroy half the town in order to get Scott back. I could have just as easily gone and gotten him myself without anyone dying. Maybe Arthur would’ve tried to exploit me for something else, but at least I wouldn’t be in this mess.

I rub my hands over my face in frustration.

I don’t have the energy to argue with him. It’s pointless anyway. Levias will never see the situation from my perspective, nor will he care to try and understand it either. He is stuck in his old ways, and for whatever reason, he refuses to see that times are different.

There is no longer a need for hard hearts and closed-off emotions.

I wished that he could understand that he wasn’t on the battlefield anymore, and that not everything had to be resolved with violence and the death of those that he felt were inferior to him.

It’s a frustrating game trying to make a gargoyle see humanity for what it is and not what he believes it to be.

I wane. My body grows tired, forcing me to crawl onto the bed and lay down. I face away from Levias, curling my arms around myself. The small mattress dips as he lays down next to me, the covers are pulled over us both.

“Chase,” Levias speaks to me, his voice low.

I pretend to sleep.

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A few days pass by.

I slowly start to grow tired of my time in the tower. I'm not sure if it's because I feel cooped up, or if it's because I miss the kids back home, but it really starts to wear on me the longer I stay out here on the side of the mountain.

Levias brings me food every day, leaving multiple times in order to properly keep me fed and hydrated. On more than one occasion, I've had to turn down certain foods because there is nowhere for me to cook them properly in order to safely eat them.

I can tell that he grows frustrated each time that I do this, but for some reason, he barely says a word about it before heading off and finding me something different to eat.

I spend the long days pacing around the tower, waiting for him to come back with news that he's either killed everyone in the village, making it safe for me to return to, or he's decided that he's grown bored of being up here with me and has decided to take me home.

I hope for either of those options to happen soon because I'm really not sure how much longer I can take being away from my family.

Though, the hope of ever seeing them again is slowly dwindling the longer I'm stuck here.

When Levias comes back for mid-day lunch, he has a small handkerchief full of berries clutched in his hands. I quietly thank him and take the handkerchief over to the mattress and sit down onto it.

I place the berries in my lap and fold the handkerchief carefully away from them so that none of them roll off of my lap and onto the ground.

Levias hovers over me, watching me eat with a careful stare that makes me feel self-conscious. I hold up a berry, offering it to him.

"Would you like one?" He wrinkles his nose at me and shakes his head in disgust. I shrug. "Suit yourself."

I can't help but devour them all. I'm so hungry for regular food that anything Levias brings me, I practically scarf down almost immediately.

Back home, I'm used to being the last to eat and sometimes going hungry for the sake of the kids having full plates, but for some reason being up here has made those times look like child's play. Maybe because I was doing that out of my love for the kids, and not because I was being forced to.

I stare down at the empty handkerchief once I'm done.

A gray hand comes into my view, snatching the piece of fabric from me.

“Are you full?”

I shrug. I'm as full as I can get before he heads off to find us dinner.

My head turns to look out the windows next to me. The sun is still high in the sky, which means it's most likely around noon. We still have a ways to go before a heavier meal comes our way. Perhaps I can convince him to let me go with him and help him hunt.

It would give me time to stretch my legs and breathe in the fresh air outside.

The mattress dips next to me, making me lean back from the added weight. A hand comes up to rest on my lower back, traveling across until it grips my hip.

I look over, blinking when Levias' lips find mine.

He's been doing this for the past few days. Expecting me to let him bend me over the mattress after bringing me food. I don't know if it's some kind of mating ritual that gargoyles do, but it angers me each time it happens.

I can't help but think that I've been tricked into this scenario too—being his mate. Why did he have to exploit my feelings for him in order to bond us together? I would have just as easily done so if he'd asked me or let me come to my own conclusions about my feelings for him.

First, it was the garden. He made our first time together a bargain, and it didn't have to be. Now, I'm basically a prisoner, and while before I'd try to keep him from growing angry, I don't care anymore. Maybe I just don't think he'll hurt me or I'm just tired of repressing it all, but I don't care.

Why does everything have to be a battle with him? One that either one of us—usually him—needs to come out on top? That's not how a partnership is supposed to work.

Levias grabs my jaw and pushes his tongue into my mouth, exploring me while I simply sit and wait for him to finish.

Of course, I know that he isn't ever going to force me into having sex with him. Thankfully, he isn't a monster. But I can tell that each time this happens and my indifference to him is made clear, he gets more and more agitated.

When I don't respond again, he pulls back from me roughly. "Chase."

I simply stare at him.

He lets out a small growl. "Why do you keep doing this?"

I frown. Isn't it obvious? Aren't my feelings apparent? Why can't he see why I feel this way?

He lets go of me and stands, shaking his head in annoyance. "You have been cold to me since we arrived here."

I fist my hands in my lap. "I know."

He whips around. "Why?" I shake my head, looking down at my hands. "*Chase.*"

"Because you manipulated me!" I burst out. "You hurt me by forcing me to mate with you! Now, you're forcing me to stay here! It's like you want me to fit into your fantasy your way!"

"*Forcing* you?" he spits out. "I seem to remember that you were very enthusiastic in the garden."

I lift my head, tears brimming at my eyes. "That isn't the point, Leviias! You manipulated me into mating with you without even considering that I had real feelings for you. You

had me agree by offering to *not* kill my brother. It was a shitty thing to do to me.”

He blinks a few times in disbelief. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this...”

I let out a frustrated noise. He really knows how to push my buttons. “Really? That’s all you have to say?”

He growls and throws his arms out. “What do you *want* me to say?”

“Well, first off, an apology would be nice.”

He snorts. “No.”

“No? You won’t even admit that what you did was wrong?”

He growls. “*You* wanted me just as much as I wanted you.”

“That’s not that point!”

Levias pivots on his heel and storms over to the doorway leading to the stairs. “I’m not continuing this conversation.”

I stand, tears pouring down my cheeks. “Levias!”

Before I can get him to stop, he takes off into the sky, leaving me behind.





## LEVIAS

**A**s I fly away from the watchtower, my anger begins to boil over.

I land somewhere on the opposite side of the mountain on a grassy plain that I usually touch down on when I'm hunting for dinner for us in the evenings.

Rodents and rare livestock live among the fresh vegetation and small patches of trees surround me on all sides. I look overhead at the tree canopy, spotting a few mynahs flitting among the branches as they chirp cheerful tunes that irritate me.

I let out a growl and put my fist through one of the closest tree trunks. "Fuck!" Pieces of wood splinter off of my hand and land in a wide spray on the ground while the entire rest of the tree shakes above me from the force.

How dare Chase accuse me of manipulating her.

She has no idea how hard it has been to keep myself from destroying those little ankle biters that she keeps around as well as going out of my way to rescue one of them so that she wasn't forced to grieve his loss.

She should be thanking me for breaking her out of that jail cell, too, on top of it, instead of letting her waste away in there like I probably should have if I were any other gargoyle.

Where does she get off on insisting that *I* have been the only one in this relationship who has benefitted? I've done

plenty for her without so much as a ‘thank you’ in return and haven’t complained once about it.

I pull my hand from the tree and spin on my heel to punch through another one.

I don’t see what difference it makes in how we actually fucked in the first place. Does it really matter that much that the circumstances behind it happening were due to her begging me not to kill her brother?

If anything, as soon as I awoke from my slumber, I should’ve grabbed him and thrown him off the nearest cliff when I had the chance to. Then her ammunition over me would cease to exist altogether.

I’ve never once forced her to be intimate with me, nor have I forced her to choose me as she claims that I have. What good would that ever do me, anyway? I don’t want my mate to hate me, so why would I shackle her to me in such a heinous way?

None of what she spews makes any sense to me.

My chest aches from her tears spilling down her cheeks and the pinched expression that reminds me of those villagers looking at me while I tore through their town: fear and hatred all wrapped up together.

I sink down to my knees and put my head in my hands.

Every time she acts cold towards me, it feels like hot knives are stabbing straight through my chest to pierce my beating heart. Her dismissal of me trying to take care of her, and her refusal to respond to my touches, only makes me more frustrated.

What have I done to make her act this way?

I waited so long in that damn garden to be free from my curse and to hold her in my arms like I dreamed of since the day she appeared with her soft voice and her sweet words. The thought of her hating me so viciously causes my chest to feel like it’s caving into itself.

I choke and press my hand against my ribcage. The pain radiates up through my arms and sinks at the base of my skull. My vision blurs and I can hear my pulse beating in my ears.

If I knew in hindsight that this love, this devotion to Chase, would make me feel this way, then perhaps I would've second guessed my infatuation with her. I would've asked myself if it was truly worth it, or if once I had been set free, that I should've simply left her and her orphans behind.

Perhaps that is what I should do now: leave her be. Let her hate and blame me for the situation that her and her family are in. It isn't as if my trying to help her hasn't already backfired enough as it is.

I know I'm not the only one that was forced into a stone slumber during the war with the purna. I could search for more of my kind and wake them. Once we have enough of us, then we can rise up and take control over the land like we were once before.

Humans need to learn their place regardless. Observing them like I have been, I've come to realize that they have become far too comfortable in their stagnation and it has given them a false sense of superiority.

They are not as strong as they think they are. No matter how they may advance their civilization, they will never be the gods that us gargoyles were made from. We hold immense power simply at our fingertips, and nothing can match that.

Not even the strongest human.

I stand slowly, getting to my feet while I sway. My hand finds the battered tree trunk, my claws dig into it to keep me upright while I try and catch my breath.

I hate this. Even the thought of physically leaving Chase behind pains me enough to affect my body like it's been through battle. I can't believe a human woman has this much effect over me without so much as being here.

Simply her memory alone is enough to almost incapacitate me completely.

I want to leave her up in that watchtower. I want to make her feel as half as miserable as I currently do.

Because as much as her rejection hurts me, I don't know if I can continue living like this with her—stuck in a loop of never-ending rejection with her at the forefront of it. Even the few days we've spent together already have turned into a cycle of sadness.

I stagger forward, pushing through the dense brush.

I need to forget about her and find those of my own kind. I need to surround myself with other gargoyles that will not constantly question me or my motives constantly. There is a lack of understanding between Chase and I that I don't know can be fixed.

Do I want it to be fixed? I'm not sure.

Right now, as it stands, the answer is unclear to me.

But if I were to find those of my own kind, I could move on from Chase. I could let her live her life as she chooses to—wherever that landed her in the end. She would be happier to be rid of me anyway, seeing as she had already begun pushing me out before I'd even realized it.

I shake my head at myself.

There are things far worse than leaving one's mate behind. At least, that is what I will continue to tell myself the longer we stay apart and the farther I travel away from the watchtower.

Taking a mate as a gargoyle always results in a strong gamble. If things go sour—much like the way things are going right now—it causes us to become too vulnerable and open for potential ruin.

Before the war with the purna, I'd never considered that there would be a time in my life that I would choose to do something as reckless as let my heart go to another. It had never been in my nature to do so even before I'd been cursed to live as a statue in that garden.

Maybe the curse has somehow softened my heart. Allowing it to be corrupted just enough to let Chase in.

Whatever the purna did to punish me, it certainly worked. I had thought at the time that simply being forced to live out the rest of my eternity as nothing more than a glorified garden gnome had been punishment enough.

How wrong I was back then and how wrong I am now as I flee the only person that has ever made me feel vulnerable and valuable in the first place.

The sudden thought makes my feet stumble. I catch myself on an old tree trunk and lean my entire body weight into it as my mind reels.

Is that why I'm so upset? Because Chase has given me the one thing in my life that I never thought I'd be searching for?

I shake my head again in disbelief and run my hand over my face.

I truly have lost my gods damned mind. Of course... of course it would take me deciding to leave her behind for good for me to realize how deeply she's infected my heart. How can I be this stupid?

How can I be so *blind*?

I groan and straight up.

I need to go back to her and talk to her. I need to find out where exactly she stands in this relationship. If she actually wants to leave and live her life without me, then so be it. But I won't allow this confusion to continue on for any longer.

I need her to know how deeply I feel for her. Perhaps my caution for using my words sparingly has made it seem that I am indifferent towards her. It could certainly explain why she's been feeling like I only want her for her body and nothing else.

I turn and flex my wings a few times, feeling the joints stretch.

Wherever our discussion leads to at the end, I will respect her decision. Even if it means her rejecting me. It may kill me,

but at least we will no longer be in this unsteady limbo where neither of us are actually happy.

I'd rather hate her than feel this longing for her. At least my hatred can fuel me into finding more of my brethren and waking them from their stone slumbers.

I take off into the sky and beat my wings hard and fast, heading directly towards the watchtower.

Thankfully, the sun hasn't dipped too far down over the horizon yet, giving me plenty of light to see while I fly. I spot the watchtower quite a ways away from me. It surprises me how far I managed to travel while I had been consumed with my thoughts.

Though, I suppose my fleeing had been a better response than me tearing up the inside of the tower out of anger. That, I suppose, would be more terrifying for Chase to witness than my departure.

When I finally make it back, I land on the top steps of the watchtower and climb up the remaining few. The door is cracked open, letting in the soft breeze from outside. I push the door the rest of the way and step inside.

“Chase, I need to speak with you.”

It surprises me when she doesn't immediately respond.

“Chase?”

As I cross the threshold into the tower, I notice that she isn't in her usual spot at the workbench table that I converted into a breakfast nook for her. I tilt my head in curiosity before making my way over to our bed.

I stop dead in my tracks when I see that the sheets and single blanket are tucked neatly over the mattress with no sign of Chase at all.

My heart begins to beat wildly.

My body turns to the single-use bathroom. I rip the door open without knocking, the air leaving my lungs once I see that it, too, is vacant.

“Chase!” I yell to the empty air around me.  
But no one is there to answer my calls.





## CHASE

**I**t's all my fault.

Why didn't I fight hard enough? Why didn't I demand that he stay with me?

It's all my fault. All of those people are dead because of me. Because I wasn't able to set boundaries with Levias and tell him that he's acting like an unruly monster.

Those innocent people are dead. Men, women, and children. Their only fault was being in Levias' line of sight. What if they were my orphans? Would he have killed them all, too?

I don't want to think about it. My stomach seizes up on me when I try.

I think about a lot of things on my walk back to the orphanage. Particularly, I think about all the mistakes I made which led me up to this moment. I'm crying for everyone. For the innocent lives lost, for my brother, for my orphans, but it's not enough. It's not going to bring back the dead.

The townspeople are going to want my head for this, and I don't blame them. I don't plan on fighting it if they come searching for me and find me. I just hope they don't do anything to my orphans. They didn't do anything wrong. They're innocent.

My legs are burning. As I approach the orphanage, there's a feeling in my heart that something isn't right. It's far too quiet. The thought of someone or something hurting my kids

sends a small dose of energy through my veins, giving me the strength to burst through the door and see what's going on.

It's *horrifying*.

All of my kids are cowering in the corner of the kitchen, crying and screaming uncontrollably. The only one who isn't bawling her eyes out is Haley, but even she has a mortified expression on her face. She's sitting at the table with her hand on her head.

"Haley?" I breathe out, hurrying to her side. "Are you alright? What happened? Why are you all alone?"

"We were left alone," she replies, staring at the tablecloth. "They left and went out looking for you. We thought you were never going to come back."

"Who left?"

"Uri!" Felicity sobs. She's holding her two-year-old sister in her arms, doing her best to calm down the crying child. "Uri!"

"Thomas left, too," Tony says. He's standing beside his brother. They have their arms wrapped around the Eggers twins. "Some other woman left with them."

"Another woman?" I place my hand on my chest. I can barely breathe. "Do you know what she looked like?"

"It was the woman who was with the man when he first took Jessie," Roberta says. She's standing by the sink with a white bandana over her head. She's cleaning the eggs. I think she wants to prepare breakfast for the rest of them. "She's related to the man, I think."

"Sarah," I whisper. She left, too? "Have they contacted you since they left? Have you seen any trace of them?"

"I... I spoke with a man who came from the town," Roberta replies. She dries her hand with a rag, hesitant to speak. She keeps her eyes on the ground. "They wanted to free you from the gibbon because you got arrested."

"Chase...?" A small voice pipes up. It's Scott. He's usually a happy kid, but this situation has robbed the light from his

eyes. “What’s happening? Are we going to be alright?”

“But the man told me that they got caught before they could even get close, and now they’re imprisoned, too. They’re accusing them of being purnas.”

“What?”

This is worse than I thought.

It’s so rare to hear that word. The purna are something of a myth around here, stories that children use to scare each other. They used to live here, some say, and Levias has even mentioned that they were once great foes against the gargoyles, confirming that they are real when I always thought they were fiction.

Still, the concept makes little sense to me. Human women, or at least they looked that way, with magic? That’s impossible. We aren’t dark elves. We aren’t orcs. We aren’t gargoyles. But that’s what Levias confirmed as well. He said they looked just like me and Uri with powers as strong as his.

If they are being accused of that – truly thought of as having magic – this situation has gotten so much worse.

“It doesn’t help that Uri lit a guard’s sleeve on fire while they were being escorted away,” Roberta continues. She sighs and resumes cleaning the eggs. “I don’t want us to get hurt, but something might happen to us.”

It’s all my fault. This needs to end.

“Roberta,” I say, approaching her and placing my hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t lift up her gaze to look at me. She continues to wash the eggs. “Please look after the children while I’m gone, alright? You’re the oldest, so you’re the one who is most responsible.”

“...Me?” Roberta whispers. “I’m not the oldest, it’s Uri—” Understanding dawns across her expression. She stiffens, then nods. “Okay. Where are you going?”

“I have to make things right. I don’t know if I will be able to come back.”

“Please don’t go!” Felicity cries out. “What are we going to do without you?”

Haley’s right foot constantly taps against the ground. Her hand clutches her scalp. She’s silently freaking out.

“Roberta is going to take care of you all, okay?” The kids tremble and cry and my heart breaks because I can’t do anything to help them. “Later today, Uri is going to come back and she’s going to help, too. Is that alright with everyone?”

If I turn myself in, they’re going to let Uri, Thomas, and Sarah go. At least I hope the townspeople can show me that kind of mercy. It’s for the sake of my orphans.

I can’t depend on Levias’ protection anymore. Besides, I can’t trust him around my orphans right now. Just look at the carnage he caused in town! I couldn’t even recognize the bodies as human anymore!

“Will you be alright, Roberta?” I ask again, hoping that this isn’t too much stress on the girl.

She nods. With the back of her hand, she wipes away her tears.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you. Uri will be back soon, I promise.”

“Okay.”

I hug each one of those kids tightly, knowing that this will be my last time with them. I don’t tell them that, though. I can’t stand breaking their hearts even more. They have all gone through so much.

As I make the journey to town, I keep glancing back at the orphanage and wonder if I’m making the right decision. I can see Felicity and the Eggers twins watching me from a window, pressing their little hands on the glass.

I’m going to miss them desperately, but this is the right thing. I need to save innocent lives from a false imprisonment, and if I have to give myself up for their freedom, then so be it.

I deserve to be imprisoned, anyway. I am the one who failed to stop Levias from going on that rampage. I am the one who caused so many people to lose their lives. It breaks my soul to think about, but it's the only thing on my mind with each step I take towards the town.

The surviving townspeople cleaned up most of the carnage, with some of them still scrubbing the sides of buildings and sweeping away bits of flesh and organs from the paths. As I enter the town, I offer them respectful nods and smiles.

They stare at me with nothing but hatred in their eyes. They are cleaning up the remains of their husbands, wives, and children. And it's all because of me.

"It's you."

A man emerges from a building, dressed in a white outfit that is stained red. His sleeves are pulled up to his elbows.

"I'm sorry. Who are you, sir?"

"My name is Tobias, the village doctor," he replies. "Why are you here? Do you understand the gravity of what you caused?"

"I-I'm so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen. I would like to speak with the mayor or jailor. Please. My friends were imprisoned on my behalf and—"

"How dare you!" A woman flings a rock near my head and it barely misses. I kind of wish it hit me.

She's charging at me and is only held back by Tobias, who hurries forward and links his arms around hers. There's rage in her eyes and it's all directed towards me.

"How dare you come into our camp after summoning that demon! He tore my husband apart!"

What is there to say? My shoulders slump. The townspeople hate me. There's nothing I can say to heal the hurt I caused them.

"Some of the people he killed were members of the BSB," Tobias informed, struggling to hold the woman back. "Still, he

killed many innocents in his pursuit of Arthur. It wasn't right."

"I know." I nod. I'm trying to hold back my tears. "And from the bottom of my heart, I am deeply sorry for everything that happened here. If I could have prevented it somehow, I would have."

The other townsfolk are already running to alert the mayor and the guards of my presence in the camp. I'm standing there with no fight left in me. If they want to talk me away, so be it. I deserve it, but I need them to let go of my people.

"I heard that three people were imprisoned for trying to save me," I say to Tobias. He somehow subdued the woman who tried to attack me and pushed her into a nearby home. "Are they also in the gibbon?"

"Yes, they are."

"Do you think they will be released with my arrival? They are innocents in this. They had nothing to do with the carnage caused here. It's my fault and I want to pay the price, but—"

"Are you crazy?"

I turn around and there's multiple villagers standing with pitchforks in their hands. They stare at me with contempt.

"We're not going to let you go and we're not going to let *you* go, either. You caused enough damage here already."

"W-What?" I back away from them. "But they're innocent! They didn't do anything wrong."

"They're *purna*. They're as good as dirt, in my eyes." A man nods his head in my direction. Quickly, two men take me by the arms. "Take her away and put her in with the rest of them. We execute them at dawn."

"Wait! Wait!" I flail and kick my legs. "You can't kill them! They aren't *purna*, they're innocent! They don't deserve to die for what happened! That's unfair!"

"Unfair?" He scoffs. "Unfair is what happened here to all those people. Your demon killed them with no regard. He killed everyone who was in his way. He didn't care if they

were innocent or a BSB gang member, they were all the same in his eyes.”

“I-I’m sorry!” I sob, knees buckling as the men drag me away. “I never meant for that to happen!”

“Well, it happened. And now you and your friends have to pay the price. Four lives for the lives of countless others. *That’s* unfair.” He points his pitchfork at me. “You should be lucky that we don’t tear you limb from limb right here like that beast of yours did to so many people.”

“Please, don’t.” I only say that because I know Levias would destroy the camp if they did so. “Please let my friends go. That’s all I ask.”

“You don’t deserve to ask for anything,” he spits. “Are you a purna, too? Should we just hang you right now with your other friends?”

“No! They deserve to live! I don’t care what you do to me, but please, let them go! They didn’t do anything wrong!”

“One of your friends caused a guard to catch on fire,” another man says. He laughs dryly. “And you trying to convince us that they’re innocent? That they’re not purna? We saw these things with our own eyes! They’re dangerous, and so are you.”

No. I’m running out of energy to fight back. The men don’t stop dragging me against the floor. My legs give up from underneath me.

“Remember to throw her into the same cell as the rest of them. Start digging up four shallow graves for tomorrow morning.”

It doesn’t feel real. The men don’t look at me while they bring me to the gibbon.

In the back of my mind, I think of Levias. What has he done? Why did he cause so much carnage?

Because of me. It’s quite simple. I knew that he was dangerous, but I still felt so much love for him.

I continue to do so. It's wrong, but I do. I love him, despite what he's capable of.

It's far too late to do anything about that now.





## LEVIAS

The tower is empty.

I know what this means. I might have been trapped in stone, but my brain is not. I hid her there from the townspeople. If she's not here...

*No.*

It's a simple thought, but I won't let myself finish it. I can't let myself imagine the townspeople laying their vindictive hands on her.

*It's my fault.*

I never should have left her to begin with. I should have stayed. *Listened.*

"Damn it all, Chase. You were right."

I did manipulate her into being with me. The rage I swallow as I fly towards the town is directed at myself as much as the wretched humans stinking up their so-called camp. Thick smoke pours out of poorly built chimneys, and the stench of the unwashed wrinkles my nose as I land at the edge of the destroyed town center.

It's a broken disaster, like everything else here. A cobbled mess of dark elf ruins and unskilled human labor. The rumble crumbles beneath my weight, sprinkling a few stones on the ground before I take flight once more.

"He's here!" A bell rings in a distant tower, and shrill voices sound the alarm. "The beast is here!"

I pull my lips back from my teeth in a feral grin. The beast *is* here, and may their puny gods help them if they've so much as touched a hair on her head.

Arrows sail towards me as I take flight, but the dawn sun has not yet risen. I don't imagine their aim is terribly accurate on the best of days, either.

It doesn't matter. My skin isn't stone, but it's stronger than any human flesh, easily repelling the few lucky shots that make it through. Panic surges in the populace below as they begin to understand the depth of their mistake.

*Good.*

I drink in their fear like a fine wine. Let them fully realize the cost of their deeds before I make all of them pay. How they thought a few arrows would do anything when I burned half their village to the ground, I don't know.

The makeshift jail – after I broke the roof off the previous one – is easy to find, though it's obviously not typically used for this, and I can sense her inside just as I feel my own heart beating.

*Alive.*

That face alone will spare a few moments of these humans' lives. Guards scurry around the jail below, now armed with fire. Soon, I will take that fire and raze this *entire* mockery of a village to the ground.

First, there's Chase.

The jailhouse is sturdy compared to the other structures surrounding it. Solid stone, carved with the sigils of ancient dark elves. It looks to have been a court of some kind, or perhaps an altar.

I rip the roof off of the corner and toss it towards the fire-carrying guards below, and then I fly inside.

Chase is there, comforting Uri, whose face is streaked with tears. She looks as though she's been crying as well. The thought of it hurts worse than any arrow I've been hit with tonight.

“Well, I for one think this is fantastic timing.” Thomas smiles like we’re old friends until my snarl sends him flat against the stone wall. “Or we could stay here. I could stay here. Totally up to the magical being who tears roofs off buildings.”

Chase tilts her proud chin towards me and walks up to the bars. The guards approach as she does so, arrows poised to fire.

I can take a hit, but she cannot.

With a ferocious growl, I pull the bars from her cell and launch them at the guards. They fall in a groaning heap. Before I can advance to finish them off, Chase’s hand curls around my arm.

I relax without meaning to. It’s as though I’ve melted from stone all over again. As though Chase was put on this earth to save me, to bring me home, over and over again.

“I’m sorry.” I have not apologized for centuries, but the words fall from my tongue as easily as I breathe. “I’ve hurt you, and I was wrong, and Chase. I am sorry. For all of it.”

“Levias—”

I can hear reinforcements building outside the jail. We don’t have much time, and I want her to hear everything before she sees me as the monster I am. She deserves that much.

“I shouldn’t have used your brother against you.” I peer over her shoulder at her brother, who looks far too hopeful for my liking. “As much as I would like to slaughter him where he stands and leave a feast for the carrion animals, you deserved a choice.”

She presses her lips together for a moment before she nods. “I did.”

“I took it from you, and I have no excuse. I wanted you. I wanted you from the moment you sat against me in the garden, and I was made of stone. I think I loved you then, too. I know that I love you now. And if you never want me to touch you again, Chase, I won’t. I swear I won’t. And I don’t expect you

to feel the same, or to forgive me, or to...I just want you to know. That you were right.”

The words tumble from my lips like an avalanche, but they're quickly stopped by the sight of twin tears trailing down her cheeks. She swipes them away as quickly as they've fallen.

Her useless brother clears his throat. “This is all very touching, but I think there are more guards coming—”

“I know that I love you, because I refrain, every day, from twisting that man's head off his shoulders. It would be so very easy to do so. If at any moment you have wavering morals or family loyalty—”

Chase stands on her tiptoes and presses her fingers against my lips. “Levias. I love you, too. What you did was wrong, but as soon as they sentenced me to death, all I could think about was how much I wished I could see you again.”

Heavy footsteps echo in the jail, but I hardly hear them.

“They sentenced you to death?” My voice is quiet. Careful. The guards storm closer, walking to their own deaths.

She nods.

“I'll kill them all,” I vow. “I will tear every man's arms from his body for daring to touch you.”

A rage larger than any I've ever known builds and swells inside me. My fury at the purna pales in comparison.

I pluck one of the fallen metal rods from her jail cell up. An injured guard stumbles to his feet, but his steps are clumsy and slow. It will take no effort at all to rid the world of these weak, gormless parasites.

I pull back my arm.

Chase pulls it. She's stretched out on the tips of her toes, clinging to my arm, and I force myself to stay the blow lest I harm her.

“Stand by your brother,” I order. She shakes her head. “Chase—”

“Do you love me?” Her voice catches on the word love, and I am already undone. “Truly?” I nod. I don’t think I can speak. “Then spare them.” She nods at the fallen guards, and then outside the jail. “All of them. If you love me, show them mercy.”

My hands tighten on the metal rod. It would be so easy to ignore her. None of the humans here have done anything to deserve her mercy. It’s a foolish hope, to think that if she shows them mercy they will survive to do anything other than plague her for the rest of their miserable existence. Enemies are made to be destroyed.

But I’ve already stolen her choice once.

Reluctantly, I allow the rod to fall to the floor. It clangs against the stone. The injured guard sags in response, so relieved he squirms like he’s going to piss himself.

The other guards should have arrived by now, and I find them just inside the entrance, quaking.

“Put down your weapons. You can’t win this. Not with those, at least.”

One by one, the guards lower their weapons. All except for one. I admire the fire in his eyes, even if it’s futile. He fires, loosing his arrow swiftly, and then firing another. If I were another human, or perhaps a very distracted orc, he may have felled me.

I catch the first arrow with my left hand, and send the other skittering to the floor with my right arm.

I take a step forward, but Chase stops me again with a meaningful shake of her head. I have to bury a frustrated sigh.

Right. Mercy.

I speak through gritted teeth. “Bring me to your leader so we may end this without bloodshed. Test me again, and I will spread your ribcage apart with my bare hands.”

Impossibly, the archer moves to fire again, but he’s stopped by his commander. “Go wake up Riley, if he’s

managed to sleep through this. Tell him the monster wants to talk.”

“He’s not a monster,” Chase snaps. “Not anymore than any of you.”

I glower at the humans over her shoulder as we walk out of the ruins of the jail. I am a monster, at least to them. And I will be worse than they can imagine if they ever decide to hurt her again.

---

Gargoyles’ leaders are chosen by ability in battle.

It is clear this is not the case in Camp Hope.

The mayor is a wizened, wiry man, with a long, dark, white-streaked beard. A scar across his cheek suggests that he’s known his share of battles, and he doesn’t flinch as I duck inside the dilapidated dark elf-era storage silo they’ve repurposed as a meeting room.

He sits on a bale of straw and scowls. “So you’re the one causing all the problems around here.”

“He isn’t.” To my surprise, it isn’t Chase speaking up for me, but Sarah. “It was my brother. He and his gang started all of this mess, and they dragged Chase into it.”

“*I* dragged Chase into it.” Thomas looks at his shoes instead of the town leader, but his voice rings clear. “It’s all my fault, really.”

“I killed all those humans of my own accord,” I scoff. “And I’ll do it again if you can’t do your job and stop letting gangs threaten her life.” I point specifically at Chase; the rest of them aren’t my concern. Well... “Or the orphans she cares for,” I add, looking at Uri. “If any of you even look at her the wrong way again, there won’t be a person standing in this awful place.”

The mayor considers this for a long moment, looking up at the conical ceiling above us. Then he spreads his hands wide.

“I can’t say that I’m sorry to see those bastards go, but you caused a hell of a lot of collateral damage.”

“You are not in a position to negotiate, old man.”

The man’s eyes are shrewd and bright. “For now,” he allows. “I don’t have much choice but to let all of these criminals go, do I?”

I shake my head.

“And you could have destroyed the entire camp if you wanted to. I appreciate that you didn’t.” He crosses his arms. “The Bowler Street Brothers put me in a terrible position. We’re here to serve as a place of refuge for all humans, but sometimes that means making deals with unsavory individuals.”

“I weep for you.”

The man waves away my sarcasm. “If we have such types here in the future, it only puts everyone else at risk. Even your girl there. If I were to call on you in the future, to clean house, let’s say...Is that something you’d be interested in?”

*No.*

Not even a bit. Human problems are beneath me and my kind. It’s like mediating a dispute between bugs.

Chase looks up at me and bites her lip.

*Fuck.*

“Fine.” I cross my arms. “Maybe. But we’re leaving now, and I don’t want any more arrows fired.”

The man pushes himself to his feet and dusts the straw from his legs. “I can arrange that.”

The people in the camp set up a hoqin to carry us back to the orphanage, but there’s no hoqin that can carry someone as large as me.

And Chase keeps sneaking looks up to me filled with adoration and warmth I thought I’d never see again.



Uri and Sarah mount the hoqin, and I pull Chase into my arms. She shrieks with joy as we fly into the night, and her arms loop tightly around my neck.

“Let’s go home.”

She presses a kiss against my neck. “Take me to the garden, first.”



## CHASE

“Are you almost done yet?” Thomas asks. “Levias is tired of waiting in the stable.”

Uri is balanced precariously on the edge of a chair, standing so that she can hang a dried bouquet of herbs and flowers in the corner of the room. “I’m going as fast as I can,” she snaps.

She stretches a little too far and loses her balance. Her hand flies out to steady herself, supporting herself against the wall. Then she tries again, managing to toss the string around the wooden beam of the roof.

Today is the day of my mating ceremony to Levias. He may be dark, brooding, and, quite frankly, a lot to take. But I love him, and he loves me, and we’re ready to officially celebrate that love.

Considering most of the townspeople are terrified of us, we’re just having a quiet ceremony at home. But we’ll make the most of it. It won’t be the most traditional affair, for several reasons, but it will be our own.

Hanging the bouquet in all four corners of the room is one of the few customs that we’re following exactly. It’s meant to ward off bad spirits, to ensure a happy future.

“Be useful and go bring the sapling in,” I suggest. Outside is a small potted tree that is supposed to be included in the ceremony. It will decorate the house until after we enjoy the cake and wine. We “water” the tree with a tiny sip of the wine,

and then plant it in the yard tomorrow. It's a symbol of our growing relationship, and another source of future blessings.

Uri seems to have the hang of it now. She drags the chair to the next corner of the room, hanging the next bouquet with ease. "I'm going to take my bath," I announce. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I got this," Uri agrees. The bath is a gargoyle tradition, though it's quite sensible. Just before Levias comes to claim me as his mate, I'm supposed to clean myself, and use certain oils and scents to prepare for the ceremony.

The idea of a luxurious, pampering bath had appealed to me greatly when he first mentioned it. It's not something that I get to indulge in often, and I thought I'd really enjoy it. Now that I'm in the moment, I realize that I'm too excited for what comes next to make the most of it. Still, I follow the steps exactly as he described, doing my best to hold up my end of the ritual.

When I'm clean and ready, I don the special dress that I made for today. It's a simple blue frock, but I'm pleased with how it turned out. It's a flattering cut for me, with a tight bodice that hugs my curves and a flared skirt that makes me appear tall and willowy.

I slip the veil over my face. It has several layers, making it hard to see through. I try to angle my head to find my way out of the bedroom, but finally just decide to pull the veil off for now. Levias is still outside, and I have time to put it back on before he arrives.

Veil in hand, I head back into the dining room. The tree is set up along the wall, close to the table but still out of the way. Uri has finished hanging the bouquets and moved the cake to the center of the table, along with plates and serving utensils.

I look around, taking in the scene and trying to think of anything that we're missing. Uri waits expectantly, her eyebrows raised as she silently stands by, prepared for the next order.

“I think we’re all set,” I finally admit, almost afraid to say it out loud. I want everything to go perfect, and what if I’m overlooking something?

*Well, in a house this big, nothing ever goes perfect, I remind myself, trying to manage my expectations. But it will be lovely, no matter what happens.*

“Should I get the kids?” she asks.

“And I’ll get Levias?” Thomas offers.

I sit down at the head of the table, and nervously give my assent. They scatter in different directions as I put the veil back on, pulling the heavy fabric over my face. In a few moments, I hear the noise of the children filing into the room, taking their seats around the table.

Through the cloth, I can’t see much. I can make out the vague movements of shapes, but nothing specific is discernible. I hope the kids managed to stay clean and presentable, the way they were directed.

There’s surprisingly little commotion, which is rare for this group. It seems that the seriousness of the occasion has been properly impressed upon them. There’s virtually no chatter, and the few bits of conversation that do occur are all in a hushed whisper. They’re a properly solemn group, and I feel a sense of relief to sense that they’re treating this with respect.

The back door opens and shuts with a bang, and Thomas comes rushing inside. At least, I assume it’s Thomas. This means that he’s given Levias the go-ahead, and we’ll be starting any minute. I draw in a shaky breath, my excitement starting to build. It feels real now, and I’m both nervous and giddy.

About a minute later, I hear the knock that I was expecting. I know, intuitively, that it’s Levias. If my father were alive, he’d be the one opening the door to greet my suitor, but instead Thomas has that job.

The fact that I can hardly see does nothing to amplify my senses, the way that I thought it would. It does the opposite, actually, making the whole event seem a bit confusing and

surreal. I can hear Thomas and Levias talking, and though I pick out bits and pieces, I can't make out the whole conversation.

I know that the gist must be Levias explaining that he's chosen me as his mate. That he's come to claim me for his own. Now he has to offer each member of the family a small present.

The tradition is that they accept his offering, and in return share a piece of cake with him – apparently there is one thing he likes other than meat and it's sweets. It's a glamourized version of breaking bread. Once they've both eaten the cake, it's the same as an agreement. They've given their approval to the relationship.

This is normally a much simpler process, intended for families of more ordinary size. In our case, Levias having to get the blessing of twelve others takes some time. It's helpful that Levias has a monstrous appetite, at least, since he's sharing twelve slices of cake.

I let out a little sigh of relief when he gets past Tony and Scott, and they play along without question. I half expected a prank or some other derailment, but they're quite somber and mature about the whole thing.

Finally, I can see the vague outline of his body, standing next to my chair. I hold my breath in anticipation as he pulls off the veil. The moment he looks at my face, we are officially mates, and everyone at the table cheers.

Thomas hurries to the kitchen to grab the wine, while Uri cuts a piece of the cake for me. The older kids jump up to help carry the rest of the food that we prepared for today out to the table. Now that the formal part is out of the way, we can spend the rest of the day as a family.

We'll eat, celebrate, and make special memories of this once-in-a-lifetime event.

In Levias' case, that almost doesn't sound strong enough. It's a once-in-a-century event.

---

It took longer than we would have liked, to move onto the next significant moment of our special day. But slowly, the kids ate their fill and grew tired of the party. They began to filter away from the table, changing their clothes so that they could play outside.

I didn't beg them to stay. I was too eager to be alone with Levias, who seemed to be coyly trying to tempt me. Every move of his body, even the gentle placement of his hand on my arm, made my nerves fire up. I knew what was coming next.

I begin to clean up the used dishes, using it as a distraction for my racing mind. I'm concentrating on the task at hand when the last of the children finally gravitate outside.

Levias creeps up behind me at the sink, his arms shooting out to wrap around my waist. His voice rumbles low in my ear. "We can do that later," he says. "There's something I'm looking forward to right now."

I lean against him, feeling boneless. "What's that?" I whisper back.

"Claiming my mate," he replies hoarsely.

His head swoops down, kissing my neck. His hands begin to slide up my frame, stopping to cup my breasts. I inhale sharply as he tweaks the thumbs across the nipples, sending a jolt of electricity through my very core.

"The bedroom," I reply, turning my head toward his. He responds by pressing his lips against mine, ravishing my mouth.

Breaking apart for air, he grabs my arm to lead me to the bedroom. His hands begin to roam again, all over my body. He presses me against him as we walk, as though we can't bear to be apart, though it makes the journey that much more difficult.

My heart is racing in my chest so loud that I think Levias must hear it. We stumble through the doorframe of the

bedroom, and he kicks the door shut behind him.

He slides the arms of my dress off my shoulders, and the fabric begins to slide to the floor. With a few more tugs, I am naked before him. His eyes light with desire, looking me over appreciatively.

Though Levias only wears a simple loincloth, he's now overdressed for the occasion. I hook my hands in the material at his hips, unfastening it. It shimmies down his hips, pooling on the floor with my dress.

Our lips meet once more as we step past the clothes, heading toward the bed. My hands splay across his muscular chest, and he lifts me in his arms to place me on the bed.

His mouth closes around one of my nipples, his hand skimming over the other one. I moan, my hips arching at the sensation. He pinches the nipple gently between his fingers, increasing my pleasure.

After a few moments, his hands slide across my hips, making me shiver with delight. They make their way south, and I open my legs in invitation. With one hand, he inserts two fingers into my wet pussy, beginning to move them in and out. The thumb brushes across my clit, making me moan again. My breath quickens as he continues his ministrations, until my first orgasm crashes through me.

Everything feels delightfully hazy, my nerve ends still tingling as I come down from my climax. He positions himself to slide his cock into my wet folds. He uses his arms to support his body, keeping from crushing me with his weight, and begins to thrust.

"Levias," I moan softly in his ear, feeling the prickling heat at the back of my neck that tells me another orgasm is building. Our eyes lock as he thrusts deep inside of me, and I lift my hips to meet him.

"You're mine," he growls.

"I'm yours," I cry out in agreement, and my entire body flushes as my second orgasm wracks my body. My walls



tighten around him. His eyes close briefly as he groans, and I can feel him filling me with his seed.

When he is spent, he rolls to lie beside me. I'm a bit delirious and disjointed, stunned by the pleasure of two back-to-back orgasms of such intensity. I lay there for a moment, gathering my wits, as he trails a gentle hand across my side.

"I'm glad you're mine," he says in a quiet voice. It's almost meek, and so out of character that I feel even more disoriented by the statement. He clears his throat immediately, as though he can remove any evidence that he said something so sweet.

But it is sweet, whether it embarrasses him or not. I tilt my head to face him, kissing his nose. He makes a disgusted face, but I can tell by his eyes that he's secretly pleased.

"I'm glad I'm yours, too," I answer honestly.



## LEVIAS

**I**t looks like the humans learned their lesson. For now.

The townspeople do not bother Chase or the orphans anymore. Ever since I got rid of Arthur Ripley and the rest of those vile human creatures, the town has calmed down. This is what Chase tells me, anyway.

I believe her. We share a strong bond and I know when she's lying to me.

She feels a growing concern for one of her orphans ever since the incident. It's the eldest one. Uri.

She's a purna. Whenever I am near her, I feel a dull pulse of magic emanating off her body. She must have been activated when they detained her. I doubt she knows the extent of her powers, which is dangerous. An untrained purna can easily lose control.

I don't want to deal with a rowdy purna. Not again.

Chase and I find Uri sitting alone outside, observing the natural beauty of the world around us. Chase warns me not to be too upfront with the girl, but I'm not too sure what that means. I speak the truth. Am I not allowed to?

"Just... don't make her feel uncomfortable. Please."

"I would never do such a thing on purpose."

"Yes, yes, I know, but you have a difficult history with her kind, and if it's true that she's a purna, she might believe that

you see her as an enemy. I don't want that to happen. I would hate to make her feel uncomfortable in her own home."

"Fine. I won't say anything to her."

Chase approaches first. She takes the seat next to the girl and bumps shoulders with her. I stand in front of them, watching their interactions silently. She truly loves this girl. I don't know why.

"Are you feeling alright, Uri?"

"No. Not really." Uri hugs herself. "The townspeople don't like me." Her voice gets quieter. "I think the other kids are growing wary of me, too."

"What do they say to you?"

"They accuse me of being a purna. I-I'm not one of them." She lets out a shaky breath. "At least, I don't think so."

"Is it true that you lit the guard's sleeve on fire when you tried to save me from the gibbon?"

"I don't know if it was me! That could have happened for some other reason. Maybe he bumped into a candle and lit himself on fire. I don't know!"

"Uri, I walked through those same hallways as you did. They don't have candles hanging along the walls."

"Well, I don't know what happened." Uri turns away from Chase and stares at the ground. She shrugs away from Chase's touch. "I don't want to talk about it, either. The townspeople give me a hard enough time as it is."

I step forward. "Would you like me to—"

Chase points a finger at me and makes a noise. She *shushes* me. I'm taken aback slightly.

"No. Absolutely not. You are not going to mess with those people ever again. Do you hear me?"

"If they are bothering her—"

"You're not going to involve yourself in this situation and that's final." Her words are stern and she's staring at me

intensely. Her lips purse together. “We don’t need a repeat of what happened. The mayor was kind enough to accept our deal. We’re not going to push the boundaries after they showed us clemency.”

“They’re mean to me, Chase,” Uri whispers. She’s refusing to lock gazes with Chase. Instead, she stares at the tiny bugs on the ground, wiggling around and darting through their makeshift holes. “They say horrible things to me whenever I’m in town. I don’t like it here. I don’t.”

“Does that mean you want to leave the orphanage?” Chase asks, voice barely above a whisper. Gradually, she places her hand upon Uri’s shoulder. “You’re old enough to go your own way, you know. I’d prefer if you stayed with me, but if this is what you truly want—”

“You should try and find the Snowfall Glen Coven in the mountains,” I say.

Chase and Uri stare up at me with wide eyes.

“The what?” Uri repeats, jutting out her neck. “I’ve never heard of that before.”

“...Me, neither. What are you talking about, Levias?”

“It’s a coven that helps train young and inexperienced purna, such as yourself.” I gesture towards her. “They will accept you into their ranks and they will show you what it means to be a purna. There, you will be able to develop your skills freely without having to worry about troublesome humans bothering you for your talents.”

“But I...” Uri stares at her hands. “How do I know I’m a purna? I don’t *feel* like one.”

“Aren’t you able to perform magic on others?” I tilt my head. “That’s the first step. It’s a subconscious one. You don’t have to feel it. The events just occur.”

“How do you feel about that?” Chase asks, tucking Uri’s hair strands behind her ear. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. We won’t force you to leave. And even if you do leave, I hope you know that you’ll always have a bed in the orphanage with me.”

“Stop coddling her and let her make a choice,” I retort, ignoring the way she stares at me with scorn. “At her age, humans are independent. Aren’t they not?”

“They are, but...” Chase sighs. “I’m going to miss her.”

Uri smiles slightly. Then, she reaches for Chase’s hand and gives it a tight squeeze.

“I don’t want to leave you, but these townspeople aren’t giving me much of a choice. I won’t be happy if I stay here for long. They might just drive me out sooner or later.”

“In that case—”

“Can I come?”

In the distance, a woman carries a basket full of flowers and herbs. It’s Sarah, Arthur Ripley’s sister. I still have not apologized for tearing off her brother’s head, which is Chase’s suggestion. I don’t think I should. He was doing a disservice to this town and I am skilled at clearing out pests.

“Sarah?” Chase’s eyebrows furrow together. “Were you eavesdropping on our conversation?”

“Not intentionally. I was picking flowers while I enjoyed my afternoon walk. I accidentally heard fragments of your conversation with Uri, but it caught my attention so I kept listening in.” Sarah rounds the tree we’re under and approaches Uri. “Do you think I can accompany you to the coven?”

“Why?” Uri eyes her up and down. “Are you a purna, too?”

“No, I don’t think so. I don’t feel a sliver of magic within me, if I’m being honest.” Sarah offers a sad smile. “I just feel useless here.”

“Why’s that? You do a great job collecting herbs for us to use,” Chase argues.

Yet, Sarah shakes her head.

“I have a bad reputation for my brother’s actions. I don’t blame everyone for feeling that way. He did awful things to

the camp and its people, but I don't want to be associated with him anymore. I want a new start elsewhere.”

“And you want to start in the mountains with a bunch of purna?” I ask. Humans don't make any sense. I'm still trying to understand the way they think, but they make it so impossible.

“Anywhere is better than here. I don't think Uri wants to go about this alone, either.” Sarah kneels down so that she's eye-level with Uri. “Have you ever ventured off alone by yourself?”

“No.”

“Have you ever done anything like this before?”

“No.” Uri wrinkles her nose. “Why are you so willing to help me?”

“I guess I need some sort of redemption,” she admits softly. “I stood around and watched my brothers terrorize the townspeople for far too long. This might give me a chance to make up for my wrongdoings.”

“Are you sure you're going to take care of Uri? With your life, if necessary?” Chase asks. “I don't want anything happening to her. I want to see her come back to us one day after she's developed her skills.”

“I promise that I will do the best I can with her. I want to help!” Sarah pats Uri on the shoulder. “As long as you'll let me, I'll be there.”

“If you two head off into the mountains together, may I ask one request?”

Sarah and Uri look at me.

“Let me know if you find any other gargoyles in those mountains. You can even send me a message about it.” I stare at those jagged peaks in the distance, wondering if there are more like me still trapped in their cursed state. “I would like to know about this, if so.”

“What if they attack us?”

“Why would they do such a thing?” I ask. “We don’t attack unless provoked.”

“Well, you set a pretty bad example for them to go off of,” Chase teases lightly, nudging Uri in the side to get her to laugh. “They’re smart for being hesitant about that.”

“Just let me know if you see any of them. Please.”

“We’ll make sure to do so, Levias,” Sarah says, helping Uri to stand. “Thanks for telling us about this coven in the first place.”

Chase leads them into the house and helps them with their preparations. They pack their few belongings into knapsacks that Chase provides, along with some fruits and bread slices. I watch her dash around the kitchen while she helps Sarah and Uri.

Meanwhile, the strange looking human child stares at me from her seat at the dining room table. Her hair is dark and her eyes are sullen. She doesn’t behave like the rest of the small humans. Most of them are loud and too curious about the world. This one is silent, but never stops staring. I’m her focus right now.

“What?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing. I’m just looking at you.”

“And for what?”

She shrugs. I don’t think I have ever seen this one smile.

“I think you look strange.” She opens her fist and stares into her palm. Then, she shows me what it contains. “Do you like him?”

“What is that?” I twist up my face. “Is that a creature? A bug?”

“He’s dead. He’s going in my collection with the rest of them.”

“You have a bug collection?”

She nods. “But they’re dead.”



“Why would you want to have that? They can’t *do* anything. They’re just lying there, taking up space!”

“I like them.”

“You are one of the strangest humans I have ever seen.”

“And you’re just strange. Period.” She closes her fist and continues staring at me. “It’s a good thing Chase likes you. At least you have something going for you.”

I can’t disagree with the little human. She leaves before I have the chance to respond. By then, Sarah and Uri are packed up and ready to set off on their adventure. Chase cries as she gives them a hug. She whispers a few things into Uri’s ear that I’m too far away to overhear.

We follow them out to the dirt path that directs them towards the mountains. Chase waves goodbye and doesn’t stop until the two of them are nothing but two specks in the distance. She wipes her tears furiously until the underneath of her eyes are red and raw.

“It’s alright,” I say. I wrap my arm around her and pull her close. She rests her head against my arm. “We will see them again. Just wait.”

“I know.” She snuffles, nodding her head. “It’ll happen some day. I can’t wait to see Uri’s progress when she returns. I’m sure she will be one of the most talented purna around.”

“I suppose I can be happy about that.” I reach over and rest my hand above Chase’s stomach. It’s starting to bulge. “But I’m more happy about the future we are creating together.”

She rests her hand on top of mine. “Me, too.”

She’s the woman I love and she’s carrying our unborn child. I will stop at nothing to protect them from everything and anything that wants to harm them.

Woe to the creatures who even dare to try.



## SARAH

“Does it feel weird?” I glance back at Camp Hope in the distance. We can barely see it anymore. I don’t know how long we’ve been walking, but it feels like ages. My legs burn, but it’s nice to know that we’re leaving that place behind.

“What?”

“You’re leaving the only place you’ve ever known. How does it feel? You’re independent now.”

“I don’t feel any different. I didn’t think it was supposed to change me in a drastic way.”

“You’re right. The changes come slowly. You’re going to have to start making decisions for yourself now. It’s a tough world, so you have to prepare yourself quickly.”

“I think I can handle it.” Uri readjusts her grip on her knapsack. “Chase taught me a lot of survival skills because I was the oldest one there. If anything, I’m going to miss my siblings. I hope they don’t miss me too much once they realize I’m not coming back for a while.”

“They will. I can tell they love you very much. They look up to you. Even the creepy little one—”

“Haley.”

I like that. She knows precisely who I’m talking about.

“She leaves an impression on most people, doesn’t she?”

“She’s unique. I’m going to miss her.” Uri stares up at the mountain we’re climbing. Then, she pauses. She digs her heels into the incline, making sure she doesn’t tumble. “It’s going to take a while to find this coven. I really hope we’re headed in the right direction.”

“Yeah. I hope that gargoyle didn’t lie to us.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a chance that there’s no coven at all and he lied to us so we could get lost in the mountains and die.” I glance at her. My remark doesn’t faze her. “What? That’s not scary to you?”

“He cares about Chase. He wouldn’t do that to us because he knows that will just hurt her.”

“Well... she wouldn’t *know* that we’re hurt. We would just never be heard from again.”

“That would still make her sad.” Uri shakes her head. “We should trust him. Let’s keep going.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want to drink some water?” Chase packed me a metal container filled with water. I hand it over to Uri. “Drink up. I don’t want you passing out on me when we’re barely starting this journey.”

Uri takes a long gulp from the container before passing it back to me. She wipes away the stray water droplets that trickle down her chin. Then, we continue.

“I never thought you’d be so nice,” she says, which makes me laugh.

“Why’s that?”

“Because of your brothers.” Uri glances at me. “They used to boss everyone around and intimidate the people they came across, including our orphanage. They terrorized Chase for some time before her protector came along.”

“Ah, yes. Her protector.” I bump shoulders with the girl. “We went through a lot of trouble because of those two, didn’t we?”

“I never thought I’d get imprisoned. It was a scary experience, but I’m glad I didn’t have to go through it alone.”

“Mhm. I’m surprised you allowed me to tag along in the first place.”

“To be honest, Thomas didn’t want you to come. He thought that you were a spy for the BSB, so he didn’t want to let you follow us into town, but I talked him out of that. We were all panicked and we just wanted Chase to be alright. I’m glad they didn’t hurt her because Levias would have—”

“You don’t have to mention that.” I shake my head. “We know what he would have done. It would have been worse than his original carnage.”

Uri’s shoulders slump. “Yeah. It was bad.”

“How did you manage to get that guy’s sleeve on fire?”

Her eyes widen and her mouth falls slightly open. She stumbles over her words a few times. Then, her cheeks redden.

“I-I still don’t know what happened back there. Like I said, he probably bumped into a candle and blamed it on me.”

“Now, you know that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course it does.”

“No one around us was holding a candle and there were no candles in that hallway, so your argument isn’t standing up on its two feet.”

“Yeah, okay.” Uri blows out a puff of air. I don’t know if her cheeks are red from the exertion or from the embarrassment. “I still don’t know how that happened. Why?”

“Just curious. I thought it was pretty cool. It helped us out in the moment. That guard was about to yank a tuft of my hair out if you didn’t intervene.”

“I was scared. That’s all I remember.” She shrugs, keeping her gaze on her feet. “It overwhelmed me and I froze up. I didn’t know what to do, but I felt the walls closing in on us. Like the world was collapsing, you know?”

I nod.

“I focused on the guard that was grabbing you and threatening you. Then, it just...” She makes a motion with her hand. “Everything exploded in seconds.”

“Everything?”

“The feelings inside me. I lost control. And that’s when the fire started.”

I snort, remembering how the guard thrashed around and screamed like a dying animal as his arm burned. His friends tried to help him extinguish the flames, but he ended up tossing himself on the ground and rolling around a few times.

After that, they accused us of being purna and threw us into the gibbon. What a turn of events!

“I don’t see why that’s important anymore.”

I point towards the top of the mountain. It’s getting more difficult to breathe the farther we ascend.

“We are trying to find some coven hidden in these mountains because we suspect that you’re a purna. Of course it’s important. That’s the only reason why we’re here in the first place!”

“What if it wasn’t magic? What if it was just—”

“Oh, enough of this,” I say, waving her off. “I think you’re a purna. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re not among the townspeople anymore. You’re with me.”

“Sure, but what if you think like one of them and you secretly hate me?”

“Seriously?” I quip, raising a brow. “After everything we’ve been through? I wouldn’t have volunteered to guide you to this coven if I secretly hated you.”

“I guess. Sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. I can tell the question made you nervous. I never meant for that to happen. I just hoped that you could use some of your magic to protect us in case we were attacked by something. Or someone.”

“What would attack us here?” Uri gazes at our surroundings. Low shrubs, gravel, dirt, and scurrying creatures. “It looks like we’re alone.”

“Yeah, it *looks* like that. But what about when nightfall comes and we’re all alone in the cold? We need some protection.” I look at our outfits and the pitiful little knapsacks we’re carrying on our backs. “I don’t think we thought this one out very well.”

“I don’t think you should count on me to protect us. My magic isn’t very reliable.” She rubs at her palms. “If you can even *call* this magic.”

“What else would it be? You have a special gift. You should embrace it because it’s a part of who you are. Once you join this coven, what are you going to do? Are you going to develop your powers?”

“I don’t know. You’re asking me too many questions at once.”

“Sorry. We can go one at a time.”

“Let’s take a break,” Uri says, resting her hands on her hips. “I can’t breathe very well.”

“Just calm down. Do you need some more water?”

“No, I want to stop moving for a second. I’m tired.”

“You’ve never done something like this before, huh?”

“I’ve never gone to the mountains before! I have never experienced so much of this world all at once.” Uri stares at the mountain peaks with wide eyes. They’re still so huge and we’re still so tiny. “It’s amazing. I never thought this was possible.”

“Why didn’t you go out on adventures with your siblings back at the orphanage?” I shrug. “You guys could have explored the world for yourselves.”

“We were afraid of the BSB. Plus, we didn’t want to worry Chase by straying too far. She would have been hysterical if she saw our beds empty in the morning.”

“I’m sorry about them.” I’m going to be apologizing for my brothers’ actions for the rest of my life. They did unspeakable things and I’m the only one who can make things right. “I should have stopped them from going after you kids, but they never listened to me.”

“It’s alright. I don’t blame you for anything. They didn’t seem like the type of people to respect someone’s wishes, anyway. They just trampled over everyone in their path.” Uri sighs through her nostrils. “I wish Levias would have just killed Arthur and not all of those other innocent people.”

“He managed to kill a lot of BSB members, but...”

“Yeah. I know what happened. Everyone does.”

“What if we manage to find our own gargoyle protectors on our journey to the coven?” I wiggle my eyebrows at the girl. She laughs, then waves her hand to the side.

“No. I don’t want one.”

“Really? It sounds pretty cool!”

“No! If he’s going to be capable of the same things Levias is capable of, then no. I can live without him. I can fend for myself, thank you very much.”

“Suit yourself, but if I manage to find one, I might let him tag along.”

“Well, let’s make sure he doesn’t rampage through an innocent village when that happens.”

I hand her some more water. Her breathing rate is starting to return to normal. As I look back towards Camp Hope, I see a peculiar mass in the distance. A crowd.

“What the...?”

Uri turns around and quickly sees what I am seeing. Then, she gasps. Her hands cover her mouth.

“They’re coming for us.”

“What?” I shake my head and laugh. No. That sounds too ridiculous. “How do you know?”



“They’re holding pitchforks and swords.” Uri stares at me. Then, she grabs my wrist. “We need to run.”

*Fuck.* Running up a mountain while my legs scream for mercy? This isn’t fun.

I think Uri is right, though. That mob is heading right towards us. Who else would they be after? Someone told them that we left, but who?

That’s too complicated to think about right now. I’m scrambling to follow Uri up the mountain path, digging my nails into the loose gravel and hurrying my way up on all fours. We steer away from the main path and scamper down a more secluded route through shrubs and low trees.

Uri stops abruptly and I nearly slam into her back. Her breath hitches in her throat.

“Should we go in here?”

The building in front of us looks completely abandoned, but it doesn’t look safe, either. The exterior walls are painted black and there are no plants surrounding its perimeter. It’s an old temple, with a shabby bell tower and holes in the rooftops.

The screams in the distance are getting louder. We have to act quickly.

“Sarah, we don’t have any other choice,” Uri says. “We need to hide!”

“In there?” This is just my luck. “Does it have to be *there?*”

“What other building do we have to choose from?!” Uri exclaims. “They’re not going to find us here! Come on!”

I’m digging my heels into the ground, but Uri is persistent. She grabs my wrist and all but drags me towards the temple. The lynch mob nears closer. With each step towards the temple, the more my heart sinks. Fear fills my heart.

“I don’t think we should do this...”

“I’m sorry, but we can’t afford to look elsewhere.”

Uri opens the temple, having to use all her strength to tug the massive door open. She pushes me inside and I trip over an uneven plank as I go in.

Behind me, Uri slams the door shut. I don't see anything, but I hear the mob.

“Give us the purna!”

In the darkness, I wrap my arms around Uri.

“We'll hang the purna!”

The End

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## **PREVIEW OF MATED TO THE DARK ELF**

The Worlds of Protheka is a vast and growing world. Check out the standalone series starter, Mated to the Dark Elf

Mated to the Dark Elf

By Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)



## AMELIE

### Amelie

**I**t feels like my birthday.

It's not that I'm excellent at keeping track of the days, from the window of this little room. Hardly a room at all, I have to admit. No, it's a feeling I have in the pit of my stomach, that's growing more sour with every passing day. The tension of my keepers, getting impatient as I come of age. I must be twenty, by now, though the seasons have drifted by like the clouds above. Meaningless.

I lean against the narrow frame of the window, watching the street below. It's my only entertainment here. The lone book they gave me weathered and worn from too many read throughs. I already know it by heart. They don't think humans need much to survive. This place is little more than a cell: a toilet, a bed, a sink... Enough to keep me alive, and little else.

It's not unknown what the dark elves do here, at Club L'amouer. I've heard the screams for years, of pleasure and pain. I was brought here as a child, under the impression that it was safe compared to the rest of the empire.

But that is not the case.

They refuse to tell me why I haven't yet been thrown into the pit with my friends, to be played with by their patrons until I expire. I've heard stories from Honey and have seen the marks. I've waited in this room for years, biding my time until

they decide to drag me out and submit me to their wicked whims.

Every day, I have to wonder, *is this it?*

There is a strict order in their world. The upper caste of dark elves that rule over everyone else, and their appointed talents—from artists to warriors and minor nobles. The lower caste, merchants and laborers and even criminals have a place in their society. Humans and the other species don't even make the rank, existing beneath their feet, entirely at the mercy of their dark magic. We subsist as little more than pets for their amusement.

I am worth only what my master can sell me for.

Swift footsteps sweep past my door, making me cringe. It is not often the dark elves come down this hall, but when they do, it is smart to be afraid. Hopefully, they pass by without a word. I would rather miss a meal than come face to face with a Zagfer—dark elf servants with a heavy chip on their shoulders.

They do the club master's bidding without hesitation, but there's a gleam in their dark eyes as if, without their shackles, they're capable of greater evil than even their master can imagine. I shudder at the very thought of them.

Another set of footsteps closes in, and I brace myself, listening for their passing. But instead, they stop at my door. Again, I have to ask myself, *is this it?* when a heavy knock jars me from my focus.

“Amelie,” comes a deep and grating voice.

I say nothing.

A key scrapes the lock, and the knob turns. It opens to one of *them*, just as I feared. He says nothing as he takes me in, his hard eyes roving over my threadbare clothes concealed by the washed out robe I use to cover myself. I tuck it tighter around my chest as if to hide my frame from him, but it does nothing to deter his hungry gaze.

“What do you want?”

His grin broadens, his massive frame barely fitting in the room as he enters and reaches for me. I'm too frightened to pull away when he grabs me by the arm, jostling me and forcing me to my feet. Even as he drags me out of the room, I try to secure the robe that's slipped around my shoulders.

My voice quivers when I dare speak out against his handling. "What's the meaning of this? Where are you taking me?"

He says nothing, my heavy boots clomping harder than his fine leather soles, though he's easily twice my height and three times my weight. I am not prepared for whatever they have planned, though I've been waiting most of my life to find out. My limbs are weak from years of captivity, and my knees give out on me.

But the dark elf won't let me collapse, his grip too tight around my elbow.

The sounds of couplings are louder here, and the smell of hot flesh and sex is noxious. I can barely breathe as he drags me through their menagerie of rooms, some doors open to reveal the goings on inside.

I catch only glances, but the images sear themselves into my mind.

A woman is shackled from the ceiling, her body strained between heavy manacles that pull her taut as a dark elf patron rails her from behind. Her screams are senseless and batting, and I know she must be in great pain. It's a hard contrast to the gratification blooming over her host's countenance. In another room, several dark elves are crowded around a human who can't even let out a scream, choking on some kind of foul liquid. I can't even tell if they're male or female. All I can see is the surge of their flesh between the naked limbs of their dark elf masters.

Is that what will happen to me?

*Of course, not,* comes a small voice inside of me, *I am the most expensive pet here. They will reserve me for something far worse, I'm sure.* The thought brings tears to my eyes,

blurring the horrible display as I am dragged toward the front of the building.

A human male nearly bolts from his captor, only to be dragged back in by a heavy dark hand and onto a waiting cock. Even as he struggles, his own cock goes hard against his will, and I understand the gleam of fear in his eyes as he stares right through me.

The space opens to more of the same, and as horrible as the sight is, I can't tear my gaze away. There's a woman, shackled to the bottom of a shallow pool, her head barely above the yellow waters as several dark elves take aim at her face. Hot streams cut off her gasps and make her choke as they laugh at her expense.

Two more sit atop human figures—who strain beneath the weight of them—watching with glee as the woman slowly drowns in their collective fluids. There are people strung from the ceiling here too, unmoving. I can't be sure if they're still alive or not, but no one seems to care. They're finished with those ones, and they'll be dragged away soon enough.

I want to puke.

But showing weakness will only make my punishment more severe, when it finally comes. I have to remain stoic and silent among the worst of it. The hot panting of a dark elf as he mounts one of the unconscious humans echoes in my mind, even as we turn down another hall, away from the gruesome orgy.

I can breathe a little better here, though the air is still thick with the reek of sex.

The Zagfer catches me by the nape of my neck and leads me forward, his grip tightening as we near the master's office. A chill runs up my spine as I tear out of his grasp and turn to face him. He may be doing his master's bidding, but he is not my owner, and I will not be treated like a pet by him. "Get your hands *off* me, Zagfer."

He takes no offense to his title, measuring me up and licking his lips.



Disgust finds me again and I straighten. What is the point of being the most sought after pet if I am subjected to the whims of the master's servants? He wants to sell me to the highest bidder, and for that, I need to be pure before they put me on the auction block.

I bare my teeth at him in the only language they know and grab the handle to the master's door. "It will *never* be your turn," I say with certainty, stealing the smug expression from his face. He glowers at me as I turn the handle and enter.

I am pleased with myself, until that too is stolen from me.



## KRAL ISHIRAYA

The silence of my study is a blessing.

It is free from the fickle emotions of court, and insulated from the whims of my family. Many in my position might have abused the authority of it by now, but I'd rather be studying the royal accounts, hidden away in my private chambers.

My brother, the King, respects my wishes to a point. But he insists that I still make appearances from time to time, so our subjects don't think I've disappeared entirely from proper society. They'll begin to wonder and talk.

It's the talk that I hate most.

Even those I respect are prey to it, where I am immune. It is no wonder why, however. We all know the story of how I was forced to seal away my emotions because they were simply too powerful when tethered to my magical abilities.

It's easier this way.

I prefer it, not having to worry about the subtleties that plague every interaction as the Archduke of my brother's kingdom. They will say one thing and mean something entirely different. They should simply pass around a ledger and sign their names under friend or foe, so that I know which to trust and which to have executed. I don't enjoy parsing through their words like puzzles to be solved.

Numbers make more sense than they.

A soft knock at my door makes my shoulders tense. I say nothing, in hopes that it is a stray Zagfer who will leave if I do not respond. The knock comes again and I sigh, surrendering the pages to my desk. “Go away.”

The door opens a crack, and I realize it cannot be a servant. A servant wouldn't dare disobey an order from the Archduke. So, it must be one from among my family, coming to pry at why I have not left my chambers in days.

His presence is subtle but unmistakable. “Cousin,” comes his silky voice. “Don't these walls grow tiresome?”

“They suit me quite well, actually,” I grumble, lowering my head as if I am engrossed in my work, though I am the furthest thing from it. His very presence raises my hackles. “Don't *you* have some party to attend in the city, Carisu?”

“Not without you, Kral,” he says, levering off the wall and making himself at home in my study. He falls into one of my favorite overstuffed chairs and runs his hands up the arms. When I turn to glare at him, a smug look has taken over his dark face, and one leg is draped lazily over the other, his fine shoe wagging impatiently. “Come out with me tonight. I insist.”

“Insist all you like,” I respond, “I much prefer the company of my books-”

“Which have been balanced and balanced again!” he cries, slamming a fist against the padding of the chair, hardly making a thud. “You have not been seen in public for over a fortnight. Do you even exist anymore, cousin? The other nobles are beginning to question it.”

I straighten the pages in front of me and sigh, considering what my brother had told me, not so long ago. *I cannot make you do anything, brother, but please, for the sake of our family, you must uphold our social status.*

*An Archduke that doesn't ever socialize is not a proper Archduke at all.*

*You are an extension of us, and should flaunt our power and influence among the higher caste. There is a city for you*

*to explore. Explore it!*

*And carry with you our name in pride.*

I scoff under my breath, shaking my head. “Explore, huh?”

“What was that?” Carisu asked, leaning forward in his chair. Out of all our family, he always had the keenest of our sharp elven ears. “You admit it, then? You will come out with me?”

“I said nothing of the sort.”

That smile is back as Carisu flashes his sharp canines. “I have just the place in mind for you, cousin. Maybe it will liven you up a bit and bring a healthy flush to your cheeks in the process.” He stands in a sweep of his finely cut surcoat and offers a hand. “The women will fall at your feet—and mine too—if you make an appearance.”

With the utmost consideration, I return the sheaves to their binder. “I have no interest in seeking out trouble with you on the streets of Vhoig. You have friends who would gladly-

“But they are rats! Son of K’sheng that can’t even vote in parliament! They are nothing in the light of you, oh great Archduke of Vhoig.” He closes the distance between us and grabs my shoulders, nearly shaking me with his frustration. “What can I do to convince you to leave this hovel?”

I push him away. “Go bother someone else. I will hear no more of this nonsense.”

Carisu doesn’t accept my answer, spinning me around by the shoulder. “There is delicious food among the Zagfer that you have never even tried!”

I sweep his hand off my shoulder.

“Great treasures to be bought on the black market,” he insists as I adjourn to my closet. “And women, cousin. Oh, the women!”

“I have no interest in love.”

My cousin scoffs. “Who said anything about love?”

I stall as I reach into my wardrobe. I'd happily leave my study if he were to remain behind. "You speak of the skin market, then. A most deplorable pastime. How many slaves do you own now, Carisu?"

"Ah, but they break so easily. They must be replaced on occasion."

His little value of human life almost makes me disgusted. Almost. "I have no time for your games," I say, donning a sleek black cloak, my last resort to lose this philandering cousin of mine. "If your business is done, I really must ask you to leave."

Carisu troubles himself with fastening the clasp of my cloak like a Zagfer, patting it down until the folds are smoothed out. "Come with me, please. I don't want to go alone, and I will get a better price if you're sitting beside me. It will only be for a little while, and then you can return to your study. The King, long may he reign, will be satisfied with your attendance in public. You need only sit there and watch the proceedings."

I meet his eye and scrutinize his mercurial features. "Who told you?"

He shrugs and withdraws with a dismissive air. "The walls might as well be made of paper, cousin. You should know that by now. And besides, it doesn't matter who told me. We are all family here."

"*We* are hardly family."

"Then, let's change that." He links his arm in mine like a close friend, though he's antagonized me for as long as I can recall. "I want to know what you fancy, and what makes you smile. I've only ever seen that scowl of yours, hiding much emotion, I'm sure."

"You know better than that," I say, though I can feel my will crumbling. I could blast him out of the third story window with just a pulse of my magic, but I don't have it in me. "Why are you so insistent?"

“Because, I fear you are drifting away from us.” He leans in and lowers his voice. “And so does the King. Soon, the whole of the city will suspect it, too, and your position will not be secure. Even the King cannot guarantee your protection. You know that.

“But if you make the occasional appearance, you’ll show them that you are a dark elf to be reckoned with.” He stares hard into my eyes, searching for something that has long since been locked away. “You don’t even need to flaunt your magic,” he continues, adjusting my cloak again. “You need only attend.”

A long sigh escapes me, and my jaw works in consideration. “Just this once.”

Carisu’s features light up instantly. “I’ll take it.”

I chew on my lower lip in true resignation. My cousin certainly has a way of wearing a soul down. “When did you say you wanted to leave?”





## AMELIE

I walk into Rhakis' office with my head bowed. I don't want to show any signs of defiance here. My life may be horrible, but it can always get worse, especially in a place like L'amouer.

"Amelie, it's lovely to see you this evening. How are you faring?"

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

The look in the manager's eye hints at one of the ways my life could get so much worse. We exchange pleasantries because that's expected of me, but I know what he really wants. As if I needed any more than the lustful stare to tell, he lets his robe fall open, revealing his massive erection.

"Frustrated."

Any other girl called in here would take this as the signal to bring him to bliss. And while his nakedness and lichenous stare make my skin crawl, I know he would never dare to touch me. I'm too valuable, untouched and pure.

I'm one of L'amouer's 'select stocks.' At a young age, with a little bit of divination magic, they select those who will grow up to be the most desirable. We are sequestered away from the rest, and our training is a much different matter. While others are taught how to perform carnal acts, we are trained in dancing, music, singing, and other forms of entertainment to keep our dark elf masters entertained in between whatever debauchery they have planned for us.

The manager gives a sharp whistle, and then another woman comes into the room, crawling on all fours like a dog. I keep my face serene, but my heart aches for her. Honey wasn't selected like I was. I don't know when the training starts for the others, but by the time I met her, she already had the lifeless stare of someone who begs for death, knowing they'll never get it.

I'm also ignorant of exactly what hell she's gone through. I only know of mine. But while the exact nature of our torments is different, we both hate this place and hate men like Rhakis with every fiber of our being. I don't know if mutual, seething hatred of someone is the best basis for a friendship, but it's how our companionship started.

Honey crawls over to Rhakis and starts licking up and down his cock before letting the head pass between her lips. While his sneer never falters, he swallows hard as she manages to take far more of him into her mouth than should be possible. These are the things the girls like Honey are trained to do. For her, this is rote. And while she makes enthusiastic sounds, acting as though his cock in her mouth brings her to ecstasy, I'm sure everyone in the room knows it's an act.

It's something that will be expected of me when I'm sold, but to maintain my purity, my lessons have never been hands-on, so to speak. I've been made to watch it often. I've seen enough blow jobs to know that Honey's technique is flawless, wet, and sloppy, but not excessively so. Her breath control is admirable, something that makes me wonder how well she'd do playing a flute made of wood instead of flesh.

I have trained on illusions, and to be sure that no one is tempted to trick me, most of those I've cast myself. They're minor illusions, but I'm apparently quite adept. At the illusions. I don't know how well I can suck cock. Ephemeral magic constructs don't naturally spasm and twitch as their crown starts to brush the back of your throat.

But the praise for fellating phantasms does little to stop the way my stomach turns at the thought of actually having to do it to a real person, to whichever dark elf happens to purchase me for the express purpose of deflowering me.

But even as expertly as Honey sucks his cock, Rhakis' eyes stay fixed on me. I'd have to be a complete fool not to understand that he's imagining it's me on my knees in front of him.

Honey gags slightly and backs off, but that simply won't do for Rhakis. He grabs her head, forcing it down on his cock further, and from my angle, I can just make out the way his cock makes her throat expand as he pushes more and more into her.

Honey's face is starting to turn blue. Her eyes and nose are running, and I think for a moment that Rhakis is going to actually suffocate her with his cock, either because he's too busy watching me to know that Honey is suffering, or it's the suffering that gets him off. Honey tries feebly to push away, but he just holds her there.

I mustn't move. I want to rush to her. Beat him back, pull her free and give her air, but our lives are not our own. Just as her eyes start to fade, Rhakis pulls out, and while Honey gasps for breath, he sprays his cum on her face and breasts.

But he doesn't even notice her. His eyes are locked on me as he licks his lips in carnal hunger.

"You're now twenty years old. The time has come to serve your purpose. Prepare to be auctioned."

Even though I knew this day was coming, and I was almost certain this was the reason he called me in here, the word auction hits me like a blow to my chest, driving the breath from my lungs, causing me to gasp.

I have to figure out a way to escape. But how? I've been trying to figure out how to leave this damn place since I could form conscious thought, and nothing has ever presented itself to me.

"You must prepare yourself to perform for your audience."

My head snaps up, and I look at him, half-dazed.

"Perform what? How?"

If they want me to sing or dance, even something salacious, that would be preferable to having to display other skills. They certainly wouldn't have me have sex with a real person in front of a gathering of dark elves, but I might be ordered to do something unseemly with an illusion.

Suddenly, Rhakis is on his feet. He moves so fast Honey doesn't have time to move, and he kicks her out of the way. I open my mouth to scream. In anger or in fear, I don't know and don't have the time to even figure that out before he pushes something into my mouth. I feel it burn as it dissolves on my tongue.

The fiery warmth spreads down my throat and into my belly before spreading out to my entire body. The heat starts to pull in places. Around my lips, behind my ears, the insides of my wrists, behind my knees, but most intensely my nipples and between my legs.

"What did you give me?" I ask. But it's an automated response. A question that was formed in my mind and on its way to my burning lips before the warmth had finished spreading. I don't know where it comes from, just that everyone calls it Heat for the sensation and the effect. It could be a plant or maybe just pure, perverted magic distilled.

All we know is that it acts as half sedative, half aphrodisiac. It's used to make human sex slaves more compliant. And that's what I am, a slave here about to be sold at auction to the highest bidder who will do. The Thirteen knows what to me.

And the worst part, now that the Heat has taken hold of me, my mind and body are at war. I want to be revolted by the thought of some dark elf using my body for their pleasure, but my body screams for it.

Rhakis just grins at me and then calls the guards in to take me away. I gasp as their hands seize my sensitized skin. I want to struggle, but my body wants them to touch me more. I hate how much I want it.



## KRAL ISHIRAYA

I immediately regret agreeing to go out with this bunch. I linger at the back of Carisu's pack of overly loud friends. They're rough and obscene and vulgar. I wrinkle my nose as one of them jostles into me, looking across their playful punches with a bored expression.

I want nothing more than to go home, but they keep talking about how the place is full tonight and how much fun they are having. They laugh in a way I've never been able to, and for a moment, I just watch them.

People have told me before that it's weird when I do that, but I forget. I lose myself in evaluating them, trying to understand something I have no means to, when Carisu leans over to me.

"You have to stop staring at them like you might murder them," he murmurs.

"I won't. I lack the passion to do something like that. You know this." I raise my eyebrows at him.

"Yeah, that emotionless stare is what freaks people out. Just try to keep your face neutral and not stare at anybody too hard." He slaps me on the back. "Let's get you a drink and loosen up, eh? We're going up to the VIP lounge."

I choose not to tell him that I have no interest in going to the top floor of this building I'm being dragged through. Floor after floor exposes all that the L'amuor has to offer.

I swallow back how little I want to push through this building, seeing only reminders of why I had never come here before. In fact, I had always avoided this place because while others see fun, I see a mess that I don't want to touch me.

The L'amouer boasts its abundance of humans to torment or screw, but it makes no sense to me. The hours of rutting don't bring me satisfaction, especially when I can fulfill my needs with a willing elf.

It seems that I am the only one that doesn't derive any pleasure from bullying these humans, and I have to assume it is because of my distance from emotions. No matter what it is, I know that I won't be having any fun tonight.

I make a mental note to bring this up to my brother. It's proof that I'm making an effort, even if everyone gives me a wide berth. I think they can feel how different I am if they don't recognize me first, and I don't mind. It's better than being brushed up against naked bodies that I wish I didn't have to be near.

I recoil from the humans in the halls, many attached to elves using them for the night. I've always avoided the creatures since they came. I have plenty of servants already, and I've found no need to deal with the new race that everyone has exploited.

Don't be mistaken. I don't care what other people do. That's none of my business. I just keep away from them, and until tonight, that's gone fairly well.

My cousin has now thrust me into the throngs of these humans, the L'amouer being full of them. On top of that, the smell of semen, sweat, and urine saturates the air, and while the others comment on the activities available for the night causing these scents, I just feel dizzy.

I don't know how it's not affecting them, but I need fresh air. It's the only thing that keeps me moving up through the floors as the stench grows and the entertainment turns even more twisted.

Relief bursts through me as we arrive at the VIP box. It's on the upper floor, and it's so exclusive that few people are up here. The guys are so excited they don't seem to notice as I hang back.

I let them go into the room while I linger in the hallway. The air out here isn't tainted, and for a moment, I want to cleanse my senses.

It's really been a waste of a night, and I question again why I even bothered to come out. I know my brother would never force me into anything, but I want to appease him.

Honestly, I thought by now I wouldn't be upheld to traditional standards. Having a social life isn't reasonable for someone like me, and I thought that others would have seen that by now. It doesn't appear to be that way, though, so I find myself considering my options, of whether I'll join Carisu and his friends or head home and send him a Zagfer to tell him.

Before I decide, I hear a loud commotion coming from the other end of the hall. My curiosity piques, and I head toward the noise of thrashing and arguing.

As I turn the corner, I spot two dark elves dragging a human woman between them. She flails against them, but her movements seem weak, even for a human. I stand there wondering what they are even doing with her as she doesn't smell disgusting like the others when her eyes lift to me.

Something strikes me deep in my core as I stare at her, and my breath catches in my throat. My chest constricts, and my feet seem rooted into the ground.

Her eyes are a crystal-clear blue, so icy that they nearly look translucent as they watch me. I find myself frozen underneath her gaze, and I swear time itself stops in her presence.

It feels like everything about her engulfs me, and I no longer can hear the roar of the people on the other side of the door or smell the sour scents of the building. No, all I can see or feel or think of is her.



I've never felt something so all-consuming like this, and it's like my soul is being sucked from my body as she passes by me. My body aches to go to her, but I don't move. For a fleeting moment, I swear I don't remember how to.

I would have stayed there all night just staring at her, letting her gaze pin me in place, if it weren't for the dark elves. They drag her around the corner, breaking our eye contact, and it jerks me out of my daze.

Still, I don't move, even as my senses come rushing back in. I can hear and smell everything again, and I even take a few stumbling steps forward.

Her gaze has left my body feeling tingly and off-kilter, which is extremely unusual for me. I am known to be so disciplined now, but the way my heart is pounding and adrenaline is rushing through me proves that something revolutionary has just occurred.

My mind replays the scene over and over as I try to make sense of it. It's been so long since I've felt anything remotely close to that, and I need to understand what happened.

How did this human pull that out of me? What was she?

My body starts to burn with a fire that I don't know how to tame as I think of her, and the only thought that I can process is that I need to go after her. I'm not sure if what I just experienced was pleasant, but it was more than the usual numbness that I have grown used to.

I ache to understand it, to explore it more, but I have waited too long. I pace down the hall, but I have no idea where they have taken the girl.

It seems that my questions are answered as the room below roars to life, announcers shouting. Normally, I would ignore such a commotion, but with my body heightened and my head in such a weird place, I find myself rushing toward the VIP door.

I'm not sure why, but I thought that maybe all that noise could actually solve something for me.

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)